

Amy Tan

## The Bonesetter's Daughter

### Chapter One

**F**or the past eight years, always starting on August twelfth, Ruth Young lost her voice.

The first time it happened was when she moved into Art's flat in San Francisco. For several days, Ruth could only hiss like an untended teakettle. She figured it was a virus, or perhaps allergies to a particular mold in the building.

When she lost her voice again, it was on their first anniversary of living together, and Art joked that her laryngitis must be psychosomatic. Ruth wondered whether it was. When she was a child, she lost her voice after breaking her arm. Why was that? On their second anniversary, she and Art were stargazing in the Grand Tetons. According to a park pamphlet, "During the peak of the Perseids, around August 12th, hundreds of 'shooting' or 'falling' stars streak the sky every hour. They are actually fragments of meteors penetrating the earth's atmosphere, burning up in their descent." Against the velvet blackness, Ruth silently admired the light show with Art. She did not actually believe that her laryngitis was star-crossed, or that the meteor shower had anything to do with her inability to speak. Her mother, though, had often told Ruth throughout her childhood that shooting stars were really "melting ghost bodies" and it was bad luck to see them. If you did, that meant a ghost was trying to talk to you. To her mother, just about anything was a sign of ghosts: broken bowls, barking dogs, phone calls with only



silence or heavy breathing at the other end.

The following August, rather than just wait for muteness to strike, Ruth explained to her clients and friends that she was taking a planned weeklong retreat into verbal silence. "It's a yearly ritual," she said, "to sharpen my consciousness about words and their necessity." One of her book clients, a New Age psychotherapist, saw voluntary silence as a "wonderful process," and decided he would engage in the same so they could include their findings in a chapter on either dysfunctional family dynamics or stillness as therapy.

From then on, Ruth's malady was elevated to an annual sanctioned event. She stopped talking two days before her voice faded of its own accord. She politely declined Art's offer that they both try speaking in sign language. She made her voiceless state a decision, a matter of will, and not a disease or a mystery. In fact, she came to enjoy her respite from talk; for a whole week she did not need to console clients, remind Art about social schedules, warn his daughters to be careful, or feel guilty for not calling her mother.

This was the ninth year. Ruth, Art, and the girls had driven the two hundred miles to Lake Tahoe for the Days of No Talk, as they called them. Ruth had envisioned the four of them holding hands and walking down to the Truckee River to watch the nightly meteor showers in quiet awe. But the mosquitoes were working

overtime, and Dory whimpered that she saw a bat, to which Fia teased, "Who cares about rabies when the forest is full of ax murderers?" After they fled back to the cabin, the girls said they were bored. "There's no cable television?" they complained. So Art drove them to Tahoe City and rented videos, mainly horror flicks. He and the girls slept through most of them, and though Ruth hated the movies, she could not stop watching. She dreamed of deranged babysitters and oozing aliens.

On Sunday, when they returned home to San Francisco, cranky and sweaty, they discovered they had no hot water. The tank had leaked, and the heating element apparently had fried to death. They were forced to make do with kettle-warmed baths; Art didn't want to be gouged by emergency plumbing rates. Without a voice, Ruth couldn't argue, and she was glad. To argue would mean she was offering to foot the bill, something she had done so often over their years of living together that it had become expected of her. But because she did not offer, she felt petty, then irked that Ark said nothing further about the matter. At bedtime he nuzzled her neck and bumped gently into her backside. When she tensed, he said, "Suit yourself," and rolled over, and this left her feeling rebuffed. She wanted to explain what was wrong - but she realized she did not know. There was nothing specific beyond her bad mood. Soon Art's sonorous breathing rumbled out of sync with her frustration, and she lay wide-eyed in the dark.

It was now nearly midnight, and in another few hours, Ruth would be able to talk. She stood in the Cubbyhole, a former pantry that served as her home office. She stepped onto a footstool and pushed open a tiny window. There it was, a sliver of a million-dollar view: the red towers of the Golden Gate Bridge that bifurcated the waters, marking bay from ocean. The air was

moist and antiseptically cold against her face. She scanned the sky, but it was too light and misty to see any "ghost bodies" burning up. Foghorns started to blare. And after another minute, Ruth saw the billows, like an ethereal down comforter covering the ocean and edging toward the bridge. Her mother used to tell her that the fog was really the steam from fighting dragons, one water, the other fire. "Water and fire, come together make steam," LuLing would say in the strangely British-accented English she had acquired in Hong Kong. "You know this. Just like teapot. You touch, burn you finger off."

The fog was sweeping over the ramparts of the bridge, devouring the headlamps of cars. Nine out of ten drivers were drunk at this hour - Ruth had read that somewhere. Or maybe she had written that for a client. She stepped down, but left the window open.

The foghorns continued to wail. They sounded like tubas in a Shostakovich opera, comedically tragic. But was tragedy ever funny? Or was it only the audience who laughed knowingly as the victims walked into trapdoors and trick mirrors?

