



Emerald City

By Jennifer Egan

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These eleven masterful stories – the first collection from acclaimed author Jennifer Egan – deal with loneliness and longing, regret and desire. Egan's characters – models and housewives, bankers and schoolgirls – are united by their search for something outside their own realm of experience. They set out from locations as exotic as China and Bora Bora, as cosmopolitan as downtown Manhattan, or as familiar as suburban Illinois to seek their own transformations. Elegant and poignant, the stories in *Emerald City* are seamless evocations of self-discovery.

From the Trade Paperback edition.

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Editorial Review

Review

“Lustrous. . . . These stories sparkle with Egan's fresh imagery and precise renderings of mood and place. . . . A writer of tremendous intelligence and grace.” —*The Philadelphia Inquirer* “Boldly modulated tales of displacement and blazing moments of truth. . . . Riveting, vaguely Hitchcockian. . . . Piercingly tender. . . . Outstanding.” —*The New York Times Book Review* “Immensely appealing. . . . Told with dazzling insight and emotional daring.” —*Elle* “[Egan] deftly depicts the ways in which women can create glamorously detailed personas for another based on passing observations.” —*Time*

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About the Author

Jennifer Egan is the author of four novels: *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, *The Keep*, *Look at Me*, *The Invisible Circus*; and the story collection *Emerald City*. Her stories have been published in *The New Yorker*, *Harper's Magazine*, *GQ*, *Zoetrope, All-Story*, and *Ploughshares*, and her nonfiction appears frequently in *The New York Times Magazine*. She lives with her husband and sons in Brooklyn.

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WHY CHINA?It was him, no question. The same guy. I spotted him from far away, some angle of his head or chin that made my stomach jump before I even realized who I was looking at. I made my way toward him around the acupuncturists, the herbal doctors slapping mustard-colored poultices on bloody wounds, and the vendors of the platform shoes and polyester bell-bottoms everyone in Kunming was mysteriously wearing. I was afraid he'd recognize me. Then it hit me that I'd still been beardless when he'd ripped me off, two years before, and my beard--according to old friends, who were uniformly staggered by the sight of me--had completely transformed (for the better, I kept waiting to hear) my appearance. We were the only two Westerners at this outdoor market, which was a long bike ride from my hotel and seedy in a way I couldn't pin down. The guy saw me coming. "Howdy," he said. "Hello," I replied. It was definitely him. I always notice eyes, and his were a funny gray-green--bright, with long lashes like little kids have. He'd been wearing a suit when I met him, and a short ponytail, which at that particular moment signified hip Wall Street. One look and you saw the life: Jeep Wrangler, brand-new skis, fledgling art collection that, if he'd had balls enough to venture beyond Fischl and Schnabel and Basquiat, might have included a piece by my wife. He'd been the sort of New Yorker we San Franciscans are slightly in awe of. Now his hair was short, unevenly cut, and he wore some kind of woven jacket. "You been here long?" I asked. "Here where?" "China." "Eight months," he said. "I work for the *China Times*." I stuffed my hands in my pockets, feeling weirdly self-conscious, like I was the one with something to hide. "You working on something now?" "Drugs," he said. "I thought there weren't any over here." He leaned toward me, half smiling. "You're standing in the heroin capital of China." "No shit," I said. He rolled on the balls of his feet. I knew it was time to bid polite farewell and move on, but I stayed where I was. "You with a tour?" he finally asked. "Just my wife and kids. We're trying to get a train to Chengdu, been waiting five days." "What's the problem?" "Mei you," I said, quoting the ubiquitous Chinese term for "can't be done." But you never know what, or which factors, if changed, would make that "no" a "yes." "That's what the hotel people keep saying." "Fuck the hotel," he said. We stood a moment in silence, then he checked his watch. "Look, if you want to hang out a couple of minutes, I can probably get you those tickets," he said. He wandered off and said a few words to a lame Chinese albino

