Audition Katie Katie Kitamura

A Novel by the author of Intimacies

ALSO BY KATIE KITAMURA

Intimacies

A Separation

AUDITION

Katie Kitamura

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About the Author



IT SEEMED AN UNLIKELY CHOICE, this large establishment in the financial district, so that I stood outside and checked the address, the name of the restaurant, I wondered if I had made a mistake. But then I saw him through the window, seated at a table toward the back of the dining room. I stared through the layers of glass and reflection, the frame of my own face. Something uncoiled in my stomach, slow and languorous, and I decided it would be better if I left now, and did not go in to him.

At that moment, the front door opened and a man stepped out, he inclined his head and held the door open, and because of that small courtesy—an invitation or injunction to enter—I went inside. The foyer was busy with diners collecting their coats, people surging in and then out of the entryway, and briefly I allowed myself to be buffeted by their movement. When the crowd dispersed, I could see across the dining room floor again, he was bent over the menu, examining it in a nervous posture. His table was between the entrance to the kitchen and the bathrooms, caught in a stream of constant traffic. A pair of businessmen bumped against its edge and he sat back impatiently, I saw him take a deep breath, as if trying to collect or steady his thoughts.

The host asked if I had a reservation. I said that I was meeting someone and indicated the young man seated at the back of the restaurant. Xavier. It occurred to me that the host must have been the person to seat him at this inhospitable table, and I saw a flicker of surprise cross his features as I pointed. He looked quickly from my face to my coat to my jewelry. It was my age, above all. That was the thing that confounded him. He gave a tight smile

and asked me to please follow him. I was under no obligation to obey, I could tell the host that I had made a mistake, or that something had come up, I could turn and slip away. But by that point it seemed too late, and much as I had entered at the behest of the man at the door, according to the imperative of mere courtesy, I followed the host through the warren of tables, each one occupied. I wondered again why Xavier had chosen such a crowded venue at such a busy time, when we might just as easily have met elsewhere, in the afternoon, in the morning or early evening, for a coffee or quiet drink. The din pressed against me, crowding the inside of my head so that it was hard to think, difficult to locate my thoughts amidst the noise.

Xavier looked up as we approached. He set the menu down and rose to his feet, I remembered that he was unusually tall. I was momentarily intimidated, whether by him or by the situation I wasn't sure. He smiled and said that he hadn't been sure if I would come, he had been on the verge of giving up hope when at last he had seen me.

The host had already disappeared. We sat, one on either side of the table, me with my back to the wall. I looked across at Xavier and slowly unwound the scarf from my neck. He was still smiling, from the start I had noted his natural charm, his charisma. But I now saw that he dispensed it with too free a hand. He didn't seem to understand the intensity of its effect, or the fact that he moved through a world inhabited by other people. In this sense especially, he was still very young.

I put the scarf down and apologized and told him that I was usually on time. He shook his head, manner too eager, he said that there was no need to apologize, it was only because he was anxious, it was only because he'd been afraid that I would change my mind that he'd had such thoughts, under ordinary circumstances a five-minute delay would pass unnoticed, he was himself often late.

There was an awkward pause and then we both spoke at once—I asked how his classes were and he apologized for how he had behaved the last time we met. I understand how I must have sounded, he said. You must have wondered if I had lost my mind, if you had reason to worry. His words

drowned out my question, the shore of ordinary conversation rapidly receding. He had spoken over me—not out of any chauvinism, I didn't think, but out of an excess of enthusiasm or nerves, he spoke like a person who did not have time to waste.

I looked at the menu and said that we should order, I wanted to eat and I wanted to have a drink, as soon as possible. He paused, then ducked his head down to examine the menu again. I asked if he already knew what he wanted and he said he wasn't especially hungry. I have no appetite, is what he said. Still, when the waiter arrived he asked for a hamburger and French fries, the order of a child. Despite myself, I smiled. I ordered my food and then asked the waiter to bring me a vodka tonic, it was past noon and I saw no reason not to start drinking.

As soon as the waiter left I looked at Xavier and asked again how his classes were. I was determined to put things on a more neutral footing, but in doing so I seemed to antagonize him, I could see that he took this dispassion as an affront. He was silent and then said in a sullen voice that his classes were fine. Fine, he said and nothing further. I pressed on, I asked who his professors were, it was possible I knew some of them, but he shook his head and said that he was mostly taking technical classes this semester, and that I was unlikely to know his instructors.

Still, I persisted. I'm interested to know what you are learning, I said. What kind of work you want to make. Who you admire.

I admire Murata, he said after a sly pause. I love his work.

I nodded warily.

Of course, you knew him.

