RANDOM HOUSE eBOOKS

Free Food for Millionaires

Min Jin Lee

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About the Book

Casey Han’s years at Princeton have given her ‘a refined diction, an enviable golf handicap, wealthy friends, a popular white boyfriend, and a magna cum laude degree in economics. But no job, and a number of bad habits...’

The elder daughter of working-class Korean immigrants who run a dry cleaning shop in Manhattan, Casey inhabits a New York a world away from that of her parents. Ambitious, spirited and obstinate, she’s developed a taste for a lifestyle – and a passion for beautiful hats and expensive tailoring – she hasn’t the means to sustain. And between the culture to which her family so fiercely cling and the life she aspires to, Casey must confront her own identity, the meaning of wealth, and what she really wants from her future.

As Casey navigates an uneven course of small triumphs and spectacular failures, a clash of values, ideals and ambitions plays out against the colourful backdrop of New York society, it’s many layers, shades and divides...

About the Author

Min Jin Lee immigrated aged seven to the United States with her family. She studied at Yale and at Georgetown Law School, and worked as a lawyer before giving it up to write full-time. She lives in Tokyo with her husband and son.

free food for millionaires

min jin lee

arrow books

For *Umma, Ahpa,* Myung, and Sang

Our crowns have been bought and paid for – all we have to do is wear them.

JAMES BALDWIN

Book One

Works

One

Options

COMPETENCE CAN BE a curse.

As a capable young woman, Casey Han felt compelled to choose respectability and success. But it was glamour and insight that she craved. A Korean immigrant who'd grown up in a dim, blue-collar neighborhood in Queens, she'd hoped for a bright, glittering life beyond the workhorse struggles of her parents, who managed a Manhattan dry cleaner.

Casey was unusually tall for a Korean, nearly five feet eight, slender, and self-conscious about what she wore. She kept her black hair shoulder length, fastidiously powdered her nose, and wore wine-colored lipstick without variation. To save money, she wore her eye-glasses at home, but outside she wore contact lenses to correct her nearsightedness. She did not believe she was pretty but felt she had something – some sort of workable sex appeal. She admired feminine modesty and looked down at women who tried to appear too sexy. For a girl of only twenty-two, Casey Han had numerous theories of beauty and sexuality, but the essence of her philosophy was that allure trumped obvious display. She'd read that Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis advised a woman to dress like a column, and Casey never failed to follow that instruction.

Seated in the spacious linoleum-covered kitchen of her parents' rent-controlled two-bedroom in Elmhurst, Casey looked out of place in her white linen shirt and white cotton

slacks – dressed as if she were about to have a gin and tonic brought to her on a silver tray. Next to her at the Formica-topped table, her father, Joseph Han, could've easily passed for her grandfather. He filled his tumbler with ice for his first whiskey of the evening. An hour earlier, he'd returned from a Saturday of sorting laundry at the Sutton Place drop shop that he ran for Mr Kang, a wealthy Korean who owned a dozen dry-cleaning stores. Joseph and his daughter Casey did not speak to each other. Casey's younger sister, Tina – a Bronx Science Westinghouse finalist, vice president of the Campus Christian Crusade at MIT, and a premed – was their father's favorite. A classical Korean beauty, Tina was the picture of the girls' mother, Leah, in her youth.

Leah bustled about cooking their first family dinner in months, singing hymns while Tina chopped scallions. Although not yet forty, Leah had prematurely gray hair that obscured her smooth pale brow. At seventeen, she'd married Joseph, who was then thirty-six and a close friend of her eldest brother. On their wedding night, Casey was conceived, and two years later, Tina was born.

Now it was a Saturday night in June, a week after Casey's college graduation. Her four years at Princeton had given her a refined diction, an enviable golf handicap, wealthy friends, a popular white boyfriend, an agnostic's closeted passion for reading the Bible, and a magna cum laude degree in economics. But she had no job and a number of bad habits.

Virginia Craft, Casey's roommate of four years, had tried to convince her to give up the habit that taxed her considerably while she sat next to her brooding father. At the moment, Casey would've bartered her body for a cigarette. The promise of lighting one on the building roof after dinner was all that kept her seated in the kitchen – her bare foot tapping lightly on the floor. But the college graduate had other problems insoluble by a smoke. Since she had no job, she'd returned to her folks' two-bedroom on

Van Kleeck Street. Seventeen years earlier, in the year of the bicentennial, the family of four had immigrated to America. And Leah's terror of change had kept them in the same apartment unit. It all seemed a bit pathetic.

