

## The Responsibility of Deceit

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We arrived in Napa Valley at night, after battling Friday rush-hour traffic and dodging oncoming cars on the two-lane roads. Our headlights illuminated snatches of rolling hills, fences, and metal stakes in the dark vineyards.

It was all last minute. A friend of Peter's prepaid for a stay months ago at a bed-and-breakfast but broke up with her boyfriend last week. Planning in advance jinxed things. This trip was our first to wine country. We had stayed in Russian River and sunned poolside with the other men at Fife's, but Calistoga offered gauzily romantic activities: hot-air balloon rides, couples' massages, and bicycles built for two. We needed to get away. In the last month, after our fight in the car, we had avoided each other, spending time apart at lab, at work, or at the gym.

The GPS told us to go left, right, right, until we were parked in front of Whitmore Manor, where everyone else appeared to be tucked away for the evening. The owner had left the keys to our room and to the house taped to the tall front doors, along with a note written in tight, small cursive script: *Quiet hours begin after 10 pm. Extra pillows and blankets are in the armoire. Breakfast served from 8 to 9:30 am.*

She had signed the note, "Mistress Goodnough."

"She sounds like a discount dominatrix," I said.

"Or a pilgrim."

We crept into the house like bandits, our eyes adjusting to the glow from the moon and the night-light in the front parlor. There was a plate of chocolate chip cookies on a side table. Reaching for one, I tripped over a cat, which yowled and darted under the table. Laughing, Peter stilled the quaking table and righted the chubby porcelain figurines toppled next to the cookies. I wasn't used to house pets. My immigrant Chinese parents saw no use in feeding an animal that lived in the house, or for that matter, any creature not bound for the dinner table. Practical, they saw themselves undisputed at the top of the food chain.

As a result, I was uneasy around dogs and cats, never quite sure what to do with myself or their sentience, and nervous around goldfish, wondering if I should tap the glass tank or leave them alone. Peter bonded with animals, extending his curled hand to their noses, getting on his knees to play with them, and letting them lick his face. "You're too easy," I once said, teasing him about his loose affections. "You're too cautious," he replied.

We took careful steps on the creaking staircase to our third-floor room, the Hedgehog's Nook, dominated by a huge four-poster bed, hung with watercolor sketches of the misty English countryside, and scented with lavender. A pair of stuffed hedgehogs, kissing, sat against plumped pillows. One was wearing a lace dress and a bonnet, the other wore a checkered cap and short red velvet pants on its stubby legs. A magnet held their lips together.

I set the pair on the mahogany nightstand, turning their heads to the wall. I didn't want them to see what we were up to. When I turned around, Peter was sprawled on his stomach, wearing only his boxers. Like Clark Kent, he could shuck off his clothes in a single bound. Tall and lean, he had curly brown hair starting to thin that we were debating whether to shave off. I was shorter, stocky, and strong from lifting weights.

He was more comfortable than me stripping down in strange places. In locker rooms, I kept a towel wrapped around my waist when I changed. At clubs, when men tore off their ribbed undershirts while dancing, I kept mine on.

"Calvin, I wonder how many couples have put this to use?" He tested the springiness of the bed with his hand, his query both scientific and flirtatious.

I slid in next to him. "Is that including the hedgehogs?"

At sixteen, he came out to his mother after his car broke down in the Castro. He'd spent the evening groping strangers in a club he'd entered with a fake ID. Although she picked him up with no questions, he told her over fries at the Bagdad Café. She had suspected, she said, but was waiting for him to tell her.

With me, Peter worried about dating someone still coming out, and that he served as a training wheel that I would cast off when I came into my own.

"You'll marry a woman to please your parents," he had said as we drifted off to sleep one night. I held him tighter, but said nothing. I did not want to promise what I could not predict. In three years, I had revealed myself to my sister, Jeanne, to my friends, to coworkers, and to our neighbors in Berkeley. All dry runs for when I would tell my parents.

Last year, my family had watched an evening newscast that featured the Pride Parade in San Francisco. Drag queens, dykes on bikes, and so on. Then an Asian Pacific Islander group walked by, waving rainbow flags and beating drums.

"Those are Thai and Filipino." My father walked to the television and scrutinized them, inches from the screen. "Not Chinese."

Behind him, my sister had smirked. My mother glanced at the ancestral shrine on our mantelpiece, piled with oranges and fragrant with incense. "Their poor parents."

A THIN SHAFT of light through the heavy velvet drapes meant it had to be morning, probably early. Peter stirred beside me. I envied

how he could immediately plunge into deep sleep, and then awaken ready to go, no matter where we were or how late we had stayed up.

