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This Is Chinatown: Stories

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WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY IN ST. LOUIS

Department of English

Writing Program

This Is Chinatown: Stories

by

Paul Sung

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of Washington University in
partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree
of Master of Fine Arts

May 2017

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Table of Contents

Acknowledgements ... iii

“This Is Chinatown” ... 2

“The Fight” ... 18

“Everything I Want to Say but Nothing You Will Ever Hear” ... 30

“Happy Valley” ... 54

“Mango, Lily, Orange” ... 82

“Go West” ... 100

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Paul Sung

Washington University in St. Louis

May 2017

This Is Chinatown: Stories

“This Is Chinatown”

There was a neon sign that lassoed into a pair of legs that sat on the roof of the Naked-I Lounge, that overlooked the Boston skyline, that shadowed the neighborhood of Chinatown, that I still remember to this day. The clarity of its lines, the robustness of the thighs and calves, the blueness of her heels; the legs opened and closed, as a folding fan did. In its closed position, the heels pointed to the sky; and, when the legs spread-eagled, an eye blinked into existence, leering from between them.

As kids, Johnny, Willie, and I kicked around a limp ball on a parking lot that was three blocks away, only when it was empty, which was most of the time. No one who lived there had cars. The lot was sandwiched between Tyler and Harrison, and intersected by Harvard Avenue on the north side, forming a horseshoe that wrapped around it. It was a piece of shit, littered with oil stains, flattened Styrofoam, and shards of glass; but it was a great place to kick around a ball and throw bricks at each other, bricks that came loose from the sidewalk.

We would have stayed out all night if we could, and we did when we were older, but, before all that, our mothers herded us in when the streetlights came on, calling from their stoops, slapping their fans against the building sides, threatening to beat us to death if we didn't. After we'd all gone in, I'd watch from my window the empty lot bathe in the saturated orange of streetlights. Bawls came from up the street; men who had too much to drink, daring to throw the first punch against whomever, tossing insults, arguing over strippers, arguing over nothing; grown men sobbing like children when real punches started to fly, when real jaws started to get broken. But it mostly never came to that; just shit talk, a few shoves, tumbles, and retching on

that one car stupid enough to have parked there. But sometimes, just sometimes, the fights got real bad.

My mother and I lived in a basement apartment on Tyler Street that had been a barbershop, where the cut linoleum was never replaced, and stubborn bits of hair clung to corners and crevices. From the street, the concrete steps led down to our door, and, when it rained, the water poured like waterfalls. The smell lingered for days, and we strung our bread on ceiling hooks and showered with a hose in a small concrete-floored closet. Across from us was a mahjong parlor where Fujianese played with other Fujianese. It got robbed at gunpoint once, but no one was killed. I remembered the yelling, the tables flipping and the mahjong tiles hitting the floor. My mother and I didn't know it had been robbed until the police banged on our door. When they told us what had happened we were shocked. People were always yelling and flipping tables over there.

The parlor really did get shot up another time, and it killed my mother that we still had to live there. At night, I could hear her cry sometimes; something she would never let anyone see. My father was dead—had been for a while—so I never knew him. My mother had me light a stick of incense every morning, three sticks at night, and kneel to his altar, to the black and white photo of him as a young man. And whenever I got bad grades, or she discovered missing money from her tin box, my mother would kneel me down in front of him and beat me with the bamboo feather duster that she kept behind the cabinet. When she did, neither of us could ever look at my father's photo, nor could we look at each other; so we both cried with our hands over our faces

until she could no longer raise her arm, until I could no longer plead for forgiveness, until we were both exhausted.

Johnny lived on the fifth floor of Building Two of the Tai Tung apartments at the end of Tyler Street. It was made up of three buildings, surrounding a small courtyard below, and had a Laundromat, a general Chinese goods store, a pharmacy, a Tai Chi school, and a decent café that served Chinese barbecued meats.

In the 9th grade, we developed a taste for skipping school, and did it a few times every month. Willie freaked when we almost got caught at the arcades and he stopped altogether. During school hours, cops monitored the arcades like crazy, so Johnny and I hid and smoked at his place until it was safe. Johnny's aunt worked until 4PM, which was more than enough time to clean and air out the place, and his uncle, a kitchen grunt like my father had been, didn't come home until late at night. The apartment was a narrow flat with well-scuffed linoleum tiles, shelves and shelves of VHS tapes labeled in Chinese, and cabinets stuffed with white plastic bags and empty mooncake tins.

Johnny's room had a small TV jammed under a warped board of his tall shelf, a dresser up against the window, and a bunk bed opposite the shelf, with hardly any space in between to even stand. The top bunk was piled with clothes and old blankets. We unhooked the VCR from the living room to use in his room, but had to remember to hook it back up before Johnny's aunt came home. We watched movies and smoked until 2 or 3, until it was safe.

My mother worked at a daycare on Tremont Street, and washed dishes and peeled vegetables for Ming's down the street near the A&P. She had an old Singer sewing table that she loved more than anything, and at times used it to tailor for other women in the neighborhood for extra cash, whenever I needed new clothes or shoes. She would never leave the thing behind, and, when we finally moved out of the basement and onto the third floor of a building five doors down, it took the movers—borrowed husbands and fathers—nearly half a day to squeeze it up the stairs.

That apartment was robbed during a fireworks show that summer before 9th grade. My mother and I walked through the door to find clothes tossed to the floor, cabinet doors pried off their hinges, our portable closet slashed from top to bottom. But my father's photo was untouched. Scattered around it were disposable lighters, bundles of incense, loose change, and my mother's tin box. I could smell the bottle of medicinal rub that had been my father's, which my mother kept even after all these years. The policemen came and went; looked around, wrote a report, and left footprints on the backs of photographs that lay scattered across the floor. When I went to bed my mother was stacking those loose photos back into their drawer, a drawer that now carried a gash on its front face.

We spent the summer before 10th grade throwing bricks at each other, trying to hit them in mid-air with our fists. Something we saw in *Five Vemons*, *Drunken Master*, or one of those movies. Johnny's hands had swollen to potatoes. He'd hit my shoulder to show how hard his knuckles were getting, hard enough to leave a bruise. Sometimes he'd hit the same spot three or four times. He'd make fun of my hands, how small they were, how much they looked like an old woman's hands.

The bricks tore up our arms. Willie stopped after his father found out and threatened to beat him to death if he didn't. I kept it up and caught a brick between the knuckles and was purple for weeks. I hid the bruise from my mother, broke into the cabinet where she kept that bottle of medicinal rub, stuffed with old roots and herbs and, over the years, had turned as black as coffee. She had used it to knead my father's wrists, when he was alive, after long shifts. I dotted three dabs where the bruising was the worst and rubbed it in until I wept, until I knelt in front of my father's altar, until I realized why my mother never let anyone see her cry.

On most summer nights we played pick-up basketball on a court at the end of Kneeland Street, next to the interstate, and the bus and train terminals. We played half court and sometimes full court if we had enough people. It was always Johnny, Willie, and I, and some others from the neighborhood. Sometimes Tanya and her O'B friends would come and cheer us along. We stayed out long nights and guzzled down gallons of red-flavored drink from the White Hen. On some nights we stayed out so late that our mothers called each other asking if they knew where we were.

There were two full courts. We had the south court; the neighborhood black kids had the north, and they stayed out just as late as we did. They had their own groups, but sometimes we played together when they didn't have enough and when we didn't have enough. Though we never mixed teams. They beat us most of the time; we had our victories here and there. Willie was pretty tall but couldn't defend to save his life. He got knocked around so many times he was useless. It was just the way it was, and that was why Johnny never liked playing them. They had

great blockers and played a tight game, and were serious as shit about their ball. We had long-range shooting but even with our best, Johnny, Henry, Gabe, it was mostly a loss.

The first time I met Tanya was that same summer Johnny and I threw bricks at each other. I found her in Johnny's room, lying on the bottom bunk, lounging against the wall with her legs stretched out like she owned the place. I had seen her once or twice, not in school but in and around Chinatown, hanging around some Quincy boys. Quincy boys had shit attitudes about everything, thinking they were better than us. A cigarette hung from her mouth with that Quincy attitude, while she played up the hot-shit role, while the TV played *A Better Tomorrow*. Johnny was sitting in a chair, crammed between the bed and the dresser. I lit a cigarette and sat down on the other side of the bottom bunk. She watched me and I watched her. I breathed in deep, exaggerated inhales and let the smoke rollout of my mouth, then twisted toward the movie. Johnny had his back to me and didn't say a word about Tanya, or explained who she was, or why she was there. He acted as if this was normal—a girl lying on his bed. If anything, he owed me an explanation, considering what we had together.

Johnny went out to buy lunch and left us alone. I moved to Johnny's chair, spun around and waited for her to talk, to explain herself. She didn't say a word and sort of smirked, as if knowing what I was trying to do. She wore washout tennis shoes and jeans that were broken at the knees, showing skin. She wiggled her toes, perking the canvas of her shoes. I twisted back to the movie, but could only think about the girl, about her legs, wondering if they could spread like the neon sign, if there was an eye in between them.

Sometimes the three of us went to the arcade in Downtown. There were circles around the machines for Mortal Kombat, Johnny's game, and he was king. Johnny had told me about a time when he punched a guy for suggesting that he play the character, Johnny Cage, instead of his favorite, Kung Lao, and I believed him. Street Fighter had its own circles. Tanya asked if I wanted to play when a machine freed up. She beat me all two rounds, having memorized all the moves, jerking the joystick in perfect semi and quarter circles. She said she had the Super Nintendo version at home and played against her younger brother. We went another round, and she beat me again. A white kid watching from behind taunted me, and, when Tanya laughed too, I shoved the kid. He had big friends but Johnny pulled me away and we ran out the door, down Washington Street, back to Chinatown. Every time I tried to look back to see if Tanya was behind us, Johnny shoved me forward, telling me how awesome that was, telling me how much more awesome it would have been if I had punched that white kid square in the jaw.

Tanya said she liked the look of my hands, thought that they were like corn dogs in miniature. I asked her what corn dogs were, and she laughed. We were lying on the top bunk with Johnny's clothes pushed to one end, using them as pillows. She explained what they were, and I looked at my hands again.

“Don't you think they're small?” I asked.

She took them in her hands and spread my fingers out and overlapped them with hers. We were so close I could smell her mouth. Our faces were like two puzzle pieces before connecting. We looked at each other and she waited for me to make a move. But I couldn't kiss her. She relaxed, lying out like a patient, like we were children playing doctor, and asked if I wanted to

touch her. I listened for jiggling keys, for doorknobs, for footsteps along the hall. I ran my fingers over the hairs on her arm—long, black, all in one direction. Three tiny moles dotted the length of her arm, and I traced them. One. Two. Three, and I kept my finger on the last, at the bend of her underarm. I ran my finger across its shape and she laughed. I had yet to say a word.

“It’s all right,” she said. “I’m not Johnny’s girl.”

I lay beside her.

“I’m not anyone’s girl.”

Tanya lived in Quincy but went to O’B. The kind of girl that came here to hook up with Chinatown trash to make her feel connected to someone that looked like her apart from what she could find where she was. She thought someone like Johnny or I could make her feel more Chinese. I said that I understood. I told her that this was what we were all trying to do.

By the middle of that summer Johnny and I got jobs working under the table for the noodle factory on Essex Street, packing and hauling bags of noodles to trucks, and sweeping shards of broken fortune cookies into garbage bags. The cookies were baked in the basement, where the ovens were manned by women with short perms like my mother. They flailed their arms, threw back their heads to laugh, and shouted to talk over the noise of the folding machines.

Johnny and I, and this eighteen-year-old Khmer from Jersey had fun imitating them, out on the loading dock. We were not supposed to smoke while at work, but we didn’t care and hid in a blind spot behind packed crates. The Khmer spoke at length about the Chinatown over in Manhattan: the hookers, the gang bosses, and the stacks of money that could be made so easily. I thought it was all bullshit, and didn’t believe him, but I kept it to myself. He was eighteen and

looked like a bull. Johnny seemed skeptical too, chuckling whenever the Khmer brought up the subject. But on our last day, before we started 10th grade, the Khmer showed us a folded stack of twenties, two fingers thick. “Can’t make this shit up,” he said, looking at Johnny.

When Johnny turned sixteen, near the end of our 10th grade, he pulled up in a matte beige Chevy wagon, stuck his head out and told me to get in. All the windows were rolled down and it was as hot as hell, as if it had sat in the sun all day long.

“Where’d you get this car?” I asked.

“Borrowed it.”

I twisted the radio dial to dead noise. “It’s ancient,” I said.

“Don’t fuck with that. Gonna get me killed.”

“Who’d you borrow it from?”

He didn’t answer. I told him that I had to stop at the A&P to get detergent for my mother, and after we did, the detergent sat in the back, and Johnny turned onto Kneeland and went up the interstate, driving out of Chinatown. The Chevy was old, the AC didn’t work, and the engine was god-awful loud, but we sailed against the wind and it was perfect. I wanted to ask where we were going but was afraid if I did that he might turn around, leave me behind, and take off on his own. We rode until the sun was a sliver. We stopped for gas somewhere near the ocean, using the change I had leftover. The last of the sun was reflecting off the water and the street-lights were coming on. I had never ridden in a car for so long. I threw up next to the pump. Johnny laughed and gave my head a little shove. On the way back, I asked him what the deal was with that girl.

“What girl?” he said.

“Tanya.”

“Oh, that girl. She’s nobody—just some girl.” A car sped by, honked for no reason.

“Fuck off,” said Johnny, and returned to me. “Why? Do you like her?”

“No, no,” I said quickly. “No, no,” I said again, slower.

I banged on Johnny’s door for what felt like hours. The drumming of the steel door echoed through the entire length of the hall. When the door opened, I exploded on Johnny, told him how long I had been waiting and knocking. “Fuck off.” He shoved me away from the door, looking like he was about to kick my ass. He burst out laughing, said he was joking, and slipped on some sneakers before leaving me in the hall with his open door.

Tanya was asleep on the bottom bunk; I sat beside her. I lit a cigarette and watched the empty TV screen, watched Tanya’s reflection. She shifted around, changed positions, and I stayed as still as possible. Then I couldn’t anymore and left.

I wandered down Oak Street, then Tremont, even passing the daycare where my mother worked. I was sure she would catch sight of me and drag me home and beat me like she used to. But she didn’t see me. No one saw me. I kept walking around and around until school let out, until there was no place left to go.

On our last day of 10th grade, Johnny and I played two rounds of one on one. Johnny won one, and I won one. We were leaning against the chain-link when he pulled up his t-shirt sleeve and showed me his bicep, pointing to a round burn the size of a pen cap that had started to scab over.

I scanned the blackheads and thin hairs on the wet, pale muscle. “Know what this is?” he asked proudly. The charred dot sat on the top of his skin like a felt sticker, ready to fall off. It was fresh and could be barely called a scab.

“Yeah. I know what it is.” I had heard about these burns. They were made by jamming a lit oversized stick of incense onto the skin, and holding it, sometimes as long as a minute, until it scarred. “Can I touch it?” I asked.

“Go ahead.”

I touched my finger to the burn and slowly circled the skin where it started to heal, then wiggled around the edge and sat my finger over it. I jammed my finger in. Johnny shoved me so hard that I flew against the chain-link. He shouted, cocked his fist, ready to kick my ass, in the way I had always imagined my father would have if he were still alive.

The Naked-I Lounge and a string of clubs and sex shops along Washington Street were shut down that summer. The city blocked off a proportion of the street, and large groups of surrounding residents came out to watch as excavators, over the course of weeks, tore down the marquee, then the neon legs on the roof, then the building itself. The local paper wrote that it was a victory for Chinatown, a step toward a better and brighter community.

Willie and I were on the basketball court. It was the summer before 11th grade and it was a quiet night, even for the black kids. There was still one shooting hoops by himself when Johnny came. Willie and I were sitting against the chain-link fence, tossing empty water bottles against the backboard of the hoop.

“Where’ve you been?” I asked.

“None of your business.” Johnny took the ball from between Willie’s legs and made a few layups. “Let’s play,” he said.

“Just played. We’re tired,” said Willie.

“Fucking pussies.”

Willie pointed across the court, and, as a joke, said he should play the black kid. We laughed. We had seen him play earlier, in between our own games and when they had more people, but Johnny went over and challenged him. The black kid laughed too, but Johnny was serious as shit. His name was Reese. They played one on one for 21 points, shit talking all the way up to 19 to 19, then they got real quiet. When Reese made his last 2 points, shooting from the 3-point line, Johnny kept shouting for a rematch.

“I gotta go,” Reese said.

“Running like a pussy, huh? Yeah, you heard me.” Johnny met him eye to eye.

“Yeah, whatever.” Reese picked up his ball.

“Well, forty bucks say I win.”

“For real?”

“You lose, you owe nothing.”

“And if I win?”

“You get forty.”

Reese laughed, dribbled the ball, and flicked it up into the air. “All right but show me the money first.”

Johnny dug into his pocket and pulled out a twenty. He held it at eye level and flapped it a few times. “Beat me and you’ll see the rest.”

Reese sucked his teeth. “Fine, one more game. Then I gotta go.”

Johnny balled up the twenty in his fist and threw it at me for me to hold. They took off their shirts and began. They had already been sweating from the first game, but now it was all bravado; their words reduced to animal grunts and howls. At times they were on top of each other, swimming on their own wetness. They exploded from one end of the court to the other, flinging volleys of sweat into the air, all the while glistening under the riling lights of the court. Reese sank his last point in; the ball dropped to the asphalt and bounced unmolested until it gave up its breath. Johnny paced back and forth across the court with his head hung back, without a word, looking at the darkened sky. He stopped at the fence and grabbed the chain-links, shaking them so violently the entire length of it trembled. The fit went on for a solid minute. The three of us stood by, watching, not knowing what to do—if anything even should be done.

When Johnny had enough, he walked over to me and jerked his thumb toward Reese, who was behind him. I gave Reese the balled up twenty. Reese held the money in his hand, felt its texture, but also seemed to hesitate if he should ask for the rest. He did.

Johnny waved his hand to follow him. “In my car,” he said.