The smoking, among other things, was corroding Casey's sense of being an honest person. She prided herself on being forthright, though she often dodged her parents. Her biggest secret was Jay Currie – her white American boyfriend. On the previous Sunday night after having some very nice sex, Jay had suggested, his elbow crooked over his pillow and head cradled in his hand, 'Move in with me. Consider this, Miss Han: sexual congress on tap.' Her parents also had no idea that she wasn't a virgin and that she'd been on the pill since she was fifteen. Being at home made Casey anxious, and she continually felt like patting down her pockets for matches. Consequently, she found herself missing Princeton – even the starchy meals at Charter, her eating club. But nostalgia would do her no good. Casey needed a plan to escape Elmhurst.

Last spring, against Jay's advice, Casey had applied to only one investment banking program. She'd learned, after all the sign-up sheets were filled, that Kearn Davis was the bank that every econ major wanted in 1993. Yet she reasoned that her grades were superior to Jay's, and she could sell anything. At the Kearn Davis interview, Casey greeted the pair of female interviewers wearing a yellow silk suit and cracked a Nancy Reagan joke, thinking it might make a feminist connection. The two women were wearing navy and charcoal wool, and they let Casey hang herself in fifteen minutes flat. Showing her out, they waved, not bothering to shake her hand.

There was always law school. She'd managed to get into Columbia. But her friends' fathers were beleaguered lawyers – their lives unappealing. Casey's lawyer customers at Sabine's, the department store where she'd worked weekends during the school year, advised her, 'For money –

go to B school. To save lives, med.' The unholy trinity of law, business, and medicine seemed the only faith in town. It was arrogant, perhaps rash, for an immigrant girl from the boroughs to want to choose her own trade. Nevertheless, Casey wasn't ready to relinquish her dream, however vague, for a secure profession. Without telling her father, she wrote Columbia to defer a year.

Her mother was singing a hymn in her remarkable voice while she ladled scallion sauce over the roasted porgy. Leah's voice trilled at the close of the verse, 'Waking or sleeping, thy presence my light,' and then with a quiet inhale, she began, 'Be thou my wisdom, and thou my true word . . .' She'd left the store early that morning to shop and to cook her daughters' favorite dishes. Tina, her baby, had returned on Thursday night, and now both her girls were home. Her heart felt full, and she prayed for Joseph to be in a good mood. She eyeballed the whiskey level in the jug-size bottle of Dewar's. It had not shifted much from the night before. In their twenty-two years of marriage, Leah had discovered that it was better when Joseph had a glass or two with his dinner than none. Her husband wasn't a drunk – the sort who went to bars, fooled around, or lost his salary envelope. He was a hard worker. But without his whiskey, he couldn't fall asleep. One of her sisters-in-law had told her how to keep a man content: 'Never deny a man his *bop*, sex, and sleep.'

Leah carried the fish to the table, wearing a blue apron over her plum-colored housedress. At the sight of Casey pouring her second glass of water, Leah clamped her lips, giving her soft, oval face a severe appearance. Mr Jun, the ancient choir director, had pointed out this anxiety tic to her prior to her solos, shouting, 'Show us your joy! You are singing to God!'

Tina, of course, the one who noticed everything, thought Casey was just asking for it. Her own mind had been filled with the pleasant thoughts of her boyfriend, Chul, whom

she’d promised to phone that night, but even so, she could feel Casey’s restlessness. Maybe her sister would consider how much trouble their mother had gone through to make dinner.

It was the water drinking – this seemingly innocent thing. For always, Joseph believed that the girls should eat heartily at the table, grateful for the food and for the care given to it, but Casey habitually picked at her dinner, and he blamed Casey’s not eating on her excessive water consumption. Casey denied this accusation, but her father was on the mark. Back in junior high school, Casey had read in a fashion magazine that if you drank three glasses of water before a meal, you’d eat less. It took great effort on Casey’s part to wear a size 6 or smaller; after all, she was a girl with a large frame. Her weight also shifted by five pounds depending on how much she smoked. Her mother was thin from perpetual activity, and her younger sister, who was short like her father, had a normal build, and Tina disapproved of dieting. A brilliant student of both physics and philosophy, Tina had once scolded Casey when she was on Weight Watchers: ‘The world is awash in hunger. How could you cause your own?’

