All That Divides Us

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It’s jade, flawed with brown flecks, rimmed with narrow gold and not quite the shape of our usual hearts, those valentines with twin scallops we send to hide and seek love. This one, cool as a lilac leaf but heavy in my hand, grows a third curve where the chain holds—an odd catch of the heart.

I close my fingers around the green stone, remembering the chilly gift shop in Beijing where bored young women sold silks and bamboo off-season. They hugged themselves in the bitter air and turned their heater’s flame so high I imagined the fringe of my plaid wool scarf catching fire for buying something cheap to take home.

Ellen, my cousin and companion that final day, watched me solemnly as I made my small choice, guided me with kindness through that gray city she called home, looking even then as though she were lost. Her eyes and forehead—half foreign, half family—made my face burn as I remembered how my uncles, their necks flushed, talked about their sister marrying a Chinaman, disappearing for years, only to come back at the end to make claims on them.
But gentle Ellen, who owned so little, claimed nothing but what I felt from wearing her mother’s face.

Now three years later this thin letter from Beijing tells me how the same grim illness and death that took her mother, my second self, has finished her. I think of journeys, kin, distances, home. Foolishly I wonder what she took with her. If I could send her something, I’d say, Ellen, take this, my flawed stone heart, and keep it green.