Willie tried to tell me that Johnny didn’t have a car, but I told him to shut his mouth. They were ahead and had already left the court; Willie and I caught up. Reese dribbled his ball as we went down Tyler Street. Willie tried to steal; Reese spun and faked, and I laughed. Johnny didn’t pay attention to us.

We crossed the parking lot, where we had played as kids, where my room window faced now, and we continued down Harrison. We went into the small lot behind the café and weaved in and out between parked cars. Johnny stopped between two pickup trucks.

“Which is yours?” Reese asked.

Johnny had his back turned and mumbled something. We couldn't hear and huddled closer, when Johnny turned and slugged Reese in the head. He fell back, taking us with him; I hit the side of the trunk. Willie shouted something. And bodies came together. Grunts, arms, elbows flailed everywhere, some hitting me; I fell to the asphalt. Sneakers danced in front of me. I was getting up, but someone fell and took me down again. Heat radiated from the asphalt and our bodies. I was soaked through and could only hear my blood beating. Johnny and the black kid wrestled to ground; I was three feet away. Johnny's fist plunged into his face. The fist peeled back then went in again, then in again, then in again. Johnny acted like he was hitting a sack of rice, and I thought he would never stop. I wanted to yell but I was choked. When Johnny stopped, I found the energy to sit up. I was shaking badly, and saw the red on Johnny, and on Willie, and on me. Johnny stood, turning into a silhouette, eclipsing the street lamp that was behind him. Johnny's fists were up in front of him, squeezed into balls, almost like he was flexing.

The kid was curled up with his face covered in blood. He was breathing and his fingers twitched blindly for something. A long time passed. We did nothing. Only when a siren went off did we make a run for it. We shoved our way through a gap in the back gate; Johnny was through first. I kept running until I was out of Tai Tung courtyard and back on Tyler Street. I lost Willie but didn't look back. I ran for three blocks straight and almost missed my door. I peeled off my shirt, balled it, and pushed it down a trash bin piled over with garbage, not caring what I had to

touch. I just wanted that thing out of my hand. I looked around, looked at my trembling hands, and looked at the garbage that had spilled onto the sidewalk. I had to believe that this wasn't who I was.

My mother had been sleeping on the couch when I opened the door. She stirred awake. All the lights had been turned off. I was shaking again and hoped that she couldn't see it from where she was. She said, very matter-of-factly, that I was home. I nodded in the dark, and had yet to say anything. She asked me where my shirt was, and, when I couldn't answer, I tried, the hardest I ever had, to find a lie for my mother, to give her something to believe in that her son wasn't a failure. She waited for it. Every second tore at me, at my attempts to come up with a lie, and I found myself closer to telling her everything. Until she stood and told me that she had to go to bed, then hurried away.

In bed, I lay with the window cracked open, looking at the ceiling and waiting for sleep. The heat clung to me and every siren set my nerves on fire.

I ran into Willie at the Y a few times, and we played ball together. He had gotten better, lifted weights, and practiced layups. He asked, after a game of one on one, what I was considering for colleges, and I said that I hadn't thought much about it. He shook his head, rolling his eyes. We were sweating, and coming down from the adrenaline, and I didn't care enough to say anything.

"I'm gonna go out-of-state if I can," he said.

"Good for you."

"Yeah, good for me."

After that, we ran into each other a few more times, played ball a few more times, until I stopped going to the Y altogether. Not once did we ever mention anything about that night.

When the Naked-I Lounge was still under deconstruction I ran into Tanya as well. She was on the corner of Washington and Kneeland across from the McDonald's, looking at the wreckage that had been piling up since the first weeks. She seemed absorbed and hadn't seen me until I went up to her and asked how she was.

“Just waiting for some friends,” she said.

“Johnny?”

She laughed. “No.” She checked her watch and asked if I had any cigarettes. I handed her a pack from my bag, and she took two and thanked me.

For weeks, after most of the demolition was complete, the mangled neon tubes of the legs lay in piles of crumbled concrete, weathered bricks, and twisted iron rods. The building's steel frame was all that remained, until it too was uprooted from its bedrock, laid into piles, and made to wait for an uncertain future. But, eventually, the piles were cleared, and eventually a new construction began, and by the time it was all complete, my mother and I were gone.

“The Fight”

School let out 14 minutes ago, and Fong and Leung were the first to arrive at the Longwood train platform. They wondered who else would show, who would stay, and who would truly act when it came down to it. Three days before, a fight broke out in the cafeteria. Egos were bruised, and reputations were broken. Fong and Leung didn't plan on arriving together, but they waited side by side. Leung was dwarfed by Fong's height, by about a head. Fong had the build of a budding gym rat. They were high schoolers, young men, foolish and driven by motivations that they themselves did not fully understand. They did not talk. Talk was no longer a recourse.

The Green Line trolley tracks ran along the middle of Huntington Avenue, between its right- and left-lane traffic, separating the prim Longwood medical area from the working-class neighborhood of Mission Hill. Children's Hospital, Massart, Mass College of Pharmacy, the Museum of Fine Arts, and their high school on one side; and housing projects, Massart-owned dorms, and rundown apartment buildings on the other. The two sides came together and sandwiched the platform in open air.

Two weeks before, Swanson got knifed on the inbound train by some Viet boys that supposedly went to Dot High. Everyone said that it was over a game of pool. Fong had his doubts. He was on the car when it happened and it was chaos. People lost it, pouring from one end of the train to the other, until someone pulled the emergency brake lever. Everyone gushed out. Fong caught a glimpse of Swanson when he tried to escape. His hands were sliced up. Lucky, considering. The Viet boys part was true, though they probably went to Roxbury High, not Dot. Fong had no idea whether it was over a game of pool or not. Couldn't imagine how

Swanson would've ended up playing pool with those Viet boys. Swanson did have a big mouth, liked to talk big, and probably made up some of the rumors himself. It was most likely that Swanson flapped his lips a bit too much while riding the train, talking shit about something, and pissed off some hothead, getting his ass knifed in the process.

Students from their school trickled onto the platform, walking down to the end of the station, where it started to crowd. Fong and Leung stayed close to the front. From where they stood, they could see up the street, watching their schoolmates move in packs, horsing around, clustering at the stoplight, waiting for the walk signal, before crossing the street to where they were. They could easily see who was coming, and who was not coming. The after school rush was upon them.

Leung and Fong weren't entirely close but they hung out with the same circle of friends. Su, Lin, Lau, Chan and so on. They were Chinese, and it seemed right to stick together, especially when it came down to this whole business with Chan and Mahoney.

Leung wasn't surprised to see Fong first on the platform. Fong lived in Chinatown, lived and breathed it—the strip club laden side streets, garbage day rats, pirated-CD shops, and nighttime pick-up basketball games. Fong was known for getting into fights in junior high, had a sharp tongue, a bit of a temper—though not a wild one. Fong ran an under-the-table side business, making illegal copies of CDs, VCDs, and PlayStation games. He had broadband and a burner on his computer and downloaded what was needed, charging five dollars per disc. Leung had once asked Fong to download a handful of Utada Hikaru music videos, Leung's dialup crawled, and Fong charged him five bucks all the same. In 9th grade, they had U.S. history. Fong

talked to Leung first, the only other Asian in the class, and spied him drawing Dragon Ball Z characters. Because of his art skills, Fong respected Leung, encouraged him on occasion, telling him not to let that bitch ass Kirkpatrick fuck with him in computer class anymore.

Leung admitted that Fong had an edge to him. Fong once took him to a dimly lit pool hall called the K Place, which was underneath a Korean barbecue restaurant near Fenway, where he knew all the tattooed attendants that freely called him by a nickname. He also shit-talked a kid from their school, to his face, who was known to have connections to a Chinatown gang. The kid carried an incense scar on his arm. Leung could never really conclude how sharp Fong's edge was, thus always kept him at an arm's length.

Leung started having second thoughts about the platform, but it seemed too late to escape with Fong standing with him. Leung was in the cafeteria that morning, three days ago, when the fight between Mahoney and Chan broke out. It happened in a flash; Leung was plugged into his Discman and only turned to see when a crowd spontaneously spawned. Chan was throwing a flurry of punches at a bent-over Mahoney. Mahoney wasn't a sports brat like O'Malley or that meathead McNamara, but he wasn't a small guy, either. Back to back, he would've towered over Chan by two heads, so Chan had been standing on a bench while unleashing his flurry. The sight was cartoonish. The flurries were clumsy and child-like, so inept that Leung felt embarrassed for Chan. After the monitors pulled them apart and the cafeteria cleared, crushed milk cartons and white puddles dotted the scattered benches and tables.

On the platform, Leung and Fong waited for something to happen, for someone to show, to add their numbers. The possibility of being involved in a fight unnerved Leung. He tried to let the sight of the Massart buildings lull him into a daydream. The only brick building across

the street had the aesthetic of old Boston, the same aesthetic that inhabited their high school. The moldings were inlaid with motifs of olive branches and grapevines, and the carved words *The Normal School*. Leung had heard it was an all-girls high school, until it was integrated into his high school in the 60s. Three years before, when Leung was attending summer camp for junior high schoolers, a counselor told him this. On the first day, she asked if we wanted to know something about the building. She always started conversations that way. “Wanna know something?” Leung had developed a minor crush on her. She was white, offbeat, wore silver wing-tipped glasses and skull-print dresses, and occasionally tap-danced across the room instead of walking. “Wanna know something about me?” She had gone to tap dancing camp as a kid. All the camp counselors were Massart students, and Leung’s wire sculptures seemed to tickle her, or at least set his work apart from the drawings of Wolverine and the Predator that had become the defacto go-to subject that summer. She had developed a motherly fondness for him but was often cheeky with him as well. She allowed him to walk by her side when the group went on field trips to the Museum of Fine Arts, only to disbar him to the end of the line on their walk back, for seemingly no good reason. Leung suddenly felt the need to talk and announced how much time had passed. “Where the fuck is everyone?” Fong asked.

Su and Lau were still at their lockers. Wu was with them and was telling Lau how stupid the whole thing was, that Chan was an asshole, and probably started the fight. Wu and Lau always talked at their lockers after school. They started dating at the end of 10th grade, just last year. Lau and Su’s lockers were next to each other, so Wu was a fixture for Su. Lau and Su were long-

time friends, had went to junior high together, and elementary before that. Their parents came from the same village in Toishan, making Lau and Su what their parents called village mates.

Su ducked around the corner to the hall where Mahoney's locker was, where Mahoney was goofing around with O'Malley and McNamara, trying to impress or get a laugh out of O'Brien. They always hung around each other. O'Malley was a hockey player and carried an enormous bag of gear. McNamara was a bull, played varsity football and carried the locker-room smell. Mahoney was always the clown. In English class, whenever Mr. Barry stepped outside or was out sick, which was often, Mahoney would make armpit noises, fake farts, and talk circles around the substitute. O'Brien was all right and had a good head on her shoulders. In 9th grade, Su and O'Brien had the same homeroom and sat next to each other. They talked about swimming. O'Brien swam for their high school team. Four months back, Su started having chronic nose bleeds. His doctor blamed it on the winter air and Su's swimming. Chlorine dried out the membranes, the doc said, and told Su's parents to keep him hydrated and for Su to quit swimming. Su and Lau started swimming when they were at J.Q. Elementary, where there was a pool, and they loved it. They swam for the fun of it and competed with each other, trying to best each other's record. Lau was the better swimmer, and by no coincidence the taller one as well, though there had been a period between 3rd and 4th grade that they were equal in height. When they left J.Q. Upper, a pool was not so readily available, and Lau had all but quit by the 10th grade, citing his need to focus on studies, having decided to go pre-med when the time came. But Su kept it up at the Y. As it turned out, O'Brien started volunteering at the nurse's office during her study periods and was helpful when Su went in with a bleeding nose. She gave him an ice pack, a wet

wipe for the dried blood, and helped Su sign in when the adrenaline from the bleeding shook his hand uncontrollably.

Yes, Su agreed with Wu that Chan was an asshole and that this whole thing was stupid but so was Mahoney. After the fight, Chan and Mahoney were suspended, and it didn't take long for the news to spread, of Chan getting his ass kicked, of Mahoney prevailing. The talk of retaliation came soon after, but now that their suspension was over, Chan was nowhere to be found.

Su had been sitting at the far end of the cafeteria when clusters of people crowded together, chanting "fight, fight, fight," as the noise echoed across the high ceilings, deepening the chaos of it all. Su heard the rumors of what had happened, how it happened, but none of that mattered at this point. After the fight, Su caught a glimpse of Chan and Mahoney getting marched to the headmaster's office by hall monitors. Mahoney was red as all hell. Chan was red too, his glasses were missing, and his face was covered in either sweat, or tears. Yes, Chan was a dick, but Su couldn't shake the bit of respect that had formed from taking on Mahoney alone. Even if he did lose.

Lin and Mok joined Fong and Leung on the platform, though they stood a bit further down. The platform was getting crowded but there was still enough space for all four to stand together. Fong wasn't sure whether they were in or out. Lin and Mok were always together. Both had been in the same year as Fong and Leung but were held back, and had to repeat the 10th grade. Playing too much hooky. Fong wasn't sure why Leung was still here either, wasn't sure he had ever been in a fight, but didn't care enough to tell him otherwise. Hell, Fong wasn't even sure if anything would happen, since Chan was nowhere to be found. Last time they talked was at Yip's house,

the day of the fight. Chan was running his mouth, saying he was going to get his Quincy boys together. Fong didn't like Chan, thought he was a douche. Chan had borrowed his VCD of *A Man Called Hero*, the first edition, had scratched the disc and lent it to Yip without telling him. Fong found out only after badgering Chan for the fifteenth fucking time. Fong didn't mind Yip. They were old friends, both lived in Chinatown, had played pick-up basketball together since they were twelve, but had drifted apart after they got into different high schools. Fong's parents were friends with Yip's mother, though they pitied her behind her back. The father died in a car accident when Yip just was a baby.

Fong and Yip still talked on occasion. Five months back, while Fong was ordering at a café, he caught sight of Yip at the church across the street. In fact, he had run into Yip inside the café as well. They chatted about the usual stuff, TV, video games, movies. Yip's demeanor was different. Different how? Just different. They were waiting in a long line, the midday rush, and, after a silence, Yip told Fong about an event his church was having. Live music, free food, and fun games to play. Yip started playing guitar a year ago, showed Fong his calluses, and was going to be playing at the event. Fong politely declined.

When Fong went to Yip's place to pick up his VCD, Chan was there, watching the disc, nearing the end of the movie, and, upon reaching the end, went to play it from the beginning. Fong ejected the disc, and Chan threw a hissy fit. Chan was a fake, lived in cushy Quincy, but always hung around Chinatown, boasted about knowing so and so, and this and that. Chan knew shit. And Fong wondered why Yip let Chan hang around him so much. Yip was level-headed, though he was turning into one of those church kids if not already one. He held a certain brand of loyalty that Fong recognized, and that Fong himself had. Chan was a faker. Fong knew

this. Yip had to too. But they were all Chinese, and it seemed right to stick together. Perhaps Yip came to that same conclusion.

Fong was late on the day of the fight and didn't see any of it. He made it to homeroom before the bell, but rumors were flying even before then. Those who were there swore they saw everything. Rodriguez said that it was over a girl, that Chan had been leering at Hogarty, and everybody knew that Mahoney had a thing for her. Nguyen said that it had to do with Swanson getting knifed two weeks back. Bullshit. After school let out, Fong went to Yip's apartment and found Chan there, slamming about how he almost had Mahoney down, if only the monitors hadn't pulled them apart. A large swell near his hairline had formed where Mahoney had hit him. It started to color as well. Chan reenacted the scene, only giving the details that stroked his butt-hurt ego. Mahoney had backed into Chan while he was drinking milk, and the milk had spilled on Chan. That was how it started.

A train lumbered down the street and halted the stream of high schoolers that were pouring onto the platform. It split the stream in two and those who got to the platform on time squeezed out of the way as the train pulled in. Some were dangerously close to the train's steel body as it moved into place. When the doors opened, the high schoolers poured in, pushing and pushing. The narrowness of the platform betrayed itself. Fong got a call from Chan. Chan said he was on his way, that he had gotten his people together, and that they were ready to fuck up those white boys. Fong didn't know how to feel. The train pulled out of the station and continued its descent down Huntington Avenue. Fong, Leung, Lin, and Mok remained on the platform.

Mok didn't want to be on the platform, but Lin had convinced him to stay, assured him if it got too hot that they would hop the rail and jump in a bus. The talk of retaliation had spread even to the 10th grade, though the stake was lower for them. Before they got on the platform, Mok warned if he got into trouble again that it would be Lin's fault. Lin had suspected that Mok held a grudge against him, that Mok blamed Lin for getting caught at truancy, but Mok had a will of his own. Lin didn't put a gun to his head. It had started out innocent, shaving off a class here and there, but, before they knew it, they ditched before homeroom bell even rang. Three months went by and teachers noticed, parents were called, and the rest was history. Mok complained how embarrassing it was to have his father visit the school, who nearly threatened to transfer Mok out. Lin wanted to tell him to fuck off, was sure that Mok told the headmaster, their teachers, his parents, everyone that it was Lin's idea.

Mok lived in Dover, the suburbs, and Lin took him for a wuss because of it. His parents were rich enough to rent an apartment in the city, for its address, so Mok could attend their school. Mok was a nut for electronics, and had a PDA, a WonderSwan, a TI-89. Lin was jealous but only over his dead body would he ever admit that to Mok.

Lin lived in Southie, close to the projects along Carson beach, and was the oldest of three boys. His parents worked all the time. His mother at a textile factory in Woburn, and his father as a line cook all over. When Lin was in junior high, he walked his brothers all the way to Denver Elementary before bussing to his own school in Dorchester. They were harassed all the time by a group of neighborhood white boys, chanting "ching chong," making slanted eyes with their fingers. Lin kept his mouth shut like his mother taught him. She repeated the same three phrases to him and his brothers. "Keep your mouth shut," "Keep your head down," and, most

importantly, “Don’t fight back.” But Lin lost it when one of them spat on his youngest brother. The kid was bigger than Lin but the kid was on the ground in seconds, his friends stood frozen around them. When Mahoney pounded on Chan, Lin was in the midst of it. He ran to get the monitors, helped them pull Mahoney and Chan apart, and found Chan’s glasses and brought them to the headmaster’s office. The sight of a bigger person wailing on someone smaller really ticked Lin off. Mahoney desired what was coming to him. It was the only way he’d learn, like the kid who spat on Lin’s brother. Lin tried to explain this to Mok, but it seemed impossible for him to understand.