Casey’s water drinking at the table was not lost on her father.

At five feet three, Joseph was compact, yet his rich, booming voice gave him the sound of a bigger man. He was bald except for a wisp of baby fuzz on the back of his head, and his baldness did not grieve him except in the winters, when he had to wear a gray felt fedora to protect his head and large-lobed ears. He was only fifty-eight but looked older, more like a vigorous man of seventy, especially beside his young wife. Leah was his second wife. His first, a girl his age whom he’d loved deeply, died from tuberculosis after a year of marriage and before she bore him any children. Joseph adored his second wife, perhaps more so because of his loss. He appreciated Leah’s good health and

her docile Christian nature, and he was still attracted to her pretty face and delicate form, which belied her resilience. He made love to her every Friday evening. She had given him two daughters, though the elder looked nothing like her mother.

Casey drained her water glass and rested it on the table. Then she reached for the pitcher.

'I'm not Rockefeller, you know,' Joseph said.

Casey's father didn't look at her when he said this, but he was addressing her. There was no one else in the room who needed to hear how she didn't have a trust fund. Right away, Leah and Tina moved from the counter to their seats at the table, hoping to dissipate the tension. Leah opened her mouth to speak but hesitated.

Casey refilled her glass with water.

'I can't support you forever,' he said. 'Your father is not a millionaire.'

Casey's first thought was, And whose fault is that?

Tina knew when not to speak. She unfolded her thin paper napkin and spread it across her lap. In her mind, she ticked off the Ten Commandments – this thing she did when nervous; and when she felt particularly anxious, she recited the Apostle's Creed and the Lord's Prayer back to back.

'When I was your age, I sold *kimbop* on the streets. Not one piece' – Joseph raised his voice dramatically – 'I couldn't afford to eat one piece of what I was selling.' He lost himself in the memory of standing in a dusty corner of Pusan's marketplace, waiting for paying customers while shooing away the street urchins who were hungrier than he was.

Using two spoons, Leah filleted the fish from its skeleton and served Joseph first. Casey wondered why her mother never stopped these self-indulgent reveries. Growing up, she'd heard countless monologues about her father's privations. At the end of 1950, a temporary passage to the South had been secured for the sixteen-year-old Joseph – the baby of a wealthy merchant family – to prevent his

conscription in the Red Army. But a few weeks after young Joseph landed in Pusan, the southernmost tip of the country, the war split the nation in two, and he never again saw his mother, six elder brothers, and two sisters, the family estate near Pyongyang. As a war refugee, the once pampered teenager ate garbage, slept on cold beaches, and stayed in filthy camps as easy prey for the older refugees who'd lost their sense and morals. Then in 1955, two years after the war ended, his young bride died from TB. With no money or support, he'd abandoned his hopes to be a medical doctor. Having missed college, he ran errands for tips from American soldiers, ignored his persistent nightmares, worked as a food vendor, and taught himself English from a dictionary. Before coming to America with his wife and two little girls, Joseph labored for twenty years as a foreman at a lightbulb factory outside of Seoul. Leah's oldest brother, Hoon – the first friend Joseph made in the South – had sponsored their immigration to New York and given them their American first names. Then, two years later, Hoon died of pancreatic cancer. Everyone seemed to die on Joseph. He was the last remnant of his clan and had no male heirs.

Casey wasn't indifferent to her father's pain. But she'd decided she didn't want to hear about it anymore. His losses weren't hers, and she didn't want to hold them. She was in Queens, and it was 1993. But at the table it was 1953, and the Korean War refused to end.

Joseph was gearing up to tell the story of his mother's white jade brooch, the last item he'd possessed of hers. Of course he'd had to sell it to buy medicine for his first wife, who ended up dying anyway. Yes, yes, Casey wanted to say, war was brutal and poverty cruel, but enough already. She'd never suffer the way he did. Wasn't that the point of them coming to America, after all?