Very little. I worked with him only once, and briefly. He died not long after. And we did not speak the same language. I did my lines phonetically, we worked through interpreters. The interaction was somewhat circumscribed.

What was he like?

He was brilliant, I said slowly. I was aware that Xavier was watching me closely, with a hunger that sat too close to the surface. He was already very

sick, I said. He tired easily and it was only through sheer force of will that he finished the production. None of us knew he had cancer.

Parts of Speech is a masterpiece.

Yes.

I watched it again recently. You were so young.

I was. And now look at me.

I heard a teasing note in my voice, perhaps because I was not comfortable talking about Murata and I wanted to direct Xavier's attention elsewhere. The flirtation was a habit, one that had quieted over the years as I grew older, but that could still at times awaken. It was an error on my part. Xavier quickly leaned forward, as if he sensed an opening. I sat back again. Like all women, I had once been expert at negotiating the balance between the demands of courtesy and the demands of expectation. Expectation, which I knew to be a debt that would at some point have to be paid, in one form or another.

Xavier now said in a low voice, I want you to know that I accept what you told me. He seemed about to reach for my hands before pressing his palms down on the table, remaining in this strange pose for too long, the posture at once abject and defensive. I knew almost nothing about the person sitting across from me, I felt my skin grow hot as I recalled the fervor with which he had spoken that day at the theater, the feeling of repulsion and excitement that had stirred inside me. I was used to people armed with tremendous will, I was frequently with people whose job consists of imposing their reality upon the world. But now, as he seemed to shrink into himself in a manner subdued and uncertain, I wondered if in the end he was not one of these people, and did not truly know what he wanted from me.

The waiter arrived with our food, and as he hovered above us Xavier reluctantly slid his hands from the table and into his lap. The waiter began setting our plates down, his gaze moving surreptitiously from me to the young man and back again. I raised my head and his gaze skittered away. Xavier began to eat. As I watched him, the movement of his mouth as he chewed, his sinuous throat, I felt an unexpected charge between us.

Although he was a stranger to me, in so many respects unfathomable, I knew the details of the fantasy he had created, the castle he had built in his mind, he had shared its private architecture with me and that disclosure was a form of intimacy.

The waiter cleared his throat and asked if there was anything else he could bring us, anything we needed. Xavier had eaten a third of his hamburger while the waiter was arranging the side plates and garnishes. He swallowed and took a long drink of water. The waiter's face, with its careful neutrality, was like a mask. As I stared at him, I suddenly recalled an incident many years ago, when I was not even twenty, in a restaurant much like this one, but in Paris. I had met my father there and he had taken me to lunch, I was then a thin scrap of a drama school student and in his general worry about me he ordered a vast succession of dishes. Once the waiter had gone, he told me he had something special that he wished to give me, something he and my mother had seen in a shop in Rome.

I opened the box with a gasp of delight. It was an emerald necklace, beautiful and extravagant, and once he fastened it around my neck I embraced him. I had not realized until that moment how much I missed the regular company of my parents. Perhaps my reactions were in some ways secondhand or performed—the gasp of delight, for example—but the feeling they were designed to express was sincere, I have that necklace still and I think of my parents whenever I wear it. But I also think of something else, another version or interpretation of the scene that took place between my father and me at that restaurant in Paris, and while it did not contaminate my memory of that lunch—one of the last before my father died—it did represent to me the definitive end of my girlhood and the start of the long stretch of what is called womanhood, the end of which was only now in turn beginning to approach.

We had settled into our meal, at that expensive restaurant in Paris with our crisply aproned waiter bringing dish after dish, my father had ordered too much food. The waiter also refilled our wineglasses, and I noticed that my father was drinking a lot again, in the middle of the day. It was when he was refilling my father's glass that the waiter turned very slightly toward me and gave a salacious wink. I was startled, my father asked if anything was wrong. I looked at the waiter, whose face was so impassive I wondered if I had imagined it. Nothing, I said. It's nothing.

But my impression of the waiter had changed, and for the remainder of the meal I found his attention increasingly oppressive, the way he seemed to come too close when he set a dish before me, or swept the crumbs from the table, his manner full of an intimation that my father seemed not to notice, and that I noticed but did not fully understand. In and of itself, his flirtation was not so outrageous, he was not much older than I was and it was not as if I were immune to the attention of men. But it was only when my father had paid the rather substantial bill and we rose to go that I understood the precise nature of the insinuation the waiter had been making.

We were a few feet away from the table when I recalled the empty jewelry box I had left on the table and turned to retrieve it. As I reached for the box, the waiter appeared and pressed a piece of paper into my hand, which I immediately dropped in my confusion, but not before I saw that it was a telephone number, and not before the waiter had whispered in my ear, his breath hot and damp, Call me when you're done working. And I understood that he had mistaken my father and all his beautiful kindnesses to me that day for something else entirely. That was the first time I felt pity for my father, that he could be mistaken for a ludicrous and grasping old man, of the sort that needed to pay for company, of the sort with needs that could not freely be met.

