

**Joel Hinman**

### **An Unpredictable Disease**

They're standing in the foyer, Ruth chanting in front of the little Eurasian statue, Arthur remembering the old testament prophets who condemned graven images, calling them "wind and confusion." But then what is the harm, Arthur thinks. If it reduces her anxiety, he's all for it, halacha be damned.

Arthur has spent in the morning in soon-to-be-nursery working the impasto into a fine chop that emulates his subject — the currents of the East River — until he adds one color too many and the painting tips browns out. What they call anal expressionism. Ruth has come for him then, inspecting his shoes, making him change because they've got paint on them, her face so tense the makeup has splintered: craquelure.

Then the dog gets escorted behind the kitchen gate, the lights turned off and they're off, down the elevator, out past the Albanian doorman, hurrying towards Park.

But the silence between them is so strained, Arthur's almost grateful when Ruth can't contain herself. She wheels on him.

"Just don't pick a fight!"

Arthur's stunned. Is she continuing an argument he can't remember starting? Picking at the stale leftovers of need, overpreparation and insomnia? Some repetitive thought loop to which he isn't privy?

"What?" he says, but she's waving her hands as if pointing to prior instances, scowling as she says, "I've seen you around people in authority."

He should let it pass. He knows she's three nights without sleep, knows how hard she's worked to get them this far, knows how much she wants the baby. But the accusation is unjust, not because of inaccuracy, but because her vehemence represents an opportunity to claim a future grievance.

Folding arms he regains his full height, towering over her because he is six four and she a mere five foot five. "I've been nothing but sweetness and light." His tone is preposterous.

She shrugs him off and continues across Park with him chasing behind. At the corner, she turns back, "Half the time you don't know what you are saying." She's about to turn north but thinks better of it. "I take the lead," she says. "Is that clear?"

“Okay,” Arthur says.

“Not good enough. I want you to promise.”

And, of course, he does.

Outside Twitchell Loomis couples cluster on the sidewalk. It’s a repurposed Episcopal Rectory with a brass plaque that reads, “Serving Families & Children since 1907.” The front door is immense, made from ship-building oak.

Arthur and Ruth are greeted and escorted to a courtyard in back of the building where Elizabeth waits with Daniel Kwoo, who, according to Elizabeth, is way up there in something called the Korean Bureau of Child Services.

On the small wicker brick patio, teak lawn furniture. Stepping down into the courtyard, Arthur notices a playset tucked in the corner: two swings, a slide and a climbing rope. It looks forgotten. Protectively he reaches for Ruth, touching her back in case she’s seen it, because recently, and not so recently, she has become undone at the sight of anything suggesting infancy. In the aisle of the supermarket, he has found her paralyzed by a stumbling toddler.

But it’s Kwoo who surprises. In the preceding weeks, Arthur had conjured, if not counted on, Kwoo being this little Asian fellow with English that went off like firecrackers. This clumsy but sturdy imago, finding contemporary American culture bewildering and frightening, comes to depend upon Arthur as his guide (and savior). In the predictive logic of fantasy Kwoo, of course, finds Arthur to be the only truly suitable father for his Korean orphan. But the man gracefully draping his suit jacket on the chair back can’t be this tall and handsome — a regular Cary Grant; he can’t be sporting fancy French eyewear, or a double-vented merino; he can’t speak with the clipped precision of someone who attended a New England prep school. Nor should he be more successfully American than Arthur.

The collision of reality and projection causes Arthur to bungle his rehearsed introduction. “I’m Art but you can call me Arthur.”

With all the small talk and air kissing, no one seems to notice. Elizabeth, the host, bids them sit.

Because he’s a big man — with a great round head like a finial — the loveseat groans and a gust of air rises in a column of heat from beneath his shirt. The patio on which they sit is surrounded by a screen of ailing rhododendrons. Tall glass apartment buildings — criminally tenanted high rises Arthurs calls them — loom above the courtyard so that the air is filled with shifting

gray shadows and the light has a hooded murky quality. Tilting his head back, the sky seems small and very far away.

Kwoo sits forward and says, in a voice that is surprisingly warm and open, “You know, I can’t tell you how excited I was when Elizabeth told me you were interested in a special needs child.”

The relief is so powerfully sweet Arthur forgets himself, “Yes! I hear you have our little girl.”