Casey rolled her eyes, and Leah wished she wouldn't do that. She didn't mind these stories, really. Leah imagined Joseph's first wife as a kind of invalid girl saint. There were

no photographs of her, but Leah felt she must have been pretty – all romantic heroines were. A lady who died so young (only twenty) would have been kind and good and beautiful, Leah thought. Joseph's stories were how he kept his memories alive. He'd lost everyone, and she knew from the fitful way he slept that the Japanese occupation and the war returned to him at night. His mother and his first wife were the ones he had loved the most as a young man. And Leah knew what it was to grieve; her own mother had died when she was eight. It was possible to long for the scent of your mother's skin, the feel of her coarse *chima* fabric against your face; to lie down for the evening and shut your eyes tight and wish to see her sitting there at the edge of your pallet at dawn. Her mother had died from consumption, so she and Joseph's first wife were entwined in Leah's imagination.

Joseph smiled ruefully at Tina. 'The night before I left on the ship, my mother sewed twenty gold rings in the lining of my coat with her own hand. She had these thick rheumatic fingers, and the servant girls usually did the sewing, but . . .' He lifted his right hand in the air as if he could make his mother's hand appear in place of his own, then clasped the right one with his left. 'She wrapped each ring with cotton batting so there'd be no noise when I moved around.' Joseph marveled at his mother's thoughtfulness, recalling sharply how every time he had to sell a ring, he'd unstitch the white blanket thread that his mother had sewn into the coat fabric with her heavy needle. 'She said to me, "Jun-oh-*ah*, sell these whenever you need to. Eat good hot food. When you return, my boy, we shall have such a feast."' The yellowish whites of Joseph's eyes welled up.

'She unclasped the brooch from her *choggori*, then she handed it to me. You see, I didn't understand. I thought I was supposed to return home in a few days. Three or four, at the most.' His voice grew softer. 'She didn't expect me to sell the pin. The rings, yes, but not . . .'

Casey drew breath, then exhaled. It must have been the thirtieth time she'd heard this tale. She made a face. 'I know. Not the pin,' she said.

Aghast, Tina nudged her sister's knee with her own.

'What did you say?' Joseph narrowed the slant of his small, elegant eyes. His sad expression grew cold.

'Nothing,' Casey said. 'Nothing.'

Leah pleaded silently with a look, hoping Casey would restrain herself. But her daughter refused to notice her.

Joseph picked up his tumbler for a drink. He wanted to stay with the memory of his mother, the leaf green silk of her jacket, the cool whiteness of the pin. He'd never forget the day he left the jeweler with the bit of money he got in exchange for the pin, his hasty walk to the herbalist to buy the foul-smelling twigs and leaves that never cured his wife.

Wanting to create some distraction, Leah removed her apron and then folded it conspicuously. 'Tina, would you pray for us?' she asked.

Tina would have done anything to make Casey control herself. She brushed aside her thick black hair and bowed her head. 'Heavenly Father, we thank You for this food. We thank You for our many blessings. Lead us, dear Lord, to Your good service. Show us Your will; let our he arts and minds converge with it. We pray in the name of our dear Redeemer, Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior. Amen.' Privately, Tina wanted God to tell her what she should do with Chul – how she could keep him interested in her without having premarital sex with him, or if he was the one to whom she should give herself. Tina wanted a sign; she'd been praying for guidance for the past several months, but she could discern nothing except her own pressing desire for this boy.

Leah smiled at Tina, then Casey. In her heart, she, too, was praying, Dear God, let there be thanksgiving, because at last, we are together.

Before anyone could eat, Joseph spoke. ‘So what are you going to do?’

Casey stared at the steam rising from her rice bowl. ‘I thought I’d try to figure it out this summer. No one’s hiring now, but on Monday, I’m going to the library to write some cover letters for jobs starting in the fall. Sabine also said I could get more hours during the week if someone leaves. Maybe I could work in another department if she –’

‘You know the options,’ he said.

Casey nodded.

‘A real job,’ her father said. ‘Or law school. Selling hats is not a real job. Making eight dollars an hour after getting an education worth eighty thousand dollars is the stupidest thing I have ever heard of. Why did you go to Princeton to sell hairpins?’

Casey nodded again, pulling her lower lip into her mouth. The blood left her face, making it paler.

Leah peered at Joseph’s expression. Was it safe to speak? He hated it when she took the girls’ side.