Still wide awake, Ruth turned to her desk. Just then she felt a tug of worry, something she was not supposed to forget. Did it have to do with money, a client, or a promise she had made to the girls? She set to straightening her desk, aligning her research books, sorting faxes and drafts, color-coding them according to client and book. Tomorrow she had to return to routine and deadlines, and a clean desk gave her the sense of a fresh start, an uncluttered mind. Everything had its place. If an item was of questionable priority or value, she dumped it in the bottom right-hand drawer of her desk. But now the drawer was full with unanswered letters, abandoned drafts, sheets of jotted-down ideas that might be usable in the future.

She pulled out a clipped stack of paper from the bottom of the drawer, guessing she could toss out whatever had lain there the longest by neglect.

They were pages written in Chinese, her mother's writing. LuLing had given them to her five or six years before. "Just some old things about my family," she had said, with the kind of awkward nonchalance that meant the pages were important. "My story, begin little-girl time. I write for myself, but maybe you read, then you see how I grow up, come to this country." Ruth had heard bits of her mother's life over the years, but she was touched by her shyness in asking Ruth to read what she had obviously labored over. The pages contained precise vertical rows, without crossouts, leaving Ruth to surmise that her mother had copied over her earlier attempts.

Ruth had tried to decipher the pages. Her mother had once drilled Chinese calligraphy into her reluctant brain, and she still recognized some of the characters: "thing," "I," "truth." But unraveling the rest required her to match LuLing's squiggly radicals to uniform ones in a Chinese-English dictionary. "These are the things I know are true," the first sentence read. That had taken Ruth an hour to translate. She set a goal to decipher a sentence a day. And in keeping with her plan, she translated another sentence the next evening: "My name is LuLing Liu Young." That was easy, a mere five minutes. Then came the names of LuLing's husbands, one of whom was Ruth's father. Husbands? Ruth was startled to read that there had been another. And what did her mother mean by "our secrets gone with them"? Ruth wanted to know right away, but she could not ask her mother. She knew from experience what happened whenever she asked her mother to render Chinese characters into English. First LuLing scolded her for not studying Chinese

hard enough when she was little. And then, to untangle each character, her mother took side routes to her past, going into excruciating detail over the infinite meanings of Chinese words: "Secret not just mean cannot say. Can be hurt-you kinda secret, or curse-you kind, maybe do you damage forever, never can change after that...." And then came rambling about who told the secret, without saying what the secret itself was, followed by more rambling about how the person had died horribly, why this had happened, how it could have been avoided, if only such-and-such had not occurred a thousand years before. If Ruth showed impatience in listening to any of this, LuLing became outraged, before sputtering an oath that none of this mattered because soon she too would die anyway, by accident, because of bad-luck wishes, or on purpose. And then the silent treatment began, a punishment that lasted for days or weeks, until Ruth broke down first and said she was sorry.

So Ruth did not ask her mother. She decided instead to set aside several days when she could concentrate on the translation. She told her mother this, and LuLing warned, "Don't wait too long." After that, whenever her mother asked whether she had finished her story, Ruth answered, "I was just about to, but something came up with a client." Other crises also intervened, having to do with Art, the girls, or the house, as did vacation.

"Too busy for mother," LuLing complained. "Never too busy go see movie, go away, go see friend."

The past year, her mother had stopped asking, and Ruth wondered, Did she give up? Couldn't be. She must have forgotten. By then the pages had settled to the bottom of the desk drawer.

Now that they had resurfaced, Ruth felt pangs

of guilt. Perhaps she should hire someone fluent in Chinese. Art might know of someone—a linguistics student, a retired professor old enough to be versed in the traditional characters and not just the simplified ones. As soon as she had time, she would ask. She placed the pages at the top of the heap, then closed the drawer, feeling less guilty already.

When she woke in the morning, Art was up, doing his yoga stretches in the next room. "Hello," she said to herself. "Is anyone there?" Her voice was back, though squeaky from disuse.

As she brushed her teeth in the bathroom, she could hear Dory screeching: "I want to watch that. Put it back! It's my TV too." Fia hooted: "That show's for babies, and that's what you are, wnnh-wnnh-wnnh."

Since Art's divorce, the girls had been dividing their time between their mom and stepdad's home in Sausalito and Art's Edwardian flat on Vallejo Street. Every other week, the four of them - Art, Ruth, Sofia, and Dory - found themselves crammed into five miniature rooms, one of them barely big enough to squeeze in a bunkbed. There was only one bathroom, which Ruth hated for its antiquated inconvenience. The claw-footed iron tub was as soothing as a sarcophagus, and the pedestal sink with its separate spigots dispensed water that was either scalding hot or icy cold. As Ruth reached for the dental floss, she knocked over other items on the windowsill: potions for wrinkles, remedies for pimples, nose-hair clippers, and a plastic mug jammed with nine toothbrushes whose ownership and vintage were always in question. While she was picking up the mess, desperate pounding rattled the door.

"You'll have to wait," she called in a husky voice. The pounding continued. She looked at

the bathroom schedule for August, which was posted on both sides of the door. There it said, clear as could be, whose turn it was at each quarter-hour. She had assigned herself to be last, and because everyone else ran late, she suffered the cumulative consequences. Below the schedule, the girls had added rules and amendments, and a list of violations and fines for infractions concerning the use of the sink, toilet, and shower, as well as a proclamation on what constituted the right to privacy versus a true emergency (underlined three times).

