

Amy Chan

## Flux

Sunday noon, seven days into 2019. My family and I walked into the brand-new Starbucks on Bobby Jones Expressway, at my own insistence. It had been open for a year, while I was away living in New York, and my family had gone every Sunday without me. It was their new tradition, sitting ordering fancy burnt coffee and gabbing about all the other Chinese people in Augusta, in a venue just spacious enough to talk loud and not be bothered. Not content to miss out on anything, I had begged at lunch at Red Lobster that we all coffee-break together, before dropping my brother Mike off at Gold's Gym to work out with friends. The sun was splintering, unseasonably warm for a quaint winter coffee; still my family enthused at the idea, wanting to show their girl the works, the newly-erected pride of Bobby Jones.

At the shop, Dad and I went to order the drinks, as we always did. Mom, Grandma, and Mike sat in the armchairs by the righthand corner, ordering us to order for them. They wanted mainly regular sized coffees (Grandma) and caramel macchiatos they couldn't pronounce (my parents) and Frappuccinos the size of their head (my brother). I asked my brother whether he had to work out or something, to which he replied that it gave him energy, not once looking up from his phone. I shrugged and approached the counter with Dad.

There was a long line, and Dad and I were standing at the pinch of the U-bend enough time for my eyes to wander. I noticed a ceramic Georgia mug on a shelf to my right. Two peaches were delicately painted on the side, a watery bottom, above them the words *Georgia on my mind*— clichéd but silly and sweet from certain angles, a perfect representation of home. I wanted it. I lifted it up and waved it in front of Dad. *It was a memento. Me. It was overpriced. Dad. Sentimentality is never too expensive. Me. So do you not know you're from Georgia or something?* Dad. The back-and-forth growing old, Dad at last “*ai-yah*’ed!” and urged me to just buy the damn thing if I wanted. I tittered, winning the acquiescence I aimed for, ultimately making an about turn and insisting no, I wouldn’t buy it — I only wanted permission after all, not to actually do it. Dad tsk’ed at me and we moved another spot forward.

Because I had sauntered through the door without looking at a single face — a New York City learned courtesy — I hadn’t fully grasped all the people sitting around me. We still had a few in line in front of us and time to spare, so I turned my head to observe, jolting when I recognized a couple at a small round table almost point blank behind me. The woman censored her face with a journal and took notes on what seemed to be *Wuthering Heights*. The man donned black earphones and vaguely hunched over his Macbook. Both had taught me English before, at different times. The wife was my AP English teacher junior year, who had encouraged me to submit an essay on *Jane Eyre* to a writing contest. I won nothing but never forgot her kindness. The husband was my seventh-grade English teacher who had once spent a whole class comparing the blackness of our two heads of hair. He was eventually fired for drawing a penis on the board. The Dentons were about as unsuited to each other as their past behaviors implied, and rarely had I ever seen them speak words to

each other, very often keeping a distance of at least a foot between them, staring at the ceiling, the floor, anything but each other — much like now.

I whipped my head back to face the front of the line. I was less anxious than I usually was at seeing acquaintances because I knew I looked very different from high school, with the short hair and baggy style evolution of coming into one's "wokeness." Beyond that, it had been almost nine years. The Dentons had seen many students come and go, and besides those two small moments, I had never connected to either of them very closely. Still, the jolt had run through me and I was alert now.

Finally, Dad and I reached the front of the line, placing our orders.

"It might be a little while," the cashier said. "We're backed up at the moment. Just got a rush."

"Yes, that's very fine," Dad and I replied. "We've got time. Don't worry about it." But I was tapping my foot up and down wishing to stand somewhere less obviously visible, impatient not for the drinks but to hide. Dad and I shuffled to the pick-up corner behind four or five women who had all been waiting at least the length of time Dad and I were in line, and were currently tapping on the wood top or going so far as to bend over the counter, peering behind the drink holders. Arms folded, Dad and I watched them, silently bemused, until all of a sudden I caught sight of another familiar profile in a penguin tracksuit joining the ranks of the bender-overs. *Oh, god, I gasped, Could this moment get any worse?*

"Dad," I whispered furtively, "I'm going to go sit back down with Mom and Grandma. I see someone I know." Mrs. Turner had come from nowhere. Dad and I had not seen her in line; she had popped up like the devil she was. Surely, her furious incantation powers resided in that mystical pact called an online order, but you couldn't have convinced me of such things at the moment.

