

# Hello, Goodbye

By [Yiyun Li](#) November 8, 2021

*Photograph by Ying Ang for The New Yorker*

Nina held between her hands baby-shaped air, her left hand supporting an unseen head, heavy for the supple neck, her right hand patting. She had read somewhere that an infant found it calming when the mother's patting matched her heartbeat.

"Guitar?" Ethan guessed.

Nina shook her head. She changed her position so the baby would be upright. She had recently begun to pay attention to mothers with infants.

"Burping?" Katie said. "Nursing?"

Nina blinked twice, and switched back to rocking the air.

"Baby?" Katie said. "Infant?"

The second word might be easier. Nina waddled around the ottoman.

"Duck?" Ethan said. "Duckling?"

"Baby duckling?" Katie said.

"Baby duckling? That's what I would call redundancy," Ethan said. His voice had a grating quality, like sandpaper, but Katie didn't seem to notice.

Perhaps even the coarsest sandpaper would leave no damage on a night smoothed by drinks and youthful optimism, Nina thought. "Ugly duckling?" Katie tried again.

Nina went back to pampering the air. Then waddling. Pampering and waddling.

"Oh, I know, I know!" Katie shouted. "Mother Goose?"

"Yes!" Nina said, making way for the next person. *Hickory dickory dock, the mouse went up the clock*, she hummed as she took a seat. Nina was twenty-seven, not helplessly young, yet far from being trapped in a mildewed marriage, as she tended to believe many middle-aged women were. Things were going well for her and her friends that year. The Y2K bug had not materialized. The Twin Towers still stood. Everyone had a few ideas for a startup. Katie and Nina worked in marketing in Silicon Valley, and both were confident that before long they would found the next hot company. They were planning to travel to Prague the following summer. They were impressionable, and therefore predictable, though neither realized it then. They found joy in what they were told contained joy: Birkenstocks, artistically designed CD racks, a new platform for bloggers called LiveJournal, Yo-Yo Ma's solos in "Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon."

Nina and Katie had met as roommates in their freshman year at Berkeley. Neither was a California native, and they had spent their college years together, becoming Californians. There had never been a doubt that after graduation they would stay in California—returning to where they had come from was not an option. Nina was the daughter of Chinese immigrants who owned a grocery store, East-West Market, in a college town in Kansas. Her father drove a refrigerated truck to Chicago once a week to pick up stock, her mother tended the shop, and her paternal grandmother cooked homemade food, which was sold inexpensively and served in their minimally remodelled garage, to graduate students and visiting scholars from China. Katie had grown up in a small town in Indiana. Her father was a locksmith, and her mother worked in the cafeteria at the high school. A genetic disease that affected only boys ran in her family; Katie, who had no brothers, felt for her male cousins and their parents. She thought her family, with three daughters, was luckier.

They were both girls with some history, but it was history taken on credit

from their families. They scarcely had a past, mistaking a backpacking trip in Wales to celebrate their twenty-fifth birthdays together for their past, and, before that, the ordinary heartaches they'd collected in high school and college. They thought about their future as a game of connect the dots: from ideas to I.P.O.s. They were lucky—that much they knew. They both had friends in their home towns, whose futures, seen through their Californian prism, looked dim, even bleak. They were lucky, but they did not know that theirs was beginner's luck.

Twenty years had passed since that game of charades. Katie had not married Ethan, who had not reciprocated her love. Nor had she married any of the slew of men after him, all seemingly suitable yet each exhibiting flaws that were intolerable to Katie. Sometimes Nina thought about the Matthews and the Jakes and the Dustins whom Katie had dated, and wondered where they were in their lives. Harmless bores, Katie called them. Nina's husband, Daniel, a pediatric dentist, fell into the same category, though Katie never pointed that out. She did not have to.

Raymond, the man Katie did marry, was twenty-eight years older than she, and had sold three companies and taken up a semiretired life by the time they married. Raymond was not a harmless bore. Rather, he was a bully and a bore, though Nina had voiced this thought only to herself.

One afternoon, Nina sat on her porch with Katie, who had arrived with four marigolds and several rosemary sprigs from her garden, which garnished the gin-and-tonics they were now drinking. Raymond was on the road again, this time in a new, extra-deluxe R.V. He dreaded flying. Nina had never asked what was behind that, but she wished he were plagued by many more fears. At the beginning of the marriage, Katie had travelled with Raymond in his R.V. In recent years, she had been joining Nina and her family on their summer holiday instead.

