

999 Park

Julia Wang

“ ‘Villains!’ I shrieked, ‘dissemble no more! I admit the deed! —tear up the planks! here, here!—It is the beating of his hideous heart!’”

-Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849)

Mrs. Virginia Moon opened her eyes on October 7 at 6:30 AM, right on time. In her youth she had set an alarm every day, but now she only needed to twice a year when the clocks changed. She set about her morning routine with formulaic precision. 6:45 AM, washed and brushed and sitting in front of the vanity mirror. This is where she “put on her face,” as her mother used to call it. Wrinkle cream, revitalizer, moisturizer, foundation, powder. She used to only need a dab of concealer, right on her temples where she had the first liver spots. Now she regretted to admit that her whole face required a lot more concealing, which she limited to special occasions.

With shaky hands she unscrewed the top of her mascara tube. Three slow swipes across each lash line. Twenty years ago Mrs. Virginia Moon would have given herself only 15 minutes to “put on her face,” but her hands no longer had the strength and accuracy they used to. Now there were few days where the wand didn’t will her hand to smear a streak of black across her cheek. This meant wiping the line away, then reapplying layers of product—with finesse she no longer had—to make sure that her face was evenly powdered. Today, she was lucky and got away with a near miss. Next, a touch of eyeshadow, which was easy enough with a stroke of mauve on each wrinkly lid. A few pats for the pink blush on the high cheekbones she liked to accentuate. Finally, the lipstick. It had always been her favorite part, giving her face the bright dash of color that she needed to start the day. The shade was a classic red: No. 1, by Yves St. Laurent. Rouge pur, just the way she liked it.

Today she finished a few seconds short of 7:30 AM, the same as every other day. Junyi would have already opened the curtains in the parlor. The maid arrived every day at 7:00 AM, but took at least 15 minutes to change into her uniform; this meant that Mrs. Moon sometimes had to open the curtains herself. She had complained about this many times to her daughter, who laughed at her and asked why she didn't just let Junyi wear what she wanted. Mrs. Moon had never hired a maid who didn't wear a uniform, however, and she didn't plan on starting now. When she tried to ask the maid to wear her uniform to the house, Junyi just nodded and went about her dusting. The next day, Junyi came in wearing the same dirty sneakers and baggy jeans as always, which she stored in a plastic bag in the hall closet under Mrs. Moon's coats. Mrs. Moon shuddered to think that one of her guests might come upon it someday.

Years ago, she would have fired Junyi summarily, but then she'd need to find someone else. She had always insisted upon in-person interviews with potential candidates, but nowadays it was pointless because none of them spoke English anyway. At least this maid didn't bring her gaggle of children around, like the last one.

She sat down at the dining table. The sun poured in through the window, basking the centerpiece of fresh dahlias in yellow light.

Virginia jumped when she heard the maid's voice behind her left shoulder, closer to the kitchen entrance. Good morning, she said, speaking in her usual short and sharp phrases, thick with foreignness. Junyi was somewhat personable, at least, in a way that the previous maid hadn't been. Then again, Mrs. Moon had never attempted to start a conversation with the last maid, who presumably was too busy breaking her finest dishes to make pleasantries.

Junyi placed the silver breakfast tray in front of her. Black tea, dry toast, and, once a week, a cup of blueberries. Simple: not because she had simple tastes, but because she was disciplined. Toast and coffee kept her figure slim. Well, that and white wine for dinner.

Breakfast was a quiet affair, even when her husband was alive. Edward preferred to read the papers in silence, and left her with the task of conversing with their children. After his death, Virginia left his urn on the mantelpiece above the fireplace, directly across the room from her seat at the dining table. After breakfast and before her 8:00 AM walk, she spoke to him while polishing his urn. It was the only chore Mrs. Moon ever did.

After Junyi took the tray and left the room, Mrs. Moon took out the handkerchief she kept in her Friday tweed blazer and wrapped it around her right pointer finger. She tenderly traced her finger around the rim of the vase's lid. The lid's golden outline gleamed in the light. She didn't really need to do this every day, she supposed, but she had started doing it a few years ago when the fat maid (three maids ago) almost dropped the vase in her attempt to polish it. Those thick sausage fingers. Now, it had become a routine. Besides, she needed someone to complain to about the help, and Edward, in both life and death, was never one to disagree with her.

