

“With *Win Me Something*, Kyle Lucia Wu tenderly and masterfully reveals the fury, hope, and longing that come with trying to be seen in a world that never looks for you.”

—**MIRA JACOB**,
author of *Good Talk*

“In *Win Me Something*, Kyle Lucia Wu examines the biracial experience with razor-sharp precision, nuance, and profound feeling. Her prose radiates off the page, with every color, character, and scrap of food animating the world of this story, all of it asking who, and what, is of value in America? I love the gentle candor of Wu’s prose, the sneaky devastation. Her debut is a resonant knockout.”

—**T KIRA MADDEN**,
author of *Long Live the Tribe of Fatherless Girls*

“Kyle Lucia Wu’s *Win Me Something* is groundbreaking in its exploration of blended families and a biracial Asian American consciousness. In subtle but strikingly observed scenes that depict race, class, and lives of having and not having, she explores the secret want that we all have: to belong to something, somewhere. Here we find Willa, a biracial Chinese American narrator seeking to understand where she belongs in the family of things. Here is a prose writer who relishes in the poetry of language. Under Wu’s deft hand, each sentence unfolds like a miracle.”

—**CATHY LINH CHE**,
author of *Split*

“Taut, engrossing, and masterfully observed, *Win Me Something* announces a powerful and luminescent new literary voice in Kyle Lucia Wu.”

—**ALEXANDRA KLEEMAN**,
author of *Something New Under the Sun*

“Like a latter-day Willa Cather, after whom her protagonist is named, Kyle Lucia Wu has written a beautiful novel about a fiercely American young woman whose Americanness is constantly questioned by those around her. This is a sad, funny, and tender coming-of-age story about what family and belonging means for someone who is realizing that she is constantly watched but not truly seen.”

—**DAVID BURR GERRARD**,
author of *The Epiphany Machine*

“*Win Me Something* is an observant, contemplative story about the complex reality of growing up with a mixed identity in two starkly different mixed families. Kyle Lucia Wu deftly weaves back and forth between Willa’s teenaged years and her adult life to explore loneliness, uncertainty, and a singular, persistent question—where do I truly belong?”

—**CRYSTAL HANA KIM**,
author of *If You Leave Me*

Win Me Something

KYLE LUCIA WU



TIN HOUSE / Portland, Oregon

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*For my dad, and his love of books
For my mom, and her love of flowers*

It seems so selfish, to want to be known!

—Yanyi, *The Year of Blue Water*

1

New York City, 2013

I didn't know what it looked like to take care of someone. I imagined that being a nanny meant watching a small person bounce her backpack home from school, microwaving chicken nuggets on a paper-toweled plate, and lying with an arm folded behind my head while the bright colors of a cartoon flashed. The intricacies of it hadn't occurred to me—that I'd have to sniff her palms to discern the citrus scent of soap and scrape dirt from underneath her fingernails. How I'd end up eating a room-temperature scoop of macaroni and cheese off her plate and raking lice shampoo through her soapy scalp. Maybe I couldn't imagine these moments because when someone asked about my childhood, my mind clenched and closed like two fists in a pool—fingers squeezing for something to come up with when everything around them was a different kind of matter.

I had parents. I had siblings. I had homes, multiple or zero, depending on how you looked at it. I wasn't unloved, not uncared for, exactly. It was cloudier than that, ink spreading in water as I tried to claim the words. If you're undercared for, but essentially fine, what do you do with all that hurt, the kind that runs through your tendons and tugs on your muscles, but doesn't show up on your skin? There

were harder things in the world, hundreds of them. I floated silently through.

*

It was a swampy day in early August when I interviewed with the Adriens. I stood in front of my window unit damply, asking the cool air to soak me up. I picked out my most conservative dress, navy-blue cotton that reached just above my knees. It had straps that I thought too flimsy for the occasion, so I dug out a whispery, pale yellow cardigan from the back of my dresser drawer—something I'd bought on sale, thinking I might have a professional opportunity to wear it to. And now I did, in Tribeca at two o'clock.