Dad, eyes darting furiously, almost shouted: “Who do you see?”

I hissed, “Mrs. Turner, Dad! And be quiet!”

Dad retorted, eyes brimming with disdain: “You chicken!”

I rushed to rejoin the family, stealing the seat beside Mom she was reserving for Dad. Mom’s eyes were dancing. “*Ai*, I saw that. I recognized her right when she came in.” She spoke behind a closed fist, thinking she was somehow sneaky. I didn’t have to ask whom Mom was referencing.

“She turned, looked right at me when she came in. Didn’t even act like she knew me! The *shw paw* (*bitch*)!” Mom cursed. Mrs. Turner was one, certainly, but the curse came a little harsh to my ears. “I know she knows who I am. How could she not? Ten years, both my daughters playing tennis with her. The *shw paw*!” Mom repeated. She loved repetition for effect. If you didn’t stop her, she could say the same two phrases in a whirlwind until she almost passed out for lack of breath.

“And you! You coward! I knew you had no guts!” She turned on me. “Just say hi! It won’t hurt you. You know her!” My mother was incredible. Who was this woman who could fault a stranger and her daughter in the same beat?

I stared at her. Paused — for effect. Mom wasn’t the only one with dramatic tricks up her sleeve. “Mom, I intoned, “don’t be a bitch.”

My eyes rolled around the place, looking for distraction, praying Mrs. Turner wouldn’t catch me and say hi. Mom was right — my older sister and I had played tennis with her almost all our lives, and there was more of a chance of her recognizing me than the Dentons. In fact, I was surprised she hadn’t caught me earlier already. *Oh, god, oh, god*, I thought, *Which is the lesser evil? Being seen by the Dentons or being seen by Mrs.*

*Turner?* I was caught in the righthand corner perfectly square between the two, debating whether to shift behind my mother and risk being more overt to the Dentons, or shift further to the right and front to place myself square behind an obstacle in front of the Dentons, being more obvious to Mrs. Turner. The woman was currently tapping *and* bending over the counter *and* saying her name repeatedly, insisting her order should already have been ready ten minutes ago, completely ignoring Dad right beside her, whom she should have recognized from my tennis matches. I decided to lean back further behind Mom.

Nervous, I joked, *Who else will I see today?* And in walked Mr. Harvey, who glanced at me briefly, igniting the spark of recognition between us. *Devil take my accursed tongue!* I whispered, or as Mom would always say in Canto, *jut lay-gah bah how (shut your stupid mouth)!* This time I had been recognized, and rightly so. Mr. Harvey was a regular at Barnes & Noble, where I used to work as a barista the summer before I moved to New York. He would make his typical afternoon appearance and order a red eye, sometimes a decaf Earl Grey — “with an extra bag for the special customer,” my boss would insist. Mr. Harvey was the face who had seen me the most recently, who had acquainted himself with my newest iteration. In the Starbucks, we had several seconds of eye contact which would have resulted in a verbal brawl in New York. I tightened up. He passed.

*He's coming here now? What are the chances?* I thought. I tugged on Mom's sleeve, threw glances to my left and, despite still resenting her bitchiness, whispered “Look! Another person I know!”

In an Augusta Starbucks on a January noon, my past had caught me. With each familiar face, I saw a familiar Emily, a past iteration of who I was and the possible ghost of who I could have been. With Mrs. Turner, I saw the me who could have been a tennis star. Me who was a singles prodigy at nine, forced into daily

