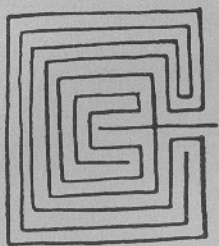


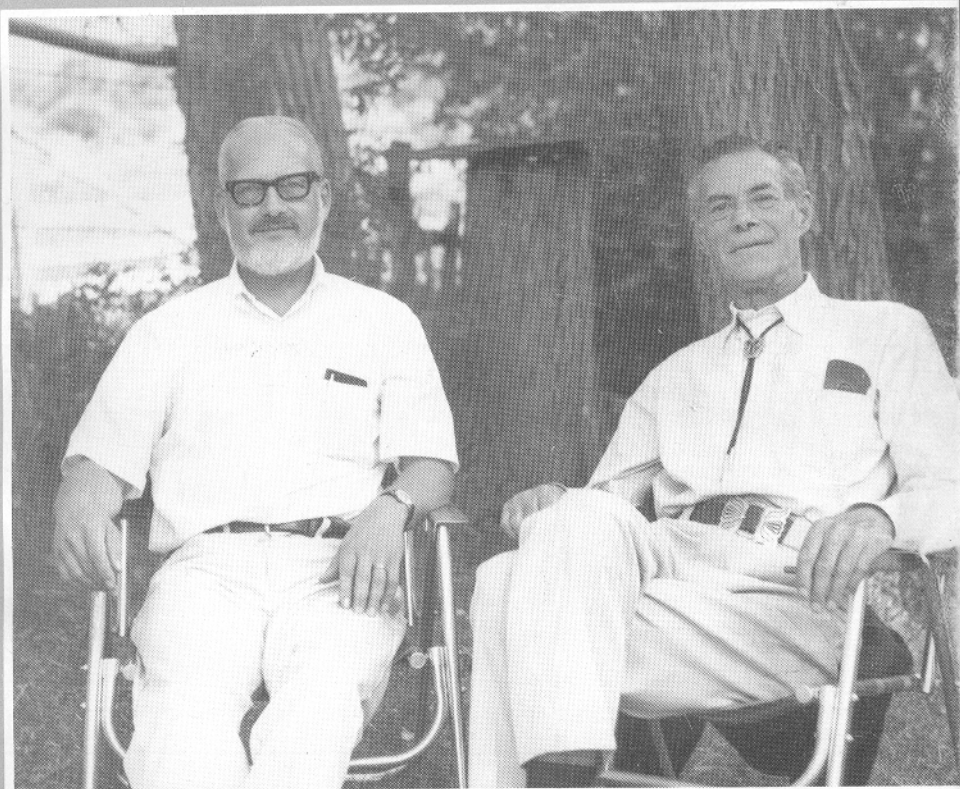
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Lessons

by Marcia Yudkin

"You see, I've heard so many very wonderful things about you, Mrs. Mintz, from Tang and Song. We have a saying, *yi jian ru gu*—I feel like old friends at the first meeting."

Lesley Mintz took a discreet step backwards. Like the other mathematicians who had come to Ithaca from the University of Nanjing—Tang, Song, Han and Zhao—this Wang Li stood too close when he talked. But where the others had arrived drunk-tired in loose, rumpled clothes, reeking of stale cigarette smoke, forlornly repeating sentences they had memorized, this one seemed fresh and primed for a TV interview. Taller than all the previous exchange scholars, smooth-faced as a boy of fifteen, dressed like an American squash pro, he gave off a smell like cloves and jasmine. He made her feel twenty, not thirty, and she had to concentrate on his running shoes to regain her breath.

"Well, I know very little about you, Wang Li," she said, keeping her gaze down. "My husband is sorry he had a meeting tonight and couldn't pick you up at the bus station himself. But I hope you'll make progress here, and I hope I can help you get settled." When she glanced back at his face, he was still smiling at her like a pop singer posing for an album cover.

He closed the distance between them again. His black eyes gleamed; his Adam's apple rose and fell when he spoke. "With your help, Mrs. Mintz, I know I can succeed. I know that I'll learn a lot from you. I anticipate your lessons eagerly. And I know you'll help me. So young and kind—Tang and Song told me all about you. A famous writer who is a talented piano musician as well, devoted to your mother-in-law, so honest you return checks that don't belong to you and write to politicians to persuade them to be honest too, and bravely make speeches to the whole faculty about their shameful behavior. . ."