The pounding came again. "Ru-uuth! I said it's the phone!" Dory opened the door a crack and shoved in a cordless handset. Who was calling at seven-twenty in the morning? Her mother, no doubt. LuLing seemed to have a crisis whenever Ruth had not called in several days.

"Ruthie, is your voice back? Can you talk?" It was Wendy, her best friend. They spoke nearly every day. She heard Wendy blow her nose. Was she actually crying?

"What happened?" Ruth whispered. Don't tell me, don't tell me, she mouthed in rhythm to her racing heart. Wendy was about to tell her she had cancer, Ruth was sure of it. Last night's uneasy feeling started to trickle through her veins.

"I'm still in shock," Wendy went on. "I'm about to...Hold on. I just got another call."

It must not be cancer, Ruth thought. Maybe she was mugged, or thieves had broken into the house, and now the police were calling to take a report. Whatever it was, it must have been serious, otherwise Wendy would not be crying. What should she say to her? Ruth crooked the phone in her neck and dragged her fingers through her close-cropped hair. She noticed that some of the mirror's silver had flaked off.

Or were those white roots in her hair? She would soon turn forty-six. When had the baby fat in her face started to recede? To think she used to resent having the face and skin of a perpetual teenager. Now she had creases pulling down the corners of her mouth. They made her look displeased, like her mother. Ruth brightened her mouth with lipstick. Of course, she wasn't like her mother in other respects, thank God. Her mother was permanently unhappy with everything and everybody. Luling had immersed her in a climate of unsolvable despair throughout Ruth's childhood. That was why Ruth hated it whenever she and Art argued. She tried hard not to get angry. But sometimes she reached a breaking point and erupted, only to wonder later how she had lost control.

Wendy came back on the line. "You still there? Sorry. We're casting victims for that earthquake movie, and a million people are calling all at once." Wendy ran her own agency that hunted extras as San Francisco local color-cops with handlebar mustaches, six-foot-six drag queens, socialites who were unknowing caricatures of themselves. "On top of everything, I feel like shit," Wendy said, and stopped to sneeze and blow her nose. So she wasn't crying, Ruth realized, before the phone clicked twice. "Damn," Wendy said. "Hang on. Let me get rid of this call."

Ruth disliked being put on hold. What was so dire that Wendy had to tell her first thing in the morning? Had Wendy's husband had an affair? Joe? Not good old Joe. What, then?

Art ducked his head through the doorway and tapped his watch. Seven twenty-five, he mouthed. Ruth was about to tell him it was Wendy with an emergency, but he was already striding down the narrow hallway. "Dory! Fia! Let's hustle! Ruth is taking you to the ice rink in

five minutes. Get a move on." The girls squealed, and Ruth felt like a horse at the starting gate.

"I'll be there in a sec!" she called out. "And girls, if you didn't eat breakfast, I want you to drink milk, a full glass, so you won't fall over dead from hypoglycemic shock."

"Don't say 'dead.'" Dory griped. "I hate it when you say that."

"My God. What's going on there?" Wendy was back on the line.

"The usual start of the week," Ruth said. "Chaos is the penance for leisure."

"Yeah, who said that?"

"I did. So anyway, you were saying....?"

"Promise me first you won't tell anyone," Wendy sneezed again.

"Of course."

"Not even Art, and especially not Miss Giddy."

"Gideon? Gee, I don't know if I can promise about him."

"So last night," Wendy began, "my mother called in a state of euphoria." As Wendy went on, Ruth dashed to the bedroom to finish getting dressed. When she was not in a hurry, she enjoyed listening to her friend's ramblings. Wendy was a divining rod for strange disturbances in the earth's atmosphere. She was witness to bizarre sights: three homeless albinos living in Golden Gate Park, a BMW suddenly swallowed up by an ancient septic tank in Woodside, a loose buffalo strolling down Taraval Street. She was the maven of parties

that led people to make scenes, start affairs, and commit other self-renewing scandals. Ruth believed Wendy made her life more sparkly, but today was not a good time for sparkles.

"Ruth!" Art said in a warning tone. "The girls are going to be late."

"I'm really sorry, Wendy. I have to take the girls to ice-skating school-"

Wendy interrupted. "Mommy married her personal trainer! That's what she called to tell me. He's thirty-eight, she's sixty-four. Can you believe it?"

"Oh...Wow." Ruth was stunned. She pictured Mrs. Scott with a groom in a bow tie and gym shorts, the two of them reciting vows on a treadmill. Was Wendy upset? She wanted to say the right thing. What, though? About five years before, her own mother had had a boyfriend of sorts, but he had been eighty. Ruth had hoped T.C. would marry LuLing and keep her occupied. Instead T.C. had died of a heart attack.

"Listen, Wendy, I know this is important, so can I call you back after I drop off the girls?"

