

## **“Line, Please”**

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*From “You Don't Look Like Your Picture: Stories of Love in the Digital Age”*

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Perhaps you've heard of me?

Maybe you've listened to a song by the Jump Boys, a group I fronted, which had three gold records that launched countless jingles for a remarkable array of consumer products. Or on television, as the host of a reality show where contestants dared to eat horse cock sandwiches and cling to helicopters zooming over a tropical bay. On billboards, hawking heavy gold watches, cask-aged cognac, or alligator leather shoes, my shirt unbuttoned to reveal six-pack abs.

I didn't think so.

In America, most likely the only reference you've seen of me would be a blurb, news of the weird, along the lines of “those funny Asians, at it again.” Video-game pets, robot butlers, used schoolgirl panties sold in vending machines, and the sex scandal involving Kingsway Lee, the Hong Kong star whose compromising photos were stolen off his laptop, played out in the tabloids, and posted on the web.

Thousands of shots from my cell phone, scoring with scores of women: the actress wife of my former bandmate; the Canto-pop star and lover of a reputed mobster; and the daughter of a shipping magnate with ties to Beijing and the Red Army.

I've been forced to flee to the safest place I could think of, where no one would recognize me: my hometown.

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Trying to flag down the pork rib cart, Ma waves as frantically as a passenger in a life raft toward a distant light.

“Ma, she'll be back again,” I say, jumpy and jet-lagged from last night's sleeping pills and this morning's Red Bull. Her contortions turn vigorous, like martial arts or semaphore, aggressive to assure the best dishes for her family.

Risky, for me to suggest going out and possibly blow my cover, but I am still pretending I returned home for a long overdue visit. I have yet to discuss what happened with my parents, who

don't know that hours after *The Look*, Hong Kong's biggest tabloid, published my photos online, my cell phone began clicking and hissing, and my archived messages mysteriously disappeared – signs that I must have been hacked, placed under surveillance, and my whereabouts pinpointed. Paparazzi swarmed the entrance to my building, a triad offered a reward for my hacked-off hand, and I'd left that night.

Yet on my first public outing in America, no one recognizes me, which hurts more than I want to admit. How dim, my star across the Pacific. Surely, someone in Chinatown might stare for too long, might whisper with excitement, might acknowledge the calamity that swept me to these shores. Evidence of fans, women my parents could blame for preying upon their firstborn and only son.

Ba serves my sister a shrimp dumpling. "Seafood is brain food," he says. "For the baby."

"For me too," Ellen says, though we all knew her son, in utero, has usurped her in our father's heart.

Hybrid vigor – her genes, bred with her husband's Irish ones, will create superior offspring, healthier and resistant to disease – according to Ba. In retirement, he's become obsessed with orchids: joined a local club, won prizes at shows, and traveled to buy specimens, lavishing more attention upon the flowers than he had upon his children. A refined undertaking, noble as learning calligraphy or playing the zither, awakening a sense of beauty suppressed during the many years he designed utilitarian freeways and bridges. From his new greenhouse, which takes up most of the backyard, he coaxed elegant blooms from leathery bulbs and debuted them at Ellen's wedding in the bouquets, boutonnieres, and centerpieces.

I'd skipped the ceremony because I'd been on location for a movie in the far western deserts of China. A swords-and-slippers epic, endlessly delayed and over budget, a role supposed to propel me to greater stardom, be a contender for the foreign-film Oscar, and attract the attention of Hollywood directors. The movie flopped.

The scandal hit less than a month later, first breaking on the website of *The Look* whose publisher, Pius Lo, I had once considered an ally and a mentor. *Sik si gau*. Shit-eating dog. Close as family to me and my girlfriend, Viann. We called him Uncle Lo. One day we're cruising on his yacht, and the next he's calling me a *baam sup lo*, a salty wet man, a pervert, on the cover of every magazine in his empire. Curses in Cantonese are vile, guttural, like hawking spit into your enemy's face.

A flash fires beside me. Instinctively, I turn to the left, my good side, before realizing the true center of attention: a chubby little emperor, dressed in a dark blue kung fu suit and a round cap, posing for the camera phone. My hands twitch in my lap. I left mine at home in the refrigerator,

hadn't turned it on since landing, to keep people from tracking me. My neck feels strange upright instead of tilted in prayer over my phone, checking for messages on email, SMS, and most of all, Weibo, the micro-blog, in between takes, coming off the set at 3 am, on the limo ride home from a club. The endless high-fives, in-jokes, and easy approval that Viann can't supply.

Although I invited my family to various premieres and award ceremonies in Asia, with first-class plane tickets, they never came. Not even Ma. Too busy, they said, and after a while, I stopped asking. Ellen offers me a glistening dumpling, her chopsticks crossing in the back, not staying parallel. Her ineptitude cheers me up. She never holds her chopsticks correctly, no matter how often Ba coaches her. Ellen was my first audience, watching with reverential absorption as I conquered video games, clapping when I moonwalked and when I juggled, hobbies of a teenager with a lot of time on his hands.