"The way he goes around as though *COVID* were fiction, I won't be surprised if he gets it," Katie said.

"But you could get it from him," Nina said. What she really wanted to say was, Well, he's not that young, is he?

"I'm moving out," Katie said. "He's away for more than two weeks. Now's the perfect time."

"Oh." The resolution was not a new one, and Nina did not expect much to come of it.

"I'm serious. I hired that forensic accountant I told you about."

Until the week before, Nina had not known what a forensic accountant's job entailed, or that such an expert might be needed to dissolve a marriage. Katie had stopped working in marketing after the wedding, and had started a boutique spice shop with two other women, who, like Katie, needed something to do and a reason to get out of the house. For years Katie had been talking about divorcing Raymond. Crying wolf, but now the real wolf was about to show up, in the form of a forensic accountant.

"What do you think?" Katie asked.

"Why now? Don't you want to wait until the pandemic is over?" Nina said. It was a refrain for her at the moment. Anything that required her attention, anything that demanded a decision, she moved to an indeterminate future time when she would no longer have an irrefutable excuse.

"How long will the pandemic go on?"

"Who knows."

"Then I don't want to wait," Katie said. "Nothing happens now. I need to get something done."

Was boredom a good reason to divorce Raymond? No reason would be bad, Nina thought. "All right. What can we do to help?" she said. "Do you need a

place to stay?" Their house was a quarter the size of Katie and Raymond's house, up in the hills, but they could make room for Katie. The girls wouldn't mind, and Daniel had foreseen this inevitability for years.

Katie said that she would think through everything that weekend. They drank more and talked about their cancelled trip to Japan. They had been planning to fly to Tokyo after the Olympics. They had gone to Rio in 2016 and London in 2012. Going to a party after the revels were over appealed to both of them: for Nina, it was a financial consideration; for Katie, something akin to a good joke.

"Remember the innkeeper in Dubrovnik? The guy who complained about his wife?" Katie said, recalling another vacation they'd shared, right after Nina got engaged. Katie had said that they needed a holiday to celebrate their last days of freedom.

"Sort of," Nina said. "Tell me again?"

Nina liked to be told stories, and Katie was good at telling stories. In college, when they watched a movie together, Nina would have forgotten nearly everything about it within days, but Katie could recount the movie, sometimes shot by shot, so that Nina could see it in her mind's eye once more. Memories—the shared ones and the ones that Katie saved up from her life to amuse Nina—were related as if they were scenes from movies. Even the most mediocre stories became entertaining in Katie's telling.

The man in Dubrovnik was one of those harmless bores. After taking down their passport information, he had seated himself on the patio, speaking to Nina and Katie in fairly fluent English. Other than the bench and a patch of space around it, the patio was covered by flowerpots. The man complained about his wife, whose biggest sin, he said, was her addiction to buying potted plants.

"But they make the patio look nice," Katie said.

"Three pots are enough for looking nice. She has thirty-six here," the man said. He pointed to the courtyard. "There are more down there. And she's still buying. They cost money. The water costs money."

The exchange had gone on for a while, Katie talking, Nina listening, the husband complaining, and the wife, who spoke no English, smiling at them while carrying a giant watering can up and down the steps. "You should buy her a garden hose," Katie said to the man.

"Why should I?" the man said. "I don't want to make it easy for her."

On Nina's porch, Katie reproduced their exchange with the innkeeper, altering her voice and accent and acting out his grudge. Later that night in Dubrovnik, Katie and Nina got lost heading back from a club, and an English couple had tried to help, but none of them could identify where they were on the map, all having drunk a bit too much and having difficulty distinguishing one statue from another. In the end, it was Nina who decided to follow a trickle of water that the night breeze had not yet dried.

"Remember, you said you'd noticed the water running down from the patio into the street when we left the apartment," Katie said. "Why, have you forgotten that? Why is it that some people's memory is not as good as others', have you ever wondered?"

There was a difference between forgetting and not remembering. Nina was not as forgetful as Katie thought; it was just that she did not indulge herself by bringing the past into focus. Nina did not believe in the benefit of seeing the past or the future with too much clarity—one could lead to undue nostalgia, the other to unwarranted alarm. The present was another matter. She wanted to be as clear-eyed as possible about the present. But she said none of this to Katie. She liked to imagine Katie revisiting their fairy-tale-like youth, when the water from thirty-six drenched pots had led them back to safety in a foreign city. "Who knew we could do this," Nina said, taking the marigold out of her glass and swirling it.