"What?" Lesley backed up one step more, against the wall. His

grabbag of distortions was incredible. Who had coached him to flatter her so? "Did you come here to become a saint or a mathematician? Honestly, I'm not either one. I can help you with some practical things, and the rest is my husband's department."

"No." Wang Li brooded for a moment. "May I give you something that will explain everything?" He stepped away, and Lesley let out the breath she had been holding.

"Please."

He bent over the smallest of the rope-wrapped leather suitcases clustered in the center of his bare dormitory room. As he unfastened it and rifled through it, Lesley watched his polo shirt and pants gap at the waist, revealing a muscular bronze back. "Here." He straightened up and handed her a messy stack of Chinese newspapers.

"I can't read these."

"Inside there's something. Please, would it trouble you to read it tonight and speak with me about it tomorrow?" For the first time, his brow puckered in worry.

"Tomorrow?" She sized up the parcel. Assuming the contents were in English, they couldn't take too long to skim. "At ten-thirty? On my way to my office, I can stop by, and show you how to get to the Math Department."

"Wonderful!" He switched his charm on again, full force. "So until tomorrow?"

Lesley didn't begin to take apart the bundle until she was in bed, settled back against the pillows in her favorite T-shirt of Samson's. Disguised within several folded newspapers was a manuscript, closely typed in English on thirty long sheets of onion-skin paper. "The Dragon's Scales, by Lao Baixing," read the heading. Despite idiosyncratic spelling and grammar, the narrative absorbed her in a story of strife, treachery and betrayal at a Chinese school during the Cultural Revolution. In a full, rather old-fashioned style, fascinating characters and complications unfolded. When she got to the bottom of the last page, she was sure Wang Li had smuggled out a chapter of a Chinese *Grapes of Wrath*. He must be a friend or relative of this masterful Lao Baixing—a nephew, perhaps. She turned out the light but pulled herself back from sleep when her husband thumped up the stairs. "Hey Sams, what do you know about Wang Li?" she called.

Samson's ghostly bulk stomped into the dark room, pinged keys onto the bureau and dropped shoes that thudded like barbells. "Sorry, sweetheart. That Hardwood, you know what he said tonight? 'That's as naive and idealistic as if it came from your wife, Mintz. You, you're old enough to know better.' OK, so *his* wife is as dried up as he is. Does he have to take it out on me in front of the whole department?" Stripped to his underwear now, Samson thunked into bed, surrounding her like a grandfather teddy bear with soft fur and a dependably beating heart.

"Oh, that again? Forget it, people are so unimaginative." Lesley

stroked the arm hugging her until they were breathing in unison. "Wang Li. . ."

"Mmmm. Everyone predicted he'd never get out. He did some brilliant work in the mid-fifties, and then after that got into political trouble. He just came back from Chinese Siberia last year, and Zhao said he was as sharp as ever, so I sent for him."

"But. . ." Lesley slipped into sleep before she could pursue the inconsistency between the newcomer's youth and her husband's story. Near dawn, a dream solved the mystery, though: undressed, Wang Li demonstrated the sexual exercises that had kept him young. "Lessons? You don't need any lessons from me," Lesley marvelled, at which he disappeared, stymieing her.

Wang Li looked a good twenty, and weary, the next morning at 10:30. A lock of black hair stood up at the crown of his head, his belt was tangled, and there was a gravelly hesitation in his speech when he let Lesley in. "It's very kind of you to come, Mrs. Mintz." He motioned her to his vinyl armchair and perched against his desk, far enough away that Lesley could relax. "You know, I've imagined our meeting many times, and every time I was certain that you would do the right thing."

"You mean about that manuscript? Well, that's obvious. Anyone in the literary world would know what to do. Get me the rest of the manuscript and tell me about this writer Lao and I'll do my best to get it published." She smiled.

Instead of smiling back, Wang Li raked his hand through his hair and began to pace. "Ah, it seems that you don't understand." The energy in his bounding steps reminded Lesley of her dream; she flushed. "You see, Mrs. Mintz, Lao Baixing must be admitted to your English department."

"Oh, is that all? Then why all the urgency and mystery? Is he someone you met while you were, um, away from Nanjing?"

