

## A QUIET INSURRECTION

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*As though on the brink of a chasm, / As though treading thin ice.*  
 - from *The Book of Odes* (5:3)

The morning when Andrew realized that Leigh’s silent treatment might be more than a stunt in their latest domestic skirmish, he found an odd note in his computer case. There was no mistaking his wife’s distinctive cursive: *Jen is a Confucian concept in which a person brings the good things of others to completion and does not bring the bad things to completion.*

“Confucius? Jesus Christ.” Andrew laughed out loud at his inadvertent juxtaposition of religious figures, loosened his flowered necktie, and leaned forward in his black leather swivel chair to read, once again, this note Leigh must have slipped into his bag. Several things about the note agitated him—first, its obliqueness felt intentional, as though she were doling out a clue in a mystery that she didn’t want him to crack. And couldn’t she get over herself? Must she keep re-hashing their difficulties from the day before? Plus, this word *jen*—he’d never heard of it, except that it was coincidentally—or not—also the nickname of their 10-year-old daughter, Jennifer, whom they had just dropped off at the airport the prior evening for her trip to summer camp in Massachusetts. Andrew closed his eyes to try and conjure the *Jen* he cared to consider, *his* Jen now bunking in the Berkshires for five weeks instead of staying closer to home, where she belonged. He hadn’t wanted her to go to that particular camp in the first place and he supposed that fact may have been at the root of the terrible fight he and Leigh had had on the way to the airport. It might explain why, despite the late hour and the flight to catch, he’d taken the time to read the paper (even the classifieds and obituaries) and ride on his exercise bike (45 minutes, not 20) as he did every day before work.

“Andrew, what are you doing?” Leigh had called to him from the entryway, where she was stuffing a windbreaker into Jen’s carry-on backpack. She was already dressed in blue jeans and a navy blue tank top, her long dark hair, wet from the shower, curled and pinned into a loose coil. Still sweating from the bike, a towel around his neck, Andrew had eggs frying on the stove and was searching for the silver canister of Irish oatmeal. He wasn’t in the mood for instant.

“We have to leave here in 15 minutes. You haven’t even showered.” Her dismay screeched through him. “What’s going on here? Why aren’t you ready?”

“Calm down, babe. I’ll be ready. I always am. Now can you please give me some space?” He measured a cup of dry oats, sprinkled them into the pot of water, and ignited the flame.

“*Space?* So you can eat a five-course breakfast? Please, Andrew. You’re being so unreasonable.” Then quieter, nearly pleading: “Our daughter has a plane to catch. She’s leaving home for a month.”

“More than a month, actually. And whose fault is that?” He couldn’t say why he was taking this poorly timed moment to unleash his fury over her unilateral decision, but it suddenly flooded him—how Leigh had ignored his desire to send Jen to the nearby Idyllwild Arts Center that his colleague, Boone Tucker, had raved about, how she hadn’t listened to his reluctance about the rustic old camp that Leigh had attended decades before, bestowing the place upon their daughter like it was some kind of treasured heirloom. It drove him mad how Leigh usurped the role of parent in big decisions, as though by gender or genome or her former job as a fifth grade school teacher, she felt herself more qualified than him to pave the way for Jen, with barely a dirt lane for him.

“Whose *fault?* What are you talking about? I can’t believe how selfish and childish you’re being.”

He couldn’t recall exactly what else they said to one another during the car ride to the airport. Harsh words spoken in the heat of an argument never stayed with him the way they did with Leigh—they were so beside the point as far as he was concerned. But he remembered the sensation he had as they crawled along in the unexpected Sunday traffic, the glint of Jen’s pink footlocker in the back of their wagon, Leigh shooting off a barrage of exasperated sighs. The pressure swelled in his temples, the frustration mounted in his belly. “Don’t turn here!” Leigh whistled through her clenched teeth,

as they approached the airport entrance. He swerved, nearly careening into a car in the adjacent lane. “Didn’t you read the information sheet?” She held up her stapled camp packet and shook it, sending a blast of perturbed air into his right eye. “We want Parking lot C.”

He pulled off to the side of the road and shut off the ignition. “I can’t take any more of this. You fucking drive.”

“Oh god. Don’t do this now, Andrew. I’m sorry. I’m stressed out. We both are. Let’s just get her there okay? Jen’s going to miss her plane.”