"Good morning, darling." She readjusted the cloth to a slightly cleaner spot, gently circling the nub at the tip of the lid. "I've got quite a busy day today. My daily walk, of course. And then Caroline will be joining me for the Society luncheon, which I am hosting. The ladies and I talked about inviting her to apply for membership: well, they were thinking of inviting the twins together, but..." She paused. She didn't like to come to Edward with unpleasant news, but it didn't seem right to keep this from him. In any case, if he truly watched over her, then he would already know that one of their twins had not visited for almost a year

now. Part of her was almost glad that Edward was not around to witness all the unhappiness that "Chris" had caused the family.

They had told her on Christmas, for goodness's sake. Christmas, while Caroline's children were opening presents under the tree. Christina and that Mexican-looking girl she always brought around as her "roommate" held each other's hands while Christina told everyone the news. That she had always felt like a he, that she was starting hormone therapy, that the surgery was scheduled for May, that she was going to go by "Chris" from now on. Chris for Christopher.

Caroline had said that the surgery went well, that "Chris" was adjusting fine. She shuddered as she imagined the embarrassment of telling Christina's ex-boyfriend, the son of Edward's company lawyer. Why couldn't Christina have married Samuel's boy?

Mrs. Moon sighed, then nodded to the jar. "All right, darling, enough about unhappy things. I'm going to go on that walk. I might drop by and say hello to the new neighbors. Margaret's daughter said they're a young couple, both lawyers: I heard the movers yesterday, and they seemed to have had a welcome party. It's a bit rude to not invite one's new neighbors, but I suppose they would want to show their friends and family first. In any case, I will do the polite thing and drop by with a nice Malbec, perhaps, to show them how things should be done." With a final dab, she returned her handkerchief to her jacket pocket and blew Edward a kiss.

As Mrs. Moon left her apartment and turned the corner to reach the elevator, she almost ran over an Indian woman, dressed in what looked to be a Chanel suit.

"Oh, hello, I'm sorry." The woman looked taken aback by Mrs. Moon's brusqueness. Ignoring the startled apology, Mrs. Moon tried to brush past the woman. "Are you Virginia Moon?"

She stopped and turned around. "Yes, I am."

The young woman extended her hand to Virginia Moon, who stared at it for a moment before shaking it gingerly. "I'm your new neighbor. Sorry I'm a bit of a mess right now—I just came back from work, and it has not been an easy night."

"Oh, is that right?" Mrs. Moon pursed her lips tightly and gave her new neighbor a once-over. Chestnut brown hair covered two tactlessly expensive diamond earrings. Her skirt suit was indeed Chanel, but it was in a color that Mrs. Moon immediately decided was not suitable for her skin tone. "Yes, I heard your...party last night, even through our heavily soundproofed walls."

"Oh, I'm sorry about that! My family came up from New Jersey to visit and help us move in, and stayed for an impromptu housewarming. Once we're fully settled, we'll invite everyone from the floor around for a proper introduction. You must meet my husband; he worked for your husband's company almost ten years ago!" The girl smiled warmly and ran her hand through her hair, revealing yet another diamond. Gaudy, thought Mrs. Moon, whose collection of much larger diamonds was meticulously organized by season.

"Yes, dear, that would be nice. Now, if you'll excuse me." She brushed past again -- this time with success -- and walked into the elevator. Mrs. Moon looked at her watch: 8:09 AM. She was 9 minutes behind schedule.

The morning walk was pleasant, as always. The neighborhood was quiet, not yet alive with the bustle of people going to work. In an hour, the streets would become an assembly line of professionals, filling up the metallic skyscrapers like blue-suited sardines. 999 Park Avenue looked particularly beautiful in the morning light. Just two blocks from the Met and the Dalton School -- where both of her daughters matriculated -- the address marked one of the grandest hotels of the early 1800s, with a list of famed Gothic writer residents to match its Gothic revival grandeur. The Great Fire of 1836 burned the entire thing to the ground; in the 1920s, it was replaced by an Art Deco structure that has remained home for Manhattan's elite -- unlike many of its... adjacents, as Virginia Moon tended to characterize them nowadays.