His hand drifted across my stomach and down my thigh.

Mornings used to be our specialty, a quick romp before we headed out. We fell into each other. Afterward, I listened to the sound of water running somewhere in the house, and footsteps through the walls and the floor. Very soon, we would no longer have the whole place to ourselves.

“Let’s go for a walk.” Peter bounded over to the window and pulled open the drapes, letting in blinding light. I turned my head toward the wall.

“I think we’re in a historic district. We don’t have to go far.” Whenever we traveled, Peter was out the door first, headed toward whatever looked interesting while I trailed behind with tour books and maps. I was in no mood to explore this morning, preferring to curl in bed with Peter, and try to reclaim a little lost sleep. “I don’t feel like getting lost before breakfast,” I said.

“Come on—live a little.”

I pushed off the covers, willing myself to get out of bed. Peter flipped through a magazine on the coffee table, and then threw it back down.

“Never mind. We have all weekend.” He disappeared into the bathroom and started the shower.

He was the only person I had ever been with, and I was still learning how to act in a relationship. My teenage years passed by without the usual sexual fumbling and confusion. Studying was enough for me, and for my parents, and in college, I continued as a sexless engineer, seeking comfort in the cold order of circuits.

As a graduation requirement, I took a biology seminar on animal behavior. I wrote a paper on homosexuality in animals, about rams that butted heads, male monkeys that rubbed one another, and boy dogs that licked each other. There were fags everywhere in the animal kingdom, exhibiting similarities that looked like the truth.

It had been obvious that I was struggling with myself. Peter had been amused at my awkward attempt to understand, but also had admired my logic, my drive to think through the matter. He hoped to see how I would turn out, he told his friends. He could want the kind of man I would become.

We ran into each other a year after graduation and only then did I admit to myself I was attracted to him. Even then, I thought it was because I found his field of study, biomechanical engineering, interesting. Later, when he kissed me, the years of calculus and physics fell away under the simple proof of his lips.

“In the animal kingdom, geese mate for life,” I told him on our one-year anniversary. We were parked in a turnout in the Berkeley Hills, looking at the dark water of the bay and the glittering lights of San Francisco.

“Yes, but they also lay eggs and fly south for the winter,” he said. “They’re birds; instinct is all they know.”

PETER HAD SEEN my childhood home only once before, last month when my parents were visiting my aunt in Los Angeles. He wanted to see where I grew up. I agreed, but only on the condition that we wore baseball hats and sunglasses. Lavenida was a small town, and we risked running into people who knew me.

“Why do I need to hide?” Peter had asked. “No one knows who I am.”

“But then I’ll look out of place, if I’m the only one covered up.”

On the tour of my childhood, we first stopped by my elementary school, where the metal play structures had been replaced with a fancy climbing wall, and the sand with rubber mats. Then we visited the library, where I found a haven of science fiction books as a teenager. At my favorite novelty store, Peter bought sour apple bombs and a handful of green army men, one of which he marched over my arms and shoulders as I drove.

After we turned off the main strip of small shops, I followed the road to my neighborhood, passing through a tunnel of trees. I kept an eye out for deer and wild turkeys, whose population flourished here with no predator but car bumpers. Many houses were set back from the main road, glimpsed over hedges and through lush trees. Peter twisted around, looking in all directions, as if we were on an African safari instead of a ride down a suburban street.

“Did your parents change the house much?” Peter asked.

“After I left for college, Mom turned my bedroom into a guest room.” My mother took over the closet space, but kept the same twin bed and plaid comforter. “She left my Academic Decathlon trophies. Jeanne calls it ‘the shrine.’”

“Impressive. The same posters, too, on the walls? Let me guess. A black-and-white shot of Einstein, with his tongue sticking out? A map of the solar system? Or maybe an Oakland A’s player you were fascinated with, but didn’t know why at the time. You wanted to know all his stats?”

The soldier lingered on my ear, circling, toying with my lobe. I took my right hand off the steering wheel and ruffled the back of his head.

“If you already knew everything about me, why did you want to come?”

“You might surprise me,” he said. “There’s a small chance.”

“Am I that predictable?”

“Not predictable, Calvin. Just transparent.”

I swatted away the toy soldier, machine-gunning against my ear. “I’m trying to drive.”

I was turning onto my street when I spotted a familiar blue station wagon—my next-door neighbor’s car—coming from the opposite direction.

“Get down, get down!” When he hesitated, I reached over and pushed him below the dashboard. He complied, hunching, his eyes level with the radio dial. I rested my hand on the back of his neck, where I could feel the tiny hairs and our sweat pooling beneath my fingers.