"Do what?" Katie asked. "What is 'this'?"

"Being married," Nina said. "And being middle-aged."

"Well, we've done more than that, haven't we? You have your children, and I'll get my divorce."

"Children are optional," Nina said. Of course she loved her daughters, but being stuck in the bungalow since the beginning of March had made the girls at once older and younger. They sounded more like the teen-agers they would become in a year or two, and they had also rediscovered their talent for throwing tantrums.

Raymond had had two childless marriages before Katie. He had never wanted children. Katie had offered this up as an argument in support of his candidacy as a husband. A marriage has to start with some consensus, Katie said, as though that could explain away the impulsiveness of her decision. She had seen several aunts devastated by their sons' inherited illness. She herself did not want any heartache from her marriage, she said. Nina preferred to think that Katie had been spared that.

At dinner that evening, Nina told her family that Katie might need to move in for a short time. The girls liked Katie, as she did not commit the cardinal sin common among adults—interfering where she had no right to. Daniel, an experienced calmer of squirming and screaming children in his dentist's chair, was good at keeping his opinion to himself. Even so, he had drawn the line at Raymond, whom he despised. Daniel was a solid and good man. Nina's two sisters adored him: a family man with an even temper. Her mother approved of Daniel's profession but not his receding hairline. Her father, making his best effort to tone down his criticism, remarked only that he himself could not see the merit in a man "who would not give out as much as a silent fart even if you beat him with a stick."

"Will Katie take a *COVID* test before she moves in?" Ella, the cautious twelve-

year-old, asked. Nina had once fretted about Ella's rigidity, but her habit of frequent hand washing had turned out to be a desirable thing under these new circumstances.

Nina said that for sure Katie would get tested. Paige, who was eleven, asked if her best friend, Cameron, could move in if she, too, took a *COVID* test. Nina replied that Cameron's parents might not see that as a good idea.

"If her parents are fine with the idea?" Paige pressed. "Can we have her, too?"

"You see her on Zoom every day," Nina said.

"But we haven't seen each other in person for four months," Paige said. "If Katie can come for a drink, why can't Cameron come over for a visit?"

Before Nina could form an answer, Ella said, "Grownups think they're more trustworthy, but there's no evidence for that."

"It's so not fair," Paige said.

Nina would be fine with Paige and Cameron doing a few outdoor activities, but Cameron's grandparents lived nearby, and her parents, having made a family pod, weren't socializing with anyone else. Nina wished Daniel would say something about the good they were doing for the future by tolerating some inconvenience now. Nina could not bring herself to say those reasonable words; even the thought made her feel tired. She wished she could tell Paige to shut up and finish her meal, but there was a reason she never talked to her children like that. She and her sisters had grown up with similarly strong—and stronger—words from their parents.

"Really, Mommy, don't you think grownups are stupid enough to mess up the world for us?" Paige said.

"There's no guarantee we'll be better when we grow up," Ella said.



Ella's premature defeatism often alarmed Nina; shouldn't a child have a childlike sense of justice, and a childlike optimism? The few times that Nina had brought up the worry with Daniel, he'd rightly pointed out that Nina also wished Paige could be more rational, like Ella. "Who wants ice cream?" Nina said. Diversion was a parental tactic she had learned from Daniel. "Katie and I made some this afternoon."

"What flavor?" Daniel asked.

"Mango," Nina said. "Katie brought mangoes."

"Cameron can bring mangoes, too, just so you know," Paige said.

Nina scooped four perfect balls of ice cream into four bowls. Only then did she allow herself to speak. "Paige, Cameron's mom does not feel comfortable with the idea of a playdate."

"More of a reason for us to rescue her," Paige said.

"Rescue her from what?" Nina asked.

"Some children feel homeless even when they have a home," Ella explained with a patient equanimity, the way she would point out to Paige that the snail she had drawn was a rare species, as most snails had shells that swirled in the opposite direction.

Daniel looked at Ella, and then Paige. "Is that how you feel?" he said.

"No," Ella said. "But I can't speak for Cameron."

"I can," Paige said.

"Do you think she'd be happier if she moved in with us?" Daniel asked.

"Of course," Paige said. "Do you know how hard it is to be the only child? It's always two to one, her parents outvoting her and then saying it's

democracy."

"Have you thought of moving in with Cameron?" Ella said. "So you get a vote there?"