The after school rush was in full swing, and, even though a train had just passed, the platform remained tight. Some hopped the rail, crossing the street, when they saw an approaching bus. Cars caught off guard, jerked their brakes and honked at the high schoolers’ rash stupidity. Lau and Su came up the other street and joined Fong and the others on the platform. The six young men stood together.

“Chan’s on his way.”

“Is that for real or a guess?”

“Who the hell knows.”

“Has anyone even seen Mahoney?”

“Yeah, we saw him at his locker. Should be coming soon. He always takes the train home.”

“What if he ain’t going home?”

“Well, fuck.”

“I think I’m gonna get going.”

“Just stay a sec. Would it kill you to wait a second? There’s no guarantee it’s gonna happen anyway.”

“It’s going to happen.”

“Go if you want. Six is plenty.”

“What about McNamara? O’Malley? Kirkpatrick?”

“Six ain’t enough.”

“Chan’s bringing his people.”

“Ha. *His* people.”

“Would you all shut the fuck up? It’s going to happen. If you’re a pussy, just get the fuck out of here. Enough said.”

“This is really really stupid. I’m not getting my ass kicked for Chan.”

“Then fucking leave. No one’s got a gun to your head.”

“I might go.”

“I’m staying.”

“Me too.”

“You’re staying?”

A train pulled in from the opposite direction, and they all went quiet. Chan got off the train with two older kids that the six did not recognize. Chan and his two friends crossed the tracks and joined the six on the platform.

“Sup, fellas?”

“These the homeboys you’ve been talking about?”

“Watch your mouth.”

“Fuck you.”

“Yo, chill. Keep the eye on the prize. Remember what we’re here for. To protect my rep!”

“Ha, your rep.”

Mahoney started up the street toward the platform. He was with McNamara, Kirkpatrick, O’Malley, and O’Brien. O’Malley was lugging his hockey bag full of gear, and McNamara carried his shoulder pads in one hand and his football helmet in the other. Mahoney was doing a dance and made O’Brien laugh. The nine young men watched. Lau remembered Wu’s words, how this whole thing was all stupid, and Lau agreed that it was. A second train approached from down the street. Mahoney and the others waited at the stoplight for the walk sign to come on, not noticing the nine young men on the other side. The train pulled into the station and onto the platform. The walk sign came on. And the doors of the train swung open.

“Everything I Want to Say but Nothing You Will Ever Hear”

This was how we met.

Two years ago, at the end of our freshmen year, she stood by a wall staring at “Legs” with a poppy seed cracker and a slice of smoked Gouda between her two fingers. Her body leaned into my painting. Unashamed of her gawking, she wore these risky jean shorts and flaunted hair that I wanted to touch so badly.

“You like the painting?” I asked.

“Hmmm,” she said, drawn out. She kept her eyes on the painting, which was behind Plexiglas. She stuffed the cheese and cracker into her mouth, licked the residue from her fingers and kept one finger to her lip. “These are your legs?” she asked.

“Do you like them?”

“What are these splotches?” The finger that had been on her lip touched the Plexiglas and made a smudge.

“Bruises, I guess.”

“You’re not sure?”

“No, I am.”

“Bruises on legs?”

“Yes.” I shrugged.

“Why cut off the painting like this? Why not show the whole person? Or the rest of the lower body at least.”

“Maybe it’s a metaphor.”

“For?”

“Her life. This is the part of her life worth showing, worth talking about. This hurt she’s going through. These bruises.” I wanted to shrug again. My hand followed the perimeter of the painting. “This is what defines her life right now.”

For the first time she looks at me. Her body twisted toward me; her cheese finger back on her lip. “You’re so full of shit,” she said.

“Maybe.”

She said nothing else and turned back toward the painting. I wanted her to keep talking; I asked her for her name.

“Caddy with two d’s.”

“Your parents really into golfing?” I laughed; she smiled politely before returning to the painting again. I told her my name was Amelia.

“I know,” she said. “It’s here on the label. But you look more like an Amy.”

“What’s an Amy supposed to look like?”

“Like you,” she said.

In the morning, after our first night in Seattle, before I opened my eyes, I heard her packing: clothes getting stuffed into a bag, hangers dragging along the closet pole. The window was open; the air was cool and wet. The sky was probably gray. I heard the bag’s zipper pull shut and the door slam.

When I was sure she was gone, I got up and looked at the empty room, empty bottles, energy bar wrappers, my clothes, clean and dirty, on the carpet, and the bed I was still on. I went

to the window, hoping to see her one more time. But she was gone. This was what we agreed upon the night before, what she wanted, what I conceded to, what we had to do.

We got into Seattle too late and too tired to do anything. We made it to the bed and breakfast by light rail, and bus, and some walking. We found a Safeway and got bottled water, energy bars, and two boxes of wine that were on sale, and went back to the room. We put on Amy Winehouse's *Back to Black* album and fucked to "You Know I'm No Good," "Love Is a Losing Game," and finished on "Tears Dry on Their Own."

Afterward, we lay in bed, not looking at each other.

"I can't do this anymore," Caddy said.

I rolled away, knowing what was coming. She didn't move. The mattress was dead still. I wanted to tell her not to leave, throw some kind of tantrum. Instead, I said fine; not what I wanted to say, but I couldn't correct myself. I couldn't think straight; all I could see was Caddy leaving right then and there. I pleaded with her to stay through the night.

"Understand this is what we need to do, right?"

I didn't, but I said yes. I said yes, because this was what she wanted to hear, and, in my head, if I answered everything correctly then maybe she would change her mind.

"I'll leave in the morning," she said.

She didn't say anything more; she did not move. I squeezed my eyes shut, not letting anything in, and I listened to her breath, calm and steady. How could she be so calm and steady? I lay awake, staying still as not to disturb what little we had left, and hoped the night didn't end. The window was open, but neither of us got up to shut it.

Before Seattle, I took Caddy to my house for dinner, for what I boasted as authentic Chinese food. She met my mother, father, and little brother. We had been dating for a few months, but I chickened out at the last minute and introduced Caddy as a friend. I had said it in Cantonese, but my little brother translated everything that I had said, and, at the table, Caddy didn't talk to me.

My mother, speaking in her fiery Cantonese way, pointed at my beehive, about how ridiculous I looked and how it was a nest done up by a blind bird. She waved her hands in grand gestures, pantomiming. She ended the performance by shaking her head and sucking her teeth. She would wait a minute before repeating it all. My father explained each dish in his broken English, Caddy nodded, but mostly watched my mother flaring on. Caddy leaned toward my brother and asked for a translation.

“Exactly what you think,” he whispered.

Inevitably, my mother brought up the name of a boy I used to date, the one they liked to refer to as “the nice boy who's just a little fat.” It didn't sound as bad when said in Cantonese, though it should. When I translated this to Caddy, she glared at my mother. Caddy knew whom she was referring to, and, even though she didn't say anything to me, found my hand under the table and held it.

After dinner, we hid in my brother's room. It didn't seem smart to go to mine. We watched *Ashes of Time*, a movie my brother and I had watched a billion times. He enjoyed the sword fighting, and I enjoyed the melodrama. With the door closed, the room was hot as hell, but we had no choice with my parents poking around. On the screen, Brigitte Lin drunkenly studied a birdcage, and upon seeing another character, mistook him for another man, whom she loved.

Lin begged him to tell her that she was the one he loved the most, and I started sobbing. “She does this every time,” my brother told Caddy. I bawled so hard I started to hiccup and my nose started to run. I covered my face but Caddy pulled my hand away and gave me a peck on the cheek.

I moved into Caddy’s apartment in Allston, after one of her roommates moved out. A decent enough place, but BU kids kept tossing their beer cans into our front yard. We lived with another girl, whose boyfriend was always eating my Cocoa Puffs. The boyfriend rarely talked to me. After he asked what my name was on three separate occasions and where I was from on four, I snapped at him. Now he avoided me altogether but still kept eating my Cocoa Puffs.

Caddy and I liked to take the bus over the river to Harvard Square. We went to Brattle Theatre and watched a Wong Kar-Wai marathon. I knew my hair would no doubt block someone’s view, but I insisted on sitting close to the front. I got annoyed at the subtitles, the subtle meanings that were lost in the translation, and the sometimes gross oversimplification. I told Caddy how in love I was with the scene of Leslie Cheung leaning on Tony’s shoulder in *Happy Together*. I tried the same move on Caddy on our way home. But we were on a bus, not a taxi; and she shrugged my head off, or the bus hit a bump, and my ear banged on her shoulder. I gave up. “It’s not the same as in the movie,” I said. She didn’t understand why I was upset. I thought I was perfectly clear.

I apologized for canceling the two other nights we had booked and asked if the B&B owner knew of any cheap places in the area to stay. He wrote an address on a paper bag and gave me

rough directions that I immediately forgot. He repeated it two more times after seeing the look on my face. He looked like a Santa Claus. Before I left, he insisted on packing a breakfast for me. In the paper bag he wrote the address on, he put in a bagel, single-serving cream cheese and orange marmalade, and a raspberry Danish.

I walked downhill, following the route of the bus Caddy and I took the night before. It was hard discerning the same landmarks in the daytime. I found Madison Street. Along the way I ate half the bagel, drank some coffee, and helped a couple take a picture with a Jimi Hendrix statue that was oddly placed in front of Blick Art.

The Pike Market, where crowds of tourists watched men toss fish to each other, didn't seem all that special; seemed dull even. The tourists gawked at the spectacle, stood open-mouthed, in their khaki shorts, pale legs and oversized straw hats. The way it appeared on TV made it seem like more was happening than mere men tossing dead fish to each other, that the act also possessed some kind of indecipherable magic. It did not.

I sat in a small park by the water where many homeless lingered. I lit a cigarette with my zippo, a year old gift from Caddy, and watched the ships on Puget Sound. A few times, I turned back to the market, hoping to see Caddy pass by, hoping for her head on my shoulder, hoping for her to tell me this breakup business was stupid and that we should just have fun while we were here. I would give her the Danish, and we'd watch the ships together.

Caddy liked to read while we ate. One hand holding a novel or a book of short stories, the other a fork or a spoon, and me left to my own devices. If we were at a café, we would look like two strangers sharing a table. She hardly spoke to me during these times. Sometimes it felt like she

was playing a game of how long she could ignore me until I said something. And when I would complain, she would twist it back to me and would somehow make me feel guilty about it all.

Caddy was really good at this.

I guess I couldn't fault her entirely, because I didn't talk much during those times, either. I did like to watch her. I watched her like I watched animals in a nature documentary. When she ate, there was a grace to it. Her lips seemed autonomous like a prehensile tail; it moved like a free muscle or limb that picked up bits of food that strayed from her fork to her face. She would fold napkins to equilateral triangles and dab the corners of her mouth. She would hold food in her mouth, forget to chew, only to resume long after.

Sometimes she didn't speak to me for hours, for days, even. I would talk about how the Green Line was packed, how utter bullshit my art classes were, then I'd stop and realize that she had not said even one word. She talked only when she wanted to talk. And nothing I ever said or did would ever change that.

We spent hours, using blue and black ballpoint pens, drawing on each other. The drawings went on for the entire length of our limbs, filling arms and backs and legs with botched imitations of *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, the *Triptych of the Temptation of St. Anthony*, and other paintings we found in my art books.

In a day the ink already started to fade and smudge. I was sure I looked ridiculous, but I didn't care. It got on the insides of my shirt, underwear, jeans—everywhere except the place I wanted it to stay.

After the first time we met, I ran into her again at my end of the semester gallery show, at a Cambridge gallery in Harvard Square. I imagined that she was there for the wine and cheese, but she came right up to me and said, “Found you.”

We talked behind the gallery, sitting on the steps of a closed crepe shop. We escaped the show for a cigarette and relief from the increasing noise. We talked long after the wine was gone, long after the show ended, long after the gallery closed. “I wish the crepe place was still open,” I said.

“Crepes are disgusting.”

“They’re heaven.”

We were sitting close enough for our knees to touch. It was late but I didn’t care. Maybe I was fascinated that someone wanted to hear what I had to say. Maybe I liked the feeling of being heard rather than being told to shut up.

“It’s late,” I said.

“We should try something.”

I asked what she wanted to try, then she kissed me.

“You’re nervous,” she whispered and reached behind my ear. I couldn’t answer. Our lips came together again, staying. She moved a lock of my hair away from my face to behind my ear. She played with my earring, gave it a few gentle tugs. Her other hand reached behind my neck. Her fingers were strong. She took my upper lip between her teeth.

“You like to bite?” I whispered.

“Am I biting?”

“I mean, ‘use’ teeth?”

“Shush.”

“Nibbling?” I offered. “Is that more accurate?”

“Just enjoy it.” She massaged my neck, moved her tongue into my mouth.

“I don’t know how to talk sexy.”

“Shhh.”

“Should I stop talking?”

“Yes.”

“I’m sorry.”

For midterm critique, a guy in my printmaking class put up a series of eleven prints. The black-and-white print showed a woman, unabashed and unaware, walking away from the viewer to a far-off focal point. Her short skirt was lifted by a wind, far enough for the viewer to see her underwear, and transposed over the peek of her underwear was a splotch of red, the only color on the print. The figure of the woman was more or less the same throughout the eleven prints, but the pot of red was different in each. One looked like a splattered bug, another a stemless rose, another a fuzzy dodgeball. The guy explained his process of adding the red ink to the plate before rolling it through the press. The resulting shape of the red spot was out of his control.

The class tore him apart. Questions of subject appropriation arose; whether a man could bring anything of substance to the subject of menstruation, whether he had a right to even engage with it. There were controlled accusations of sensationalization. Some classmates came close to, but stopped short of, calling him a pervert. I kept quiet the entire time. It looked like the

guy wanted to cry, he seemed to be that kind of a guy, like a little lost puppy. In a way I wanted to lay his head on my lap and stroke his hair, telling him it was going to be all right.

Caddy and I took a seat on the bus. She pulled out a pack of Tic Tacs, put it to her lips and let a few drop in. She sucked on them. The bus went up Brighton Avenue and took a turn at Cambridge Street, heading to Brattle Theatre, for another marathon.

“Can I get some?” I asked.

She handed me the box, and I put it to my palm and tapped the end. I snapped the lid shut and looked at the back label.

“Sugar, maltodextrin, tartaric acid. Artificial flavors, gum arabic—”

“Will you stop?”

“I’m just reading.”

“Stop.”

I handed them back, and she dumped it into her bag. I placed a Tic Tac in my mouth and sucked on it the same as she did. She looked out the window. The trees were in full green.

“Mm, tasty gum arabic and artificial flavors.”

“Why didn’t we walk?” she asked.

“The bus take us right there.”

“How long would the walk have been?”

“Twenty-five minutes probably.”

“That’s not that long. I hate the bus,” she said.

“The bus is a fine mode of transportation. I don’t mind taking the bus.”

“Then take the bus all the way to school.”

“The train is faster.”

“I thought you said you don’t mind taking the bus.”

“Not when you can take the train.”

“I don’t like the bus. It stops too much. It gets crowded.”

“It’s a bus,” I said.

“Exactly.”

We were silent for a moment.

“Do you ever wonder what the hell we’re doing?” I asked.

“All the time,” she said.

“All the time?”

“All the time.”

“I wish I had a car.”

“So get one.”

“What?”

“So get one,” she said.

“Okay, I’ll just stop off at the local dealer and put down a bunch of money I don’t have.”

“We need to get milk on the way back,” she said.

“You don’t drink milk.”

“And you don’t have a car. What’s your point?”

“Do you like this? What we’re doing here? You’re happy where all this is going?”

“I’m not unhappy.”

“But you’re not happy?”

“Does it matter?”

“Yes. Yes, it matters.”

“I’m happy sometimes,” she said.

During lab hours I cornered him, the guy who made the series of prints that the class now referred to as “the menstrual eleven.” I asked him how it felt to be grilled, tempted to say railed.

He laughed and tipped his head. “Not great.”

I asked him what gave him the idea.

He shrugged. “I don’t know. It felt like something I wanted to do.”

“Do what? Work people up?”

“There was an attempt to sensationalize.”

“Yeah.”

“But really, they were images I just wanted to tackle. Can’t say I did a good job of it.”

“Some of them are interesting.”

“You can have one if you want.”

He laid out all eleven for me to choose. In one print, the red spot looked like a splattered mosquito. It reminded me of my brother, when we were young and went on mosquito hunting rampages after a night of getting bitten. We tightly rolled newspapers into clubs, scanned the beige walls for the resting insects and flattened them. Sometimes they left dry, black smears; other times, if a mosquito had its fill, left a splat of blood on the wall. I hung the print on my

wall. Caddy hated it, calling it perverse and ripe with the male gaze. When I refused to take it down, we had a big fight, and she stopped spending nights in my room.

I started to wear my hair like Amy Winehouse, in a beehive. I watched videos of her live performances. She looked sad and beautiful, and had hair so magnificent that, if I could only touch it, it would solve all of life's problems.

My hair wasn't long enough, and the beehive came out much smaller. I searched online for potential wigs but they all looked fake. I resigned to my smaller real version and spent an hour each morning keeping it up, and my mother never let me hear the end of it. She kept on about how ridiculous I looked; it didn't matter. She could talk all she wanted. I turned on the blow dryer, drowning her out, telling myself that, if I ever had a daughter, I would never call her the things she called me.

After the dinner at my house, I walked Caddy to the train station. My mother told my brother to go along, because it was that kind of neighborhood, and he did. He walked up front. It was dark, but I should have known. Caddy and I held hands the moment my mother closed the door. I should have known my mother would be watching from the window. I should have known the darkness wasn't enough to hide the things between Caddy and I.

I spent the night at a hostel in Downtown, Seattle, on the top bunk of a female-only room, right near the Pike Market. I got in late. The lady at the counter said that I would be sharing with two sisters. The room was empty when I settled in, and I crawled into bed. In the morning one of the

sisters peered into my bunk and asked if I wanted to visit the Space Needle with them. I said, yes.