And now, I thought I saw the same assessment in the eyes of the waiter, as he looked at me and then at the beautiful young man sitting opposite me. The shoe was on the other foot, I was now the object of pity, if not outright scorn—I was a woman, after all, and for women the judgment is always harsher. Curtly, I asked the waiter if I could have another drink and he nodded and whisked the empty glass away. As he departed, I met the gaze of a man seated several tables away. For a moment we stared at each other. Then he reached out and patted the hand of the woman sitting beside him,

the gesture bloodless and reassuring. I understood well enough what the middle-aged couple believed was taking place between us, and I felt a wave of irritation, and then also a feeling of sympathy for Xavier, I remembered what it was like to be so young, and to be seen always in relation to the fulfillment of an older person's desires.

Do you enjoy living in the city? I asked abruptly.

He set his fork and knife down and wiped his mouth with his napkin, he had very good table manners, he had been nicely brought up. He was what used to be called presentable, a young man who did not lack for money or care. Yes, he said. I love it here, I would do anything to stay. He spoke with ease, and also with the expectation that this, the desired outcome, would come to pass. I understood that he was in essence a confident person, my first impression of him had been the correct one. The young man who had appeared in the doorway of the theater, his body only a little tense. I remembered that Lou had immediately risen to her feet to go and ask what he wanted, if she could help, I remembered turning and seeing how she smiled up at him, and how he smiled in return.

It was my presence that turned him inward, that changed the composition of his personality. I knew then that I had been wrong to come. I had a natural inclination to press my face against the glass, to peer at the mystery of other people, but I also had an instinct for self-preservation. I knew how to draw the lines firmly and rapidly when necessary, how to pull down the shutter and withdraw. I had not touched my fish but Xavier had eaten, now was the time to speak decisively.

I don't think we should see each other again, I said once the waiter had taken our plates away. Xavier flinched, as if I had struck him. No relationship between us can be possible.

Everything you said to me—I accept it. I understand. I really do.

Then why did you want to meet?

He hesitated. There's something I need to tell you.

The man at the nearby table was observing us again, I could feel his eyes on me and I looked up in irritation. But what I saw past him caused me to stop in confusion. I saw Tomas enter the restaurant, although this was not possible, he had told me that very morning that he would be at home working the entire day, he was never in this part of town and had no reason to be at a restaurant like this, which he would have hated. It must have started raining, he carried an umbrella and carefully shook the water off it as he entered, his movements deliberate, as they always were. He spoke to the host, who nodded and indicated the rapidly emptying dining room, probably telling him he had his pick of the tables.

I'll be right back, Xavier said and began to rise to his full height.

No, I said. Sit down.

I had spoken more sharply than I intended. He sat down. He was staring at me, perhaps it was the first time I had genuinely taken him by surprise. Tomas was now following the host into the dining room. I wondered what the best course of action was, whether I should simply catch his eye, wave from across the restaurant. That would be the natural thing to do, I could say that Xavier was a student, which he was, a young person interested in the theater. But then Tomas would join us, that would also only be natural, and from there an entire cascade of events would follow.

Xavier was looking at me strangely. Is anything wrong? he asked. Tomas was now halfway across the restaurant and I was preparing to stand, to bluff my way through the situation as best I could. He had not yet seen me but it would not be long, there were perhaps a dozen occupied tables, the host was walking rapidly in our direction, it was only a question of time. Tomas was following, his manner a little vague and distracted, as if his mind were elsewhere. I watched from across the restaurant, he appeared so much older from a distance and I felt a pang of tenderness, of love, in that moment I could not understand why I had not told him about Xavier, when I told him everything, when I trusted him more than any person in the world.

Tomas would understand. Of course he would. It was with this thought in mind that I raised my hand, as if to get his attention. Sit down, I would say. Join us. This is—and I would introduce Xavier to Tomas, who would sit beside me. His presence would calm me, it would remove all threat from the

situation. I waved my arm through the air, Tomas was only a dozen feet away, I was sure he must have seen us. Xavier turned, his face confused, his gaze swept across the room but did not linger on Tomas, whom he did not know and had never met. Xavier gave me a questioning look, I only raised my hand higher, signaling.

But at that moment, Tomas froze. He had his hands in his coat pockets and he began rummaging inside, as if looking for something—his phone or his wallet, perhaps his keys. He had stopped in the middle of the restaurant, I should have risen to my feet and gone to him, but I did not move. As I watched, Tomas spoke to the host, who nodded and shrugged. Tomas turned and retreated, walking swiftly across the dining room floor, as if he had forgotten or lost some item of importance. At the same time, alongside or propelling that urgency, was something shamefaced, something hidden and untoward.

