**TALES FROM THE CHRONIC MYTHOS**

**(Stories)**

**by**

**Steve Noyes**

Canada: 993 Admirals Road

Victoria BC

V9A 2P1

[snoyes@vanisle.net](mailto:snoyes@vanisle.net)

250-382-0922

UK: G5/D Woolf College

University of Kent

Canterbury UK

CT27BQ

44-07523-504-778

smn6@kent.ac.uk

Some of these stories have appeared or will appear in *Qwerty, Pilot Pocket Project #12,* and *Wasafiri* (UK).

**Table of Contents**

**Pooky Wooky Summer…4**

**Angry Shanghai Manga…32**

**May Or No Way…45**

**The Girl and the Ghost…48**

**The Member…72**

**Burning Swarm of Ali…87**

**The Coolerator…101**

**Convenience…109**

**The Foreigners…125**

**Pooky Wooky Summer**

Rocks Heights was hot and still and the lawns were if not a hot yellow scorched colour then brown, and there were no cars parked next to the curbs, which were not curbs but just slopes. Ransom pulled up in his ex’s driveway and got out. The arrangement of cigarette packs, lighter, and parking-tickets on the dash was stable. His son was sleeping in the back seat.

He looked up from undoing the boy’s belt.

Nothing.

Up on the bluffs, perched, the luxury aeries, big windows, west coast wood, hideouts of international superspies, as far as he knew, or the Deans of universities in cardigans, their casual chat changing the direction of entire economies—people he would never know, looking down on him.

Ransom turned and may have seen a neighbor of hers, awkwardly watching between a car and a stucco wall; he may have heard the closing of a door; the street returned to early summer silence.

The sun centered at the street’s end like the orb atop a key.

His son mumbled into Ransom’s neck, his legs working against Ransom’s thighs as he carried the boy across the lawn got his hand free rang the bell.

“You’re late,” said his ex.

“He had a long nap,” Ransom said. “May I, we, come in?”

“No, why would I mind?”

She let him pass and touched the boy’s plastered hair above his ear.

Ransom laid his son on his bed and the boy opened his eyes and puzzled took in Ransom, the hockey-player wallpaper, and was already sinking into sleep again. Ransom bent and kissed his boy.

She was waiting in the kitchen.

“A glass of water, please?” said Ransom.

She poured it and gave it over and stepped back against the oven, her arms crossed high over her breasts. There was just enough time for Ransom to feel the stifling silence, the odor of her last meal, fish-sticks, before she spoke next.

“You’re going to get served. I got to tell you. Someone’s going to serve you,” she said.

“Oh well, I got to serve somebody,” Ransom said. “That’ll be a change.” Light of it.

But when she didn’t laugh, he said, “What do you mean?”

“I mean a man’s going to come and tap you on the shoulder and give you a copy of what I’m going to give you right now. Sorry, Jack, but I got to.”

As she fetched the photocopies from the living room Ransom remembered he had a glass of water in his hand, and drank some.

“There you go.”

He started reading.

“Jack, I’ve been more than patient.”

He flipped to the third page where a lawyer’s scrawl finished it all off, the post-dated cheques for child support, references to statute and schedule. He threw it on the floor.

“You can’t change the access,” he said.

“So let’s settle the support. You do that, we can talk about access.”

“I’ve had Terry every single fucking weekend.”

He put his hands on the counter, said, “Shit.”

“Jack, are you listening? This finding yourself stuff is over. You’re not finding a goddamned thing. You’re not working. Meanwhile, there’s clothes and dental and school supplies. Go back to the Children’s Ministry, Jack. Can’t you even do that, for Terry, for your son?”

She was watching his rear toe scraping at the lino.

“My lawyer is prepared to be very reasonable. We’re not—.”

His hands caught her shoulders and slammed her back against the oven, and she groaned, twisting from him, held her kidney area as she slumped; he caught her pinned her with both hands over the burners; her eye was trained on the spiral of the element.

“Now. Okay. Jack. Now, okay. Okay.”

He smoothed her throat with his thumbs.

Something was kicking at the backs of his legs.

Ransom raised his hands and backed off. His ex was blubbering, the boy was blubbering; they huddled together.

“Jesus Christ,” Ransom said. “Mary. I.”

She broke from the boy and pointed at the door.

“Go!”

He scraped his shin getting in the car. He felt shuddery sick before he turned the key, and just as he swung out, an ice-cream truck turned into the street ahead, its dim carillon ringing across the yellow lawns, and as Ransom crept past the truck, doors were opening along the Rock Heights boulevard, the tykes and tomboys running across the lawns to the door of the ice cream truck, and its electric blare of cheer around an old tune swept into Ransom’s car, and he pulled over and held his ears until the boys and girls returned to their homes holding their cones just ahead of their tongues.

\*\*\*

Now, in the difficult ward, it is quiet as befits a disinfected hallway where many antipsychotics are at play, and the birdlike beings parked in wheelchairs peer at the personnel with an eager and Martian curiosity; the hallway leads to a barely lit room in which Ransom presides, a little underweight, a little chicken-necked--all right, a living wreck--in his specially designed chair he can shit through the bottom of, with his feet strapped down and his curiously plump belly taut in a seat-belt of sorts. He leans over his knees sometimes and drools on them. He is mostly in his mind. Where black roads are still unrolling, flecked with leaves, sun-polished through the branches. Rushing. All that rushing. And the fuzz-rot blackberries fermenting outside the town of Scaler. His eyes are trained on the door, but he has no expectation of an entrant.

Ransom, as it turned out, is regularly visited and fed puddings by his ex-wife, but he has no recollection of her; nor can he tell her his pudding has fallen in a caramel clot on the floor. She is checking her text messages. Good gracious, it is best for all concerned on the difficult ward that he not pick up on what a hell this is.

When she leaves, Ransom cackles and says to the sole geranium on the night-stand, “You better go,” but he does not mean her. He means someone else.

And the roads return, night-roads, rushing, night-curves, rushing.

\*\*\*

“Look, here,” said the Regional Inspector, a clamped man in his Fire Service Gore-Tex and his borrowed boots. The two of them, black sticks in a thicket of black sticks at sunrise, were picking their way among the stumps.

His companion just crumbled a hunk of charcoal and was enjoying the rich shards as they slid from his gloved hand and smirched his jeans.

“I don’t see it,” he said, aware that this was the correct Fire Service cue for instruction.

The Inspector’s owl-like face softened, some.

“You see this wavy line in the loam? That’s an accelerant. The heat-burst shoots out and makes a wavy line. And then. It skips, on a surface wind. Perhaps. Or its own volition. We don’t know why it skips, why it makes waves. But come on.”

The Inspector leading, the men walk on, stopping by a log, whose rounded top is all small, glossy pillows of charcoal. The Inspector picks up and tosses aside a burnt starling. Their boots crunch. They were in a mass of dark stelae, finely ranked and blistered silviculture. It went on and on. And beyond the hollow the men dip into, the fire’s damage spread out to the highway. The sun was coming up, above La’watl’kl, and the men sensed in the chill its changing, hesitant gradient.

“Here.”

The hollow was about twenty yards across, grey ash with sprinkled yellow bark-flecks.

“What am I supposed to see?” said his companion.

The Inspector shifted some toasted earth. It was faint, but it was undeniably a footprint. Sneaker. Pattern of the plasticized rubber.

“Size seven,” his companion said.

“Wrong. Three-four. Female. Feral, I’m thinking. A child, actually.”

“A child.”

“And look over here.”

There was a small hollow at the bottom of the hollow, with signs of digging with fingers, rake-marks.

“Anything funny about the ground?” said the Inspector.

“It stinks a little.”

“Normal.”

“I can’t see it.”

“From the pattern of fallen branches, the fire swept this way,” he swooped his glove toward the stelae, “and coming back, this way. The wavy lines are kerosene, we’ll check that. Over here. I’m thinking she started the fire and it caught a wind and she got trapped, couldn’t get away fast enough. For a time she was trapped in this declivity. You can see, can’t you, can’t you? She tried to dig a hole.”

“Holy shit.”

“She was lucky. It took off that way. There’s still moss on these stumps. It just touched down around her, in spots. I wonder.”

“We should get back,” his companion said.

“I wonder what she thought about when she was in the middle of the fire,” said the Inspector.

“Sir, you think too much.”

“I don’t think enough.”

\*\*\*

Many years ago, Baby pulled the cord for the light in the root-cellar, and stumbled to the hatch, and easy-pie was running through the trees downhill to the highway moving fast. It was a scene Baby often tried to recreate. Her breath white and quick. The stars in the black. The bathing of the headlights as the first car slowed to pick her up. Her phony story. But she cannot. In her plaintive recreation, she was always looking back in her attempts at a dark roofline in the trees. She got dropped off at a gas-station near Chetwynd, and crawled into the fringe of woods behind it and slept a long time wedged snug to an oil-barrel on its side. She may look back, and that may frighten her, but it was not one hundred percent sure he would come after her, or even care, much, when he noticed, and Baby knew this, because she set it up, beautifully, and Mother, well, she just couldn’t, anyway. Do much.

“Daddy, what do the police do?”

“Lots of stuff. Huh. Useless.”

“Do they look for people?”

“Sure, they look for people. People on the run.”

“Kids?”

Daddy’s face went dark. “Don’t you dare,” he said. “It’s none of their business. We got what’s between us, all of us. Sweetheart, you wouldn’t get far. And I sure as hell wouldn’t come looking.”

“I meant kids in general, Daddy. Like that Michael kid.”

He was drunk.

“On the milk carton,” said Baby.

“So a kid goes missing. Who the hell gives a fuck?”

Her sisters finished their dinners and one by one got up and washed their plates and went up the stairs to bed, slippers and bare feet.

“Thanks, Daddy,” Baby said. “For explaining about the cops.”

“You wanna be useful, get me a glass.”

Now, she had that roofline in mind, waking up behind the Chetwynd Esso, and the chimney pleasantly smoking with Daddy’s considerations upon finding her gone--the police involved and maybe they’d see Samantha, how little she was, and maybe her old bruises, I got a stolen truck and unregistered guns, so let her go--but it was still a difficult matter for Baby: if she held that roofline too long she’d hear a clear shout, Daddy’s command, and her heart would go shooting back, fluttering the leaves, to that awful room.

She had other things to think about, like food and shelter unrolling before her as an endless task. She had thirty-seven dollars and another two girls’ school IDs she’d pinched at phys-ed.

She went back to sleep, and the details of her leaving came, slow and heavy as blood.

Plain faced Mary on the landing in her nightgown, hand on the newel, and her noiseless kiss that consecrated all.

Father slumped across the kitchen table, the bottle slant from his hand, as though escaped from him.

Mary lifted the trap-door for her.

“You can, too,” Baby said. She was already thinking about the trees, the ditch, the highway. The men would be driving on the way to the crummies; the highway was their driveway.

Mary put a finger to her lips.

“Go,” she said. “I got to look out for her.”

Then Baby’s head popped down into the darkness.

The cellar. What leaped from the lightbulb. Spiderwebs, sprouting turnips.

\*\*\*

Nobody knows how these things get started, but that’s what they ended up calling it: *pooky wooky summer*. It became the pet phrase of community college journalism grads in their AM peerages. In July the fires had started, and *pooky wooky*, which had formerly only been applied on radio to describe an altercation at a topless bar outside Summerland, took on a new meaning – the province was wired for naught but calamity. The ridges of pine outside Axwalaka caught fire, deer streaked from the crackling forest, in Terrace and Smithers there were new fires, people stood on their roofs playing water from hoses over their shingles. And the green tiara of hills outside Bridesville was wreathed in smoke as the fire played down the Kettle Valley.

“BC Fire says the losses due to destroyed property are in the millions already; thousands have been evacuated.”

“You know, Jeff, the second growth of Indian paintbrush brush and fireweed it’s just gonna be magnificent. That’s the pooky-wookiness of it I guess.”

“It’s pooky wooky all right. No other word for it.”

Ransom listened to the radio in his office; no one was around. Friday at 6. The weekend was a big scary blank to him. This summer he was avoiding people. He avoided conversations with his colleagues. His boss. He reminded himself – never talk to the ex. He couldn’t talk to his son. The bitch had laid a restraining order on him after their parting fight. He’d started to choke her, and his boy had darted into the kitchen and beat at his legs until he came to his senses and ran.

The phone rang and he picked up, for he knew who it was.

“Friday night and you’re working. Get a life, fuck-face.”

“Hello, Baby.”

“Chewing through those files, eh? You’ll never find the likes of me.”

“We’ll find you.”

“Three and a half year I ain’t been in custody, care. And me a Ward of the State. I may go public with this. ‘*Sweet Girl Slips Through Cracks*.’ Game over, you better believe it, you wheezing lump of shit.”

“Just so you know we’re tracing this.” But he hadn’t pressed that button yet – he couldn’t be bothered. He put his feet up on the desk.

“What, are you breathing at me? You fucking poultice of putrid slug meat. Did I ever tell you about the time Paw killed a homeless? He dragged him all fucked up down to the creek and broke the ice with his head and strangled him with fishing line, he should have used 40 pound line, such needless suffering.”

“The thing about you Baby is you’re all alone and you don’t know it. You’re all alone out there. You better take care.”

“I’m beyond all that.”

She hung up.

He felt it was wrong to avoid talking with Baby. Her calls were infrequent but becoming more regular. She’d been calling him since May. At first he’d told no one for a month. Then he’d made a presentation at a staff meeting, and asked for a case-load reduction so he could spend time on tracking down this weird girl, for the voiceprints said her timbre and pitch were those of an eight-year old.

Ransom switched on the overhead fluorescents, for he had been sitting his hands white in the task-light’s pale circumference, so he could look at his maps and charts, his theories and lists.

One of his early theories was that a transfer of the girl, from a Remand Centre, or a Psychiatric Unit, or even a hospital emergency room, had gone wrong or didn’t occur, and had been overlooked in the paperwork. After long and patient tracking he was left with three girls missing from foster care situations, all born in 1998, all, he noted, Scorpios. They fit the profile. Rainbow Joseph, last seen hitchhiking outside Kamloops. Jacqueline Morel, last seen in a junior high gym in Treeline. Courtney Kincaid, last seen in a mall in Salamakat. Their pictures couldn’t have been more different. Rainbow was a sulky bruised under-the-eyes type with long black hair who looked impossibly thin across the shoulders. She wore an Avril Lavigne tee shirt. Jacqueline had originally had military parents and was with a foster home on the base in Boundary. She had a tomboy’s fine-cropped crew and big mournful eyes and she wore a duck-hunting vest way too big for her. Courtney was an Ice Capades blonde and the only photo they had was her in a hospital bed a tube in her nose, she had some complicated lung thing. Barney jammies and a camisole.

Ransom shifted his attention to the map where push-pins radiated from a rough circle, Prince Rupert to Prince George to Kamloops down to Hope and through the Lower Mainland and up to Lund and beyond to Bella Bella. The thing about BC, the roads were all long narrow corridors. He hoped to catch Baby in Boston Bar or on the Skeena. The push pins were located where the cell phones used to make the calls had been reported stolen. She moved quickly after each theft, sometimes covering more than 500 clicks in a day.

He thought she had a cache of cell phones somewhere on the Coquihalla. She arranged a lift before she made the call, and then took off? She made the calls en route? She had an accomplice? He didn’t know. Lately the calls had been untraceable; she’d learned how to get into the trunk lines using a dog whistle or a Radio Shack keypad, $18.95, but it would have to be wired by an expert. Maybe an old mobile from the 70s? Once or twice she had called from pay phones, but these were from remote gas stations on secondary roads, the population so far-flung that a search would be futile.

Ransom was struck by something; he touched the map and traced with his finger one by one the calls in the last two weeks. He did this again. There it was. Treeline, Xwintala, Watershed, Dufferin, Treeline again. The calls formed a pentagram.

An eight year old with the intellect of a Renaissance scholar. An eight year old with Satanic edge. Who the hell *was* this Baby?

They had successfully traced one of the first land-line calls to a shack listing into a swamp outside Bachelorville. They had to use four by fours to get there on a logging road with lots of deadfall and steep runaway lanes grown over with salal. Lightfoot’s green dark forest closed in again damned quick. No one had driven the road for a long time, they flattened a tall spine of horsetails thistles under their bumper as they went, and in the shack someone had ripped out the lino and the plywood floors and the dirt was strewn with scat; and in the living room was a rotary dial phone, a book of matches from a casino, two huge crinkling plastic containers full of gasoline, and nothing else.

\*\*\*

Baby woke up behind the White Spot dumpster in Iron Angel.

She was on her way to the Husky, uphill past the Big Box, when the RCMP car slowed beside her.

“Where you going?”  
 A young cop.

“School.”

“Get in, I’ll give you a lift.”

She got in.

“You’re headed the wrong way,” he said.

Baby held up a set of keys. “Gotta get new ones cut, my Ma she got the locks changed.”

The cop studied her.

“I never seen you before.”

“I’m usually in school.”

“Is there a problem at home?”

Baby looked out the window, holding it for several beats.

“I can handle it.”

The cop thought for a second. “I’m sure you can. Here we are.”

She walked through the front doors past the trophy cases and ducked into a washroom. Empty. She waited for a good fifteen, feet up on the toilet seat, picking her nose, and got Teddy out of her backpack. “We’ll change his fucking locks, all right,” she told him.

When she arrived in Spurline, they were evacuating the outskirts; the fire had run swiftly, jumping the highway, and the edges of the forest were substantial spectral sheets of twenty foot flame. A pall of smoke caught in the back of the evacuees’ throats, as they left their homes and parked their SUVs at the high school, where cots were set up in the gym. They were giving out free bottled water. Baby helped herself. The firefighters were gearing up in the parking lot; they pulled on their leggings and jackets and helped each other with masks and tanks. They carried axes and shovels; they were going in to dig firebreaks around the town. Baby stood on the edge of the crowd, Teddy dangling from her fist, drinking in their camaraderie, their sense of high adventure. She wished she were a boy sometimes.

Baby thought better of sleeping in the gym, and broke into one of the abandoned houses that night and stayed up watching them fight the fire. It was pretty, their dark silhouettes struggling in the firelight, the twisting sprays of sparks. It reminded her of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego in the furnace of the Pharaoh. She fell asleep, she woke up, her neck cramped.

She was going to get that bastard, if it took her whole fucking life.

\*\*\*

Ransom stood on the pontoon unsteadily, gripping a strut, as the floatplane taxied into the Scaler dock. The cop was waiting for him, hat in hand, sheepish from the get-go. In his small detachment office Ransom heard his story, the girl was about eight, unkempt, *purple* hair, he took her to school.

“And?”  
 “I was in the middle of about a hundred other things, I.”  
 Ransom judged the cop had come to the end of his rope, his two-year posting. He could imagine easily how everyone knew him and had made some deal or other with him to keep the peace; he had called in all his favors.

“I didn’t think much of it at the time. There’s a high dropout rate here, there’s lots of kids not in school.

“At least I reported it.”

Ransom let it drop. They went over the description again. It could be anyone that age with purple hair. Not very helpful.

“There’s something else. I had the strangest feeling when I was talking to her. I gotta mention it. It felt like I wasn’t talking to a person, to a human being.”

Ransom sat up. “How come?”

“It felt like I was talking to a mainframe computer or something. A database. I could not shake this feeling, afterwards. All she was, was an assembly-point of information, like I was scanned through a huge checkout.”

Ransom gave him his card, told him to keep in touch.

“And another thing,” he said. “She stinks.”

\*\*\*

In late July, there was a reprieve of several weeks, and Ransom continued his investigations unbothered. The Welfare Ministry had had a leak. A client had been found with her hand in the cookie jar; the case involved sixteen phony names and addresses and as many welfare cheques collected by some trailer trash in Prince George. Welfare fraud was all over the media. Welfare was taking all the heat. The Minister rose in the House to hoots and calls of “Resign!” New forest fires blazed up outside Merritt, Summerland. Tourism dollars were way down in the Okanogan and Shushwap. Everywhere there was smoke on the horizon.

Ransom checked his voicemail:

“I sent the countersuit to your home address, did you go over it? I need you to sign. Call me. Under no circumstances talk to your wife. Repeat: do not talk to your wife. Call me.”  
 “Hi, okay, just checking in. Everything okay? Guess you’re not in, or you’re not picking up. Right. Bye.”

“Hi, it’s me. Are we having fun yet, numb-nuts? I’m in the Sandman in South Hazelton, that’s just south of North Hazelton, Room 39. Ransom, you don’t know shit.”

\*\*\*

“Let me out here,” said Baby.

“You’re a stupid girl. I keep telling you but you won’t listen. You biggest problem is you ain’t got no Jesus in you, you know that? So quit your hollering and complaining—Jesus ain’t listening.”

“Just let me out.”

The overweight driver of the Country Squire wiped his forehead with a snotrag as he slowed, pulled onto the shoulder, mouth working: “Jesus ain’t gonna let you down, not ever. Now just sit a spell. Cause there’s something we can do about it. Just set and we’ll go through a little ri-chool that’ll bring Jesus right into your heart. Accept him as your personal Saviour.”

“Fuck you,” said Baby, and spat in his face.

She wrenched open the door and hit running. The car was whining up the hills toward the moon.

She found the road to the family ranch, working at it, steep. As she neared the top the road got darker; she unhooked the drooping wire cattle-gate, the smell of wild mint grew stronger, and Baby got angrier; he had brought her and her sisters here summers.

The cabin sat near the pond overlooking the distant hills and the American border.

The door was hanging and the windows all broken. Part of the roof was caved in at a corner. Yellow warped Reader’s Digests on the table. A mosquito coil, half-used.

She fell asleep and awoke to hot sun through the kitchen window and a furious rustling from the mudroom. In the rafters there was a nest and a small hawk was beating its wings in the back door, trying to lure Baby away. She ran at it and it burst outside, aloft.

Baby snatched down the nest and feasted on the eggs, sucking every last bit of albumin out of them, crushing the shells in her fist.

\*\*\*

Ransom returned to the tapes. He had boxes and boxes of tapes. He had miniature cassettes of the telephone calls. He had Dictaphone tapes of the incidents in the three girl’s lives, calls in to Children’s Security. He had videotapes; he hadn’t gotten to them yet. He had put aside some time to listen this weekend, and played them continuously. He listened especially to Baby’s voice.

*I ain’t no ordinary eight year old, Ransom. I’m your worst fucking nightmare.*

*You slime bucket, you Viagra-pit.*

*Why don’t you check out the Kamloops casino. I was playing Keno there last week. Don’t think too hard, fuckhead.*

Sometimes the voice rose in rebarbative wavelets, like a taunt, a skip-rope song, but it was essentially faux-adult. He was starting to see that Baby had constructed this voice, it was her idea of cracker-slang. He wondered if she had read Flannery O’Connor, then dismissed the thought. Then reconsidered it. The false adulthood was definitely there, subtle, like a skilled singer trying to sing slightly outside her comfortable octaves. No real regional flavour to the voice, as if she had learned to speak watching The Simpsons. He played them over and over, letting her voice fill his head.

He had phoned his lawyer yesterday.

“I want to see my son,” was what he said.

“Now, hold on, you know how these things go.”

“It’s my fucking right, I want reasonable access.”

“The court has to decide on access. You need to be patient.”

“He’s my son!”

“As your lawyer I have to be realistic with you about what the score is for men in your situation. And there’s a restraining order. You want to see your son you should never had laid hands on her. I think we can look at appealing the access provisions within a reasonable time-frame. It will take time.”

“I’m paying you two fifty an hour and you’re telling me be patient. Thanks a fuck of a lot.”

“Ransom, you better cool it.”

He sucked in his breath.

“You don’t know where she is, do you?” he said.

“I’m going to pretend I didn’t hear that. I’ll be in touch when we get a date.”

Ransom went through the box of videotapes, which were taped child-abuse hearings from the Vancouver Family Court, some from regional Family Courts. He had asked for anything remarkable in the last ten years.

“What do you mean, remarkable?” they asked him.

“I mean disgusting,” he said. “I mean repellent.”

“No problem,” they said.

At that time, they had videotaped all the indictable trials, and the examinations for discovery. He slid another one in, pressed play.

A huge man in a velour suit and a bowl haircut sat hunched listening at a table too small for him. Ransom could tell the suit was a hideous Hunter green or soul purple; he had never seen a velour suit in a normal color. The sound was jarring and flat.

The shot changed to a teenage girl picking at her cuticles in the witness stand.

“…that’s him. That’s my stepfather.”

She blew her nose.

“The court wants to hear what sort of things your stepfather did to you and your sisters.”

“He made us do things. He made us take off our clothes and eat off the floor. Sometimes he screwed me.”

“He had intercourse with you?”  
 “That too. The intercourse hurt, I—“

The prosecutor wanted to clarify—the judge waved him off.

She could not go on.

She went on.

“He tied us up sometimes. Once he ordered us all into the basement and hollered down the stairs he was going to come down and shoot us, but he never came. We sat there for hours and finally Mom went upstairs and he was passed out. We went to bed and never mentioned it again.”

The other camera picked up the man, transfigured by this narrative, unavoidably, in Ransom’s eyes, into a monster with a protruding brow and oxen like eyes, in his Friendly Giant bowl cut, just sitting there, cool, shut down. Ransom made him 230, 240 and muscled. A dangerous man.

The teenage girl was sobbing raggedly into her arm.

“If you have had enough and can’t say anymore just tell the Court and we can recess, let you calm down. Just say the word. I want to treat you like I would my own daughter. This isn’t easy for you, there, there. Court will recess—half an hour.”

They led the giant out in his velour suit. He wasn’t cuffed.

She was back, had drawn her feet up onto her seat, speaking over her knees. “I’m ready. My boyfriend told me to tell the truth. He encouraged me to come forth all along, cause I started to remember when, when, oh shit.”

She cried.

“He wanted to develop our relationship, I mean make love to me, and, and, I started to remember.”

“Get the young lady some water, Sheriff.”

The screen broke up, and then the camera on the giant, standing, and the judge’s voice:

“The Court is satisfied there is enough evidence on all the charges to try Simon Madken for rape, sex with a minor, assault and pederasty. No bail shall be allowed. You are hereby ordered into custody until such time as the Court will hear the case. A date should be selected. This Court may hear the case on September 15; is this suitable for counsel?”

Ransom looked at the tape’s label: if Baby was eight, really, she was three then. In Lalakwit, the aluminum company town. Or she was five, six. He called the RCMP in Rupert and found out that Madken had been out on parole for two years, had been psychiatrically assessed, judged fully rehabilitated, and had stopped seeing his parole officer about six months ago, a free man. He had last been living in Axwalaka. Ransom checked the phone and city directories but there was no Madken in any town in the North; nor was there a Madken on 411.com.

Ransom put a Kleenex in the ashtray and lit it; watched it turn orange at its fringes and collapse into a trembling gray wasp’s nest.

He started making phone calls to account for the Madken children.

\*\*\*

Baby was drinking from the pond on her knees when a shiver scampered up her back and she stiffened staring at the porch on the cabin, remembering how her stepfather would appear on the porch in just his work boots and call them in, and they would come in from the fields and the pasture, or from the top of the hill, or the barn, and wait for him to tell them what to do.

A memory unspooling. She smelled sage from the hills.

April had the worst of it, he had fucked her from behind and made them watch, she had the prettiest ribs and tits starting to swell. Alice got it too.

His hand fondling her. “My baby, my baby,” he said.

She ran to her backpack and got out the cell phone, and dialed and waited. She clicked it off, thought. Then she dialed again, her eyes on the porch.

“Full fathom five my fucking father lies,” she said. “His bones of coral made. I have timelines, Ransom, I’m goal-oriented. I hope you’re getting this.”

But Ransom wasn’t listening. He was in Iron Angel.

Baby hucked the cell phone into the pond.

\*\*\*

“We thought you should be seeing this,” Sergeant Oblinksy said, “now, what is your pleasure?”

He had a modest mini-bar in his office.

“I don’t have any pleasures,” said Ransom. “What have you got?”

“I got scotch, I got wine, I got Slivowicz, I got a couple of beers.”

“Just put the fucking tape in.”

On the wall there was a velvet painting—Ransom peered to confirm—of the Pied Piper of Hamelin playing the flute for a phalanx of rats.

Ransom had been unable to turn the air-conditioning off in his hotel room last night, so he was surly. He ignored Oblinsky and looked out over the spurlines and snow to the two-lane, and over the guardrail into the valley where there were zigzagging roads to the face, hectares of rock dunes, the faint clank of machinery.

“We got this from the local TV station. It is happening about five years ago. Little girl she disappear, they close the case eventually our detachment, we do not have the resources, I am sorry. This is her mother comes to the TV station asks for help finding little girl. Name is Mandy Tenbray. This is her, now, this is Mrs. Tenbray.”

“We just pray to God she’s okay,” the slow-talking, almost muffled woman said. “She’s our little angel. I know you’re okay and I can’t wait to hug you and kiss you I love you so much, Mandy. Please come home.”

“Watch this part,” said Oblinsky.

There was a short clip of a five year old, it looked like, singing in some community-hall talent show; she wore a tiny Stetson with a whistle-clip at her throat. She was absurdly young. She sang Patsy Cline’s ‘I Go To Pieces.’ She had not a bad voice for a five year old. Her skin was so fair it looked like her brain was growing out through her skull, the veins were blue. Her eyes were blue too. She tapped her foot as she sang. Then there were still shots of school photos.

“You can tell me what you know any time,” said Ransom.

“There was a name-change, legal name change, all the children in Tenbray family. The mother, she *was* Mrs. Madken.” Oblinsky sipped his whisky, his eyes sad. “Your job it is very hard, maybe? Will you not drink with me?”

\*\*\*

He met the Deputy Minister in the Vancouver airport. The Deputy was brisk:

“Since this Madken girl was never in our care, you have to stop. Return to your job. Keep all your notes, but stop looking for her. The police are involved.”

“But.”

“No buts. Stop.”

Ransom shot the shit with him until he had to board, and then Ransom went to the Air BC counter and bought a ticket to Kamloops. He would phone in sick, terrible flu, yadda yadda. He had to play a couple of hunches.