Full, I block my plate with my hand. Ellen flushes and the look she gives me – tightening around her eyes, the parenthesis around her mouth – before smoothing into an uneasy grin, makes me almost certain she's seen the photos, seen what no sister should see of her brother.

I can't breathe. Ba fumbles with his chopsticks, the chicken feet splatting on the tablecloth, while Ma purses her coral lips. Probably, they know too.

Ma plops a zongzi onto my plate, nimbly unwrapping the leaf with her chopsticks. By stuffing our faces, we can avoid discussion. Though she favors me, she finds me suspect. For years now, maybe from the time she caught me scribbling answers for my first-grade spelling test in my palm. She scrubbed so hard that my hands were raw for days. She despised cheaters and short cuts. With honest hard work, you could achieve your every goal. "*Xiao cong ming*," she called me. Clever-clever, trivial victories at the expense of the significant. To her, Hong Kong is a corrupt city that welcomes my sort of thinking, a place where success comes not from diligence, but from deficiency.

My skin goes moist and sticky as though I had plunged into a bamboo steamer basket. In my other life, I'd rarely been at a loss for words, not with scripts and Teleprompters, and not with adoring fans, whose Weibo messages dictated my quips and catchphrases. I hand a server the bill along with a stack of twenties, while fending off my parents with my elbow. Their generation lives for a showy fight over the check, tugging, sitting on it, and chasing down the server to pay. Neither reaches for the bill.

I bolt, muttering I'm going out for a smoke, and at the entrance, I stop short to avoid barreling into a woman with her back to me. Her arms are attractively muscled, defined, not the pale twigs in vogue in Hong Kong, where women in my circles lack the strength to lift their arms above

their heads and have wrists no bigger than a kindergartner's. Her tanned skin has a creamy latte glow. Delicious, not the watery skim milk complexions to which I have become accustomed.

My childhood neighbor, Jenny Lin.

My family has dined at Legendary Palace since I was a kid, and my parents often bump into neighbors coming from the suburbs to Oakland Chinatown to eat and shop. But the coincidence of running into her feels like another blooper in the gag reel of my life. Jenny Lin, of all people. I'd always envied her popularity. How she knew what to say, as though reading from a script, how easily she slid into crowds, clubs, and committees. Since the first grade, teachers and classmates expected us to be friends because we were both Chinese, in a town with few Chinese families, and our last names were Lee and Lin, which meant that our photos appeared next to each other in the yearbook. Annoying, how others tried to get us to play together and, later, expected us to date. A matched set. Who better to squire her to Winter Formal than the Oriental in alphabetical proximity?

Which is why we had steered clear of each other in high school, why we never partnered in biology and never paired off in P.E., why we hadn't stayed in touch over the years since.

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A decade ago, Hong Kong had thrilled me like no other place I'd been. Grimy, glittering, pulsing. After my freshman year at Cal, I was visiting my aunt on a stopover on my way to a Mandarin program in Taiwan. My first passport, my first overseas trip and though I felt spacey, and though I didn't speak Cantonese, I knew within hours of getting off the plane that I wanted to live there someday. My parents didn't know the med school future they'd planned for me was in peril after I'd flunked o-chem. In the absence of their ambitions, I was beginning to find mine.

At an outdoor electronics mall, I haggled with a vendor over a video game, via a calculator and caveman English. Afterwards, a stranger sidled up and said I sounded like a rapper. A rapper?

"You from California?"

When I nodded, he brightened and asked if I'd ever modeled.

Senior year, I'd appeared once in my yearbook, stiff and pained in my formal portrait, as though I were encased in a back brace. I'd since shed my glasses and shape-shifted with protein shakes and weight lifting, but this question had to be a scam, a come-on. I wasn't a model. I was a failed pre-med, a fuck-up son. When I turned away, the man handed me his card and explained he was a talent scout.

I didn't know then that my kind charmed in Asia: someone who looked Chinese but spoke and carried himself like a Westerner. The American exotic – beach lifeguards, football, cowboys – made accessible through us. We were chop suey, orange chicken, egg foo yung, Chinese and yet not, American and yet not.

The photo shoot for a bottled grass jelly drink seemed legit. The scout didn't try to fleece me with an up-front fee, and miraculously, the make-up artist with the smoky voice and smoky eyes seemed to be flirting with me. With me! In high school biology, the teacher had explained that asexual organisms, like the amoeba, divided and reproduced without a partner. When the teacher asked for more examples, someone blurted, "Kingsway." Everyone had laughed, but not Jenny.

Until that moment in Hong Kong, I had been nobody, nothing to no one. When the make-up artist leaned in, enveloping me with her musky scent, when her breasts pushed up against my arm, I thought I might pass out. She wasn't interested, I told myself, up until she asked what I was doing that night. To be wanted like that made me feel like a superhero, like I could fly or stop bullets with my hands.