*I just need some air*, he thought, but must not have said, as he slammed the door of their silver BMW wagon and stood in the roadway.

“Andrew! Not now! I’m begging you,” Leigh called out, as he bolted.

“Daddy! Come back! Where are you going?” Jen’s voice trailed him, as he sprinted alongside the tumbled shrubs and brush near the airport, the underbelly of jet after jet gliding overhead.

*I’ll be right back*, he must have said only to himself.

When he returned to the car about five minutes later—winded, with a cooler head, Leigh was huddled with Jen in the driver’s seat, his daughter’s frightened eyes peering at him through her blond curls. Standing there, he felt the car keys poking through his sweaty fist. As he started to explain, Leigh placed her finger to her lips. She mouthed in a whisper, her voice barely audible, “Please don’t speak. Don’t say a word.”

They missed Jen’s plane. His daughter’s weeping dripped into him, winding its way intravenously through his core. He held her hand. Feeling like a child himself, he could only watch as Leigh briskly moved through the airline desks, managing the logistics of the next flight to Boston. Her quiet efficiency churned and clouded the space around them like a dust storm.

The airline permitted only one parent to escort their daughter to the gate. After Leigh was on the other side of Airport Security with Jen, Andrew had an urge to flee. Instead, out of some habitual obligation, shame or possibly even love—he couldn’t tell the difference anymore—he went to the airport lounge and ordered a beer. Through the tinted window, he watched Jen’s plane taxi past him on the airfield and take off into the scattered blue light. Such an impossibly vast sky.

On the way home, Leigh's silence wasn't irate or punishing; it had a guise of surrender, which should have alarmed him. Instead, he felt relieved. "Jen seem okay?" he asked. "Not too nervous?" When she didn't respond, he rolled down their car windows to fill the quiet with wind and noise. He didn't notice her leaning, eyes closed, against the glass, and as her window came down, her head lurched into the sudden opening. "Sorry," he said, and he truly was, although he knew it didn't come across that way. He rolled up Leigh's window again, creating such fierce interior rattle that he was forced to close his own window too. That's when he noticed her writing something. With eyes downcast, biting her lower lip, she placed the folded piece of paper on the black leather console between them.

"What's this?" he asked. Leaving it there for a moment, he checked his rearview mirror, the speedometer and the time. The air was stuffy and close and smelled of their mingled breath—the fermented yeast of his recent beer and stale mint from Leigh's morning tea. Finally, in the spirit of a truce, he looked down at the paper, which turned out to be the backside of a deposit slip: *I'm not going to speak to you for a while.*

His eye twitched. "That's fine by me."

The traffic on the 405 sputtered into a crawl. To his left, a motorcycle rode along so slowly that the biker's foot skidded along the freeway asphalt. Andrew watched this man's Nike on the surface of the road, wondering—with a tinge of envy—how it felt to ride like that, so open and exposed. "Fuck!" Suddenly, he slammed on the breaks, nearly rear-ending the car in front of him. He blasted his horn. "Why didn't you warn me?" His words hovered, undefended. Leigh appeared perplexed, as though he spoke a foreign tongue she didn't understand. Silently, she turned away and started writing again. Then she passed him another note.

"Read it to me," he joked. Still no response from her, he strained to read it himself. *We're destroying each other. Our words aggravate and incite. They lead to distorted thoughts and bad feelings. Until we find a way to make our language in accordance with the truth, the less said between us the better.*

It took several moments for him to bring her words, delivered this way, into focus. Even so, he couldn't quite absorb them. "Whatever you say." He had laughed the whole thing off. "Or maybe it's

whatever you *don't* say.”

His assistant, Belle, buzzed him. “Andy? Your ten o’clock is running late.”

Andrew crumpled Leigh’s note in his fist and woke up his computer. “Thanks. Just let me know when he’s here.” He liked that she called him Andy, the affection in it. Funny that he hadn’t thought of Belle as particularly attractive when he hired her—pale, blonde and curvy, she was such an opposite to his slim, olive-toned Leigh. Who was his ten o’clock? He logged on to his schedule and checked—MicroTech. Andrew saw he had a twelve o’clock, a lunch, a 3 o’clock and a 5 o’clock. He made a mental note of the times and the companies, the actual people seemed secondary somehow. And who was *he* to them? A ten o’clock from Shift Equity.