By the time she returned to the building, Mrs. Moon felt refreshed and was equipped with a plan for the day. For now, she only needed to make sure that her luncheon with Caroline would go smoothly. As she walked through the big double doors, she nodded at the doorman. "Good morning, Hector. Do you have any packages for me?"

Hector, who for the past 25 years had always greeted her with an infectious smile, looked stricken. "Oh hello, Mrs. Moon. I'm sorry -- I haven't had time to organize the deliveries today. Did you hear the terrible news? Juan was attacked earlier this morning."

"Oh my goodness, that's awful." She had no recollection of who Juan was, but did recall that there were several foreign-looking janitors who worked in the building regularly. She made a mental note to tell Junyi to send some flowers to his family.

"Yes, while he was cleaning the storage in the basement, something bit him in the leg -- almost took his calf off at the knee! They think it's Mrs. Nelson's mastiff, Norbert. He's

always running around in the building when Mrs. Nelson forgets to close the door to her apartment. That thing can leap a whole flight of stairs."

As Hector sifted through packages, Mrs. Moon tutted at the idea of a mastiff running loose in the building. "Mastiffs are known to be gentle creatures, I thought. Oh well, someone must really talk to Lorraine about her dog. We wouldn't want him to attack the residents next! Perhaps this is something that the board can address at our next meeting." Hector nodded as he handed her a package from Bloomingdale's, though he didn't look like he had heard a word. "Yes—I'll have to talk to the rest of the cleaning crew and tell them to be careful. They're going to hire someone new to replace Juan for now. Anyway, you have a nice day, Ma'am."

By the time Mrs. Moon reached the apartment upstairs, Junyi was already preparing for lunch. She was even more disorganized than usual, having dropped two plates in the process of carrying finger sandwiches out to the terrace. Thankfully, Caroline had arrived a bit earlier to prepare for the meeting and rescued a pair of ceramic teacups from her mother's wedding that Junyi almost dropped with the plates. Mrs. Moon frowned in the maid's general direction, shaking her head slightly as she did so. "Junyi, can you buy some flowers and send them to José, that janitor's family? The one who got attacked this morning? Horrible news! Caroline, dear, what do you think of this hat? I thought it might be nice for the luncheon on the terrace. It's a bit sunny outside today." Caroline said the color matched well and told Junyi that the janitor's name was Juan.

"Yes, Mrs. Moon. It is horrible. Horrible." Junyi had never spoken more words to her employer, and for perhaps the first time, Mrs. Moon looked straight into Junyi's face, which looked as pale as the clotted cream she was carrying. She was younger than Mrs. Moon remembered, maybe only Caroline's age. "Yes, well, I am sure this will motivate Lorraine

to finally leash that monstrosity of hers." Lorraine Nelson was the oldest inhabitant of the building, both in age and in residency. She was nearing 90, and had lived on the top floor for longer than most of the building's residents have been alive. She remained there now, where she spent one-half of her time changing her will to include new great-grandchildren and the other half loudly berating both her nurse and her mastiff, all with the door to her apartment wide open.

"It is so sad. They do not know if Juan will be able to survive. He's quite old." In the mirror, Virginia saw Junyi wipe away a tear before stepping out of view behind the brim of Mrs. Moon's new hat. "Do you want me to send a bottle of wine to the new neighbors next door?" she asked. Mrs. Moon pursed her lips as she recalled her earlier encounter with the neighbor. "No, not right now."

The American Women Historical Society luncheon settled Mrs. Moon's nerves. The maid even managed to get lunch on the table right at 1:00PM. The ladies were always a welcome distraction from any unpleasantness in her own life, equipped with both the latest news and the happiest reminiscences. It was wonderful to have her own daughter there, following in her footsteps. Caroline Moon Tyler was the spitting image of her mother—with her striking green eyes and silky blond hair. Caroline exuded the elegance that she herself had had to manufacture, back when she was merely Virginia Allan, the daughter of a small-time lawyer from Maryland and the distant relation of a Civil War general, a heritage that only just earned her a spot in the Society. If there was one thing Virginia's father did value, it was his daughter's education, and his investments in her future paid off when she matriculated at Radcliffe and met sweet-faced Edward, who came from real money, at a makeshift dance hall in Harvard Yard.