In Kamloops he waited until the teenage receptor of stimuli – ears to the iPod, eyes on the CNN feed—cleared out, and he opened the locker he’d rented last week and withdrew the canvas bag. It contained a Remington bolt-action rifle with scope and a Beretta automatic handgun, clips and shells, and a length of soft rope. He walked swinging the bag to the Travelodge and checked in, spent some time assembling and disassembling the rifle. The hills north of town were snow-molded with dark blots of sage, brown earth near the top.

Later, he walked back to the Avis outlet and rented a compact, returned to the hotel and fidgeted in the parking lot, in the cold, for a couple of hours, concentrating on what cold had to tell him about space, which in turn would tell him about time, about sequence and pattern; lone whistles from freights beyond the hills seemed to corroborate his reverie. He was virtually sure he was right, both counts: his ex was living in Potlax’tl, and Baby would show up next near Baker’s Face, where Madken had worked the longest as a miner. He wasn’t sure about the timing; he would have to wait Baby out. Perhaps he would suddenly *know*. There was only just enough room in the car for his knees. The ex and his son could be dealt with directly. He imagined taking the boy, but hadn’t got much beyond that.

He knew it was Potlax’tl because he knew his ex had a thing for cowboys, and there was a certain cowboy type who’d showed up at a family dinner from Potlax’tl, and Ransom had caught the look that passed between them, and he knew how his ex would have gone about it: there would have been a phone call, and a meeting, and his ex would have touched, quickly, in an impulsive-looking way, this cowboy’s shoulder and asked him one of her classic bullshit questions. And where the hell else would she be? Few things are more infuriating than an ex’s sexuality. He didn’t want to go snooping around her older sister in Iron Angel—that could have consequences.

He got into Potlax’tl near in the late afternoon, and sat lights off in a runaway lane reading maps.

\*\*\*

Baby appeared from bush beside the Mohawk outside Baker’s Face and limped up to the Travelall. The good-old was rolling the window down. Baby waved her gas can.

“You wanna get me five dollars?”

“You a bit young to be driving.”

“My Paw sent me.”

“Cute.”

“You think so?”

“You hold on. I’ll get your gas.”

He filled the can and returned.

“Need a lift?” he said.

“Fuck you, hoser.”

She walked all the way into Temperance Mines, keeping to the forest fringe off the highway. Eventually there was the turnoff, the leaning chain-link fence, its posts loose like teeth, the gravel road, the no trespassing sign. She hopped the fence. She knew the elevators to the shafts would be locked up; she simply wanted to get a feel; she believed she could tell if Madken was around by punching the clock at old Temperance Mines. Madken had spent most of his time there, while the family endured a buffalo-board and chicken-wire house outside town near the dump.

She got the feeling he was around.

In the cool gloom of the elevator tower, perched at the edge of a scree-slide, the way another child might surmount a toboggan-run, Baby \schemed. Baker’s Face was surrounded by five finger-lakes, sparsely populated by RVs and small cabins on recreational properties. Which of the five would her stepfather live on?

Baby spread her hand out to the setting sun.

A planetary chill wind came out of nowhere.

\*\*\*

Ransom shut the car off and slipped out, moving quickly behind the hedge of another trailer. Only one light on in the cowboy’s double-wide. His son’s tricycle on the porch.

A shadow slid across one of the windows.

He had two options: wound the cowboy in the leg, walk in, take the boy, or walk in directly with the Beretta, tie him up, take the boy.

Ransom waited for clarity.

\*\*\*

The cowboy left her snoring and got up and let the cat out, for he couldn’t sleep. The porch was cold on his feet. He stood there scratching his balls.

“Who’s there?” he said.

But no one was; Ransom was already driving to Baker’s Face, flat-out. His high beams roamed on the long curve of encroaching forest and to the left the vexed surface of a lake. Like a bad car stereo, Terry and Baby’s voices dueled side by side from the back seat.

“You’re scary, Daddy. I want to go home. I want Mommy.”

“I’m goal-oriented, Ransom.”

“Why did you have to use that gun, Daddy? You frightened Mommy.”

“I’m killing it, Ransom, totally killing it, and you can’t stop me.”

“Stop, Daddy. Stop, or I’ll never play with you again.”

“Dagger, dearest,” said Baby.

Ransom passed a deer in the ditch and the sign that said *Baker’s Face, Unincorporated, Population 890.* An intuition made him turn hard onto Fingerlake Road.

\*\*\*

Baby waited folded between the branch and trunk, and here he came, wobbling to the alder for his morning piss, still tipsy, she thought, and he was under her. She waited until the middle of his steaming stream, and Baby dropped on him (the last thing he saw was her hurtling teeth, hurtling), hung like a bat on a cow’s back for a second, and slit his throat, deep, with the gutting knife; she sawed. He dropped, his elbows gave, his face smashed the dirt as he convulsed. It was over quickly. Baby kneeled and washed her hands in his blood, and smeared his blood on her cheeks, and took her Teddy and stuffed it in his throat with the button eyes up. She was breathing hard. She fetched the gas can from the tree, and dribbled the gas downhill to the creek, where she stripped and soaked herself, rubbing at her ribs and her face with her wrists, dunking her hair. Baby emerged from the creek glistening. She pulled on a hoodie and sweatpants, drew a lighter from her backpack and lit the trail, and watched the flames volley up the hill to the clearing and the evidence of her father’s unfortunate end.

Ransom was in the trees at the hook in the creek when Baby came skipping along in the moonlight in her hoody. He withdrew further into the shadows. Baby advanced, her face stricken and cleared by the rage of the flames behind her.

He let her go, for an admiration had passed over his soul slowly, like the shadow of a pelican.

\*\*\*

He saw the earth smoking with the sun coming up outside Scaler, the earth fuming, among the charred tree trunks, and the emergency vehicles by the roadside, and they waved him through. Why he had walked away Ransom didn’t know, and wouldn’t tell. The arrangement of things on the dash was sufficient. In a couple of hours he was in a roadside Food Store gawking at the papers like everybody else. No one dared to publish the photos, but the prose was full of the charred remains of Madken, the charcoal Teddy in his mouth: a reporter had got a citizen of Baker’s Face to say that there was a little bit of that little girl, Baby, in all of us, for there are some things that can never be forgiven.

\*\*\*

Ransom’s ex looked up from her texting. Ransom had fallen asleep. She felt it coming, hard and strong, like a peppercorn, the itch, and then the sneeze. She sneezed so hard she hurt behind her eyes. Shit, the snot was thick on her lips, her wrist, her sleeve. The Kleenex caddy was empty.

She looked out the door into the hallway, quick.

She blew her nose on the hem of Ransom’s robe.

His equipment, the wrinkled sac and lolling prick, made her laugh. That once upon a time they were the source of rapture, both of them digging for the selfsame thrill in a genital nest. Ridiculous.

She gathered her things and left.

For a long time, the hum of an air conditioner.

“Take good care,” Ransom said.

**Angry Shanghai Manga[[1]](#footnote-1)**

The girls were halfway across the Jia Cheng intersection when Candy-O’s pathetic little suitcase fell off the back of Sugar’s Yamaha and sprang open in a puddle. It was raining hard. Her curlers and panties on the road. On one side of the intersection was the car-plant compound, and on the other the peasants’ dark-tiled roofs set back among the willows, and in the foreground a billboard asking the girls, Do you have a *personal* computer?

Candy-O sat on the shoulder getting soaked and weeping.

Sugar with all her might was hauling the bike back on its kickstand.

They were moving Candy-O from Shanghai to Jia Cheng, to a cheaper place.

“It’s Li’s fault,” Candy-O sobbed. “He went and got fired again.”

“You got fired too.”

“Oh. Yeah. ”

\*\*\*

Candy-O, not her real name, had been fired last Tuesday for standing underneath the air-conditioner and giggling with the other waitress, getting their necks all icy in the middle of the shift. They loved it.

Li had come in the doors just as the manager appeared from upstairs, and Li slinked over to the bar and picked up a matchbook, wondering if Candy-O saw him, and watched, plucking matches and striking them. The manager started pointing and waving, he raised his voice, said that looked cheap, in his restaurant, and Candy-O said, “Fuck you, it’s cool.”

Li suppressed a chuckle.

“You’re fired, you little slut!”

“Hey! Don’t you fucking talk to her like that.” Li was bearing down on the manager.

Candy-O relaxed and started enjoying herself. There was a scuffle, but they left presently. Gripping Li’s hips on his Kawasaki with the lightning paint, she flashed past endless restaurants, the hostesses bright slashes of tall red in the rapid passing doorways,

Candy-O whispered in Li’s ear, “That’s twelve in twelve months, a perfect record.”

Li kept his eyes on the road.

“I’ll talk to my cousin,” he shouted.

\*\*\*

At Li’s room in North Yangpu above the Banana Bar house-trance, thumping, thumping, he screwed Candy-O from behind, his pants bunched at his knees; he liked the deeper purple of her labia around the base of his cock. They traded TOEFL phrases as they screwed like minks in the twilight.

“The weather is actually quite agreeable,” said Candy-O.

“Is the post office at the end of this boulevard?”

“New York City is not the capital of New York State.”

Above Candy-O’s twisting head and her hair sifting and slipping to show her white nape, Li saw out the window into a courtyard with a broken bike, a washtub with a wet pair of jeans scrunched up in it, and a pile of cabbage.

“Our English study session yesterday was highly stimulating.”

Li came, and bent over to kiss her shoulder blade, and said, “Technology, as we shall see, requires a substantial infrastructure.”

“Cheers.”

\*\*\*

They got Candy-O set up quick in her Jia Cheng room. Candy-O let Sugar lug her suitcase and bags and purse up the stairs and pointed at the bed, while she sat on the windowsill and dialed.

“You rely on Li too much,” Sugar said.

“Who asked you? Were you going? *Qing ren*, hi, I’m here now.”

“I can’t talk,” said Li. “I’m working.”

“Have you asked your cousin yet?”

“I haven’t got to it. I gotta go.”

“Cousin?” said Sugar, who was still standing in the doorway, her arms crossed.

“None of your business,” said Candy-O.

\*\*\*

Li slipped the phone in his windbreaker, and blew on his hands. He was in a deep-freeze, without mitts, hat or an adequate jacket, but this was what he could find; he didn’t know how long it would last. He was moving sides of pork and ribs on with huge hooks and filling bins. He stepped outside every ten minutes. The ribs were studded with pearly thick fat in a rind of crystal and the blue blood in the meat was bright and slick. He looked around, and put his fingers to the fat, then tore at it until his hand was red and hurt, and he hugged himself in the deep freeze. He couldn’t very well ask his cousin because last Spring Festival he had had a bitter fight with Yang Deyi, because his last girlfriend had leaned over to Yang Deyi and said, so everyone in the family could hear, “So when are you going to come through for Li Ruixia?” because she was the sort who didn’t go at anything indirectly, and she tapped her chopsticks as she waited for a response. Yang had simply smiled, ignored her, because he chose his moment outside the restaurant, when everyone was shaking hands and *bai nian*ing[[2]](#footnote-2) each other, to quietly say to Li, “She’ll give you the green hat, you’ll see, little badger,” and the ring of uncles and aunts had heard, and there was a heartbeat of silence, because Li had stepped toward Yang and said, “Say that again,” and Yang lit a cigarette and laughed, because Li remembered Yang coming around years ago when Yang first got his *bang* *ku[[3]](#footnote-3)* job, in his suit, and Yang had ruffled his hair, Li’s, for Li was only fifteen, and said, “You can come to me, you need a job, you remember that,” and Li did remember it, and it urged him to punch Yang in the eye that Spring Festival, which had resulted in a visit a week later from one of the uncles who persuaded Li to pay Yang a few thousand *kuai* so there would be no trouble, but the night street had been suddenly loud with insults flying back and forth and frothy denunciations, and people stepped in to separate Li and Yang, so how the hell could he ask Yang anything, because when he was seventeen he had got packed off to reform school, because he got caught lifting cigarettes from a warehouse, a bungled break-in, and Li had had no idea that by then Yang owned that warehouse, and the cops had gone to Yang and told him all about it, what had he been thinking of telling Candy-O that, ask his cousin, because he was in love, he took his hand off the fat, his fingers cramping in the intense cold, because he had not found his former girlfriend’s eyes in the gathering that night under the orange restaurant lanterns, when he punched Yang, she had taken off, afraid, and because Candy-O was never afraid, and he loved her, he had told her he would ask his cousin about a job, and because his ribs looked under his skin very much like pig ribs he supposed, and the taste of the fat had not yet reached his tongue. He would give it a try, for his fox.

\*\*\*

Candy-O painted her nails at the window in Jia Cheng and watched TV, infomercials for jewelry of dubious paste and model-quarter townhouses in Shanghai. She looked at the highway from time to time, the blue trucks rolling through the tolls. Above their hum there was the pleasant intermittent whine of a mosquito. Her face was nicely contained, for she had long studied its effects; therefore, she fantasized often about girly, gushy spontaneity. She was on the edge again, and all because of a stupid air conditioner.

In Shanghai when the humidity and heat and pollution peaked, people slumped on the street-corners, their shirts open, beside piles of pale melon and closed their puffy eyes *yi xia zi*.[[4]](#footnote-4) They wheeled their bicycles slowly past the building sites. They fanned themselves with magazines in the alleys, kicked back in lawn chairs, or on the steps of sundry stores, the lips of dry fountains. There was nothing doing.

She had pinned up posters of tiger-haired boys two hours ago but they were already starting to peel from the walls.

Candy-O knew very well what she wanted: a baby. She wanted to dissolve in the joy she knew she would surely feel when she gave birth to an infant. Years of bliss would follow; slowly the child would come to have Li’s shy way of looking away. She would shed the anxiety of ripeness; the time would come. It drove her through her twelve jobs in as many months, and made the calendar pendant with hope, disappointment, repentance, humility, hope again.

She wiped the slick polish-brush off on the rim and screwed it on tight. Magenta was the shade she chose for her middle of the month, middle of the night nails. Candy-O was an avid reader of angry manga; she loved the heroines with eyes as big as the eyes in peacock feathers.

\*\*\*

A foot was nudging Li’s head. He was sleeping underneath the tables in his uncle’s noodle house; the Yangpu landlord had given him the boot; he saw the tires of a parked moped. It was Little Wang, the fucker. Little Wang shoved a watch in at him—he was late.

He got there mid-morning, back in the freezer. Last night he had worked until midnight, it was special overtime, and he had asked, “Would we get paid any extra?” He was sickly cold, his nose was running.

“Do it and maybe we won’t let you go tomorrow.”

“Could I have a jacket then, I’m freezing.”

They had found him an army coat in the back of a truck. When they got off, Li had gone straight to a bar and drank three quick shots of *baijiu* till he felt warm, then there had been some serious pool and pinball, and a few pitchers, and now, after a shitty four-hour sleep, he was struggling pork around, again, in an icy foxtrot, and the meat hunks kept coming. Mid-afternoon someone he had never seen before with a clipboard came into the freezer and touched the men he wanted on the arms, and waved his hand in his breath-rags to dismiss Li and the others.

He went back to the noodle house and this time it was he who woke Little Wang.

“Get up, we’ve got some money to make,” he said.

\*\*\*

Yang Deyi was supervising the installation of a mahogany boardroom table in his offices at Global Systems, a company owned by his stepmother now, but presided over by the titular head, Chen, a greasy distant uncle from the village who wore the same bad purple pinstripe suit all week.

The boardroom table gleamed. The workers had set it on its side across from the windows that gave on the Pudong skyline while they tacked the carpet-corners. It looked so good it smelled like perfume: spears and isobars of dark grain in warm red wood.

\*\*\*

Little Wang and Li pulled up outside the Kedi convenience store about four a.m. and banged in and yelled at the clerk, “*Give me all your money!”*

“Hold it, hold it, brothers, I need a purchase, a product, to open the till I need a bar-code.”

“Bullshit,” yelled Little Wang. Both of them wore stockings over their faces and Li had a gun; Little Wang had his hand bulging out his pocket for effect.

“How about that comb there?” said Li.

“This?” He waved it over the scanner. “Doesn’t seem to be working.”

“This is fucking bullshit,” screamed Little Wang, looking over his shoulder at the street.

Li waved the gun. “Does it open now?”

“It opens, it opens,” the clerk said, and the till flew open.

They grabbed the bills and skated over the just-mopped floor, only to find the door to the street now locked.

Li whirled. The back door was just closing.

Li ran at the glass window. It proved quite resistant to him. He panicked, and kicked at it, then grabbed a rotary display of sunglasses, kneed it up, and heaved it through the window. Pellets everywhere. Sirens were coming up Chang An Road, and they hopped on his Kawasaki and booted it, flew past the painted movie marquees at the corner and cambered left then right into an alley. A toothless woman waved a hankie at them as they whizzed past. Little Wang was crying, Li could feel him heaving behind him. He turned off the bike and they sat in the dark alley, a close call.

\*\*\*

Candy-O sat up in bed and the mosquito net draped over her lap outlining her thighs. Her eyes were very bright.

“I felt a twinge, Li, for sure.”

“Go to sleep.”

“I did!”

The air-con died shortly thereafter, and they opened the window wide and listened to the highway.

“You make me happy,” said Candy-O.

“You too.”

“Here. There, oh. It’s good. Isn’t it good, Li?”

“Fuck, my cock, deep…”

“Can you, do you know, can you get pregnant twice in one night?”

“We can’t afford it.”

\*\*\*

Yang found out all about the Kedi robbery. His contact at the Security Bureau was pretty sure from the clerk’s description, and their peerless stupidity, that it was Li and Little Wang; there was no mistaking their ineptness and their dumb luck.

Yang listened, the ceiling fan turning above him, as his mistress selected a chocolate from the bedside table. “Yes, I’ll keep that in mind.”

She patted the bed, turned her haunch at him, and batted her eyes.

\*\*\*

“Australia boasts a number of unique and strange animals,” said Candy-O, her tongue finding the groove of his glans and lapping slowly. “Li! Li, I want to live in Shanghai again. Jia Cheng is no fun.”

“We can’t afford it.”

“How about your cousin?” She tightened her fist on him. “He’ll give you a job.”

“Nice,” said Li. “Our 50-inch plasma screen will color your world.”

“Be serious,” said Candy-O. She straightened and drew her hair back. “We’ve got to get on in the world, just like everyone else.”

“You do. I gotta be back on my bike in an hour delivering pizzas.”

“Migratory birds return to their home waters in the spring,” Candy-O said, and bent to her task.

\*\*\*

Yang also had an office in the #3 Textile Mill Factory Outlet on the way to the airport, tucked under an on-ramp in a heavily sooted two-story mall. He sat in the corner on a stool and talked on the phone, fingering a tape measure. Sometimes he got up to pole down a *qipao* from the high gods of the shop. Chen was on the line; their weekly teleconference.

“It’s up to you,” Chen said.

“I’m all tied up,” said Yang. “It makes me vulnerable. Get someone else to move it.”

“*You* get someone else.”

“I can’t think of anyone right now. What’s in it for me?”

“You want some scope, you do this right and doors will open.”

“I just thought of someone,” said Yang.

\*\*\*

Yang’s wife minced from the gateway of her compound, saying Hello to the security guard, and she had almost reached her waiting car when Li approached her from behind a bus-stop shelter, and said, “Yang Tai Tai? Your husband is having an affair. I have pictures.”

She looked him up and down. “For a moment you looked like you were going to tell me something interesting. I don’t have time for this. What a pity.”

The car slid into traffic. Li fumed on the sidewalk.

\*\*\*

Yang Deyi met Li Ruixia’s eyes as Li came into the restaurant, and appeared to smile. The other family members came in as the two men sipped tea and ignored each other, and Yang lit a cigarillo and leaned back; behind his head striped yellow and purple tropical fish hung in gaping layers and occasionally propelled themselves to another level; one slender red fingerling popped out of the coral fish-castle like a worm out of an eye. Yang wore a tie and silk jacket. The family was famished and they ate and chatted for an hour. Li ate little. The dishes were greasy wreckage before long. Soup was served. On the way out Yang turned artificially in the doorway next to the lobster tank and said, “A promise is a promise,” and handed Li a slip of paper with a phone number.

\*\*\*

Candy-O squealed with delight when she heard about the job; she was so happy she let him suck her tits a long time in the shower. He gave her a piggy-back and dumped her wet on the bed. They made soggy shadows on the sheets until the moon had come and gone.

\*\*\*

There were three of them, and one of him, in a pullover about forty clicks from Shanghai.

“What the fuck, I don’t get paid!” said Li.

“Give us the keys.”

“What, you’re taking my fucking bike?”

“What’s it look like, shitfinger?”

He crouched as their car and the bike roared onto the highroad.

He turned and began walking back to Shanghai, not even a fucking glow on the horizon, and he had the idea fairly quickly.

\*\*\*

After a six-hour walk and what seemed a very short sleep and a gelid bowl of cold dumplings he caught up with Candy-O, after taking the subway to her new job on the outskirts in a beauty salon.

“Come with me,” he said.

Candy-O was in no mood to listen, but she agreed; she took her sweet time sweeping up the hair around the dryer plugs and the chairs, and then she made a lame excuse and took his arm, and they caught a cab. He had about three hundred *kuai* in his pocket, a screwdriver, credit card, a large ring of keys, and a tiny pair of wire-cutters.

“Where are we going?” said Candy-O.

“We’re eating out.”

He told the driver the Nanxiang Village Life Restaurant, please.

At the restaurant, they were led through a courtyard with a steaming pool of eels and bream and into an air-conditioned party room, and Li took a long time with the menu. Finally he decided and the dishes started to arrive, brought by a sulky girl with buck-teeth, who lingered overmuch.

“How come *she* gets to hang out under the air conditioner?” said Candy-O.

“Quiet, I’m eating.”

He slathered *hoi-sin* sauce on a cold slice of pig nose and munched.

He tied on a huge bib and pulled on crime-scene gloves and sucked yellow curried roe from crab-claws.

He dug in smoky colored snails for the pungent meat stuffing.

Pancakes, pancakes.

A steamed bass with strips of chili.

He rested and guzzled water.

“I’m bored,” said Candy-O. She didn’t like the way the girl was looking at Li, as he licked at a small dish of black-bean chicken.

“Bring me more chili,” he told the girl. “I want Sichuan noodles in chili oil, I want *ma po to fu*, I want fish-flavored eggplant. Make it *tebie la.*”[[5]](#footnote-5)

These were brought and Li ate them. He rubbed his stomach.

Li stripped the ribs till the bones were smooth; same with the chicken feet.

“What now?” said Candy-O.

“We’re going to wait for it to get dark,” Li told her.

\*\*\*

Yang grimaced at the phone and pinched his eyes at what Chen was saying, and said, “What do you mean the wrong guys? Who’d he give the fucking package to?

“You’re kidding.

“No. I don’t know. I’ll meet you there.” Yang was reaching for his clothes.

\*\*\*

Candy-O threw up in the parking garage of Global Systems, in the ducting as they were crawling on their knees towards the boiler-room; Li listened to her retch as he forced the vent-cover. He pushed her along the duct and crawled over her and helped her down. She felt dizzy in the stairwell. She threw up again in a waste paper basket in the boardroom. “You sit there,” he told her, and she did, she wheeled around in the boardroom chair.

“I’m going to get that guy once and for all,” said Li, and he loosened his belt and pulled off his pants and hopped up on the boardroom table. He farted.

Throat taut, framed against the Pudong skyline, Li, squatting, started to grunt. Candy-O’s mouth exactly conformed to her horror as the first dark turd came inching out, and dropped, and the door flew open.

**May or No Way**

I have a confession to make: I am one of those people who get frisked all the time when entering stadiums. My luggage is regularly opened and thoroughly inspected at airports.

I rarely slide by the metal detector without a shrill accompaniment.

In sum, I have gotten away with nothing.

I am also one of those men who can light a candle in a dark bathroom and see, in the mirror, my visage from a past life. Except in my past lives I am much as I am now--totally obsessed with the Taiwanese rock star Mei-mei, May to us North Americans. There are many incarnations: Mei-mei and I in the Late Cretaceous, with pterodactyls slowing flapping through the smoke from tar pits, is nice; a late Renaissance oil, crazed, of Mei-mei dripping from her bath in a dark room of swag curtains and polished sextants is also very nice, don’t you think?

\*\*\*

I log onto *mayday.com* at least three times a day, to get my hit of Mei-mei. There is a photo-gallery of Mei-mei in every imaginable outfit: tennis clubber, Sailor Moon, cowgirl, robot, biker chick, and something a wraith might like, or Stevie Nicks.

\*\*\*

A friend of mine was quite excited to have seen, on the verge of the new millennium, a showing of *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, because he believed he had witnessed the beginning of an era, the ascendancy of Asian culture on a global basis. He went on and on. How *recherché*, I thought, does the man not know that the era properly began with Mei-mei’s recording of *Ai Ni Zhen Hao* nearly two decades ago, and gloriously culminated in 1997 when Mei-mei appeared on MTV’s *Unplugged*, recorded live before an emaciated, private audience at Abbey Road, an event with global reach and plenty of boa and hoopla.

\*\*\*

If you plug Mei-mei’s full name into Google, Wang Mei Mei, your screen will erupt into plum blossoms.

Just kidding.

\*\*\*

If you Google Wang Mei-mei, you will find there is another Wang Mei-mei with her own website. This Wang Mei-mei is a studious and earnest girl, a lifelong student of the *hu-qin* and the *er-hu*, who studied many years in Beijing with famous Chinese soloists and is herself an accomplished, and internationally known, concert *er-hu* finalist in the major competitions. This Wang Mei-mei sincerely hopes that her website will further the spread of Chinese culture, and bring peace and harmony to the nations; whereas my Mei-mei makes no such claim, is uninformative and fey and has star written all over her, though she did once record one of her legendary foggy-forest song-cycles with the Beijing Symphony Orchestra and offers her fans the chance to win all sorts of CDs and tee shirts. Wang Mei-mei is one of the richest women in the world, rivaling Elizabeth II in raw assets. She owns several tiny islands in the Gulf of Siam.

Nice try, Miss Other Wang Mei-mei.

\*\*\*

You will notice there is an Elizabethan spin to the story of my love for Mei-mei, that the great chain of being has raised Mei-mei on high and brought me low, but this does not seriously concern me. There is always a retrograde wobble to the stars, and a sidereal accident may one day tilt the heavens so Mei-mei and I become a constellation. In meantime, I drift through the cities, anticipating through the soles of my feet the crack in the mantle of the world that will bring me into the presence of Mei-mei.

\*\*\*

For many years I have tried to convince the keepers of *mayday.com* that the only suitable slogan for the website was “May or No Way.” My suggestion is being ignored.

\*\*\*

Though the rattle of the light-rail shakes the coal-dust from the windowpane, and I have no sheets or pillows in my room, it is not so bad now. Not really. A nearby alley door gives onto a noodle-shop kitchen, and a dishwasher, and I have found cloggy bits of food stuck under the bottom racks, enough for a plate, last night; if I put enough salt on them, I can pretend that I am eating them *au gratin*. It is never cold in this large Asian city; I have found further foodstuffs in the ashes of the villagers at the building-sites; and I have only been kicked around a few times. They seem to rather like me. They are brewing a young wine in some sacks and tubing in the elevator shaft, and when they find me they get me drunk and we sing songs—strange, bird-like songs from their villages -- together until they puke, one by one, in the ragged firelight and piss in each other’s helmets. It is not so bad. Perhaps it was worth it.

**The Girl and the Ghost**

April thought she had green eyes, like a cat's, and this pleased her, though no one had ever agreed. Hazel, they said. Hazel-brown. When it came to her eyes, they were prepared to put their feet down. Fine.

\*\*\*

When she woke up she had a full loll, curling into herself, enjoying her small smells. Today, didn’t Kaylene say today she’d tell her about the ghost? In the lull of the comforter she confirmed it.

Her Guatemalan scarf hung from her dresser-knob, the stray cat slept with the hackeysack. She had never played the guitar leaning in the corner. A picture of a sister lay face down on the bathroom vanity, soaking up toothpaste.

She came from an alcohol-soaked prairie city and was never going back.

April at five a.m., her cluttery world around her, sipped coffee by her window, snow falling from the paling stars. Her green eyes would do all right, she knew, despite disappointments, and a big disappointment named Brad, and imagined, a lax tremble up her legs, a man she would meet. She would stand next to him, and *know*.

Later, following a line of footprints under the power lines to the hotel, her back felt bunchy, electric-alive. She had hung on here for three seasons, and this was the first winter she had enough hours at the hotel (it was not a popular ski-site) so she didn't have to waitress at the Husky as well. It was an old, huge, railroad hotel, with hauled fieldstones and a green copper roof, hanging over the lake. Its windows lost their dark opacity to drapes, a glass on a sill. She entered the gasoline darkness of the parking garage, stamping her boots, and spun around, once.

Here began invisibility.

The first thing April had to do was place the newly baked pastries in the display case. Unshaven and speechless, Henri lined them up on the stainless peekthrough into the kitchen. She was pleased by the wistful shavings of dark chocolate and the dustings of sugar. Cheesecake moated with artistic dribbles of bright berry-sauce against a white plate. The restaurant still dark behind her, she bent and sniffed, while he watched her, his chin tucked down, from the repurposed armchair near the walk-in freezer. "*Merci*," she said. A nod. Henri spoke little English. White tides of sweat under his armpits; one eye was funny; he sneaked cigarettes in his stainless cave.

Out she went under the dimmed chandeliers. She slid the pastries into the rolling display-case, turning a pie-wedge's point for effect, then flicked the switch. The blaze of color. Perfect. Appositely, April loved the ceremony of silently stepping back, with a cleared plate, with the bill-tray, after pouring: her smile saying that is over now, I am simply not here. She nudged in the rounded backs of chairs. The tablecloths spilled in flutes from the tables. Above the mantel, there was a romantic oil of a kilted ancestor.

She heard Henri shuffle out back for a smoke when she returned to gather cutlery. He never said boo.