I had only a muddy sense of why I was going. I sank into an orange seat and felt the train lurch forward, at home in my unease. It seemed like I often sat still while the pieces of my life rearranged around me, my only job to be stoic and unmoved, to come up for air and readjust once they stopped shifting. But there was a reason for this interview, I reminded myself: a move out of one service industry into another, a change of hours from late nights working the bar or early mornings at the coffee shop, to afternoons and early evenings—hours to make a life around. That appealed to me. The idea of opening my day up to something more—to echo the sleeping patterns of the rest of the city, to chisel out some vision for my future self—the hope that it might find me.

*

The lobby held no trace of the heat wave. A uniformed doorman held open one of the wide glass doors and the glacial air urged me in. I told him I was here to see the Adriens.

“Willa, right?” he said, kindly. “They’re expecting you.” He walked me to the elevator, and I stepped inside, wanting to stay for a moment before pressing the button, but then I saw him turn a key and press the number 5 before moving back into the lobby. After one short whoosh, the doors opened again, and Nathalie was standing in her entryway. Even though I knew they had the whole floor, I wasn’t expecting to be inside their home so quickly. I stepped off the elevator, the sun in my eyes, and held my hand up like a visor. I felt the slipperiness of my underarms and elbows and backs of my knees, prickled by the central air. The entryway had more floor space than my bedroom, where I walked two steps from bed to dresser to doorway. The living room stretched a million feet out in front of me, with floor-to-ceiling windows wrapping around each side, a view of sloping buildings and looming silvery towers. There was a cream-colored sectional couch with space for ten in front of a gleaming glass coffee table, and a wide dining table past that with clear Lucite chairs neatly tucked around the sides. The last family I had worked for, the Ericksons, had not been this rich. Their apartment in Park Slope was much bigger than mine, but recognizable: it was a place where people lived, a place I could imagine myself into, in some distant future when I had learned to make correct decisions. But this home—the Adriens’ home—I would have imagined a literal castle, a gold-walled Versailles, before this real-world counterpart, a living room the size of a basketball court in downtown Manhattan. That you could wake up and eat toast in a place like this.

When I'd spoken to Nathalie on the phone, I'd imagined her imposing and powerful, five foot ten in a pinstriped suit with her hair french-twisted. But in reality, she was around my height, five foot three, and dressed like she was going to spin class: black leggings and a matching white exercise-tank-warm-up-jacket set, her glossy brown hair tied in a low ponytail. I hadn't expected her to be so pretty, with big features—wide blue eyes, full lips—and poreless skin. Her eyebrows made two perfect arches, the kind I could never wrangle mine into. I felt immediately self-conscious, my cheap cardigan trying too hard, the primary colors of my outfit like a kindergarten teacher.

"Come on in," she said, "and please take your shoes off at the door." I crouched down to take off my sandals, fumbling with the buckles. "Did you have any trouble getting here—where do you live again? How long was the commute?"

I answered the questions—Brooklyn, Crown Heights, forty minutes—wondering if this was part of the interview. Was it better if I lived closer? But how could I afford to? She led me to sit on the couch.

"Bijou isn't home from cooking camp. I've spoken to several people on the phone this week, so forgive me if I'm repeating myself, but I'll tell you a bit about her?" I began to agree, but the start of my *yes* dissolved into her next sentence.

"She's about to begin fourth grade. She's so busy and brilliant—ballet, violin, Mandarin, and infatuated with cooking, hence the camp. My husband, Gabe, and I work, as I told you, but I work from home often. Her school is in Soho, two stops away on the 1, and her activities are downtown—Soho or West Village." I thought of what my roommate, Lucy, had said when I asked what she thought the Adriens would be

like. “The kind of people who don’t ride the subway,” she’d said, and I’d nodded, thinking she knew.

“How long have you lived in New York again?” Nathalie asked.