When he halted by the window, Wang Li wore a look she'd once seen on a well-dressed girl caught shoplifting in Bloomingdale's—defiant and frightened. "Lao Baixing is—I. I wrote that story, and I must finish it here." He pleaded, as if she were the plainclothes security guard. "Please, I—I don't know any mathematics at all."

Lesley clutched her forehead, feeling sick. "So you're not Wang Li? What did you do, steal his ticket? Knock him out at the airport? How in the world did you fool Immigration in New York?"

"Please." He scurried into a squat in front of her chair. "I'm Wang Li also, but not that Wang Li. That Wang Li is still under suspicion and can't leave China. My cousin, who is an official at the university, thought it would be silly to waste the invitation."

"So that's fraud!"

"No. You read my manuscript. If you think it can be published, am I not good enough to study writing at this university?"

"But it's August, for God's sake. There are rules."

"Tang showed me a letter from your husband. He said, 'If Wang Li can come, tell him to hell with the rules. Rules mean nothing when it comes to world-class talent.'"

Lesley couldn't avert her eyes from his supplicating gaze, intense as life facing death. "You really wrote that chapter? How old are you, anyway?"

"Twenty-seven."

As if we were dreaming again, she half-saw the "Little Strength" from the manuscript fuse with the foreigner in front of her. Little Strength had kept trying to watch the Cultural Revolution from the sidelines but suffered as much as the others. Obviously Wang Li had witnessed the brutalities he wrote about. He'd seen a teacher pushed out of a window, renegades studying English by flashlight in the pigsty, kids, on pain of the dreaded "airplane torture," accusing harmless classmates of Kuomintang connections. Lesley felt a stab of sympathy for Wang Li, then admiration. When she sought his eyes again, she saw him break into as exultant an expression as she'd ever seen.

"You *will* help me, Mrs. Mintz," he cheered. "I knew you would."

Not only did she help him switch departments, after classes began Lesley had Wang Li come to her office often to discuss his novel. Although he continued to entice her in dreams, in real life she played the most severe of teachers, keeping to matters of style, form, suspense and voice. He absorbed her advice like a pliant, grateful novice. She mentioned neither the dreams nor these sessions to her husband—Samson was preoccupied with a Marxist topologist's fight for tenure. Nor did she reveal that the young man's story captivated her as no student's ever had. Even when she was with Wang Li, her praise remained implicit until one day in November when her involvement with his characters burst out of her like a too-long-held secret.

"Your characters are so real to me," she confessed. "Party Secretary Ma, the old grandmother with bound feet, Little Strength and Little Fishface, I know them. It's horrifying to me what happens to them. But at the same time I can't truly put myself in their place. It's just like that hijacking last week, where the hijackers made two hostages push others out of the plane. I would have refused, even if it meant I would have been pushed out of the plane too. How could I live with myself if I had pushed? And yet person after person in your book makes the opposite decision. It makes me more and more upset."

Recognition flashed across Wang Li's face, but before Lesley could be sure what it meant, he clasped his hands behind his head and pursed his lips, looking down. "I don't know your country's history very well," he said after some long moments. "But I remember reading about one man during your revolutionary war who said 'Give me liberty or give me death!' A hero, am I right? It's charming. I was deeply influenced when I read that story, but most people in my country would think he was foolish. In the Chinese way, life is more

precious than any principles."

"But the people in your book who do hurtful things because the alternative is death or pain, won't they end up feeling terrible about what they've done?"

Wang Li reacted as if she had spoken in rhymes, or with the plaintive wisdom of a lovely child. "Tang and Song were completely right about you. It's wonderful." He shone and sparkled at her. "I wish I could put an American in my book, to stir up the other characters. But instead they will have their fate. You see, China is an old, old country."

Was he condescending to her? Lesley resolved late that night not to take offense, and to relax their sessions a little. Here was an opportunity to learn about a world that was more remote to her than Jane Austen's, or Conrad's, or even Chaucer's. But whenever he began to describe the real horrors on which his story was based, she would recoil as if he had unwrapped bandages, exposing raw, bloody wounds. In December, after hearing about his six- and eight-year-old neighbors, who'd had to cope for themselves in the city after their doctor parents had been sent away to grow rice, Lesley couldn't contemplate historical cruelties any more. She turned to the window, let her thoughts fly loose and came back talking about Louise Balt's novella in progress. The wry, talkative blonde's stream-of-consciousness technique was too monotonous, Lesley confided, too self-conscious. "She's got a knack for dialogue, but she refuses to put any in. It's too bad," she said.