Kaylene arrived late, her hair a mess, as April was sailing between tables, plotting the coffee-pot's course. It was not busy. A few middle-aged men – to April, the most mysterious creatures, asexual and sleek, with their gold watches and *Globe and Mails* -- searched her out with boyish eyes and vulnerable smiles; they were forgetful about tipping, would often have to steal back into the dining room to scatter some change for her.

She caught up with Kaylene in the wait-station. "So? So? What did you see?"

"Later, girl, later."

"I want to know everything."

"We’ll talk."

Kaylene was plucking at the lashes of a drooping eye, and stooping slightly to check the results in a compact mirror. She was older, perhaps by a decade, with suggestions in her talk of a man-strewn past. *Regina, that one was a real loser. We lasted about eight weeks, then the weirdness started.* This interested April, the simple mechanics. Where did you meet him? How did you know he wanted you? You must have watched him from the bed as he approached you, horny, clumsy, shedding his clothes. You heard him piss in the mornings. But the ghost of an unspoken etiquette kept April from asking Kaylene directly.

"You look good," April said.

"Hanging in there."

April went forth to clear tables. And how are you doing here? Can I get you anything else? The bill? The customers -- their placement of cutlery back on the plates, their gathering of coats, their perfunctory politeness -- gave her a shuddery pleasure. It was still early morning, and she was invisible. Above her there were sixty rooms.

\*\*\*

"Come on. Out with it. "

"He said things to me."

"What kind of things? No -- wait. What did he look like? It's too much. How many times I mean does someone tell you they've seen a ghost? I want to know everything."

But she knew by Kaylene's practical eyes that she would not be told everything.

"First time for me too, but some things were awful familiar. What he looked like wasn’t too clear. I was trying to run away, so I didn't take notes, like. Shiny. Blue and he shook like jelly. I think he was sitting on a chair. But he could move, he followed me. I saw him on fifth east and down here."

"How about his face?"  
 "His eyes were angry."

"Did he speak? Sorry. D’uh. You said he did. Could I have one of those? I'm nic-ing it real bad."

Kaylene offered and retracted the cigarette from April's fingers –“Ah, I shouldn’t give you these,” and then did. A clatter and a hush of steam came from the dishwasher.

"He said guy-things. I've heard the like before." April imagined this was Ontario-talk, a clued-out older version of April herself, or a phrase Kaylene had absorbed from the New Country cable station.

The ghost had said to Kaylene -- this she let on before she started tucking makeup and mints in her purse then rattled a tray of cups around -- "*You can trust me. I will never tell anyone about you."*

And it said:

*"What's between you and me stays there."*

\*\*\*

Years later, when her first marriage had ended, stranded with her folks, April endured the endings of Winnipeg parties: everyone gets ready a half hour before they actually leave. The coats are pulled out from huge heaps on a downstairs bed, the elderly are found chairs on which to struggle with their boots, kids are scooped up and crammed into snow pants. Then there is an elaborate round of sidestepping and all-inclusive hugging. *Oh God, will this end?* The promises to look you up. *Vancouver, sure, whenever.* Swift shreds of exhaust at the curb, prairie schooners idling at the end of a tunnel of snow carved by a blower. Everyone bundled in. *Warm enough? It’s eighty-three degrees in here, come on, let’s go.* Someone forgets a child's toy, a casserole dish. And the parkas trapped in the car watch the driver’s curious ice-walk, weight on the outside of the feet, down the icy sidewalk to be engulfed by the Christmas tree lights in the doorway for an instant. A hockey score might distract the messenger, delay him, without whom the car cannot leave.

*Finally, moving.* The frosty arcs of perimeter boulevards, and snow blown against vertical roadsigns, sticking in eroding pyramids.

\*\*\*

Kaylene pulled the cigarette from April’s fingers and took a drag.

"Guy-things, he said. I've heard the like before. You know the kind of things those old farts say. Well, maybe you don't. They say them when suddenly there are more men than women, just little things, letting you know who's in control. You think you'll never hear them again; never gonna be another situation where you just want to go home and take a shower. There you are, in some kitchen. The fuckable. Like you're suddenly pure cunt. And this ghost was fulla shit. You know what he said?

“He said, ‘I bet you're a hot kisser.’

“‘I bet you're the best kisser in Alberta,' he fucking said."

April realized she was expected to ask questions. But she couldn't think of any good questions.

"Did he remind you of anyone?"

"Only everyone I ever seen driving a jacked-up truck."

\*\*\*

Before she had run away to the mountains, April and Brad had their blowout in a parking lot on a summer night. Faint thumping music. The smell of the river. Brad drops the keys on the pavement, stumbles, is unlocking the car, says, *Get in*.

April shivers in her tight top and says *No*.

Brad can hardly believe this.

*Look, I'm going*, he says.

*You're drunk.*

*Look - you want a ride?*

April starts walking away.

*Fuck of all the. Bitch.*

He squeals out thumps over the curb.

\*\*\*

"Did the ghost say he wanted anything?" said April.

"Naw, he just wanted to scare me," Kaylene said.

"When do you work nights again?"

"Later, girl. The lunchers lunch."

The hotel brought out a clockwork appetite in the guests. They were hale, and ready to grill and swill, deftly draping their bellies with napkins.

April hated being called *girl*, especially by women. With men it was ignorable, and not to respond was delicious, in a way she thought to be attractive, effective -- something to dimly aim at. Halfway through the lunch rush she put a bus-tray down and both hands to her lower back. I'm carrying Kaylene, she thought, the slacker. If *I* slacked off would Kaylene even notice?

Henri crossed his arms in the door to the dish-pit sweating in his bandana.April was sure he did drugs; you could not engage him in anything. His eyes went out into the restaurant like the kilted ancestor’s, but did not alight.

\*\*\*

April became more curious about Kaylene and her current man, Jeff, who never picked her up and was never seen, but grew in April's mind: itinerant repairer of roads in highway gangs, hard-drinking, from Edmonton, spent the winters on EI. April studied Kaylene's inflections for affection and found none. Jeff was a chapter to Kaylene, a kind of testament.

Kaylene came in late most mornings badly in need of coffee, which she shot back with double sugar. "That’s your table,” April said. “Fix my face,” said Kaylene, and disappeared into the washroom. It was nine before she faced her first customers.

Throughout the day, Kaylene glided up to April and made statements:

"He came home three last night."

"Jeff wants to work, but there's no work here."

"We drank last night. We got so blasted.”

“You're a dear, April, just a dear."

That pissed April off.

It slowed down at the hotel. The young skiers chose the economy motel on the highway, and only once or twice a week would rented cars wind up the drive from the lake, inscribing long lines of tread. The sun remained behind the mountains until ten and stole back there about four. April made her way to work and back in darkness, her senses dormant. Her skin seemed barely permeable; when she bathed it neither pinked nor peeled. She ate yoghourt and granola. She couldn't be bothered with anything else.

Shreds of fog broke off from the mountains and drifted into thin clouds.

Kaylene looked studious by the salad bar, head down, folding napkins, but secretly studying the veins in her hands.

Henri cut pictures of 4x4 vehicles from the *Auto-Trader* and taped them above the stainless steel dish-racks. The black ink roll-bars, hubcaps, fog-lamps, dashboards and snazzy chassises absorbed the vinegar and water from the nightly cleanings and bled in spikes until they resembled safari photos of crazily-maned animals.

Skeleton staff.

\*\*\*

Kaylene was scraping a plate, a cigarette in her mouth.

"So, have you seen him lately?" April said. “The ghost?”

"Wished I never told you about him."

April decided to persist. She wanted to make contact with her own reluctance. “Well, I’m interested.”

"Yes, I seen him. He was sitting over that table. Reading the goddamned menu. But he didn't want nothing. Just sitting. Looking me up and down. You were five feet away but I didn't say nothing. He wore a Case cap. A goddamned tractor cap. He smelled like piss and whiskey. I knew what he was thinking. He was thinking I like that mouth a yours. Then he did something real weird. He left his body like, but his clothes were still sitting in the chair. His overalls.”

*Kaylene is not all there. There is no ghost. She's worn down.*

"I can't talk," said Kaylene, and walked off.

\*\*\*

After April left her second husband, principally because he lay his watch beside his breakfast every morning, (she could predict each motion—the snap of the expandable band, the coiling of the band for support, the fiddling with the face, the gentle tap of his finger when it was properly in place) she drove herself hard for a couple of weeks of settling the money, the furniture, and then she snapped and found herself saying, "We can talk about that later.” They bumped into each other in the house that they had mutually agreed to vacate and sell. She was picking something up – her fridge magnets. He wanted to discuss splitting the air miles. “I am not here,” she said, and refused to respond when he wheedled away at her from the foyer as she pulled on her boots. She bought a car and drove east, after leaving a message, "Hi, it’s me. We can talk about it later. Bye.”

She rolled up her sleeves to drive, headed for Winnipeg. She wore sweats all the way and smoked immoderately. Riffed through radio stations, shut it off, the songs were all awful. She couldn't bear to hear the words 'love' and 'you' in any proximity. Billboards filed past her their simple offerings of lodging and food. She was climbing into the Rockies. Weathered houses on hillsides where nothing had ever happened. She rolled down the window and cupped her hand against the wind. Pines now, the foothills, where clerks were sullen at gas stations, trapped among the dated magazines and racks of engine oil and anti-freeze. The clerk’s car, an unwashed compact, blocking the air-dispenser. She took a long shower in the Best Western at Banff and kept driving.

As it happened, she arrived in Winnipeg in the middle of a birthday party for her uncle's father, Jack, whose name she had to be reminded of. He was getting up there, eighty-three.

\*\*\*

April touched the Squirrel screen. Nothing happened. She pressed it again, and the whole menu bar lit up, and all the menus came down, one after another, and the screen contracted to a single pixel. Orange, blue.

The opening menu reappeared.

"Squirrel's acting up," she told the manager.

\*\*\*

In Winnipeg there was no answer at her parent’s front door, but many voices coming from the backyard. She walked in and left her suitcase in the coat-closet. The cool, curtained gloom of the prairie living room completed her exhaustion. She found her mother in the kitchen up to her elbows in potato salad, in an Adidas track suit; her glasses were slung by rubber bands around her neck. She stuck three fingers of mayonnaise and egg in her mouth and sucked hard when she saw her daughter.

"Hi, Mom."

"You're home. You left your husband, I can tell. Otherwise you would have phoned. I suppose it's for the best. We’ll move the pull-out from the den into your old room. It’s Jack’s birthday out there. Your father's out back mixing drinks. Oh sweetie, it’s good to see you."

They hugged, April's mother holding her caked hands up, and digging her elbows into April's ribs.

"Had a funny feeling you'd come home. Telling your father about it the other day, I been having dreams about April, I said. I seen April in a cloud. Your feet were kicking up all that fluff. Just riding a cloud. And I kept trying to get on the cloud, but I got dizzy and I fell through, again and again. And it felt like singing, some kind of song I knew, you were a baby I was tucking you in I'd sing this song. I woke up told him you'd come home."

"Mom, I've been driving two days, I need a bath.”

But she went to the back-yard to see her father, bent over a rickety card-table and fishing for melting ice cubes in a Blue Bombers bucket.

"Well, this is a surprise," he said.

"I left him Daddy, I up and left."

“You left your husband. Oh dear. I suppose I’ll get the details from your mother.”

“Not much to tell.”

“You’re okay?”

“Daddy, I’m fine.”

He was confused, excused himself to deliver drinks.

The party had split in two. Older men in lawn chairs and younger men standing around a tub of ice and beer; women on blankets in the grass and babies stumbling. Three men were waving tongs around the barbecue, laughing and twisting their heads away from the smoke. You might as well present yourself to the birthday boy, she thought, and approached Jack, she sort of recognized him, on his lawn-chair. He was pale and veined. He had turned eighty-three and, invigorated by this achievement, was enjoying the attention. When April took his hand, he cackled, "Who're you?"

"April, Kirk's daughter. Happy Birthday."

He laughed again. His eyes moved swiftly and assertively over her breasts, her hips.

"Last we heard you were in Vancouver," a man said at her elbow.

April joined the women, where she rested briefly, admiring babies, remembering their names. But she kept looking at Jack.

Jack.

For years, Jack had been propped up by canes, helped into chairs, virtually useless. His movements and needs were attended to by his wife Florence, a snappy, mean woman who never used his name. "He'll be all right there. Just roll him to the car. He'll be fine." One Christmas, Jack, enfeebled by a gallstone operation, had sat mumbling into his cane during a long gift-exchange, a family tradition, the object of which was to grant, then take away, a bottle of Crown Royal from Jack, through a complicated gift-trading dance. The family delighted in demonstrating their mock generosity and solemn naughtiness, in elaborate feints and random dances proffering and filching the bottle, which Jack clutched, when he could get his hands on it.

"That's all he wants, is that Crown Royal," said Florence.

When it was time to go, April's husband, Bill, helped Jack on with his coat, supported him while he struggled it on. And got his shoes on and tied them. He slipped the bottle of Crown Royal in Jack's coat pocket. Bill pulled a chair up by the door for him, half in the closet, and went out to warm up the car.

He is a kind man, she had thought, drunk in the doorway, as Bill tended Jack's short, fearful steps down the icy path, made him comfortable in the front seat and stood there, thirty below in his shirtsleeves, dutiful smile, waving as the car pulled out..

A good man, by all accounts.

Now, Jack, shaking with laughter that overcame him in a deep cough, wiped spittle from his chin. He was getting on okay. Florence had died on him in their garden. She was face down in the raspberry canes, April’s mother said, during a Labor Day call. Jack cracked another beer and the foam got all over his hand. He licked and grinned. Soon the cooler would be pulled over and the old men would play cribbage on the lid. Men would drift back to their wives and take babies on their laps. The diaper jokes, the noses held. All the blond babies would run for a short time in the sun with their short legs and perfect bums. And the news of April's separation would spread throughout the party effortlessly. Women she hardly knew would *hmm* sympathetically at her, touch her arm.

\*\*\*

April found Kaylene’s note and two menthol cigarettes in the wait-station. She took it into the dining room and read it at a table, clearing a setting to one side. The kilted ancestor appeared to watch her eyes move over the mauve note-paper.

Dear April,

I had to leave. He joined that group he said he would to stop drinking and he never stopped, at the meeting he’d talk about how he wouldn't drink, then he’d go out drinking. Every night he would tell me exactly how much he had to drink and how much he didn't want to. I said I didn't want to know and he got angry. He yelled at me, he said he shouldn't have to work when I have a job, everything was just peachy. He didn't hit me but I thought he might. One morning I was fixing my face and he came up real close to me and he was just looking at me, and I got scared. I said I was going to work and I left this for you because I know you will explain this please to the hotel, thank you. I know you will be surprised hearing all this from me as I never said what was bothering me.

April was reading this for the third time. Kaylene had left instructions to forward her cheque, and closed her letter with,

If he asks around for me please don’t say anything. If you say anything, he will use it and try and scare you. Your friend, Kaylene.

Now Kaylene was gone, she had ten hour days in the cafe. Her invisibility consequently increased. The men she served didn't even bother to flirt; the women showed the customary indifference. She began to feel a pull where she had felt none before, not an ache for his slimness, but a delectable fury she returned to at the turn and cut of his tone.

So, you coming?

*Bitch.*

She had turned and walked. The car started. He paused at the edge of the parking lot, giving her a little time to change her mind, the bumper settling on the shocks, and this infuriated her more. Beneath the big elms. The sound of the motor, climbing and whining through its gears, diminished, and music came again from the hall.

*He thinks he gets to say. Is that it?*

A river beetle scuttled at her feet.

An area of asphalt between them, for months. She packed up, bought a Pacer, drove and drove until her hands cramped on the wheel, and got the lousy job at the hotel. In a controlled fury. Then explaining it to her parents on the phone. It had all been about Brad: his beer, his plans for dental college, his parents’ cottage, his buddies knocking beer bottles off sawhorses with Frisbees for fun, and she had gone along with it all, wanted, no doubt, for all eventually to make sense, and it didn't.

It was Winnipeg she missed, the illogical twists of its rivers.

Brad phoned that first month. Woke her up. There was drying underwear lying across the backs of chairs sand on the table and on speakers. She hadn't wanted to stay up for the dryer.

“Why are you calling?”

"I want to talk to you."

April hissed.

"Can I come and see you?” he said. “We had something good. So we had one fight."

"You called me a bitch, you asshole.”

“I was drunk.” He paused. “Yeah, but you just up and go. No chance, I had no chance."

"I don't think you should come out here. I don’t want to see you. You think you own me."

"I love you."

"Bullshit."

"You like this. You like this distance. You fucking like this."

He was yelling.

April slammed the phone down.

\*\*\*

When the rains came, the mountains in fog, she wanted to switch to chambermaiding, and applied. She was sick of the cafe. To arrange this she had to pay a visit to young Mr. Wilkins, the manager, who received her amid the insistent printing of his fax machine.

He listened and he said, "It is very unusual. Most people want the tips. Are you quite sure you won't change your mind?"

What on earth did he mean? Of course she would eventually change her mind. Hadn't she just changed it?

“My mind’s made up,” she said.

\*\*\*

Henri bought a red truck with silver detailing. He washed and polished it in the invincible spirit of his playing radio, in the wet spill and spread of suds from the loading dock.

\*\*\*

"I love you."

Fuck, that made her mad.

What had she wanted from him?

She wanted to be driven around Winnipeg. She wanted not to think, to listen to him while her mind drifted. April wearing just her jeans brushed out her hair in the window of their first apartment, and Brad muttered, "Someone might see you,” his voice dropping a tone. They had moved in together; money was tight; April skimmed the messages in birthday cards from her family eagerly enough, but was secretly and vitally interested in the presence or absence of a cheque. They held a pot-luck that summer, and April remembered drifting from woman to woman saying things like, *Brad’s been working so hard lately*, and, *This is the first time we’d had folks over in a while*.

Sickening.

April moved in a crouch about her living room and picked up her drying underwear from chair-backs, from drawer-knobs, saying with each finger-crook under each elastic waistband, “Love, love, love, love.”

\*\*\*

*You nearly licked your lips his shirt rolled up sliding down in the driver's seat those slim hips and you all fussing with your seat belt, din’t you girl, you, April.*

The voice, on the stairs, it was swiftly gone.

April caught the banister.

She walked through the cafe and the kitchen and out the loading doors and stopped. Henri was in his truck, listening to tunes. She returned to work.

As she mounted the stairs again, on her way to the upper floors, the lily lamps along the wainscoting successively dimmed and flared again to their full brilliance behind her.

\*\*\*

When the tall, carved, oak front doors opened on dusky snow and Jeff walked through, she was just starting her shift. She knew it was him immediately; he had bleeding and needy written in red across his eyes, the suggestion of rubbing. He wore a Rush tee shirt and boot-cut jeans. He took his hands out of his back pockets and turned from the reception counter and headed straight for her. Helen's eyes behind the counter said a dark *Sorry*.

His hand reached for her wrist. She pulled it away.

"Where is she?" Jeff said.

"You take a long step back, mister. Don't you fucking *dare.*"

"I said, Where is she?”

April started to walk up the stairs. Just keep moving; why was there nobody around? She got to the landing.

"You want me to follow you? I'll follow you." He came up a couple of steps.

"Fuck’s sakes,” said April. “She doesn't want you to know."

“Okay, okay.” He shrugged and showed her his palms.

Look at the big act.

"Maybe I'm strung out, okay. Maybe I could get you a cup of coffee and tell you my side of the story. Then you could decide."

\*\*\*

"To start with you know her name's not Kaylene.”

April said nothing to this paltry revelation.

“Her name is Elizabeth and she comes from Ontario. Two years ago she happens along, I was here waiting for the road-crew to start up and she blows me away. She's showing up at my place all the time, wants to drink with me. I met her at the Clarion. You know the Clarion?”

"No."

April liked how she could say *No* like a dark chord. If he was going to play a tune, she would too. The song was about disbelief.

"So she blew you away," said April.

"I'm a simple guy from Saskatchewan. She shows up and I was lonely, you know what it's like here. She's always dressed to the nines. Makeup. Fine, I thought."

He put three sugar cubes in his cup and observed his stirring.

"It was her talk that got me. She'd been to university and read all sorts of books. She said she got bored in Toronto, waitressing, nobody to talk to, she lived with a man and he wouldn't listen. She taught me some new words."

"What words?"

"Uh. Uh, 'implicit'. She said things were implicit. That things could be what they were. Now, why would you need a word to say that?"

"Goes without saying." April wanted to leave. This bit was phony. Jeff didn’t look like the plagued-by-words type.

“I love her, and I loved those words. She had all kinds. She looked at the stars one night and said, ‘Myriad.’ The stars are myriad. I'll never forget that."

"What's myriad mean, Jeff?"

"Bright, I guess."

"No it doesn't. It means uncountable. Didn't she tell you that?"

"She never had to think about what those words meant. She just opened her mouth and out they came." His eyes drew down slightly. "To make this short, she moved in with me about a year ago. She started to tell me more about herself. Changed her story all the time: first she was from Ajax, then Belleville, Windsor. She finally settled on Windsor. She wanted me to drink with her every night. I'd go along for a few beers, and then she'd pull out the hard stuff, whisky, bourbon when she got paid.

"In Windsor her old man was a cab driver. He used to beat her, and he'd touch her. Beat her and touch her. She'd cry. So bad she couldn't finish her story. I put my fingers to her forehead and she'd calm down. Her sister ran away before her. Mother long gone. One night he crawled into bed with her and the next morning she cleaned out his wallet and hitchhiked to Toronto. Then she came out West. So I was stuck with her. She started staying up late -- real late. In the morning she’d be stinko underneath the coffee table."

"She said you were going to hit her, " said April.

“I was mad all right, she started taking money from me to. Now she’s took off.”

“Again,” said April. “Why not let her go?"

"I care about her. She's killing herself."

"So what?"

"You've got to help me find her."

“Forget about her."

He looked out the window.

"Don't know I ever will," he said.

They were the only people in the café.

"Look, all you got to do is give me the lousy address."

"Suppose I did. You can't make her do anything."

"Well…maybe if you talked to her."

April snorted. "You should thank your lucky stars and move on."

Mr. Wilkins was approaching, stopping at each table to inspect the place mats, thought he was invisible.

"Hello, April," he said.

Jeff nodded at Mr. Wilkins.

"This guy bothering you?" said Mr. Wilkins.

"We're just talking."

“Oh, shit!” said Jeff, and pushed back his chair. It fell over and he walked out.

Mr. Wilson sat down, and spread his hands on the tablecloth, “You're, you’re not to have visitors here. No more.”

It had upset the front desk person, Heather, terribly.

\*\*\*

April got the sillies. It was the chunky cart that preceded or followed her down the halls, whether she felt pushy or draggy. The cart she took to calling ‘Marg.’ Like most such carts, one wheel had a predictable stickiness.

"Come along now, Marg."

"One more room, Marg."

The cart was hung with spray bottles, crammed with hand-towels, and crinkly plastic packets of shampoo and frankly awful coffee, which she dispensed. The rooms were cold. The things that people left. A cardigan turning slightly on a hanger. She fished its pockets and came up with hardened Kleenex-ball. Under the blankets, a few pennies. A costume necklace slumped on a table lamp's base.

She took a different route home, through the town, and looked at the outfits in the window of the only boutique. Beaded party dresses screamed out *one wear only*, if that, and why did there have to be rhinestones? Like, in the world? Here it was, seven in the morning, the sun a long ways behind the mountains. She yawned. People spooled along the streets, intent on direct routes to coffee.

At home she plunked down on the couch. Then she pummeled its cushions.

"I can't believe *you fucking did that*,” she said.

For the closet door had opened and Kaylene had slipped out and sat beside her.

"How the hell? Aw shit, aw fuck."

Kaylene's hair was mussed from the closet. She smelled of a forgotten soap.

"I said, how did you get in here?"

"You’re mad. I thought you’d be mad. I wanted to surprise you, then I knew you’d be angry, so I hid, but I thought, This is stupid, I can’t stay in here all day, better face the music.”

"I don’t need this crap.”

"He came to see you, didn't he? So what bullshit did he give you?"

Tell her a bit, get her out of here. "Your friend Jeff -- " she began.

"Hah. What a liar. To start with, his name's not Jeff, I seen it in his wallet. There are guys like Jeff being produced all over. There's a small factory in BC.”

“He said a bunch of shit about you taught him words.”

"Did he tell you about these?" She rolled up her sleeves. The bruises were irrefutable; purple; April was not prepared for them.

"You've got to help me,” said Kaylene.

“Get out,” said April.

“I bet he got a real good look at you, sugar, didn’t he? Didn’t he?”

“You broke into my – fuck off. Just fuck off, okay? I ever see you again, I'm calling the cops.”

"I thought you were a friend."

"You're full of shit," said April. And she got up walked to the door and opened it.

Kaylene's eyes crystallized, frost, and she sailed out of the apartment.

\*\*\*

And she had to go into work again. She slipped a banana in her backpack and trudged through the shoulder-slush, stopped at the drugstore to pick tampons. Back on the main drag, she froze. Jeff was talking into a public telephone. She kept her eyesahead and concentrated on the oncoming headlights, the power-lines. Yet there was no denying her thrill -- she was *adult.* She sensed the vast romance of the shifting and radiant entanglements. She was one of them, acting in their playlets, knowing their lines and manners.

She collected her cart from the station. "Morning, Marg.” She started vacuuming the upper halls.

The vacuum stopped.

She checked the plug, replugged it. Nothing, then it roared up again. As she pushed it methodically around, it surged, cut out, roared up, stuttered, revved.

She kicked it, frustrated, in the darkened upper hallway.

She chose a door and stepped in and quickly out again. The door stood open. The smell of rot, and a print, an instant only, of his presence in the armchair, the Case cap at a jaunty angle, his clothes and blue eyes shining upright and the faintest of acknowledging nods. She breathed quick and sharp. He was gone.

*Thinking you're better than them, ain’t you, April.*

"Damn you," she hissed.

She rolled the cart into another room and began in the bathroom. She chucked out shrunken soap and scrubbed the bowl and replaced shampoo and the shower cap in its transparent package. Her hands worked quickly; her mind was fuming. The shower cap began to glow, brain-like in its wrinkly folds, began to transmit.

*Which one you think is stupid, Jeff or Kaylene? They both a little dim, never you mind, on accounta thinking about what you love to do when you got the chance, wrap those legs of yours around him and just give her, thinking you were never gonna do that again, all stuck out here with the likes of me for company. I know you.*

She wiped up the stains around the coffee-maker, plumped pillows, and picked up a stuffed animal—a cat—put it on the cart to hand in at the front desk. But on the bed was another, a Snoopy, legs in the air. Something thumped softly against her ankles. Hippopotamus. Toucan. Before she could breathe, the stuffies were hailing down from nowhere, thumping around her; she stumbled. Big dumb rabbits with floppy ears, frowzy Garfields and Cabbage patch uglies, Raggedy Annes and a Casper with an annoying smile, up to her waist now. Deeper. Dolls and lions with broadloom hair; raccoons with bright glass buttons for eyes; the whole menagerie of childhood, surging at her, trying to cram into her mouth, smothering. April screamed. The lights went.

She was lying on the floor, smothered by tails and noses and paws, struggling.

*You’re always gonna be my girl, now, aincha.*

The lights came on, and the weight lifted, they were gone, save for a couple of cats that rolled across the floor like blue lightning-scraps and when they hit the baseboards, vanished.

An iciness lingered.

Breathing, in the hall, pushing and pushing the elevator button, nothing.

The doors slid open on a blast of frozen light, the roar of his pulsing form. He tipped his cap and said, “Would yer like to go down, April?”

*You ain’t gonna get away from me. Never. Ever.*

Within an hour she was in her Pacer, flat-out running, gulping the hot air from the roaring heater, heading for the prairie. *This is it*, she thought. *This is the last time I go home.*

\*\*\*

April retained her invisibility. In her casual encounters, in her being with others, and her heart's longing for men and their sensations, there remained the significant hesitation, the drawing back, the flight with its hope of pursuit, and then she wasn’t there.

She thought she saw the ghost again on a hotel porch in Estevan one evening, in a rocking chair, sucking on a lollipop, but he got up with his cane and tipped his cap at her and she saw he was real.

Things had changed, however: a species of man, *homo lecherous*, had vanished from the earth, just as her beauty had vanished. Only in the odd word – *betcha, doncha*—was there a trace of those early passions and bad decisions. She cringed at that sort of man: could see them coming.

Quite by accident, she saw an advertisement for the hotel in *The Globe and Mail*. She was about forty. She closed her eyes after reading the ad, so she could rest in the memory of the copper roof, the strong mottling in the stonework. The bodies crossing the lobby, the staircase, the kilted ancestor. These faded quickly and what came back was Henri heaving his gym-bag in the back of the red truck and crushing his smoke out. The red truck winding among the speckled birches to the lake.

**The Member**

Honourable Speaker,

Picture a motel corridor. Exit signs, arrows. Carpeting. Metal receptacles. We've been here. Door at the end of the corridor, propped open on light, pure, of the palest candescence peculiar to a Northern B.C. midsummer.

Our camera enters a room.

The recordist, his face cubistically altering, sits at a small desk writing on hotel stationery, which focuses: *The Heritage Inn*. On the TV there is a man in a *kefya* speaking passionately in Arabic. No translation is provided. There is a sense of danger, a different order kept at bay. Our recordist, though, is no more than bored. Comfortable. For those he records, the stakes are low.

Our point of view, then. Small hotel room. Light until the body tires. Over-the-shoulderness with the recordist and his taken-away face.

\*\*\*

All that summer, when Your Party came to power after a decade in lusty opposition, I lived with the Member, in Victoria and all across this great province of British Columbia, whose travel posters bloom and flourish; I lived painfully non-stop with the Honourable Member, and it was not a particularly nice summer.

We were travelling. The Member was on a committee. I kept waking up in motel rooms overlooking a parking lot; no question, it was the same parking lot, its allotments and markings, the logical benevolence of the economy. I lay, fully awake in bed, clothed, eyes clamped. Already it was hot. The Member's wakeup call trilled through the wall, opening me to the noise outside. Traffic, considerable. The angle of the sun smelled like an engine on a platform, tied down with greasy ropes and set throbbing to shake every flat surface. As if the cash bar jingled. The forces out there. The deficit.