“Almost three years,” I said. “And I used to work in the West Village. I’m—comfortable getting around.” I hoped she wouldn’t ask what my job in the West Village was, and then I’d have to name the sticky bar I’d served picklebacks at.

“So, you’ve worked for the Ericksons before. I used to work with Marie, years and years ago. She’s so lovely. Can you tell me a bit about what that routine was like?”

Lucy used to work for the Ericksons and had sent me in her place one night. I was surprised that they didn’t seem to care that I was new. They’d shown me what to microwave for dinner and left me to watch *James and the Giant Peach*. They told me the kids would ask me to lie in their bedroom while they fell asleep in bunk beds, and it felt vaguely illicit, like I should have gone through a background check before watching them slip to sleep. When their parents got home, they gave me eighty dollars for four hours and waved me off cheerily. Lucy eventually relinquished the job to me, and I accepted eagerly—who wouldn’t? It was so easy, I could have cried for each morning at the coffee shop when twelve customers in a row told me the boiling water was too hot.

“Sure. They have two kids. So sometimes I’d pick them up from school, or from after-school, and take them home, and . . .” I tried to think of a way to elongate the routine. I’d actually picked them up from school only twice—most of the time I’d shown up at their apartment as their parents headed out the door. “We’d get on the subway from the East

Village, and go back to Park Slope, where they lived, and once home, I'd—fix dinner . . ." I thought of the frozen fish sticks I'd watched spin in the microwave, how I'd squeezed ketchup into a little dish on the counter. "And then I'd help them with their homework, or we'd color—they loved art, coloring books, things like that." She looked at me. "I took them to buy a watercolor set once. And you know, I'd make sure they were in bed by a certain time."

She nodded imperceptibly. What else was I supposed to say?

"Not that we want you to sign a contract, but we do like to have everything set in place once Bijou starts school, so as not to disrupt her routine. Do you have any future plans that would affect how long you could potentially stay with this job? Like graduate school, moving—children of your own?"

I stared at her. People normally thought I was nineteen, even though I was twenty-four. Children of my own? "I'm not planning on any of those, um, anytime soon."

She smiled. "You're young, but you never know! Have you always liked children?"

This was a mistake, I thought. The Ericksons had been so easy, so trusting, I'd imagined that all families were like that, and clearly Nathalie was expecting someone who had prepared, someone who cared, earnestly. I didn't like children; I wanted a job where I didn't have to talk to ninety people per shift who all said the same things. I wanted to stop forcing myself to laugh, I wanted peace. "Yes," I said. "Always. I—I have three siblings. So I grew up with kids around."

A light peeked up from behind her eyes. "Are you the oldest?"

I nodded. "By a lot."

“I’m the same way!” she said. “Three younger siblings. Sometimes I can’t believe that I stopped at one of my own, though sometimes it feels like, of course I did.”

I opened my mouth and closed it. I was lying, I thought, but then I corrected myself: not really. I did have three younger siblings, even if we weren’t from the same family, same house, same two parents.

“It was a lot to manage,” I said. “Being the oldest.”

She nodded confidentially. I briefly worried she’d ask me for proof of this, as if she’d expect me to have birth certificates. “So many fires to put out.” She cast her eyes down for a second. “Sisters, brothers—?”

“Two sisters and a brother,” I said. “They’re still in school. Two in high school, one in elementary school.”

“What a coincidence. I’m the exact same. Two sisters and a brother.” There was a flicker I recognized, excitement she felt in this dull connection, that struck me as lonely. How when you felt as if no one had seen you for so long, the slightest bit of kinship felt like intimacy. But I was surprised to see this reaction from her. “*My* baby brother is still in grad school. I do miss it sometimes, the big house.” Her phone vibrated on her lap, and she tapped at it with round, shiny nails before turning back to me.

I took a breath in. *I didn’t grow up with all my siblings*, I could say, or *They were half siblings, but yes, same, me too*.

“So, obviously, Bijou loves to cook. Loves food. All that. Are you into cooking, yourself? As I said, this will involve some light meal prep.”