I looked away as I drove past the Volvo, and then back onto the main road into town. Not until we were back on the freeway did I tell Peter he could sit up. He rubbed the back of his neck, glaring at me.

“I’m sorry, but I thought I saw the neighbors.” I punched up the AC.

“How would they even know we’re together?”

“They would tell my parents they saw me, and my parents would ask why I came by when I knew they weren’t there and who I was with. Questions I’m not ready to answer now.”

“Or maybe ever.”

He was not asking me to come out, only pointing out a possible truth. In this potential future, I would never acknowledge him, or myself, to my parents. And that would be the end of us.

DOWNSTAIRS, THE MISTRESS greeted us with a plate of cranberry scones. Wearing a striped dress that buttoned up to her throat and a frilly white apron, she told us buttermilk waffles and homemade sausages were on today’s menu. She curtsied good-bye and stepped backward into the kitchen.

I broke apart a scone and gave Peter half, hoping that breakfast could help us start the morning over. He wolfed his share and held his hand out for more, smiling. He curtsied, imitating the mistress, before we took our seats at the long polished table across from an older couple. Tom and Diane were scouting Napa and Sonoma as a potential place to retire, maybe to raise alpacas or angora goats on leftover land no good for vineyards, they said. The fleece was soft, warm, hypoallergenic—all natural. “It’s a better investment than emu.” Tom resembled a gunslinger, with his bushy gray mustache, scar over his right eye, and battered cowboy hat. “They have a bad temper.”

“Alpacas don’t bite, but they do spit.” Diane was tanned and wiry as a leather whip, with ropy muscles in her arms and neck. “When they get angry. Or agitated. You never know what might set them off.”

Were people also one way or another in terms of temperament? Some were rude, some polite, some flamboyant, others bookish—it was in their nature. Biology was fate. If being gay was a trait like eye or hair color, then ancestor after ancestor had passed this inheritance down to me. It couldn’t be helped. I could accept who I was if I had no say in the matter, and in this way I hoped my parents would understand, all of us released from responsibility.

I was pouring syrup on my waffles when Mr. and Mrs. Woo, my parents’ favorite karaoke partners, walked into the dining room. The top fell off the miniature jug, and blueberry syrup flowed off the waffle and onto the plate. Peter took my hand and righted the jug. Looking where I was looking, he took his hand off my knee.

Why were they here? Middle-class Chinese immigrants stayed at glitzy hotel towers in Las Vegas, not at quaint bed-and-breakfasts. They didn’t drink wine, comparing vintages; they sipped Rémy Martin at Chinese banquets. They wanted their own spacious suite, with a view, a luminous pool, and a buffet piled high with king crab and jumbo shrimp.

They were looking through brochures about wineries, hot-air balloons, and couple massages spread out on the antique sideboard. I wanted to slip out of the room or slide under the table, but it was too late. I couldn’t hide.

“Woo Tai Tai, Woo Xian Sheng,” I called out, using the Chinese titles of respect.

Mr. Woo looked around the room, confused at who was speaking to him in this unfamiliar place, before he recognized me.

“Xiao Hu!” He used my childhood nickname, “Little Tiger.” My reserved parents, and their generation, showed rare affection to their children with such endearments.

“How are your parents?” he said in Chinese. “Your sister?”

He wore an argyle sweater vest, dress slacks, and wingtips, a banker even on weekends. He and my father were not the sort to wear shorts and sneakers and play basketball in the driveways with their sons. He and Mrs. Woo sat kitty-corner across from us.

“I’m having dinner with them tomorrow night,” I answered in English. I didn’t introduce Peter.

For years, I had attended Chinese school on Saturdays with their sons, learning stick fighting and how to cheat on tests. Victor was married to a filial Chinese daughter, a pharmacist, and Ernest was dating one, my mother reminded me at dinner each Sunday.

My parents were zero for two, in terms of arranging the proper relationship for either of their children. They matchmade with friends over karaoke and at Chinese wedding banquets, but their schemes never worked. My sister and I begged off dates, with busy schedules as an excuse, or consented at most to one dinner. My parents adhered to strict Chinese traditions that we learned to circumvent. Over the years, we shared the responsibility of deceit, the big and little secrets that oiled the machinery of family expectations.

Peter and I lived together on the second floor of an old house. We alternated between the two bedrooms, depending on the mood—either to bask in the glow of a tropical fish tank in his room, or to snuggle in my feather comforter and flannel sheets. I kept the doors to the bedrooms shut when my parents visited. Ever polite, they never asked to look inside.