A type of person began to show up at the hearings; there was a delay in recording their coagulated essence, for it lay not in apparel or office, but in anger. People whose personalities were so stilted and stunted, so universally shrill and retaliatory they reminded me grey and again of a cramped and sour-smelling laundromat under the Sky Train in East Vancouver. Was this the standing committee on disaffection and reaction or a polite inquiry into alienation, or what? Did we need this? No. We needed politically useful information for our fact-finding committee on electoral reform.

They showed up with file folders or with hastily scribbled notes. They read from prepared statements or spoke extemporaneously. They represented labour unions, anti-poverty groups, small business, national and provincial political parties, chambers of commerce, themselves. They tended to cancel one another out. Frequency and recall, duration, timbre. At length in their presentations there was always a time to depart from the text, to stare straight across the floor of the MacKenzie Room or the Salish Room in various motels at the Members as they sat in sympathetic receptivity, to threaten the Members whose faces were still as stucco, to threaten, and then, their time diminishing, to attenuate their tone and summon from their fatigue and general disgust a plea for action.

In Iverson’s Lake, in the smelly basement of a wartime boarding house, after what amounted to an All Party Congress about the cigarette burns in the carpets and the questionable locks, the Committee sat down to a preliminary harangue from a horse-logger with a metal brow, who yelled, "This is fucking *bullshit*. I'm three months in the bush with my guys logging an I come back some fucking Paki tells me I owe three thousand bucks in tax and the fucking roads are shitty an it's not important my kids read an write. Fucking bullshit."

The Member got up to take a call.

Harbinder Singh walked in from the men’s room, wiping his damp hands on his lapels, and took his place as Chair.

Harbinder said, "Excuse me sir, what changes would you like to see in the way you are taxed?"

And even the logger relaxed.

All they cared about was tax.

The Members were mostly nice people. I'm totally sincere. It wasn't their fault that they had stumbled upon what charm or talisman they had to lead, inspire, or simply say things that people wanted. It was just that they perceived a fine and noble justness to our system the moment they became elected. Consequently, they evolved in attitude.

It was a sort of blessing on our happy Parliament to see the Members on the catwalk between the House and the Caucus, chatting and schmoozing, but I was always mindful that there might be others who would not enjoy the sight; then, too, there was always the slight embarrassment, a pulling away, when one of the Members had to stop being with you or talking to you or walking with you to become a Member. I guess they were enjoying the perquisites of power. They allowed themselves to gripe about their pay, or, more precisely, mentioned how much more money they could make if they had not chosen public service. In compensation, they relished public spending. "Democracy costs money," was a phrase not unoften uttered that summer.

So was, "We can do *that*? Oh. Well, let's."

Your Party was an information age conglomerate of networkers who, had they not been repeatedly recognized as "the Hon. Member from Salamakatawa--Iron Angel,” "the Hon. member from North Circle," might have told you that they lived in the global economy.

The Hon. Member from Uplands, Toller McTavish, had to have aides explain to him several times why someone might want to have an illegal suite.

The Hon. Member for Maypole had a daughter who would yell, "Elephant legs! Elephant legs!" when her mother's stockings fell down. And the Member would go, "Oh, you, girl. Just you wait!"

And she said: "Isn't this all a bit like school? I mean there are always bells going off. There's definitely a dress code. Pencils are supplied. We have to bow before we leave the room and we have to stand up to say anything. For Christ's sake, we have to have a note to leave the building."

"Look!" the teenage daughter said, and stuck her face about an inch from her mother's. "Notice anything different?"

"You get that thing out of your nose or you're never going out again."

"It's my body! It's my body! I can do what I want with it."

On her wrists and from her ears the Member from Maypole wore bracelets and earrings wrought from heirloom forks.

\*\*\*

Amid all this, outside the Legislature whose lawns were littered with AAA batteries from trinket tape recorders and cameras, there were clearer, less comforting voices to be heard. It may have been when we were sitting down to dine at Mario's in Shushkapi or the Tastee-Freez in Scaler when I happened to *scannice* -- a modest invention of mine, meant to symbolize fleeting intake -- that Slobodan Milosevic had told the Serbian militia, "You will never be defeated again."

Someone must have recorded that, a few rows back, in clothing that was shiny at the patches, beer on his breath, cheese beneath his nails.

There must be many others in the world who are not uneager to receive similar benedictions. Was I about to say, Alas, not here? I was not about to say, Alas, not here.

\*\*\*

The-Party's platform was so abstract, had the killer spin, was loosey-laissez so the Member's words tesseractally disappeared into implications of each other in the very air. His was rhetoric of promises and stirring need. His constituents supplied essential services to a surprising degree. The Member looked about his age. He had recently fallen in love and wore from time to time a freshly ruined *boutonniere*.

\*\*\*

The banks of monitors in Your Party's briefing room changed every seven minutes (empty legislature leather and oak, marble halls, brick tunnels in the basement) unless overridden. It was chill as chromakey. The Member from Marten, kept waiting, had shrugged on her shoulder-padded jacket. Last night she had made a speech in the House entitled "Our Children's Children Challenged: The Decline of Values Among Our Youth." Caucus had taken notice; Caucus had faxed Wolfgang and Smith a copy.

Who now entered, keystone-copping through the narrow door, found chairs, swiveled.

"What we want," said Wolfgang," is you to read your speech. Just the way you gave it last night." His lapel button read, ‘Shameless.’

"Be natural," said Smith.

Laughter. The monitors changed again. (A security guard on a stairway landing, rubbing his thumb along the cherrywood bannister.) The Member from Marten stood and, leaning on her black ashplant, read the speech. Wolfgang made notes; Smith listened. The Member had a way of regarding her audience from above her glasses and below her eyebrows that was primly instructive.

Wolfgang sent for tea before commenting, “Yes, very good, but I'm wondering, yes, I am, so it's no good -- wondering about that 'I'm an urban Member and I never knew about the North' shtick. Wondering if the appeal of that is in fact a broad-based appeal or maybe effective only in certain age-tiles?"

The Member from Marten grew immobile.

"You mean to say, " she began.

"It's not a question of content," Smith put in. "We agree with what you're saying."

"Yes," said Wolfgang.

"It's a question of consolidating appeal."

"You've got a lot," said Wolfgang.

Her eyes changed (with the monitors) from wrinkle to crinkle. "What does that mean?"

The men rearranged their knees.

"Can we talk clothes?" said Wolfgang.

The Member from Marten bit her lip.

"Listen, I have to get back to the House. E-me."

They watched her and her cane trundle down the hallway on the security screen.

"Her, we can work with her," said Wolfgang. Smith nodded. Wolfgang continued to intone something into his clipboard.

All the monitors unified at an aboriginal chant over an ocean sunrise: they showed the House's Christmas-light silhouette, thirtyfold; they showed the tuliped grounds; the Revolving Dome; The Shiny Scepter; a Senior Clerk in a tricorn handling the Green Book.

In the recording room, far below the house, whirring under tons of concrete, the VCR's *Record* display automatically began, its ---, began to --- --- ---.

On the microphone panel AMBIENT changed to SPEAK.

Maylene hit the buttons on the Sony twindeck with her fingerpads, swiftly, under her triangular flamingo nails.

"Is Committee A sitting? We don't know yet. Oh God! There she is! Oh, sit down. Oh, shut up."

THE SPEAKER: I call the House to order.

She continued, we continued, rapt. We, the Underlings of the Halls, the RANSAC[[6]](#footnote-6) staff. We crept around the basement. We trooped in past stacks of discarded binders, telephone and government directories, blotters, scribblers, clipboards, folders and calendars. Our jobs left us minorly inconvenienced, but marvelously uncompromised.

Sustainable development.

"Him, I wish he'd up and get a new suit," someone said.

The walls were covered with shelves, the shelves were lined with tapes. In *Meditations on Hunting*, Ortega y Gasset comments that the first plunder of the uprisen poor throughout European history has been hunting game -- one of the promises of paradise, but also with its wicked cachet of sheer sport and privilege.

How gingerly we carried those tapes and how often we spoke about their provenance and serial order and told ourselves and others exactly where they were; they weren't lost; *there would be no break in our transcripts.*

A man named Abu Haydar witnessed the storming of a Ba'athist Party police station in Iraq, 1991: "All police resistance inside the building collapsed and the rebels swarmed in, burning all the papers and files....Everything was destroyed: car records, property registries, police files, court proceedings."

So it was written.

Maylene began recording the House in the 1950s, when she wore skirts and sweaters and smoked 35 per day. Coming down for lunch, carrying two boxes of tapes, she tripped on her heels and crashed to the bottom of the Main Stairs, breaking her jaw on a marble riser.

"Mr. The Party better watch that lover-girl of his," Maylene said now. "He'll wake up one morning and he'll have nothing. She'll have it all."

\*\*\*

Hon. J.M. Cooper: Don't think I don't understand the political game that's being played here; I understand it very well. Yet it seems to me, Hon. Chair, that the Hon. Member gets so carried away with his role of opposition critic that he can't even realize something that's taking place that might actually benefit the people of British Columbia.

Hon. Leader of the Third Party: Point of Order.

(Where was the ambient microphone? The hours I spent searching the pressed tin ceiling for the ambient!)

Chair: The Member from Skalalakit--Qa'ash'asen on the Point of Order.

Hon. Leader of the Third Party: Well, it seems to me a character shift on the order of post-amnesiac assumed identity for the Minister to be lecturing my colleagues on the duties and practices of a responsible opposition member! I know well, Hon. Chair, that this is not the place to mention the consistently contrary and not particularly constructive ploys the Minister was fond of in his role as opposition critic. And it probably isn't the forum to suggest here that the rights of ordinary working men and women in this province...

An Hon. Member: Of British Columbia!

Hon. Leader of the Third Party:...that the Minister is fond of attributing to his party --

Hon. J.M. Cooper: Government.

Hon. Leader of the Third Party: --were in fact brought about by the Third Party government.

Hon. J.M. Cooper: You know, Hon. Chair, I wasn't going to mention the scandalous reign of that government, so I won't.

The Speaker: The Member from Transmission on Vote 19.

Hon. K. Jason: Through you to the Minister: would the Minister confirm the exorbitant expenses allowed vis a vis the short-term Crown appointment of Your Party insider Miller Wolfgang?

Hon. J.M. Cooper: No.

\*\*\*

For a long time I used to worry, What was the matter with the Member? Now I know what is the matter with him, and a lot of people in North America. *He felt it was beneath him to speak his mind.*

He tried to correct this by wardrobe.

He changed his software, his investments, his newspapers.

He tried to correct this by sophistication. At the hint of conflict he was on his feet, alleviator, no menace but a practiced polish in his eye.

Charismatic.

\*\*\*

There was, of course, a level of all this that was predictable, cartoonish:

"…it's the end of collective bargaining as we know it."

The Minister shot to his feet when the Member from Glacier was finished. "My friend, Honourable Chair, it is really a very simple proposition of the algebraic persuasion: if, on the one hand, you would ask us, as a duly elected Government, to reduce taxes, and, on the other hand, also ask us to provide further services, you must admit that it is somewhat incumbent upon you to suggest where else we might tax or what other services we may cut if you should also have, and you have, the temerity to ask us to reduce the deficit."

In Estimates it was one of the wonders of our age to see the Ministers falling and rising from their chairs after *conferring with their people*. Contingencies were so complex, so sidereal, that they could only be explained by ranks and ranks of dark-suited gentlemen and gentlewomen who at the Minister’s behest flipped through binders, made notes, craned to whisper in the Minister’s ear. The look of wonderment, of genuine glee, that things could be so complicated and yet so well-explained, that flitted across the face of the Minister, his hand tensed on the chair-arm, before he rose to tell the committee what he had only just learned.

I straightened the stacks of tapes and numbered the logsheets well ahead, humming a tune.

*Players at the table,*

*Making eighty grand,*

*Ease the process,*

*Freeze the process,*

*Home and native land!*

I think I know what the Member saw the day he spoke out: he looked up from his notes at the faces around the committee table. They weren't there any more. In their place were roving, electronic cubes, like that graphics trick used to preserve anonymity on TV. On their shoulders, above the school ties and the cufflinks of the Members, he saw but scrambled signals, geometric mess.

Is there a cure for symmetry when the bilateral governs? When the polarized paralyzes? Mornings after trips the signs of motels flashed off and on and replaced. A weakness of sunrise, perhaps: their continuing signatures flickered palely in the texture-gaining tile floor of the House. The Hemlock Room with its painted colonial illustrative panels. The Birch Room. The Douglas Fir Room.

\*\*\*

And so we left on our tour to gather the input of the populace, trimly disinterested, while, on the other side of the earth my shadow recorded his subjects, their honour and blood. There was a terrible silence in the North that sunned itself above the roadbeds and stared out of shadows and overhangs at entrances and drank the big screen, out there -- not spoken of, unrepresented. The North made itself apparent to each of us differently. The Member from Marten was enchanted by types of manufacturing and enterprise hitherto unrealized; her notebook was full of notations such as RE-CHIP HOLDINGS NO. 3722 and BED AND CHORES or FERTILIZER DIAGNOSIS SYSTEMS. Others raved about the yarn barns and corny boutiques.

Myself, I saw a Wet'suwet'en boy asleep under a Chevron air-dispenser. Closed, he had the most beautiful eyes, almond-gated at their inner quillage by long, black lashes. They were eyes so sad, so unmoving and deep-locked. He slept face-deep in the unleaded stink and the wheels dinging and dinging over the rubber hose.

I knew we were North. A mechanic in Axwa'laka told me the time was near; the number of the beast shone from our credit cards.

I knew we were North. It was the battered vehicles, the illegible plates, the crazed and fatal windshields, above all the mud scattered in Atlantean patterns on side-panels of vans, and the winches and hip-high wheels.

North. Detroit was coming in on four channels. People sweated at the hearings, but seemed, mysteriously, sterile, because they froze the sweat back to their Sunday shirts in black-lit lounges, froze a thin armour of beer and toilet disinfectant to their irises, the better to sneak glances in the space-gracing mirrors at the Members in their more casual skirts and outfits.

I knew we were North, because there was no South.

Light till the body tires. Light on the foil-green algae in the pool. The painted mouths of Tikis in Kon-Tikiland Lounges. The Members at table, the glittering array of plates and glasses. The Member from Maypole spilling and plucking her pills from the Alaska Highway tablemat. After their day of hearings they used their mouths. Outrigger canoe above them, natively painted in animist emblems.

"If I won the lottery, I would fain pursue gentlemanly pursuits."

*Swiving. Lepidoptery.*

"I don't know, you know, I think I will be happy to do my time in the House, but I'd like to get back to the office and make some money."

"Hey, Harbinder, did you see that documentary on nuclear accidents in Rajasthan last night?"

"I have seen that documentary no less than four times, and believe me, when the Western powers want to make a point, they have their very efficient ways of doing so."

*Freezepacked, airshipped, rooms from $29.*

"Did I tell you about the time I came running up the stairs of the House with my goddamned pantyhose around my knees?"

I knew we were North because there was no south. Light in the wee hours of the map.

The Member in his bathing-robe stands in the hallway pressing and pressing the elevator button. He has returned disappointed from the drained pool and has missed his dip. The fire door bangs open. Two Gitxsan men enter, singing, bumping the walls. The one starts to hop like a frog down the hall, passing behind the Member's back and shoulders. His friend cracks open a Kokanee.

"I told him not to fucken do that. He's fucken pissed."

I lift the Member's gymbag, and we proceed.

I sit up late, and listen to the strange man speaking Arabic above the running newsreel banner. Someone is recording him; I know it.

When we returned to Victoria, the small city was a sort of sick richness after the North. There were pastries, overwhelming bookshops, creamy espresso. It was not a bad day along the Inner Harbor. I had a long lunch and walked past the professional beggars on the causeway, entered the House, and made my way up to the Douglas Fir Room, to relieve one of the Underlings from the microphone zone. I sat, I listened, I took frequent peeks out the small window. *Relieve*, from the Old French, *relever*, to raise again. I watched a raven unface a gargoyle gracefully and ride a wave of air. *Record*, from the Old French, *recorder*, rarely of humans, to sing a tune in an undertone, often of birds. I stared at the linens and silks in contestable gesture before my eyes; it was not as if, as I had read elsewhere, that words ceased to mean anything, or meant their opposites; no, it was simply that the ladies and gentlemen were at it again, debating, benevolently carving their endeavours through the four-channeled air, like a mirage of scarves. They talked and talked. The pleasure of a memory, a meeting where everyone or nearly dealt with their agenda in the splendor of raiment and refreshment, temperance and reason, oil and wine. In every missive spilled the shadow of another age.

The Member was on his feet in one of his better suits.

*Rigmarole*, I muttered. Look at that ragman roll.

The Member continued:

"...as I was saying, enumerating--I'm sure we all know about that. Ha, ha."

Silence.

"Anyway, I didn't want to talk about that. I wanted simply to point out that that attitude you display towards our colleagues in the Ministry of Women's Empowerment, it's hostile. It's ungentlemanly. There's no excuse for it. It reminds me of *The Lion in Winter*, Peter O'Toole and Katherine Hepburn, where O'Toole says to her, no, she says to him, 'You're still a marvel of a man,' and he responds, 'And you're still my lady.' I just thought I'd mention that."

The Minister said, "I didn't detect a question in the Member's salvo. And my friend seems to have forgotten that he, too, is a Member of our Government! I wonder if he'd care to repeat at least the answerable part."

The Member: "Yes. My God, yes. What I want to know about are the people. What about the people?"

The Sergeant of Arms was on the House line.

"The people. Well put, my friend. Well, I do believe the people are well served by my Ministry. That is, after all, our aim. Granted, there is a larger aspect to the Member's comments and it is the case that we are challenged in this Ministry as in others by that challenge. We're fortunate to be so well-equipped and able to effect that change howsoever it might be conceptualized by the people--"

The Member was now shouting: " *1066. 1776. 1923. 1867. Decembrists. Ana Hegira. Black September cells. Year One!*

“Stop the clock! We want to get off! *The people I've met want off the clock!"*

They had the Member in their arms and moved him swiftly through the door.

"But the people can still benefit under this Government from being the people," said the Minister, since nothing had happened.

\*\*\*

Someone is always recording. A man of slimness and medium complexion, a man of cooling tea, complexities. I have had cause to think of him. I saw his neatly labeled tapes on TV. He, like me, sets up his equipment, connecting each microphone to each channel-feed, and each feed into A, then B, the two decks he must surely use if there are to be no gaps in his record. He is quick at setting up, perhaps ten minutes, so he has a bite before the meeting starts. He plans ahead, like I do. Numbers his logsheets and tapes well ahead of time, *waHd* to *'ishreen*.

It is very hot. About an hour after the men convene, the recordist has oozed into his microphone zone in which he is only aware of the tapes and their changing as process, and the talk as a field in which he hovers, startled to deeper stillness by the mental apparitions he beholds: his wife's lower back as she leaps from bed for the baby; the letters *Khaa* and *Jiim* chaining shapes in a brass table; the smell from his own body is like a copper bracelet, sharp, mineral-thin.

Tempers rise in the small room. There is drinking. Provoked, one of the men stands and fires a handgun into the ceiling.

The recordist tears his earphones from his head.

"*Fa'atabbahum ma:a ad-dababa Hatta laysa 'uula'ika hum illa ad-damma'a!*"[[7]](#footnote-7) the man with the gun is shouting.

Yet a while before the recordist hears him.

The man is shouting, the men are shouting, but the recordist cannot hear them.

He pleads with them to stop.

They come for him. They want to comfort him.

They comfort him.

The Member continues.

\*\*\*

I thought, having taped them, stored them, that we were done with them, but the presenters were relentless. They got into my hotel rooms and stood at the foot of my bed, asking for more water. An old man with a hearing aid: "We fought for this country and all this now is about money and power and you won't even admit it." A young woman with a two year old on her hip: "I don't know why I came here, but I brought these articles and clippings from the Resource Centre, cause I got this job through the GAIN program. Can I read a bit from them?"

"Hey, I pay taxes too," I said. Hid under the covers. Switched beds.

One morning, I stopped before the lactic bronze statue in front of the House. The plaque read "To Our Glorious Dead." The grass was chaste of flashbulbs and batteries around the base, which was expected. The dead have shed resemblance. They are and are and are. How many insects in a cameo of amber?

There was another notable work of art in the House, in the heart of it. Concealed all summer by hoardings and scaffolding, it was revealed in autumn as a hologram in a projected clearing of trees.

This is under the cupola, near the security guards.

It floated a foot from the subdued tiles. It was a hominid figure in a fine Kwak'wala transformation mask, raven from salmon from otter from orca emergent, all the planes of the marvelous ramified animals seemingly glazed and shaded, such cumbersome, glorious shedding of self, enigma.

Indigenous.

**Burning Swarm of Ali**

Twilight had come and passed over his shoulders and bent head, like a crow.

\*

Ali stood on the promontory watching his house burn down, a terrestrial crown of flame within the dark blue heavens.

\*

He had often imagined a flash of ignition against the ocean, his headlights sweeping the bay’s curve, and then a razor of flame twisted into rising smoke, but this time he had missed it. The fire was already advancing. He pulled up and watched it burn, calculating.

The fire trucks had not yet arrived; the sirens were coming; the fire had not yet reached the den.

Ali madly ran through the back door. It was warm inside, and a warped, buckled crick-crack was coming through the walls. He snatched two things: a 10-gram brass weight and a teardrop earring. He got out fast, tripping at the back door and regained his vantage point on the road, hands on his knees, panting.

\*\*\*

In the matter of houses burning down and Islam, Ali had only one reference point, an interview with Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, the basketball star. Many years ago, when Ali’s wife Jamilla was still alive, she was rolling the sofa with a lint-remover as Ali surfed the channels. Kareem Abdul-Jabbar’s house had also burned down, a great big place in the Hollywood Hills. His huge hands were smoothing the viewer over to his faith: “Sometimes Allah teaches us that *things* are not so important,” said Kareem, and then there was a clip of him shooting his famous sky-hook.

\*

The roof bellowed its collapse, and sent a great huff of circling sparks out into the cold night.

He held the brass weight in his palm, dense polished brass; he held it as if it were the only ruby in a world of jade. The earring he left in his pocket.

\*

From the transparent rage of flickering, enwrapping and licking flame, the *jinn* crept out and perched on the charcoal rafters, unbothered by the fire, as they were made of smokeless fire themselves. He had the feeling they wanted to listen. He knew he could not really see *al-ghayb[[8]](#footnote-8)*, but he wanted to talk to the jinn. He felt he had the right; after all, his house was burning.

He supposed he had better begin with Katheeja Mubarikta and her family, who were prominent at the mosque when Ali was still a growing teenager: his sleeves rode up inches from his wrists. The community was mostly from India and Pakistan, although recently more and more Arab students were attending Friday prayers, bringing with them their almost competitive piety. Already an Arab student had disrespectfully commented on the women’s dress at community functions, and the most disgusting Western habit of applauding after speeches. Katheeja’s brother Khaled, because of his superior knowledge of the Qur’an, quickly became a negotiator between the two groups. Ali’s family had tried to stay out of it.

\*

Ali had long imagined Katheeja’s family escaping from Swahilia. This would have been when Katheeja, and he, were three. He had done some reading, and for the harder-to-imagine parts he had relied on remembered passages from V.S. Naipaul. His Swahilia therefore has a certain Trinidadian cast, not entirely inapposite, as colonies are always forming and reforming on the surface of the earth. Naipaul’s people, too, were indentured labourers brought from India, but the Empires were different: Swahilia relied on the labour of Indians from Gujarat, brought in to supply the services and crafts for the slave-trade by the Arabs. But the Arabs had long since gone. News of them only came from the rare old person who trickled back from the *hajj.*

The Mubarikta family were *halal* butchers in a small town about a day’s drive from Swahilia’s capital, Darjoon. They lived in a bungalow in a large clearing and rickety fences over which Katheeja could see the vats, hanging sides of meat, and the flayed hides drying in raw, warped cowl-shapes, but she was forbidden to go past those fences. They kept chickens. She chased cane-rats, another thing she was forbidden. She was allowed to beat on the sides of the funnel they drove the cattle through on inoculation days.

Her parents were often arguing, and Daddy was always listening to the big tube radio in the room where he kept his Qur’an and his pipe. His friends came over to talk with him. He stayed in his room with them a long time. The next day, Mommy and Daddy were rushing around, picking things up, putting them down, and piling clothes and food by the front door: Katheeja and her brother Khaled got sent to bed early, and were hurriedly bundled into the car before the dawn prayers. Daddy touched the roof once before he started the car and said, *Inna nahnu billahi wa billahi raja:un[[9]](#footnote-9).* She didn’t know what that meant, but knew it was Arabic. He always said that when he drove. They drove for a couple of hours away from the rising sun. Are we there yet? said Katheeja. It is a long way, said Mommy. It was already very hot. They passed plots of cassava and yams in clearings, where there were black men squatting by fires, whose eyes followed them. Daddy rolled down the window and she heard the chatter of macaws. Mommy and Daddy weren’t talking. Are we there yet? said Katheeja. I need to go. Reluctantly, Daddy pulled over and took her hand as she peed in the red earth. She was full of pee. A black man with no shirt swinging a gun strolled out on the road. *La khawfa illa billah[[10]](#footnote-10)*, she heard Daddy mutter. They got back in the car. The man was poking his gun through the window at Daddy. Mommy! Said Katheeja. Sssh, said Khaled behind her. Hush, honey, hush, okay, okay, honey, said Mommy, and held her close.

Daddy got out of the car, and the man hit him in the face with his gun-butt.

Mommy clapped a hand over Katheeja’s eyes and pushed her down, and spoke harshly to Khaled. The man was shouting in Swahili. The car door opened, and Daddy got behind the wheel. The man hit the car roof hard with his gun. The motor started and they were moving again; Mommy’s hand relaxed. Katheeja eventually sat up. Mommy was busy daubing Daddy’s face with a Kleenex she kept spitting on as he drove. They passed a burned-out car on the shoulder, and a cracked, dry lake bed with gleaming salt-flats; on the horizon a few plane-trees, and a thin blue line of mountains. Daddy stopped the car and got out, and Katheeja twisted around and watched Daddy throw up. Daddy is sick, said Katheeja. Are we there yet?

\*\*\*

Ali believed that he had richly and faithfully imagined this, but he had no way of knowing that in Katheeja’s bag her mother packed for their long journey out of Swahilia there was a tube of Darkie toothpaste, common in the Levant, with an Old Black Sambo face in a top hat with a piano-key grin. It had come overland to Swahilia from Tunisia by stages in dusty jeeps. The black face made Katheeja giggle. The Swahilian government had banned this toothpaste. It is still available in Turkey and parts of Syria.

\*\*\*

The Muslim year, being lunar, moves its festival dates backwards through the Gregorian calendar at the rate of 9 days per year; Ramadan was in July and August the year that Katheeja turned away from his path in life, and now the Holy Month fell again in the heat of summer, after 40 years. He remembered the long, parched days of the Ramadan fast. He fell in love with Katheeja that summer, at the weak ends of the day, at the mosque, in the dusk, her hands around a dish cloaked in a tea-towel. She was a slight girl, whose *hejab*, knotted under her chin like a kerchief, at least lent her face some weight; she wore kohl and had slender olive-coloured hands. Ali had just turned eighteen. He also noticed Katheeja at the *madrasa,* which was still co-ed*[[11]](#footnote-11)*. Her attempts to pronounce the Arabic letter **ع** were comic. You might say she had a fear of **ع**. He tried to talk to her after class and found her shy, and interesting. After Ramadan, Ali looked forward to Fridays when the Mubariktas arrived at the mosque for *jum’a* prayers, and he got a glimpse of Katheeja gliding through the lobby into the back-room where the women prayed.

\*\*\*

Khaled, Katheeja’s older brother, used to recite the Qur’an at Friday prayers and when he came to a part he couldn’t remember, he stopped, and waited until his father mumbled the next word from behind the rows of standing worshippers, before he continued, in the *taratilla[[12]](#footnote-12)* manner, a not unleisurely and measured unrolling of the word of Allah. He recited beautifully. The whole community agreed on that.

\*\*\*

Ali’s father told him quickly, perfunctorily, categorically, that Mr. Mubarikta did not accept Ali’s inquiry regarding marriage to his daughter Katheeja. Ali’s father explained that Mr. Mubarikta had just spent a great deal of money to send Khaled to Saudi Arabia for a proper religious education, and could not at present afford a wedding; besides, Katheeja was far too young.

“But didn’t he talk to her? *What did Katheeja say?*”

“I don’t know,” said his father.

“Can’t we ask again, when she’s older?”

“*Inshallah*.”

And Ali knew better to bring it up again.

\*\*\*

At first, among the shadows of the Great Mosque’s outer walls and the crowd-control features of Mecca, the rails and lines where people were always lining up to gain entrance to the Kaba’a, Khaled had felt lonely, but his studies absorbed him, and his teachers were demanding. He had the tongue for Arabic, and he recited the Qur’an like someone much older, with a greater sonority and majesty that marked him as an unusual student. The other standout student, seldom seen in the city without an entourage, was a Omani prince, always in a traditional *jellaba*. One evening, as Khaled was swallowing kebab and licking his fingers, the prince sat next to him and waved his followers away. “You are from Canada, *ikhwani*,” [[13]](#footnote-13) he said. “You are all alone here.”

“Thanks to Allah, I am fine.”

“Canada. You have a valid passport?” Ali nodded. “Come have coffee with me,” said the prince.

The prince, despite his regularly voiced pieties, did not seem to Khaled particularly devout, but he invited Khaled to his study-group, and when Khaled showed up, the prince was absent. They listened to the imam fulminate about the conditions of the Arabs, the oil companies, the CIA, and about the possibility of training. The next week, the location of the group changed, and it was a longer bus-ride out to the suburbs where the lights were farther apart and Khaled could see the stars, some. The group moved to another location, and there was a sense of selection, being nudged into a smaller, and yet more remote circle of prayer-partners. Then one evening the imam invited them to take part in military training.