“Oh, yes, I love food, too,” I said carefully, avoiding the active verb. “I have a very small kitchen at my apartment, so

it's not the best for cooking. But if I had a bigger kitchen, I would definitely cook more."

"I remember those days," she said. "Well, we have tons of kitchen gadgets here. What would you say is your favorite thing to make?" She noticed my pause. "Back when you had a nice kitchen, of course. Growing up, maybe?"

"Yes, growing up . . ." *Just name a food*, I thought. *Name any food*. "Breakfast was a big deal. Eggs, pancakes." A second passed and I nodded, like I was agreeing with myself.

"So the way we've done this in the past is to bring on a few people part-time for a trial period, and then we can see who meshes the most with Bijou. It ends up being better that way for all involved. Would that work for you?"

I nodded. "I'm still working at the coffee shop at the moment, so I would be fine for a trial period. But I'd like to . . . switch eventually."

"And you're sure this is what you want—full-time?"

The sun shifted and fell in a stripe across her face, so she had to squeeze her eyes shut. "Yes," I said clearly, before they blinked open again. She started to stand up.

"Let me give you a small tour. Gabe will be home with Bijou soon, and you can meet her for a few before I take her to dance, and then you can be on your way."

Was that all? I followed as she walked me through the living room, showing me the kitchen that sat behind french doors. The apartment had an open style, so the living room in the front bled into the dining room in the back, and the kitchen was to the left. "Our bedroom," she said to a set of closed doors past the kitchen, "and my office is back there." She pointed to another shut door on the opposite side of the apartment, next

to the entryway. I was having trouble imagining how much space was hidden away behind these doors; how many more rooms were in this apartment? She walked me back toward the elevator, gesturing vaguely down a hallway. “When Bijou was younger, my mom lived with us over in that wing. It’s got its own bathroom and a little kitchenette. We think sometimes about having a live-in. Are you open to the possibility of that? We’re asking everyone, just in case.”

“Live-in?” It was such an intuitive term that after I repeated it, I felt embarrassed. As if I needed her to decipher the English language.

“A live-in nanny. Obviously, that would require further discussion, pay rate and logistics. It might not be relevant, and we may decide against it anyway. But, hypothetically, is that something you’d consider, so we know?”

“Sure, of course,” I said. I sounded lukewarm about it, and suddenly I wanted to convince her. “I’m not in love with my apartment, and we’re not on a lease.” I wanted her to believe me. “It would be really convenient for me, and I wouldn’t mind the extra hours.”

I wasn’t sure why I was saying this, or if I really wanted it. Thinking too far into the future was a problem for me. I loved looking at job listings, internship ideas in careers I’d never dipped a toe in, real estate websites that showed rent I couldn’t afford. I wanted to be chosen, or to choose—maybe I wasn’t sure of the difference yet. I saw choices glimmering outside my reach, and I wanted badly to get closer.

Nathalie looked at her watch and paused in front of a cluster of pictures on the wall. “Here’s Bijou,” she said, stroking the top of the portrait. It was a professional photo

taken on a beach, a perfect little girl with shoulder-length blonde hair rippling across her face, caught mid-run, her mouth wide in a smile. Next to that one was her school picture, a slim baby-blue headband nestled in her hair, the same smile, with a front tooth missing.

“Gabe and I,” Nathalie narrated, pointing to a wedding picture of the two of them, her head on his chest at sunset. She was wearing a strapless white gown with an endless train, her hair gathered intricately at her neck; her husband looked ordinary but adoring. “And here’s my siblings and me,” and she tapped with her fingernail three times on this one. It was a photo from when they were younger, so I couldn’t tell which one Nathalie was. One boy and three girls with tangled limbs, sitting on the top step of a porch, the same eyes and mouths and symmetrical faces. One of the girls stared at the camera and laughed, while the remaining three looked up at her, admiring. I looked closer, trying to pick out which one was Nathalie, but then the elevator rang, and she pulled me away. I fixed a bright smile on my face and turned toward the elevator, waiting to meet the rest of this new family.