Nina wished that Ella had not put that idea into Paige's head, but fortunately a chunk of mango in Paige's bowl distracted her. The children believed that finding a piece of mango or strawberry in their ice cream brought special luck, which struck Nina as illogical: she could easily offer them a bowl of mango or strawberries without generating such enthusiasm.

At the end of August, Katie moved into Ella and Paige's playroom. Only for a couple of weeks, until she found a place, Katie said. She had hired a real-estate agent, who, dressed in P.P.E. that looked like a spacesuit, visited the potential rentals with her iPad and showed Katie the walk-through from different angles. The good thing about Katie looking for an apartment or a house virtually was that Nina could be there to offer a second opinion. She would not have been able to check out all the places with Katie in normal times.

*"It's almost as if you can get lost in it, Timmy. Timmy?"*

*Cartoon by Harry Bliss*

Having an additional person interrupted the monotony of housebound family life. Paige's remarks were now often addressed to Katie, hoping for agreement or approval, which Katie was always ready to offer. "You wouldn't have known what a doomsday looked like when you were our age, right?" Paige said to Katie one morning, when they were all dumbfounded by the unfamiliar eerily orange color of the sky, as smoke from a wildfire covered the Bay Area.

"No, I never saw a real doomsday," Katie replied. "I only worried about things that would never happen."

"Like what?"

"Like a nuclear war. I worried that I would still be a virgin when the world ended," Katie said. "Why is your mom frowning at us?"

"Because she's trying to look like a parent," Paige said. "And she's a puritan."

"Where did you learn that word?" Nina said. "You don't know what a puritan is."

"She learned it from me," Ella said. She was reading a brick-thick book at the far end of the living room. "A puritan, a.k.a. a hypocrite, is a condition, like a virus. Parents catch it easily."

Nina wanted to say that a person cannot be a condition, but who was she to teach Ella anything?

One afternoon, while Katie was showing Nina a bed she was thinking of ordering, Ella stood behind them, knocking her teeth against the edge of a glass of lemonade as though it were the glass she meant to consume. It was a habit that Nina found distracting, though she had never said anything. "I feel bad for the bed-makers' lack of imagination," Ella said, after finally taking a sip of the lemonade. "Queen bed, king bed, California king, why is there never a dictator-size bed?"

"Don't suggest that to Trump," Katie said.

"Some entrepreneur could make a fortune naming a bed after him," Ella said.

"Like Raymond," Katie said. "He would do that in an instant."

Raymond's name was not forbidden in the house, but Nina had never told the girls anything concrete about the man. She herself preferred not to dwell on the many dramas that Katie had told her about over the years. Once, at a restaurant, Katie had thrown her wine in Raymond's face, and he, in turn, had

thrown his wine in her face, and, when a waiter approached, Raymond had pushed a hundred-dollar bill into his hand and told him to shut his mouth and bring an extra set of napkins. Once, after a quarrel, Raymond had left Katie in a parking lot in Reno and driven on to Idaho by himself, and Katie, instead of renting a car, had taken a two-thousand-dollar cab ride back home because, she said, why not—it's his money, in any case. After a wedding in San Diego, Raymond had cornered Katie in their hotel room, insisting that she remove her underwear because he wanted to take a sniff—he had seen her flirt with a guest, he said, and then had noticed that they were both absent from the party for some time. Katie had narrated these episodes to Nina as though they were merely scenes from movies about bad marriages, which could be forgotten afterward.

"He sounds like an awful person," Ella said.

"He is an awful person," Katie said.

"Why did you marry him?" Ella asked.

Why indeed, Nina thought. Katie glanced at her. "Because I wasn't as smart as you are, and I didn't have parents as smart as yours to tell me a thing or two."

"Mostly we're smart," Paige said, appearing just in time to correct Katie. "No offense, but grownups are mostly pretty stupid."

"Well, that's why I married an awful man," Katie said.

Nina wondered why neither she nor Daniel was good at having conversations with their children. They sounded like dull parents, and they sounded as though they didn't have much confidence in their impostor selves but nevertheless hoped for some reward for their effort. When she voiced this worry, Katie said, "But you love them, don't you?"

"Yes."

"That's enough."

Is it, though, Nina thought, watching Katie measure their drinks. The air outside was heavy with smoke, and they had to forgo the porch.

"Did your parents ever worry about their conversational skills with you guys? Mine didn't. And we've turned out fine," Katie said. "Besides, what can parents do for children? Things go well for a child, or things don't go well. We know it's really just luck."