Immediately Elizabeth jumps in. “That isn’t what Daniel meant. We don’t want to jump to conclusions. This is a long complicated process.” The edges of her nostrils flare.

Ruth stiffens. Somehow Arthur maintains a poker face even as the tips of his ears burst into flames.

He had, at one time, liked Elizabeth. He’d even felt sorry for her. Homely, she compensated by adopting a kind of theatrical Mother Superior attitude. He overlooked the chandelier earrings, the horse blanket skirts, the Hermes scarves covering an age ravaged neck when she seemed to be on their side. Today, he senses she is the company’s girl and sitting across from him she drums her fingers ominously on the thick manila folder perched on her lap. It is their invasively gathered dossier. And what Arthur fears more than anything is that it should slip and fall spilling its contents upon the ground.

“I’m not going to lie,” Ruth had said during one of their arguments.

“No one is asking you to,” Arthur had replied.

Now Ruth comes to the rescue, admitting with a little gust of air, how nervous they both are, and it’s enough to remind Arthur of his great good fortune. She is his Mizrahi jewel. Beautiful always, but particularly in moments of vulnerability where her olive skin glows and her face, all angles and sharp features, calls up princesses of Central Asia or the Steppes.

Kwoo acknowledges her excuse. “I know,” he says, “but it’s always better to meet in person. Since I had to be here for an orientation, and you two are being fast-tracked, I thought it would be a great opportunity to get to know each other.” He hesitates before saying, “I understand you went through IVF?”

Arthur shoots a glance at Ruth. Because of her he understands what has just transpired. If he has learned anything since they decided to have a child, it is that all aspects of conception, adoption and parenting are saturated with folklore. Superstition and myth swirl around in the background of every decision. One says that

if you are unable to conceive, try adopting because it reduces the pressure — and there is so much pressure — making it more likely you'll become pregnant. Knowing this, Twitchell Loomis insists, if you want their children, you must cease and desist all biological efforts to conceive.

Sadly, it's not an issue for Arthur and Ruth. They've already shot their wad — four treatments, fallopian timed sex, blastocysts, ultrasounds (Arthur likened it to some insanely expensive space program complete with the lunar docking of the eggs) — and they had emerged barren, humble and scarred and hardly ready for a new set of demands. Worse, in the wake of the failure, Ruth, for the first time in her life, had plunged into a deep depression that left her sleepless for months, ghosting around the apartment in a nightgown, unable to work, to eat, to walk the dog. Her depression was contagious, because Arthur, reduced to a powerless observer, thought he had failed the marriage. It took months to persuade Ruth to seek help. When she did, a mild anti-depressant was prescribed, a fact buried in the dossier.

Arthur turns to Ruth as she says, "Every woman thinks she'll have a baby." Her hand flutters over her womb. "It was a dark time when we realized it wasn't happening for us. For a long time we weren't ready to adopt." She stops speaking, leans forward and when she speaks again her voice is low and thick. "You aren't sure what you think. Part of you feels as if you're being disloyal to the baby you lost. Part feels unworthy."

As she is talking she seems to be gazing inward, but then her tone begins to shift. "I have been lucky," she says. "I have a good husband, I'm healthy, my practice is going well and I've been brought up to believe that if you've been fortunate, you should give back. Arthur and I talked about it, whatever the guiding principle of the universe is, we want to give our love to those who need it most."

Elizabeth and Kwoon exchange a look that Arthur can't decipher.

"Frankly, Ruth," Elizabeth says, "I'm relieved to hear you say that. If you hadn't been so honest, we'd have wondered had you guys really thought this through."

Kwoon nods. "It's funny, but in Korea they often want younger couples. But in my experience, when we're dealing with special needs, you want couples who are more mature, who've had more experience."

Kwoo, Arthur realizes, is talking about the clock. He's using the coded language of social services but referencing the almighty clock. Adoption, Arthur has painfully learned, is ruled, as are all things, by the clock. He had been oblivious sitting out there in the audience at the first orientation, his head sticking up well above the crowd, an easy target. Then Elizabeth, from the pulpit, had announced in a high fluffy voice that in virtually every single country around the world a couple's age couldn't average more than forty-six. At first this went right by him. But then, laboring, he had done the math and realized that only because Ruth was so much younger were they even in the running. And that this was their last year and no sooner had this fact taken up residence in his chest than his face began to beat with heated shame, discolored so conspicuously that Elizabeth's gaze found him. Maybe he imagined it but he thought he heard younger couples around him snickering. What could he do but sit there helplessly while Elizabeth prattled on about exceptions and waivers and special circumstances?