2

New York City, 2013

I rubbed my feet restlessly on the Adriens' carpet, pressing my toes into the plush beige fibers so deep that they disappeared. As the afternoon dwindled, the light from their ten-foot windows fell inside honeyed and golden and made me want to fall asleep. I yawned and placed my fingers in a peach ribbon of sun. It was September: autumn only in advertisements, cartoon-orange leaves and red backpacks lining the signs for back-to-school sales, the warmth whittling down but still keeping us in short sleeves. After a month and a half, I'd won out as the full-time nanny, somehow.

Bijou and I were sitting in the entryway. As the most wide-open space, it served as her pseudo-backyard, a place she could twirl in pirouettes, or lie on her stomach drawing, or, today, practice downward-facing dog. At her school, yoga began in the first grade, so it was her fourth year of practice. She was concerned that I did not know as much about vinyasa as she did. She asked if I could do a split, and I couldn't, not anymore—not since I was young, like her, when I wore black leotards in my middle school's basement a dozen years ago.

“Can you?” she asked again. I shook my head, and Bijou slid her legs on either side of her body to show me that she

could. She was still in her school skirt, a pleated navy blue with the Stanton Academy crest sewn in yellow thread above the right knee, and I noticed she was starting to sprout leg hair. It was so blonde it wasn't visible as much as reflective, shimmering with the last wisps of sun. She popped up and went back to downward dog.

"What did you play in school when you were a kid?" She kicked her right leg into the air, away from her tented body, and then brought it in front of her torso, bending it into a neat ninety-degree angle while her left leg lay straight. "This is called pigeon."

"Softball." I lay on my side, stretching my arms toward the exit. "Kickball."

"What's kickball?" She held her arms out stick-straight, like a zombie, and then collapsed forward over her leg. Her school called gym class "cooperative teamwork time."

I was debating whether to explain kickball when we heard the rumble of the elevator doors. I still felt special about being in an apartment that had an elevator open right into the living room. When I'd told Lucy about it, she'd marveled, "Wow. Imagine being so rich, you're actually *unable* to lose your keys?" Lucy had locked herself out of our apartment twice that month alone.

I scrambled to sit up and look alert before Nathalie came in. When the doors opened, it was her husband, Gabriel, and I slouched back down. He wasn't home as much, and even though I'd been in his home for almost two months, I didn't know what to call him. Mr. Adrien sounded too formal, Gabe seemed too casual, and I'd never heard anyone actually say Gabriel. He was a doctor, and tonight he'd left

his white lab coat on, sticking out from under the hem of his jacket. He looked at us sitting on the floor as the doors slid shut behind him, and his voice was tentative as it came out.

“Hello, you two,” he said. He didn’t know how to talk to me either.

“I’ve been showing Willa how to do yoga,” Bijou said, standing up in front of me. “She didn’t even know what pigeon was!” The end of her french braid was right in front of my face. I thought about tugging it and then I did. She whipped her head around, confused.

“Sorry.” Guilt pinpricked my chest. “A strand was loose.” I rearranged the bracelets on my wrist. “Um, have you heard from Nathalie? She hasn’t told me what to do about dinner.”

Gabe’s eyes widened a bit, and he shook his head, turning toward the coat closet. “No, I haven’t.” He removed his jacket and then his lab coat, hanging each of them up before shutting the door. When he turned back around, he looked surprised to see me still looking at him. “I’m sure there’s something in the fridge?”

“I’ll go look,” I said. I hadn’t thought the light meal prep would be so complicated, that there were no frozen fish sticks in this house. There were only meals made from scratch and my constant fear of infecting Bijou with something like salmonella.

“I’ll come,” Bijou chirped, skipping until she was in line with me. Taking care of a child meant being under constant scrutiny, no escape for even two minutes into the kitchen by myself. I opened the fridge hopefully; I still hadn’t cooked without meticulous instructions from Nathalie. Bijou had the palate of a classically trained chef. She often asked me to

buy langoustines or duck liver when I went to the grocery store, and spent her allotted television time on competitive cooking shows. Each time I put a plate in front of her, I thought she might take one bite and give me a rundown of its flaws. Sometimes, she did.

