“Kali Yuga”

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The first time I met my half-brother I was seventeen and he was fourteen. My assignments were neatly organized and my books newly jacketed in butcher paper, but at the airport, when I saw the hale blue-jeaned boy and his mother, as thin and erratic as the menthol 100 she soon lit up, I knew I should have left the books behind.

He caught me in a bear hug, chin against my collar as if biting. Not once that day did his mother address me directly. She spoke like a poet to the air, “Hotdogs on the table. Coke in the fridge.” The sky was haze and glare, humidity worse than the rain our northern poets elegized so often.

That evening, as he took me to meet two of his friends, he told me that his mother had named him after the guy who owned *Playboy* magazine. Hugh told me he’d one up his namesake, the way a six-year-old might, dumb and proud, pointing at his chest with his thumb.

We met his friends (two brothers with beards), and with them we wandered the lumpy terrain of an incipient subdivision, drank Busch (hidden suitably in the bushes), visited a Ford Mustang whose windows the duo had blasted out with shotguns (the glass mixed with smashed Jack Daniel’s bottles, one black-and-white label stuck to a seat) and later, as a result of that feud, fled a red monster truck on lifters (Confederate flag and devil cab lights and heehawing passengers). Hugh was the least fearful, watching the truck race close, eyes as wide as tunnels before he turned and mooned it, then ran, hooting and monkeylike as he hitched his jeans.

When he and I arrived back at his house, dawn was a faint, ugly elbow-smear on the dark glass of his little town. I supposed I’d been treated as any visitor from afar, regaled by local tradition. I was three years older, but next to him I looked young. I didn’t understand how our father could have produced two entirely different creatures nor why the second was so much closer to his image.

“I’m happy as shit to see you,” Hugh said and hugged me like a wrestler grapples. He insisted that I sleep next to him, in his bed, his arm around me and his beer snores in my face.

The second time we saw each other was my father’s funeral, and it was, Hugh told me, his first trip out of Virginia. He was seventeen, almost graduated and wearing the shoulder-length hair and

cropped beard of a country-rock star. He'd flown up for the death of a man he'd met twice and had paid his way from earnings on a construction site, what his high school considered Life Credits and for which it let him out at noon.

"I can't believe it," he told me, hunched as if to confide or to lower his mouth to my ear. "We were gonna travel the country when I graduated. We talked about it."

I glanced away, afraid he'd see his stupidity in my eyes. My father never kept his plans. He could talk in a way to make anyone dream, on the rare occasion that he actually conceded to talking —usually after too many drinks. But he was always one revision away from having the time to do the things he promised. I'd learned this as a boy, not to believe too easily, though I said nothing to Hugh. I let him squeeze his tears and pay fealty to my mother's mourning, which came from the bitterness of years spent waiting to inherit my father's wealth. Hugh didn't know this, and she received his gesture like a pope with a ring to be kissed.

Afterward, I showed him my father's basement study, rank with B.O. and two decades of bourbon fumes, cramped with a heaped escritoire and walls of sagging, overflowing bookshelves, the single high window heavily draped. At the center of it all hunched the reading chair whose synthetic nap had been worn to a glassy sheen, its right arm flecked with the burns of fallen cigarette embers. I couldn't bring myself to say that my father had had about as much impact on my life as a boarder would have. Instead, I described the three novels he'd written about being a draft dodger, doing my best to make him sound heroic.

"Did he talk about me much?" Hugh asked.

I cleared my throat. The air was thick and musty down here, and I had to clear my throat again. He knew nothing about our father and had no right to care. He stood hunched, as if the ceiling were low, one arm across his chest. He looked like a spent boxer, waiting for the final punch.

"He told me you were like him," I said. I lowered my eyes. In front of the chair was a greasy-looking patch of carpet where my father's feet had rested. When I'd learned I had a half-brother, I'd asked him how he could be sure Hugh was really his. "The boy's my spitting image," he'd said and then, when he saw my face, added, "Consider yourself lucky."

"Did he leave me anything?" Hugh asked.

"This was his," I told him. The leather jacket was so new it smelled of the tannery. My father had bought it a week ago, the cut immodestly fashionable, unlike anything he'd ever worn. It was the sort of jacket a poorly aging man might go for.

Hugh clutched it, bunching up his shoulders and inhaling. He stared at the shelves, and the way he looked at them made me look, too, at the crooked and piled-up spines in the faint, almost particulate light, each book thick with use, broken-backed, in an anonymous state of wear.