crouched near a building alongside the market. China Times, I thought. Like hell. Heroin pusher was more like it. At the same time, there was an undeniable thrill in being near this guy. He was a crook--I knew it, but he had no idea I knew. I enjoyed having this over him; it almost made up for the twenty-five grand he'd conned out of me. We set off on our bicycles back toward the center of town. With Caroline and the girls I took taxis, which could mean anything from an automobile to a cart pulled by some thin, sweating guy on a bicycle. It pissed me off that the four of us couldn't ride bikes together like any other Chinese family. ("Since when are we a Chinese family, Sam?" was my wife's reply.) But the girls pleaded terror of falling off the bikes and getting crushed by the thick, clattering columns of riders, all ringing their tinny, useless bells. Secretly, I believed that what really turned my daughters off were the crummy black bikes the Chinese rode--such a far cry from the shiny five-and ten-speeds Melissa and Kylie had been reared on. In our previous encounter, his name had been Cameron Pierce. Now, as we rode, he introduced himself as Stuart Peale, shouting over the thunderous racket of passing trucks. The names fit him exactly, both times; Cameron had had the impatient, visionary air of a guy who thinks he can make you a shitload of money; Stuart was soft-spoken, a sharp observer--what you'd expect from a reporter. I told him my name--Sam Lafferty--half hoping he'd make the connection, but only when I named the company I traded for did I notice him pause for a second. "I've taken a leave while they investigate me," I said, to my own astonishment. "Investigate you for what?" "Messing with the numbers." And unnerved though I was by what I'd revealed, I felt a mad urge to continue. "It's just internal at this point." "Wow," he said, giving me an odd look. "Good luck." We dismounted in front of a large concrete kiosk teeming with several lines of people all shoving and elbowing one another goodnaturedly toward a ticket counter in a manner I'd decided was uniquely Chinese. Stuart spoke to a uniformed official in vehement but (I sensed) broken Chinese, gesturing at me. At last the official led us grudgingly through a side door and down a dimly lit corridor that had the smudged, institutional feel of the public schools I'd attended as a kid and made sure my daughters would never go near. "Where is it you're headed--Chengdu?" he called. We had entered a shabby office where a military-looking woman sat behind a desk, seeming thoroughly disgruntled at Stuart's intrusion. "Yes--for four people," I reminded him. Within minutes, I'd handed Stuart a wad of cash and he'd given me the tickets. We reemerged into the tepid, dusty sunlight. "You leave tomorrow," he said. "Eight-thirty A.M. They'd only sell me first class--hope that's okay." "It's fine." We always rode first class. So had Stuart, I guessed, in his prior incarnation. "Thank you," I said. "Jesus." He waved it away. "They don't want Americans having a lousy time over here," he said. "You point out that it's happening, they'll fix it." He handed me his card, the address in English and Chinese, the China Times logo neatly embossed. Still a pro, I thought. "You live in Xi'an," I remarked. "We may go there, check out that clay army." "Look me up," he said, clearly not meaning it. "Thanks again." "Forget it," he said, then mounted his bicycle and rode away. "A total stranger?" my wife said, back in our hotel room, where I'd surprised her with the train tickets. "He just did this, for no reason?" "He was American." I was dying to tell her he was the cocksucker who'd conned me, but how could I explain having hung out with the guy, having accepted a favor from him? I knew how Caroline would see it: one more incident in the string of odd things I'd been doing since the investigation began, the most recent of which was to beg my family to drop everything and come with me to China. It wasn't depression, exactly; more a weird, restless pressure that made me wander the house late at night, opening the best bottles of wine in our cellar and drinking them alone while I channel-surfed along the forgotten byways of cable TV. "Where are the girls?" I said. "I got them each a little knife to peel pears with." "You bought them knives?" "Just little ones," I said. "Have you noticed how the old ladies are always peeling pears? I've got a feeling there's something on those skins they shouldn't be eating." Caroline had washed her bras and underpants and was hanging them on the open dresser drawers to dry. In the late seventies, before we married, we'd spent a year in Kenya with the Peace Corps. Caroline washed her clothes the same way over there, hanging them on strings she tied across our tiny room. I used to watch her through the web of strings and underclothes--her reddish brown hair and deep, peaceful eyes that made me think of amber. I always liked remembering that time, knowing the money and houses and trips we'd gotten our hands on since hadn't washed it all away. We're still those people, I'd tell myself, who helped the Masai to repair their houses made of cow dung. Caroline opened a window, and instantly the