He took up Leigh’s note again—now a tight wad of paper—pushed back his chair and aimed for the metal wastebasket on the far side of his desk. After two misses, he retrieved it and unwrinkled the page. *A Confucian concept*. That was still another disturbing thing about the note. For the past six months, Leigh had been consulting a man on a regular basis to whom she first referred as her therapist and then her “shaman” —that title was even printed on the business card he saw on her night table: “urban shaman.” If that wasn’t enough evidence of his dubious character, and although Andrew had never met him, as far as he was concerned, just the audacity of the guy’s name—Luz Chun Tzu—said pretty much all there was to say about him, not to mention his diffuse, sketchy training, which he claimed to be in parts of India and China. Based on the little Leigh had told him, the guy seemed to spout more new age bullshit than Eastern philosophy, but he had a definite and, in Andrew’s opinion, a rather peculiar bent for Confucius. At a friend’s 35th birthday party shortly after beginning her “therapy,” Andrew had overheard Leigh refer to Luz Chun Tzu in her conversation as her “Chinese guru.”

“Really?” He couldn’t contain himself—“Did I hear you actually use the word guru in a sentence?”

She laughed gently. “Well I just read that *Gu* means darkness in Sanskrit and *ru* means to dispel. A *guru* is simply someone who dispels darkness. And that’s what he’s doing for me.”

Andrew hadn’t been able to ask—he wasn’t sure if he even wanted to know—how he was going about that delicate task.

That evening, during their first meal without Jen, Andrew found himself eating leftover spaghetti and meatballs, trying in various ways to apologize for his outburst at the airport and to get them back on speaking terms.

Leigh ate in silence.

“How long are you going to keep this up?” He didn’t mention her note in his computer bag. “Let’s call a truce, shall we?”

She went into the kitchen and returned to the table with a pad and one of Jen’s handmade, flowered pens. On a piece of paper monogrammed with Hotel Despierta, where they’d stayed in Cancun last summer, she wrote: *You abandoned us on the highway.*

“I’m sorry, but don’t you think the word ‘abandoned’ is a little strong?” He thought better of taking issue with the word “highway”—it was just the roadway near an airport, after all.

*You took the car keys,* she wrote. *I didn’t have my cell phone. The area wasn’t safe.*

“I feel badly about all that. Really.”

*Our words don’t mean anything anymore.* Her print was brisk, noisy. *It was Jen’s last day.*

He looked up from the barrage of ink. Leigh’s eyes were blood-shot and watery. “You’re upset. I get it. I’m sorry that I walked out on you yesterday. But I came back, didn’t I? Jen is safe at camp. Can’t we just have a nice”—he had to stop himself from adding the word *quiet*—“evening together?”

Leigh sliced into the day-old meatball; her fork clanked loudly against her plate.

“Come on, Leigh. Cut it out, will you? We have an empty nest for five weeks. We should try to enjoy each other.”

*Clank.*

“Can we please put an end to this? What can I say?”

She ripped out a fresh sheet of paper and scribbled furiously. The page made a loud scratch across their walnut table as she shoved it toward him. *That’s the point. There’s nothing to say.*

“What does *that* mean?” Although he understood the words, he kept feeling like he was missing something. *Clank.* “Well, you can play this silly war game all you want. But I’ll tell you right now: it’s a no-win battle. I’m not engaging.”

The notes began appearing on tables and countertops, some-

times taped to their kitchen cupboards or bathroom mirrors. They almost always had a purpose: informing him of her whereabouts or inquiring about a meal, meals during which the lack of conversation had become so insufferable that he tried to avoid dining with her altogether. His own voice sounded hollow to him. Without her responses, it seemed to drift between them and evaporate like a faint trace of second-hand smoke. He resented words Leigh shared with others—overheard cell phone conversations with her friends, laughter, even an innocuous inquiry to a plumber. All of this made him wonder about what role Leigh’s voice, when directed at him, played within the context of their relationship. When they met back in college, volunteering at a Berkeley soup kitchen, he’d been attracted to her intelligence and generosity, her humor and laughter. Did those qualities require sound?