A year ago, my sister had moved in with her boyfriend, Phuoc, whose parents were refugees from Vietnam. They lived in San Jose, more than an hour away, too far for my parents to drop by unannounced. As far as they knew, her roommate was a medical student always at the hospital. Phuoc was a hardworking line cook bursting with ideas for artisanal dishes, farm-to-table-to-pun—but not Chinese.

“Victor and Ernest sent us here for our thirtieth anniversary,” Mrs. Woo beamed beneath her permed hair and gold-rimmed glasses, much like my mother’s. She was proud that her sons, a doctor and a software engineer, were successful enough to pay for the trip.

“They’re making it tough for the rest of us,” I said. “My sister and I will have to send our parents to a place like this, on their anniversary.”

Mrs. Woo laughed. “Where’s your girlfriend? My sons said, very romantic.”

“Big beds,” Mr. Woo said. “Comfortable.”

“I’m here with my roommate.”

The conversation halted at the inadequacy of the title. Mr. and Mrs. Woo looked at Peter, me, and then at each other as if to say, *We’ll continue this later, in Chinese*. As oblivious as my parents and their immigrant friends were to pop culture or social revolutions, they knew that male roommates did not spend weekends together in wine country.

“They told us you had a good friend,” Mrs. Woo said after a minute. Her husband busied himself by pouring a glass of cranberry juice.

“We met in college,” I said. “We like traveling together.”

“You’re just like Victor. Always liked to go out with his friends. Go to ski, go to Vegas, go around everywhere,” Mrs. Woo

said. “Finally he settle down.”

She was giving both of us an out. She did not have to recognize what was before her, if I did not. It would have been easy. I had done it many times before, putting just enough distance between us when I saw someone I was not ready to out myself to. On guard in public, putting Peter on edge all over again. He had already settled on who he was, but I had forced him again into hesitancy. I hung my head and closed my eyes, trying to relieve the pressure building.

Looking up again took an immense effort. Exhausted from last night, and from pretending, I put my hand on top of Peter’s. He rubbed his thumb along my pinky, on display next to the butter dish. Our hands splayed together looked like a strange species of crab, one half pink and hairy, the other smooth and tan.

The Woos glanced down and kept talking about their plans for the day. Golf, Mr. Woo said. Mud bath, Mrs. Woo said. Wine tasting for us. Maybe they did not understand our precise relationship, or they disagreed with who we were, but they kept chatting with us. Small as the talk was, it left me hopeful.

I also knew that dealing with me was easier for the Woos than my parents. I was not their son. When I was nine, my paternal grandfather had died after wasting away in our spare bedroom for several months, and I came to associate the smell of herbal brews with decay and decline. My father cried that afternoon, standing over the body, choking gasps from a quiet man. I hid in my bedroom, covering my head with a pillow and scratchy Garfield comforter, but I could not escape the sound.

Soon after, he was on the phone, arranging for motels and airline tickets for relatives. I understood then that sons repaid their fathers at the time of death. And that sons had to have sons to carry on the family line.

At the funeral, taped Buddhist chants played on a portable stereo. Incense drifted from the brass pot in front of the casket. The family took turns, each person bowing at the waist three times, then kneeling on the ground and touching their head to the floor, starting with the eldest son, my father, and ending with the youngest male grandchild, my cousin Louis. After my turn, I sat next to my mother and put my head in her lap, something I had stopped doing a year earlier, because it seemed too babyish.

“He’s responsible for everyone now.” My mother had stopped stroking my head and sat me upright, smoothing her hand down my back. I stared at the dark paisley carpet. If I looked at the casket, I might fall in, the lid closing over me. “Just like you will be.”

I could guess how my parents would react in the abstract, but could not bear to imagine the details if I told them I was not whom they assumed. Would my mother wail about the shame to the family, would my father walk away? Would they tell me to leave and never return?

As much as I concealed from my parents, I needed them to be there to hide from. Worse than any rejection would be their absence from my life.

WE WERE AT our fourth winery, and I was getting buzzed. Although there was a silver spit bucket at the end of the counter, it seemed a waste of fine wine not to drink.

“Imagine what that tastes like.” Peter tipped the bucket and peered inside. The mixture of wine and saliva sloshed against the sides, stinking of grape juice and yeasty ferment.

“This is much better.” I swirled the rest of the Merlot in the back of my mouth.

Other couples stood at the bar, sniffing and downing their \$10 glasses of wine. The wineries had different themes, tricked out as farmhouses and French chateaus, with outdoor sculptures, peacocks, aerial trams, whatever the rich founder fancied. You could be anywhere. This winery had the décor of an Italian villa, with a whitewashed exterior, red tile roofs, and bottles of olive oil sold beside the raffia-wrapped wine in the gift shop.