The topic of discussion at dessert was 999 Park's upcoming board election. Virginia Moon has held the esteemed position of President for the last ten years. Several ladies in the Society lived in the building and were on the board. All were present today, except Lorraine Nelson, the mastiff owner; all of them complimented her cucumber sandwiches, which Mrs. Moon had forced Junyi to spend the morning fussing over because she needed them to be just right for the occasion.

"Virginia, will you continue your reign?" "Why, of course she will. She'll be the longest running board president ever if she stays for another three years." "Oh, I'm not so sure about that. Maybe it's time for someone else to take over."

Everyone's gaze shifted to Caroline, who beamed at Virginia and took a sip of Earl Grey. "That's right, Caroline: you're thinking of moving into your mother's building, aren't you?" "Oh, that would really be perfect -- continuing the tradition!"

Mrs. Moon frowned. "Let's not get ahead of ourselves. Someone else bought the unit upstairs last year, so we'd have to wait until another one becomes available." This had been a point of contention with Caroline, whom Virginia had accused of moving too slowly in her efforts to obtain a flat in 999 Park. Caroline assured her mother that there would be other opportunities to move into the building, but Mrs. Moon reiterated that she was not getting any younger. "There's a lot of movement in and out of the building these days. Did I tell you? Someone even bought the apartment next door."

"That's right -- the rumor is that the couple paid up front in full. Have you met them, Virginia? If you like her, maybe we can invite her to lunch and tell her about our organization. We're always looking for young members." The ladies all smiled at Caroline again. Mrs. Moon nodded, and waited for Junyi to refill everyone's tea. "I'm not sure what

interest she would have in this kind of Society, if you know what I mean. Speaking of, let's begin our formal meeting with a review of the membership applicants that we *do* have."

"Virginia! It's so good to see you!" Mrs. Moon gingerly wrapped her arm around Edna Kapuchin, the board secretary, in a loose embrace. Edna never did learn how to greet other Society members appropriately, though Caroline always chastised Virginia for being old-fashioned if she mentioned this. Caroline gave her a warning look now as she pursed her lips, then stretched them into a smile. "Edna. It is good to see you."

The ornate meeting room next to Lorraine Nelson's apartment was crowded, especially for a Friday afternoon. The Vice Chair of the 999 Park board declared the 4:00PM meeting only two hours before to address the safety of the building in light of Juan's injuries. Mrs. Moon thought this was quite inconsiderate to her and other residents' plans. She would have preferred to wait until next Monday, when they could discuss the matters for the month all at once; nevertheless, she admitted that something had to be done about the mastiff, even if it meant cutting her lunch short.

"Terrible news, really terrible news. I can't believe it-that poor man! They said he might lose his leg." Edna shook her head so vigorously that the baubles dangling from her ears were on the verge of flight. Virginia nodded, but her attention immediately shifted to Caroline, who was five feet away, answering a question about her twin sister's absence asked by the building's biggest gossip. Caroline fiddled nervously with her emerald pendant. A gift from Mrs. Moon to both her daughters on their birthday, Caroline's necklace was engraved with "CM, my heart" on the back. Christina had a matching one in sapphire, to match her blue eyes. The necklaces were a reminder not only of their pedigree but also her love for them.

She could still remember their delighted expressions, as they put on their new necklaces and opera gloves, walking around the apartment pretending to be Audrey Hepburn in *Breakfast at Tiffany's*.

Looking at the pendant now, Mrs. Moon furrowed her brows and tried to push away the thought of Christina, “Chris,” returning her necklace last Christmas. Mrs. Moon could not bear to look at it, and told Caroline to save it for her own daughters.