The glass door opened and swung shut. I turned to watch as Tomas hurried away down the street. I felt, in his departure, a feeling of regret so pronounced it seemed to exert a gravitational pull, it seemed to pull me to the ground. I could have gotten to my feet and called him back. I could have run after him, tugged at his arm. But there had been something that stopped me. When had it last happened, that I had looked at my husband and seen an emotion or expression that I was not easily able to parse, the meaning of which was not apparent at first glance? Was he hiding something—the reason for his presence in this restaurant, which was in the wrong part of town, at the wrong time of day, particularly for a creature of such habit?

Is everything okay?

I turned to look at Xavier and then I saw it—the similarity between us, which was more than the fact of our shared race, it was an echo or mirroring in our features that had no explanation, no purpose. In that moment, I could perceive the outer edge of his thought, his personal delusion, I could almost reach out and grasp it. But then the feeling receded and the gap between us yawned once more. He sat back in his chair and exhaled and I recognized the movement, it was the one he had done at the theater, when we first met.

An old gesture of mine that he had lifted from my films, my stage performances, and copied without shame. A piece of me, on the body of a stranger, a thing of mine that had been taken and moved into the realm of the uncanny by this young man sitting across from me. Anger surged through me, a sharpening of all my instincts. The situation was more dangerous than I had previously understood, below the surface demands and obtrusions of his personality was a ruthlessness I had not perceived or prepared for. I need to go, I said to Xavier, and before he could reply I rose to my feet and stepped back from the table, I had nothing else to say, I could only repeat, I need to go.

I PUSHED OPEN THE FRONT door of the restaurant and tumbled outside, I looked but there was no sign of Tomas, he had disappeared into the densely populated street. There was a rain so faint it was mist in the air. I thought of Xavier, whom I had left at the table without explanation, and I began walking quickly down the street, away from the restaurant.

As I turned the corner and walked north, I breathed in the cold air as if I had been long deprived of oxygen. It was too far to walk back to the apartment in the rain but I could not bear the thought of taking the subway or sitting in a car, I needed to feel myself decisively moving away from the situation inside the restaurant—Xavier sitting across from me at the table, Tomas standing frozen on the other side of the dining room. Now, as the rain grew heavier, I continued to walk as if to chastise myself, I couldn't understand why I had agreed to meet Xavier in the first place.

I had felt sorry for him perhaps—to have so much unreciprocated feeling, to be carrying that imbalance. But had it only been that? Hadn't there also been some underlying curiosity, an old instinct to draw close to other people? When I was younger, that impulse had almost been the governing principle of my life. I had tried many times to explain this compulsion to myself—it was a way of being in the world, of relating to the life that was taking place around me, it was a question of being open. But over the years and in particular once I met Tomas, I had learned to curtail that urge, to see it for what it really was—a passing curiosity, a spirit of bedevilment, and a form of voyeurism.

Because of Tomas. Through him, with him, I had learned to live with greater discipline, to inhabit a certain quietude, so that I no longer fully remembered what it felt like to be so open to the world, to take such pleasure in throwing myself onto the crashing waves of other people's temperament. I had been surprised when the feeling had overtaken me once more and with no small urgency, I had been compelled by Xavier and his strange predicament, in all its wild illogic. I had become curious despite knowing better. The situation bore every red flag that I had learned to recognize over the years, and yet I had replied to his message, I had agreed to meet with him, I had gone into the restaurant and sat down across the table from him.

It had been a heedless moment. I had entered the stage of life where there is a certain amount of immutability, in middle age, change is experienced primarily as a kind of attrition. Perhaps for that reason I had been lulled into a state of unthinking complacency. As I continued walking down the street, through that soft rain, I began to wonder how long I had been in this state of excessive inurement. I looked around me, I saw that I had walked much further than I had thought, I was almost home.

When I returned to the apartment, Tomas was not there. We lived in the West Village, in an apartment we purchased not too long after I worked with Murata, on the film that Xavier had mentioned. That was my first taste of success, and although the role was small and the film in another language, it had achieved some renown. The parts began to come a little more regularly after that, although still circumscribed in scope and scale, none of them equal in depth to what Murata had offered me.

Mostly it meant that we had a bit more money, that I could pay the bills and buy the clothes I wanted, that we could eat out when we did not feel like cooking. In the years that followed, we began to accumulate a little money, there would be residuals here and there, a guest role on a television series. It helped that we did not have children. Children, with their mouths to feed, clothes to purchase, the cost of childcare and tuition, we had friends who