

## CARLA CRAWFORD

*Half Light*, 2016  
Oil on linen, 19 x 14 in



COURTESY WINFIELD GALLERY

## JAE KIM

# Expectations

**W**e were having coffee at the coffee shop that wouldn't let a customer take coffee to go. We saw this happen: A young woman, probably a student at the nearby university, asked for a paper cup so she could carry out the rest of her latte, and the cashier, another young, beautiful woman, said, "Sorry, ma'am. It's the store policy." A practiced explanation about what happens to coffee over time followed. It felt long-winded, even though it was succinct and well put.

We—Genevieve and I—were saying goodbye because she was moving somewhere warmer and I was staying put. I wasn't sure how she'd answer the question, "Were we close?" That I wasn't sure was perhaps indicative of how close we were. Genevieve was hardly a friend—we were two intelligent women who had met at a local book club. But the goodbye was sad and we certainly acted sad. Acting sad made me confused as to how sad I actually was. Either the acting sad or the saying goodbye made me more aware of the fact that I might not see Genevieve ever again. Probably the saying goodbye did. Acting sad—I was sad, though not as sad as I was acting—made me glad I wouldn't see her again, unless one of us went out of the way to get in touch with the other. It meant if I had to see her again, I would have to act glad—though I would be glad. It meant the second time we said goodbye, I would be too cognizant of the first goodbye to relax and let whatever emotion that would otherwise arise arise. But in this moment the goodbye was mostly natural, the emotions didn't feel unpleasant, though I was annoyed by my own association of Genevieve with the things in my apartment that I couldn't bear to throw away because I'd had them for so long. Genevieve told me she used to be this way but, when she hit twenty-five, she realized she'd been letting her things weigh her down, govern her life, and threw them away. Now, the two suitcases behind her constituted all her belongings. I'd never had this epiphany, and Genevieve was like one of my things I couldn't part with. After the parting, after a bit of time, I wouldn't miss her. The parting shouldn't mean much of anything in the first place, given our unremarkable relationship. I decided the best course of action in the future would be to make an excuse and not be available for such an occasion as a goodbye coffee. "I'm sorry I'm out of town; I'm sure I'll see you again. xo Jane."

My worry was that Genevieve didn't feel as close to me as I felt close to her, but I wasn't worried so much as I was lamenting. Lamenting the fact that I wasn't able to tell her, show her, communicate to her in some way how I felt. Most likely I couldn't. It was possible but most likely I hadn't been able to—I wasn't sure. There was no way to find out while drinking coffee. This was the other thing: uncertainty begging to be let out into the open, laid out on the square table, so we could try to make it certain, though that wasn't something people did. There was no way to find out while sipping coffee because one, there were no good words for how I felt about her, and two, there were no good questions for how she felt about me. "Would you rather spend a day with me or with Sarah? Would you let me hold you for twenty seconds without being weirded out?" "Yes, yes of course," you would answer. How about: "Do you want to know whether I'd rather spend a day with you or Sarah? Do you want to hold my hand for twenty seconds but are too afraid to ask because I might think you strange?" If I asked these better terrible questions and you said, "Yes, yes of course," I'd be happy about the possibility that our feelings were reciprocal in some shape or form, and then I'd worry you were being insincere. I'd rather wallow in the uncertainty anyway, hang on to the ecstasy of being about to blurt at any moment those questions that would prove the excitement had been nothing more than a flight of fancy when you answer "Yes, yes of course," and our relationship remains as unremarkable as before.

Genevieve and I were two intelligent women who had met at a local book club. I'd never spent time with her outside of the club. What would happen at the end of our coffee shop meeting was that she would give me a teary-eyed hug and line up to buy a sugar cookie for Clint, her five-year-old, who was with his father because being with his father wouldn't be so easy anymore. I'd like her to, anyway. Line up for that cookie, I mean. It would indicate a lack of acting, or an effort to undercut the situation, as in the situation held some meaning for her, too.

Someone entered through the back door by the bathroom, and we heard the rain. Genevieve wore a yellow flower over one ear. She'd recently had LASIK done and she said the flower felt comfortable in place of glasses. She'd gone to the beach all last week and against her newly

tanned skin the flower looked good. Her straight black hair was parted like a Hawaiian dancer's. She wore black boots. She was already a new person, even before moving to and living in a new place, with a new partner I knew she'd find.

After we said our goodbye, I hid in the bathroom while she got in line to buy a cookie for Clint (I was right). I came out and said to the cashier I'd like to work there. I hadn't planned to, but when I saw the impeccably dressed middle-aged man at the cash register furrow his brows and speak like a butler to the customers who were wet from rain, I wanted his job. He had also followed up with the to-go-cup woman and professionally made sure everything was okay. They liked me, and they were shorthanded—two of the baristas had quit to go live in South Africa.

The next morning I came in an hour before I was supposed to. People were milling in the back room, which was also the kitchen. By milling, I mean leaning on the cooking counter and on the dishwasher opposite the cooking counter with not much room between them, not saying much of anything. The back room/kitchen was a narrow strip, full of stuff but well organized. Everything was either silver or milky white. Thick bacon was cooling on a silver grill below a big, whirling silver vent. Furrowed Brows wasn't there. I was introduced to some beautiful people, one of whom was Jen. Jen made me coffee. Jen asked if I hadn't come in the day before, with a friend. I wanted to call her Jennifer, because Jen sounded like Gen—sometimes I'd called Genevieve Gen; "Glad you could make it, Gen" versus "Genevieve, but aren't you a fan of Rumi?" I didn't want the ghost of a person I'd already said goodbye to lingering. But saying "Jennifer" seemed to send the wrong message, as if I was insisting we were strictly coworkers, so I decided to call her Jen like everyone else. Jen put me on the spot with two truths and a lie. "You first," she said to me. One of the guys got up to deal with the bacon, and another went and did something to the espresso machine. Jen brought out milk and cream pitchers to the service station. I followed her. "Am I just supposed to watch and learn?" I asked. She took the empty jug of water back to the kitchen and filled it up. "Help me," she said. We carried it back to the service station together. It was heavy. I thought we'd make good friends and told her so. She stacked glass cups beside the water jug. They clinked pleasingly.