Once she had hung up, Ruth reminded herself of the tasks she needed to do today. Ten things, and she tapped first her thumb. One, take the girls to skating school. Two, pick up Art's suits at the dry cleaner's. Three, buy groceries for dinner. Four, pick up the girls from the rink and drop them off at their friend's house on Jackson Street. Five and Six, phone calls to that arrogant client, Ted, then Agapi Agnos, whom she actually liked. Seven, finish the outline for a chapter of Agapi Agnos's book. Eight, call her agent, Gideon, whom Wendy disliked. And Nine-what the hell was Nine? She knew what Ten was, the last task of the day. She had to call

Miriam, Art's ex-wife, to ask if she would let them have the girls the weekend of the Full Moon Festival dinner, the annual reunion of the Youngs, which she was hosting this year.

So what was Nine? She always organized her day by the number of digits on her hands. Each day was either a five or a ten. She wasn't rigid about it: add-ons were accommodated on the toes of her feet, room for ten unexpected tasks. Nine, Nine...She could make calling Wendy number One and bump everything back. But she knew that call should be a toe, an extra, an Eleven. What was Nine? Nine was usually something important, a significant number, what her mother termed the number of fullness, a number that also stood for Do not forget, or risk losing all. Did Nine have something to do with her mother? There was always something to worry about with her mother. That was not anything she had to remember in particular. It was a state of mind.

LuLing was the one who had taught her to count fingers as a memory device. With this method, LuLing never forgot a thing, especially lies, betrayals, and all the bad deeds Ruth had done since she was born. Ruth could still picture her mother counting in the Chinese style, pointing first to her baby finger and bending each finger down toward her palm, a motion that Ruth took to mean that all other possibilities and escape routes were closed. Ruth kept her own fingers open and splayed, American style. What was Nine? She put on a pair of sturdy sandals.

Art appeared at the doorway. "Sweetie? Don't forget to call the plumber about the hot-water tank."

The plumber was not going to be number Nine, Ruth told herself, absolutely not. "Sorry, honey, but could you call? I've got a pretty full day."

"I have meetings, and three appeals coming up." Art worked as a linguistics consultant, this year on cases involving deaf prisoners who had been arrested and tried without access to interpreters.

It's your house, Ruth was tempted to say. But she forced herself to sound reasonable, unassailable, like Art. "Can't you call from your office in between meetings?"

"Then I have to phone you and figure out when you'll be here for the plumber."

"I don't know exactly when I'll be home. And you know those guys. They say they're coming at one, they show up at five. Just because I work at home doesn't mean I don't have a real job. I've got a really crazy day. For one thing, I have to..." And she started to list her tasks.

Art slumped his shoulders and sighed. "Why do you have to make everything so difficult? I just thought if it were possible, if you had time- Aw, forget it." He turned away.

"Okay, okay, I'll take care of it. But if you get out of your meetings early, can you come home?"

"Sure thing." Art gave her a kiss on the forehead. "Hey, thanks. I wouldn't have asked if I weren't completely swamped." He kissed her again. "Love you."

She didn't answer, and after he left, she grabbed her coat and keys, then saw the girls standing at the end of the hallway, staring critically at her. She wiggled her big toe. Twelve, hot water.

Ruth started the car and pumped the brakes to make sure they worked. As she drove Fia and Dory to the skating rink, she was still mulling over what Nine might be. She ran through the

alphabet, in case any of those letters might trigger a memory. Nothing. What had she dreamed the night before, when she finally fell asleep? A bedroom window, a dark shape in the bay. The curtains, she now recalled, had turned out to be sheer and she was naked. She had looked up and saw the neighbors in nearby apartments grinning. They had been watching her most private moments, her most private parts. Then a radio began to blare. Whonk! Whonk! Whonk! "This has been a test of the American Broadcasting System's early-warning signal for disaster preparedness." And another voice came on, her mother's: "No, no, this is not test! This real!" And the dark shape in the bay rose and became a tidal wave.

Maybe number Nine was related to the plumber after all: tidal wave, broken water heater. The puzzle was solved. But what about the sheer curtains? What did that mean? The worry billowed up again.

"You know that new girl Darien likes?" she heard Fia say to her sister. "She has the best hair. I could just kill her."

"Don't say 'kill!'" Dory intoned. "Remember what they told us in assembly last year? Use that word, go to jail."

Both girls were in the backseat. Ruth had suggested that one of them sit up front with her, so she wouldn't feel like a chauffeur. But Dory had replied, "It's easier to open just one door." Ruth had said nothing in response. She often suspected the girls were testing her, to see if they could get a rise out of her. When they were younger, they had loved her, Ruth was sure of it. She had felt that with a ticklish pleasure in her heart. They used to argue over who could hold her hand or sit next to her. They had cuddled against her when scared, as they had often pretended to be, squeaking like

helpless kittens. Now they seemed to be in a contest over who could irritate her more, and she sometimes had to remind herself that teenagers had souls.

Dory was thirteen and chunky, larger than her fifteen-year-old sister. They wore their long chestnut hair alike, pulled into ponytails high on their heads so that they cascaded like fountain spray. All their friends wore their hair in an identical style, Ruth had noticed. When she was their age, she had wanted to grow her hair long the way the other girls did, but her mother made her cut it short. "Long hair look like suicide maiden," LuLing had said. And Ruth knew she was referring to the nursemaid who had killed herself when her mother was a girl. Ruth had had nightmares about that, the ghost with long hair, dripping blood, crying for revenge.