sour, bodily smell of China poured into the room. "A perfect stranger," she mused, smiling at me. "Must've been that sweet face of yours." My daughters give me away. They are blond, expensive-looking creatures whose soft skin and upturned noses I used to take credit--wrongly, I know--for having procured for them at great cost, as I had their orthodontically perfect smiles. In Kenya the Masai children had dry lips and flies in their eyes. Memories of their deprivation had overwhelmed me in recent months, for reasons unknown. I'd find myself staring at my daughters accusingly, awaiting some acknowledgment from them of the brutal disparity between the Masai kids' lives and their own. Instead, I found in their beauty a righteousness that galled me. The Avenging Angels, I'd started calling them, which perplexed my wife. Not that my daughters were identical. They were ten and twelve years old, the younger one deeply in awe of the elder, Melissa, whose figure-skating prowess had lent her a kind of celebrity at their private grammar school. Melissa was also, the world seemed to agree, fractionally more lovely. Determined to correct this imbalance, I had lately become the fervid champion of Kylie, my youngest, a campaign my wife deplored and begged me to abandon. "Picking favorites is awful, Sam," she told me. "Melissa thinks you hate her." "The world picked. I'm just evening up the balance." But there was something heavy-handed in the sudden barrage of affection I lavished on Kylie. She rose to the occasion, gamely enduring our "special" trips to the zoo and the Exploratorium and Ocean Beach, where we stumped through the damp, heavy sand, both wishing (or I was, at least) that Melissa--whom I'd bluntly excluded, whose skating competitions I often pretended to doze through--were with us. But now their hatred of China, their deep resentment at having to spend the best part of their summer in a land where people blew their noses without Kleenex, had united Melissa and Kylie in steely mutiny against me. "Daddy, why?" had been their refrain from the moment the trip began: the boat from Hong Kong into Canton, the days of waiting for a plane to Kunming that, when it finally arrived, could not have inspired less confidence had we assembled it ourselves. "Why, Daddy?" With time the object of their query had grown more and more diffuse: Why here? Why any of this? They were asking the wrong man. The buildings of Chengdu were newer, and therefore less pleasing, than those of Kunming. I roamed the streets impatiently, my wife and listless daughters in tow. We drank green tea in a moist enclave beside a Buddhist temple. The fog smelled of chemicals. An Asian girl with strange pale-blue eyes kept staring at us. "Do you think she might be crazy, Dad?" Melissa asked. "She's admiring your haircut." Melissa glanced at me, thinking I might be serious, then recognized the acid sarcasm that had become my preferred mode of speech with her of late. "Probably had you for a dad," she muttered. "Probably wasn't so lucky." My wife sighed. "She's blind," she said. And instantly I saw that Caroline was right; the girl was drawn by our unrecognizable voices, but her eyes were empty. "Let's go to Xi'an," I said. "It's supposed to be fascinating." Melissa opened our guidebook, scanned the pages, and read aloud: "The Qin Terra-Cotta Warriors are one of the few reasons to visit Xi'an, an urban wasteland of uniform city blocks and Soviet style apartment buildings, but they are a compelling one." "That's not what I heard," I said, suppressing an urge to knock the book out of her hands. "Terra-cotta worriers?" Kylie said. "Heard from who?" my wife asked. "The guy who got us the train tickets." "They're thousands of clay soldiers as big as real men," Caroline explained to Kylie. "A paranoid Chinese emperor had them built underground to protect him after he died." "Neat," Kylie said. Caroline looked at me. "Let's go there." "Why?" Melissa asked, but no one answered. Looking downtrodden, Melissa wandered out first from the tea shop. As we followed her, I turned to glance behind me, and sure enough, the Asian girl with the pale-blue eyes was still gazing blindly after us. I knew--and Caroline knew--that since the investigation began, my status had slipped--or risen--from that of her husband and equal to that of a person she indulged. Gratitude and guilt played a part in this. I'd worked my ass off at the office for years while she puttered away in her sculpture studio. Then, three years ago, Caroline hit the jackpot, landing a piece in the Whitney Biennial. This led to more exhibits, one-person shows in several cities, including New York, and dozens of studio visits from thin, beautiful women and their sleek young husbands who smelled (like me, I suppose) of fresh cash, or from scrawny, perfumed old bats whose doddering mates brought to mind country houses and slobbering retrievers. Everything my wife had yet to sculpt for the next three years was already sold. We'd talked about my quitting, pursuing anthropology or social work like I'd always said I wanted to, or just relaxing, for Christ's sake. But our overhead was so high:

the house in Presidio Terrace, the girls in private school heading toward college, skating lessons, riding lessons, piano lessons, tennis camp in the summers--I wanted them to have all of it, all of it and more, for the rest of their lives. Even Caroline's respectable income could not have begun to sustain it. Then let's change, she'd said. Let's scale back. But the idea filled me with dread; I wasn't a sculptor, I wasn't a painter, I wasn't a person who made things. What I'd busted my chops all these years to create was precisely the life we led now. If we tossed that away, what would have been the point? We were still chewing on this when I found out about the investigation. Its architect, the aptly named Jeffrey Fox, had been after my scalp for years because his wife, Sheila, was a ball-buster, whereas mine was lovely and terrific. He was always sniffing around Caroline's studio, and had bought three of her pieces the year before. "That little turd!" Caroline had shrieked when I told her about the investigation, and night after night we'd sat awake long after the girls were in bed, holding whispered conferences on how I should respond: Write a letter to the board proclaiming my innocence? Mount a counteroffensive against Fox? But no, we decided. The best thing to do, for the moment, was nothing. Let the investigation run its course, and when it turned up nada, question the legitimacy of its having been started at all. In the meantime, take a leave, clear my head, get some sleep. Ha-ha.

Users Review

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