As Edna kept talking, Virginia Moon strained to hear what Caroline was saying. Mrs. Moon certainly saw no need for Caroline to tell people anything approaching the truth, especially so close to Mrs. Moon’s board re-election. Virginia breathed a sigh of relief when Caroline changed the subject to her daughter Annabel. Caroline smiled with pride as she recounted Annabel’s victory in the fourth grade math contest, beating out several kids from China.

“Have you met Ada? She is absolutely delightful, and a favorite candidate for board president.” Mrs. Moon snapped her head back toward Edna, who quickly conceded: “if you decide not to run, that is.” Edna beamed past Virginia Moon’s head towards the back corner by the Flemish tapestry and—nearly scratching Virginia with her glittery pink claws in excitement—beckoned over a petite Asian woman in a white sweater and a Burberry scarf, her jet black hair gathered in a bun so tight that she could see the taut lines above the woman’s temples from across the room.

“Ada! Oh, dear, you must meet Virginia Moon, incumbent Board President and one of the leaders of our community. Virginia, Ada and her husband moved into the unit above you, and they are absolutely delightful! They’ve been very active on the rooftop greenhouse initiative, which I spearheaded, as you know. Ada’s a lawyer, and she’s from Korea, South Korea, isn’t that right dear? How wonderful! Adding a breath of fresh air to this building,

the two of them.” Edna clucked on as Ada Kim and Virginia Moon shook hands. Mrs. Moon tried to remember if she had met Ada before, but found her mind wandering to the Vietnamese woman who married Christina’s ex-boyfriend.

When Edna finally stopped for breath, Ada clarified that she was actually from Lansing, then immediately launched into her campaign platform. “. . .the security of this building! The previous board was very lax about that. There’s reason to believe that the cause of the incident was . . .unnatural. I would change that as board president,” Ada droned. Mrs. Moon frowned. There was so much this young, foreign woman failed to understand about running the board of a building as illustrious as 999 Park. One *must* see the big picture. She would not win a campaign based on a simple dog bite; in fact, Virginia thought the entire building’s reaction was far too extreme. It was just a janitor. This was the price to pay if residents wanted to have pets, after all. Edna, of course, was cooing and nodding her head in her usual obsequious way. Just a moment ago, she had been raving about what a fantastic job Virginia had done as the board president. Virginia was about to interject with her own assessment of the situation when a bloodcurdling scream cut through the entire room.

The residents rushed into the hallway to see Junyi stumbling up the steps to the top floor, clearly horrified. “Someone attacked! Blood, blood everywhere.” The maid collapsed into a breathless heap at the top of the stairs, pointing feebly in the direction of the floor below.

A middle-aged man with a dark complexion lay in a pool of mahogany-colored liquid next to Virginia’s door, his stomach a bulbous mesh of red and brown. Mrs. Moon’s new neighbor sobbed hysterically over his body, her long hair soaking in the blood. The board members gathered around the body, murmuring about who he might be and what had attacked him, while Ada hurriedly called the police. Virginia shuddered to think how close the incident

had happened to her own apartment, as well as the giant eyesore of a stain this man would leave for all her guests to see.

As the paramedics arrived to take Mr. Bhattacharya, apparently her new neighbor's uncle, to the hospital, the crowd was abuzz with theories. Did Lorraine Nelson's nurse let the mastiff out again? Why wasn't that dog locked up? Did someone sic him on poor Mr. Bhattacharya, who had only come for the day from Edison, New Jersey, in order to visit his niece?

"This is Poe's curse!" someone shouted, silencing the crowd. A tall, African-American man stepped into the middle of the circle, his left hand trembling as he gestured towards the ceiling. Virginia wondered how the building staff had hired a replacement for the janitor so quickly, and why they hadn't done a more thorough background check: the man appeared to be out of his mind.

"Henry, dear, this is not the time." Ada stepped forward and gently placed her hand on the man's shoulder, but he shook her off, apparently incensed. "They have to know what we're dealing with here! This location marks the grounds of the haunted building from Poe's unfinished story. He came here to write his greatest tale about a green-eyed succubus, inspired by rumored stories of hauntings. The monster drove him mad in this very spot two hundred years ago. The building may have been destroyed in that fire, but its spirits were not."