His policy of non-engagement wasn’t as easy as he thought it would be and he slipped a few times. One Sunday morning, they were reading the newspaper at the kitchen table, the extension of a quiet breakfast, a rare and tranquil moment together. Completely unprovoked, Leigh passed him a note. He shifted his attention from the Los Angeles Times, where he was reading an Op-Ed piece on the insurgency in Libya.

*Luz says that anger, violence and aggression arise when we are frustrated in our efforts to achieve love and affection. Rage is love made hungry*

Whenever Leigh mentioned his anger, he felt an electric surge, like she had just flicked a switch. He knew his temper had long been an issue for her—he’d been working on it—but each time she threw it up at him, his temper flared even more. “Fuck off, Leigh. If I want analysis, I’ll go to a shrink, not some shaman-guru with a ludicrous name. He’s a hack. And who do you think you are? I’ll tell you—you’re a *mute* hack. Is that aggressive and angry enough for you?”

*I didn’t mean to upset you. I thought you might find it enlightening. Please forgive me.* She wrote on the same sheet as her other remark and all her lines together, especially in contrast to his response, made her seem virtuous in a way that felt hopeless to him. “Anger can be brought on by circumstance, you know. It takes two to tango. Have you considered your role in my anger?” He couldn’t pinpoint it but he knew there must be a direct link. As he spoke, he saw how his words brought her lower in her chair, a flush across

her face. But she didn't react. She closed her eyes. She took several deep breaths. When she opened her eyes she had a faint smile. She wrote: *I must take full responsibility for my role in your suffering.*

"Well, now you're talking." The word talking struck him with unexpected ferocity and he laughed sharply. "Or—well, you're making sense anyway."

She shook her head in pity or sorrow, he couldn't tell. *Do you want to share what you're feeling?*

He picked up the newspaper and shook it in her face. "I feel busy."

The scratch of her pen across her notepad, her expectant expression, reminded him of the way Jen wrote notes to them after her tonsils were removed. *Maybe you need some time off since it seems you're always busy.*

"You're always a pain in the neck."

*I'm just me.*

He lifted the ballpoint pen from her fingers and shuffled through a pile of unread mail envelopes for a blank space. His heart pounding, he scribbled his own version of a reply on the back of a credit card bill: *Me=Pain*. It was only after she retrieved her pen and walked out of the kitchen that he realized what he'd written, that ambiguous *me* glaring at him on the table.

It amazed him how little communication they actually needed. So much of their lives were flooded by logistics and plans; when they stripped it all down to what was necessary, it amounted to very little. For instance, one morning she left a note attached to the refrigerator: *I'm going out to dinner with Nadine*. Before, she might have bombarded him with extraneous information about Nadine's life, things she found fascinating but that he didn't really care about, such as the strain of her husband's demanding business travel and long absences from the family—which, on top of everything, Andrew might well have interpreted as Leigh's passive-aggressive communication about his own difficult schedule. Without her being able to speak, those kinds of misunderstandings—an entire strain of loaded miscommunications between them—were slowly being discharged.

But the silence was having a strange effect on him. That week, Leigh had had a slight cold, and in their lack of conversation, she



was reduced to bodily functions and sounds: sniffles, blowing her nose, clearing phlegm from her throat. Her presence was marked only by inadvertent noises: the trickle of water running in the bathroom, a toilet flushing, a toothbrush scratching across her teeth. Funny how that went—when one sense was down, the others flared up so sharply. Wasn't that the way it was for the blind?

There was something else: a physicality that she still possessed. Without her voice, she looked different. Fresher. Her long hair shinier, her dark Italian eyes brighter. Was she wearing less makeup? He could really smell her, even from a distance, her peppery body odor after her yoga class, her lavender body lotion after a shower. He wanted her more than he had in months.

He wanted her badly when he returned from a hellish three-day business trip, zigzagging between meetings in San Diego, San Francisco and New York. Although he knew Leigh didn't miss him the way she used to, he wondered whether she had missed him at all, and if their time apart might have inspired her to resume talking to him. Looking back over the past three or four years, he didn't fully understand—even after they spoke to a marriage counselor about it—how or why things between them had disintegrated. He assumed it was because of his working and traveling all the time and their recent financial strains with the recession. But none of that mattered to her, she said. She believed that she was finally blossoming, awakening to the truth of herself, and becoming conscious of their “erosive patterns.”