They asked for my name. On impulse, I told them Amy. Theirs was Trisha and Jenna. Trisha was a sophomore, and Jenna was a junior, and they were taking the semester off to find themselves. I laughed on the inside.

Caddy was arranging books on her shelf. I sat on her bed and watched. Every book had its place. Hardcover and oversized on the bottom, where the shelf was taller. Paperbacks on the top, ordered by genre then alphabet. The very top shelf was left empty of all except three books: a 1967 reprint of *Dubliners*, a hardcover copy of *The Complete Poem of W.B. Yeats*, and a first edition copy of *Waiting for Godot*.

“You’ll need another shelf soon.”

She checked the three books to make sure they were okay.

“They look fine,” I said. “Did your mother really give those to you? Must be nice to have a mother like that.”

Caddy put the books on the top shelf, and sat next to me on the bed. She took my chin in her hand and looked me over.

“Just a tiny scratch,” she said.

“We should go away for the summer.”

“Don’t move.” She got a tube of concealer from a drawer.

“How about Ireland?” I tried not to move; she dabbed a bit on her finger and gently worked it over the scratch. “Probably not Ireland, though,” I said. “Sounds expensive.”

“Why Ireland?”

“You could show me around. Don’t you have family there? You can introduce me to them.”

“Just distant cousins.”

“I’d love to meet them.”

She finished with the concealer and gave it two quick blows. “Why?”

“I don’t know. It wouldn’t be as weird as meeting your parents.”

She reached for a small hand mirror and showed me her work. “Why do you want to travel all of a sudden?”

“It’d be fun. We could find ourselves.”

“I don’t need to find myself.”

Caddy pushed my arms off her shoulders.

“What do you want from me?” she asked.

“To be with you.”

“Are you even happy?”

I shook my head.

She stayed quiet for a long time and gave me a look that said more than anything that could be put to words, and it killed me to receive it this way, to understand, to realize that it was over. What we had, then and now, had run its course.

I took off Caddy’s arms from around my waist.

“Fuck off.”

She laughed, went into a spasm of laughter and giggles; she felt her forehead and belly as it convulsed. “There really is something wrong with you.”

I threw all my pillows across the room, then my blankets, then my sketchbooks.

“Are you done? Is it all out of your system?”

She hugged my waist again, and I broke away and shoved her to the bed and backed away. She lay there, her hands on her forehead again, laughing like it was a game we were playing.

“I feel sorry for you,” she said.

“I don’t need you to feel sorry for me. I can feel sorry for myself.”

The bones in Caddy’s back arched up like hilltops. A bit of fat gathered at her wings as I worked the base of my palm into her skin, down to the bone; first at her shoulder blades, then upper back, then middle spine. I imagined my hands breaking the invisible knots that had tightened under the surface of her body. She told me not to stop.

“My mother did this back in Hong Kong,” I said.

“She was a masseuse?”

“A hair washer,” I said. “At the salons over there you get full treatment. Neck rubs, back rubs. All while they washed and dried your hair. Her hands used to get so stiff my father had to rub them back to life.”

“She taught you?”

“Well, I just watched. It was a long time ago.”

Caddy always wanted to visit the Space Needle ever since seeing *Sleepless in Seattle* as a little girl. Meg Ryan was her first crush and that was when she knew she wasn't like everyone else. We had been drinking when the subject came up. When it was my turn to share, I said my first crush was Leslie Cheung. When she found out that Leslie was, in fact, a man, her attitude seemed to change. I briefly entertained the thought of doing my hair like Meg Ryan.

Secretly I called my brother. Secretly because he was not supposed to talk to me anyone. When he picked up and realized it was I, he asked me to hold. I imagined him finding a corner or stepping outside the house, to avoid eavesdropping. He fed me what information he had, what Mom and Dad was doing, what they were saying to each other. I asked if they talked about me, and what they talked about when they talked about me, if they even bothered to talk about me. He answered no to each one.

I went with the sisters to the Space Needle in hopes of running into Caddy. The Space Needle itself was surprisingly small, but the area around it was enormous. We wandered the park and came across a big concrete pit, where jets of water shot up into the air. Children played and laughed. The sister and I watched the sunset from the top of the Space Needle. Our feet were tired from the walking. When the sisters asked if I was ready to go, I hesitated.

“I think I'll stay for a little.”

“Why?” one of the sisters asked.

“So Caddy can find me like Tom Hanks found Meg Ryan.”

“Have you ever watched the movie?”

“It’s been a while.”

“The Empire State Building was where they meet again, not the Space Needle.”

Caddy’s hand started at my knee and moved along the top of my thigh and worked under the skin. She turned to the inner thigh where I clamped against the oncoming fingers. This was the first time she touched me this way. It felt good and weird at the same time.

Good as in the first time I let a boy sleep with me. He didn’t care much about what I wanted, but I let him do what he wanted, because he was a much better painter than I was. He seemed surprised when I enjoyed myself, because it was my first time, and, I suspected, his first time as well. “Isn’t it supposed to hurt?” I didn’t talk to him again after that.

Weird as in the second grade when a boy grabbed my crotch under the drawbridge at the playground, behind the swirling slide. No one saw it; we were in a blind spot for every single adult around us. He stared back at me, as if wondering what my crotch was doing on his hand. He took his hand away and ran, leaving me empty inside, as if my body wasn’t my own anymore. I convinced myself it was an accident. I made myself believe it was an accident, because that was the only way I could regain myself.

This was how our first time together felt. Good and weird.

Caddy hit me across the face.

I returned her books to her. Her room was piled with stacks of books that teetered the height of her desk. Each tower was nestled into clusters. Her four shelves were filled to the brim.

Stacked sideways, double shelved, lined in rows. She took the books without a word and combed through them.

“One of the pages ripped when I—”

She hit me across the face, and I fell into the books on her floor; I put up my hands, and I shrank into a corner as fast as I could. I’m sorry. I’m sorry. I’m sorry. I kept repeating. I got louder and louder until I couldn’t breathe, until I was choked, until I couldn’t form words anymore.

Whenever Caddy apologized, she used a mocking tone—a vaguely familiar contempt bred from playgroundish, childish conflicts. “Well, soooorry. Lighten up.” Still, she gave me a peck on my cheek and sometimes my nose, then I rolled away to my left, always the left, and the argument ended there. This was what she did all the time. This was how every argument ended. She never said sorry, a genuine sorry. Not now, not ever.

When I found my menstrual print gone, I threw a full tantrum. Screaming, crying, pounding the bed, pounding the wall. I lost. I was totally gone. Caddy ran into the room and said something I didn’t completely hear. Something like what what what! Over and over again. I continued pounding the wall where the print hung and I kept pounding until my fists turned red, until they went numb. Caddy watched me do this to myself. She did nothing. My hands were shaking. I stopped. I fell into the wall and onto the bare floor. I looked at my reddened hands, holding them gently together. Caddy looked down at me. “Are you ready to use words now?”

“Just tell me if you did it or not,” I said.

“I don’t even know what you’re talking about.”

“You’re lying.”

“You really need to grow up. You’re acting like a child.”

“You’re acting like a child.”

“I’m not the one who just pounded the wall until their hands broke.”

“They’re not broken. You are.”

“I’m gonna go back to my room now. Good luck finding that perverted print.”

“You did take it! Why would you do this to me?”

“Because.”

“It’s special to me,” I said. “Have you ever thought of that? Have you ever thought to put your opinions aside and consider someone else’s for a change?” I curled into a ball. She may have said other things, but I didn’t listen. I stayed in my ball until she left.

Caddy pushed open the door to my room. I was lying in bed, scrawling in my sketchbook. She stood in the center, feet planted firmly on the floorboards.

“Can’t you knock?” I swept my pencil’s tip across the page, making grand and elegant but superficial lines.

“What the fuck is wrong with you?”

I laughed.

“Look at me when I’m talking to you.”

“You’re missing something?” I closed the sketchbook, leaned on my elbow. “Something important to you?”

“They were my mother’s.”

“Isn’t it funny? How things just go missing?”

“Give. Them. Back.”

“I. Don’t. Have. Them.”

She moved to the other side of the room, walking the perimeter. She tipped a large canvas that had been leaning against a shelf, until it fell to the floor. She extended her arm and let its momentum knock three cans of paintbrushes, sending them sprawling to the desk, to the chair, to the floor.

My mother confronted me about my relationship with Caddy. I told her the truth, and we screamed. My Cantonese was not good enough to explain what I wanted to explain, and her English was not good enough to understand what she needed to understand. So we screamed at each other with sounds that ended up being incoherent. To me, to her, my brother, my father. Everyone.

I gave up. I stuffed what I could into a backpack and headed out the door. I stayed with Caddy in her Allston apartment, in her room, until one of her roommates moved out, and I officially moved in. For weeks after, my brother snuck things out of my room, whatever he could fit in his gym bag, and delivered them to me.

Caddy made dinner and asked me to come home early. Canned clams, white wine sauce, and macaroni elbows, a recipe she learned when we started dating those first few weeks. We ate qui-

etly. “Thanks,” I said, and went back to my room. She followed. I sat on the bed. She sat behind me, put her arms around my waist, placed her ear to my back and listened to my heartbeat.

The sisters took me to a club on Capitol Hill, a place called “Cassidy’s.” I could’ve sworn they said Caddy’s. They offered to do my hair. I asked if they could redo it like Meg Ryan. “When-Harry-Met-Sally Meg Ryan, You’ve-Got-Mail Meg Ryan, or Sleepless-in-Seattle Meg Ryan?”

Some guys approached me and asked me to dance or offered to buy me a drink—some people were desperate, I guess. I didn’t dance. Even though I only just met the sisters, I felt the need to protect their drinks while they were on the dance floor. That was the excuse I used. I didn’t dance, and I needed to watch these drinks.

“Why aren’t you dancing?” one of the sisters asked. “You’re not having fun?”

“I am. But I don’t dance and—”

“Get out there,” she said.

“I need another drink.”

I pushed my way to the bar and tried to make eye contact with one of the bartenders. I spotted someone farther down that looked like Caddy. She was talking and laughing with strange people that I didn’t know. The light was dim, and I couldn’t be sure. I kept staring at her until her eyes met with mine. I looked away. I went back to the table. The sisters were out on the floor again. “It wasn’t Caddy.” The sister’s drinks, a Cosmo and a Manhattan, were still there. I drank them down to the bottom, to protect the sisters. I moved to the door. That wasn’t Caddy. I left the club, went down the street, and around the corner. I skipped the bus and, instead, walked the

whole way back to the hostel. It was night, and I was drunk, and that person that I saw wasn't Caddy.

When I got back to the hostel, I changed out of the sisters' dress that they had lent me. I folded it the way my mother would have. I wrote a sappy note and placed it on top. I called home from a phone in the lobby. My mother answered. She kept saying "hello," and I said nothing. "I don't know who it is. No one is talking," she said to someone. The phone changed hands. "Hello?" It was my father.

"Dad?"

He stiffened, took in heavy breaths. My mother mumbled something. "No one," he said, "Wait a minute." The phone clicked and went silent. After a moment, the phone clicked and came back to life. "Amelia?"

My voice cracked. "I want to come home," I said. He was silence, listening. I tried to disguise my crumbling voice as a sore throat, hoping that it was convincing, hoping for a brief moment that I might be understood.

On my first birthday with Caddy, before Seattle, before everything, we sat on the window sill in my room. I was smoking, playing with the zippo lighter she had gotten me, mirror polished and engraved. *As you are now so once we were.* She drank bourbon and soda water from a sippy cup, which I gave her for Christmas, with colorful octopuses that looked like chubby babies. She mused how you can't get a hangover from really well crafted bourbon, then told me not to smoke too much.

“Why’d you get me a lighter then?”

“You’re an adult. You make your own choices.”

“Adult. I like the sound of that.”

A breeze came through the window. The faint light of street lamps reflected back on the half-gessoed canvas leaning against the opposite wall. There was a blue hue to the room.

“Isn’t there something special we can do?”

“We can fool around again,” she said.

“That’s not what I mean.”

“Let’s dance.”

“I don’t feel like going out.”

“No. That’s not what I mean.”

She took my unfinished cigarette and, reaching out the window, snubbed it against the side of the building. She took me by the hand and pulled me up. Here, she said and put my hand on her waist. We moved slowly into each other. I smelled the oil in her hair. We circled around in the small space of my room. It was awkward, unsynced, and we laughed. Then our bodies started to move together. My feet made small steps. The apartment was quiet. Our roommate and her boyfriend disappeared for the night, as their gift. The window was wide open. The sound of people walking on the street, the traffic, the trolley cars off Brighton Avenue seemed muted. It was only the two of us, moving in circles, slowly slipping our hands to softer places, holding each other like babies. My hands moved to her upper back. Hers moved toward my hip, where she gave a gentle squeeze. My nose was at her ear. She heard my every breath, and I heard hers. There was no music. There was no talk. Only ourselves, only our bodies.

“Happy Valley”

Paul Sung

I.

Pinkie and I found a gap that led to a narrow path through the reeds that brought us to a hidden clearing. The clearing looked out toward the Muddy River, past the Gardner Museum, the Museum of Fine Arts, just before the Boylston Street bridge that headed to Fenway Park. It was a real place. The clearing had a mottled blue-gray blanket, the kind given to the homeless, and a few dozen or so empty nip bottles. Pinkie and I found this place and it was real.

Pinkie had parents he could steal from and got his name from the Benadryl that he carried with him in Ziploc bags, which he told me were Pez candies when we first met. He said it was for his allergies. The allergies were a lie. His parents started giving them to him to make him docile and manageable because of the way Pinkie used to get sometimes. He didn't care anymore that it was a lie; he repeated it to anyone who asked him about his Benadryl. He always said that lies could turn into truth if you held onto them long enough. Before that, he used to say that you could make yourself believe anything if you repeated it enough times. Pinkie hated his parents.

We drank, hidden among the reeds, under the daylight of the skyline, in the middle of Back Bay, Boston. “A little bit here and a little bit there” was what Pinkie liked to say when he was pouring. “More here and more here” was what I liked to say. We split our time between the reeds and the MIT campus. It was almost summer and everyone was nearly gone, and anyone left didn't give a shit. We roamed the empty halls of all the buildings, found giant bins along the cor-

ridors filled with dissertations with titles like “Random Error Models in Quantum Error Correction” and “Decycling Density of Tessellations.” We took what we could carry and burned them in the clearing hidden in the reeds. The pages blackened, curled like scorched hairs, then broke away in fine layers of white-gray ash. A column of smoke billowed straight into the sky.

The woman tied back Tia’s hair, using a hair tie, to form a ponytail. She pushed back the hair tie as tight as she could. Tia flinched, looked away from her image in the mirror, to the floor.

Strands of different colored hair clumped into mottled piles. The woman placed a second hair tie an inch below the first. “Are you ready, honey?” she asked. Tia nodded. The scissors that the woman used were gray office scissors, with thick titanium blades. Tia thought it was strange that she could buy those very same scissors at a CVS—and something about that didn’t seem right.

The woman cut between the two hair ties. A muted, bass-heavy crunch, ending with a snip when the scissor blades rejoined.

“That’s it?” Tia asked.

“That’s it.” The woman dropped the bundle of hair into a Ziploc bag, sealed it, and pasted a label on it. Tia wondered what the label said.

Tia looked at the small mirror that she was sitting in front of. The mirror was held to the plushy room divider by thumbtacks. The chair was a cheap folding chair. There were five of these stations set up in the gymnasium. All this looked funny, but Tia didn’t feel like laughing.

“I bet you can do something real cute with this.” The woman untied Tia’s hair, bobbed what was left in her palm.

“Can’t you do something more with it?”

“You mean you want us to cut more?”

Tia nodded.

“Well, how much more do you want me to cut, sweetie?”

“Just take it all.”

“Cut it all?”

“Yes. Might as well.”

“If that’s what you want.”

“Can you please just do it? I don’t want to talk anymore.”

“All right, honey. Be brave.” The woman stepped away for a minute and came back with a buzzer attached to an extension cord that ran to the other end of the gym. The buzzer came to life and the woman inched it toward Tia’s head. Then it was done. The woman kept the buzzer in her hand. Put that thing away for Chrissake. Anywhere that Tia couldn’t see it. Was that so hard to ask?

Pinkie forewent many beautifully bound dissertations for a manila envelope filled with cassette tapes. We snapped some reeds to make the clearing wider. The broken stalks cut like razors and covered my palms in slices. We started calling the clearing hidden among the reeds the Happy Valley. The pain of the cuts kept me grounded—forced me to feel. The cassette tapes melted over the fire in large ooze-like dollops. We impaled them with sticks and waved them over the flames. Threads of black smoke leaked out the plastic bodies. We were in the Happy Valley. A real place. We drank and allowed ourselves to float above the reeds. But the cuts on my palms kept them on Earth, so I ascended without hands.

The cuts turned to scars, and the scars itched like hell.

“I’ve been thinking about this blanket,” said Pinkie.

“About how dirty it is?”

“About how this probably belongs to a homeless person.”

“And how dirty it is?”

“What if he comes back?”

“When has anyone?”

Pinkie stopped talking and focused on the sky.

I searched for something to say. “He would probably kill us.”

“How would the headlines read?”

“Teens Killed over Blanket Dispute.”

“High Schoolers Play Hooky, Get More Than They Bargained For.”

We laughed.

The smoke licked in tiny pulses, and everything moved like a time-lapse film of a grid of stars. Movement leapt forward. The rotation of the Earth could be felt. The Earth was moving. The Earth was moving! Like I was being turned upside down. I wanted to barf. I wanted to ride the tail of the smoke to the sky. I wanted to hold someone’s hand. I wanted to be someone else. I wanted to this. I wanted to that.

“What’s her name again?” said Pinkie.

“Huh?”

“The one with the buzzed hair.”

“It doesn’t matter. You won’t remember.”

His head turned to look at me. We were lying down. The head of the reeds moved in and out with the wind. My head swayed with them. There was a gray overcast like it was going to rain.

“Why would she do a thing like that?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “You’re talking too much.”

“I feel like talking.”