Which took place that summer in the mountains of Yemen. The landscape was craggy, strewn with boulders, and bushes of something smelling like sage. They practiced artillery skills with old Kalashnikovs, but there was not enough space in the narrow valleys and their irregular slopes for long-range work, and so they dragged along but did not fire the mortars. They broke regularly for prayer, all their materiel piled behind them as they unrolled their carpets and prostrated.

The afternoons after *zuhr* prayers were lax and many nodded off after their supper, airplane trays wrapped in foil and heated in the burning branches. Old and young faces around the fires, sprigs of fresh *qat*. By *maghrib* prayers, the men were either sleeping or talking about their hometowns, their cousins and children. It became clear to Khaled that this training was at best provisional; no great aim had been stated; indeed, the Pakistanis and Bangladeshis viewed it as a holiday, and entertained each other with rugged male imitations of distant songstresses as the sun set, and the stars came out, and the constellations formed, and Khaled felt comforted by this simpler world among men, and under the wheeling stars and the dusky contours of the hills often reminded himself, from his Qur’anic learning, that all on the earth would eventually vanish, and that men would be like scattered moths one day, the mountains themselves like carded wool.

Khaled did not take it very seriously, though he did learn how to fire an automatic weapon. He viewed it as military service, not unlike what Europeans countries demanded of their youth.

It was quite some time before he learned the code-word *black rock*.

Once again, Ali, distracted by shouts, and men in high boots running past, and hoses dragging in the dirt, thought he had faithfully and truthfully imagined this Khaled sequence, but he had no idea, and, indeed, with the heat of the flame playing over his face, it seemed that his ideas were just another substance the fire could feed on.

\*\*\*

One of the jinn, horrible crimson puzzle-man, laughed and hoisted another jinn onto its back, and hopped along a crackling rafter. Yes, thought Ali, there is always a horrible moment, and for him it was when he rounded a street-corner, carrying his three-year-old piggy-back, and nearly ran into Katheeja, also with her child on her shoulders, her hands under his armpits. They nodded and stepped around each other. And what was so horrible for Ali? -- because you might say that these were the ingredients of a not unhappy ending. He thought he saw in Katheeja’s eyes the slight shadow of a shame that their attraction had ever happened in the first place.

And so the years of difficulty began. The years of choked-up sorrow in his throat when he ran across her, by chance. In grocery stores. In a baby-clothes boutique. In Staples buying school supplies. He had no reason to feel so strongly; his father had found him a perfectly good girl to marry; but there was Katheeja, in radiant good health, and obviously enjoying being a wife, a mother. Her eyes looked away; her finger twinkled. When they met in a bank line-up, he offered the customary greeting, *Salaam ‘aleykum*, and she, eyes on her hands, replied, *Wa ‘aleykum as-salaam.*

Yet those words would destroy his next couple of days. He took off from his accountancy firm and drove out to Cattle Point and looked at the ocean and summoned the memory of her voice, and it was in such a stew of feeling that Ali realized he had not performed his prayers for several days. He rectified that.

When his child Turgay was five and Ali was leading him by the hand towards the playground water-jets in Beacon Hill Park, he saw Katheeja with another baby in diapers; Katheeja right up behind the child, her fingers in the back of its diaper and nose down, sniffing for mess, and Ali turned around suddenly, and had to bear Turgay’s tears, “I want to play in the water, Daddy,” and swept Turgay up and practically ran towards the slides and swings of the playground on Cook Street, where Turgay forgot all about the water-jets.

\*\*\*

The first *jinn* listened and when Ali had finished smiled his little lizardness of a smile and said, *Yes, but what about the brass-weight*? The other *jinn* all started cackling in unison as the embers pulsed, and a cotillion of tiny red hands, the hands of Fatima, fluttering, flaked upwards into the night. Ali rubbed his eyes.

\*\*\*

Ali’s father, before he came to Canada in 1958, had sold nuts outside the public baths in Bodrum, Turkey for twenty years. He used the Armenian-made set of brass weights to exactly fill the paper cones with pistachios and filberts. In Canada he cleaned the local airport for twenty more years. Upon retirement, he swore that he would have nothing further to do with pistachios or vacuums. He died a year later. After the funeral, Ali noticed an uncertainty, a secret fear in his wife’s regard for him; they had not been getting along, and the old man’s death, she may have realized, had removed a stricture obedience from her husband, so she would fall into silence when they argued, let her point drop. But nothing dire happened; Ali did not separate from Jamilla; instead, he worried out loud to her more and more about his mother’s health. The years passed, and they continued to be husband and wife to each other, just like Katheeja and her husband. They had not done such a bad job, Ali thought.

They had bought the house when Ali retired, and Ali liked to think of it as his *yala*, one of the big Turkish summer-homes that looked onto the Golden Horn, where he and his wife had vacationed. And then his wife had died, of breast cancer, and he was alone in it.

*And the ships that furl upon the wavy lanes of the sea at His pleasure, can they not see upon this promontory my house, burning?*

\*\*\*

Ali was oblivious to the firemen as they dragged their ganglia of hoses around.

The house was settling in the tonnage of water that rained down, barking a few last shards, hissing, spitting.

A hand on his shoulder, “You’re all right?”

“I’m okay,” said Ali, “It’s just that my house is burning.”

\*

In the Muslim year 1400, a group of well-trained commandos under the leadership of the eldest son of a pious Sunni family hijacked the Grand Mosque in Mecca and held it for nearly three weeks. They claimed the ruling Saudi family was corrupt and unworthy of their role as steward of the Holy Places. Violence was not originally intended, but things went badly, and a guard was shot. The Saudi police surrounded the Grand Mosque and waited. They proved inadequate to their task, and a French elite SWAT team was brought in; the Saudis hurriedly proclaimed a *fatw*a allowing bloodshed in the sacred precincts, which was unprecedented, and in a special ceremony the French assassins were converted to Islam *en masse*. The French flooded the Grand Mosque and electrocuted the hijackers.

\*

There was a farther enclave in the flame, an opening shaped like a peaked seed, and within the seed a volitional area, and Katheeja was right in front of him, just as she had appeared forty years ago, after his failed proposal, outside the mosque, in the most recondite corner of the flower-garden, her hair down, looking at the rhododendrons. You’ve got to be bold, he thought. He walked up to her.

“*Salaam aleykum*.” [[14]](#footnote-14)

She returned the greeting and lowered her eyes.

“I respect your father’s decision,” he said, and faltered, and went on, “but I love you, Katheeja. I love you.

“Do you love me?”

“Yes, I love you,” she said it small and to the rhododendron.

“Then, please, please, let us talk to him. Perhaps the three of us could have coffee together…”

“*Inshallah*,” she said.

\*\*\*

Later that summer, there was a special meeting of the Muslim community, organized by the Mubarikta family and the Arab students. It was staged. The Mubariktas appeared and installed themselves in the front row; an *imam* they’d invited from Vancouver led them in prayer, and delivered a righteous *khutba* about certain matters of propriety. There was an angry babble among the congregation, seated in rows on fresh sheets: *Imagine an outsider showing up and telling us what Allah’s will is. The man is no imam. His card says he is a professional engineer. This is a liberal community. This is no Wahhabi[[15]](#footnote-15) gathering.* Ali felt sick inside all the voices.

Katheeja gathered up the sheets, and was herself whisked through the door by her father and the other Mubariktas. Ali watched her go. He waited but a second; Ali crossed the carpet and, with the swift drop of a raptor, picked up the teardrop earring.

\*\*\*

Since Khaled was in Mecca studying, someone else recited the Qur’an at the mosque; in fact, there were many reciters, and spirited arguments drawing on *hadith[[16]](#footnote-16)* to determine the rank in expertise of recitation; but Mr. Mubarikta no longer supplied the next word if the reciter happened to forget. The pauses just became longer. Often the reciter would back up, recite the previous, intact *sura*, say *Allahu akbar*,[[17]](#footnote-17) and begin the bending, the prostrations. Mr. Mubarikta did not say much to anyone. He slumped in a chair off to the side. He eventually stopped coming, and so did Katheeja.

\*\*\*

The *jinn* ran swiftly up the studs, rafters and trusses on a roof no longer there, brilliant crimson notes and rests perched *do-re-mi* on an invisible staff.

Ali kneeled and beheld before him, suspended between blades of crabgrass, a wet and evanescent spider-web. *The spider’s house is the flimsiest of houses*, Ali recited*, if ye but knew.*

The spider vanished.

\*\*\*

A year after Katheeja had said *Inshallah* to him, and Ali saw her from afar on campus, and ran and caught up to her. Her eyes were angry.

“Where’s Khaled? Why doesn’t he come to visit any more?”

But Katheeja kept on walking, past the fountain, into the crowd near the library doors, as if she didn’t see him, intent, in fact, on getting away from Ali.

\*\*\*

A pressurized, rushing, explosive hiss from his burning house startled Ali, and his chest constricted in terror.

Khaled would have heard the faint drumming and trickling of the water, and, as it infiltrated and found the lower levels of the Great Mosque, he would have seen the wavy interplaying of lines of refraction on the ceiling, like *nashkhi* calligraphy, and mesmerized to insight by the beauty of the light, white, watery reflections, would have realized what was going to happen, and panicked, tried to escape, to get to higher ground.

You don’t know that, thought Ali.

\*\*\*

Ali was walking in a small, loose circle in the driveway as the sun came up.

A car slowed, uncertain, and pulled in.

Katheeja got out, nodded once, and helped her father out of the back seat. He was old now, and walked heavily on his cane; his stubble was grey as his nubbly *kalpak*. She lifted a bulging Thrifty’s bag from the trunk and brought it to Ali.

“News travels fast. We thought you might need these,” she said.

He turned the shirts and pants over in his hands. He knew they were Khaled’s.

“Thank you,” he said.

“It is our pleasure. We are Muslims,” Katheeja said. “We believe in the unseen. We establish regular worship. We spend out of our Lord’s bestowal. I brought coffee.”

They stood before the lightly steaming, blackened *ikhlas[[18]](#footnote-18)* of Ali’s house and drank the coffee. Ali upturned a milk-crate for Katheeja’s father so he could sit.

**THE COOLERATOR**

One February night Ryan and Terry were sitting up in their heaviest coats in the warehouse watching *Ren and Stimpy.* They had some skunk to smoke, and the bong clouded up cold as they toked, and Terry asked Ryan for a beer, and in that blissful instant, torn between the TV, the fridge and the bong, Ryan had the idea for The Coolerator. Ryan had in mind a volcanic boil of smoke rolling in a freezer’s few cubic feet, and a trippy light-effect, and some way to suck the smoke out of the frozen light.

He kept it to himself for a while.

\*\*\*

Ryan frequented Home Depot, the Sally-Anne, head shops, certain marine supply warehouses and the want-ads of the Surrey and Langley community newspapers looking for parts for the Coolerator. He ignored Terry, who said he was in the doldrums and just shuffled around the warehouse getting high, in a housecoat and Reeboks and a soft pilot’s helmet, tuned out of every conversation. Ryan managed to find the embouchure, the tubing, the sealing, the black-light, cheap. He got a junky fridge from the *Buy and Sell* and only had to replace the Freon tube. The flat-screen TV was a problem. After a few months, an opportunity presented itself: Ray, the Abbotsford tattoo artist he admired, was moving to Newfoundland and wanted to unload his 51-inch. They settled on 200 vials of hash-oil; Ryan had made it in an ethanol haze some years back for barter. As Ray counted the streaky black vials, Ryan had a good look at Ray’s baller garb and bling and thought, This guy is *set.*

He hauled it all into the small room of acrid mold off the loading dock, and got to work.

\*\*\*

Terry sidled up to the fridge and sucked and the smoke rushed into his mouth, and his eyes went pop as the TV, built into the freezer door, displayed the purple smoke circulating in the freezer. Ryan flicked a switch for the strobe feature. The bowl of *sensamilla*, Ryan’s finishing touch, anchored to the freezer-handle, was a steampunk goblet with springs dangling from its lip, and it was still smoking when Terry pulled away.

“Wow,” he said.

“Meet The Coolerator,” said Ryan.

“You did this all by yourself?” said Terry.

“I got plans,” Ryan said.

\*\*\*

Ryan got Kimberly and Ashley, their current girlfriends, both black-haired in great bikini T&A, to have a spat at the end of the 30-second video-ad for the Coolerator, which Ryan unsteadily filmed, lending some vérité to the antics.

“Like, it’s the Coolerator. It’s cool—and that’s hot,” said Kimberly.

Ashley was tired and out of breath from her oboe lesson. They had to do several takes. Ryan smirked at her oboe lesson—he called it “honking on the little bulb.”

“Again. Work it again.”

“…it’s cool, and that’s hot.”

“The Coolerator’s *awesome*. It’s hot—and that’s cool.”

Back and forth it went, hot and cool, cool and hot, each stroking a side of the fridge with their appliqued nails. They jutted their hips and offered their asses. The tip of Kimberly’s tongue drifted around her lips.

\*\*\*

Unexpectedly, the Coolerator began to take off. It was sold out of storage rooms in car stereo outfits; it was sold in the smelly, small rooms that janitors keep near the dumpster in major malls. No one could quite niche it. It wasn’t exactly a luxury item, but it was expensive, a cool five grand. A band from Seattle ordered two—one for the road and one for the garage. Ray and Terry couldn’t keep up with the orders. Before long the driveway was full of Ryan’s friends, the distributors, in shorts and aviator shades barking into their walky-talkies. The Coolerator crew began to take on a paramilitary look; when autumn came, they all wore cargo pants and camouflage tee shirts. They reminded one of Yukio Mishima’s private army.

\*\*\*

Ryan had no taste when he got going. He found out that Terry’s mother had a birthday coming up, so he threw a party for her at the warehouse, with lots of fresh steak *tartare* and *ceviche* from a restaurant, *Flames,* that had turned out to be a great referral-hub for the Coolerator. He drove to Canadian Tire and came back with a stack of plastic patio chairs, a brace of bunched balloons. He and Terry, of course, had the Coolerator going all morning. Gary, in from Ashcroft, did most of the set-up, and declined to Coolerate. He said there came a time in a man’s life when he gets sick and tired of Creedence Clearwater Revival.

“I got a Kansas bootleg,” said Ryan, unconcerned that Gary was out. The purple smoke gathered onscreen like an approaching cold front, tornado at its base that funneled down the drain and into Ryan’s mouth.

So, come the party, everyone was milling around appreciating the lime juice on the *ceviche* and the strawberry daiquiris in stadium cups and a worried voice peeped through the smoke and the general roar wondering, *Can you get red tide from scallops?*

Terry’s Mom got all seated in front of her Black Forest and her Blue Nun, and sucked in to blow out the candles, when Ryan leaped up and yelled, *Intervention!* and everyone around the table proceeded to turn on Terry’s Mom and told her how her birthday *problem* was wrecking their lives and interfering with their *drug-centered choices*. That was Ryan’s idea of fun. Terry’s Mom finally realized it was a gag and her mouth became smaller and more Episcopalian, and she said, *You’re pulling my leg, that’s all you are.*

Terry laughed too, but he thought Ryan had gone too far.

\*\*\*

“The demographic we want to target is funking it up,” Ryan said. “They’re establishing essentially a drug-centered lifestyle. They’re the nouveau slack. We’ve got to do some marketing. I see a series of events, classy, phyllo-wrapped appies kind of events. We could model them after *Maxim’s Golf Classic*. What do you think we should we call our Coolerator bash, because it’s gotta be catchy.”

“I dunno,” said Terry. He was dabbing a fatty with saliva so it wouldn’t burn so fast and run up the paper, which could lead to re-rolling the joint. Terry though this a paradox: the paper burnt fast, but it slowed down doing the drugs; a golf-like paradox. Golf, now where did that come from?--if you wanted the ball to go *up*, then you kept your head *down*.

“How about *Loserama*,” said Kimberly.

“You guys,” said Ryan. “We gotta get serious.”

\*\*\*

Ryan and Terry actually got a job application from a customer in Ames, Iowa. His resume was:

***CAREER GOAL***

*Smoke kick-ass bud.*

***EDUCATION***

*Smoked kick-ass bud.*

***WORK EXPERIENCE***

*Smoked kick-ass bud.*

***REFERENCES***

*Smoking kick-ass bud.*

Terry phoned the guy immediately. “Aw, what the fuck for?” said Ryan, but Terry was running with it. The voice in Ames, Iowa was bluegrass-driven and eager; Terry said he’d pay him six bucks an hour; that was what the provincial government training wage was, and besides, the Coolerator was always available for test-drives, man.

The Coolerator intern, Mister Iowa as they called him, showed up in two days in a druid beard, with everything he owned, which did include a banjo, in a Volkswagen van and a couple of ferrets on leashes, whom he called Alice and Cooper.

\*\*\*

“Ain’t you noticed?” said Terry. “Kimberly and Ashley been shopping so much lately we never get laid anymore.”

“No, I ain’t noticed,” said Ryan. “Where’s my Dead Kennedys cassette?”

“Ryan, that’s my Dead Kennedys cassette. I lent it to you about a year ago.”

“Thanks.”

\*\*\*

Terry had a funny feeling when he was tooling down the King George Highway on a blue-sky day. Something amiss in the ditch alongside a farmer’s field of bright pumpkins, so he slowed, pulled over, and backed up on the shoulder.

It was a fridge, its door hanging, with the mouthpiece and tubing. But he also knew that neither Ryan nor he had made it, for it was an Electrohome. Something made Terry get back in his car and drive away.

\*\*\*

On the nightly news they happened to catch a special bulletin while surfing for reality shows: a homeboy in Mission had been found dead in a townhouse, his lungs exploded. Apparently, he had been inhaling narcotics, said the RCMP flak, from a refrigerating device, and the Freon tube sprang a leak; the Freon had expanded in his lungs, killing him almost instantly.

“Oh-oh,” said Kimberly.

“A Freon tube going, that’s once in a blue moon,” said Ryan. “Let the buyer beware.”

“Jesus, Ryan, the kid’s *dead*,” said Terry.

“That could have been me,” said Ashley.

“Maybe it wasn’t ours,” said Terry, but he didn’t mention the fridge in the ditch.

“We better cool it,” said Ryan.

Over the next few weeks the crew with their camouflage and aviator sunglasses and cell phones, still reminiscent of Yukio Mishima’s’ private army, showed up one by one to collect their CDs and articles of clothing. Kimberly disappeared. Then no one showed up. Ray and Terry lived in fear of a tip to the RCMP, but none occurred. They smashed up the extra fridges good and got an unsuspecting odd-jobs man to dump them in the landfill. They didn’t go out much.

\*\*\*

Almost three months to the day after they sold their last Coolerator, they ran out of dope. They had maxed out their credit cards and those of their immediate families, and Ashley was particularly tense; her skinny figure and sunken eyes bespoke a kindergarten Wichita of the soul. To smooth things over, Ryan went and sold the remaining demo TV through his network and scored a few ounces. Then that was gone. Ryan took a pipe cleaner to the bongs and tried to get the resin out. He was tense and frustrated at the results. Through the kind eye of literature, we are reminded of a scene late in Yukio Mishima’s *Spring Snow*, in which a covey of Thai princes in white robes were patiently combing a bright green sward for a golden ring one prince has lost, and in that pleasure of remembering, we can let the brilliant white Thai princes and their emerald island dissolve into the unpainted drywall of the warehouse, and enjoy the similar vignette of Ryan, Terry and Ashley as they crawled around on the carpet, tweezing smidges of bud out. They had a little pile going on the coffee table, part dope and part ferret-hair.

“Don’t move that fucking lamp,” Ryan said.

“How about the couch? Like, under the cushions,” said Ashley.

Finally, they got enough for a bowl, and Ashley lit up.

“Sweet,” she said.

\*\*\*

Ashley woke and pulled on her Snoopy tee shirt and Levis. Ryan lay dead to the world. She licked out her tiny baggie, as if one filament of red-hair would revive her. The floor was freezing. Someone had left the Coolerator running all night: the black-light was sputtering on the flat-screen. She hoped there were Cheerios. She looked a while at the purple flashes glancing off the molded pockets of the freezer. She had never seen so small an emptiness.

**Convenience**

The streets were rain-wet with only taxis hissing through the night. Other cars stood out, not-yellow, not-red, no roof-sign. The time of night for counting games based on traffic. Now that the movie-rush was over and the bar-rush, the only customers at Zig’s Convenience were the cabbies, and they came in silently, helped themselves to coffee and slid their exact change at Gwen.

The dead night started and Gwen could stop punching the register.

Gwen was on her break, had only just plunked herself down on the stool behind the counter and begun to leaf through *People*. Sherry was mopping the floor near the stacks of pop-bottle cartons beside the freezer. Sherry’s pen kept falling out of her breast pocket so she would lay the mop on the floor and stoop to snatch it, her gut-roll forcing her to take two tries at the pen. A faint radio was playing from the back room where they hung their coats, like a whisper of spring, its pitch so low neither of them could hear its lyrics of love and fortune, the way a resort is sensed before it is dreamed into a destination.

Gary phoned halfway through Gwen's break. She was now riffling the pages of *Celebrity*. Gary’s rasp intruded into a famous actor's world-view: *We had a lot of fun shooting Lionbrain, and that's what it's all about. You can wait a million years and try and set it up so you have the perfect movie, script, cast, location, director. Or you can take what you got and go for it. That's what we did with* Lionbrain*, and it all came together. I hope --*

"Zig's Convenience," she said.

"Gwen?"

"Course it's me. Can't you recognize my voice?"

"Sometimes I can, sometimes I can't. Depends where I'm at. So what are you up to?"

"Working."

"Yeah, I know, but what's cooking?"

"I'm on my break, Gary. It's late."

"I guess it's all the same, you work nights. Me, I'm sitting up. Had a few buddies over, a few tunes, it was fun."

"Tim over?"

"Yeah."

"Ken?"

"Look, I can give you the whole list."

"I'm just asking, is all."

"Yeah, I know. You're working, but I got a life."

"I got one too."

"Listen to her."

"Oh, Gary."

"No, listen to her. I have a few friends over; you got a problem with that?"

"No. There is no problem."

"Well, you sounded pissed."

"I'm tired."

"Okay, you're tired. I'm tired too. I got to go do that thing tomorrow."

"Uh-huh."

"Boy, you sound fascinated. Maybe I'll just hang up. I call, want to talk with my sweetie, she doesn't have time for me. Okay, you don't want to hear about what I gotta do tomorrow, I can understand that."

"But I want to hear."  
 "You sure?"

"I have a little time."

"Fuck, I know you guys do fuck-all all night. But here it is: I'm gonna read you this letter and --"

"What's this for again, Gary?"

"It's I'm trying to get work. Communications, you know. Like in the government and sweet 40 bucks an hour. Editing and like writing stuff. So here goes:

Dear Sir or Madame:

In this time of abundant information dedicated professionals like you or your coworkers surely need dedicated persons like myself to write things and edit them. This is why I am writing to you...”

"How's it sound so far?"

"Okay, I guess."

"Just okay? Holy shit, Gwen. How about a little support on this one? I'm trying like to make something happen for us. I'll read it over, if you want. Because go to town, don’t hold back, tell me the mistakes. I'm counting on you. Because like one mistake and I'm toast -- fuck, into the garbage it goes, they see a mistake. Okay?”

Gwen felt herself go clammy as he read the paragraph again. She felt caught. Something wasn't right about this -- but where was the mistake? He was almost finished. Where was it? She had to make something up.

"It sounds good. I would hire you."

"Yeah, thanks, but was there anything wrong?"

"Do you have to use 'dedicated' twice?"

"Okay so what's another word for 'dedicated'?"

Gwen thought. Sherry was straightening magazines. In the round security mirror, the rows of merchandise loomed, top-heavy.

"'Eager'," she said.

“‘I don’t know, Gwen, that makes me sound like some suckhole or something. Okay, I'll think about that. Anything else?"

"You shouldn’t use ‘thing’. If you're writing about writing, it makes it sound like you couldn't think of the word to write instead of 'thing'."

"Well, that's what they are, things. Issues, like. Speeches and I don’t know, essays? So things is no good. Thanks. I'll work on it. "

Gwen yawned.

"You're pretty tired," he said.

"I guess."

"Me too. Okay, I'll let you go."

"See you later, Gary."

"Bye. I love you."

"Love you."

She hung up. Sherry was looking out at the street. The rain had stopped. Gwen knew that Sherry would turn to her with a challenging look, catch her in her feeling, which was complicated, burnished in her throat. So Gwen bowed her head and pulled the thin sheets of lottery tickets out from under the scored Plexiglas and fingered them: Rodeo, Wheel of Fortune, Scratch4Loot. She put two in her pocket, and slid the lottery-tray back in place.

"Time to restock," she said.

Sherry removed a finger from her nose. "So, how's it going?"

"Gary, you mean? Oh, he's okay." She purposely brightened: "He's looking for a job."

Sherry snorted.

"He read me the covering letter."

Sherry, bored, started in. "That boy last week, he came at me with a knife," she said. "A big knife. You were off. Dwight was in the back. I saw his face right through the window -- above the *Globe and Mails*. I could tell what he was going to do, his *face* was nervous, looking around like. I didn't have time to get the float down or anything. I just froze at the counter right where you are -- everything really slow. Must have been two or three. He comes in and goes to the magazines, touches a magazine, same one, over and over, like he's trying to figure out where the camera is. Finally I see him shudder and he runs at me, right at the counter, and starts waving his knife. So I go, You want some money?, and he doesn't even hear me. He's yelling *Right fucking now*, or something. So I pull all the bills and just lay em down and he just stuffs the money in his pocket and runs. He trips, he falls flat on his face. And I'm thinking, Fuck, I hope he didn't fall on the knife, which is weird, eh, it's like I hate the guy, I'm frightened, I still can't move or anything, and I don't say a word. He gets up and grabs two or three chocolate bars, slashes at something and boom, he's gone, I'm standing here, it's ten minutes before I can go take a piss and then think about phoning anybody. So the cops come half an hour later, an I can't remember what he looked like, long hair, what he wore. And like, it's not the first time."

"No, what's it been now?"

"I been robbed six times."

"Never,” Gwen said.

"You got your own problems," said Sherry, "I got mine. I don't know what it is. I draw those guys out of the night, all’s I got to do is open the cash and there's someone come through the door with a nasty look and a gun."

"A *gun*?"

"That was just once. Usually it's knives. I been on stress-leave so many times I could practically write a self-help book on it. You missed when those two guys came in kicked the hell out of the place. Magazine rack--on its back. Smashed a bunch of bottles. I gave them the cash, and they went berserk, I was feeling sorry for them when the cruiser pulled up."

Gwen crossed her legs and heard her out, though she wanted to go for a pee and a smoke.

"Oh, you should have seen them. Meek and mild. Waltzed towards those cops with their hands out for the cuffs. And they apologized like gentlemen. "

"Strange."

The phone rang. Gwen said, "You get it."

Sherry smiled and walked over to the coffee-island. She pretended to assess the cream.

"Hello, Zig's Convenience," said Gwen.

"Am I interrupting you, honey?"

"Not really."

"So I am?"

"What is it, Gary?"

"Does it got to be something? Can't I just call?"

"Sure, you can."

"I wanted to ask you a question, is all."

She touched the lottery tickets in her pocket.

"How do you spell *paradigm*?”

"One ‘g’."

"'One 'g'?"

"Yeah, I'm pretty sure that's it. One ‘g’."

"How the hell is that supposed to help me? One ‘g’? Jesus, I ask you a simple question and you give me some sphinxlike-thing to figure out. All’s I'm asking is how do you spell a word and--"

She slammed down the phone. Her hand was hot on the phone, and she had slammed it down. Gwen straightened her neck up from the phone, her hand still on the receiver. She moved slowly away from it, staring at it intensely. It rang. She picked it up and slammed it down again. Again.

"Take a break, girl," Sherry was saying, from very close, hand on Gwen’s back.

Gwen went over and looked at the magazines.

All the bright bags of plain and lime and cheesy nachos and ripple-chips and pretzels crinkly around her.

The rack of glossy magazines. The star of *Lionbrain* was on many covers. He had been voted the sexiest man in the world. She went and watched a Slurpee plop into a cup for her, and returned to the rack. What was *he* really like? Did she want sex tips to keep her man captivated? What indie band ripped it up and started over? Did the TV anchor have time for a private life in his hectic schedule? What was behind college football's new controversy? She loved her dalliance with such thoughts, because it was pleasant.

She had to leave him, soon.

\*\*\*

She would wake and it would take no more than ten minutes to clean her undies out of the drawers, a couple of pairs of jeans, she would travel light. She knew where she was going. There was a town with clear evening light and tall pines where her sister lived. He had never met and didn't know about the sister. She would write a note. In the note she would blatantly lie: an old friend had come into town and they were kicking around. Old haunts. Girl’s night off. There was a lasagna in the freezer. She cynically figured that the lasagna would buy her more time than the note. She would stand in the kitchen, her hand passing over and over the mouth of the goldfish bowl. She would take a last look at all the lavafied vases and ashtrays she made in pottery class, and the uneven dragony light on their glazes. She would take a shower, needing to feel good.

It felt shitty.

If the leaving was shitty, then the relationship was shitty: she felt it fill her, some sort of power, till she was a ball of false equality, meaning he had to be unhappy with her, too. When she had first asked him for coffee, he said, *Sure, I guess, I'm what's left*. In the shower she discovered they were out of shampoo. In the beginning of things was their end. She read that somewhere and it had impressed her. It was interesting. There were a whole bunch of boots and shoes scattered at the door and she took a long time deciding. She would take the money out of their joint account. All of it. She would put this in a envelope, 900 bucks, and tuck it deep in her backpack. Then she would walk to the bus station, exactly as she had timed it. She would hand her ticket to the driver, and the bus would leave the downtown, cruising above the street-people, roughneck intersections, where the buildings lost all their cornices and gargoyles and became prefab and car dealers and computerized golf and fast food franchises and finally the two lanes of freeway to the ferries. And the highways would widen even more on the Mainland, all those houses, and chimneys in the wastes of warehouse roofs near the Fraser and puddles on those roofs and the reflections of clouds in the puddles.