Someone working with a forensic accountant had to be pragmatic and unsentimental. Still, Nina frowned at the drink passed to her. "What? You think I'm too indifferent?" Katie asked.

"No, not that," Nina said. "Did I tell you about Ella's friend who shoplifted at Sephora?"

"When? What happened? You never tell me stories," Katie said.

But it was not a mere story, Nina thought, looking at Katie with her usual inarticulate doubt. Early in the year, a girl in Ella's class had been posting pictures on Snapchat of lip glosses she had sneaked out of Sephora. When it happened a third time, Ella told Nina, who wondered if she should talk to the girl's parents, or if she should check in with any of the other parents in the class, but Ella sternly warned her not to.

"Surely she'd be mortified if her mother was a snitch," Katie said.

"That's how Paige would feel," Nina said. Ella, she explained, had a different attitude. She thought her friend was stupid to post the pictures: someone was bound to take a screenshot; in fact, Ella said, she had done just that, all three times, though she refused to show the pictures to Nina. What if the girl kept doing it and then was caught one day, Nina asked Ella. Did she not think that the parents should know, so that they could do something to help her? But that was exactly the reason the parents shouldn't be told, Ella said.

Grownups would be of no help; they would only kick up a big fuss about the wrong thing and make life difficult for the girl, and for her friends who had seen the pictures without reporting the crime.

"She said, and I quote, 'Things will go right for us if we're lucky, things will go wrong if we're not lucky, there is nothing you parents can do.' "

"Didn't I just say the same thing?" Katie said.

"Ella," Nina said, "is twelve."

"If a twelve-year-old hasn't thought through these things, how much hope do you have for her? You should be happy for Ella."

How could I be, Nina thought. The world holds a perpetual scolding power over all parents—no, not all parents, but those who want to be good and do the right thing for their children. Even so, she could muddle through being Paige's mother. But being Ella's mother made her feel that she was no more than a frog trapped in a pot of water along with Ella. If they were unlucky, if the water were brought to a slow boil, what could Nina do but endure that fate with her daughter? A long-forgotten moment from Ella's infancy came to Nina. Ella was seven months old, and had just begun to crawl. One day Nina noticed that the baby's knees, once smooth and unblemished, had started to show a few creases. No parenting handbook or blog had prepared Nina for that: wrinkles and creases on a baby's kneecaps, a price paid for mobility. Nina, uncharacteristically, wept. Another person—Daniel or Katie or, one day, Ella herself, as an adult—would explain Nina's tears as a result of exhaustion and postpartum hormone changes. They would not be wrong, and yet Nina, caressing her baby's knees, had envisioned all the things she would not be able to shield her child from, starting with the carpet. What blind courage had led her into motherhood?

And yet, she thought now, those knees, less perfectly smooth than they had been the day before—what did that matter in the larger scheme of things?

Her mother, toiling away amid the shelves at East-West Market, had hardly noticed the scrapes and bruises that Nina and her sisters had incurred as they grew up. Her maternal grandparents, boat people on the Yangtze River, had begun one day with eight children on the boat and at the end of the day counted seven.

"So did you say anything to the girl's parents?" Katie asked.

"No."

"What happened after?"

"Nothing, as far as I know," Nina said. "The pandemic started. The girl wouldn't have an easy opportunity to do it again. Why? Do you think I should've said something?"

"Would you prefer to be told about it, if you were the girl's mother?"

"Yes."

"Don't be so certain," Katie said. "Did I ever tell you the story about my cousin Jock?"

"The one who died in his sophomore year?"

"Yes, but I only told you about his death," Katie said.

How strange, Nina thought, that after a young life ends people think and talk about the death more than the life. It is easier that way: tragedies and catastrophes always have an ending. Perhaps that was why Katie could tell many good stories about the violent and dire moments in her marriage; dramas lent a sheen of bravado to a bad choice. Harder to communicate—which was perhaps the reason Katie never did—was the enduring unhappiness. Boring, Katie would call the stretches of time between crises: physical closeness fused by a passion that was not love, everyday

interaction without the kindness of everydayness, a truce that promises no peace. Katie would insist there was nothing to say about those times. But the truth was that neither she nor Nina had words for what could not be fitted into the mold of a story. Are good choices and bad choices all that different? The consequences of those choices are where life is, and there Nina and Katie were similarly muddled.

