

EMERALD

CITY

AND OTHER STORIES

JENNIFER

EGAN

author of

THE KEEP



"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

Acclaim for Jennifer Egan's

EMERALD CITY

"Fiction writers are connoisseurs of memory.... Egan, a writer of understated elegance, is no exception, and it's clear that she retains keen memories of girlhood, that quicksilver time of eagerness and fear, vulnerability and conviction. She mined this deep vein with great success in her bittersweet novel, *The Invisible Circus*, and it fuels her boldly modulated short stories, tales of displacement and blazing movements of truth."

—*The New York Times Book Review*

"A seamless collection.... Displays a gift for cool, clean, wrenching prose. Jennifer Egan has modern life down pat, and in this smartly crafted collection, she hands it over."

— *People*

"Astounding.... The wistfulness of her characters, her transcendent prose—concise and lyrical—and the consistently high caliber of stories in this collection mark Jennifer Egan as a tremendous talent. "

— *Detour Magazine*

"Egan displays wonderful empathy toward people who are standing at the brink of life; her tales celebrate the power of hope and redemption. Like a necklace of which every stone is a stunner, *Emerald City* will take your breath away."

—*Glamour*

"Accomplished.... She brings us to the transcendent place where reality becomes illusion."

— *News day*

"Egan is a skillful writer with a good eye, a smooth yet passionate style."

— *San Francisco Chronicle*

"Egan's voice is boundless.... The moment of change is so carefully constructed in each story, so fascinating in Ms. Egan's offhand way, that one recognizes a great new writer."

—*The Dallas Morning News*

“Immediately apparent is Egan’s versatility, and the confidence she has to create such dramatically different characters from numerous backgrounds.”

— *Bookends*

“Distant settings and enticing writing ... all bear the unmistakable stamp of a rising talent at work.... Egan takes chances, ventures afar.”

— *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*

“Egan displays a mastery of voice for a young writer.... Her voice moves easily and accurately between characters, her stories as beautifully crafted as they are darkly moving.”

—*Charlotte Observer*

“Both *Emerald City* and *The Invisible Circus* shimmer with moments when everyday life seems imbued with intimations of the marvelous.... Egan’s finely polished gems, mined from the expanse of her rich imagination, will surely retain their literary luster. “

— *NewCity’s Literary Supplement*

EMERALD
CITY

JENNIFER EGAN

Stories



ANCHOR BOOKS

A Division of Random House, Inc.

New York

For David Herskovits

For their guidance and support during the years I spent writing these stories, I am grateful to the following: Tom Jenks, Daniel Menaker, Mary Beth Hughes, Ruth Danon, Romulus Linney, Philip Schultz, Diana Cavallo, Daniel Hoffman, Don Lee, Virginia Barber, Jennifer Rudolph Walsh, Nan A. Talese, Jesse Cohen, Diane Marcus, the National Endowment for the Arts, the New York Foundation for the Arts, and the Corporation of Yaddo.

CONTENTS

[Why China?](#)

[Sacred Heart](#)

[Emerald City](#)

[The Stylist](#)

[One Piece](#)

[The Watch Trick](#)

[Passing the Hat](#)

[Puerto Vallarta](#)

[Spanish Winter](#)

[Letter to Josephine](#)

[Sisters of the Moon](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Other Books by This Author](#)

[Books by Jennifer Egan](#)

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 Fischel 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.”