Later, in the safety of their living room, he exploded. "You know those kids in Africa, Ruth? The flyblown ones sprawled in the dust clutching their puffed-up bellies? Guess what? Turns out they'd rather die a miserable death than have some old fart like me be their father!"

Ruth's elbow digs into his side. Kwoo's been talking and he hasn't heard a thing.

"What?"

"I was saying, Arthur, we haven't heard much from you. What was your reaction to this idea of a special needs baby?"

Despite all their preparation, Arthur suddenly finds himself speechless. "You know," he stalls, "I think Ruth said it best. I mean, call me old fashioned, but really, when you think of it, aren't all children special?" Out of the corner of his eye he watches Ruth's knee begin to vibrate. "Now, of course," he hurries to say, "my parents never used *that* word. We wouldn't say *special*; in those days, you were *different*, which, let's face it, is a euphemism for the fact that you have something wrong with you. Me? I was artistic, a poor student. All the other kids would be reading and writing, I'd be doodling. They sent me to a special school for doodlers, I guess. Which is to say, when you come right down to it, we're all special in our own way and therefore we need, every one of us, to appreciate people's unique qualities." He can feel himself deflating, like a tire that's been slashed.

Kwoo frowns and Elizabeth is giving Ruth a skeptical look. Seeming to shrug it off, Kwoo changes the subject asking how they met. Ruth launches into how she saw Arthur's work at the 2<sup>nd</sup> Avenue Art Fair. As a couple, it's a story they're used to telling. In fact, it's such a well-worn groove that there is a place where Arthur usually steps in to get a laugh, saying that it was only when Ruth appeared a second time without her husband that he allowed himself to hope. Today, however, he remains silent when Ruth pauses. Fresh off his disappointing commentary, he's isn't ready to risk screwing up again. Besides, she's making the right impression, maybe he should hang back, confine himself complaisancy.

"When you write your application, make sure you include that kind of thing," Kwoo says.

Arthur hears Ruth gasp. "Wait!" she says. "What do you mean? We *already* filed our application!" She's pointing to the dossier. It's as though the conversation has fallen through a trapdoor. With the effort that went into assembling the dossier, it's unimaginable they should have to go through *that* again.

Elizabeth holds up her hands, addressing Kwoo. "They did file an application for the Ecuadorean program."

Kwoo wants to know whatever happened with the Ecuadoreans.

It was late the night Elizabeth called. Ruth shouted for Arthur to pick up the extension. Ruth's tone indicating something was wrong.

"Ecuador is dead," Elizabeth was saying. "Political machinations, nothing can be done."

Arthur remembers putting the phone down, curling up on the bed. The news hit him harder than expected. Gradually he'd come to accept the idea of an Ecuadorean child. He'd even begun daydreaming about the boy — it was always a boy. They'd go to the park when the weather turned, Arthur batting fungo, the kid shagging grounders.

After the call ended Ruth found him in the bedroom. He was staring out at the East River. "I didn't hear you hang up," she said, sitting next to him. She took his hand. "Elizabeth said if we were interested in a special needs child, she could fast track us with the Koreans."

Arthur heard the need in her voice. But an Ecuadorean kid could still be mistaken for your own. How could he tell her about hoping people might think the child was his biologically?

“They’d waive the age requirement,” Ruth said. “They have a little girl, Arthur.”

Sitting in the dark he couldn’t find the words. She was asking him to do this for her. Later, he thought, there would be time for his misgivings.

Elizabeth finishes giving Kwoo the Ecuadorean low down. He nods and turns back to Ruth and Arthur. “Okay,” he says. “Sounds like it’s time for my little talk about Koreans. I assume you’ve already heard.”

They have. In adoption circles, the Koreans are an urban legend. A woman at the dog run had said it was like being worked over by homicide detectives, starting with the presumption of guilt. No other country has both mental and physical health benchmarks. There are couples, they learned, on something called the “South Korean Beach Diet,” trying to get their weight down so they could meet the requirements.