‘Graduation was just last week,’ she ventured. ‘Maybe she could rest a little at home. Just read or watch *terebi*.’ Her voice was faltering. She smiled at her daughter. ‘Casey had all those exams.’ She tried to shore up her voice and sound as if it were the most natural thing in the world for someone in her family to graduate from college and then to figure things out. Casey was staring at her rice bowl but didn’t pick up her spoon. ‘Why don’t you let her eat?’ Leah said carefully. ‘She’s probably tired.’

‘Tired? From that country club?’ Joseph scoffed at the absurdity.

Leah shut up. It was useless. She knew from his face that he wouldn’t hear her, nor would he let her win any points in front of the girls. Maybe Tina might say something to help the conversation along. But she looked as if she were somewhere else entirely, chewing her rice with her lips sealed. Even as a child, Tina had been a good eater.

Casey studied the white walls. Every Saturday night, it was her mother's ritual to wipe down the glossy painted walls with Fantastik.

'Why are you so tired?' Joseph asked Casey, furious that she was ignoring him. 'I'm talking to you,' he said.

She glared at him. Enough, she thought. 'Schoolwork is work. I've always worked hard . . . just as hard as you work at the store. Maybe harder. Do you know what it's like for me to have to go to a school like that? To be surrounded by kids who went to Exeter and Hotchkiss, their parents belonging to country clubs, and having a dad who could always make a call to save their ass? Do you know what it's like to ace my courses and to make and keep friends when they think you're nothing because you're from nowhere? I've had kids step away from me like I'm unwashed after I tell them you manage a dry cleaner. Do you have any idea what it's like to have people who are supposed to be your equals look through you like you're made of glass and what they see inside looks filthy to them? Do you have any clue?' Casey was screaming now. She raised her right hand as if to strike him, then she pulled back, having surprised herself. She clasped her hand over her heart, unable to keep from shaking.

'What? What do you want from me?' she asked at last.

'What I want from you?' Joseph looked confused. He repeated himself. 'What I want from you?' He turned to Leah. 'Do you hear what she's saying to me?' Then he muttered, 'I should just kill her and me right now, and be done with it.' He cast about the table as if he were searching for a weapon. Then he screamed, 'What the hell do I want from you?' Using both hands, he shoved the dinner table away from him. The water glasses clinked against the dinner plates. Soup spilled over the bowls. Joseph could not believe his daughter's nerve.

'What do I want from you?'

‘Dammit, that isn’t what I meant.’ Casey tried to keep her voice from quavering, and she willed herself from dissolving into tears. Don’t be afraid, she told herself; don’t be afraid.

Leah shouted in Korean, ‘Casey, shut up. Shut up.’ How could the girl be so stupid? What was the point of being good at school if she couldn’t understand timing or the idea of finessing a difficult person? Her older daughter was like an angry animal, and Leah wondered how it was that she hadn’t been able to prevent her from becoming so much like Joseph in this way. A man could have so much anger, but a woman, no, a woman could not live with that much rage – that was how the world worked. How would Casey survive?

Joseph stood up. ‘Get up,’ he said, gesturing with his hand for Casey to rise.

Leah tried to pull him down. ‘*Yobo* . . .’ She was begging him, and her fingers caught the belt loop of his slacks, but he swiped her hand away and pushed her back to her seat.

Casey rose from her chair, tucking aside the loose hair that had fallen over her face.

‘You stupid girl, sit down,’ Leah cried, hoping that of the two, Casey might be reasonable. ‘*Yobo*,’ she pleaded. ‘The dinner . . .’ She wept.

‘Come here,’ he said, his voice calm. ‘What?’ he began, his shimmering eyes unblinking. ‘You think you know more about life and how you should live?’ He’d long feared that his college-educated children might one day feel superior to him, but he would never have held them back from any height they wanted to scale. Still, he hadn’t anticipated how cruel it’d be for his child to condescend to him in this way – to consider herself equal to him in experience, in suffering, in the things he had seen. He could hear his Korean accent muddying his English words, and he regretted having told them always to speak English at home. He’d done this for their benefit – so they wouldn’t look stupid in front of the Americans, the way he did. Joseph regretted so many things.

Tentatively, Casey shook her head from side to side, not quite believing what an asshole he was. He was so unfair.