Ruth pulled up to the unloading zone at the rink. The girls scrambled out of the car and swung their satchels onto their backs. "See ya!" they shouted.

Suddenly Ruth noticed what Fia was wearing—low-slung jeans and a cropped shirt that bared a good six inches of belly. She must have had her jacket zipped up when they had left home. Ruth lowered the car window and called out: "Fia, sweetie, come here a second.... Am I wrong, or did your shirt shrink drastically in the last ten minutes?"

Fia turned around slowly and rolled her eyes upward.

Dory grinned. "I told you she would."

Ruth stared at Fia's navel. "Does your mother know you're wearing that?"

Fia dropped her mouth in mock shock, her

reaction to most things. "Uh, she bought it for me, okay?"

"Well, I don't think your dad would approve. I want you to keep your jacket on, even when you're skating. And Dory, you tell me if she doesn't."

"I'm not telling on nobody!"

Fia turned and walked away.

"Fia? Fia! Come back here. You promise me now, or I'm going to take you home to change clothes."

Fia stopped but didn't turn around. "All right," she grumbled. As she yanked up the jacket zipper, she said to Dory, loud enough for Ruth to hear: "Dad's right. She loves to make everything sooo difficult."

The remark both humiliated and rankled her. Why had Art said that, and especially in front of the girls? He knew how much that would hurt her. A former boyfriend had once told her she made life more complicated than it was, and after they broke up, she was so horrified that his accusations might be true that she made it a point to be reasonable, to present facts, not complaints. Art knew that and had even assured her the boyfriend was a jerk. Yet he still sometimes teased that she was like a dog that circles and bites its own tail, not recognizing she was only making herself miserable.

Ruth thought of a book she had helped write a few years before, *The Physics of Human Nature*. The author had recast the principles of physics into basic homilies to remind people of self-defeating behavioral patterns. "The Law of Relative Gravity": Lighten up. A problem is only as heavy as you let it be. "The Doppler Effect of Communication": There is always distortion

between what a speaker says and what a listener wants it to mean. "The Centrifugal Force of Arguments": The farther you move from the core of the problem, the faster the situation spins out of control.

At the time, Ruth thought the analogies and advice were simplistic. You couldn't reduce real life into one-liners. People were more complex than that. She certainly was, wasn't she? Or was she too complicated? Complex, complicated, what was the difference? Art, on the other hand, was the soul of understanding. Her friends often said as much: "You are so lucky." She had been proud when she first heard that, believing she had chosen well in love. Lately she had considered whether they might have meant he was to be admired for putting up with her. But then Wendy reminded her, "You were the one who called Art a fucking saint." Ruth wouldn't have put it that way, but she knew the sentiment must have been true. She remembered that before she ever loved Art, she had admired him-his calm, the stability of his emotions. Did she still? Had he changed, or was it she? She drove toward the dry cleaner's, mulling over these questions.

She had met Art nearly ten years before, at an evening yoga class she had attended with Wendy. The class was her first attempt in years to exercise. Ruth was naturally thin and didn't have an incentive at first to join a health club. "A thousand bucks a year," she had marveled, "to jump on a machine that makes you run like a hamster in a wheel?" Her preferred form of exercise, she told Wendy, was stress. "Clench muscles, hold for twelve hours, release for a count of five, then clench again." Wendy, on the other hand, had put on thirty-five pounds since her days as a high school gymnast and was eager to get back into shape. "Let's at least take the free fitness test," she said. "No obligation to join."

Ruth secretly gloated when she scored better than Wendy in sit-ups. Wendy cheered aloud at besting Ruth in push-ups. Ruth's body-fat ratio was a healthy twenty-four percent. Wendy's was thirty-seven. "It's the enduring genetics of my Chinese peasant stock," Ruth kindly offered. But then Ruth scored in the "very poor" range for flexibility. "Wow," Wendy remarked. "According to this chart, that's about one point above rigor mortis."

"Look here, they have yoga," Wendy later said as they perused the schedule of classes at the club. "I hear yoga can change your life. Plus they have night classes." She nudged Ruth. "It might help you get over Paul."

In the locker room that first night, they overheard two women talking. "The guy next to me asked if I'd like to go with him to that midnight class, Togaless Yoga. You know, he says, the nude one."

"Nude? What a scumbag! ...Was he at least good-looking?"

"Not bad. But can you imagine facing the naked butts of twenty people doing Downward-Facing Dog?" The two women walked out of the locker room. Ruth turned to Wendy. "Who the hell would do nude yoga?"

"Me," Wendy said. "And don't look at me like that, Miss Shock-and-Dismay. At least it wouldn't be boring."

"Nude, with total strangers?"

"No, with my CPA, my dentist, my boss. Who do you think?"

In the crowded workout room, thirty disciples, most of them women, were staking out their

turf, then adjusting mats as stragglers came in. When a man rolled out his mat next to Ruth's, she avoided looking at him, in case he was the scumbag. She glanced around. Most of the women had pedicured nails, precision-applied nail polish. Ruth's feet were broad, and her naked toes looked like the piggies from the children's rhyme. Even the man next to her had better-looking feet, smooth skin, perfectly tapered toes. And then she caught herself - she shouldn't have nice thoughts about the feet of a potential pervert.