“This isn't about money,” Leigh had said in one of their therapy sessions. “It's about happiness. I want you to be happy. Genuinely happy.” Andrew didn't believe her, and was irritated when the therapist suggested that perhaps he didn't believe enough in himself.

During his flight back home this time, he had decided to cut through all this note-writing bullshit and make love to her—he'd do it without uttering a word if that's how she wanted him. *That* would make him happy.

When he got home, she was sound asleep. She looked serene. With her eyes closed, he saw no mistrust or fear or disinterest reflecting back at him. Her face appeared clear, even luminous. He had hurt her. Wasn't that all she was trying to tell him? If only he could let her know that he understood. He listened to her steady breathing and fought his desire to rouse her. A soft ecstasy rippled

through him, and he fell asleep hoping to share it with her.

By the time he rose the next morning, she was already gone. In their bathroom he found a note scotch taped to the mirror: *Early appointment. Sorry I missed you.*

Later, in the office, although he should've been preparing for a large investor meeting, he thought of Leigh. Was she sorry she missed him? His disappointment dissolved into faint hope. But where had she gone? Maybe something for him. His mind drifted to the Brazilian wax Leigh once received from a Yugoslavian woman in West Hollywood. Leigh had described the woman like some kind of waxing sergeant, commanding her to hold herself open, to twist this way and that so that she could paste the wax inside deep enough. It must have hurt, and yet somehow it aroused him now to think of that small sacrifice, Leigh enduring pain in order to please *him*. He wished he could please *her*.

Belle buzzed. "Andy? Your 9:30 has arrived. Shall I show him to the conference room?"

Resisting the urge to reach into his pants, he said, "Yeah, great. I'll be just a moment." He tried not to think of Belle's round thighs in that short denim skirt today or to imagine a soft, warm welcome between her legs. Sweating—he could feel the steam from his neck around his hands as he readjusted his tie—he surveyed his desk for a pen. In a burst of hope, he imagined where he'd place his note later—on her pillow? On the breakfast table? He wondered if she'd smile when she saw it, whether his writing to her would crack some mysterious code that would make everything right—*true*—between them. Maybe he could dispel some of her darkness. But what should he say? Something simple, perhaps. *I want you* – He scrawled it quickly and scratched it out. He wrote: *I love you*. He did love her, he must. And yet those words looked so feeble somehow, flat on the page. *Our words don't mean anything anymore* – he could almost hear her say it, although she had written it. He went to the computer and Googled Confucius. Scanning quickly, he struggled to assimilate something useful. He saw references to *jen*, which, as a concept, was—at once—more simple and complex than he realized. "Jen is human-heartedness, it is the perfect giving of one's self to the *human* way, the ideal basis of all relationships." Andrew read, trembling a little. "It is walking to the very edge."

Belle buzzed again. Whatever he wrote, he realized that his

note wouldn't get to her until late, after work sometime. It would be dark outside. As he stared out of his office window, the hazy sun reflecting off the panes of glass, he could feel his intentions drifting and diffusing in the light. He felt utterly bereft. He thought of how Leigh refused to email or text him, declaring in one of her recent notes: *immediate, impulsive communication is too dangerous for us*. Suddenly, he reconsidered that—*dangerous*? Was that how she saw him? Was that how she saw *them*?

His collar now wet, he removed his tie, put down the pen, and opened his e-mail. Scribes may have been noblemen in Confucian times, but he didn't see the wisdom in denying progress. He tapped quickly, smiling to himself. *Isn't Confucius the guy who believed wives should look up to their husbands and be loyal to them? What about that aspect of Confucian philosophy?* Later in the afternoon, long after he had sent the e-mail, he wished that he hadn't, or that he'd at least typed a smiley face to soften its effect.

That evening, he found Leigh in the bedroom, drying herself from her shower. He noticed the hair between her legs glistening with water droplets, unchanged yet beckoning. He started to move toward her and then suddenly stopped. It was a peculiar sensation—aroused, his heart beating, and yet, at the same time, he had the deflated feeling that whatever she had done to herself was not for him. If she was beckoning him at all, it wasn't his body or even him, but something that was so much harder to give. He stood facing her unable to make a move. She pulled on her jeans, and handed him several pages. His heart sunk at the prospect of reading another note—let alone such a lengthy one—before he realized that it was a letter from Jen. That bolstered his spirits only slightly. Although he missed his daughter and was eager for her news, he couldn't *read* Jen; he needed to *hear* her.