Wang Li nodded enthusiastically. "And what about her family?"

"Her family?" Lesley blinked. He was wearing that open, radiant expression that held the power to unbalance her.

"Yes, you see, I'm still not very familiar with your country's customs," he went on, "and I would like to do things properly. I'm already twenty-seven and I would like to be married. Louise doesn't wear a wedding ring. So it seems to me perhaps I may be introduced to her family."

"Introduced? Married?" His logic was so preposterous with respect to Louise, who probably juggled two or more lovers at once, that a laugh escaped from Lesley while her stomach flipped. "Have you spoken to her? Do you think you're compatible? You don't need introductions here. Just ask her out for coffee after class and see if you like each other."

He nodded gravely. "Thank you, Mrs. Mintz. You see, I've been so busy since I arrived working on my English and my book that I haven't had time to investigate these things."

Over the course of the winter, Lesley suffered the results of her advice. Wang Li had coffee with every unmarried girl in the seminar, settling finally on Martina Flor, who was slightly older than he, with the dark allure of a city-bred gypsy. They obviously liked each other. More than once they arrived late to class together, Martina with a cool poised glow and Wang Li's cowlick wilder than usual. Lesley showed

no reaction, she hoped, but at home alone she moped. Some American slang began to creep into the Cultural Revolution saga, and when Lesley warned her protégé about breaking tone, she felt her chest constrict. What else was Martina teaching Wang Li that she couldn't?

The first week of April he lingered after their conference like a schoolboy who had to beg for carfare home. "Mrs. Mintz, I don't like to presume," he began, "but after all, we're really old friends now, aren't we?" He paused. "Well, you see, I would like to marry Martina, but—"

"But you don't know how to ask her?" Morosely Lesley wondered if she would have to discuss another American tale—Myles Standish and "Speak for yourself, John."

"No, she's already agreed." Wang Li waved that off as if it were mere detail. "But I would like to do it correctly. Martina would like to invite guests. But where? Not in my room, not in her apartment, and her parents live all the way in Florida now—our guests couldn't travel so far. I saw a wedding in a magazine at someone's house, in a garden full of flowers. Everyone says you have the most beautiful garden in Ithaca, which gave me this idea. If it wouldn't be too much trouble, could we get married at your house?"

Lesley turned to her calendar so he wouldn't see how the request stabbed her. "Congratulations, Wang Li, Of course I'd like to help—when were you thinking of? This summer, I assume? Oh dear, this summer isn't very good at all. Samson's mother is in very poor health, and if she needs me, we may have to close up the house and rent a cabin near her in New Hampshire. Can you wait until the fall? In fact, we'd better suspend these meetings for the summer too. Even if we don't stay up there, I'm sure to be running up to New Hampshire pretty often." After a summer apart, she would surely be able to bear seeing him get married, she was thinking—if Martina didn't have second thoughts.

Wang Li looked as though he would run out of the office whooping. His eyes glowed with appreciation. "Mrs. Mintz, you are truly a great friend, and a splendid person. How may I thank you? May I dedicate 'The Dragon's Scales' to you?"

"Let's see you finish it first. Do you think you can complete Part Four by September?"

"Definitely. And by the way, congratulations on your story about the old widow. Martina showed it to me. It's so sensitive. If I can only learn from you how to make everything come out in a perfect circle. . . ." He had come up close, too close, and his scent of cloves and jasmine unhinged her knees.

"Perhaps you will," she whispered. "Let's see."

"Lesley Wells Mintz!" Samson's gargantuan bellow made her tattered copy of *The Magic Mountain* jump out of her hands. The fan that hadn't done much to ease the swelter of late summer now blew some

loose pages out a screenless window. Her husband filled the doorway now, sweat beading down his face, his jaw set as if she were his naughty child, whose capers had just come to light.

"Sams, what is it? Did Peng Wei arrive all right?" Riveted to the armchair, Lesley barely noticed more of her beloved book scattering like early fall leaves.

"Like a messenger of doom."

"Doom? Whose doom?" She felt like Wang Li's character Ling, who challenged the right of the Red Guards to search her house but couldn't avert catastrophe.

"Our doom. Perhaps yours more than mine."