The scout asked if I was available for a television show, adding that I wouldn't need to audition because the booker owed him.

Did I need a work permit?

"I get, I get," he said. A favor from another contact. "Rush job." My initiation into Hong Kong's network of influence and connections, the shortcuts and open disregard of rules that my mother would have scorned. I cancelled my plane ticket, my ad appeared in the subway, and strangers began recognizing me: a bigger brighter version, me all along, like a moth's hidden brilliance, exposed by ultraviolet.

At first, I kept thinking my runaway fame was a practical joke, that I'd wake up and revert to the loser I'd been. Instead I became a star.

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Jenny gazes over the balcony onto the plaza below where children whoop and chase each other around the fountain. Over the loudspeaker, the hostess squawks out "89" in Cantonese and English. While she checks her slip of paper, I wheel toward the elevator. Catching sight of me, she calls out my name. I grit my teeth into a smile, face her, and to my surprise, she throws her arms around me. As I return her embrace, a dangerous heat lights in me.

“Back from Hong Kong?” she asks. We break apart. She’s followed my career, at least nominally. Her parents, watchful and amused, hover nearby like chaperones at a school dance.

“Taking a break,” I say, wondering what she knows. Someone, or a team of someones, had updated my Wikipedia page with a blow-by-blow of the blow jobs performed by spoiled rich girls, auto-tuned singers, and cue-card actresses. The sheer magnitude in the aggregate might appear staggering. Nothing on the order of Wilt Chamberlain’s 20,000 women, but three or so each week add up – an equation of no comfort to Viann, whose status as my girlfriend hangs in doubt.

“You might have traveled the farthest,” she says. “Unless Ben comes from Brazil.”

It takes a second to realize she’s referring to our high school reunion, our 10<sup>th</sup>, held tonight in San Francisco. The invitation had piled up with the rest of the mail addressed to me that kept arriving at my childhood home, as though I led a parallel life that fulfilled the expectations of my parents.

Ellen waddles up, rubbing her fist into the small of her back. Jenny hugs her, a squeeze from the side to avoid her belly. Somehow they have become friends. Life here has continued without me: degrees, weddings, and babies I wanted a lifetime ago. Jenny asks about the progress of my sister’s pregnancy.

“He kicks so much, I wish he’d kick his way out,” Ellen says. She sinks onto the bench and slides her swollen feet out of her Birkenstocks.

“Have you tried the foot massage? Across from the library?” Jenny asks.

“I don’t trust those cheap Chinese places,” Ellen says.

A foot massage parlor, in our hometown? Seeing my puzzled expression, Ellen explains that these shops are popping up everywhere, the latest cut-rate Chinese export.

“Have you picked a name yet?” Jenny asks.

“His first name we won’t decide until he’s born. But his middle name – Kingsway,” Ellen says, studying my reaction. Her apology, for ratting me out to my parents? Even still, the honor floors me. A name Ma had chosen, hoping I might follow the king’s way. When Jenny smiles at me, I feel something akin to *déjà vu*. Like a fast-forward hallucination to a time when Jenny and I are paired off, meeting my family on a routine weekend. As if I could trade one life for another, as if I am choosing scripts, tossing aside a drama in favor of a rom-com. Couldn’t I? I’d done it once already, traded roles from nerd to superstar. I picture us slow dancing at the reunion, Jenny’s head tucked against my chest, my hands stroking her waist. In this flick, I would right wrongs from those years. I wouldn’t arrive by helicopter, Porsche, or elephant, but I could talk about filming on

location, about projects in the pipeline, vague enough to impress and vague enough for me to believe my future remained in reach.

“We can ride over together,” I say. I swallow hard. *Carpool*: too gutless to ask her out.

Jenny’s smile widens, as if she’d been waiting for me to ask, waiting since graduation. “I’ll drive,” she says.

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In my attraction to Jenny, I’ve betrayed Viann again.

None of the photos posted online had been taken after I started dating her. Well, almost none. I’d hooked up with my co-star, Bobo Sun, a few nights before filming our love scene, to ensure our chemistry on-screen. And every once in a while, with starlets Scarlet, Kimmee, and Cherry. Nothing serious, like my films, which wavered between violin-string sentimentality and slide-trombone silly from one scene to the next. With each rumored affair that I denied, with each inch of ink in Uncle Lo’s celebrity magazines, my star rose, shining bright onto Viann.

Worldly as Viann was – fluent in Cantonese, Mandarin, English, and French, and a graduate of the top business school in Europe, educated among the children of diplomats and industrialists – my fame fascinated her. I’d seen her at the usual clubs, the usual restaurants, and she’d brokered a lunch, seeking a pitchman. We began dating not long after, though her parents would have preferred Uncle Lo’s son, with his respectable position and prospects.