Tina pressed the fine features of her oval face into her folded hands. From behind her seat, she could feel the heat of Casey's long body moving toward their father. Ever since Casey was in high school, she'd fought with Joseph once or twice a year. And each year, her sister's anger toward their father grew, compacting into a hard, implacable thing. In ninth grade, Tina went on an overnight school trip to Boston, and there, at a museum, she saw a real cannonball. Tina could imagine such a thing lodged in Casey's belly, sheltered between the fingerlike bones of her ribs. But no matter what, Tina adored her sister. Even now, as Casey stood in front of their father, awaiting a painful judgment, there was an obvious grace in her erect posture. All her life, Tina had studied Casey, and now was no different. Casey's white linen shirt hung casually on her lean frame, the cuffs of her sleeves were folded over as if she were about to pick up a brush to paint a picture, and her narrow white wrists were adorned with the pair of wide silver cuffs she'd worn since high school – an expensive gift from Casey's boss, Sabine.

Tina whispered, 'Casey, why don't you sit down?'

Her father ignored this, as did Casey.

Joseph lowered his voice. 'You don't know what it's like to have nowhere to sleep. You don't know what it's like to be so hungry that you'd steal to eat. You've never even had a job except at that Sook-ja Kennedy's store,' he said.

'Don't call her that. Her name is Sabine Jun Gottesman.' She spat out each part of her boss's name like a nail but kept herself from saying, *How could you be so ungrateful?* After all, Sabine had given his daughter a flexible job, generous bonuses that helped pay for her books, for clothes – all because Sabine had gone to Leah's elementary school in Korea. Sabine and Leah had not even been friends back then – they were merely two Korean girls from the same

home-town and school who'd by chance run into each other as grown women on the other side of the globe – of all places, at the Elizabeth Arden counter at Macy's in Herald Square. It was Sabine who'd offered to hire Leah's daughter for her store. And over the years, the childless Sabine had taken Casey on – the way she had with many of her young employees. She'd bought her rare and beautiful things, including the Italian horn-rimmed eyeglasses she was wearing now. The glasses had cost four hundred dollars, including the prescription lenses. Sabine had treated Casey better than anyone else had, and Casey hated her father for not seeing that.

'I had to work for Sabine. I had no choice, did I?'

Joseph looked up at the ceiling tiles above their kitchen. He exhaled, stunned by the child's meanness.

Casey felt bad for him suddenly, because for as long as she could remember, they never had any money, and her father was ashamed of this. Her paternal grandfather was supposed to have been very rich but had died before her father had any real opportunity to know him. Joseph believed that if his father had explained to him how a man made money, things would have turned out differently. In truth, Casey had never blamed her parents for not being better off, because they worked so hard. Money was something people had or didn't. In the end, things had worked out for her at school: Princeton had paid for nearly everything; her parents paid whatever portion they'd been asked to contribute, so she didn't have any college loans. The school had provided her with health insurance for the first time in her life and, with it, cheap birth control. For books, clothes, and walking around money, she'd taken a train to the city every weekend and worked at Sabine's.

'I . . . I . . .' Casey tried to think of some way to take it back but couldn't.

Joseph looked her squarely in the face, studying her defiance. 'Take off your glasses,' he said.

Casey pulled off the tortoiseshell horn-rims from her face. She squinted at her father. From where she stood, not quite three feet away from him, she could still see his face clearly: the wavy lines carved into his jaundiced brow, the large, handsome ears mottled with liver spots, and his firm mouth – the only feature she took after. Casey rested her glasses on the table. Her face was now the color of bleached parchment; the only color in it came from her lipstick. Casey didn't look afraid, more resigned than anything else.

Joseph raised his hand and struck her across the mouth with an open palm.

She had expected this, and the arrival of the blow was almost a relief. Now it was over, she thought. Casey held her cheek with her left hand and looked away, not knowing what to do then. It was always awkward after he hit her. She felt little pain, even though he had used great force; Casey was in fact watching herself, and she wished the person who was watching her and the body she inhabited could merge and come to a decision. What to do, she wondered.

'You think good grades and selling hats is work? Do you think you could survive an hour out there? I send you to college. Your mother and I bring lunch from home or share one sandwich from the deli so you and Tina can have extra money for school, and all you learn is bad manners. How dare you? How dare you speak to your father this way?'