Pinkie said I was good with pain. I told him that scars itched as they healed. Pinkie never mentioned his pain. Inside or out. It was like your body wanted you to scratch, to break the skin again, so it could heal itself, but then wanted you to scratch again, so it could heal again, and it went on like that. Breaking, healing, breaking, healing. The body wanted to continue that cycle, to keep it going as long as it could. As long as it was able to.

“Her sister has cancer,” I said.

A pair of joggers passed. “We just have to get the lawyers on board,” one said. The voice huffed in between each word, until it trailed and disappeared.

“She buzzed it off so her sister wouldn’t be alone. Solidarity,” I said. “Solidarity,” I said again, liking the way my lips moved and how my chords rumbled. “Solidarity.”

“Hm.”

“Happy Valley is a real place,” I said, after a pause.

“I know.”

“No, I mean a real *real* place. It’s in Hong Kong.”

“I *know*.”

We went to the Happy Valley again the next morning, as we always did, and I drank too much in one go and threw up in the river. We had one bottle left for the week, and Pinkie wouldn't let me have anymore. He ground a Benadryl between his teeth and sent me to get another bottle. "Give me the ID then." I went to a liquor store down the street, a block away from Berklee College of Music, and came back with a bag of corn chips and the cut up pieces of the ID. Pinkie sat cross-legged toward the water, facing the narrow gap of stalks that opened out to a view of the river. I looked at his face and he was gone. All droopy-headed and gone. At his feet was the empty bottle and at the corner of his lip was a spot of wetness. That was where I hit him. He snapped out of it, and we were on the ground, rolling and rolling, like fucking pigs. I tried to get my hands perfectly around his neck but he didn't let me. He was strangely strong for a suburban kid hopped up on antihistamines and rail Vodka. His eyes bugged out, silently screaming for something. To live?

The chips popped under one of us and I let him go. I fell next to him on top of the bed of chips. Side by side, we stared at the blue-gray sky as the reed heads swayed in and out. My arms were slice up. I felt the burn. The smell of the dirt mixed with the salt of the chips.

"She died," I said, after a long pause. "Tia's sister. The one with cancer. Just like that."

Pinkie's head rolled like he was following the motion of the reed heads. His weight and movement was like a slow grinding stone against the chips. My weight was crushing the same chips, and my eyes were following the same reeds.

Pinkie was walking down the hall to his next class when he spotted a buzzed head, and followed it for no reason until it stopped at locker #163. Pinkie faced locker #165 and turned the dial to

random numbers, pretending to know the combination. The bell for seventh period rang and the hall emptied, leaving Pinkie and Tia alone. Pinkie watched Tia fiddle with things in her locker. Tia noticed Pinkie. His eyes stared blankly back at her, then they shifted up to her buzz cut.

“Want one?” Tia used her middle finger to point to her buzzed head.

Pinkie didn't notice. He shook his head in disbelief. “What were you thinking?” he asked.

“The little girl that would get the hair. That's what I wished I was thinking.” She slammed her locker shut. “What I was actually thinking was ‘stop.’ I didn't want her to buzz it anymore. But I only repeated ‘stop’ in my head.”

“Okay.”

“Okay is all you have to say?”

“Well, I'm not a girl.”

“No shit.”

Tia looked over her shoulder. No one. And walked, and Pinkie followed.

“Shouldn't you be in class?” she said.

“Shouldn't you?”

“I'm not going.”

“Me neither, then.”

“Why are you wearing a scarf?”

“Oh, this thing?” He adjusted the black handkerchief tied around his neck, and swallowed.

“You have hickeys under there?”

Pinkie thought for a bit, then removed the handkerchief. Two thumb sized bruises framed his throat.

“What the fuck? Someone tried to kill you?”

“It was an accident.”

“What kind of an accident?”

“It’s hard to explain. Your name is Tia, right?”

“Yeah. What’s yours?”

“Sorry about your sister.”

“How’d you know?”

The entire junior class was filing into the auditorium. Pinkie looked around, searching for me, but found Tia instead, and they sat with each other. Pinkie thought that I slipped out the back of the school without telling him. Pinkie didn’t have time to check his locker for a note. Usually, I would slip one in there if I planned on skipping. Pinkie didn’t feel well after our fight. He thought that maybe I was mad at him. But he was the one that should be mad. Who had their neck fucked up? Before the announcement was made for the junior class to assemble immediately in the auditorium, Pinkie took two Benadryl and three Advil in the boy’s room. The pills were starting to kick in. In the auditorium, the headmaster used a mic to tell everyone that Maxwell Cho had passed away the night before. Maxwell Cho was in their class. The headmaster announced that counselors were on the ready.

The assembly was dismissed, and everyone went back to homeroom. Pinkie lost Tia, and made several loops around the building, never making it back to homeroom. Instead, he

headed for the west wing and hid in one of the art rooms. Pinkie followed the black streaks on the linoleum tile that seemed to lead him to the back of the room. The desks cast the lower half of the room in shadows, while the midmorning sun illuminated the top half through the high wall windows. Pinkie sat under one of the desks where he could not be seen by anyone at the door. Someone came in. The person searched the shelves, where students kept their artwork. Pinkie saw the legs of the person. It was Tia. Tia made a few circles around the room before spotting Pinkie. “Jesus Christ! What the fuck are you doing under there?”

“What are you doing with those?”

Tia had a few watercolors rolled under her arm, and two canvases that were cut from their frame, also under her arm. “Can you believe it?” Tia asked.

“Yeah. Sucks.”

“He killed himself. Did you know?”

“No shit?”

“This is his stuff.” She patted the canvases and watercolors. “I’m stealing them. Just kidding. I’m taking them for his family. They might want them, right? Would you if you were them?”

Pinkie tried to think how parents would feel, whether or not they would want the art assignments of their now deceased son. “Why did he kill himself?”

“SSRIs.”

“Oh.”

“You know what they are, right?”

“Prozac and stuff.”

“Yeah.”

Pinkie tensed and slowly flexed his neck. The pills were wearing off.

“He had depression, and they prescribed them to him. Then, a week later, he killed himself.”

“I thought it's supposed to help. Why would he kill himself?”

“Something about the chemicals. I read this article that talked about the effects of SSRIs on teenagers. How it makes them so happy that they don't have the barriers of a normal person anymore. It makes them think everything will be okay, even in death.”

“That's messed up.”

“Maxwell was a beautiful person.”

“Do you think about it?”

“What? Killing myself?”

Pinkie nodded.

“Sometimes,” she said. “Doesn't everybody, at some point? But thinking is different from doing. I don't think I could do it. I don't do well with pain.”

Pinkie lingered on the last phrase and thought of me, and how he thought I was good with pain.

“What about you?” Tia asked.

“No.”

“Are you just saying that?”

“Maybe, but I don't think I am.”

“What makes you so special?”

“I don’t think I’m special. I just think it’s dumb.”

“I think it’s dumb too sometimes. Like, why would Maxwell kill himself? He does these amazing paintings.”

“Yeah, I know.”

“Like, I would kill to have his skills. But I don’t know. Maybe having skills isn’t everything.” She stopped. “Did you ever find your friend?”

“He’s gone.”

“Gone where?”

“I don’t know. He’s just a goner.”

Tia put the canvases and paintings on the desk, found a roll of masking tape, and rerolled them tighter and bound them up. “What do you think I should do with these?”

“The parents?”

“I wish I could burn them. They belong to Maxwell. His paintings should be with him, in the afterlife or whatever. But where can we even do that?”

“I know a place.”

Pinkie and I found a gap that led to a narrow path through the reeds that brought us to a hidden clearing. The clearing looked out toward the Muddy River, past the Gardner Museum, the Museum of Fine Arts, just before the Boylston Street bridge that headed to Fenway Park. We called this place the Happy Valley. One day I went there and found Pinkie and Tia burning something that made the blackest smoke I had ever seen. They never noticed me and I left before they could. I ran up to the Boylston Street bridge and watched their tiny movements in the reeds. A jet

of black smoke billowed into the sky, tainting the air with its plastic stench. I left and hoped that I would never come back.

II.

How long ago was that? Eleven. Thirteen. Fourteen years? Tia had just asked me if I ever considered going back home. I told her Hong Kong was home. After college, Tia and Pinkie married. Tia became a painter; Pinkie a photographer. Both had shows in Chelsea, and enjoyed minor success. After three years of adjunct teaching and of semi-regular commutes to Manhattan, they sold everything and moved to Hong Kong. I stayed behind. After three years of Hong Kong and obscurity, they divorced. When it finalized, after months of long distance finesse work with lawyers in the states, Tia called me to tell me that it was done and that she wished nothing more than to see my face. She was drunk. I was too. I booked a ticket and was there within a month. That was three years ago.

“I meant home home. Boston.”

The five apartment buildings that made up our housing estate surrounded the courtyard and basketball court. Many of the teenage boys from the buildings stayed up all night playing ball, especially during the summer, like it was now. Tia and I watched them from the concrete bleachers. The dribble of the ball was slow and calculating in one moment, fast and explosive in another. Complementing the sounds were backboard slams, rim hits, and the occasional “swoosh” of the ball when it went perfectly into the net. The five building array created an echo chamber, reverbing the sounds of the game.

“I haven’t thought about that home in a while.”

“You don’t miss it?”

A ball went into the net, and the boys exploded across the court. “No,” I said.

“I don’t believe you. I think you do.” She mulled over a thought. “You miss it but probably don’t know that you miss it.”

“That doesn’t make sense.”

“We make poor judges of our own thoughts, don’t you agree?”

“I don’t.”

“You’re being unreasonable.”

“About what?”

“I really think you should consider going back home.”

I received a call from Pinkie’s phone, but a frantic woman spoke. It was hard to understand. She spoke fast and her voice quivered. I asked Tia if she had a pen and wrote down the name of a hotel and a room number. “Pinkie’s in trouble,” I said.

“I want nothing to do with him,” she said.

“I’ll call you later when I’m done.”

“Go play your savior role.”

I found the right hotel and room number, and knocked on the door. I heard the woman pleading with Pinkie to get up. I started banging and told her to let me in, and that I was Pinkie’s friend. She opened it, and swore she didn’t have anything to do with it. She was losing it bad, and I told her to keep it down. Pinkie was passed out on the bathroom floor. I gave the woman

whatever cash I had and told her to go, and to not tell anyone about anything. I carried Pinkie to the edge of the bathtub and hung his head over it.

“Pinkie, old boy. Do you hear me?”

I rattled his cheeks and slapped him. When he didn’t respond, I checked his pupils. Glassy gone eyes. I turned on the showerhead and drenched his head in cold water until he gave a moan. He started to gasp. I stuck two fingers down his throat until he threw up everything. I washed his face, my hands, then took off his wet clothes and put him into bed. Pinkie continued to moan but started to blink. He asked for cigarettes. I said I didn’t have any. I found the keycard and told him that I would be back.

The hotel bar was open. I asked the barman if they sold cigarettes and he asked what kind. I told to surprise me and ordered a scotch and soda as well. It was late at night and there were very few people in the room. At the end of the bar was the woman from before. I sat next to her. She was still shaking.

“The adrenaline is no joke,” I said.

The barman brought over a pack of Yat-Lau cigarettes, a domestic brand, and the scotch and soda. I looked at the keycard and told him to charge it to Room 165. The woman had a cigarette in one hand and a gin and tonic in the other.

“I’m sorry about before,” I said.

“How’s your friend?”

“He’ll be fine. It’s not the first time. Can I get you a cab?”

She shook her head.

“Can I do anything for you?”

“Yes. Leave me alone.”

Back in the room, I found Pinkie awake, sitting on the floor, with an almost finished cigarette in his mouth. The balcony doors were wide open. The breeze felt nice. I could see the lights of Wan Chai down below.

“Found a cigarette,” Pinkie said.

“Then you won’t be needing these?” I showed him the Yat-Laus.

“You’re a swell friend, Henry. Always have been.”

I sat with him, opened the pack and gave him and myself a fresh cigarette. I found a lighter and lit our cigarettes. We were high enough from the street that the murmur of nightlife was just a soft lull.

“I was with Tia earlier,” I said.

“What happened to that girl?”

“Forget about the girl. Did you hear what I said?”

“Yeah. What about it?”

“She said she wants nothing to do with you.”

“Finally we agree on something.

“We’re not so young anymore,” I said.

“I know.”

“You can’t keep doing this to yourself.”

“I know. I know. I know.” He kept repeating it.

The taxi drove up the hill around Chai Wan and the lights of the apartment complexes were lit like pillars of uniform stars. Tia had her face almost against the glass, looking like she was mapping the pattern of the stars. We passed the empty racetrack, which was blindingly lit with fluorescent white lights. The turf was a painfully artificial green.

“Where do you want to go?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” Tia said.

The taxi driver cleared his throat. The meter’s digits shifted with a click.

“How about home?”

Tia was quiet.

“Kowloon, please,” I told the driver.

The driver cleared his throat again. “Kowloon, it is.” He looked at us through the rearview mirror for a second.

“No, driver,” Tia said. “Take me to Happy Valley.”

“Happy Valley?”

“Yes, take me to Happy Valley.”

“What are we going to do there?”

“I don’t know. I just want to go, all right?”

“Ah, hell, why don’t we just go to Flying Geese Peak, then?” I leaned toward the driver. “Flying Geese Peak. Step on it. And take the East Tunnel. Maybe we’ll hit heavy traffic, how’s that? For fuck’s sake.”

We all grew quiet and reached the bottom of the hill. We stopped at a red light, and the driver cleared his throat a third time. “Happy Valley or Flying Geese Peak?”

“Nathan Road, Kowloon,” Tia finally said.

The driver seemed to wait for an affirmation. I kept quiet, feeling the embarrassment of my outburst. The driver sighed. The light turned green, and he took us through the East Tunnel, under Victoria Harbor, to Kowloon.

We ate at a noodle shop that was on a corner close to where we lived. A woman sat outside in the alleyway, sitting on a stout red stool, pinching dumpling skins together with her fingertips. Two young women walked by. A young man, in a clean tight shirt and slacks, ate a basket of dumplings and smoked a cigarette. He looked at the young women that walked by, then the woman in the alley.

“Sorry that I snapped back there.”

“It’s fine,” Tia said. “I owe you too much, anyway.”

“Don’t talk to me about who owes what.”

“I got a new idea for a painting.”

“What is it?”

“You know I don’t like to talk about my ideas before I paint them. It ruins it, trying to dissect it to words. I want it dissecting on the canvas.”

“All right, then.”

“It’s— It’s about...”

“Don’t worry about it.”

“Did I ever tell you that he had your eyes?”

“Don’t talk to me about eyes.”

“I know it sounds weird, but he had your eyes that first month of his life. Then, he changed. And looked more and more like his father.”

“I’m finished. I can’t eat anymore.”

“I wish that—”

“Waiter, can we get the check over here?”

The young man, sitting at the other table, finished his dumplings and his cigarette. He stood and snubbed the last of it on the sidewalk, and tossed the butt into a red bucket of water that held many others. The water was brown and ashy gray.

“Where do you think he’s from?” Tia asked.

We were at a hotel bar, in Tsim Sha Tsui. It was well into the afternoon and the bar was close to being empty. The bar looped around in a U, and we sat on one end and the barman stood on the other. He polished wine glasses with a piece of silk. His back was turned toward us.

“I don’t know,” I said.

“Shandong. I’m gonna guess Shandong.”

“He can hear us.”

“What does it matter if he can hear us? He won’t say anything. He’s paid to not say anything. They train him well, I bet. It’s his job to ignore shit people say.”

She played with an unopened pack of Yat-Lau cigarettes, next to her wine glass. She wore shades, even though the room was dim and cool. She took a sip of wine.

“Why Shandong?” I asked.

“Look how tall he is.”

“Only tall people come from Shandong?”

“I hear people from Shandong are very tall. He could be from Shandong.”

“Have you ever been to Shandong?”

“No,” she said. “But I might go one day. I’ll go and send you a picture of some Shandong boys. I’ll be in the picture too, standing between them, and you’ll see.”

“Sure,” I said.

She grew quiet. A young white couple walked in from the lobby and sat at the bar near the barman. They giggled to each other and asked the barman something in English. They seemed to be in love. Newlyweds, probably. The barman replied in English and the couple nodded. I could only understand a few words of the barman’s English. It was terrible, broken, accented. I pushed my wine glass away from me.

“What does Shandong have?” Tia asked.

“Mountains and tall people.”

“Isn’t Guo Jingjing from Shandong?”

“Hebei, I think.”

“She probably drinks wine in hotels like this.”

“She practices sixteen hours a day. And probably sleeps on a hard bed on a bus that shuttles her from swim meet to swim meet. She doesn’t have time to sit in places like this.”

“Who else is from Hebei?”

“I don’t know.” I held my glass to the light, watched the light bend through the ripples of the wine, then took a drink. “The hotel is nice. What kind of wine is this?”

“People come and drink here all the time. Some do it everyday. Every. Day. Can you believe that?”

“We do things too.”

“Not like this.”

“What kind of wine is this?”

“Do you like it?”

“It’s pretty good. What’s it called?”

“Sauvignon blanc.” After a while. “I picked it off the menu.” She took a sip. Classical music played over hidden speakers. The barman was pouring wine and chatting with the young couple. “I want to fall in love again,” she said.

“Have you started working on the new painting?”

“In progress.”

“How much is the wine?”

“I’ll take care of it.”

“Where’d you get the money?”

“Don’t worry about the money.”

“I didn’t say I was worried, but where did you get the money?”

“Can we please please not talk about the money?”

The young couple laughed and cradled each other in their arms. The barman stood at the center of the U now, carefully placing wine glasses on a rack hanging above the bar. They looked delicate and ready to fall.

There was a fine hum to the air surrounding the supermarket. I walked down the aisles stacked with cases of carbonated box drinks. I hadn't seen a person since walking past Tia at the front of the store. The food court and the à la carte cases were closed and had its lights turned off. There were boxes of mangoes and bruised starfruit with flies dancing in threes above them. The hum of the lights was replaced with the hum of the refrigeration unit. I picked up a pack of pork trimmings among the sparse offerings, looked at it and put it back. It was only a few more minutes until Tia's shift ended. Tia had told me to never come to this supermarket when she was working, so I was surprised when she asked me to head over.