The class started with what sounded like a cult incantation, followed by poses that seemed to be saluting a heathen god. "Urdhva Muka Svanasana! Adho Muka Svanasana!" Everyone except Ruth and Wendy knew the routines. Ruth followed along as if she were playing Simon Says. Every now and then the yoga teacher, a rosy-muscled woman, walked by and casually bent, tilted, or lifted a part of Ruth's body. I probably look like a torture victim, Ruth thought, or one of those freaks my mother saw in China, boneless beggar boys who twisted themselves up for the amusement of others. By this time she was perspiring heavily and had observed enough about the man next to her to be able to describe him to the police, if necessary. "The nude yoga rapist was five-eleven, maybe a hundred and sixty pounds. He had dark hair, large brown eyes and thick eyebrows, a neatly cropped beard and mustache. His fingernails were clean, perfectly trimmed."

He was also incredibly limber. He could wrap his ankles around his neck, balance like Baryshnikov. She, in comparison, looked like a woman getting a gynecological exam. A poor woman. She was wearing an old T-shirt and faded leggings with a hole in one knee. At least it was obvious she wasn't on the prowl, not like those who were wearing designer sports outfits

and full makeup.

And then she noticed the man's ring, a thick band of hammered gold on his right hand, no ring on his left. Not all married men wore rings, of course, but a wedding band on the right hand was a dead giveaway, at least in San Francisco, that he was gay. Now that she thought about it, the signs were obvious: the neat beard, the trim torso, the graceful way he moved. She could relax. She watched the bearded man bend forward, grab the bottoms of his feet, and press his forehead to his knees. No straight man could do that. Ruth flopped over and dangled her hands to midcalf.

Toward the end of the class came the headstands. The novices moved to the wall, the competitive types rose immediately like sunflowers toward the noon sun. There was no more room at the wall, so Ruth simply sat on her mat. A moment later, she heard the bearded man speak: "Need some help? I can hold on to your ankles until you get balanced."

"Thanks, but I'll pass. I'm afraid I'd get a cerebral hemorrhage."

He smiled. "Do you always live in such a dangerous world?"

"Always. Life's more exciting that way."

"Well, the headstand is one of the most important postures you can do. Being upside down can turn your life around. It can make you happy."

"Really?"

"See? You're already laughing."

"You win," she said, placing the crown of her head on a folded blanket. "Hoist away."

Within the first week, Wendy was off yoga and onto a home gizmo that looked like a rickshaw with oars. Ruth continued with yoga three times a week. She had found a form of exercise that relaxed her. She especially liked the practice of staying focused, of eliminating everything from her mind except breath. And she liked Art, the bearded man. He was friendly and funny. They started going to a coffee shop around the corner after class.

Over decaf cappuccinos one evening, she learned that Art had grown up in New York, and had a doctorate in linguistics from UC Berkeley. "So what languages do you speak?" she asked.

"I'm not a true polyglot," he said. "Most linguists I know aren't. My actual language specialty at Berkeley was American Sign Language, ASL. I now work at the Center on Deafness at UCSF."

"You became an expert on silence?" she joked.

"I'm not an expert on anything. But I love language in all forms - sounds and words, facial expressions, hand gestures, body posture and its rhythms, what people mean but don't necessarily say with words. I've always loved words, the power of them."

"So what's your favorite word?"

"Hm, that's an excellent question." He fell quiet, stroking his beard in thought.

Ruth was thrilled. He was probably groping for a word that was arcane and multisyllabic, one of those crossword items that could be confirmed only in the Oxford English Dictionary.

"Vapors," he said at last.

"Vapors?" Ruth thought of chills and cold, mists and suicide ghosts. That was not a word she would have chosen.

"It appeals to all the senses," he explained. "It can be opaque but never solid. You can feel it, but it has no permanent shape. It might be hot or cold. Some vapors smell terrible, others quite wonderful. Some are dangerous, others are harmless. Some are brighter than others when burned, mercury versus sodium, for instance. Vapors can go up your nose with a sniff and permeate your lungs. And the sound of the word, how it forms on your lips, teeth, and tongue - vaporzzzzz - it lilts up, then lingers and fades. It's perfectly matched to its meanings."

"It is," Ruth agreed. "Vaporzzzz," she echoed, savoring the buzz on her tongue.

"And then there's vapor pressure," Art continued, "and reaching that balance point between two states, one hundred degrees Celsius." Ruth nodded and gave him what she hoped was a look of intelligent concentration. She felt dull and badly educated. "One moment you have water," Art said, his hands forming undulating motions. "But under pressure from heat, it turns into steam." His fingers flittered upward.

Ruth nodded vigorously. Water to steam, that she understood, sort of. Her mother used to talk about fire and water combining to make steam, and steam looked harmless but could peel your skin right off. "Like yin and yang?" she ventured.

"Duality of nature. Exactly."

Ruth shrugged. She felt like a fraud.

"What about you?" he said. "What's your favorite word?"