"Sams, relax." She'd seen him so worked up only once before, when two of his favorite juniors had cheated on a take-home exam. "Relax. Sit down. What on earth are you talking about?"

"Permit me to read from a letter from Zhao. You remember Zhao?" Still standing, he pulled a folded sheet of paper from his back pocket.

"Of course." Zhao was the third one on the exchange, the one with thick glasses and the incongruous moustache.

"Wang Li the English student stole Wang Li the mathematician's visa papers. How was he able to conceal this crime after he arrived? Why didn't your university report him to your government? Wang Li the English student may not be touched here in China, because his relatives are very powerful. But in the United States even your President must obey the laws. This is what I finally understood after you and Mrs. Mintz explained the terrible destiny of China's good friend Nixon to me. In your country, common people can demand justice. We believe Wang Li the mathematician was wronged. So although it was very inconvenient, Han and I spoke to the consul of your country here. He told us that if we can document this charge, Wang Li may be deported for immigration fraud. He also said anyone 'aiding and abetting immigration fraud' may be sent to prison or fined. Please, Professor Mintz, for the sake of the mathematician Wang Li who has suffered so much, send the imposter home at once. We're sure you just didn't realize how terribly you were tricked."

Lesley's thoughts raced. She'd have to shred her diary with its evidence of "aiding and abetting" and vet her story in progress for telltale signs of guilt. "But a whole year later, Sams—doesn't that seem peculiar?"

"Oh yes." His voice was still heavy with accusation. "Zhao addresses that issue. 'Peng is completely reliable. That's why we have waited to send a message with him. Wang Li has stolen mail often.'"

"That's ridiculous. How could Wang Li intercept mail in the U.S.?" She got up to collect the *Magic Mountain* pages fluttering around the room.

A strong hand on her shoulder halted her. "Lesley, here are the facts. Your Wang Li came here on someone else's visa. You knew that. Nevertheless you arranged for him to stay. That's all. Period. And I

count as a conspirator too, since I knew he wasn't the mathematician." Samson shook his head, as if to marvel at his obtuseness. "My God, and here I am accusing Dean Halloran and Mac MacArthur of shady dealings."

"Sams, listen. A mistake isn't shady dealings. Wang Li told me the university sent the visa form with the birth date blank, and all mail to the mathematician came to him since the older Wang Li still didn't have any official status at Nanjing. Someone who's not—what do they call it? 'rehabilitated'—can't get mail. And he read some letter of yours to Tang saying, 'To hell with the rules.' Sams, it's just as I explained in August, bureaucratic foulups. We didn't do anything wrong."

As unconvinced as a prosecutor, Samson left, his footsteps banging on the stairs.

Lesley avoided her husband the rest of the night, thinking, thinking, thinking. She changed into her nightshirt in darkness and still lay aware when Samson cracked the bedroom door and came in after midnight. Suddenly the phrase "your Wang Li" struck her, along with the realization that he'd read aloud only parts of the letter. Were there other accusations or insinuations? "Sams," she said when she felt his weight tilt the mattress. "Sams, I didn't betray you in any way."

There was a long silence. Then came a veiled, polite "Oh?" He didn't roll toward her and cuddle, and Lesley wondered, before the dreams began, if she would ever be able to undo this mess.

Wang Li wasn't easy to find. In the gray light of morning, Lesley checked his dorm room first—apparently unoccupied. In a phone booth, she searched the book for "Flor, M."—unlisted. At the information desk of the student union, she got an address for Martina among the old vacation cottages on the edge of town. She knocked door to door there, anticipating Martina appearing in a silk robe blazoned with dragons. "Wang Li? I'm sorry, we were up half the night, he's still sleeping." Or Martina would flash her a suspicious gaze, brimming with jealousy. But outside of the fifth cottage, Martina emerged in a pink cotton sun dress, seemingly pleased to see her teacher. "Wang Li? He walked down to McCusker's to get the paper. How was your summer?"

After murmuring the proper things, Lesley drove to the little store—no Wang Li along the way or inside. But on a side road that wound along a creek, she spotted a black-haired man squatting motionless on a rock, his broad shoulders and strong back bare. After she pulled the car over and crunched a few twigs with her steps, Wang Li turned and shot up from his crouch. "Mrs. Mintz, how wonderful of you to stop here! Do you know these fish, the ones with silver tails? They look like the kind my grandfather used to catch with his hands."