\*\*\*

When she woke up, Gary was sleeping in the armchair under the Norman Rockwell poster of the girl and the boy at the soda fountain, their temples touching above their straws and twin heaps of whipping-cream. Gary had drooled.

"Come to bed," she said.

"Partying with the guys," he said. And he crawled in and fell asleep.

His arm was around her.

Horribly, she nestled into him.

It was probably late afternoon. She should think about getting ready for work.

\*\*\*

Sherry was outside the store waving like crazy talking to a couple of cops. When Gwen got closer, Sherry stopped yakking and came running to Gwen and needed a hug, and they stood there swaying on the sidewalk, making little fond noises, while a skateboarder rolled past them.

"You sure you’re okay?"

"Oh yeah, oh honey, there was only one of him, and he wrecked the whole store. And he swore at me. I don't think he had a weapon. He got real nasty. I'm going home."

"They're sending you home, that's good, Sher, I'm sure I can take care of things."

"They're giving me two days time-and-a-half."

Their hug was losing force.

"Just a few magazines to pick up. That's all."  
 Sherry was escorted by one of the cops to a cruiser. "They're giving me a lift! Pick up my kid! Bye-bye."

Inside, it was a different story. Magazines slid all over the floor. The coffee island was white with dripping cream, and several smashed syrup bottles. Toffee-coloured puddles. It took her an hour to clean up, and then she opened. One of the cops hung around for a while, intermittently looking at her tits, and then left.

She watched the light outside change to dark blue.

Gary phoned at nine or so.

"We got robbed," she said.

"So what else is new?"

"Sherry's pretty shaken up."

"Listen, you want to go to the Forge?"

"I'm working."

"Say you're sick."

"I can't."

"Well, I'm going. Me and Ross and a couple other buddies. Just thought you'd like to come."

"And just leave work?"

"Just up and go."

"I need this job."

"Okay, well, just asking..."

"Have a good time. Listen, Gary?"  
 "Unh."

"How'd that thing go?"

"I don’t know, I haven't heard."

"Oh. Well. Have fun."  
 "Yeah."

She put the receiver down so soft.

Gwen taped up a sign next to the cash register. "I am real short of twonies and loonies, if I could buy some from you that would make me ☺," and drew a border of flowers around it with a felt marker.

She lifted her eyes from *Spin* where a red-haired boy was describing the aimless way he made his albums, and looked at the street. It was empty. The alarm lights of the security boxes of the Marigold Palace, deep within the dark glass opposite, made double red points. She took the lottery tickets out of her apron and ran them. She won twenty bucks on a Gamester and a Windfall and ploughed these back into more tickets.

At four a.m., in a vague mood of entitlement, she spilled the strong-smelling cleaner on the floor and began to mop, a lazy swinging of her hips spreading the milky water wider and wider until the tile shone like sun through a warm rain. She dozed. Soon the morning cabs would come to fill up.

\*\*\*

Exactly one week later she got off the bus and saw a crowd outside the store and an anxious prickle started in her feet as she approached; *not again*; *yes, again*; the cops were surrounding and protecting Sherry, who seemed larger around the shoulders as she slowed down her report, went into detail. Gwen looked in the store. Spotless. Nothing out of place. Like Sherry was getting good at being robbed.

"And, you say, was there a weapon?"

"You bet your sweet ass there was."

"Would you care to describe it?"

" It was a knife yea long." Sherry held her index fingers apart so he saw. "Slender. Like a, like a letter opener. Whipped it out of his belt."

"He was at the counter?"

"No, he must have been about five feet back."

"Did you see where the knife came from? A pocket?"

"He fumbled with his buckle."

"Ah," said the other cop. "A Silent Sam. A buckle-sheath. It’s flexible, it’s thin, and you don’t see if coming. That's an offence in itself, you know. Concealed weapon."

" Of course, you're cops. You get all this stuff."

"Miss, we have binders and binders full of different types of concealed weapons. Photos. What colour was it?"

"Coppery. It glinted."

"You must be pretty shaken up."

"Hi," said Gwen. She had joined their circle, her face more plaintive in her hoodie.

"The store's closed for a time, ma'am," said the tall cop. "There's been a robbery."

“I work here,” said Gwen.

"She's my relief," said Sherry. "Her shift starts soon."

"She'll have to wait. Could you please stand aside, miss, while we talk to your friend?"

"It'll just be a few minutes," said Sherry, touching Gwen’s shoulder, and then the cop’s shoulder, deftly, as though tapping Gwen’s shoulder was the decoy for that second, inviting touch. "I'll tell you all about it later."

Gwen walked over to the edge of the parking lot and looked blankly at the people at the bus-stop. Sherry was having too much fun. Her big hair bouncing on her ears. The big cop leaning in and his voice getting gentle, as all big guys did when they judged the woman they were talking to was upset, or available.

\*\*\*

It was two-fifty three a.m.

The boy came in, wide-eyed from gaming or some altering drug, and fished around in the plastic fishbowl for on-sale chocolate bars, sixteen maybe, pimply, then dawdled to the back and returned with a Coke. Gwen watched him all the way in the mirror. He plunked his stuff down and scrabbled in his pockets for change.

"So fucking rob me," she said.

The kid flinched. The hands came out of his pockets, and he searched out her eyes.

"Just rob me. Ask me for money. I'll give it to you. What's the matter, don't you got the guts?"

"Just let me pay. I'll go. Please, ma'am."

With a ding, she opened the register, and handed him a twenty, then more twenties, then she grabbed all the cash and threw it at him. Most of it fell on the floor.

"Take it!"

The kind turned and ran, and crashed into the rack of engine-oil, wheeling, regaining, he made the door and was gone.

\*\*\*

Here is how she left him:

One Saturday morning, while Gary was humping drywall around in Colwood, she just went to the bank and took out all their money, and hurried towards the bus station, down Yates, and she heard Gary’s voice shouting, “Gwen!” but that couldn’t be, but he was sitting in the Starbuck’s patio with his friends, smoking, and he got up, and they stared kitty-corner at each other across the street, describing some demanding parallax, and she started running, and he started chasing, “Gwen! What the fuck. Hey, it’s me!”

She raced across Douglas on a yellow and dodged around bodies, entered The Camelot Mall.

She stepped on an escalator and descended, dropping away from the grubby sky-light. And then Gary stuck his face over the railing above and said, "Gwen!", and she stepped off, sped through Eaton’s, darting among spinners of dresses and housecoats, and stopped behind a mannequin, breathing, planning, and a shop-girl said, “Excuse me…”, and scared Gwen; she ran through the perfume and makeup, and at the elevators saw him running for her, "*Gwen!*", and she entered the main mall. Just ahead, there were tall speakers, a stage, actors on a stage, and a big crowd, and microphones, and she knew that safety was there.

For the star of *Lionbrain*, this was the fifteenth appearance he had made in thirteen days at nearly identical malls, and he was just about to skim his script, but the emcee was joking, trying to tease some of the teenage girls in the audience into extreme eagerness, and eligibility, for the supporting role about to be played, so the star of *Lionbrain* idled his charm, smiling automatically into the crowd, with his microphone resting on his hip. In such times he thought of Sandra Bullock pulling up to a curb in a powerful touring vehicle, the driver scooting for her door, and the pleasure in her eye, the door opening, leg, leg, and other such calm moments of celebrity, a realm he found relaxing, whimsical and well clear of the awful meals and hurried phone calls he had to suffer.

"Now, the scene is this," the emcee was saying to the lucky winner, still shrieking out her gratitude, *Oh, my, God*, just as Gwen hit the crowd and pushed aside spectators to get to the stage.

Peripherally she saw Gary coming fast through scattering shoppers, but he was almost in a different world from her now. She clambered on the stage. She got it, they were soap stars, and they were here to interact with their fans. The audience objected; they had just endured a popularity contest, lost it, and now this interloper was up there with the stars and pawing for the microphone.

Gwen whirled and spoke to the crowd. "Excuse me, excuse me, my name is Gwen and I've just got to play this part."

The star of *Lionbrain* handed her a script.

She felt weightless. The print swam.

*"Oh, Brad!"* she sobbed. *"Brad, I thought you had a meeting."*

*"I was just with Allison going over the minutes of the last meeting."*

*"Oh, Brad, I haven't seen you for ages. Have you forgotten?"*

*"Forgotten that I love you? Never,"* and the star stopped with his toe at the edge of the stage. "*I will always love you,"* he said. But he was looking around panicked; the woman across from *him* had a wild look, like she believed the script.

*"Then we can get together this evening, like we used to?"*

*"No, there's still a few details that Alison and--"*

Gwen saw a couple of guards with white shirts, walkie-talkies moving swiftly; they tackled Gary just as his hand touched the stage. They dragged him to a standing position and walked him quickly through the mall.

Someone was touching her arm.

"Ma'am, we need to talk to you.”

She handed *Lionbrain* boy the script. He looked so different from his pictures. The crowd was shuffling, grumbling, needing something more rounded, more complete.

"Take it!" she said. He did. She whirled at the crowd. "Are you detaining me? Thank God you're detaining me. Oh, yes, please take me away..." and her head bowed as the security guard threw his jacket over her shoulders and helped her down; the emcee suggested a short break, and cut the clusters of balloons above the stage, and these bumped and wobbled their way to the upper skylight.

Then there was a heavily filtered voice announcing a jeans special in Eaton's, towards which some of the crowd dispersed themselves, carrying children on their shoulders who pointed at the balloons.

**THE FOREIGNERS**

Khaled Ibn Sa’eed had just enrolled in Qingdao University’s medical school, when he went on a sudden junket to Washington, DC, and liked it so much he called his Pakistani classmate and told him to transmit the lectures via a cellphone open on a desk—and would he mind running this past the administration? This the friend did. There were no objections, so long as tuition was paid upfront. They tacked on a modest ‘remote attendance’ fee. Megabytes of etiology and anatomy began to stream towards DC, and Khaled Ibn Sa’eed was not seen again until what I have to tell you had already transpired. It was disconcerting for the Department of Medicine professors, in their Air Jordans and clinical whites, to face an open smartphone with its red light recording video all semester. Perhaps you will treat what I have to say about Jack—or Jin Ming, his proper name—in much the same light, red, small, a slow, deliberate blink in Jin Ming’s direction, in his last college year.

Let’s dispense with Jin Ming’s epiphanies, especially in view that they were so easily overmastered by events. There weren’t many epiphanies in life, Jin Ming thought (he had learned the word in his English class,) but he could remember all of his. He meekly hoped for more, but things were going well for him at University that last year, and he kept his hopes simple, the better to slide by any accompanying demands.

Jack was writing a faux-utopian consideration of the treatment of the ‘common folk’ in the *Book of Songs* for his undergraduate thesis. He came from a tiny village in Hebei province that was still run by a tough old man with failing eyes, teeth that looked like yellow-grey shreds of sardines, and solid Party connections. The village had returned to its more or less agrarian ways, having survived aid workers, village planners, a developer or two, and then, after the expected collapse, a film crew; now, turnip and herb patches grew once again along the river, tucked away behind the carp and turtle ponds, and there was a curious section of the village about six homes square, the exactly equal backyards marked off with string, where the stucco and tile houses were proving, after all, that anything given enough neglect and winters could be composted. The stucco fell away in shards and revealed cracks in the cement; the shards turned into a toxic white powder around the footings. And the floors in the tiny garages—though only a few had cars—were inexpertly poured and sloped. The villagers used the garages to store pyramids of purple carrots and turnips in the winter. Windows in the houses had been removed or just smashed. Square in the middle of the village was a huge spaced cleared and rolled for a parking lot, now speared with crabgrass and dandelion. That was supposed to be the factory location.

After that ruction of development, the village returned to its immemorial ways, supported by donating graduates whom the headman, Lao Kuang, had organized into a formidable network of earners whose contributions were displayed in tidy graphs on the wall of his second house, beyond the bend n the river, its cement blocks painted an immaterial turquoise. The village recently upgraded to G4 Wi-Fi. It had supply contracts with neighboring farmers. The men gathered in Lao Kuang’s home nightly for drinking and a puff on his pipe and pirated movies; the women cooked and bossed their daughters around and chatted about personal shoppers and did their *tai-chi* mornings for an audience of sleek and tumbling pigs. Last year earnings had been so good that the whole village went to Macau for Spring Festival, a week of *bo-de, pai-ke, ma-jiang, he-jiu, wu-nu, la-cai*, and, for an unlikely few, *zuo-ai*, [[19]](#footnote-19) all their favorite two-syllable words.Lao Kuang liked to pass the time in his garden smelling the skins of persimmons, or in contemplation beside his koi-pond with his pipe and the ineffable mysteries. In short, the village was paradise on earth, and Lao Kuang intended to keep it that way.

Jin Ming’s first epiphany was when he was five; he had jumped the old man’s garden fence; the garden was legendary. There were 300-year-old pines held together by moist slings of gauze. The sun through the leaves came from a distant time, an emblematic atmosphere. Who knew what the old man mumbled by the pond, as he directed the carp or they directed his cane, as they glided in their fin-swishing ovals? Jin Ming picked some bitter cherries in the goldenness around him, the arcing ferns, and he plucked from the bark a golden-green whirring beetle whose wings opened as it left Jin Ming’s hand, and he thought, “It’s alive,” and saw it light on a leaf, and thought again, “I’m alive,” and, struck by this total glimmer, lay down in the shade, a weakling boy who ran from tag and games and wore the same pair of pants for months. But he was alive—the beetle had proven that; he didn’t know how it proved that, but he refrained from killing small animals for about a week.

However, the next time he snuck into the garden, there was a great crashing in the ferns, and Lao Kuang, who was in his mid-fifties phase of pretending he was one of the Eight Immortals and lived mostly on roots, fungus, and mold, smashed into Jin Ming—something blue-green flew out of the old man’s mouth--and definitively taught him that he was alive, because he beat the boy within an inch of that blue truth.

Many years later, the village took up a collection to send him to Qingdao University, a low-level provincial institution that would take a middling *gao-kao* tester[[20]](#footnote-20). Jin Ming knew there had been plenty of grumbling about this collective grant –many of the older villagers made direct and aggrieved remarks to him that summer – but he was overjoyed at the chance to leave. His parents were never there, for they, and a number of his peers, were living above a tool factory in Jia Zhe Cheng, the county seat. In order to hand over the first installment, Lao Kuang, the headman, had invited Jin Ming to tea. The old man stank of wild garlic and wolfberry root. He ate for longevity, and the first thing he did was slap Jin Ming hard across the face.

“What was that for?”

“For all the mistakes you’re going to make with our money. But how can it be helped? You’re young. Even heaven’s halls need renovation.”

“What does that mean?”

“Don’t trouble yourself with what I mean,” the old man said. “Your brain is not capable of my meaning.”

“I am not worthy,” said Jin Ming.

“Don’t bore me.” He handed the red packet over. “This is for your first term expenses. Wang paid your tuition last week in person, and his truck broke down on the way back, so we deducted that. Look, you asinine twerp, we see this as an investment. We expect a return.”

It was then, smiling in a simpering style before Lao Kuang, who now wore a filthy garment like a monk kicked out of the monastery, with a Pepsi t-shirt over it, that Jin Ming caught the worry gallivanting in Lao’s eyes, and he realized that the old man’s hopes would be easy, almost too easy, to fulfill.

“I promise you a good return,” he said.

“Fuck off and die,” said the old man.

\*\*\*

In his sophomore year, Jin Ming had his second set of epiphanies. He was living, after paying the village kickbacks, on a few extra hundred *kuai* a month, but at least the situation was promising: the year was young. He could afford, however, little entertainment other than early morning walks. He crossed the park just off campus, where senior citizens were trying their muscles against the blue and yellow exercise machines made for children, and walked into a neighborhood of good apartments, without hand-lettered for-rent signs hanging off the balconies, without street-level businesses; there were even a few houses on small lots with scholar-trees, and a restaurant with fish-tank that took up an entire window. He chose a cross-street that rose; he ran up a flight of smooth stone steps, and the leaves dropped away near the top, and he came out against a fence that looked down on the athletic fields of the Number Five High School, the best private school in Qingdao.

He looked down on the students in their blue and white-striped tracksuits running around the ruddy Astroturf track, but by no means did he feel above the uniformed students at their play below; he peered into a deep pit of privilege.

It was not their fault that they went to Number Five High School, and as such were practically guaranteed Party positions, or plum jobs with firms, or were simply handed the cash to go and get themselves some Number Three Bathing Beach real-estate, or a lifestyle. These must be the shrimps and wimps of this class, still enamored of their track-suits. They were dawdling around the track. A group of girls in blue skirts spilled out of a far doorway, and they began running in teams, on the far curve. Everyone has to run in this school, thought Jack, even the senior girls, so in a couple of years they can sit back, take it easy, slip into pregnancy, whereas I am standing here frozen and undernourished in the same pants I wrote the *gao-kao* in. The girls were coming around the near curve, one with a purse slapping at her thigh, and rounded it enough that Jin Ming felt the fence under his fingers as he first saw Lin Yan’s face.

A face so beautifully enigmatic and enigmatically beautiful that it ought, Jin Ming judged, to be printed on every map of Asia.

A face to Jin Ming’s mind that perfectly combined the glimmer of the beetle and the gallivanting worry of Lao Kuang’s eyes into a being who might justify any number of racial policies on grounds of purity, of tender loving, of a glowing motherhood.

He would die to see her face shift in the covetous throes, the bolder contours of love.

Lin Yan had touched him in the same way a taste, a candied haws perhaps, might touch the tongue and perfuse the mind. Taste once savored that dissipates to the precise density of scarcity and longing. Five minutes before his prospects were reheated noodles and onions for lunch and dinner and all day tomorrow, and a future as a Carrefour barista, and now he felt able to turn around proudly and leave Number Five High School. The girl was young, but almost a woman. He judged he had a year left before she showed up at Qingdao University, a year before he learned her name. If she went there. She might go to Shanghai, Beijing. Jinan, for that matter. That gallivanting worry—it had to be contagious.

Jin Ming walked home feeling something had been prepared for him. He crossed the dusty net of trees in front of the library—the radio-point was hammering away at socialist facts among the branches, like a bird at bark—and turned at the Student Centre onto one of the uphill staircases between the whitewashed classrooms, and he saw again Lin Yan’s eyes like a questioning coal in his forehead and, just as he was about to grin, there was a shout behind him.

He turned. An angry janitor, broom in hand as though he held another, thinner prisoner, had grabbed the elbow of a student and said, “Thief! This man’s a thief!” and the accused stiffened but appeared to accept the situation, placidly accompanying the janitor’s further shouts with a calm that separated him from all the moral tunneling of two students here, three students there, rigid behind their book-shields of a sudden, adopting either the stance of Staircase Safety Inspector or of Dreamer of Far, Far Prospects. “What is this thief’s name? He will not tell me,” cried the janitor. No, the thief had clearly left the university’s orbit; he would have nothing to do with the students, the law-abiding, ha. His back was straight and his chin high. “I don’t know,” said Jin Ming, and hunched away. “I’ve never seen him before.” This was a lie. He knew the accused student very well; had chatted with him in his English classes. Perhaps, some day, it would furnish them a boozy afternoon philosophy session, a conversation in the graduate student lounge about whether anyone truly ever saw anyone, if either of them ever got there.

But no one would every mention this incident again, and Jin Ming never found out what the student had stolen. But it struck him as funny that two contrary visions had invaded him within a half-hour: the one of swimming immiscibility, love, and the other of planetary remoteness, exile.

This may not have been much of dual epiphany, more of a gathering of disparate data. Afterwards, it was true that Lin Yan’s imagined voice did not always ring like a recess bell through the cloakrooms between Jin Ming’s ears; its power was actually incalculable and snuck up on him, and pounced, and it hurt. He had no power to schedule or titrate his visions of Lin Yan; he could not set forth 1) Court the foreigners 2) Fake studying 3) Time to dream about Lin Yan. No, no, no. He woke up and she sprang like an icon up in his mental vaults; he lay down, and she walked the pre-paths of his sleep.

\*\*\*

Forced to be resourceful, Jack had sized up the opportunities as soon as he got off the bus and moved into residence at Qingdao U. A perennial money-maker were the parents of the freshman from the sticks of Shandong province, the one-factory towns. They showed up stinking of garlic and in baseball caps upon which their work-unit was emblazoned. Jack drew them aside while their offspring were off on military training, marching about in camo, and made himself useful to them. He carried luggage; he gave directions; he found them restaurants that served their disgusting regional dishes: tripe soup, fried locusts, sea-slugs. He could steer them to such holes-in-the-wall for a tip. He could advise on the best malls to buy printers at. But it wasn’t enough. He needed another revenue stream.

And over the next two years, he found them. He and his roommate maxed out the plagiarism game, so much so that the letters C and V were no longer legible on their laptops. They silk-screened t-shirts exploiting the *fen qing* fad, the angry youth, and many pirated Hello Kitties; and even more which said *Qing Ren Dao*, a pun on the city’s name and ‘sweetheart’, for a time a popular gift on Valentine’s Day. He diversified and taught a little basic English and introduced the foreign students to the local nightlife, all for fees, but Lao Kuang’s financial demands were relentless, and by his last year, though he was now running four or five businesses, he was tapped out.

\*\*\*

Mr. and Mrs. Campbell did not appear until the third week of classes; and then they retired and did not surface for another three days. They were resting from their journey, a poorly-coordinated multi-stop flight from Missouri. The administrator had gone to their apartment to check and found the doorway blocked by packing-cases and strapping from a washer, dryer and a small refrigerator. He knocked.

Mr. Campbell answered. He explained they were in a period of intense prayer. Would he care to join them?

In that case, we will be able to teach after this Sunday. Sunday is our Holy Day, Mr. Chang. If there is nothing else?

Mr. Chang was a good deal more educated in English than Mr. Campbell supposed, and as he made his way down the stairs, he chuckled to himself about passing through the *valley of the shadow of appliance ownership*.

Mr. Campbell was the author of the self-published volumes *Fifty Famous Christians* and *So You Think You Know Jesus*, which he distributed liberally on campus. A routine soon established itself. In class, Mr. Campbell taught them short-stories of an inspirational cast of sinners and those who were born again, and often finished off with a quiz, the answer to which, the students soon caught on, was always Jesus. And every night, more young women and men showed at their apartment for Bible study, for the tollhouse cookies and banana bread and muffins and pies that Mrs. Campbell trotted out from the convection oven she’d found at *Jia Le Fu*, or Carrefour, the French department-store chain. *Jia Le Fu* was the only Chinese phrase she knew apart from “*Qingdao Daxue*” and “*Duo shao qian*?,” how much.

In due time, many first and second year students came to their dormitory building hoping to catch a glimpse of the foreigners, and Jin Ming was among them.

Jin Ming made himself smaller by isometric contraction of his shoulders and chest, wore his oldest clothes, practiced filling his eyes with a damp meekness, and went to the foreigners’ dormitory. He sat at the picnic table in front of the store, directly across from the exit. Not much was happening. The dormitory *fuwuyuan* –no one could remember when he hadn’t been the dormitory *fuwuyuan*--was sticking underwear and other wet garments through the holes in the fence around the basketball court. A blind man sat across from Jin Ming, blocking his view. Jin Ming wanted to steal a cigarette from him, but had read somewhere that being blind sharpened the other senses, and besides the blind man leaned on a sturdy black stick. In any case he wasn’t there to steal cigarettes; he was there to watch the foreigners.

They presently appeared, and strolled the path beside the basketball court before holding hands and crossing the road. She wore a Qingdao U. sweatshirt, and he wore a Missouri State sweatshirt. Despite the high-protein culture they came from, they were disappointingly small. Their hair was greying. Any self-respecting Chinese would have died their hair, Jack thought. They did not seem especially rich, or powerful, but Jin Ming knew that appearances were deceiving. They wore the same runners that everyone else around here did. They were sunburned at the back of the neck from the September heat, and Mrs. Campbell limped some from an obvious back injury; Mr. Campbell adjusted his pace to hers, and even divagated, to stall, so she could catch up. Often Mrs. Campbell would point—now it was toddlers frolicking on the sparse lawns under the milky surveillance of grandparents—and touch her husband’s shoulder, to remind him to pay attention.

Jin Ming took this all in. He could just hear the foreigners saying, *We’re in China. Praise Jesus.* Last week he’d learned in Reading 3 the English idiom *bigger fish to fry*. Whether these Campbells were big fish or not, Jin Ming knew it didn’t much matter. What mattered was you gained practice in catching fish.

He stood up and waved, “Hello! Please!”

But the Campbells were too far away.

“Who the fuck are you?” said the blind man, who was inexactly eating a fudgesicle.

“What do you care?” said Jin Ming. “Eat your fudgesicle.”

“Care? You were thinking about stealing one of my cigarettes.”

“I was not.”

“You were.”

“This is ridiculous.”

“Leave me alone,” said the blind man.

“Me? I was sitting here, minding my own business. You sat down after me.”

“What a joke. You were sitting here thinking about how to get money out of the foreigners. Why else would you go anywhere near them? Well, I’ve got news for you—you’re about the 20th student to gawk at them today. So suck on this.” And the blind man flipped the half-eaten fudgesicle at Jin Ming, and Jin Ming held his temper as he picked the frozen mess off his tee-shirt.

“Like I said, leave me alone,” said the blind man.

“But why?” said Jin Ming. “Thanks, by the way, for the fudgesicle. Why should I leave you alone?”

“Because I’m fucking blind!”

A couple of girls turned as they passed, worried, quickening their pace.

“I’m fucking blind!” he yelled. “Can’t you see? Can’t you fucking see I’m blind?”

Jin Ming skulked off.

He wandered home in a mesmerized state, past the peasants digging a hole in the far corner of the basketball court, and past the vendors on the high road that circled the campus, with its safety-rail consisting of a strand of barbwire, down the steps to the graduate rooms, a shabby two-story right next to the boiler-plant and its two huge piles of anthracite that spent their black powder in the wind, and he paused in the courtyard, wanting to keep down appearances, and washed his face in the cold standing tap. He then entered his room, and a remarkable transformation took place. His room-mate, Xiao Wang, roused himself, and rolled the cigarette-scorched carpet against one wall, revealing a fine Azerbaijani *kilim* with a trees and rivers of paradise pattern; he wheeled the soft leather chair from the bedroom for Jin Ming; he pried a plywood panel from the wall-studs and a 52 inch flat-screen TV flicked on (Euroleague soccer); all as Jin Ming fished in a gym-bag, in a jumble of small electronics for the correct remote; two paper-skinned lanterns dropped from the ceiling, like airline oxygen; and Jin Ming called for his foot-bath, he called for his space-heater, he called for his smart-phones three.

“Get me my girls,” he said.

\*\*\*

“Are we doing that again?” said Susie Zeng, bibbed at *Miao Jian*, Magic Scissors; she loved how her hair smelled, sleek with some coconut conditioner. The stylist seemed to measure her head with his clippers before they buzzed. “*Ting hao*. It’s fast cash. I’m in. What’s that? Okay.” She tugged on the stylist’s shirt. “Got a pen?”

“Monkey’s nuts,” said Ya Li, walking through the library stacks, “Great. I need the money. But it gets complicated, you know, Ming darling. Stuff I don’t like.”

“It doesn’t have to be complicated,” said Jin Ming, “you’re just there. You’re a presence. Do I really need to go over my policy?”

“ ‘Whatever happens after the initial transaction, happens. Jin Ming doesn’t know, and he doesn’t want to know,’” she repeated.

“Excellent. Besides, Chen and Zhou are available, if things get too difficult. There’s always a bad night now and then.”

“Chen! He owes me 300 *kuai*.”

He got Gao Di as well. She was naked except for a towel around her head in the bathhouse dressing-room. When she saw it was Jin Ming, she clamped her shoulder and neck on the phone and pulled on panties. “I won’t do it unless you pay the drivers,” she said. “They’re a pain in the ass. Always wanting tips. Wheedling bastards. One had an *ignition fee*—can you believe it? Another…well, his hands.”

“The drivers are independent contractors.”

“Very well. Have a nice season.”

“Di, you still there?”

“Give us taxi-chits. Pay them a flat fee. Qingdao’s not that big. We never go beyond Badeguan anyhow.”

“I’ll think about it.”

“Me too.”

“Okay, I’ll pay them.”

“You are such a sweetheart. Such a pushover,” Gao Di purred.

\*\*\*

And all the time the Saudi student’s cellphone was propped on a desk, receiving the lecturer’s Grand Tour of the skull, the gentle fissures along the major plates, the *pia mater* like cradle-satin and the cerebrospinal fluid sluicing through the convolutions, lighting up the intelligent tendrils, the hidden divisions.

\*\*\*

The parents from Shandong province showed up again in the lazy September heat, and the freshmen began, again, their military training, but this year Jin Ming was thrilled to finally see Lin Yan appear in a camo T-shirt, a light sweat on her forehead as she twirled and presented at high port her dummy weapon, as she wheeled and one-twoed in line with the other boys and girls, as she, at ease, savoured a frozen *bing-gur* with her new friends sprawling on the grass verge. He quickly identified her parents; they were the other ones watching Lin Yan’s every move; also, they were the only parents watching. Their baseball caps said they worked in Zibo. The father was lean, the mother was large and wiped at her neck and brow with a napkin. The father tried to wrestle Jin Ming’s arms off the luggage. “We don’t need help,” he said.

“Sir, this is a totally free service. It is my pleasure. Where would you like to go after the drills?”

When he had lugged Lin Yan’s bags to her dorm-room, and got the Lins settled at the campus hotel, and spent an hour in line with them to register their daughter, Jin Ming took Lin Yan’s parents to the Sichuan restaurant on campus, really just an eatery perched over the dividing highroad, where the students saved up and splurged on the gummy noodles swimming in chilli oil, the fire-starter *gong bao* *ji ding*. Lin’s mother had to be helped up the steps; her feet were bothering her, and there were, Jin Ming saw, his hand on her lower back, issues with balance. An emaciated cat seemed to materialize out of the stone wall and wound around their feet, importunately. Lin Yan’s parents chose to sit on the terrace, and ordered the stinkiest, hottest dishes and consumed them rapidly, without much talk, wiping their foreheads. Jin Ming was surprised that they came from Zibo; they must have spent dearly to send Lin Yan to that Qingdao high school.