I got a few items and went up front. Tia rang them up: a pack of cigarettes, two bottles of Tsingtao, a shrink-wrapped pack of soda crackers and two sausage sticks. "Find everything you needed?" she asked, mechanically. I nodded and put the cigarettes in my pocket and carried the rest in my arms. I sat outside on a concrete ledge directly under a streetlight. The streetlights were blocked by floppy cypress leaves.

The supermarket lights closed, and Tia came out, still wearing her uniform, and sat down with me. I pulled the packaging off the crackers and handed them to Tia. She put one in her mouth. I opened the two beers, and we drank and ate the sausage sticks. I was in the middle of chewing a soda cracker when I started laughing. I covered my mouth but bits of cracker flew out. Tia started laughing too, and we both laughed until the laughter faded further and further away. We cleared our throats with the beer.

"Why were we laughing?" Tia asked.

"Just thinking about this lady at the salon."

“Ah. Continue, then.” She laid her head against my shoulder and chewed on another cracker.

“Nothing. There isn’t much to tell.”

“Was she cute?”

“She was fifty at least. I asked what she wanted me to do, and she looked at me in the mirror and in a very serious voice said she wanted to look like Guo Jingjing.”

“Go on.”

“I said I wasn’t sure what she meant by it, so she pulled out a magazine page she had in her purse. And that’s it. That’s the end of the story.”

“Did you do it? Did you make her look like Guo Jingjing?”

“It was a decent try.”

“Keep going.”

“I told you everything.”

“But you left things out.”

“Like what?”

“Like how she felt about her new look. Like how you made such a feat happen. Like what—”

“What she was wearing?”

“Yes. What was she wearing? Was it something that Guo Jingjing would’ve worn? Go on, go on.”

“I’m over it.”

She sat up and sighed. She finished her beer and started picking up bits of trash we had dropped on the ground. “I want to go to a club,” she said.

“Dynasty?”

“I hate Dynasty.”

“Then where? Momo’s? Jam Cherry?”

“I’m sick of those places.”

“You love those places.”

“I hate those places. It’s so fucking boring there.”

“I’m sorry,” I said.

“Don’t say that, please. I don’t want to hear you say that.”

“Sorry.”

“I’m going to scream.”

“If it’ll make you feel better.”

“The scene here is getting lamer and lamer. We should go to Shanghai. We could take the high-speed train.”

“I have to work.”

“I know,” she said. “I do too. Someday, I will go. If I go, would you go?”

“For how long?”

“As long as it takes,” she said.

“As long as what takes? What will we do there?”

“Forget it. I’ll go by myself. I saved up some money. You can stay here and rot to death.”

“I don’t know what you want from me.”

“Me neither.”

We walked to a trash bin and put in our trash. We walked up the street toward home. As we approached the courtyard, the sounds of a pick-up basketball game came into our ears.

“They called, you know.”

“Who called?”

“They agreed to let me see Maxwell.”

“Does Pinkie know about this?”

“No. And you won’t tell him.”

“It’s his son, too.”

“I know. I know. But I’m his mother. Doesn’t that count for something? Who cares for a child more than his mother? Promise me you won’t tell him. Promise me right now. Please. Tell me that you promise.”

The sun was starting to set through the buildings, the laundry poles, and the metal-cast window bars. There was a stifling heat that radiated from the street and the sides of the buildings, and it all seeped into our little apartment. Tia dug through outfits poured out onto the bed. I sat against the wall on the cool tile floor next to the window, where the sound of a jet came through. The sun touched only her lower half. She showed me fading cotton dresses, gutted old jeans, and color tops that seemed so familiar it hurt when I tried to recall.

“Maybe you should go with long sleeves,” I said.

“It’ll be hot,” she said.

“Three-quarter sleeves then.”

She dropped the sleeveless blouse she was holding and went back to the pile, peeling at the layers on the bed. I got up. The room seemed to shrink. I kneaded her shoulders.

“You’re tense.”

I looked through the pile with her and held up tops to her collar.

“How about this?” I asked. It was an airy black blouse with different sized polka dots, and it was three-quarter sleeved. She held the top to her collar with her own hands. She looked in the bathroom, at the crusted mirror within it. A small corner of the glass had broken off long ago. I pulled the string for the bathroom bulb, illuminating her mirror image. She moved her mouth into something like a smile.

“Think it looks good?” she asked.

I nodded. She put it on.

“Come here,” I said. We moved into the bathroom, and I pulled out a plastic stool from under the sink and sat. The cartoon on the stool had peeled away long ago. I sat her on the toilet seat. I ran fingers through her hair. She looked into the mirror.

“What do you think he’ll say?” she asked.

“Is he old enough to be talking?”

“I think so. He’s two. I think they can talk by then.”

I reached behind her to a small end table with a pile of old tweezers, brushes, and plastic combs. I chose the cleanest looking brush and let down her hair, slipping the hair tie to my wrist.

“I don’t think he’ll say anything, because it’s hard to say anything in these situations. But he’ll go crazy for you. Like all hell.”

“You think?”

“Yeah,” I said. I pulled the brush over a tangle. She didn’t flinch.

“Give me your hands. We’ll fix you up. Ah, he’ll go crazy for you.” I took a file and cleaned the dirt and dried paint from under her nails and blew. “All sons love their mothers. He’ll go absolutely crazy.” I smoothed out her nails with the file.

“I’d like to take him to Flying Geese Peak,” she said. “I don’t think they’ll let me on the first day.”

“There’ll be plenty of time for that later,” I said.

“What if there won’t be a next time?”

“Don’t talk like that.”

I finished her nails and held them up to her so she could see. “I don’t think we have time to paint,” I said, “But they’re good and clean.”

I watched her through the mirror as she looked at herself.

“We should give you a little more color.” I fetched a small bag from a plastic drawer. Got out the brush and swatted the leftover powder against my palm. I applied the brush with new powder and swept neatly across her cheek. I tilted her head with my free hand and brushed the other cheek.

“There you go.”

“Will he be mad at me?”

“No.”

“Will he hate me? Will he know that I abandoned him?” She sniffed and laid her head on my shoulder. “Do you think they told him? That I gave him up after one year?”

“Tia.”

“We weren’t ready. I thought I was, but I wasn’t. Neither of us was. We could barely take care of ourselves.”

“No one is blaming you.”

“Do you remember when I called you, Henry, after the divorce? And I said I wanted to see you. Do you remember?”

“Yeah.”

“Why, Henry, did you come? Why didn’t you say no? Why didn’t you hang up?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “Who can say why we do the things we do?”

“Sometimes I wished you hadn’t come.” She sniffed. “I shouldn’t have said that. I owe you too much to have said a thing like that.”

“As you are now so once we were.”

“I need to get going.”

We moved to the front door. I opened the metal grill, sliding it on its tracks, and it opened with a heavy clamp.

“He’ll go crazy,” I said.

She said nothing and stepped out into the corridor. I shut the grill and it locked in place. She walked out of sight without saying goodbye, without looking back. She kept walking. Her heels struck against the tiles. I held my hands tight to the metal grill, and shouted down the corridor. “He’ll go absolutely crazy.”

When the sound of the heels was gone, I leaned into the wall, next to the window, and sat down. The sun was nearly set. I stayed, watching the room go dark, watching everything get cast into the night.

III.

New reeds overgrew the old clearing. The narrow path we took through its thicket had all but disappeared. The old reed corpses, which were gray, melded with the younger stalks, which were dry green, and, together, they reclaimed the place as its own. The cold was frigid enough to freeze the Muddy River's flow, and, watching from the Boylston Street bridge, the faint movement of fish could still be seen from above the ice, and, like the fish, the old mottled blanket still lay in the recess of the reeds.

“Mango, Lily, Orange”

Ma gave me a call, told me my father had been leaving shampoo bottles in the middle of the bathtub again, like some cryptic tower of the *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* sort. I told her it was nothing—not sure I believed it myself—but she said all right, and I hung up. She called me again, telling me my father had been asking if my sister had given birth yet to my already two-month-old niece. This time I told her I’d come over by the end of the week and to call the minute anything else happened. The third time she called, she told me he was packing a bag, planning to go visit my uncle. This uncle had been dead for over two years. I told her to hide the car keys, hung up, and asked my boss if I could leave early, that it was an emergency, and, when she nodded and rolled her eyes, I took off as fast as I could, wondering if I had this job to return to. When I got there, my father seemed OK, like any other man packing a bag for a trip. He laid some collared shirts on the bed, held one over himself and asked my mother how it looked. Ma was a mess.

“Ba, what are you doing?”

“Going to go see your uncle. Haven’t seen him for a long time.”

“Where are you going to go see him?”

“Baltimore.”

“He’s not in Baltimore anymore. He’s in Connecticut. He passed, remember?”

Ba put the shirt down. “I know that. That’s what I meant to say, Connecticut.” He folded the shirts and stuffed them into a shoulder-sling bag and dragged the zipper shut. He put on his baseball cap and shoehorned his feet into sneakers. He patted his back pocket. “Where are my

goddamn keys?” Ba searched the dresser, under the scads of letters on his desk, through the old newspapers he kept stacked by the side of his bed. Since his diagnosis, Ba’s pilgrimages occurred more frequently, were getting more and more elaborate. It started out with trips on the train to Chinatown, Davis Square, Forest Hills Cemetery. He disappeared for hours. Then, one day, I got a call from a police officer, telling me that he found my father, pacing in circles, not knowing who he was, what he was doing. His medication helped when he took it. Ma pulled me to another room, as Ba continued searching, and tried to convince me to take him, just this once. After the police incident, Ma freaked and kept him under lock and key. I indulged him as much as I could, but had ignored him lately, citing the stress of working two jobs—three if I still had the one I just left. I relented.

Ba and I sat on I-90, right in the middle of afternoon rush hour. Ba cursed the entire time.

“You gotta take your medication,” I said.

“It messes with my head.”

“It’s supposed to mess with your head.”

“You sound like your mother,” he said. “It keeps me up at night, that’s all.”

“You tell the doctor?”

“Doctor doesn’t believe a thing I say. Only believes your mother.”

At West Haven, I took Exit 43, and Ba yelled for me to stop, told me to keep going west, but it was too late.

“You said you wanted to visit Uncle. This is the right exit.”

“Not yet. We can’t go empty handed. You never go empty handed to anywhere. Haven’t I taught you anything? You should’ve kept going. Why didn’t you keep going?”

“How was I supposed to know to keep going?”

“We can’t go empty handed.”

“OK. I get it. What do you want me to do?”

“Just get back on the highway and keep going. We need to pick up some stuff.”

I swung around, got back on the highway.

“Where to, Your Highness?”

“Just keep going. I’ll tell you when we get there.”

“No. You tell me now.”

“We’ll go to New York, get some stuff, and come right back.”

“You want to go to New York?”

“It’s just a little further down. What’s the matter with you?”

“It takes three hours, Ba.”

“You can’t get anything good around here. You can’t go empty handed and you can’t go bringing shit either. It’s your uncle. Flesh and blood. You can’t spend a little money for flesh and blood?”

“All right. Fine.”

“What’s your problem? Your uncle watched you grow up. You haven’t seen him in ages.”

“I said fine. I’m just a little tired. That’s all.”

“Pull over, then. I’ll drive.”

“No.”

“I drove the restaurant van for forty years. I know how to drive.”

“You’re not supposed to drive, remember?”

“Ah, what the hell does the doctor know?”

“A lot more than you.”

“Why didn’t you go to work today?”

“I did go to work. I had to leave early.”

“What are you leaving early for? You know how many hours I used to work?”

“Ma told me that you were gonna drive.”

“Your mother worries too much.”

We drove through the scenic afternoon sun that washed the West Haven land- and building-scapes in saturated color. The color was reminiscent of oranges and golden autumn leaves.

“You should’ve asked that girl to come with us,” he said. “The one that brought over the mangoes that time, on New Year’s.”

“I brought the mangoes.”

“What did she bring?”

“The oranges.”

“No wonder I didn’t like the mangoes.”

“Is there a point to this?”

“She’s a flower, right? Some kind of a flower.”

“God.”

“What was it? Just tell me.”

“She’s not a flower. Her name’s Lillian.”

“A Lily. That’s it.”

“Don’t call her that, please. It’s Lillian.”

“Has she seen your uncle?”

“A while ago, at the funeral.”

“You should’ve invited Lily.”

“It’s Lillian, and why would I?”

“She’s nice and brought mangoes over that time.”

“You just said you hated the mangoes.”

“I love mangoes.”

“For god’s sake!”

We stopped at a Denny’s for a bite to eat. I ordered the Lumberjack that came with a bit of everything. I gave Ma a call and told her what we were doing, that we were a little over an hour away from New York. When I hung up, Ba told me that he couldn’t eat this garbage.

“Ba, if you didn’t want to eat here why didn’t you tell me. I’m not a goddamn mind reader.”

“It seemed like you really wanted to come here.”

“Nobody comes to a Denny’s because they want to. If you didn’t want to eat here, you should’ve told me.”

“Fine. I don’t want to eat here.”

“What’s wrong with it?”

“What the hell is this supposed to be?”

“Eggs, sausage and ham.”

“Chinese people don’t eat this stuff.”

“Ba, do you even know what you’re saying? Chinese people don’t eat eggs? We love eggs. Egg tarts, tea eggs, century eggs, egglets. Sausage and ham—that’s just pork. Pork buns, barbecued pork, pork-fat over rice, roasted pork belly. Who loves pork more than us?”

“You eat. I’ll just sit here.”

We drove around for thirty minutes, looking for a Chinese restaurant, and found one called the Golden Palace, wedged between a nail salon and a liquor store—thank god it was still open. The Golden Palace was a takeout kind of place with only two tables lined on one side of the wall. The inside smelled of frying oil. I bought a six-pack of beer and drank one while Ba ate.

“I didn’t know you drank.”

“There’s a lot of things you don’t know about me.”

“Used to be able to polish off two dozens of those, no problem.”

“Please, just eat.”

Ba picked at his beef chow fun. “Cook’s no good here. Tastes horrible. They used too much dark soy and not enough oil.”

“Would you keep it down? You’re being rude.”

“This isn’t being rude. I’m just talking.”

“Please, please, just eat, so we can get out of here.”

“I’m old. Nobody cares what I say.”

“All right. Just lower your voice.”

“You can’t use this much soy sauce. It’s got to have the right ratio between soy sauce and oil. This food is for white people. They can’t taste the difference. You get me in that kitchen and I’ll make it ten times better.”

“Finish your food and take your medicine. That’s all I ask.”

Ba searched through his bag. “I can’t find it.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me.”

“Listen to me, son. Anytime you go into a Chinese restaurant, order the beef chow fun. You can always tell if the cook is any good from the taste of his beef chow fun.”

We checked into a motel along the highway. On the phone, I told Ma that it was getting too late and even if we did make it to New York none of the shops would’ve been open. She asked about Ba. Ba was in the shower. I told her about the medication, but she didn’t seem too worried and asked when we would be back. “Tomorrow night, at the latest.”

I couldn’t sleep. We were both in bed, in the middle of the night, when Ba started talking. It was a low mumble, interrupted by slow snores and trails that didn’t head anywhere. Then his words started making sense. “Eight pounds.” I sat up slightly, and strained my eyes to see if his eyes were open. They weren’t. “Eight pounds, thirteen ounces.”

“Ba?” I whispered.

“Eight pounds, thirteen ounces, when we carried him out. I saw those meaty legs and gave him his Chinese name, Cypress.”

Did this happen every night?

“And he was a smart kid.”

Did Ma have to listen to this, lying in bed?

“A truly smart boy!”

“You beat me for not knowing my multiplication tables.”

“He was lazy. Just too damn lazy.”

“You beat me every time I turned in a report card.”

“That’s why he dropped out of college.”

“That’s not why I dropped out.”

“Maybe, if I was around more back then. It was hard making a living.”

“My choices are no one’s fault but my own.”

“I clothed him. I fed him. I sheltered him. My shifts were long. There was nothing I could do.”

“I know, Ba. I know.”

By morning, we were on the road again. Less than an hour from New York City. We crossed the Connecticut border.

“I really like that girlfriend of yours. What was her name again? Some kind of a flower?”

“Lillian.”

“Lily. That’s it.”

“Stop calling her that, for god’s sake.”

“We really like Lillian. She’s good for you.”

“Sure,” I said.

“Why don’t you bring her over more? Your mother and I like seeing the two of you together.”

“I really don’t want to talk about this.”

“I’m just saying bring her over more. That’s all I’m saying.”

“And I’m saying I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Why not?”

“It’s not like that anymore.”

“Like what? Speak up, for heaven’s sake.”

“I said it’s not like that anymore.”

“Not like what?”

“Like it used to be.”

“What the hell does that mean?”

“It means we don’t see each other anymore. I tell you every time. I wish you’d just shut up about it already.”

“Speak up, for heaven’s sake.”

“Forget it.”

“She calls sometimes, asks us how we are.”

“Sure she does.”

“And I tell her you don’t come over anymore.”

“Wait, this was recent?”

“She’s always so polite. Mr. Wong this, Mr. Wong that.”

“Ba, when was this?”

“She used to call all the time, when you were living with us. You never turned your damn ringer on.”

“No, no. Go back. You said you told her that I didn’t come over anymore. When did that happen?”

“Your mother and I, we love her. We were so surprised when you brought her home that time. Remember New Year’s Eve dinner? She brought over mangoes.”

“Ba.”

“When you said you were bringing someone over, your mother and I thought it was just some friend.”

“Ba! When did she fucking call?”

Ba went silent. He stared at the traffic ahead, glassy eyed—the city of New York coming into shape. The silence erected a wall between us, and my father kept looking ahead. The only sign of life was his blinking, the slow circling of his head. I waited a minute and tried to talk to him. He gazed at me. “What?” The last five minutes never happened to him. We reached the Bronx without exchanging another word.

On the Bruckner Express, we headed toward Manhattan. The East River was on the left, and, past it, I could make out the shape of LaGuardia. Ba shuffled around me to get a better look.

“That’s where it all began, son.”

“Wasn’t it JFK?”

“It was LaGuardia. I remember.”

“Ma said it was JFK.”

“No, no. It was LaGuardia. I came in through San Francisco. Your mother came later.”