The crowd exchanged murmurs of relief, while Virginia chuckled and responded, "Are you mad? That is an utterly preposterous tale, even if it's true that Poe did come here. I don't remember you from this building—do you work here?"

“This is Henry, my husband,” Ada stepped forward and put her hand on his arm. “He’s an American Literature professor at Columbia, and he has got quite an imagination. Mythology aside, however, we need to address this building’s massive safety issue—which I will dedicate my time and energy to as board president.”

Virginia found the timing of Ada’s campaign plug as distasteful as her Gucci loafers. “Well, certainly the security issue will be addressed, but we must not allow two unfortunate incidents to get in the way of our living life as usual. As president for the last decade, I have faced-“

“The research is all there -- I’ve done it myself! Read my papers on Poe’s Lost Books, and you’ll see that he spent his last trip to New York here. After he returned to Baltimore, he was never the same -- you all must see!” Henry threw open his briefcase and crouched down on the floor to dig through its contents.

Virginia laughed, the same sharp laugh that she always used when ridiculing the help’s inexplicable oddities. “That is simply absurd. I am descended from Poe, and I’ve never heard such a thing.”

Virginia noticed her daughter rubbing her emerald pendant between her fingers and wearing a tight-lipped expression; Caroline never approved of the casual way in which Virginia referred to her pedigree. Mrs. Moon found it particularly annoying since Caroline had no problem mentioning her husband’s even more tenuous connection to John Tyler in her daughter Annabel’s prep school admissions interview.

“Well, perhaps not directly descended -- but practically, from *close* relations by marriage. Besides, unfortunate as this is, the man did not live in this building. Perhaps

Norbert attacked him based upon his intuitions. None of the residents have been attacked, after all.”

Henry looked up at Virginia from his pile of papers, curling and pinkish at the edges after soaking in Mr. Bhattacharya’s residual blood. “Norbert is old and frail, and Mrs. Nelson’s nurse never lets him out nowadays. In any case, it is impossible for one dog to have done that much damage. Unless he’s the Hound of the Baskervilles, there is something else afoot!”

The crowd agreed that it was odd, echoed Ada’s calls for more security, and returned to their own units. The day janitor, who was covering Juan’s shifts, cleaned up the mess left by the neighbor’s uncle.

It was October 30, and the campaign for board president of 999 Park Avenue neared its end. Virginia was feeling good about her odds. There had not been an attack in weeks, and conversation in the building turned to the upcoming All Saint’s Day party, which she had planned with immeasurable success for the last eight years. However, she had to admit that her campaign’s dogged emphasis on tradition and experience did not fare as well as in past years: despite the help of the ad agency that Caroline had hired to make her campaign posters and slogans, she appeared to be locked in a close race with Ada. Some of the residents, including Edna, the traitor, accused her of being callous. So she couldn’t go to the memorial for the victims—the janitor had died after two weeks in the ICU—so what? Junyi went in her stead because Caroline needed her advice in picking out the perfect grandfather clock for the new apartment.

That was the one good thing out of the violent incident from four weeks ago: the dreadful Indian woman (or rather the Bangladeshi woman, as Caroline exasperatedly reminded her) had moved out. They sold the apartment quickly because, as Virginia had suspected, the woman had taken out a hefty mortgage in order to afford the apartment. Caroline and her family moved into the building in their place, soon after Virginia spoke to the board and wrote a hefty check to cover the difference between what Caroline's husband could afford and the asking price. Caroline expressed some hesitation about moving in next door to her mother, but Virginia assured her that if she won the election, the Kim-Howards would soon feel the pressure to move, and the Moon-Tylers could then relocate to the unit upstairs.

Caroline had really proven herself over the last few weeks. She became her mother's de facto campaign manager, liaising with the ad agency. The night before, Caroline conceptualized a new batch of posters, promising an aggressive campaign stance that would solidify Mrs. Moon's position as the clear frontrunner. Caroline had put some up around the building the night her mother had a chance to see them.