The day the scandal broke, we’d been lazing in bed, in sheets ripe with the scent of sex and sweat. I had a business proposal for her, but I was having trouble thinking about anything beyond her nails scratching my back in slow circles, on the edge of drawing blood. In truth, she was a bit of a bitch, with an alluring abrasiveness, like a grain of sand in a pearl, beauty born from irritation. Her temper was appealing after years of compliant groupies.

“Harder,” I said. I fought off an even stronger urge to check my micro-blog. Viann had warned me about revealing too much on Weibo, my whereabouts and my moods. When I reached for the script on the floor, she propped herself up. “You get older, but the characters stay the same age.”

She had a point. I couldn’t play a teen heartthrob forever. With each year, I’d seem more and more like a loser dropout lurking at the high school. Like a pervy uncle who lingers around his niece’s friends. My accidental success had been a windfall, a blessing – what I was owed after my early, unhappy years. But I needed an exit strategy before I stopped getting offers for starring roles, before I became pathetic. I did not have the same cache as when I’d started in this career. Rising

living standards had Beijing toddlers gorging on McDonald's and learning English from Disney, and my Western upbringing was no longer as glamorous.

Viann was always pushing me to think beyond the next line and the next script. "You settle because it's easy," she said.

If I didn't watch out, I could end up in the kiddie movie ghetto. My robot-detective flick had been a box-office hit and my fans were getting alarmingly young. Like the toddler who had tackled my legs recently. I almost hadn't recognized his mother: Uncle Lo's *ayi*, as stout and sturdily built as a peasant. She wore a clingy black dress, her hair fell in artful waves, and she slung an LV purse, or an amazing knock-off. I hadn't seen this housekeeper lately, hadn't seen her in a long while, actually – had it been years? I'd posed with her son, and the *ayi* had been so nervous that she'd fumbled with her phone. Starstruck, though hadn't she seen plenty of celebrities around Uncle Lo? My own phone vibrated then and when I checked the screen, the toddler lunged for it. Every kid loves getting his picture taken, and so I obliged, tucking him into a one-armed hug for the shot. He reached for the phone again, demanding to see his photo, wanting to touch with the compulsion of an addict.

Maybe I'd go into directing, or get out of the movie business entirely. Padding into the kitchen, I grabbed a tin of shortbread, manufactured by the baked good company Viann's great-grandfather founded more than a century ago. I bit into a buttery, crisp wedge, and began the presentation I'd been rehearsing in my head. "What about different flavors? Chocolate chip. Peanut butter and jelly."

"We're not a kid's snack," she said. "You Americans and your sweets." She had an annoying habit of declaring my quirks emblematic of my national origins.

"No preservatives. Moms will love it." I ate another, wiping crumbs off my mouth with the back of my hand.

"We're not in lunchboxes," she said. Her family's signature product sold in upscale department stores and duty free shops.

"Not yet," I said.

"Not ever," she said sharply. She'd take over the family business someday. Although she often hinted I might help expand the brand overseas, nothing I said appealed to her, and I wondered if I should become a consultant elsewhere, advising Americans on how to sell to Chinese consumers: how to attract followers on Weibo, how to navigate the backroom deals, how to position luxury cars and handbags, and which Hollywood has-beens to Hasselhoff.

In Hong Kong, you needed to be underhanded to gain the upper hand, to land the role, the cover, and the girl. I had more choices than my parents, whose only ticket out of Taiwan had been in



science and engineering. More choices than my sister, too, who dutifully joined my mother's optometry practice. But the last time I'd been judged on hard work alone, back in college, I'd fallen short and now the stakes were far higher. I could retake a class, but I couldn't retake the rest of my life.

My phone started ringing non-stop, a tinkling rendition of my No. 1 single, "Love You Hot." When I answered, my bellowing agent directed me to *The Look's* website. Viann peered over my shoulder at the phone screen. Scroll, scroll, scroll – click and up popped a photo of her best friend Brigitte, her distinctive star-shaped mole, and her collagen-plump lips around my cock. I might have denied everything if it weren't for the next photo, a selfie in the mirror of me entering Brigitte from behind.

Risky, to take the pictures, and riskier to keep them, but I'd believed that someday, if – when – the cosmic prank ended and I reclaimed my destiny as a loser, I'd have the pictures to remind me of my time in the stars. Clever-clever, never thinking the photos would sink me.

The phone slipped from my hand and hit the marble floor, which ended the call. As Viann jerked on her silver sequined dress, I flung open the safe where I stored my DVDs with the only copies of these photos. Still there. How then? Months ago, I'd deleted the original files from my hard-drive. Then I remembered my laptop had died last week. The technicians, recommended by Uncle Lo, had recovered my files. Maybe they'd found more, for someone else. For Uncle Lo?

Not him, not the man who talked me up to Viann's parents and in his magazines. He wasn't Viann's uncle by blood, but by long association, and her parents were always hinting she should date his son. I'd overheard Uncle Lo rooting for me. "A pretty girl needs a pretty boy. You don't want ugly grandchildren!"

"Smarts last longer than looks," Viann's father had muttered.