Ba kept nodding his head. “Old Ming picked me up right there. Your uncle went to Baltimore,

and I went to New York, you see. We took a cab, Old Ming and I. He took me right to Canal Street. Right to work. Right into the kitchen. This was where it all started. Right here,” he said. “Right here,” he said again, and again.

On Mott Street, we walked into a joss shop. Paper dolls lined the front of it. Doweled skeletons supported their delicate, tempera-painted, rice paper bodies. They were eerily tall, almost three feet, and they stood in rows like school children. Incense bundles were stacked high in grids of shelf compartments. Agarwood, sandalwood, all kinds. We walked farther back. Ba was looking for the owner, or any person, for that matter. At the very back of the shop were big porcelain idols, standing erect, next to even more shelves of candles, imitation bronze dings, little arhat statues. The whole store smelled of old wax and wood ash.

A pair of feet came down a case of steps—it was so narrow that I had mistaken it for another storage shelf. The owner had salt-and-pepper hair and wiry limbs. He asked if we found what we were looking for, but Ba gave him an ugly frown.

“Don’t you recognize me?” Ba asked.

The owner held his glasses, which were hanging from a thin red cord around his neck, to his eyes and studied Ba’s face. The owner cried out and slapped Ba on the shoulder, and Ba did the same. They laughed at how old they had gotten. Ba kept calling the owner Ghost-Hook Chow. They talked about the old days like they happened yesterday, continuing threads of gossip that had long been on hiatus. The owner made tea, and we sat and drank it from terra-cotta cups, and they continued talking. When we left the shop, an hour and a half had gone by. We held bundles under our arms—joss paper, hell money, incense and candles, almost twice the quantity that

we had paid for. The owner called down his grandson, who couldn't have been more than twelve years old, to watch the shop, and the owner helped us caravan everything back to the car.

And it was the same at every place we visited. When we went to buy the rice wine, the grocer on East Canal yelled out my ba's name, and my ba shook his head trying to remember the grocer's name and when he did they laughed, and slapped, and talked for nearly an hour again. They all had names for each other, like Ghost-Hook Chow and Salt-Fish Lam. This happened at the lunch shop where we got the rice, and the bakery where we got the paper-wrapped cakes and the egg tarts. By the time we got everything that we needed, the day was almost gone.

We packed everything into the car. The sun was starting to dip behind the skyline.

"Let's go before it gets too dark," I said, slamming the trunk closed.

Ba was a few feet away, looking at a case of concrete steps that went sharply up a gap between two storefronts. His wrist shook back and forth, pointing to the dark place that the stairwell hid. The building was five stories high, had barred windows, and laundry hanging from the bars. "I know this place," Ba said.

"We got to go, Ba."

Ba darted up the steps, up the building.

"For fuck's sake."

Ba went up three flights of steps and down a long, creepy-as-all-hell corridor, lit by bulbs covered in greased-up dust. The floor had the same greasy film that made the whole act of walking like tearing bandages off your shoes. Entire sections of the corridor had shoddy cardboard boxes piled up and packed against the wall. They weighed on top of one another, some towered to the ceiling. Some had Chinese characters scrawled on its face, years ago. The hall got

so narrow at times we had to flatten our backs against the wall to get through. I cut in front of Ba and made myself go first, but he kept getting ahead of me, and when he did, I got up front again.

“This place is a death trap.”

“Walked this way for twenty years. I know it like the back of my hand.”

He stopped at the end of the hall, at unit 34, and started banging on the door. “Old Ming, open up. It’s me.”

I pushed the ringer, but he kept banging.

“Maybe he moved,” I said.

“Why the hell would he move?”

“People move, Ba. That so hard to believe?”

“Old Ming, you son of a gun. Did you fall into the toilet?”

A door opened a few doors down. An old woman with silvery, tied-back hair stuck her head out. “Who the hell is banging! Old Ming went a long time ago.” She wore clothes my ma would wear.

“Went? Already? How come no one told me?”

“Who the hell are you?”

Ba gave the old woman his name. The old woman’s face changed immediately, like the joss shop owner, the grocer, and the bakeshop owner. It was all the same. She invited us into her flat and gave us each a cup of tea from a thermos that left a ring-shaped stain on her table. Ba and the woman sat at the table, facing each other. The table was round. Their hands were on top of it, inches apart, the cup of tea in between. Ba had his palms up. She had hers down—cupped,

long fingers, like dried chilies. Ba's were the same—a dried up something. I leaned against the wall by the door.

They talked in quiet voices about Old Ming and the old days before I was born. They talked about the INS, how they came every week to harass their restaurant's owner, someone named Black-Tooth Sum, and made green card checks during their busiest nights.

“Those damn agents,” Ba said and laughed. I'd never seen him laugh so much.

Along the wall, above the table, was a shelf. Porcelain figurines lined the length of it. At least seven. Bright red faces, long whiskers, large rounded shoulders. On one side, a Guan Di statue held his glaive at an angle, ready for use. On the other, a Guanyin statue held a carafe and offered an open hand, sitting on a lotus flower. Both watched over us, my father and this woman.

“I can't believe Old Ming passed,” Ba said.

“What's not to believe?”

“He wasn't that old.”

“Not old? Even you and I are old. Not old!” She winked at me. “Can you believe this old fool?”

I didn't respond.

“Your husband is out?” Ba asked.

“He went two or three years ago, too.”

“What about your children?”

“They moved away. My oldest is in D.C. My second, in Brooklyn. My youngest, I don't know where she is now. Traveling the world, I guess. I don't see them much anymore.

They have their own lives.”

“Grandchildren?”

“Four.” She broke into a smile. “You?”

“One.”

The woman turned to me again. “A boy or girl?”

“Girl,” my ba answered. “It’s my daughter’s.”

“Still not married?” Again to me.

“Remember how those INS thugs knocked over our vegetable crates if we didn’t line up fast enough?”

“Of course,” she said. “And that one time you forgot your green card, and we had to sneak you out behind the dumpster.”

“Yes, yes. Your husband hadn’t come over yet, is that right?”

“That’s right,” she said. “He didn’t get here until you left for Boston. Ancient history.”

“Yes. A long time ago,” he said.

Ba laid his hand on top of the woman’s hand. His palm down on hers. She slid her hand away. Ba’s hand remained where it dropped. If I had any luck at all and had been looking somewhere else, I might’ve missed it altogether. I wished I did. The woman’s hands moved closer to her body. Their hands looked so alike. Wrinkled, liver spotted, thinned linking tendons on delicate bones. So easily broken. I could’ve punched him right there.

“A long time ago,” she repeated.

“Yes. A long time ago,” he followed.

We got on the road and didn’t speak. I had nothing to say to him. If he said anything, I didn’t say anything back. He started up when we crossed the Connecticut border.

“Your mother couldn’t come for two years. There wasn’t any money.”

“I really don’t want to hear this.”

“You think I’m happy with myself? Do you know what it was like? I had my reasons.”

“You’re talking to me about reasons?”

“It was over when I went to Boston.”

“Yeah, sure. ‘Cause that makes it all right.”

“Don’t talk to me like that.”

“Like you said. I’m just talking.”

“You think you’re any better?”

“What are you talking about, old man?”

“Don’t think you can look down on me. If you were any better, you’d be married, Lily wouldn’t have left you, and I would’ve had more grandchildren.”

“Fuck you!”

I swerved to the breakdown lane. Cars honked. I stopped and hit the hazard lights.

“Lillian left because I didn’t have my shit together. I didn’t fuck around. Not like you. Not like you one goddamn bit.”

“You were better with her. You came over more. Then you stopped. You just stopped.”

“I’m nothing like you, old man. Nothing.”

I got out of the car, leaving him. I slammed the door shut and went over the guardrail into a small ditch and climbed up until I hit a thicket of brush. I went on. At a point, it got too steep and too thick, so I got on my hands and knees and crawled up as fast as I could. Things were cutting me, branches held me back, roots pulled at my feet. I reached a clearing at the top of

a hill that overlooked a strip mall. Lowe's, Target, JCPenney, Kmart. Past the flat tops of the buildings were little houses and porch lights. The street lamps started to come on because it was getting dark. I stood until all of them were on, far to the horizon. My heart kept going at a hell's pace. I watched the little moving cars and the little parked cars that were dead still on the lot. Little families pushed shopping carts toward minivans, pickup trucks, and station wagons. There was a streak of orange left by the setting sun, and I watched it as it, too, faded away. I turned around and went back. It must have been some sight, seeing the way I looked as I crawled out of the bush. Ba didn't say a word. The car was where I left it. I shook off the dirt, got in, and we continued on.

I stopped at the first motel I saw, because I could no longer drive. Down a hall, we walked arm in arm and zigzagged from wall to wall like two drunks trying to keep each other from falling. After a while, I didn't know who was holding whom anymore, but we made it to the room.

In the middle of the night, I dreamt that Ba was watching over me, standing on a side from which I couldn't see him. I dreamt that I was in my apartment, having drunk entirely too much again. I dreamt that I could forgive myself, that I was happy, that I was happy with who I was. I dreamt that I kicked off the covers. I dreamt that Ba pulled them back over me—for no reasons other than that he was my father and I was his son.

We made it to my uncle's gravestone in West Haven, before noon. If we talked, we talked in instructions. Light the incense. Bow your head. Man the fire pail. Pour the tea. We fed all six packets of joss paper and hell money into the pail. We watched the fire burn. We watched the ashes

fly. We watched the smoke bridge the sky. And, before we left, we poured away the rice wine, fed the rice to pigeons in the park, and, on a bench, we ate the egg tarts and paper-wrapped cakes.

“Go West”

The funeral was fine. Bouquets of soft-pink orchids, light-cream lilies, and dethorned snow roses with wide draping ribbons hung over the walls of the room. “From the Lau family, with condolences.” “自莫家四姐弟。” “From 老溫, your 老死 over in Hong Kong.” “From Mr. Cheung. Your father will be missed.” And they went on. The room gradually filled with family friends, relatives, and incense smoke, and it irritated Will Wong’s eyes until they reddened and watered. But he did not cry.

The reception was fine, too. The salt poached chicken was a little dry. The bamboo shoots stir-fried with wood ear in soy sauce were a little tough. The abalone and fish maw soup was a bit bland. Will’s oldest cousin, who had driven four hours down from Queens with all her children, complained in soft whispers, and offered to scold the restaurant’s manager on the behalf of Will’s mother, to which Will’s mother said no. Then, an uncle, or a family friend, got drunk off the apéritif, a yellow wine, and started to sing Cantonese opera songs in the mother tongue. “帝女花帶淚上香。” He pantomimed the lyrics, put his hands together as if presenting sticks of incense to an altar. The uncle kept having to rebalance himself. His tablemates urged him to sit down. But he went on. “我偷偷看偷偷望, 佢帶淚帶淚暗悲傷,” and pointed at Will. The uncle, eventually, tired himself out, and laid his head on the table. At that point, people started to gather their coats and scarves, and whispered soft condolences to Will, his sister, and his mother. The drunk uncle, or family friend, was the last to leave, by which time he had sobered up enough to be polite and self-conscious about his behavior. So very sorry for your loss, he said. Take care and prosper, he told Will’s mother. Prosper? Will thought, confusingly. His mother dotted her

eyes with a handkerchief, which seemed to make the uncle uneasy. He then turned to Will, squeezed his forearm, and went on about how it was time for Will to get married, have a son, carry on the family name, and make his father proud. The uncle spoke relentlessly in the mother tongue about other things, yet always echoed back to marriage, bearing a son, and carrying on the family name. Will was, just barely, able to comprehend. The uncle waited for a response. Will couldn't find the words. This sudden expectation for Will to speak in his parents' language paralyzed his voice, his ability to speak, so he simply nodded. The uncle sighed and his breath reeked.

Will drove his mother home, then drove himself home. His two roommates decided collectively to leave Will alone—their doors locked, lights off, and pretended to sleep. It was too quiet. He walked three blocks to a bar, drank three bourbons in a row, and walked home singing the same three or four lines he knew from “Lean On Me,” wishing he had someone to sing it with. When he got home he fell asleep on the couch.

Will woke with a slight headache. He was driving west on I-90, heading to the campus library to do some schoolwork since he didn't need to go into the office today. It was golden hour. The visor helped as much as it could, and “Stay” played over the stereo. But, somehow, Will found himself on a lane that was farther left than he needed to be. A Jeep Wrangler directly to Will's right was going at the same speed. Will missed his exit. And Rihanna sang: *Round and around and around and around we go*. He could make out the athletic complex that hid the library from his view. Will sped up, passing the Wrangler, and started to sing along with the song. *Oh-oh now, tell me now, tell me now you know*. It was getting hot, so he cracked the passenger-side window,

just a bit. The rush of air rattled the pages of two essays that sat next to him, that he needed to read for a class, for tomorrow. When Will decided to finish his bachelor's degree, some seven months ago, his father was already so far gone that he gave no reaction when Will told him. If Will had told him just a year earlier, his father might've still been able to comprehend. Will missed his exit again. "Somewhere We Know" played over the stereo. His mother had told Will that his father understood him, even in that late stage, but Will knew it was a lie. His father didn't know who he was nor who Will was anymore. Will's eyes started to well. He looked into the sun, threw the pack of essays to the backseat, and accelerated. *This could be the end of everything. So why don't we go somewhere only we know?* Will drove past Soldiers Field park, the Harvard Stadium, the last bit of the Charles River and its piers, and wanted to keep this feeling of heading somewhere alive, so he kept driving. Away from Newton Centre. Away from Weston. Away from Natick Mall, Edgell Grove Cemetery, Cedar Swamp. The sun was still in his eyes but, with each passing place, it dipped further down toward the horizon until it became a fragile thin line. He had never driven this far west before.

Will stopped at a Denny's in Albany. He looked over the menu, and, when the waitress came, ordered coffee and the All-American. She set down an empty glass and filled it with ice water from a pitcher, spilling some onto the laminate table. Will twirled his finger in the small puddle she left. The last time he had driven this far west was when he made the drive from Boston to New Haven, New Haven to New York, and back again with his father, before he had gotten too sick. But that was a while ago, when Will was still working three part-time jobs to make a living, when his father, for the most part, was still able to take care of himself. Will dipped his finger into his glass and made the puddle larger, and continued to twirl. *Round and around and*

around and around we go. A family of five came in with two small children, a younger and older toddler. They sat in a booth two rows down; the dad pulled a chair from a table and sat at the end of the booth. Will wiped up the puddle before the waitress came back. After he ate, the sun was long gone, and Will got back on the highway. He accelerated to 70 mph, as “Where Did Our Love Go” blasted over the stereo. He mouthed the words *I got this burning, burning, yearning feelin’ inside me*, and thought about the consequences of not turning around. He had “Beyond Painting” in the morning, and work in the evening. The two essays that he needed to read for the class was still sprawled across the backseat, untouched. Will had yet to have an absence, and, if he turned around, could still make it back to Boston. But Will kept driving.

After Will dropped out of college, his mother told him that his father had been losing sleep because of it. This was news to Will. Though his father never spoke to Will directly about it, he always belted out phrases like “Let the boy do what he wants,” “Every man has to carve out his own path,” “It’s his own future” always within earshot of Will. What would it matter now if Will missed a class? What would it matter now if Will withdrew from school again? He had gotten by without a degree for years now.

He found a parking lot that served a Walmart and a Lowe’s, somewhere in a town between Albany and Utica. It was well past midnight and both stores were closed by now. He parked on the far side of the lot, hidden by the shadows of trees that separated the lot from the public road. He killed the engine, and cracked the window just enough for adequate airflow. “Hello, professor,” he started in an email. “I’m afraid I’m not feeling well. My father had just —.” Will stopped, deleted everything, and started over. “Dear professor...” He considered emailing his advisor instead, Mr. Mahan, who had helped with his readmission application. But it

didn't change a thing; every word seemed like the wrong word. Will started a different email, this time to Amelia, his best friend. They had met in college, taking the same printmaking class three semesters in a row, by sheer coincidence alone. They were both art majors, so it probably wasn't that strange. Amelia took Will for a weirdo the first time; he had a five month obsession with monoprints of menstrual-colored splots. After the class tore him apart in the final critique, Amelia found him crying on the wooded path between Harbor Point and their school, behind the same tree that Amelia liked to smoke weed. The second semester, after the second week of class, behind that same tree, as they smoked cheap weed, he confessed that he had feelings for her, had, in fact, told Amelia that he loved her. Amelia thanked Will, but said she wasn't interested, because she was bi but was most likely lesbian, unlikely to be involved with another man ever again, then wished Will luck in finding his person, and reiterated that she was definitely not that person; Will cried again. And, by the third semester, they had become good friends, and stayed that way even well after Will dropped out. Will fell asleep before he could write anything meaningful. In the limbo between sleep and wakefulness, Will caught a dim flash of light tingling his eyelids. Within the faint scape of a forgettable dream, he smelled the hint of water-saturated air, like that of a departing storm, or an approaching one.

Will drove around Colorado Springs, as he did with other cities, whenever he needed to take a break from driving, to take a rest stop, to eat. The city shared the look of a ski resort town, though he had never been to one. Its coarse concrete building facades and church spires against the backdrop of snow-capped peaks gave it that New England town feel. The street lanes in

Downtown were narrow and oddly claustrophobic for what the name of Colorado instilled in Will's mind.

The Dragon Palace stuck out, not because of the tackiness of the name alone, but also the artificial green of the paper-mâché-esque sculpted eaves, the fading cinnamon-candy red pillars that jutted out superficially from the actual wall of the storefront, and the gold painted dragon, the size of a carousel horse, that greeted guests with its one painted black eye. A neon sign advertised "Authentic Chinese Food." Will peered through the fogged-up window; the inside was betrayed by the outside, sporting a less gaudy and more subdued decor. Will went in and sat down at a booth. The restaurant was empty except for two tables. One sat two Chinese, a cook in stained kitchen attire with a head of white hair to match, and a waiter that was skinny and wore large black frames. They sorted leafy vegetables from one basin to another, picking off withered leaves, forming an ever-growing pile. When Will walked in, they paused to look at him before returning to their task. The other table, which paid no attention to Will, sat the only other customers, three young white professionals. One wore a tie. Two struggled with their chopsticks. On their table: fried rice, crab rangoon, and orange chicken.