Things got busy, and it wasn't until I was on break eating the potatoes and eggplant I'd packed for lunch that I got to ask, "How about you? Two truths and a lie?" "Today is Mother's Day," Jen said. It was. "Truth," I said. "I steal two biscuits every day," she said, "and I've never danced in front of another person." "I've never danced," I said. She took the order from a customer who seemed really taken by her. It was an older woman with blond highlights in her hair who seemed frazzled and unsure of everything. She dropped a credit card to the floor and picked it up, apologizing profusely. Jen didn't strike me as particularly charismatic. I wouldn't find her good friend material if she was charismatic. She had a long nose and a nose ring that glinted under the white ceiling lights. I put my dirty lunch box into a plastic bag and hung it on the backroom coatrack, then took out the clean glass cups from the dishwasher to stack them by the water jug. A man with a high-pitched voice, more of a butler in training than a butler, came in for the afternoon shift and explained to me which parts of the espresso machine did what. I wrote down the names in my booklet: warming rack, group head, hot water spigot. "A portafilter is comprised of a brew basket and a spigot. You put the grounds in there to be brewed." I drew diagrams. He handed me a leaflet and told me to look it over at home. I wiped down the tables and set the chairs straight. For a moment there were no customers in the shop, and someone made the music louder and the butler's boy began dancing. He took the dirty rag from me and tossed it in the air. Everyone was embarrassed on his behalf. I assumed this wouldn't happen if Furrowed Brows was here. I went to the bathroom, navigating through the people in the kitchen who were working while avoiding the sight of the dancing man, and cleaned the toilet. Tried to make myself useful. I wouldn't have cleaned it if it was too disgusting, but it was clean, cleaner than my home toilet. There wasn't even a smell. I came out to find Jen waiting for me. I asked her if she'd cleaned the toilet already, and she asked if I smoked, gesturing toward the back door. I said I'd join her and went to grab some coffee to sip on while she smoked, but there were eight or nine customers in line and pastries needed to be put on plates with forks. The forks were weighty. When I grabbed them by the necks and set them on the plates beside the pastries, they made weighty clinking sounds, different from the sounds

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of glass cups. Someone was needed at the register. My first customer seemed to know immediately that she was my all-time first customer. She paused to size me up and ordered a mocha with almond milk. She carried a golden bag and wore a tie-dyed T-shirt that was mostly darkly green. I messed up but no one gave me grief about it. The lady looked at the guitar lessons flyer on the far wall with phone numbers to tear, as though the surprising thing would be my *not* making a mistake. (She said almond milk, I ordered two percent; I pressed the big button that said Two Percent instead of the big button that said Almond Milk.) Jen came back from smoking, and I wanted to apologize, to tell her I got caught up, but the customers were talking to me left and right—"!?" "?!"—so I never got the chance. I wish I had, somehow, talked to her. She went on a vacation the next day and never came back.

Genevieve had been wearing her yellow peacoat. The yellow of the flower in her ear was a different shade than the yellow of the peacoat, but they didn't clash—she'd kept the coat on the whole time because the shop was cold. Perhaps it had seemed colder than it was because of the rain. Probably didn't help that the ceiling was so high. Her fingers were locked, on the table, and I kept seeing the whiter ring of skin where her wedding ring used to be; her hand was otherwise unadorned, her nails short and unpainted. We were sitting straight across from the espresso

*Would I sleep  
with Genevieve?  
Sure.*

machine that was loud and drew attention to her nails and hands. We talked about *The Portrait of a Lady* (her pick for the last meet-up) and asked about each other's family.

If it was love, then which love? Or are they all the same, the apparent difference a difference only in the people involved? Cry me a river. Would I sleep with Genevieve? Sure. Could she be my one and only lifetime companion? Absolutely.

I went to help Mom unpack in her new apartment a block from mine. It was evening and there was a thick evening vibe in the street.

"Happy Mother's Day," I said, stepping through islands of stuff.

People in her life, such as my father, rubbed her the wrong way until they were in her past. She said she was looking for her calendars, a gift from her friend. "What friend?" I asked. "Jeanine," she said, stooped over a box. I took the box beside me to the kitchen table and extracted a bronze model of the Tower of Pisa, or something very much like it, by the base as though I were unsheathing a sword. The rest of the things—pictures, shoes—collapsed to fill the space.

"Who's Jeanine?" I asked.

"There they are," Mother said.

The calendars were by the window, under a lampshade. They were old. Faded, with white spots, but the paintings were nice. The months and years were long gone. The untouched pages made obsolete days seem not yet molded.

**Jae Kim** teaches fiction writing as a third-year fellow at Washington University in St. Louis, where he recently finished his MFA. Jae received Washington University's Novel-in-Progress Award, and his stories have appeared or are forthcoming in *The Collagist*, *Anomaly*, and *Spartan*. Jae was born in Korea, and spent his best years in Japan and Alaska.

**CARLA CRAWFORD**

*The Watershed*, 2017  
Oil on linen, 18 x 24 in



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