Jin Ming, having extracted all the info he could about Lin Yan’s courses and schedule, and having reassured Mr. and Mrs. Lin that they could count on him to get them and their baggage onto the bus and hence to the railway station the next morning, sank back into his preferred mode—obsequiousness—saying little, but tenderly picking out the red wrinkles of tripe from a tureen of broth and chilli and placing them in Mr. Lin’s bowl: there were as many chillies, maybe more, than tripe, and Mr. Lin was sweating from his eyebrows by the time Lin Yan showed up with another pretty girl in tow, both still in their damp camo tee-shirts.

“This is my room-mate, Chang Hu Die,” said Lin Yan, “We are going to be such excellent sisters this year. There are six in our room.”

Chang Xiaojie applied herself to the vinegar peanuts.

“All settled in?” said Father.

“Have you met Jin Ming?” said Mother. “Really, he has been most helpful.”

Jin Ming, holding his breath, saw a slinky kitten fold itself under the next table and sniff and lick the cement. He dared not look at Lin Yan directly, lest he gasp.

“He’s a good guy,” said Father.

“My pleasure,” Jin Ming managed.

Lin Yan touched his hand. “Thank you for helping my parents. Are you a student?”

Jin Ming said Yes, and found it was possible to meet her eyes while his mouth was talking. A small smirk appeared on Chang Hu Die’s face.

They got to the bottom of the tripe soup, and he walked her parents to the campus hotel and went back to his room in a fierce contact buzz. This year was going to be *feichang fucking hao*. But he slept poorly that night, and woke from a dream in which Chang Hu Die, her face obscured by a blinding light behind her, was staring at him, refusing to speak.

\*\*\*

The next day, he knocked on the Campbell’s door, he wondered if he might come in. Mr. Campbell shook his hand and said, “Why not?”

“I am sorry,” said Jack. “The other day, I did not say hello to you. You see, I was helping my friend the blind man. It is Asian culture. He is older than you, and I must be respectful.”

“Forget it, Jack. Now sit you down.”

While Jack made himself comfortable on the couch, and tried to comprehend the artful groaning of the jazz diva the Campbells liked on the TV, Mrs. Campbell took her husband aside in the kitchen, and said, “He looks very thin.”

“Most of the students don’t eat well.”

“I can fix that.”

Mr. Campbell offered Jack a beer.

“Next month is my grandfather’s birthday,” said Jack, as though the subject of birthdays had been bound to come up. “Most peasants in China, they are so poor, they have never never had a birthday cake,” pleased with his double ‘never’, as Mrs. Campbell – “Call me Katie—everybody does.”—laid a plate of gingersnaps before him,

“Bless them. On their birthday. That’s just awful,” said Mrs. Campbell.

“It is Mao’s fault,” said Jack. “He thought that people should only celebrate China’s birthday, and his. Not their birthdays.” He made that up. Today he had blamed the Great Helmsman for stubbing his toe, for Lin Yan’s indifference, for the village headman’s bad temper, and for the terrible notes that his proxy took in Senior English Reading.

“Who is that?” Jack pointed at the TV, where a blonde woman was moaning some lyrics as she flung her hair over and over the piano keys. The song was taking an insufferable period to elapse, and Jack couldn’t make out a word; he must be listening in the wrong places, he decided, entering a word on its second or third syllable and, lost, parsing the song into nonsense.

“Why that’s Diana Krall. She’s from Canada, just north of us,” said Mr. Campbell. “Canada, that’s a whole different story.”

“She’s married to Elvis Costello,” said Mrs. Campbell, pouring cream into a cruet in the tiny galley.

“Elvis?” said Jack. “I think we study him in--.”

“Wrong Elvis,” said Mr. Campbell. The weight of his hands, clasped, tipped him forward as he pondered how to begin his theme.

Now Jack’s eyes were darting—the long triangle on the wall with a leaping tiger and *Missouri* on it. Jack surmised this must be one of those animal farms where working-people could pay to watch a tiger chase and smash and paralyze with fear and pin and gouge and kill a sheep. There was a sentimental painting of autumn leaves. A poster of a monster called the Root Bear. Beyond the tiny balcony, the view of the bay was compromised by the condo towers going up by the old fishing harbor. One was fifteen stories, wrapped in a dark green netting. And in the other corner was a poster of 50 Chinese characters. Jack almost laughed. They were the simplest characters—and he knew that the Campbells were incapable and ignorant of even these words—without even enough atomic weight to attract other characters into the common pairs of *putonghua*. But Mr. Campbell was trying to tell him something.

The foreigner poked his index finger up for avuncular emphasis as he steered the talk in the direction of Jack’s Saviour.

“I know there were many wise men throughout Chinese history,” he said.

“A smaller-known fact,” said Jack, “is China’s wise men often choose simple life.”

It’s often said that two people are two solitudes, unknowable to each other, but in this case, Jack on the sofa and Mr. Campbell perched on the edge of the lazy-boy, it was a solemn meeting of two negritudes, the shadows of what they were not casting a tinseled darkness on the other’s vision. To Jack, this Missouri State acquired the physical scope of the Pentagon with powers similar to the World Bank’s; to Mr. Campbell, the somewhat sniveling boy before him was tragic potential itself, an always playing film of arms flailing at branches, the river in full flood, and other skinny boys in conical hats trying to urge oxen forward with salty village idioms.

To Mrs. Campbell, this Jack, he was slick and bore watching. She much preferred the girls who came for squares and tea and taught her how to operate the pygmy washer.

“I suppose you’re right,” said Mr. Campbell. “And this young man, he was like you. Setting out. I guess you could say his life was simple. He had parents. A trade.”

“No. The parents are no longer in our village,” said Jack. “They leave, they leave. They never come back, and the old people become sick, but there is no money for medicine…”

“He could heal, you know. He was a healer.”

“I will go back, Mister Campbell. I know I will. They suffer.”

Mr. Campbell got up and walked to the window. “Suffer the little children to come onto me,” he said. “How is school going, Jack?”

“Excuse me, but there are no more little children either. It is going okay.”

“Your village must be very proud of you.”

“They are ashamed of me.”

“Whatever for?”

“I am just a poor student.”

“How far is your village?” said Mrs. Campbell, wiping her hands on her apron.

“A couple of hours. But. You would not like it.”

“Who says we wouldn’t?” said Mrs. Campbell.

“It is very non-convenient for foreigners.”

“Hooey,” she said. “We’ve been in Chinese villages before.”

“I am so sorry,” Jack said. “We are poor.”

Mr. Campbell turned from the window, and sat beside Jack. “Nonsense. When can we visit?”

“Oh, I don’t know. I will have to get permission. Might be a long time.”

“Jack, do you have any idea who I’ve been talking about?”

“Jesus?” said Jack.

“Do you think Jesus cares how poor your people are?”

“He don’t care a bit,” said Mrs. Campbell. “Now you go and get that permission.”

Mr. Campbell pulled out a slim pamphlet, and starting showing Jack a thing or two about Jesus. Mrs. Campbell removed the plate of cookies after Jack ate his sixth.

\*\*\*

“Your plan,” Lao Kuang, the headsman, wrote to Jin Ming in his minutely detailed ancient characters, “is the work of a true imbecile. It makes me want to feel your head to find the underlying tumor or frankly organic mishap that feeds your thinking. I have read your letters. After studying your level of *Hanyu*, and your general cultural level, I have determined the optimal career for you in this ‘Missouri’ that you go on and on about. For I have learned at least a little something from satellite major league baseball. Every baseball team has a dugout. Do you follow me, you dullard? And in every dugout there is a cooler. And there is generally a stunted or runty individual whom the team has taken under its wing, and this feeble person stirs the cans of beer around in the cooler and dumps more ice in.

“Jin Ming, you are fit for nothing better.

“While your dream of winning a scholarship to go to Missouri is patent nonsense, what you have to say about this American husband and wife intrigues me. I’m sure you have gotten it wrong, again – in which case we can look forward to a good laugh, at you – and I anticipate seeing how grievously you have misread the situation, but you may continue to send me details.

“Get back to studying, or I’ll cut you off.”

\*\*\*

As it grew colder on campus, and the flowers disappeared from the dusty beds, Lin Yan, once she’d gotten to know her room-mates and had been through her gamut of classes a few times, had felt her freedom complicated by homesickness. She bought a nubbly kalpak when the snow started to cling to her hair, and a muff at the Jin Cheng market, and strolled the campus; thus she earned the nickname the Soviet Starlet among the boys. She just laughed at them. But there was little spontaneous laughter, for the news about her mother was not good. She had several spells despite the insulin injections, and her legs hurt. She bloated, her urine stank. Her father wondered on the phone if Lin Yan could get a part-time job, because the medicine cost money. Once, he told her that her mother had *a good day*, and that frightened Lin Yan.

Nonetheless, Lin Yan settled into school and the special loneliness accorded the truly beautiful. She woke each morning to the mementos of her mother’s love, a collection of hanging storage nets, felt banners with pockets, and folding chain-mail baskets to organize her accouterments around her bunk-bed. The girls were stirring around her, they brushed each other’s hair; for Lin Yan’s hair, there was sometimes a lineup. Her roommates, giggling, would shuffle up and hang their daily choices of clothes against her, as though she were a mannequin. She actually enjoyed this: it was lots of fun in the mirror. And they would bring her gifts: chocolate, an organdy scrunchie, a cute brooch of a Friendly leftover from the Olympics. But news of and her worry about her mother’s diabetes returned and added to the loneliness of her loveliness.

It was not that no-one talked to her: many of the young men did. But they stiffened and went *pro forma* on her, delivering, essentially, resumes, with much shifting of feet and avoiding of her gaze. Lin Yan, lips pursed, listened, urging them to courage with her eyes, trying to suggest to the young men she was not worried if they made a mistake. But they were incompetent to a set of testicles, and this was why Jin Ming, all things considered, was worth her attention, though he was shorter than she. He talked with her. He listened. And his speech had real content. He was making money, had plans. He did not ask her for a date, but arranged to bump into her in the library, at the magazine kiosk at the gates, and Lin Yan was secretly pleased, for she knew Jin Ming knew her routines. And Lin Yan settled into his courtship as she had settled into her loneliness.

\*\*\*

Jin Ming took Suzie Zeng along with him to work things out with one of the cabbies, who was being difficult.

“I’ve got to cover my expenses,” the cabbie said. “And look. You’re not just paying for the ride. You’re paying for my reliability. One of your girls calls, I’ve got to be available, don’t I? You should pay me like I’m *part of the team*.”

“May you live in a completely socialist state,” said Jin Ming, and spread some hundred *kuai* notes out on his leg. “Now, tell me, Mister Reliability, which of this money do you want? This is for my village, you greedy little hooligan, and this is for Big Zhang, and this is for overhead, clothes, boots, those damned Missouri sweatshirts, and this—,” he held up a note, orangey in the dome-light, “this is for my girls!”

The rear door crunched open, but they were too enthralled with their argument to notice.

“In that case,” said Suzie Zeng, “I’ll take it. It’s for the finer points of my face,” and she snatched the bill away.

“Excuse me. Is this cab taken?” said Mr. Campbell.

“*Gan ma*!” said Jin Ming. “Good. Uh. Good evening, Mr. Campbell.”

Who was looking from the girl to the cabbie and back. “Hello, Jack.”

“We were.”

“Just working out the fare…” said Suzie Zeng.

“But I believe we’ve got it settled,” said Jin Ming.

“Yes, paid,” said the cabbie and shoved two of the hundreds in his breast-pocket. “Have a good evening. Enjoy your massage, you two.”  
 “Massage?” said Mr. Campbell. “I want to go to qingDAO DAxue, do you understand?”

Jin Ming helped Suzie Zeng out, which she enjoyed.

“Oh, *Qingdao Daxue*?” said the cabbie.

“Yes, yes, QINGdao daXUE,” said Mr. Campbell.

They pulled away.

Jin Ming and Suzie Zeng started walking back to campus.

“Thanks for the hundred,” said Suzie.

Jin Ming wouldn’t respond.

\*\*\*

Jin Ming moved on to the next stage of his strategy: flirt with the Mormons. The Mormons were a tight group; they went on outings together. They had been bought wholesale by the university as a group, at a distributor’s discount, and the Mormons acted the part, clad in determinedly out-of-date slacks and calf-length dresses, escorted by a faculty member to the Qingdao Symphony or an overpriced dumpling-joint, braying at everything in their Utah accents.

They were strange, the Mormons. Every time he went to their leader’s apartment, they were sitting in a circle of chairs, as though they had been deliberating a message from a ghost, and Jin Ming couldn’t bring himself to join them. Instead, he took them to banquets, and acted as their translator. He had pulled his chair up to their leader, who was turning his mushrooms and tofu over with a fork.

“Can’t say I much care for this food,” he said. Prodded an abalone.

“It is very good,” said Jin Ming, but, when he saw this wasn’t helping, added, “What kind of food do you like?”

“You know, roasts and such.”

He had to look up the word, and consequently felt queasy.

Jin Ming learned that the Mormons had been recruited by the Foreign Experts Office to sing *Children of the Dragon* at the Spring Festival concert, so he showed up at the rehearsal hall, but too late, for several undergraduates were already hopping in front of the Mormon choir, in their tight vests and boxy frocks embroidered with a dragon’s tail, the mostly girls going, “*Hao, hao*,” their hands cupping at the air as though to shape the cacophony blasting at them in accents from the west and from the south. Jin Ming covered his mouth, and left. He was no fool. He could still recognize the hopeless.

“Sons of the dragon, my ass,” he said to his roommate as they counted out the girls’ take for the month.

“Fucking ridiculous,” said Xiao Wang.

“Black eyes, black hair, yellow skin, forever children of the dragon,” said Jin Ming.

“‘They left the stage one by one in the bucket of a front-end loader.’”

“Love it. I wish I’d seen it,” said Xiao Wang. “They might as well have got a bunch of black people and put those leather shorts and feathered hats on them and got them to sing, ‘We are the great Aryan people.’ Sons of my armpit, more like it.”

“Suzie Zeng is cleaning up this year,” said Xiao Wang.

Jin Ming got on the phone and wondered if Mr. Campbell had the time to see him.

\*\*\*

And so it was that Jin Ming addressed the village elders in Lao Kuang’s second house, around the bend in the river from the village, with a home theatre that seated 30. His penultimate PowerPoint slide was the steadily rising line indicating potential earnings based on data he’d collected on Mr. and Mrs. Campbell’s donations to other villages when they taught in Dalian and Tianjin, and a surmounting, rampant line representing a future relationship with this *Missouri State*: these jagged indicators soared above the present trend of the village graduates’ kickbacks. His last slide was a pie-graph slicing the projected earnings into village enhancement, per capita income, disposable cache, and investment fund.

The screen rolled up and the lights came on.

“Those are the facts of the matter,” said Jin Ming, looking to the headman for approval.

Lao Kuang nodded.

“You’ve all seen the numbers. The Campbells contributed about 80,000 kuai to two villages last year. We’re not sure if it’s their money or Missouri State’s. And we’ve seen how the money was supplemented by gifts of food. Chocolate bars and irradiated milk and types of cookies, mostly. There were medical supplies and drugs, too. The drugs they gave to Ba Jiao, if you want an example, fetched the price of a local Party official’s salary. Sold on the black market, in the back of a video shop.

“The bottom line is that a successful campaign with the Campbells could end up exceeding all the other revenue sources in a year, and give you some mad money to boot.

“But here’s the thing.

“We’ve got to look like we need it. No—not just need. We’ve got to look like we *deserve* it. So here’s how it’s got to look. First: no false teeth.”

There was an angry buzz.

“False teeth, contact lenses, lightweight canes, knee-braces, you’ve got to hide it all.”

“But how am I going to eat?” said Lao Xue.

Lao Kuang calmed her with a light padding of his hands to the air.

“They’re only going to be here a couple of days,” said Jin Ming. “They have to teach. Put on a big pot of *chou*. Offer them some. I guarantee they won’t like it.”

“They eat big slabs, and shit big slabs,” said Bo Yongcai.

Everyone laughed hard.

“Go on,” said Lao Kuang, becoming impatient for his afternoon session with the koy. “The other stuff.”

“I figure to get the maximum out of them, we’ve got to make our village look like it was at the time of the *Jiefang*.[[21]](#footnote-21) So we’ve got to hide all the TVs, we’ve got to cover all the generators with firewood and brush. I have some tarps. Don’t forget—we’ve got lots of storage and piles of turnips in the Yankee squats.”  
 This was the local term for the empty houses the developers had thrown up.

“Desktops, laptops, game-boys, X-boxes, smartphones, Kobo readers, blue-tooths, same thing. Hide them. They’ll ask what we do in emergencies. We don’t do anything, you tell them. We leave it all to fate. Lao Kuang has the only phone, and it doesn’t work very well.” Jin Ming pulled a rotary phone out of his gym-bag, and held it high. “This is our idea of high-tech, long as they’re here.”

A hand shot up. “Ming Xiansheng…”

That was new: he was Mister to them now, not just a student.

“—but the Euroleague Finals are then!”

Jin Ming ignored the comment, and shook a clipboard at the elders. “Just write it down and I’ll get my associate in Qingdao to record it on my PVR. Anyone else? Cross-talk? *Baywatch*?” More laughter. “Umpteenth mini-series based on *Hong Lou Meng*?[[22]](#footnote-22)

“Now let’s talk specifics. We are undernourished. Badly. Da Chong. That’s right, Da Chong, you.”

The old woman said, “All right, already.”

“Great, I knew we could count on your private reserve.”

“It’s a terrible waste of insects,” she said, for Jin Ming had called on her and implored her to donate much of her vacuum-sealed store of grubs, bugs and locusts.

Jin Ming looked pleased. “Xiao Wen, get up here. Xiao Wen’s going to look richly retarded for the Americans. Let’s do it.”

“Mommy. Fact-ry. Me sad.”

“Put a little spittle into it.”

The kid drooled. “Me go big in pants. Daddy mad. He hurt Xiao Wen. Not, not happy.”

“That’s the spirit. Lao Ning, get out your mother’s loom, please. Just make a clacking sound with it. You can pull out some of her old sweaters, if it’s product they want to see. And you—.”

Old Chang’s eyes winced at this rudeness, which was followed by insult. Jin Ming gripped Old Chang’s shoulder—Chang was old but still very strong; he’d built most of the village’s houses—and he tensed with anger as Jin Ming stuffed some gauze in his cheek and bandaged his head with a tea towel.

“Say Ah,” said Jin Ming.

“Ah…ah…Ah’m going to kill you when this is all over.”

Jin Ming guffawed, pointed at Lao Kuang. “Don’t smoke your O.”

“I will not smoke O,” said Lao Kuang.

“Allow me to be tedious. Do not smoke O. Do not do O. Do not ‘sip’ it, eat it, inject it or do it in any way. In no circumstances. Got it?”

The little twerp was swaggering.

“Oh, I get it,” said Lao Kuang.

Most of the elders smiled thinly and said nothing. They were used to Jin Ming’s antics. To them he was still the boy whom Lao Kuang had beat silly several times for sneaking into his garden. They had lived through Jin Ming’s exasperating teenage years, his ascetic diets and tantrums, his alternate affectations, one month a punk rocker and the next a Red Guard, and so generally ignored him. Their remarks after the session were not so charitable.

“Puffing and strutting like a little cock.”

“What a stupid plan. It’s too much trouble to look poor.”

“Our little ‘Jack’ from Qingdao is going to fuck this up. How do we know the foreigners will come through?”

\*\*\*

When he got back to Qingdao University, Jin Ming decided to press his case with Lin Yan, and after summoning great courage, knocked on her dorm door. It swung open. He stepped in, calling “Lin Xiaojie,” but there was no reply. The window was open and bright: his eyes adjusted and he made out the black shape of Chang Hu Die sitting on the sill.

“She’s out,” said Hu Die.

“I can see that,” said Jin Ming.

“How about that?” she said. “You know, I fancy a walk. Do you?” And she swung off the sill and unbuttoned her blouse and let it drop, and went to the closet covering her visible breast with her hand and started shooting back hangers with the other. She selected a shirt and turned her back to him and slipped it on. “Let’s go,” she said.

Jin Ming went out the door and Hu Die stopped at the sill and insisted he come back in and let her precede him.  
 “This is nice,” she said. “I’ve never talked with you, up till now.”

She touched his forearm to stop him, and pointed at the stone bridge over the creek.

“Isn’t it lovely? It’s lovely. Do you know where we’re going?”

\*\*\*

Mr. and Mrs. Campbell stopped in the stairwell, he to wipe his brow, she to rub the small of her back, for he was carrying a substantial string-bag of potato chips, soda, cookies, pretzels, and new ping-pong paddles, and she was bumping a bedroll up the steps—essentials for the guest apartment the university had granted them, after much negotiation, so they could host English corners for their students. “They just got to have a place of fellowship,” he’d said, and had gone out of his way to buy the ping-pong table, which cost him more than a few incredulous e-mail exchanges with an accountant at Missouri State. Mrs. Campbell was also fagged in the stairwell, and as she huffed on the landing, she made out a faint, repetitive noise from above.

As they continued upward, the noise became a rutting thump, and Mrs. Campbell laid her hand on her husband’s shoulder. “Perhaps we…” but he’d gathered the snack-bag again and had reached the door.

“The keys.”

“Honey, remember, we gave those girls the keys. I told them to leave it open.”

They entered.

Jack was screwing the girl from behind over the ping-pong table; her elbows out and hands under her chin, the net crinkling with each thrust. Sensing wrongness, Jack turned.

“Er,” said Mr. Campbell. He set the snacks down.

Jack withdrew and pulled his pants up, kept his eyes down, fiddled with his belt.

The girl drew her legs up onto the table and rolled to hide her cunt. A ping-pong ball dislodged itself from the net and stuck to her buttocks. She looked at the ceiling. There was no alternative: she slid off and turned her back to them, and snatched up her clothes. Mr. Campbell’s mouth went dry as she wiggled into her panties. She slid behind Jack.

“Chang Xiaojie, I would like very much you to meet Mr. and Mrs. Campbell,” Jack began, but Mrs. Campbell pointed to the stairwell.

“Out! Get out of here!” she said “Don’t you *ever* come back!”

“Please to meet you,” said the girl.

Mrs. Campbell became cross because her husband was wheezing with laughter on the couch.

“Ed. Ed! That little sneak. And the girl! That’s fornication, Ed, and you know it.”

“It was bound to happen sooner or later,” said Mr. Campbell.

“No,” she said. “That’s sin, and it wasn’t bound to happen. What’s with you with the fatalistic Asian crap?”

Mr. Campbell couldn’t stop laughing again.

“But, Kay,” he said.

She uncrossed her arms and smiled.

“I know,” she said.

“Except.”

“All right, all right, it was a pool table.”

\*\*\*

Jin Ming had barely enough time to adapt his common-room lighting to fairy-mood, throw on his new stressed jeans, when Xiao Wang came out of the bedroom, set the door to, and sidled into Jin Ming’s ruffled presence.

“Ming, there’s a new girl…” he began.

“Later. Can’t you see I’m chilling?”

“Ming, she’s *here*.”

“What do you mean, she’s here? That’s against all--.”

“I mean she is in the bedroom.” Xiao Wang brought his finger up to make a point, but never raised it above his beltline when he saw the impatient fury stoking the red in Jin Ming’s face.

“Send her away, then. I’ve got enough girls.”

“Oh, I think, market-wise, you’re going to want to see this girl. And I don’t think you’re going to be able to send her away. No,” considering, pressing on, “She simply will not be sent.”

“We’ll see about that,” said Jin Ming, and banged into the bedroom. He’d cocked his arm in a commanding bow, with enough pent force to shoo the girl out of the apartment into the winter rain and anthracite run-off (still staining his socks) but his arm, his tongue went limp, and he simply gaped.

For it was Lin Yan, in a simple lace-throated white blouse and jeans, edge of the bed, her hands in her lap. Her hair was up: nothing distracted from the perfection of her face.

“Hello Ming. I came to see about the work you have.”

“Hello Lin Xiaojie.”

That was all he could say. He pulled a chair out and sat. Then he moved closer.

“I’m applying for the job,” she said.

Her beauty, taken in at once, was like curare; it paralyzed the heart.

She had printed out a resume on heavy mauve paper.

“Lin Xiaojie,” Ming began. “I don’t have any work. All the work is gone. You never can tell with these things. What a shame—I would have loved to have you. Truly, you’re one of the best applicants I’ve seen in some time. Really. If you like, I can walk you back across campus.”  
 Lin Yan smiled. “I don’t think so,” she said. She leaned forward, and Jin Ming sat up straighter at the cream swellings where she had undone her top button.

“It’s very hard for my business right now,” he said. “Besides, I don’t think you’d like the work.”

“My room-mate likes it well enough. She says she made 500 kuai last night, and all she had to do was laugh at a bunch of foreigners’ jokes, and she got home by 11. So don’t give me that.”

“That was pre-booked. Since they’ve all dried up.”

“Oh? The girl down the hall told me she’s busy every weekend until Spring Festival.”

Jin Ming said nothing.

“While you’re thinking about it, Ming, my parents asked me to remember them to you. ‘How is that hopeless boy who follows you around like a palace eunuch?’ they asked. Just kidding. They hoped they might remake your acquaintance when they pick me up in June.”

Jin Ming could see no way out. The parents: that was promising, and proof that his efforts had not been wasted. But he didn’t get carried away. This was serious. He was, after all, about to sell the love of his life into what might be described as prostitution.

Lin Yan rocked on her haunches and pulled a piece of paper out of her rear pocket. He was still thinking, okay, it could be done in such a way…he lost track of Lin Yan’s words.

“…writing to my parents granting an exemption from tuition this term. You see,” she said as much with her eyes as with her mouth, “my mother’s condition has put a lot of financial strain on them. But it worked out fabulously, as the Dean of English Studies knows my father from way back. He expressed a lot of sympathy towards my mother, who is still recovering, and needs a lot of expensive care. The Dean likes to know what goes on all over his campus. All it would take would be a single call.

“That is what will happen if you don’t hire me.”

“Lin Xiaojie, this is not suitable work for you. I beg you to think of your reputation.”

“Oh, what do I need that for if I’m marrying you?” she laughed. “No—I beg *you* to think of my reputation. My parents can only help me so much. Unless I start putting some cash away for a good graduate program, out I go into the world of cafes and bars and hairdressers and massage parlours, although, if I act sluttily enough, at least at first, there is some chance I could get on as a secretary. But why take chances? Why should I? Why should you?”

Jin Ming knew there was a sentence he should say; it floated outside the small room, disconcertingly lit by the bedside reading-lamp and its simple, coal-smeared window, embarrassingly graced by a hot poster of Zhang Ziyi directly over the bed; no, the answer to Lin Yan simply would not enter the bedroom.

“Just tell me where I work,” said Lin Yan.

“I need some time,” said Jin Ming.

“Nonsense. You can book me now. Oh, Ming, try to think of me as an asset. I’m on your side. I really was kidding about the palace eunuch. Why would you turn down the most beautiful girl on campus? I’m not modest about that. Why be modest? I celebrate nature’s gifts. I have nothing to lose—and we can make some money. Together.”

Jin Ming tried to detect some sense of Lin Yan’s feelings toward him, but soon found in himself and in the effortful flint in her eyes that he was swamped by practical considerations. The single phone call to the Dean would cost her nothing; it would inflame the Dean’s sympathy towards her and her parents; it would reveal to the Dean his beautiful and profitable operation, causing either his expulsion, or a prohibition, or the payment of another generous kick-back he could ill afford; moreover, it would end once and for all any contact between him and Lin Yan—now, when all had seemed promising—and, if it got back to the village, he would be back to dredging cakes of algae and shit out of those stinking fish-ponds.

So he gave her an assignment, one he thought would be unlikely to lead to further service contracts or familiarity. He avoided the foreign student’s parties, especially the Pakistani boys, and booked Lin Yan for a dinner with one of the older clients he was starting to get, a Dutch businessman. He timed it so he would be showing the Campbells his village when she started working.

Lin Yan gathered her things, and refused a walk back to her residence. Their meeting was not a total loss. He did get to touch her hand, when they shook on it.

\*\*\*

The villagers planned to feed the Campbells organic crap—bark, and bitter seeds, and tasteless rice-mush, and insects, grubs and flies, and maggots and bugs.

This delighted Da Chong, who as we know was crazy for insects, and was greedy about it; you could often hear her constitutional around the village by the crunching of deep-fried locusts in her strong jaw. She loved insects so much the children had given her the name Da Chong,[[23]](#footnote-23) years ago, and in winter, when she ventured out in her padded parka, they would scream, “She’s spun a cocoon, old Da Chong has!”

Throughout the dinner she lightened the Campbell’s plates as they gagged their way through the feast. The villagers smiled and vied with their chopsticks for choice bits to feed the foreigners.

“It’s. It’s all very interesting,” said Mrs. Campbell.

Mr. Campbell was politely nibbling on a dragonfly wing.

“Do you eat insects all the time?” he said to Jin Ming.

“This is a special occasion. Usually we eat worms.”

“No.”

“Oh, yes.”

Lao Xue placed a reeking pot before them, mumbling in her gums.

“What is she saying?”

“She is saying it is wild garlic tea. You must try. It is very healthly.”