Will thought he might order in his father's language. The waiter, and perhaps the two vegetable sorters, might laugh at his accent, take him for something foreign, gauge his Chinese-ness, scrutinize it, and pass judgment. Will chickened out, ordered the beef chow fun, in English. Will ran the four words for beef chow fun in his father's language, in his head: dry, stir-fry, beef, noodle. It wasn't that he was bad at it, or didn't know how to say it or how it was supposed to sound—it seemed so clear in his mind. Yet, when Will tried to form them with his voice, his throat choked and stuttered.

The chow fun were glazed in the color of dark soy sauce, loaded with onions, scallions, and beef, which glistened, coated in the thin fatty glow of juices, pan-seared to a golden brown. Will picked up a mouthful, blew on it, and took it in. Will's father was a line cook and had told him, on many occasions, that the quality of a Cantonese kitchen could be judged by this dish alone. The beef was tender but still had a bite to it; the noodles were chewy and carried the flavor of the dark soy; the entire dish had the fragrance of onions and caramelization. His father called this kind of caramelization wok-hei. The more Will ate, the more he felt at home. All along the walls were slips of vertical paper, written in calligraphy, of off-menu items.

酒	霸	醉	八
釀	王	鵝	寶
鴨	百	鷄	燉
子	子		全
	雞		鴨

Will spent the first sixteen years of his life in Chinatown until they moved to Dorchester. At the age of eight, his parents sent Will and his sister to a Chinese school during the weekend, to learn calligraphy, to memorize and recite classical Chinese poetry. Their parents kept this up for as long as they could afford it, a year or two, until they let Will's sister off the leash, and Will continued on for another year or two. Now, Will wished he hadn't squandered those years. Will had always been a slacker when it came to school, high school, middle school, and Chinese school was no different. During that time, Will never questioned why he was the one, and not his sister, that was made to continue on. Now, he could've probably taken a guess.

Before Will could drive out of Colorado Springs, he received a call from his mother. He let it ring while he tried to find a spot to pullover, wondering why she was calling, whether she knew he had left Boston, whether it was his roommates who let out the fact that Will hadn't been home in days, or whether it was Amelia, or his boss, or his advisor even.

"What's the matter with you?" his mother said.

"What do you mean?"

"Where are you, is what I mean. What's gotten into your head?"

"Was it Christopher and Kam?"

"Amelia told me."

"I'm fine, Ma. Don't worry about it."

"How can you tell me not to worry? You up and leave without a word, going who knows where, and you tell me not to worry? What about school? What about your job?"

"I'll worry about that later."

"Will, I need you to come home right now."

"Hang on, Ma. I need to park." Will put his phone down on the passenger seat, and drove into the parking lot of a Motel 6. The sign advertised vacancies, free laundry and wifi.

"Hello?"

"Tell me where you are," she said.

"I'm safe, Ma. I just need some time to think."

"How much time?"

"I don't know," he said. "I just need some time."

“You need to come home, Will. If this is about your father, he wouldn’t have wanted this to happen.”

“Who’s to say what he would or wouldn’t have wanted? He’s dead.”

“Oh, Will. Oh, Will. Oh, Will, do you think it has been at all easy for me? To mourn a man for four years on? To watch him bleed away while he lived and breathed?”

“I’m sorry, Ma.”

“Yeah. So am I.”

“I need this, Ma.”

“Consider your father. He would’ve wanted you to finish your degree.”

“It doesn’t matter now. He can’t see it.”

“Can’t he? Please don’t disappoint your father again.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Will tried to mask his anger.

“It means—”

“I know what it means.”

They tried to continue the conversation, until language failed them both. They repeated the same few phrases to each other. “Don’t worry,” “Not a child,” “It’s my life,” “Think of your father,” “Think of me,” “Sheer recklessness.” Then the same few words: “Father,” “Mine,” “Home,” “Safe,” “Stupid.” Then resorted to nasally sighs, tongue snaps, harsh grunts, until it no longer made sense to continue the call.

Will checked into the motel for the night and tried to sleep. Even with the curtains pulled all the way, they still left a thin gap in the middle, and whenever a car drove by along the road, its headlights cast an angular sliver of light against the water-stained walls and stucco ceil-

ings. Will had been wearing the same clothes for two days now, and, even with a shower, it felt the same. He turned on a lamp and took stock of what he had with him, laying them on the carpet next to the bed. A windbreaker jacket, a backpack, his laptop, his phone, with chargers, a notebook, one essay about a French surrealist painter, and another by Emerson, about walking in the woods. He had around forty dollars in cash, and credit cards. Will would need at least another set of clothes, make use of the motel's laundromat, find an ATM, talk to his advisor, call his bosses—ah hell. Hell, hell, hell. What was he doing this for?

Before Will's father reached his worst, there was a solid year, when he seemed like he was improving. Will was visiting him almost daily, even though he was taking turns with his sister, watching him, cooking for him, and making sure he was taking his medicine. The medicine had the side effect of vomiting, and Will had to check if the pill came out if his father did. As a child, Will was close to his father, looked up to him, waited for him to come home from work. But, as he and his sister grew up, bit by bit, it all dissolved away. His sister went into pharmaceuticals studies, while Will pursued the arts, painting, printmaking, sculpture. And when Will dropped out, hoping to move to LA, it was a chore to exchange even a few words. LA remained a dream, because of other reasons. And his father got diagnosed. After his father vomited, Will would check the toilet, wipe his father's chin, and pour him a glass of water. Will had done this, in this way, many, many times. A week before his father reached his worst, one of those times seemed different. Will checked the toilet, wiped, poured, all the same, but this time they exchanged an extended glance. Will asked if he was all right. His father said he was, dabbing the towel to his chin. He sighed and looked at Will, and Will looked at him. In that glance, in that moment, they seemed to have reached a conclusion. They understood, at last, their roles for one

another, an acceptance of who they were. What their relationship was and wasn't. Will climbed back into bed, leaving his items on the carpet. It was true that his father was never as good of a father as Will wanted him to be, but Will was also never as good of a son as his father wanted Will to be. He pulled the sheets closer to him, and wrapped them around, and tried, as hard as he could, to fall asleep.

Will returned to the Dragon Palace the next night. A world apart from what he had seen the day before. People, young families, professionals, old couples filled each booth and table. A family of nine, ranging from age six to sixty, it seemed, waited at the entrance to be seated. A tag team of waiters were working to clear a table of dirty dishes, tea cups, discarded bones, loose grains of rice into dish trays on a push cart. One waiter poured leftover tea onto the table, creating a wide puddle; she threw a clean towel over it and scrubbed the table with the towel in a clockwise swirl, until she reached the table's perimeter. The six year old tugged at the arm of his mother and pointed at a table with pu pu platters, lo mein noodles, and fried rice. Other dishes floated above the crowd on the hands and forearms of waiters. Steamed fish, sweet and sour pork, white-cut chicken, salt and pepper shrimp. Will and his sister grew up inside Chinese restaurants. Will's father was a reliable line cook, willing to work at a moment's notice, holidays, weekends. Their mother often took little Will and his sister to the restaurant, during their down times, so their father could see them. Will recognized the waiter from yesterday, skinny with black-rimmed glasses, who had been vegetable-sorting with the white-haired cook. He bee-lined toward Will, holding two plates of stir-fried greens; they met eye to eye until the waiter took a quick turn to land the dishes at a nearby table. Will followed the waiter, as he dashed back into the kitchen, up until

the double swinging doors that separated the dining room from the kitchen. Waiters moved in and out, ignored Will as he peeked inside each time the door swung open. Will's father remained a kitchen grunt for life, until his symptoms worsened, until it became a chore and a liability for restaurants to have him around.

Will stepped outside, let the quiet surround him, and sat down beside the yellow dragon, and probed its one painted black eye. He checked his phone and skimmed an email from Mr. Mahan, his advisor, that urged Will to "reconsider the decision," noting "irreversible consequences," pleading Will to "seek counsel," listing resources with proven records to be of help to those "in need." Mr. Mahan ended by leaving his office number and even cellphone number. Will lingered on the words "in need" before shutting off his phone. Wanting to hear a friendly voice, he briefly considered calling Amelia.

It was not unusual for men like Will's father, having saved enough, to open their own restaurants, to rise from employee to employer, kitchen grunt to restaurant boss. Will's father never did, and, when Will's mother and father argued and things got nasty, his mother would inevitably bring up the restaurant, his father's lack of one, his inability to rise like other men had. This was his mother's special ammunition; a bullet that she used sparingly but one that she knew would always hurt. A few months after Will dropped out of college and moved back in with his parents, his father handed him a check for nine thousand dollars. He told Will that he could use it to start a business, or go back to school, or do whatever he wanted with it. Will was in a bad place then, mentally, emotionally. Angry at the world, at himself. And the idea of receiving help from his father, from anybody, disgusted him. Will wanted to carve out his own path with his own two hands. He crushed the old man's heart, balling the check, tossing it across the room.

Amelia snapped at him when she heard of what happened, one of the few times she did. Will was selfish in his outburst. Will agreed after the fact, but there was no taking back what Will did.

Will looped around the back of the restaurant to the parking lot, adjacent to an alley lined with dumpsters, cardboard boxes, empty pallets, rotting vegetables. A thin stream of water ran up the alley like a moonlit river. A door was propped open by a hardy wooden wedge. The light of the interior illuminated the alley and parking lot. Two men in aprons sat on crates alongside the dumpster, smoking and talking in his father's language. One, Will recognized as one of the vegetable sorters, the white-haired cook in stained kitchen attire, from yesterday. Will walked over and asked if he could have one, miming puffing a cigarette. White Hair elongated an "ah," reached into his shirt pocket and gave the pack and a lighter to Will. Will kept standing, though there were enough crates for him to sit down. White Hair took off his cook's hat and scratched a spot on his head. He looked to be about fifty, with a thin build, loose tanned skin, and a clean shave. White Hair nudged his coworker and whispered a few words. "You Chinese. Yes?" White Hair asked, pointing to Will.

As a child, Will watched Hong Kong television shows with his mother and sister. They were rented for a dollar per tape from a video store in Chinatown; and his mother duped them religiously, bulk purchasing blank VHS tapes when they went on sale. His mother made Will label the tapes with their Chinese titles. The shows had English titles, but most were bastardized, and oversimplified translations. "God of Flavor" became "Recipe for the Heart"; "Police Division O" became "The Criminal Investigator"; "Full Moon Curved Blade" became "Against the Blade of Honor"—actually, that one was pretty good. Either way, it didn't matter because Will's

parents couldn't read English. His father would write out the characters on a scrap of paper for Will to use, as a reference, as he copied the Chinese onto the actual label. It was another way for Will to practice calligraphy outside of Chinese school. Aside from calligraphy, Will often had to memorize a poem per week. His father thought it was too easy, a waste of his money, and made Will memorize two, which Will always resented. But when his parents couldn't afford it anymore, the poetry stopped; much of it gone now.

White Hair tried again. "Chinese, right?" He made a thumbs up, grinning, showing his stained teeth. Will still hadn't answered. His coworker told White Hair to forget it, that he probably wasn't Chinese. White Hair argued that Will was, that he looked like it, but probably couldn't understand the language. White Hair's daughters were the same, he told his coworker. It was a shame. Will finished his cigarette, took a deep breath, and recited a line of poetry: "十年生死两茫茫." I told you he is Chinese, said White Hair, punching his coworker in the arm. And he knows poetry, they shouted. They urged Will to continue. Will tried to remember the rest of the lines but couldn't. That first line had been ingrained in his mind so sharply that the rest of the poem seemed to have faded from unimportance. He searched for something else. Will started, "對斯佳品酬佳節," "桂拂清風菊帶霜," and couldn't remember the rest.

A chubby middle-aged man in a collar shirt burst through the doorway, yelling, calling the two men lazy asses, and how the kitchen was swamped. White Hair took a quick long drag, almost choking, and stamped out his cigarette. The boss asked who Will was. He knows poetry, the two shouted. Will searched for words in his father's language and told the boss he was looking for a job. White Hair told the boss that he should hire him, because Will was a funny kid and knew poetry, as if, in the world of cooking, it held some kind of significance.

The kitchen was alive in the same way the dining room was alive, but the waiters were replaced with cooks. The white haired cook introduced himself as Ghost. Ghost had Will's arm by the hand and led him through the kitchen. The floor had a slickness to it; the tiles were wet from a few puddles of water, spilled from basket steamers, and spots of gravy left by morsels of fallen food. The stovetops blasted with fire, pushing against the underbellies of woks. The clang of steel spatulas and the wok's iron body accompanied the smells of chili pepper, soy sauce, peanut oil and caramelization, wok-hei. Ghost planted Will in front of a three-basin sink, one filled with dirty dishes, one filled with soapy water, and the last filled with nothing except the head of a spray hose. Ghost found a clean apron and helped Will put it on, and rolled Will's sleeves up for him. Ghost gestured toward the dishes, mimed washing them, and left him alone. Will went to work.

The night went on and the dishes piled up. Every time Will came close to emptying the basin, a waiter would bring new stacks. The boss checked on Will three times, and told Will to work faster three times. Leave the kid alone, Ghost shouted. Ghost had a row of tickets at his station, and shouted the names of dishes: Kung Pao chicken, salt and pepper squid, garlic stir-fried pea-pod stems. At times, Will was able to lose himself to the rhythm of the kitchen.

Ghost offered Will a place to stay the night, and in return Will drove them, and offered to drive him to work the next morning. Will's hands were sore and locking up from the dishwashing, but was able to get them home in one piece. Ghost didn't have a car and hadn't driven since a bad accident that confined him to a hospital bed for six months. It happened over twenty years ago, his wife told Will. Ghost lived with his wife twenty minutes west of Downtown. Ghost had relied

on a restaurant carpool that came with an uncontested biweekly twenty-dollar donation toward gas. Will refused Ghost's attempt to give him gas money, not knowing whether it was a show of his generosity or a test of Will's character. Ghost and his wife were empty nesters. Their two daughters grew up, became educated, and took the first chance they got to leave Colorado Springs. The daughters, around Will's age, sent occasional pictures through the mail, called them on the landline less than once a month, and rarely visited them at all. Both lived in California, one in Oakland, the other in Los Angeles. Will asked Ghost and his wife if they were mad at their daughters for leaving, for not calling or writing more often. Ghost shrugged. As long as they lived well, it didn't matter.

Will had dreamed of Los Angeles once. After dropping out of college, Will worked two part-time jobs, sometimes three, to save enough to leave, hoping to become a painter, carving out his own space, his own life in the city of angels, where he knew no one. Will worked at a call center, a CPA's office, as an assistant to a Boston-based painter, anything he could find without a college degree. After four years, Will was nearly ready to go. Then the diagnosis came. His father had been gradually forgetting things, misplacing keys, mixing up names; it was just old age, his father would say. His father had denied it at first, but after enough time, even the most stubborn had to accept their fate. That same year, when the symptoms were still mild, Will was persuaded to accompany his father on a trip to Hong Kong. Will had a decent amount saved and relented. They traveled in April for the Qingming festival, a festival to care for the dead. His father took him to the ancestral plots that lined the side of a mountain not far from Yuen Long. His grandfather, grandmother, two uncles, and an aunt were all buried there. Will and his father swept the graves clear of dust and dead leaves, repainted the fading red color of names marking

each gravestone, lit bundles of incense, offered rice, tea, wine, a whole roasted suckling pig. This is so and so, Will's father said, with each gravestone. When they returned to the states, his father told Will that he could leave and go to LA now, that everything would be fine without him. Will couldn't decide if he was being tested or not. Either way, Will couldn't bring himself to leave.

The couch was fine, but Ghost's wife kept apologizing until she went to bed. Will didn't complain. He tried running hot water over his hands, it helped a little, but they were still stiff and tense. Trying to find a bit of comfort, Will pulled out his phone and played a song on low volume. Ghost's wife had gone to bed.

I always had that dream like my daddy before me

So I started writing songs, I started writing stories.

Ghost walked in with a small bottle, and said that it should help. He sat next to Will and unscrewed the cap, filling the air with the scent of menthol and an herbal, woody fragrance. He pulled Will's hand close and dabbed a few drops onto it; the smell intensified. Ghost kneaded the brownish liquid between his knuckles, his palms, his joints. He asked what Will was listening to. American music, he said. Will turned it a bit louder.

Soon we'll be thirty years old, our songs have been sold

We've traveled around the world and we're still roaming.

What did the words mean, Ghost asked, what was the song about. Will listened, searched for how to best translate it, feeling out the words of his father's language, Ghost's language. Some words came to him, but they seemed unfitting, inadequate to convey the song's true meaning. The words were only good enough, never a true one-to-one match. Will did what seemed the most accurate, what he felt was the most right and real. Will sang along.

Soon I'll be sixty years old, my daddy got sixty-one

Remember life and then your life becomes a better one.

I made a man so happy when I wrote a letter once

I hope my children come and visit, once or twice a month.

Will attempted to put his soul into it, and Ghost joined in. He didn't speak English well nor did he try to fake it; his voice made sounds that approximated the words from what he could gauge. As the song played, and as Will sang, Ghost's words became an instrument, picking up the tonal shifts, the rises and falls, adjusting pitches, elongations. They shaped a path that followed the song's emotions, that followed Will's emotions.

Soon I'll be sixty years old, will I think the world is cold

Or will I have a lot of children who can warm me.

Soon I'll be sixty years old, will I think the world is cold

Or will I have a lot of children who can warm me.

After the song, Ghost went to bed. Will tried to as well. The smell of the herbal medicine lingered alongside the melancholy of the song. He took out his phone and thumbed through Instagram, Facebook, text messages, emails. It brought him back to his life before he left. Will started to weep. At first, silently, then a muffled wail. He hid his face with the pillow and pulled the covers over him. He wept for his friends back home, his mother and sister, his father, for the life that his father had lived, for the life that Will would live without him, the unrealized moments, the lost opportunities. He wept, and he wept. And, at that moment, Will wanted nothing more than to hear that his father was proud of him, proud of him for something, proud of him for anything,

that it was all right to fail, that it was all right to get up and fail again, and that it was all right for
Will to be who he was.