She put on her idiot face. "Gosh oh golly, there are so many! Let's see. 'Vacation.' 'Jackpot.' Then there's 'free.' 'Sale.' 'Bargain.' You know, the usual."

He had laughed throughout, and she felt pleased. "Seriously," he said. "What?"

Seriously? She plucked at what surfaced in her mind, but they sounded trite: peace, love, happiness. And what would those words say about her? That she lacked those qualities? That she had no imagination? She considered saying onomatopoeia, a word that had enabled her to win a spelling bee in the fifth grade. But onomatopoeia was a jumble of syllables, not at all like the simple sounds it was supposed to represent. Crash, boom, bang.

"I don't have a favorite yet," she finally answered. "I guess I've been living off words for so long it's hard to think about them beyond what's utilitarian."

"What do you do?"

"I used to be in corporate communications. Then I started freelance editing, and a few years ago I took on more full-scale book collaboration, mostly inspirational and self-improvement books, better health, better sex, better soul, that kind of thing."

"You're a book doctor."

Ruth liked that he said that. Book doctor. She had never called herself that, nor had anyone else. Most people called her a ghostwriter - she hated the term. Her mother thought it meant that she could actually write to ghosts. "Yes," she told Art. "I suppose you could say that, book doctor. But I tend to think of myself as more of a translator, helping people transfer what's in their brain onto the blank page. Some books

need more help than others."

"Have you ever wanted to write your own book?"

She hesitated. Of course she had. She wanted to write a novel in the style of Jane Austen, a book of manners about the upper class, a book that had nothing to do with her own life. Years before, she had dreamed of writing stories as a way to escape. She could revise her life and become someone else. She could be somewhere else. In her imagination she could change everything, herself, her mother, her past. But the idea of revising her life also frightened her, as if by imagination alone she were condemning what she did not like about herself or others. Writing what you wished was the most dangerous form of wishful thinking.

"I suppose most people want to write their own book," she answered. "But I think I'm better at translating what others want to say."

"And you enjoy that? It's satisfying?"

"Yes. Absolutely. There's still a lot of freedom to do what I want."

"You're lucky."

"I am," she conceded. "I certainly am."

It pleased her to discuss such matters with him. With Wendy she tended to talk about peeves more than passions. They commiserated on rampant misogyny, bad manners, and depressed mothers, whereas Art and she talked to discover new things about themselves and each other. He wanted to know what inspired her, what the difference was between her hopes and her goals, her beliefs and her motivations.

"Difference?" she asked.

"Some things you do for yourself," he answered. "Some things you do for others. Maybe they're the same."

Through such conversations, she realized for instance that she was lucky to be a freelance editor, a book doctor. The discoveries were refreshing.

One evening, about three weeks after she met him, their conversation became more personal. "Frankly, I like living alone," she heard herself saying. She had convinced herself this was true.

"And what if you met the ideal partner?"

"He can stay ideal in his place, and I'll stay ideal in mine. Then we won't get into all that shit about whose pubic hair is clogging up the drain."

Art chuckled. "God! Did you actually live with someone who complained about that?"

Ruth forced a laugh, staring into her coffee cup. She was the one who had complained. "We were opposites about cleanliness," she answered. "Thank God we didn't marry." As she said this, she sensed the words were at last true and not a cover-up for pain.

"So you were going to marry."

She had never been able to confide fully to anyone, not even Wendy, about what had happened with her and Paul Shinn. She had told Wendy of the many ways Paul irked her, that she was tempted to break up with him. When she announced to Wendy that they had split up, Wendy exclaimed, "Finally you did it. Good for you." With Art, the past seemed easier to talk about, because he had not been part of it. He

was her yoga buddy, on the periphery of her life. He did not know what her earlier hopes and fears had been. With him, she could dissect the past with emotional detachment and frank intelligence.

"We thought about marriage," she said. "How can you not when you live together for four years? But you know what? Over time, passion wanes, differences don't. One day he told me he'd put in for a transfer to New York and it had come through." Ruth recalled to herself how surprised she had been, and how she complained to Paul about his not telling her sooner. "Of course, I can work almost anywhere," she had told him, annoyed yet excited at the prospect of moving to Manhattan, "but it's a jolt to uproot, not to mention leave my mother behind, and relocate in a city where I don't have any contacts. Why'd you tell me at the last minute?" She had meant that rhetorically. Then came Paul's awkward silence.

"I didn't ask to go, he didn't ask me to come," she told Art simply. She avoided eye contact. "It was a civil way to break up. We both agreed it was time to move on, only separately. He was decent enough to try to put the blame on himself. Said he was immature, whereas I was more responsible." She gave Art a goofy grin, as if this were the most ironic thing anyone could have said about her. "The worst part was, he was so nice about it-like he was embarrassed to have to do this to me. And naturally, I spent the last year trying to analyze what it was about us, about me, that didn't work. I went over just about every argument that we'd had. I had said he was careless, he said I made simple problems have difficult solutions. I said he never planned, he said I obsessed to the point of killing all spontaneity. I thought he was selfish, he said I worried over him to the point of suffocation, then pitied myself when he

didn't fall all over himself saying thank you. And maybe we were both right and that was why we were wrong for each other."