"Be good to the boyfriend, and he'll be good to your daughter," Uncle Lo had said.

I tried to live up to his faith in me. I admired him. Feared him too, a man coarse and self-made, who'd escaped China by clinging to an inner tube and swimming to Hong Kong. The later we used to stay up drinking, the darker and more intriguing his stories would become. How he'd sold candy aboard trains, how he'd jumped onto the tracks to save a little boy, the son of a publisher who gave him a job in the newsroom. The time he climbed barefoot into a python's cage. His fistfight in the boardroom with a rising political star. He seemed to have dirt on everyone in Hong Kong.

He'd turned civilized after he married his second wife, a steely socialite, and together they were building a legacy as philanthropists. I'd performed at his charity events, and he owed me as much as I owed him. Yet I couldn't deny that *The Look* was Uncle Lo's flagship publication, and

nothing on the cover would appear without his approval. The repair technicians, hadn't he called them "top class"? His guys.

Viann seemed to be searching for her shoes, her body stiff as a mannequin's. I'd ruined everything she'd planned for me. For us. I'd ruined her and yet my regret circled back to Uncle Lo. I brushed my fingers along the spines of the DVD cases. Maybe someone else was going to break the story, and Uncle Lo couldn't afford to get scooped. He might have even published the photos to protect me. Yes. From what I could tell, he'd held back the worst, leaving out the foursome and the leather sling. And maybe the bigger the splash, the more quickly the scandal would fade. The more I tried to justify, the emptier the excuses sounded, falling away until only one remained: he wanted me gone because he wanted Viann for his son.

Viann hurled her spiked heel and it spun at me end-over-end like a throwing star. I ducked and it hit the smoked glass of my windows, which rattled but did not shatter. The sidewalk was a long way down from my penthouse on the 93<sup>rd</sup> floor. I begged her to stop, told her that the other women meant nothing, that she was everything to me. I didn't know any other lines. When I tried to take her into my arms, she scratched tribal slashes across my cheek, stomped out sans shoes, and hailed a cab. Her solitary, straight-backed figure had played big in the tabloids, *The Look* with the biggest spread of all.

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The Chinese woman, dressed in black, sleek as an eel, locks her eyes onto our house. Her companion, built like a fire hydrant, reaches into the trunk of their car – for a baseball bat? A silenced gun? All afternoon, I've been watching the cul-de-sac from the bay window for would-be vigilantes. Restless, hopped up on energy drinks and cigarettes, I've been debating if I should cancel on Jenny. My mouth tastes foul, like an ashtray drenched with the sticky remains of a popsicle.

The strangers begin walking toward the house. I drop the curtain and fall to my knees, sneezing after dust puffs up from the baseboard of the living room. Mummified flies stud a thick spider web between a pot of orchids and the wall. Behind the couch, I find the celadon green glazed bowls that I sent as a gift years ago, encased in the original bubble wrap, along with stacks of bills, held together with rubber bands. Bills past due, bills for credit cards, for the car, for their mortgage. Bills from an orchid grower, and from the hospital for a colonoscopy.

Ba has his secrets too: rare orchids cost \$5,000 a stem, requiring expensive nutrients, climate control, and care that rival a preemie's. My parents are in trouble, and I can't deny a certain bitter

satisfaction. Their way of life – that my parents can't forgive me for rejecting – has not worked for them, either.

Ma enters with my bespoke tuxedo. Ba left for the plant nursery while she stayed home, one of them always on call for the next month until my sister goes into labor. She's steamed the tux by blasting the shower in the bathroom, but it remains wrinkled. I'd never unpacked the tux from a hosting gig shortly before my downfall. Ma asks why I am on the floor – confused, suspicious and faintly disgusted.

Heels click up the walk. The henchmen will rough me up or worse, tie up Ma and trash the house. Leaping to my feet, I hustle her into the kitchen. When I reach for the cleaver on top of the chopping block, reeking of ginger and garlic, Ma backs away, fist to her mouth.

"They're after us," I shout, dropping the cleaver, and push Ma out the sliding glass door and onto the cracked concrete patio.

"Who? Who?" she asks. She holds onto the tux, its legs dragging on the ground, but when I try to take it, she grips tighter.

"Out front," I say. We run, awkward as partners in a three-legged race. The greenhouse, we could hide in Ba's greenhouse, until I imagine bullets shattering the glass, shards raining down, blinding and slashing us. Grabbing a bucket, I push Ma toward the cinderblock fence and tell her to climb over.

The people after us might have guns, hurry, go, I say. Ducking her head, Ma steps onto the upended bucket. I boost her up, my hands tight on her waist as she swings one leg and the next over the wall. I climb over and hold out my arms to catch her. She perches before pushing herself off, the tux trailing after her. She slips out of my arms and pitches onto her hands and knees, the tux pooling into the outline of a suicide jumper. Her blouse slides up to reveal the elastic waistband of her underwear and the doughy flesh of her lower back. Her permed curls, dyed Dracula black, are a mess.