Caroline suggested distributing the posters to all the residents, but Mrs. Moon insisted on reviewing the new posters before doing so. Caroline brought a dozen to Mrs. Moon's apartment, while the rest waited in a large box in the storage basement, as neither of the Moon women wanted the cardboard behemoth to blemish her parlor room arrangement. The storage basement was where all the building's inhabitants kept their non-essentials: abandoned toys, last season's furniture, and a spectrum of useless appliances representing fads long since past.

The ad agency boasted that the new posters would take her campaign on the offensive, but Virginia hesitated when she saw them. On the first poster, a caricature of Ada Kim dressed

in military garb commanded an almost ape-like Henry dressed in a brown suit. The poster's caption read: "Don't let the building fall into the wrong hands. Vote Virginia Moon!"

At her dining table, Mrs. Moon examined the poster in her spectacles, an accoutrement she disliked almost as much as her liver spots. A nametag on the cartoon Henry's blazer labeled him "The Nutty Professor." That bit seemed quite funny at least, she reassured herself.

Comparing Ada Kim to a dictator was perhaps a bit much, but the woman was quite militant in the way she spoke. Besides, caricatures were meant to be exaggerations. Caroline had said as much, and she was usually much more sensitive to this kind of thing. With all the political correctness these days, it was easy to forget it's just a harmless attempt at a good chuckle.

Mrs. Moon was jolted from her thoughts by Caroline's voice from the kitchen. Junyi had used the posters as a makeshift tea tray while she polished the silver one, and Caroline berated the maid's clumsiness over Junyi's meek apologies. Furious and mumbling about Junyi's idiocy, Caroline ran downstairs to the storage basement for more.

Mrs. Moon looked at the stack Junyi had rendered unusable. Cartoon Ada's face was now ringed by the outline of the kettle, and Cartoon Henry was covered in loose sugar. Since the second incident, Junyi was even more distracted than usual, and had spilled more tea in the last three weeks than Mrs. Moon's previous three maids had combined. She was always crying when she thought her employer wasn't looking and resolutely refused to go to the basement to fetch anything. Mrs. Moon wondered if it was time to make some staff changes. She supposed that she could find the time to do so after the campaign, and made a mental note to bring it up with Caroline when she returned from the basement with the rest of the posters.

A sharp knock on the door startled her from her thoughts. Junyi opened the door to a livid Ada Kim, hair still in her tight bun. “Virginia, have you no shame?”

Ada held up the same poster that Mrs. Moon had been poring over moments ago. “We found this poster outside our door. Henry is so upset: he’s spent hours in the basement trying to find his college papers just so he can prove he’s not ‘the nutty professor’.” Ada’s bony knuckles popped with the force of her air quotes. Virginia thought she could detect the tiniest hint of an accent in her voice as Ada spat out accusations of racism and foul play.

“Is he down there now?” The clock above the mantelpiece indicated it was 6:49pm, and Virginia realized that Caroline had not returned from the basement for twenty minutes. She shuddered to think how her daughter would fare in a confrontation with Henry. She abruptly pushed past Ada, who followed her out the door, repeating that an apology was in order.

The first thing they saw as they entered the basement were posters, torn in pieces and scattered all over the ground. There was no sign of Caroline, and the air smelled salty and dank. When she looked at the posters closely, she saw with sickening dread that some of them were smeared with coagulated blood. She ran into the storage area and frantically searched for her unit number, hoping that Caroline was still there. She thought for a moment that she had heard the first lines of “Moon River,” her twins’ favorite song, but decided that she must have imagined it.

The door to storage unit 49C was flung open. Henry, wearing the same brown suit as his cartoon version, slumped against the doorframe, clutching a half-ripped poster in his hand. Ada, who was close behind Mrs. Moon, screamed when she saw Henry and rushed to her husband’s side. Virginia Moon’s stomach dropped when she saw Caroline’s Miu Miu flats

lying in the corner by the box of still-intact posters. She dropped to the ground and shook Henry's shoulder with all her might.

“Where is Caroline? What have you done?!”

Henry looked up at her, and raised a feeble finger directly at Mrs. Moon.

“The, the monster -- she's still here.” Virginia Moon once again heard Audrey Hepburn's deep voice.

Slowly, she turned, then gasped. “My heart!”

A flash of emerald hit her eyes as the monster lunged.