Leah wanted to stop this, and she rose again from her chair, but Joseph shoved her back down.

Joseph then struck Casey again. This time, Casey's torso weaved a bit. A sound rang in her ears. She regained her balance by firming her jaw and balling her fists tighter. Why was he doing this? Yes, he didn't want her to talk back to him. As her father, he deserved respect and obedience – this Confucian crap was bred in her bones. But this ritual where he cut her down to size had happened so many times before, and always it was the same: He hit her, and she let him. She couldn't shut up, although it made sense to do so;

certainly, Tina never talked back, and she was never hit. Then, as if a switch clicked on, Casey decided that she'd no longer consider his side of the argument. His intentions were no longer relevant. She couldn't stand there anymore getting smacked. She was twenty-two, a university graduate. This was bullshit.

'Say you're sorry,' Leah said, holding her breath, and she nodded encouragingly, as if she were asking a baby to take another bite of cereal.

Casey drew her lips closer still, hating her mother more.

Joseph grew calmer, and Leah prayed for this to be over.

'This girl has no respect for me,' he said to Leah, his eyes still locked on Casey's reddened face. 'She's not . . . good.'

'She is sorry,' Leah apologized for her daughter. 'I know she is. Casey is a good girl, and she doesn't mean any of those things. She's just so exhausted from school.' Leah turned to her. 'Hurry. Go. Go to your room, now. Hurry.'

'You spoil the children. You let this happen. No wonder these girls talk to their father this way,' he said.

Tina got up from her seat. She rested her hands lightly on her sister's thin shoulders, trying to steer her away, but Casey refused to follow. Their mother wept; she had cooked all afternoon. Nothing was eaten. Tina wished to rewind time, to come back to the table and start again.

Tina murmured, 'Casey, Casey, come on . . . please.'

Casey stared at her father. 'I'm not spoiled. Neither is she,' Casey said, pointing to Tina. 'I'm sick of hearing how bad I am when I'm not. You won the sweepstakes with kids like us. Why aren't we good enough? Why aren't we ever fucking good enough? Just fuck this. Fuck you.' She said this last part quietly.

Joseph folded his arms over his stomach in shock, unable to accept what she was saying.

'And why am I not good enough right now? Without doing another damn thing?' Casey's voice broke, and now she was sobbing herself, not because he had hit her, but because

she understood that she had always felt shortchanged by her father. It wasn't as though she hadn't tried.

Joseph took a breath and swung his fist, hitting her face so hard that Casey fell. Her eyeglasses ricocheted off the table and skittered across the floor. Tina hurried to pick them up. A nose pad was broken, and one of the sides had nearly snapped off. Casey grabbed the table for support, and the Formica table with its cheap metal legs toppled, and she slipped, falling amid the crash of bowls and dishes. A bright red flush spread over Casey's right eye, adding color to the handprints shadowing her left cheek.

'Get up,' he said.

With her fingers splayed across the green linoleum, Casey pulled herself off the remaining dry patch of floor. Somehow she was standing in front of him again. Blood trickled inside her cut lip, the metal taste icing her tongue.

'You going to hit me again?' she asked, her tongue sweeping across her teeth.

Joseph shook his head. 'Get out. Get your things and leave my house. I don't know you,' he said, his speech formal. His arms hung limply against his body. Fighting was useless now. He'd failed as a father, and she'd died as someone to watch over. He left the kitchen, stepping across the broken pieces of a white ceramic water pitcher. From the living room, he turned around but refused to look at Casey. 'I sent you to school. I did what I could. I'm done now, and I want you gone by morning. It makes me sick to look at you.'

Leah and the girls watched as he walked into his bedroom and closed the door. Casey sat down in her father's empty chair. She stared up at the ceiling tiles, unconsciously counting them as she used to do at meals. Tina smoothed her hair in an effort to comfort herself and tried to regulate her breath. Leah sat still, her hands clutching the skirt of her dress. He had left the room; he'd never done that before. She believed that it would have been better if Joseph had stayed in the room and slapped Casey again.