She looked, but couldn't focus on anything beyond his boyish delight and the crucial questions she had for him.

"Is something the matter? Your mother-in-law?"

"No, no. She's fine now, actually." Lesley's voice was gossamer thin, like spider's thread. She tried to thicken it. "No, the next Nanjing exchange student arrived last night. Peng Wei."

A breeze rustled the shadows and a truck on the main road shifted gears. Wang Li reached up to pat down his cowlick. "Peng Wei. Hmm. I don't know him."

"Samson picked him up. And he's not a writer, but suppose he was. And suppose he stole the visa papers from the guy who had earned the right to come."

"Earned." Wang Li repeated that word and pondered it rather than "stole." As if his slowness to reply cancelled the rules of polite conversation, she let her eyes dwell on a small, marvelous hollow in the upper middle of his smooth chest. "I'm on Part Five now, the last part of my book," he continued, neutrally. "It's 1975, and all the city folks in the countryside are waiting to go home. The commune chooses Red Digger to go to university, but on the day the truck goes to the city, the driver comes early and sees Little Strength kicking rocks on the road. The driver assumes Little Strength is the one waiting for the ride to the university, because he wears glasses. Little Strength realizes the mistake, and goes. This is his chance. He bluffs his way at the university and soon is studying English literature, as he has long dreamed. But along come some cronies of Red Digger, and can you guess how it ends?"

When she opened her mouth to answer, he wagged a finger. "It must be a Chinese novel through and through. I know your story of George Washington and the cherry tree. 'I cannot tell a lie—I chopped down the cherry tree.' A Chinese man would never say that. He would never confess all and hope for the public to rally for him, like the professor your husband defended last year. Not unless he was crazy."

"He would find a protector," she said slowly. "Right?"

Wang Li beamed like a doting mentor. "Yes, that's the most practical way, the only way to defend his fate. You do understand Little Strength, Mrs. Mintz. After all you've taught me, this moves me very deeply." He raised a hand to his chest and began to lift his face to the sky.

"That isn't fate. You've schemed, you've connived and you've compromised me." Lesley crossed the distance between them. His ears twitched but he didn't step back. "You've compromised me," she said again, lower, drinking in his piney, sweaty scent and the powerful allure of his flesh. "So we might as well go on."

Still close, he gently nodded as if this were a wise suggestion. "This is your true feeling, not what you said you would do in that hostage crisis. Yes, you may do something wrong if you had to, but you would not kill yourself or begin to kill others afterwards. You would go on, without—what did you call it in class?—without melodrama."

Confusion rippled through her, but she rebounded quickly. "No. That's the Chinese way. You misunderstand me."

"Do I?" There was mild concern in his look, and no surprise. "We're truly old friends, Mrs. Mintz. I wouldn't want to misunderstand you."

Lesley held their intimate distance for a few moments longer, and then pulled away from its spell. Her whole body ached, as if she'd been teetering over one of Ithaca's gorges like the amateur acrobats who sometimes fell in. Kindness radiated from Wang Li, without any condescension or contempt. He remained where he was standing while she clutched and rubbed her shoulders.

"There are things no one has told you up to now," he said after a long silence. "But I believe I may tell you because they will help you understand. Three years ago Song was scheduled to come here, not Zhao. Song was older, his examination scores were higher and he had published more papers. But Zhao was a party member and convinced the leaders he should go, not Song. To save face, Song wrote your husband that his wife was ill and he would have to wait a year. Song did come and went back. Last year, while I was here, the leaders were considering a young man named Hua. Then Song informed them that under the guise of English lessons, Hua was having illegal relations with a beautiful Canadian teacher. Song believes this. I'm not sure it is true. But young Hua will never come to the United States now."

"You mean the kind of intrigues in your book still go on. Everyone is compromised." Lesley felt exhausted. "That's not going to help me with Samson—my husband."

Wang Li swung back into a crouch facing the water. "You needn't worry about any trouble. Martina's sister is a lawyer and says that once we marry, my enemies in Nanjing cannot harm me or those who have helped me. Watch this, Mrs. Mintz." He tossed a small stone into the creek. "You see, you cannot kill a fish with a pebble. May we still be married in your splendid garden?"

Her heart pounded at the thought, and she bent pretending to choose stones until the jealousy passed. "Of course. Labor Day would be perfect, don't you think? There's an American saying: what else are old friends for?"