"There was this crazy teacher, Mrs. Gill, in fifth grade," Katie said. "Every year she picked out one boy. A sort of psychological pincushion for her. And physical, too. Don't ask me why no adult interfered. They knew about it, but they would tell themselves two things: one, Mrs. Gill has been teaching for decades and must be respected, and, two, it affects only one boy per year, so the rest of the class will still benefit from having a good teacher."

"What did she do to the boys?"

"Nothing criminal. She gave them nasty nicknames. She pinched them on their upper arms when she felt like it. In winter she hid their coats and told them they had to go out to the playground during recess without the coats. One boy per year. No one could do anything to help you if you happened to be that boy. And the funny thing is, she knew to choose the boys who could do nothing to help themselves."

Nina thought of protesting—how could people let this go on?—yet she knew not to. Terrible things happen all the time, to the deserving and the undeserving; people are never short of excuses for inaction.

"And, when we were in fifth grade, my cousin Jock was the chosen boy."

"What about the parents of those boys? What about your aunt and uncle?"

"Jock's father had already left, so there was only my aunt. Do you think Jock should have told her about it? He didn't. None of Mrs. Gill's boys was a tattletale."



There was an unfamiliar rigidity in Katie's face. Nina felt an ache in her heart. The day before, Raymond had phoned. He had talked coolly about how many more years he would live, how much money Katie would get if she stayed in the marriage, how often he expected her to have sex with him, and calculated out that each time she had sex with him she would make eight thousand dollars. More money than most women can earn in their wildest imaginations, Raymond had said. When Nina was told about the conversation, she'd had to remind herself not to get too upset—with Raymond, but with Katie also. Katie had simply laughed, at Raymond's predictability, and at her own predicament.

"Did you tell your aunt?" Nina said.

"Yes. I thought someone had to tell her. Someone had to help Jock. But I was wrong. My aunt went to Mrs. Gill, she went to the principal, but what good did that do for Jock? Or for herself?"

"What happened after?"

"Nothing. The same old treatment for Jock. The only thing he could do was wait until fifth grade was over. My mother said she wished I hadn't told Aunt Clara," Katie said. "She was right. If a person doesn't have the power to solve a problem, she's only causing pain by sounding an alarm."

Nina shook her head. "Surely I should've warned you not to marry Raymond."

"Surely there was a reason you didn't," Katie said. "You knew I would insist on making the mistake."

"You knew it was a mistake?"

"Not the same kind of mistake as telling Aunt Clara about Mrs. Gill. I regretted that. The pain I caused her and Jock," Katie said. "And yet what was it compared to his death?"

"You don't regret marrying Raymond?"

"If you'd grown up in Pigeon Blanc, Indiana, you'd think a bully with money was ten times better than a bully without money," Katie said. "I don't mind dramas. I'm not afraid of jerks."

So Katie had entered her marriage, Nina thought, with the same blind courage that had propelled her into parenthood.

"I couldn't marry one of those good men you thought I should have, you know that."

"I don't know," Nina said. "Why couldn't you?"

"They would've had expectations I wouldn't be able to meet," Katie said.

"The point is, you can't marry a good man casually. It causes pain."

And yet a casual marriage to a bully—had it not made Katie suffer, in ways she would never admit? Nina thought about that game of charades all those years ago. They had been lucky then, not knowing that once the dots were connected their lives would look nothing like what they had fantasized about. That, too, should give her some hope: for better or for worse, there are always things that remain unknown to the young, even to the most precocious children, like Ella.

"Hey, are you all right?" Katie said.

"Not quite," Nina said. "But I'll be all right."

She was crying, as uncharacteristic of her now as her weeping over a baby's knees had been. It was the past brought into focus, or the future that was always there, taunting them, eluding them. She remembered Ella's winter concert in kindergarten. During the days leading up to it, Ella had practiced taking a bow as meticulously as a scientist conducts an experiment. The music teacher had taught the children to bend at the waist, look at their toes,

and say in their quietest voice, *Hello, shoes. Goodbye, shoes*, before straightening up.

"I always thought she was a genius teacher," Nina said after telling Katie the story.

"Hello, sadness. Goodbye, sadness," Katie said, handing Nina the box of Kleenex.

"Yes, yes," Nina said, wiping her eyes. "Wouldn't it be nice if everything could be that simple? Hello, pandemic. Goodbye, pandemic."

Katie stood up and took a deep bow. "Hello, bad choice. Goodbye, bad choice," she said, with the confidence of a good actor, knowing that the next moment the curtain would fall and she would be free to think about her real life elsewhere. ♦