I've done this to her. Kneeling, I help her up, asking if she can walk. She nods, spittle in the corners of her mouth. A car backfires – or a gun goes off. I dash to the neighbor's house and pound on the back door, while a dog barks on the other side, its nails scrabbling on a tile floor. Ma bends in half, trying to catch her breath. "Police. Call the police," she gasps.

A terrier launches itself through the doggie door and nips at my calves. I kick it off, and it flies yipping, legs churning through the air. When the terrier regroups, it goes after the legs of my tux. Shit! We tug, the terrier growling, teeth bared, its brass tags jingling against its collar. With a mighty rip, the terrier tears the hem, whipping the black scrap in victory.

Ma pushes me towards the alley, the terrier in pursuit. I knock a garbage can into the terrier's path, giving me time to unlatch the gate. Diapers, potato peelings, and a bloody meat carton spill to the ground. As I slam the gate shut, the terrier leaps onto its hind legs and paws at the metal grate. I plunge through the bushes and into the yard of Jenny Lin, where she and her mother are climbing out of their Mercedes, their arms stuffed with silver shopping bags.

Back when I resisted friendship with Jenny, so too did my parents with hers. My parents considered themselves scholars, in contrast to the Lins, who ran McDonald's franchises. Junk food, my mother had sniffed. That the Lins prospered – with their luxury cars and remodeled Tuscan-style house – must have galled my parents.

Leaves are strewn through Ma's hair and a twig has scratched her cheek. My suede sneakers stink of rotting garbage, and my tux hangs soiled and defeated in my arms. Jenny rushes over, asking if we need help while Mrs. Lin clutches a plastic garment bag to her chest like a shield.

"I – we – " I say. My hook-ups – my entire existence in Hong Kong – had been possible because of the camera's omnipresence, I realize then. Framing the shot, zooming in, I had watched as though outside of myself, performing the playboy, on and off the set, in and out of the bedroom. Now, the lens shuttered, I no longer know how to act.

"Want to come in?" Jenny asks. "Rest for a few minutes?"

"You have to get ready for tonight," Ma says. She pats her hair back into place. She has regained her dignity, even after being tossed through the spin cycle.

"I'm not home that often," I say.

"Jenny comes to dinner every week," Mrs. Lin says. She and her husband could depend on their daughter, know she'd hurry over if they needed her.

"Unfortunately, I have to bow out," I say.

Mrs. Lin seems pleased, but Jenny frowns.

"Kingsway can go," Ma says, taking my crumpled tux. If I were a child again she would have pinched my arm to silence me. She doesn't like Mrs. Lin acting as though Jenny is too good for me. None of us notice the strangers until they are upon us. Not henchman, but a photographer and Maisie Chan, senior writer from Hong Kong's classiest glossy. Published by Uncle Lo's rival, a fact I register with perverse satisfaction.

I straighten and attempt a pensive, humbled expression. The photographer snaps Jenny in the doorway, turning her into an instant, unwitting celebrity. Mrs. Lin gives me an appraising look, but Ma seems fed-up. A television camera crew, or Hong Kong's Oprah, or Oprah herself would not impress my parents. I could show them my Weibo feed, pictures of my fans, but my parents would

never understand what I achieved, would never consider my success honest and deserved, and the longer I stay here, the more I'll come to forget too.

"How long do you plan to stay?" Maisie asks, pointing her digital recorder at me.

I'm leaving as soon as I can, but I say, "No comment." My reply to that question and every follow-up. Whether I'd been in contact with Viann or the other women. Whether I'd been blackmailed.

Frustrated, the reporter asks if I could comment on the rumored biopic. News to me. Good news.

"Can't say." I add a cocky smile, to imply a major deal, an international cast, and flashy locations. To awe Jenny, Ma, and the reporter.

"By Zen Ecstasy, yes?" Maisie says. An adult entertainment company. "Is porn the best move for your comeback? Or the only move?"

I gape as the photographer clicks away. Grabbing at the lens, I want to destroy the camera, as I should have destroyed my pictures. The photographer sidesteps with a fullback's brawny grace, and I almost tumble to the ground. Maisie has blindsided me, trying to get a reaction, and I must seem drunk and deranged.

Bowing my head, I take a deep breath and when I look up, offer a rueful smile. I softly promise her an exclusive interview, tomorrow at our home, so quiet she has to lean in. Everything around us disappears. Summoning the dregs of my charm, I shake her hand with my right and stroke her arm with my left. Maisie melts. I'll make lunch for her, I say, and show her never-before-seen candid childhood photos.

After she and the photographer drive off, I shrug with a nonchalance I do not feel. "The rumors are crazy in this business. Crazy."

"Crazy," Jenny echoes.

Taking me by the elbow, Ma says it's getting late. As we leave, I overhear Mrs. Lin asking what I'd done.