They’d fought over divulging Ruth’s breakdown.

“I’m not going to lie,” Ruth had said.

“Who said anything about lying?” Arthur said. “It’s in the application.”

“That’s enough. Everybody’s been depressed at one time or another.”

But now watching Kwoo finesse it, Arthur has to give the Korean credit. Obviously, he’s given this speech before, but he stays connected to the words, talking candidly mixing pride and embarrassment.

“We actually don’t get to make many decisions, so yes, we tend to want to drill down,” he says before turning to Elizabeth. Even without looking Arthur can tell how tense Ruth has become. If there is to be a point where Kwoo will ask about their health this would be it, but instead, he surprises Arthur by asking about their finances. Kwoo smiles sheepishly, “Special needs can require resources.”

When Arthur glances at Ruth he can see she’s been thinking the same thing. The worst is over.

“Daniel,” Ruth says, “as Elizabeth might have told you, I have my own legal practice. I specialize in financial planning for families.”

Elizabeth raps the dossier with a fingernail. “I know, Ruth, but they’re always concerns with a single income family.” Maybe it’s unintentional but she glances at Arthur. In the exchange, a look that lasts less than a quarter of a second, Arthur knows she’s



figured out that the galleries have stopped calling, that the invitations to group shows have dried up, that he's no longer asked to donate to school auctions nor requested to illustrate the local newsletter. Everything's there: every financial, academic, medical, historical record; they've even got letters and testimonials from family members, neighbors, first spouses and one of Arthur's old girlfriends. But Arthur is too late, just as he rouses himself to protest, Kwoo has a call coming in. At first Kwoo hopes not to avoid it, but when he glances at the screen, he's up like a shot.

"I'm sorry," he says, "but I *have* to answer this." Stepping away, Arthur hears him switch to Korean.

"I don't know how much detail to go into," Ruth whispers to Elizabeth.

"You're doing fine," Elizabeth says. "Just be yourself." Then Kwoo signals for Elizabeth. Now it's time for Arthur to whisper.

"Did you hear what she said? Single income!"

"Don't!"

"My salary is . . ."

". . . It's not important. *Lissen* to me," she hisses, "you *have* to sound like you mean it. You can't just mouth the words."

"Okay. I blew it. I'm sorry. But you wanted to take the lead."

She rolls her eyes. "You can't take your ball and go home. We're a couple." She gives him the look, then shushes him when Elizabeth and Kwoo return.

"Again my apologies," Kwoo says.

"Was it about the little girl?" Ruth asks.

"Another case," he assures her, but when he and Elizabeth settle in, something has changed and suddenly Kwoo looks solemn. "The little girl we have in mind, we think she suffers from Fetal Alcohol Syndrome."

Arthur isn't quite sure what this means, but next to him Ruth quietly moans.

"If you're familiar with FAS," Kwoo continues, "it's unpredictable. Some children exhibit no symptoms, but for others, there can be years of costly care. For parents it can be draining both financially and emotionally. It can put enormous stress on a marriage."

Even while Elizabeth is saying that Twitchell Loomis would make counselors available, Arthur feels something gathering in the pit of his stomach. They had talked for hours about what might happen during this meeting. They had speculated. They had role-played how to handle different situations. Ruth prepared as



if for trial and Arthur had thought she was overdoing it. But now he sees why the meeting had to be in person; he understands her paranoia. They needed to see how Ruth and he would react. It's a double bind. If you question the enormity, if you let on how intimidated you are, how it ruins your fantasies of happy smiling babies, obviously you aren't up for the challenge and they cut you loose. But if you're too confident, they'll say you aren't committed because anyone in their right mind would be scared. His eyes are stinging, his body temperature keeps fluctuating, while he wills himself to appear cool and calm.

Ruth grabs his hand and what surprises him is how fierce her grip is. "Daniel," he hears her say, "my husband and I would love that baby. We know you're talking about more than just emotional resources. My practice is thriving and better still, we both work from home so we could devote ourselves to her care."

"That's more than most families," Arthur interjects.