“Winemakers do it in barrels,” he said, reading aloud from the front of a \$40 apron. “That can’t be comfortable.”

“Or hygienic.”

“Or romantic.” Peter took my hand and we walked outside, up the hill, to a gazebo that overlooked a duck pond. We stumbled upon a couple necking inside, a man and a woman, both wearing tight black shirts and jeans. He had one hand up the back of her shirt, the other on her butt. She was stroking his face. As I tugged at Peter to walk away, the couple turned to us. Both slender and long-limbed, they were a matched pair of greyhounds.

“We’re finished.” The man motioned for us to come back.

“Your turn,” the woman added. They walked back to the main building hand-to-butt, their arms crossed behind their backs and slipped into the pocket of their lover. They were like teenagers making out at a party, outdoing the ardor of other couples. I felt shy, inexperienced, and unable to meet the challenge.

It had taken a long time for me to hold hands with Peter in public, before graduating to pecks on the lips good-bye. My parents did not express themselves through hugs and kisses, and I had learned how to accept Peter’s.

He walked to the far end of the gazebo, which overlooked a pond where a fleet of ducklings followed their mother. Bees buzzed on the overhanging honeysuckle. The wine and heat suddenly hit me. Woozy, I sat on a bench beside him. We had said little of our encounter with Mr. and Mrs. Woo. I touched his wrist, and he looked down at me. “So we’re roommates.”

“What does it matter what I call you?” My head throbbed.

“It matters. What would you call me if no one else was around?”

“Someone’s always around. With my family, it’s never just us.”

EVER SINCE I left home, I returned without fail on Sundays. Coming back from Napa, we drove past the suburbs that had grown from sleepy to self-satisfied in the last decade, as the wealth seeped eastward along Highway 24. The plan was to drop him off at the BART station and for me to go home for dinner, but I accelerated past the exit. I knew now I could not give up whom I loved most for my family. My parents made me the man with whom Peter fell in love. Peter made me the man I wanted my parents to love. Without both, I could have neither.

Peter, engrossed in a science journal, did not notice where we were until we turned onto my street. I parked across from the house, behind Jeanne’s car. My sister had beaten me home.

“You forgot to drop me off,” he said.

“I didn’t forget.”

What I wanted sank in. “Are you sure?”

“Are you?”

He snapped the journal shut. The cooling engine ticked, solemn as a metronome. “Are you worried that your parents’ friends will out you?”

“I don’t know how the Woos would even bring it up. It wouldn’t be very polite, to get into family business.”

“This is something you should do by yourself. They’ll want to talk to you alone.”

“If you’re there, they can’t deny you exist.”

“I don’t want to be a prop.” He dropped the journal on the floor. “They’ll blame me for making you gay.”

“Please.” My back was sticky with sweat and my mouth tasted skunky.

He ran his hand along the diagonal seat belt strap, but hesitated above the buckle. I pressed down with both hands on his, releasing him, and embraced him clumsily, inhaling his musky scent, which I could identify from a lineup of dozens.

I could see the silhouette of my mother in the kitchen window of the white ranch-style house, maybe washing off bai cai in the sink or filling the battered tin teapot with water. My father was laid bare in the living room window. The television flashed against his face. He was frugal, turning on the lights in the last minute of sundown. The scene was routine—their life, the moment before they learned that their only son was gay.

Much confusion and blame tumbled out afterward. My parents shut me out, with my sister forced to act as a go-between, the messenger of their accusations and their pleas—first hurt, then hopeful—for me to be normal, to marry, and to have children. My mother consulted a Chinese fortune-teller, seeking cures. When told that I would not change, she vowed to jump in front of a bus. My parents stopped boasting about me to their friends, who understood not to ask questions. Two years later, they did not go to our wedding in San Francisco’s city hall, but sent us a red envelope of crisp \$100 bills. Three more years followed and they came back into our lives after we designed a website to attract a birth mother. Both of us smiled so hard in our pictures that our cheeks throbbed as if punched. My parents offered to pay for an egg donor and surrogate to carry our child—our son. A baby they could understand and get behind.

I knew none of that, then. But as I watched my parents through the window, I knew it was my responsibility to tell them. If I did not, all the other duties I tried to fulfill meant nothing.

That night, the moment my key goes into the lock, my parents rush to the door. My father shouts to my mother: “Lai le, la le!” He has arrived. I hear the television turn off, the running kitchen faucet go silent, and their quick steps on the tile floor.

Peter and I stand apart, flanking the welcome mat. I hold my breath until the door swings open, and my parents greet me with smiles. I slip my hand into Peter’s, and we go in.