"I'll tell you later," Jenny says. I haven't fooled her. She must have discovered the latest details online, but is too polite to back out, or she might pity me, her fallen classmate, or maybe she wants a racy story of her own to tell. I can't start over fresh with her. It isn't a chance I'm certain I want, or even a chance I'm certain I had, but the loss stings all the same.

We walk home in silence. In the living room, I wait for Ma to berate me, and when she doesn't, I understand that she has resigned herself to such behavior from her unredeemable son. I envy my nephew's bright blank future.

“Let’s go to the House of Prime Rib,” I say desperately. The only non-Chinese restaurant my parents patronize, with dark wood paneled walls, white table clothes, burgundy leather booths, and silver carts bearing magnificent sides of beef – fancy and hearty enough to justify the expense. There, I’d tell my parents I would rescue them.

In the slanting afternoon sunlight, Ba’s orchids glow with the saturated colors of stained glass in a cathedral, of jewels on the throat of a queen, of the rings of a gaseous giant in space. Our fixations define us, have overtaken us both, and I have to save him as I myself want to be saved.

“I’ll get a reservation,” I say.

“Daddy’s cholesterol,” Ma says. No prime rib, not tonight, no longer. In the six years since my last visit, my parents have grown old and the house has fallen into disrepair. She fingers the tux’s torn pants. “I’ll find a pair of Daddy’s to match the jacket.”

When I protest, she cuts me off. “Distance tests a horse’s strength.” Clearly she’s decided I dropped out of the race before it began. Our lives have each met failure, though my parents never slid into the shadows that bred darkness. They’re probably going to refuse my help, refuse my tainted money, and the loss of their respect hurts most of all.

Ma sighs. “You can only defend yourself with the character you have. The rest we must bear.”

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When I enter Master Wang’s Foot Clinic, a bell tinkles, but the masseuse on duty doesn’t look up, engrossed in her cell phone. I blink, my eyes adjusting to the dim light. Padded recliners draped in towels take up most of the space, and a water fountain bubbles in the corner, drowned out by the movie on the large flat screen, “When a Wolf Falls in Love With a Sheep.” I’d turned down the lead role. If only I could land a part like that again. If only a film of mine could have been playing here, an omen that my fortunes might return.

I’m supposed to be on the Bay Bridge by now, awkwardly flirting with Jenny on our way to reunion. Instead I’m here, dressed in my sponged-off tux jacket paired with my father’s pants, inches too short and ballooning at the waist. I had walked to Jenny’s house but felt compelled to keep going. As I passed the tennis courts, the bus stop, and headed down the hill toward the village, sweating in the overcoat, I was already telling myself I could catch a train and meet her in San Francisco later.

After I clear my throat, the masseuse drags over a wooden bucket lined in plastic, and returns with a kettle of herbs steeped in steaming water. The smell hits me with the musty, ancient knowledge that I associate with an herbalist that Viann insisted I visit for my hay fever. A

reflexology poster on the wall diagrams the secret pathways coursing through our bodies. The health of our spleen and our eyes rests upon the soles of our feet. Superstition, not science, yet now nothing but this touch will do. I can't remember what this storefront housed in my childhood, but I am amazed China has seeped into the suburbs. It feels like I could be in Hong Kong, Beijing, Bangkok, Tokyo, or Taipei, any of the cities where these copycat foot massage parlors have proliferated. My life in Asia is distinct, a universe apart from my hometown, and this breach seems a violation.

The masseuse gestures for me to take off my shoes and roll up my pants. None of the privacy, none of the luxury, none of the oils or hot stones of a Western-style massage, but only \$25 per hour. I drop the overcoat onto the recliner beside mine.

Sullen, with dead eyes, the masseuse might be in her early twenties. With her hair dyed auburn and wearing tight bootcut jeans, a woman squarely in the target demographic of my songs and movies. I wonder how she ended up in my hometown, if she moved for adventure, opportunity, or debt, if she lives illegally in the back, and if she finds the suburbs baffling or boring, serene or cozy?

The foot bath scalds, but when she asks, "Ok?" I nod, welcoming the pain.

The movie's music blares. "Could you turn it down?" I ask. She gives me a blank look, until I ask again in Mandarin. "Do you have anything else?"

In her native tongue, the masseuse turns giggly and chattering. She brings out a binder of DVDs, and on the last page, I find one of my early lead roles, playing the undercover bodyguard of a daffy heiress. My fame has reached the land of my birth, however much my parents deny my success. I hold the disk gently between my thumb and forefinger, rainbows winking in the silver – light, fragile, and ultimately disposable.

She takes the DVD from me. "I don't remember this."

I can't remember much of the plot myself, or any of the lines. How vulnerable I look, my cheeks smooth, my innocent face topped by floppy bangs. The masseuse, drying off my feet with a threadbare towel, doesn't make the connection. I force myself to laugh, hating the hollow sound, hoping the masseuse might look up, might recognize me, might tremble with excitement, but then the DVD begins to skip.