Ruth ignores him, beginning to describe their support network, how they have such an extraordinary community of friends and family. Arthur scans their faces. Something's wrong. He senses their earlier openness has vanished. Ruth has gone on to tell them how Arthur plays a big part in the east side art's community, how he's respected, how he did this famous mural on a handball court that is practically a landmark. Unable to hear himself praised, he leans his head back gazing up at the apartment buildings. Twenty floors up he sees light flash off a window. Is it an omen or something like smoke signal, someone warning him to get out of there? What do they see from up there? Some oversized guy slouched in a chair? This big galumph as his father would say? He reaches back to pinch his neck, spreads his palm bringing it forward to rub the seed hair scattered across his scalp. He does this a couple of times, back and forth, because it's comforting.

It isn't something he planned and he doesn't really have an intention, only he can't remain silent. Maybe it's because Ruth looks so miserable.

"You know," he says too loudly at first, "this is all beginning to sound familiar. Like something is missing. Something is not being said that needs to be."

He feels Ruth's hand on his arm but shakes it off.

"You know what it is?" he says as if the revelation has just come to him. "Nobody is talking about the whole child. Like the whole deal. We're talking about parts but we're leaving out the most important thing of all, which is the spirit. Do I mean spiritu-

al? No, not in the new age sense. That's not it."

He pauses to make eye contact. Elizabeth is frowning so he decides to concentrate on Kwoo who will make the decision anyway. The hell with Elizabeth.

"See, Daniel. I'm an artist and like I said, we see things a little differently. Now that doesn't mean I hate rich people. I don't. But I think the life they lead, many of them anyway, is pretty limited. And let's be honest, do you really think one of those guys from Goldman or Lazard Frere, if they even exist anymore, is going to have time to devote to that little girl? No, they're not. What they will have is money for the best specialists. Fair enough, except the specialist doesn't raise the kid. You know where I'm coming from, there's no replacement for a parent's love. It's the real deal, as they say."

"I don't know if you know this, Daniel, but I teach Life Drawing at Pratt and what I tell my students is don't be fooled by the skin, you have to draw what's underneath. Start with the bones. Be guided by what is happening at a deeper level. And that is what you want, isn't it? People who look for the essence, people who look for the spirit, the animating spark, if you will, that's often hidden from view. We artists are childlike. Everybody else is going around trying to make money, but we're like these shamans looking for the sacred. It's like a mission. Hey everybody," he says like it's a wake-up call, "where's that sense of wonder! Who else would be more suited to bring up a kid?"

He stops as if expecting someone to respond, but when no one does — Kwoo continues to stare at him impassively — he pushes on.

"So, you gotta have money. I get that. But one of the problems we face right now is that we focus on nothing but. We turn everything into a commodity. Stuff we can trade in. Kids aren't products, they're kids."

Elizabeth cuts in. "*We don't* treat kids like commodities."

"I didn't mean to imply *you* did, just that it's done. Look, you guys do great work. If anything you should be proud, finding parents for a sick kid. Who does that? I'm just trying to remind us what can get lost in the shuffle, that each of us is special and unique and human. And I promise you there is no one out there, I don't care who, that will approach raising a child with as much reverence and humility. In short, we will do a great job with your little girl."

Kwoo shakes his head. "Thank you," he says. "That was very eloquent."

Arthur's relieved. Later, they will think about what he's said and decide he's right.

There is a long awkward pause until Ruth asks, "Can you tell us anything more about the little girl?"

For the first time, Kwoo seems uncomfortable. He twists around to collect his suit jacket. Elizabeth hoists the dossier, stands, fusses her skirt.

"We have her in a good facility," Kwoo says, "outside a city called Busan. Her height and weight are where they need to be. She's in good hands." They've begun moving towards the door.

"What about her name? Can you tell us her name?" Ruth asks.

Elizabeth lays a hand on Ruth's sleeve. "She's called Hwa Young."

"What a lovely name."

"It means eternal beauty," Elizabeth says.

"When do you go back?" Arthur asks Kwoo.

And then they are in the corridor and Kwoo says something that Arthur doesn't quite catch and Elizabeth is telling Ruth she'll be in touch. Arthur feels Kwoo shaking his hand.

It's colder outside when they step onto the sidewalk. Couples still linger in small groups outside the entrance. Arthur reaches for Ruth's arm but she drifts away.

She stares up at him as if years have passed and they're strangers. "When were you going to tell me?"