Two

Credit

THE CHILDHOOD BEDROOM Tina and Casey had shared until Casey went away to school was far smaller than any of her dorm rooms in Mathey College or Cuyler Hall. The girls' bunk beds were pushed up against the length of the room, blocking a dirty window that could not be cleaned from inside. Above the laminated headboard of the top bunk where Casey slept hung a faded poster of Lynda Carter dressed as Wonder Woman, her arms akimbo. Within the framed space of the bottom bunk, Tina had taped up a free Yankees poster from Burger King that she'd gotten when she was in primary school. Barely eighteen inches from the bed were two mismatched plywood desks and a pair of white gooseneck lamps from Ohrbach's. Above the desks, the girls had papered the walls with unframed certificates of excellence from their school years: Among their many awards, Casey had received recognition for photography, music, and social studies; Tina, for geometry, religion, physics, and BC calculus.

Casey didn't notice the awards anymore, their curled edges stuck down with yellowing Scotch tape. Nor did she notice the uncomfortable scale of the room or its lack of natural light. In the first years of visits back from school, she'd compared the glorious working fireplace in her suite in Mathey, the wood-paneled classrooms, and the stained-glass windows with the Dacron blue pile carpet in her

Elmhurst bedroom and the bulletproof glass in her apartment building lobby, and she decided that she could not afford to look too critically at what was home, because it hurt.

Following the fight with her father, Casey went to her bedroom for the sole purpose of retrieving her Marlboros, and as soon as she got them and a book of matches, she walked out the front door.

She hiked three flights of stairs instead of taking the elevator because there was no other way to get to the tar-paved roof. From memory, she keyed in the security code – 4-1-7-4, the birth date of Etelda, the building superintendent's only daughter. For years, Casey had helped Etelda with her schoolwork, then later tutored her for the SATs. In consideration, her father, Sandro, gave Casey free rein of the roof. When Etelda got a full scholarship to attend Bates College, Sandro bought a metal café table and two matching chairs from a hardware store in Paramus with his own money and left the gift along with a glass ashtray on the roof for its sole visitor.

But now Casey didn't pull up a café chair. She sat on the wide parapet bordering the roof, dangling her legs against the north side of the building facing the street, not caring if her white pants were dirtied by the brown brick facade. The night breezes, undetectable in her mother's airtight kitchen, brushed against her battered face. There was little light in the sky, no sign of the moon, and as for stars, Casey had never seen any in Queens. The first time she saw a black sky pierced with what seemed like an infinite number of white holes was on a trip to Newport with her roommate, Virginia, to her grandmother's house during a school vacation. What Casey felt initially was the pause in her own breathing. The sight literally took her breath away. Then she craned her neck to stare at the swirl of the Milky Way, and she could hardly be persuaded to go back into the great house despite the mosquitoes nibbling on her ankles. For

the remainder of her visit, the senior Mrs Craft pronounced Casey ‘that starry-eyed girl.’ The next day, when her mosquito bites grew fat and pink on her ankles and toes – forming their own raised constellation – Casey felt no regret whatsoever. At the age of nineteen, she’d finally seen stars.

Casey yearned for the darkened steel layer of city sky, banded by pink-and-gray ribbons of twilight, to be stripped to reveal the stars. There was no way to see them. Fine, she thought, feeling deprived. From where she sat, there were countless identical apartment unit windows brightened with electric bulbs, each covered by a square glass shade screwed into the ceiling. On both sides of Van Kleeck Street, there were attached rental apartment buildings raised in the late 1960s by the same developer – all with the same floor plans, Whirlpool refrigerators, and small closets. Inside them, lightbulbs flickered invitingly. The apartments were brick beehives – defined pockets of air, sound, and light. Casey wanted to believe that in them there could be happiness and not just droning.

Casey began to play her favorite roof game. There were hardly any rules, only one objective: to choose a window, then to study the contents in view. She had the idea that your possessions told about you: A plaid, duct-taped armchair showed a man’s brokenness; a heavily gilded mirror reflected a woman’s regal soul that had not yet faded; and a paper cylinder of store-brand oatmeal left out on a kitchen counter witnessed a lack of coins in a retiree’s purse.

Across the street, at eye level, Casey made out a South Asian boy and girl watching television in a modest-size living room. They were perhaps elementary school age. Casey wanted to sit beside them, silent, invisible, and breathless, because their handsome, earnest faces possessed wonder about the images transmitted to them. The glow of Casey’s cigarette kept her company, but she would’ve preferred a lamp and a book or, in her current