The shop's phone rings, and while the masseuse takes down information in the appointment book, I squirm, staring at my pixilated face, my voice stuttering, every hidden sin surfacing. In the intervening years, my youthful promise has gnarled, stunted, and I am gutted, reminded of how much I have lost. To my relief, after she blows dust off, the DVD won't play further. She turns off

the television and wipes my face with a hot towel, the steam loosening the tightness behind my eyes, and the practical yet soothing ritual is a hint of Hong Kong. I lean back and close my eyes.

The fountain trickles loudly, but not enough to hide her camera clicking, a sound I can detect from yards away, like a prairie dog turning its ear to the wind. Peeking, I see her snapping pictures from her cell phone. She must have known all along. She slips the phone into her back pocket, unaware she's been caught. She begins to knead her knuckles into the soles of my feet, strong but unskilled, each let-up sweet after a burst of pain.

"Some men's feet are ugly," she says. "Toenails black, falling off, calluses thick enough to strike a match on."

Not mine, regularly waxed and nails buffed. I direct her to the hollow area under my ankle that corresponds to reproduction and pleasure. In her hesitation, I sense she knows what the spot represents. She touches lightly, a dandelion on the wind, and all at once my confidence returns. I take her hand in mine and dig my thumbs into her palm. Her hands are small, a child's, and the skin is rough. I pull her towards me. Someone might see, anyone walking by, but I want to risk getting caught.

Her lips, slicked with cherry lip gloss, land on my chin, and her eyes are open and startled. Her first kiss? I recoil. Anything more, anything from me, would set her spinning far off course. She kicks over the tub, splashing us with the force of Shamu and soaking the carpet. Trying to mop up with towels, we knock heads hard enough to go breathless. In a screwball comedy, this encounter would have been a meet-cute, except for the soaked crotch of my pants and the ache in my groin. Except for the lump on my forehead. Except for how young and frightened the masseuse looks, huddled on the ground. As frightened as I've always been.

The bell over the door jingles, and a burly man enters. With thick fingers and the stooped shoulders of a mole, he must be Master Wang, of Master Wang's Foot Clinic. He drops his grocery bags and rushes towards us, his fists raised.

"*Mei mei!*" Little daughter.

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Master Wang is fast, but I am faster. As twilight falls, I take off towards the park and twice his fingertips scramble for the collar of my jacket. When he grabs a fistful, cursing me and ten generations of my ancestors, I shrug off the tux and race on. I round the corner of the outdoor stage and duck behind scaffolding as he staggers past. Clawing through bushes, I stumble down a



ravine and into a dry creek bed where my sister and I used to search for rocks flecked with mica. A return to my childhood, though now I'm on the run from what feels like every father, husband, boyfriend, and brother I have wronged.

By now, Jenny would have stopped by our house. By now, my parents would know I'd gone missing. I exhale, my heart pounding, and for the first time since I've arrived, I turn on my phone and find hate in my email, SMS, and Weibo, with a few supporters – a very few – and nothing from Viann. All thanks to Uncle Lo.

"Come out and fight!" Master Wang yells hoarsely. He sounds like he's on the verge of a stroke. He wants to avenge his daughter, to protect her now and always from men like me. Like Uncle Lo, who must have intended to drive me out by publishing the photos. Not for the sake of his son, I now realize, but for the sake of Viann. He loves her like a father. And hasn't every possible suspicion a father might have had about me been confirmed in Hong Kong and made plain again just now? Isn't everything in the tabloids true? I can't be trusted with decency, can't be trusted in love. I never apologized to my parents, to my sister, to Viann, to any woman caught in the scandal. But I could start.

Master Wang begins to taunt me. "*Guaishushu*." An odd uncle, a pedophile. A pedophile! To him, his daughter will always be his little girl, but she had pressed against me. The women in Hong Kong had followed me into the bathroom, had balled their panties into my hand. They'd smiled for the camera.

Uncle Lo has cast me as the villain, and he won't stop until he destroys any evidence, any chance of a finer self and only his version remains. If he were an emperor, he'd kill off my entire clan. To make a comeback, I have to hit him as he hit me. I swipe through the pictures on my phone, of Viann, of me and my young fan – the son of Uncle Lo's housekeeper, and quite possibly the son of Uncle Lo, with the same watermelon seed eyes and flared nostrils. Far from Hong Kong, I can't get confirmation, but I don't have to. In my pocket, I find the reporter's business card, the one who worked for Uncle Lo's publishing rival. I draft an email, attaching the boy's photo, the love child of Uncle Lo and his *ayi*. The reporter had tracked me around the globe. She'd chase down a rumor this juicy.

Easy, to fall back into the dirty water where I thrive. Clever-clever I'd been, and clever-clever I'd always be. Ma never visited me in Hong Kong, because she knows where I belong. Footsteps approach, panting and crashing through the bushes, loud as surf. My fingers hover above the send button. I have time enough to regret all my mistakes tonight, tomorrow, and tomorrow. But not just yet.