\*\*\*

By midnight, Lao Kuang was in a serious state of longing for his opium. He’d suffered throughout the Campbells’ long, and tediously simple-minded idea of a village-visit, during which they gaped at everything as though it pullulated with meaning, and his running nose had increased its snot output, causing his whole sleeve to be crusty. It would be more accurate to call the nose’s condition a *mucosal hemorrhage*. His eyes wouldn’t focus, screw them though he might with his fists. And, the longer he stayed put by his window and waited for the candles to go out in the Campbells’ hut, the more disastrous the effects: he now produced streams of diarrhea on the half-hour, which meant he had to cross in front of their hut several times to reach the outhouse, doubled over by gut pains. His gait was not like the comic creep and loping tiptoe of a practiced sneak, but like a centenarian approaching Huang Shan’s summit by its exactingly steep stairs: one arm out, the other on his kidney area.

He couldn’t take it any more, so he wrapped his ball of O into a gauze pocket and resolved to gain the outhouse, and hence the fishponds off the river, where he planned to swallow the O, enough to get him to morning with at least a chance of sleep. Just as he passed the candle-pool of light of the Campbell’s, the door opened, and Lao Kuang had to kneel and collapse against the wall of the adjacent pigpen. He listened to the slurping and snorting sounds, and the steps that were no more than ten feet from him.

But Mr. Campbell—for Lao Kuang peeked—just tapped his foot to the measure of a song.

Lao Kuang tried to ignore the tickling, building pressure on his anus.

Mr. Campbell, satisfied by something, closed his door and started towards the river. Lao Kuang followed—he could always say he was on his way to the outhouse. Maybe the shit running down his ankles would say it for him.

As soon as Campbell was in the shade, he lit a cigarette.

Lao Kuang saw the foreigner was a timid, lonely soul, so nagged by his wife that he had to sneak out at midnight for a smoke—this pleased Lao Kuang.

He bounded and crashed through bushes toward Campbell, who dropped the cigarette and visibly cringed.

“What? Who’s there? Shit—it’s you. Owl Fong, isn’t it? You scared me.”

“I beg your pardon,” said Lao Kuang, picking up the smoke and handing it to Campbell. “You cannot sleep?”

“I just wanted to take a walk. Through your lovely village.”

“Walk to fishpond very peace,” Lao Kuang said, as Campbell brightened the end of another cigarette with a long pull. Lao Kuang led the way, puckering below, trying to think his way out of the predicament, the impending gastric accident, leading the way to the still pond on whose surface was a perfect falcate moon.

“Here we can sleep,” he said.

“No, I think I--.”

“Here we rest, can I say?”

“Rest is correct,” said Campbell.

Lao Kuang sidled closer. They were both bent over the water, both tensed for fish rising to the surface. “You a busy man. Many worries. Pond good, for you.”

“You are right about that. So right.”

“Many worries not good.”

“Boy, let me tell you.” At this, Lao Kuang looked around—there was no boy. “This year in Qingdao has not been easy.”

“Not easy.”

“Kids these days, they’re busy. They just don’t have the time for Jesus.”

Lao Kuang’s stomach knotted uncomfortably with what he wanted to say, but he put a firm hand on Campbell’s shoulder and said, “Come back to my place.”

The two men slunk back through the trees and entered the Lao Kuang’s hut. Once inside, they sat at the single wood table; Campbell’s knees lifted it.

Lao Kuang could barely contain his excitement as he poured Campbell a cup of cold tea, but before he got to the brim, he set the teapot down with a loud clink and ran outside. Campbell heard him circle the building, stop for a long moment, and then he was back. Lao Kuang tapped his chest twice, licked away some hanging snot.

“I know…I feel…you, me, same.”

Campbell said, “Hmmm.”

“You can smoke,” said Lao Kuang, “Men like we need relax.”

“Thanks for having me,” said Campbell, “I suppose I should…” But he lit up.

“No. No, no. I see you. I know…you find peace inside. You wise. You have…other peace,” said Lao Kuang, as his hands trembled before Campbell, as though to shape the gently spiritual.

“Jesus is peace,” said Campbell.

“Great responsible, bring boys and girls to Jesus. Need wis-dom. Need relax.”

“My God, you’re right,” said Campbell.

“YOU’RE MAKING TOO MUCH NOISE,” said Lao Kuang’s wife in Chinese from behind the plastic-strip door to the bedroom.

“Not as much as you. You sound like a donkey,” said Lao Kuang. There was an exasperated sigh, and Mrs. Kuang made a big aural show of rolling over.

“You’re right,” whispered Campbell. “I never thought about it that way. It is much harder to help people than I thought. And yet I try. God knows I try.”

“God knows…” said Lao Kuang. “Why not relax a small time?”

The coffee-tin with his slender, milled-edge, carved-bowl, stinky pipe and his pen-knife and lighter were only a reach away, in the coffee tin that also contained a few brushes, and their tips in the surging candlelight, *bi jian bai lin*, were a white forest in his watering, constantly crossing eyes. He got up with a half-fart and fetched a bottle of *bai*-*jiu*. Campbell gratefully drank.

“I think you need more relax,” said Lao Kuang, almost out of English words. “Behind your problems. Bye-bye them. Need to think about God, not people problems.”

“Meditate,” said Campbell. “Don’t you meditate? I think I need to meditate. Think about what God wants.”

“God wants relax. I know what you need. Okay, take one time, very nice for you.”

Lao Kuang squeezed his eyes shut; there, he had done it. The direct approach. Campbell might respond. He had better respond: if he didn’t, he would beat him to death with a wok and then get the relief he craved.

He heard the bottle clink against the cup again.

His gut was raving.

“You don’t happen to have any opium here, do you?” said Campbell.

Lao Kuang opened his eyes and his mouth in a wide smile; Campbell’s face was delightful, both childish and pleading. “*Fan-ta-sick*!” he said.

“YOU’RE NOT GOING TO SMOKE UP THE FOREIGNER, ARE YOU? YOU SON OF A TURTLE’S EGG. YOU DESPICABLE—” said Mrs. Kuang.

This caused Lao Kuang to knock over the coffee-tin, and its contents slid and rolled along the table, a brush pitching off. Out came the knife, the pipe, the pipe-cleaners, and some grey ash, pencils, a suppository implanter, and, spinning once on its axis, a USB flash drive.

It was red and yellow, modular plastic, with a slide-feature that retracted to protect the slender metal tongue and its inner filaments.

It was manufactured by Gao Hun Corp of Shenzhen, est. 2007.

And before Lao Kuang could explain away the flash-drive, Campbell noticed the closet door at the back, near where Kuang Tai-tai was now blinking in her housecoat, and the grey plug that stuck out beneath the closet door. He threw open the door and a tumbling 29-inch monitor barked his shins.

“Shit!” he said.

“Shit,” said Lao Kuang.

Mr. Campbell retrieved and placed on the floor a couple of X-box controls. Lao Kuang saw there was nothing for it, and prepared his pipe while Campbell ranted, and lit his smidge, and beat a lingering retreat into the mysteries.

Mr. Campbell went and woke up his wife, but she told him she was sleeping off the grubs, she chuckled, and fell back asleep, and Mr. Campbell lay beside her listening to her breathing, and his anger lessened, but this did not distract him from an internal parade of heavier objects, modular objects, moulded, modern—they gathered in his mind.

\*\*\*

In the morning, the foreigners went for a walk, and they were ten steps out the door when Jack cut in front of them.

“God bless you both,” said Jack. “Is it not a tremendous morning? Time was back when, almost the whole village would be out early and in their exercising. But now, as you know well, many have the medical issues. They suffer quite a large. Amount. So they sleep in much, much later, than I was a boy. It would do me good to see them out and about again, truly. May I suggest a route for your morning constitution?”

“Didn’t you say there had been some development these parts?” said Mrs. Campbell.

“Houses and such,” said Mr. Campbell.

“You don’t want to see them,” said Jack. “They exhibit—I’m sorry to say, but it’s true—they were ignorant of our village ways, and—.”

“I think that would be very interesting,” said Mrs. Campbell, tugging her Tilley hat snug.

Jack did not move a facial muscle. He led them between a stand of bamboo and another hut, and directly to the edge of the remains of a small crop of corn and millet.

“There’s really not a lot to see,” he said.

“They’re over there,” said Mr. Campbell. And he pointed behind him, at the line of roofs.

“I think to understand the mistakes the developers made,” said Mrs. Campbell, “we’ve really got to look inside.”

“A great cross-cultural misunderstanding,” said Mr. Campbell, leading the way.

When Jack moved left, to take them to the end-house, they hung back, and turned right. Before Jack could react, the Campbells were through the far gate, and inside the cement-block house. Jack almost caught up, and Mr. Campbell said, “A-hah!” and flung open the door to the garage.

Piled carefully on a bed of purple turnips were a mint iMac, a flat screen TV, its wall-mount jutting up, a Kawasaki moped, a salon-grade helmet for setting perms, and, farther back, in the spider-webby gloom, a satellite dish.

“Now, who could have put these things here, my boy?” said Mr. Campbell.

“Now, who could have put these things here?” said Jack.

Mrs. Campbell put a hand on Jack’s arm. “Jesus will forgive you, you know, Jack.”

“I’d like to see the carp-ponds,” Mr. Campbell said.

They let Jack exit the house, and watched where he turned, and went the opposite way, towards the river. Jack had to break into a trot to keep up. For their age, they went at a good clip.

“Though. Our village. Is small. There. Are many, things. I don’t know about. It.”

“Are there?” said Mr. Campbell. He brushed aside some ferns overhanging the pond, where the few fish were flickeringly conscious. Across the water, poorly hidden in another bank of ferns, were the glass circles of headlights and the windshield of a Terrainmaster SUV.

Their walk continued, Jack now silent, hands in his back pockets.

“You ought to learn how to stand up straight,” said Mrs. Campbell, pressing her small fist between Jack’s shoulderblades.

“Let’s go visiting,” said Mr. Campbell. And they did. In Jack’s aunt’s home, ignoring her greetings and protestations, they found a Kobe reader tucked behind some old books; and in a neighboring pig-pen they found, under a tarp, an elaborate wine-making kit with bottling and labeling gear. Mrs. Campbell asked to use the washroom, and returned to present the Aunt with her false teeth and contact lenses.

“Jack has been so generous with us, with his time,” said Mrs. Campbell.

The old woman put in her false teeth and grimaced, like she wanted to bite Jack.

“Praise Jesus,” said Mr. Campbell.

It didn’t get much worse, but after a silent lunch and another walk, the Campbells found in an unlocked outbuilding, wrapped in dense plastic sheeting, X-ray equipment with wall-mounts and plates, a dialysis machine, and several storage tubs of prescription pharmaceuticals in vacuum-sealed bags. All the village lacked, it seemed, was a doctor.

“This is outrageous,” said Mr. Campbell.

“Forgivable,” said Mrs. Campbell.

“Oh, darling, all you do is forgive and forgive.”

The foreigners retired to their little room, where they proceeded to pray, and for this couple of hours, at least, the whole village prayed with them.

\*\*\*

Downhill from the university, not far from Lin Yan’s old high school, there was a level neighborhood where the sea-fog, leaving a few loose, floating shreds of stinging mist at eye-level, settled over parked cars and clung to the windows of small shops and restaurants, outside which shih-tzus and papillon puppies growled at the fog, tethered suggestively beside small pits of glowing charcoal. Korean money and influence had drifted between the peninsulas that summer, and now the streets were saccharine with girl and boy bands blaring from video stores; the choosier parts of Qingdao gained luxury hotels; and commerce in general moved west towards the bathing-beaches. Qingdao girls began to bristle with the Korean fashion for fringes and appliqued flowers and furbelows on their boots, bags and blouses.

Not so Lin Yan, who wore a white cotton top with jeans and was smoking her first cigarette in one of Jin Ming’s hired taxicabs.

Across the street, like a channel light through the fog, the flashing neon beer-stein of the Rathskaller, where Lin Yan was to join a Dutchman and his *drinking buddies* for dinner.

“I better get going,” she said.

“Whatever,” said the driver. He was resting his cigarette on the steering wheel between puffs, and he turned to her. “Are you nervous?”

“Yes.”

“Don’t be. They are only foreigners. They will show off to each other; they will drink like fish.”

Yan laughed unconvincingly at the English idiom in Chinese.

“Think of yourself as the flowers on the table,” said the driver. “Better—don’t think of yourself. Enjoy the food.”

“It’s just large meats,” she said. “And potatoes. It’s not really food.”

She was quiet. Her mother had always taught her to think of herself as a flower, but this was different.

“Whatever. Any trouble, text me. Oh, and. Jin Ming asked me to give you this.”

Lin Yan took the card.

Excuses

My roommate is missing. I have to find her.

I don’t feel well. I must go home.

My mother is sick. I should return hometown.

They called a study-group meeting. I’m fear it’s mandatory. It’s Marxism- Leninism.

If these don’t work, call 3678-2471.

The driver got out and came around, opened the door for her.

Inside the Rathskallar, there were no customers, but she told the hostess that a Mr. Vanderleer was meeting her, and was seated. There was a wraparound molded plaster frieze above the wainscoting, interrupted by recessed green and gold steins with golden lids. Yan’s eyes followed the merry medieval characters on the frieze: the miller, the maiden, the priest and the urchin, the cowherd, the nun, the lad with his axe, the crone with her cane, the occasional oxen. She had seen similar Chinese scenes on trousseau trunk-lids, the villagers meeting the official just outside his *yamen*. They travelled all around the room, *das volk*, and when she got to the end, a pair of sweethearts, a buxom girl with startling yellow braids, a strapping lad…Mr. Vanderleer was touching her arm, saying, “Mei Li?”

“Please to meet you,” Lin Yan said, and received a kiss on her cheek. She sat down, blushed. Mr. Vanderleer was florid-faced and surprisingly small; he was also polite. He asked about her studies; recommended a good beer. When his two friends, the Germans, showed up, they were towering and very loud. They spoke in English, their common language. They roared and shot up to pump the hand of the chef, who came out to recommend the *schnitzel,* clinked their mugs, tousled the Dutchman’s hair. They ignored her, except for insisting that she have her picture taken with Mr. Vanderleer, who reluctantly agreed; the Germans hovered about her and tried to push them together for the shot, which Lin Yan resisted. That didn’t last long. The Germans started singing, made toasts. Vanderleer seemed a little overwhelmed. He touched her hand on the tablecloth.

They moved from beer to schnapps. Mr. Vanderleer went to the men’s room.

“Leer, huh, he’s doing well for himself.”

“About time, after all that.”

“Oh, yes, the police were into him pretty fast.”

“It was an accident.”

“Totally. The poor Chinese, stepped out and got flattened.”

“Dragged was more like it.”

Lin Yan tried to keep her eyes down.

“So how much did the cops get him for, anyway?”

“I heard 30,000.”

“American?”

“Hell no, the local—what’s it called, Miss?”

“*Renminbi*,” she said.

“Ren Min Bi. Thirty-thousand of them.”

“Cheap.”

“Ah, well, he was just a Chinese. Here he is.”

A pang of fear trammeled her breastbone into her heart, sharp. She waited until they started to roar again. She went to the washroom and washed her hands, and sat on the counter with the water running.

When she returned, they were settling up. She ignored it when the larger of the Germans pulled out her chair.

The Dutchman looked at his friends, then her, and quietly said, “I would like to have a word with you.”

He led her by the arm outside.

“You are so beautiful. And I can tell you’re a nice girl. A little *schmuzenkatze*. How much if we go back to my hotel?”

“Thirty-thousand,” said Lin Yan.

“That’s almost four thousand U.S. dollars,” Vanderleer said, then his face darkened. “Why, you, you--what do you think this is?” He grabbed for her arm.

Lin Yan ran away. She ran until she felt cold, rising through the foggy streets towards the university, and her breath stabbed her, and took the staircase beside the backside of a scabby apartment-building, and on the first landing her knees wobbled and she sank to sit, her back against the stone wall. A streetlamp sputtered flashes in a wire cage just above her, but the fog dissipated and the moon was bright, and it shone directly on Lin Yan as she worked her hands in her lap. She wept. A married couple trudged up the steps right in front of her, wearing Mao clothes that on younger people may have been ironic or *arriviste*, but to them were simply habit, exactly as their way of walking was, he ten steps ahead, their hands behind their backs. They passed Lin Yan, (weeping still, unable to stop,) as though she were the umpteenth pieta in a European *palazzo*, passed her without looking, as though she were not there.

When she shut her dorm door behind her, later, Hu Die was laying in bed smoking a cigarette. By the way Lin Yan hovered with her foot tracing the floor Hu Die saw at once there was something wrong.

“Where are our sisters?” said Lin Yan.

“Who knows? Who cares? Hey,” she said.

“Hey,” said Lin Yan.

Hu Die stubbed the cigarette out and stretched.

“Come with me. Come on. We’re going out. We’re going to see the Damma-Lammas.”

“The Damma-Lammas?”

“It’s a band.”

Hu Die tossed her a toque, and pulled one on herself. “Don’t ask,” she said, “it’s *grunge*, okay. Just wear it.”

\*\*\*

That night, there was an assembly in Lao Kuang’s second house, in the home theatre; the Campbells had something to say to the whole village. Jin Ming had trailed around after Lao Kuang all afternoon, saying, “I did what I could,” and “Laoshi, please, it is not because of anything I did.”

“That’s true. You did what you could.”

“So things are the same between us?”  
 “Oh, yes,” said Lao Kuang. “Why? Do you sense any change coming?”

All the villagers showed up on time, perhaps because they wanted to get this over with. They came presenting indifferent face. Lao Kuang mused that he had not had so many of them over since the days of *political education meetings*. He made Jin Ming sit in the far, rear corner; even the boy who acted the retard at dinner got a better seat in terms of rank. He wore a tee-shirt that said, *Mom and Apple Cake*.

And the Campbell’s entered with Mrs.’s hugs and Mr.’s barely endurable handshake.

“I and my husband want to thank you for your wonderful hospitality yesterday,” said Mrs. Campbell. “Ed, are you?”

He rattled his throat and began. “My friends, and you really have been our friends. So thank you. You know the grubs weren’t so bad. I’m afraid I’ll never be a grasshopper-lover. But I digress. We actually know quite a bit about your marvelous country--.”

“We had to pass a test, before we came,” said Mrs. Campbell.  
 “We took a course. A long time ago, there was a wise young man who said, ‘It is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle…’”

Jin Ming had to translate.

“…rich to enter heaven.’ It makes you think, doesn’t it. What is wealth and richness if we are poor in spirit? And this young, wise man spent a lot of time among the poor, not among the rich. He knew the poor. He was poor himself. And yet he asks us to think about richness in a different way. But back to China. We learned an awful lot. Mao Tse-tung—did I get that right?—well, he established all those friendships with Soviet satellite-states in the sixties, and Mao gave grain and other things to all those poor countries. He didn’t want his fellow communists to do without.”

Temples were throbbing, a couple of fists got coughed into. Lao Kuang knew that several of the villagers’ parents had died of starvation during the same period.

“But he didn’t stop there. Mao also extended that friendship, that generosity, to many countries in Africa. He paid off loans. He gave scholarships to African students. I remember I saw a black man wearing a fez in Beijing once. There’s a long history of Chinese generosity towards the world, is what I’m trying to say, and that young, wise man—God, he practically defined that generous spirit. For he knew that there was a worse kind of poverty than sleeping on straw and sucking on stones in the desert.”

“It’s Jesus, isn’t it?” said Jin Ming, without much interest.

“It is Jesus, praise him. He knew that poverty of the spirit, when you feel you don’t have anything in you to give, so you got to hold onto it all, that poverty was more serious. So, Mrs. Campbell and I wanted to do something in that same spirit. And align it with your history, somewhat. We have a great deal of admiration for your culture, and we’ve all heard about what great things Chairman Mao did for your culture during that revolution of yours a little whiles back.”

Mr. Campbell held up a small digital camera and passed it to the front row, where it passed without comment from liver-spotted hand to hand.

It took a few seconds to register. Granny Wang took off her glasses and rubbed her eyes, put them on again.

It was a photograph of a smirking goat with a bell around its neck.

“Mrs. Campbell and I have made arrangements to donate this goat to an African village, just a poor collection of huts--.”

“He means houses,” said Mrs. Campbell. “You know, with the hats on top.”

“We donated this goat on behalf of your village,” said Mrs. Campbell. “The people will be able to get goat milk and cheese, if they know how to make it, and the children can play with the goat.

“Because we wanted to assist your village just as Jesus sure would have wanted you to reach out to others. It’s been quite a day, hasn’t it? Thank you for the Internet access this afternoon; we couldn’t have done this without you.”

Lao Kuang banged his hands together, once, twice, and the rest joined in.

The Campbells’ eyes met in adolescent love for each other’s faith.

“And,” Mr. Campbell said. “And we’ll be supporting that goat for a year in the name of your village. Do you know what else we found out? Not far from this village there are Chinese miners working. Right next door to the village we chose! It just goes to show.”

“Mr. Campbell,” Lao Kuang said. “We don’t know how to thank you. But it is late, and I know many of us wish to go to sleep. We are moved by your great gift.”

“Understandable. Okay. Anyone else want a look at the goat?”

Jin Ming was the first to slip away, and when the others had mostly gone, Lao Kuang talked softly to Mr. Campbell, and thanked Mrs. Campbell again, and went directly to his pond and fumed at the complacently flickering fish.

\*\*\*

As the lead singer of the Damma-Lammas, teasing the audience, lurching above the one lame footlight with his three-stringed guitar banging against his crotch, turning around and staggering backwards to the lip of the stage, windmilling, as he prepared himself and the arms of his audience for his leap – his flagrant forward dive into their heaving appreciation – he jumped, hands out, and he was held, bobbing aloft, as the band continued to sputter along: all this happened in a wink, in the lapses of the strobe, and Hu Die and Lin Yan, near the fire-exit of the warehouse, together they touched their cheeks with their mittens and their mouths were perfect Os as they stomped up and down in delight, framing the silent, cross-armed endurance of the lone policeman, who stared disapprovingly as the singer was heaved back on the stage, the cop who had drawn this profoundly undesirable Saturday night duty. He grew stiffer, impatient, anxious to rush the stage, burrow his eyes in the crowd to search for a crime, as the two cute girls in their pom-pommed toques, giddy with pleasure now, alternately jostled the cop by his shoulders, saying, “Come on and dance,” “Dance with us, oh pretty please,” but he shook his head and moved even farther back under the red fire-exit sign. The girls held hands and skipped into the crowd.

Lin Yan had never had such fun. And though she flailed away dancing, something sunk into her, she felt heavy on her feet, and she realized, as the Damma-Lammas’ drummer got louder and louder, that it was true, she had never, in all her life, had any fun, whatsoever. The piano, the tutors, the *bu xi ban* cram-schools, the French, the math, the piano exams, her mother. Her mother. Hu Die whirled and punched her on the shoulder, and Lin Yan punched her back, and the girls jostled girls and were jostled back, and mocked the boys they kept banging into, and when the show was over, they went up to a mild-looking boy with long curly hair, the bass-player, and they both said, “You guys were good. You guys were *awesome*.”

And so it was that Lin Yan and Hu Die were invited backstage, in a storeroom with huge plastic sacs of *pi-jiu[[24]](#footnote-24)* hanging from hooks, where the band were slapping hands and filling glasses. Lin Yan tried beer. The bass-player, Glen, introduced them. The girls told these Americans where they were from and the band chimed all around, Everett, Yakima, Coquitlam, Portland. The girls giggled with all the wicked innocence a toque can give a girl. “Play something,” they said. “More!” Glen swung open a guitar case on the floor and gentled an acoustic on his lap, and became sweetly reminiscent about his lips as he picked the strings in a pretty pattern and began to sing:

Can she bake a cherry pie, Billy Boy, Billy Boy

Can she bake a cherry pie, Darling Billy?

Yes, she can bake a cherry pie,

And she’s the apple of my eye,

“But she’s a young girl, and cannot eat her mother,” said Hu Die, with complete confidence.

“These girls are drunk,” said the singer. “I like drunk girls.”

The next weekend, Hu Die and Lin Yan accompanied the Damma-Lammas to Weifeng for a gig. And then there were more gigs—Jinan, Beijing, Tianjin—and the girls’ weekends were gloriously full. They partied with the band. They learned how to set up the drum kit. Lin Yan never saw Jin Ming again.

\*\*\*

Jin Ming was taking a long time to return from his village, so Xiao Wang became the Pad-Meister and invited many friends to hang out and go head to head at computer games on the big-screen. The pad stank of beer and salt and vinegar chips and swelling ramen in the sink.

Little Wang set up the cellphone on his desk, and took the call.

“Are you streaming?” said Khaled, from Washington, DC.

“Ready to test.”

“Okay.”

The image swung to a bed. A black girl with bushy hair toed the floor, and dropped her simple shift around her ankles. Her breasts flattened as she lay prone with her chin on her arms, then she twisted her neck, looking back, smiling at Khaled, whose hand entered the frame and stroked her back.

“Shar-Lee has agreed to help me study for this anatomy exam,” Khaled said.

“You all going to examine me?” she said.

She clenched her buttocks as Khaled’s finger poked her tailbone. “Tickles,” she said.

“Okay, here we go. Skeleton.”

Khaled’s hand, starting where he probed his fingers in her afro, travelled the long, licorice length of her, naming the brain’s plates, the islands of her spine, the fibula and tibula, the network of tiny phalanges in her pale-bottomed feet. Khaled made many mistakes, but Little Wang just said, “Good, good, keep going,” as he put his finger to his lips and waved over his friends. Quietly he got out a synchronized tablet and streamed from the phone.

Shar-Lee turned over, and beckoned Khaled, and she lay her hand to his beard as they kissed, and she sank back on the bed with a crinkly delight at the corner of her eyes, and put her hands for a pillow behind her head. She playfully breathed and inflated her chest. Her nipples were inky, like papaya seeds. Khaled, “collar-bone, breastbone, floating rib,” sounded gentle in his lists, and his fingers lightly crept and spread and depressed her breasts, and Shar-Lee said, “Honey, is it a hard test?”

“Keep going,” said Little Wang. “You’re doing great. *Hen hao*.”

The boys’ faces hung over the tablet like anglers around a glowing lake. There were worse ways of learning about love.

\*\*\*

The goat reached the African village, but not long after it became a yellow knob of bones in the dirt. The sun was setting against the Kenyan plain in a sonata that warbled in its livid red disc, stirring somehow the yellow grass and the spreading levels of leaves in the distant plane tree, when Ahmed, a boy with elbows nearly as big as his knees in ripped Laker shorts, looked up from looking at his feet. He stood. He tensed at the small bloom of dust on the horizon, which grew into a low, approaching funnel of dust. He thought it was Kill-R and Daddywhacker returning; he shouted at his brother to watch out and stood to face the dust coming up the rough road. Every time the dust came, so came his worry. He wiped the sweat from his palms on his bare chest.

His brother, Sa’im, who was slow but placid, with a bit of the slim sickness in him, was skinning a rat with a sharp rock. “You’re ruining that rat,” Ahmed said, “Time you’re finished there won’t be nothing left,” but in Swahili it was much more rhythmic: "*Wewe yanaangamiza kwamba panya, wakati wewe ni kumaliza hakutakuwa na kitu kushoto*.” Silent Sa’im kept scraping.

The boys lived by themselves in a hut of corrugated tin, and they had a flimsy water-jug and a couple of battered pots. It was burning hot and they slept outside nights; their mother was dying in the hut; her skin bloomed with sores and bruises that looked like gourd-skin rotting. Because she smelled, the boys did not go in the hut much except to feed her; the door had come to so adequately represent her mouth, so much so that the boys had no desire to enter and suffer the horror of the croakings they could no longer understand.

Last night, Kill-R and Daddywhacker in their backwards caps and construction safety vests had lit a fire and drank, offering Ahmed their beer, but he said no. Cooking the goat over the fire had been their idea.

“Come over here, want you feel something,” said Daddywhacker, and he put Ahmed’s thumb on his machete, and rubbed it below the hone. “You feel that? That Daddywhacker’s number one. I kill more with it than gun.” Ahmed gulped.

“How old your brother?” said Kill-R.

“He three,” Ahmed lied.

“I see he waste a village or two. He going be a killer.”

Kill-R chortled. The fire crackled.

“Next year we fix you up, and you come, you see with us. You going *know*. But you is going eat regular.”

Now, Ahmed put his hands on his knees as the cloud died and he saw the Chinese characters on the van. He was never so relieved to see those unintelligible symbols. It was the Chinese mining-men from the hills, their camp.

The van made a sliding turn and stopped. The side door banged open, and a man was shoved out and hit the ground, rolled, and lay on his back until he pushed himself to stand. His eyes were blackened. He had an unintentional goatee.

The van roared off.

Ahmed smiled. The man walked funny, like he had to think about it, and waved a smartphone at Ahmed. The exhausted Chinese man laughed, crazily laughed, sat down again. He lay on his back.

“Pleasant evening,” he said. He propped himself on his elbows. “Fuck. I came to take picture of the goat.”

Jin Ming extended the smartphone and its silver back gleamed in the last sun, and Ahmed took it.

“I show you goat,” Ahmet said.

1. Attention-deficit edition. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Wishing each other a Happy New Year. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Very cool. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Only for a second. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Extra hot. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Recordists and Analysts of the Non-partisan Sessional Assembly Committee. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. I will flatten them with tanks until there is nothing left of them but blood. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. The unseen. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. We come from Allah, and to Allah we shall return. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Fear naught but Allah. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Islamic school. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Cf. Sura Al-Muzamilu, “Aw ziid alayhu wa ratil al-Qur’an *taratilla*”, “Or add to it a little and recite the Qur’an in a measured manner.” [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. My brother. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Peace be upon you. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. A reformist movement in Islam that began in the late 18th century and is still influential in Saudi Arabia and among fundamentalist Muslims in many places. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. The reported sayings of the Prophet Muhammad. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. God is great. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. The Arabic word *ikhlas* refers to the dross produced in smelting metal, the essence, the irreducible; it is the name of the short, and closing, *surah* in the *Qur’an* that proclaims God’s unity. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Gambling, cards, mah jong, drinking, dancing girls, hot dishes, and making love. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. The gao kao is the university entrance exam. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. I.e. the Liberation, the founding of the People’s Republic in 1949. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. *The Dream of the Red Chamber* by Cao Zueqin; a seventeenth century novel, highly revered. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Big Insect. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Beer. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)