Bijou was nine and a half, but not the way I was once nine and a half. *How many languages do you speak? What instruments do you play? How many countries have you been to? Can you do a split?* I rubbed my temples whenever she started on the litany of questions that seemed so popular among the widely trained. *None, nothing, no.*

“Here’s some chicken,” I said, fishing out some fleshy pink pieces wrapped in plastic.

“Oh, these shallots are old,” Bijou said, standing on her tiptoes to look through a bowl of produce.

I still wasn’t exactly sure what shallots were. Something like garlic? “Okay. There’s some tomato sauce. I can make you pasta with tomato sauce and chicken? Like chicken parm.” I tried to sound confident. Kids were supposed to take what you said at face value—I’d heard that somewhere.

“But do we have mozzarella for that?”

Is that what’s in chicken parm? “Why don’t you go talk to your dad?” I said. “Ask him how his day was. See if he wants chicken parm.” I took a large skillet under her gaze and switched the flame on underneath. Their stove’s brushed steel was so smooth and easy, a bright blue flame with the slightest flick of my wrist. I drizzled olive oil in the pan and looked at her, thinking, *See? I know what I’m doing.*

She shrugged and scampered out. I searched *easy chicken parm* on my phone, then filled up a large pot with water. I

could see my reflection in their stainless-steel pots, my face bent like an hourglass, a funhouse image of my tan skin, my black hair, my nervous brown eyes staring back at me. I unwrapped the chicken breasts and flinched at how slimy and wet they felt between my fingers. I dropped two in the pan and immediately felt the hot spatter of oil on my wrists. I jerked away quickly, rubbing at my arm.

“Are you okay?” Bijou said as she walked back in. I nodded and dropped my hands to my sides.

“If you *place* it in gently, it seems like it will splatter but it won’t,” Bijou said crisply.

“What?” I said, dropping another piece the same way. She yelped as if burned. “Oops, sorry.” I turned the faucet on and pulled her toward it. “Did that really get you?”

“Did you salt the water?” Bijou asked, pointing her chin at the stove.

“I was about to,” I said, and left her with her wrist outstretched under the cold water. As I grabbed the salt, I saw Gabe in the doorway. He cleared his throat. Bijou turned off the faucet and came to stand by my side. She was so tall for her age, almost at my shoulders, and I could feel her elbow against mine as we looked up at him.

“Nathalie’s over at Amico—she said she’ll bring us something to eat from there. Sorry you already started, Willa. She said that she meant to tell you.”

“Ooh.” Bijou reached behind me to turn off the stove. “I love the duck there.”

I looked at the burners. “Should I finish that and put it away, or . . . ?” The chicken breasts were still half flesh and half meat, like pulsing organs on a pan.

“I hate to say it, but you better throw it out. We have dinner plans tomorrow and then we’re away this weekend. Thanks, Willa. They were about to go bad anyway.”

I tipped the pan into the garbage and covered the mess up with paper towels. One, two, three chicken breasts, cage-free and organic. They could have fed me for a week. I shouldn’t have asked Gabe—Nathalie would have told me something different. Most times while we fixed dinner, Bijou talked about how good Nathalie was at making this, how Nathalie’s mother had taught her that.

“Did your parents cook much?” Nathalie had asked me once when I’d left the lid on a pot of boiling water, and it overflowed onto the stove. She’d been in a good mood that day and had said it playfully, not like the time I didn’t put enough bread crumbs in the meatballs and she’d raised her eyebrows at their soggy shapes.

“My mom worked,” I’d said with my back turned, crumpling a paper towel into the trash. Nathalie murmured something tactfully, and we avoided what was in front of us on the counter: evidence of Nathalie’s own career, stacks of folders and files and notes that she’d been working on before she’d seen the lid trembling.