"I'm hungry. Let's order out. What do you feel like?" He was curious to see if her typical indecisiveness about what to eat would manifest in a note. Can one vacillate on paper?

Her pen didn't hesitate. I crave *transformation, transcendence, peace*.

He smiled. "I hear that's a slow delivery."

She laughed, the first time in weeks, and the sound of her laughter made him so happy that he reached out and touched her shoulder. She placed her hand on his and he felt her warmth buzzing through

him. Moving closer, he thought of all the places on her body he wanted to explore with his tongue, to imagine how she would taste. “Italian sounds good,” he whispered, careful not to be loud. He was about to kiss her when she gently lifted her hand from his to rifle for a pen and paper. She wrote: *I just remembered that I made a plan to go out to dinner tonight.*

“Out? But I’ve been gone for several days. I thought that I—you and me—” Questions filled him, words failed him. The idea of her having a dinner plan she hadn’t communicated in advance muddled him entirely. “Where are you going?”

*For Chinese, she scribbled. Do you want me to bring something back for you?*

*I want Jen, he thought as he left the bedroom. An eerie quiet trailed him. In the family room, where he thought he might find a moment of peace, he found a note taped to the television: Confucius says the loyalty that is due the husband from the wife is contingent on the husband being the kind of husband who warrants and inspires such loyalty. ☺*

It was the smiley face that provoked him. He marched back up into the bedroom, waving the page. “Confucius this, Confucius that. Does your Confucius say that a husband must work his ass off all day for a wife who won’t fucking speak to him? Does he say the wife should write notes to the husband to tell him how worthless he is? Well fuck Confucius and his fortune cookie platitudes.” Flashing on the note she had left a few weeks prior, he added, “And fuck jen.” He winced at the burst of sweetness on his bitter tongue. His stomach clenched and he feared he might vomit.

Leigh opened her mouth, but no sound emerged and she closed it.

“Here—” He drew his Atelier Simoni pen from his pocket and threw it at her. “You’ve got your weapon now.” Exhausted, he sat down on the plush loveseat in the bedroom and watched as she picked up the shiny pen from the floor, pulled out a pad of notebook paper from her nightstand drawer, and with mouth tightly shut—lips curled so tight to be nearly invisible—she wrote. In a sudden move, she crumpled the page and tossed it into the trash. She took out another sheet and held it in her hand with the pad. Then she hooked her purse strap on her arm and left.

He heard the front door close, and then the light jingle, jingle of her keys outside. He listened to the sound fade, watched the blue

dusk blacken. That evening, he ate Italian alone. The silence consumed him. Where did she go? Who was she with? What had she said? Then it hit him—for *Chinese*. It struck him all at once: her guru.

Later, the night progressing, he lay atop their white down comforter, and turned on the television. But he didn't watch or listen. As though trapped in some kind of sensory deprivation chamber, everything was dark and he found it hard to breathe. Leigh came to him, a figment, a figure from earlier time. How beautiful she was. He recalled her sucking on his index finger in the back of his old Volkswagen squareback, her eyes gazing at him, full of hope and desire. Now he considered an alternate view: was that sadness in her eyes? Was the hope and desire just his alone? He never meant to hurt her, to hurt *them*. He thought of their Jen sleeping somewhere far away and his voice squeaked forth in an anguished whisper. "I'm so sorry."

At some point in the night, he reached into the wastebasket and found the discarded scrap. He read by the moonlight glowing through the bedroom window. *Andrew, I hope it will come as some relief to you that the proper pronunciation of jen is wren—with an r. To become jen you must have li, which refers to an ideal way of acting and speaking to one another. I guess it's not surprising that Confucius said he never saw jen fully expressed.*

When he awoke in the morning, Leigh's side of their California king appeared tightly made. He found a note lying on his belly. How did it get there? Thinking he might be hallucinating, he was afraid to touch it and watched as it moved up and down, up and down with his breath. After a time, he picked it up. The page was blank. Empty. He placed it on his heart and closed his eyes. Had he lost her? Would he find them? The truth was—he couldn't say. ■