Art touched her hand. "Well, I think he lost a terrific woman."

She was flooded with self-consciousness and gratitude.

"You are. You're terrific. You're honest and funny. Smart, interested."

"Don't forget responsible."

"What's wrong with being responsible? I wish more people were. And you know what else? You're willing to be vulnerable. I think that's endearing."

"Aw, shucks."

"Seriously."

"Well, that's sweet of you to say. I'll buy you coffee next time." She laughed and put her hand over his. "How about you? Tell me about your love life and all your past disasters. Who's your current partner?"

"I don't have one right now. Half the time I live alone, the other half I'm picking up toys and making jelly sandwiches for my two daughters."

This was a surprise. "You adopted them?"

He looked puzzled. "They're mine. And my ex-wife's, of course."

Ex-wife? That made three gay men she knew who had once been married. "So how long were you married before you came out?"

"Came out?" He made a screwy face. "Wait a

minute. Do you think I'm gay?"

In an instant, she knew her mistake. "Of course not!" she scrambled to say. "I meant when you came out from New York."

He was laughing convulsively. "This whole time you thought I was gay?"

Ruth flushed. What had she said! "It was the ring," she admitted, and pointed to his gold band. "Most of the gay couples I know wear rings on that hand."

He slipped off the ring and rotated it in the light. "My best friend made it for my wedding," Art said solemnly. "Ernesto, a rare spirit. He was a poet and a goldsmith by avocation, made his living as a limo driver. See these indentations? He told me they were to remind me that there are a lot of bumps in life and that I should remember what lies between them. Love, friendship, hope. I stopped wearing it when Miriam and I split up. Then Ernesto died, brain cancer. I decided to wear the ring to remind me of him, what he said. He was a good friend-but not a lover."

He slid the ring over to Ruth so she could see the details. She picked it up. It was heavier than she had thought. She held it to her eye and looked through its center at Art. He was so gentle. He was not judgmental. She felt a squeezing in her heart that both hurt her and made her want to giggle and shout. How could she not love him?

As she gathered up Art's clothes at the dry cleaner's, Ruth flexed her big toe and remembered she was supposed to call Wendy. Mrs. Scott and a boy toy, what a shock. She decided to wait until she was in the parking lot by the grocery store, rather than risk a head-on collision during a juicy cell-phone conversation.

She and Wendy were the same age. They had known each other since the sixth grade, but had gone through periods when they did not see each other for years. Their friendship had grown via accidental reunions and persistence on Wendy's part. While Wendy was not the person Ruth would have chosen for her closest friend, Ruth was glad it had turned out to be so. She needed Wendy's boisterousness as balance to her own caution, Wendy's bluntness as antidote to her reserve. "Stop being such a worrywort," Wendy often ordered. Or "You don't always have to act so fucking polite," she might say. "You're making me look like shit."

Wendy answered on the first ring. "Can you believe it?" she said, as though she had not stopped repeating this since their last conversation. "And I thought she was over the top when she had the facelift. Last night she told me that she and Patrick were getting it on twice a night. She's telling me this - me, the daughter she once sent to confession for asking how babies were made."

Ruth imagined Mrs. Scott taking off her Chanel suit, her trifocals, her diamond-encrusted designer crucifix, then embracing her beach boy.

"She's getting more sex than I am," Wendy exclaimed. "I can't remember the last time I even wanted to do anything in bed with Joe except sleep."

Wendy had often joked about her dwindling sex drive. But Ruth didn't think she meant it was absent. Would this happen to her as well? She and Art were not exactly the red-hot lovers they'd been in earlier years. They prepared less for romance and accepted more readily excuses of fatigue. She wiggled a toe: Get estrogen levels checked. That might be the reason she felt a sense of unease, fluctuating hormones.

She had no other reason to feel anxious. Not that her life was perfect, but whatever problems she had, they were small. And she should keep them that way. She vowed to be more affectionate with Art.

"I can see why you're upset," Ruth consoled her.

"Actually, I'm more worried than upset," Wendy said. "It's just weird. It's like the older she gets, the younger she acts. And part of me says, Good for her, you go, girl. And the other part is like, Whoa. Is she crazy or what? Do I have to watch over her now, act like her mother and make sure she doesn't get herself in trouble? You know what I mean?"

"I've been that way with my mother all my life," Ruth said. Suddenly she remembered what had been eluding her. Her mother was supposed to see the doctor at four this afternoon. Over the past year, Ruth had been vaguely worried about her mother's health. Nothing was terribly wrong; it was just that LuLing seemed slightly off, hazy. For a while, Ruth had reasoned that her mother was tired, that her hearing might be going, or that her English was getting worse. As a precaution, Ruth had also gnawed over the worst possibilities-brain tumor, Alzheimer's, stroke-believing this would ensure that it was not these things. History had always proven that she worried for nothing. But a few weeks before, when her mother mentioned she had an appointment for a checkup, Ruth said she would drive her.

After she and Wendy finished their conversation, Ruth stepped out of the car and walked toward the grocery store, still thinking. Nine, Mom's doctor. And she started to count on her fingers the questions she should ask the doctor. Thank God she could speak once again.