two hour sessions because of Mom, routing boys several years older than me in practice but choking viciously in USTA matches. Me who could have gone to Florida to train, won a scholarship on tennis, learned to stop letting the pressure of competition crush me, sacrificed my life to the tennis gods. With the Dentons, I saw the me who was a roiling, insecure, untouched girl. Me who had a best friend named Rob with liberal ideals and a handicapped left hand, who entered short story competitions with *Jane Eyre* analytical essays hoping for glory, who curled her hair with bright pink rollers and infected her eyes wearing contacts just so someone at Warrenton Prep would love her. Me who might have gone to UGA as opposed to UPenn, married a moon-faced boy named Joe, joined Kappa Kappa Gamma and popped out a baby at 22. Me who might have assimilated and settled early in life. With Mr. Harvey, I saw the me who scared me the most. Me who graduated from Penn jobless, goalless, unsure of whether to move to New York or stay in Augusta, angry and bitter because Penn had sapped me, consumed with accolades and awards. Me who started writing a revamped *Ulysses* to emulate Zadie Smith, tossing the pages after the first chapter because the project lacked purity. Me who could have stayed in Augusta, thinking my life was over, writing pages of nothing and resenting my parents till I died.

These ghosts unnerved me. Not because they disgusted, but because they tempted. They repulsed and attracted, like the whispers of Pandora's box. They held some kind of truth, some piece of me, which I worried I had left behind when I left home. Who was I now? I couldn't claim I was dedicated, that mirage had left after the countless clubs and magazines I joined and then quit. Couldn't claim I loved people, constantly missing friends' and family's visits to study for tests or work on my columns. Couldn't claim I was a talented writer, my well of ideas had run dry.

Suddenly, Dad sat down and handed me a venti black tea. I started, staring absently at Dad. After a few seconds, I told him, “I ordered a tall.”

Dad replied, “They gave you a Venti because it took so long.” He relaxed himself into another vacant armchair to my right, and he and Mom gossiped over me about Mrs. Turner.

“*Sehw paw (bitch)!*” Dad cursed. “She still owes you \$10, Em, from that time you taught her tennis classes. Do you remember? *Sehw paw!* Cheap as hell! Wouldn’t even pay you that small amount.” Mrs. Turner had asked my best friend and me to cover for her while she vacationed in Savannah one week in June 2012 — so I’ve been told. My friend and I had hit balls and corrected forehands with fifth graders. Mrs. Turner had promised to drop the payment in our mailboxes, but never asked our addresses. To this day, the memory seems imaginary, but at Dad’s words, blurry summer greens surfaced before my eyes.

I breathed slowly, softly, waking up and finding the day outside still blue. Mrs. Turner still owed me something, was still tied to me somehow. The thought comforted me. I shook my head to clear the ghosts, begging myself not to open the door or it would be the end of me, but a last one escaped, whispering a promise.

There were ghosts and there was history. While I’d thought my whole life I had to choose between the two, maybe they were really one and the same. I had not run the course of all those other lives, had not fully inhabited all those other Emily’s, but had I not still been them, albeit in part and too briefly? And were they not in me now, as I saw in my mind’s eye, clamoring for the moment they could reclaim the spotlight? I had always thought that the one path we chose was the path that mattered. That the only self that existed was the self we would become. But the millions of invisible paths and invisible ghosts we thought we forewent in forging ourselves never disappeared, because nothing was ever final. Our lives were forever in flux.

I cleared my throat. “Whatever, Dad. It’s water under the bridge now.” I glanced at Dad to my left, Mom to my right. Grandma, resting face into palm, falling asleep. Mike staring at his phone. All resting. Me breathing.

“Eh, forget it,” Dad said. “It’s not like you’ll see her again.”

“Well...” I said. “Who knows? It’s a small town.” I diverted. “Mike,” I called out. “What time is it?”

“12:45,” he said. “Almost time to go.”

“We should just go now,” I said.

“*Aiyah*, yes, let’s go,” Dad agreed. We got up from our armchairs. Dad and I were to see *Spiderverse* after dropping Mike off at the gym; Mom and Grandma would go to Macy’s. Mom and Grandma took off in Grandma’s black Camry.

“See you later, old man,” Mom smiled in farewell to Dad. Dad, Mike, and I stepped into our white Escalade, preparing to cross the street to Gold’s on the other side. The weather outside was still unseasonably warm, getting only warmer. I squinted as the sun merged blue and yellow in the windshield. Lines of green hid in the edges.