"Maybe," he said, "maybe someday I could be a writer, too."

I scrunched up my cheeks as if I might agree.

That evening, I introduced Hugh to Nathalie, a love interest that had bloomed in the warm climate of my father's death. She brushed aside my discomfort, telling me I should be proud that Hugh looked up to me. We took him to Gastown, the Spaghetti Factory, and the Comedy Club, where he ignored the jokes and asked Nathalie constant questions.

"So you studied computers?"

"I did my degree in programming."

"That's not building them, is it?"

"No, it's putting the information in. If a computer were a robot, I'd be giving it its personality."

"You know how to do that?"

"Actually, I did my undergraduate thesis in artificial intelligence, but no, I can't program a robot yet."

The comic was talking about staying with his fiancée's parents and a toilet with no water in it —the sound the handle made when he hit it repeatedly—and I tried to focus my surprise on the stage. But I'd had no idea she was interested in artificial intelligence. I'd known she'd come to the University of British Columbia from MIT, to participate in a lab developing Internet gateways. She was telling Hugh about that now, and he kept saying, "I don't get it." So she spoke in his currency—*Tron Deadly Discs* and *The Terminator*—and he nodded vigorously at her explanations of computers wiring the world together.

"If your nervous system were the Internet, this would be China," she told him and pinched the fingertip of his big hand where it lay limp on the table, abandoned by his overworked brain. "And this would be Vancouver," she added and tweaked his earlobe. For the first time that day, he laughed, guffawing like an idiot. The comedian perked up, thinking he finally had an audience, but Hugh stared at her, his eyes big and still, a one-stop, one-size-fits-all sensory organ, doing the hearing and feeling, maybe even the thinking, too.

A few nights after Hugh's return home, the phone rang. Nathalie answered.

"It's Hugh," she said, holding the mouthpiece to her patterned pajama breast.

I fumbled the receiver to my ear. "Hugh," I croaked. "What is it?"

"I'm all fucked up, Andrew. I'm all fucked up."

"Where are you?" I asked, as if he weren't three thousand miles away. He must have punched the phone because the earpiece pulsed with a hard thump and touch-tones squealed.

"Go to bed," I told him.

"Aw, fuck you," he said and hung up. Nathalie had been watching.

"Well, tarnation," I told her, "that boy's done gone off the deep end."

"He doesn't talk like that," she said.

She pushed her hair back along her jaw, then looked away, reaching to turn off the light.

Nathalie must have made an impression: the next time I heard from Hugh was via the Internet. He wrote frequent emails, and in them, he didn't sound half so rustic, as if a computer transistor between the two of us had converted him. He confessed that emails made him realize how bad his spoken English was—*I mean, how do you write "a whole 'nother" and not sound stupid?* He said he'd been reading Steinbeck and Thoreau, had tried *Moby Dick* but was working on the earlier stuff, *building my reading muscles for the big one*. He mentioned no longer doing construction since he'd received "his share of the inheritance." I stared at the email a long time, not sure why I was surprised that he'd received anything at all.

As I got busier, I answered less frequently. To his sprawling messages, I shot back replies that were basically apologies for not writing more. I was working through a master's in comp lit, and suddenly, I no longer recognized Nathalie and me. She was the only woman I'd slept with, six years older and so pale her mousy hair appeared shimmering and dark against her skin. She almost matched my height but was fine-boned, her wrists like sticks and her extra weight conspicuous given the slightness of her frame. She appeared a well-fed waif and not the child of a Boston Brahmin financier and a Parisian mother.

After first meeting her, I questioned her willingness to date a sophomore, and she said that age and maturity didn't coincide, and that, anyway, I was something of an old man.

"Not quite as sexy as an old soul," I told her.

"No," she agreed. "Anyways, you actually like me."

But as I embroiled myself in my thesis (Silence and the Politics of the Dispossessed: Historicizing Dickens) and subsisted on Chef Boyardee peel-top ravioli, she took up kickboxing and burned off the last of her baby fat. She tried to convince me to come to class with her, but I let my organizational tendencies get the best of me. I can still see myself gesturing vaguely (in my memory,

the motion of my hand seems futile, my face looking more confused because of how pale I was) as I explained to her that I wanted to finish academics, make the transition to the job world, then get involved with hobbies and sports, and not do everything at once.

The day before my thesis was due, Nathalie and I were coming back from the bus stop, taking turns with the cage of the hamster she'd inherited from a friend who'd gone off to Bolivia. The poor little thing was crouched, watching its wheel spin with the ghostly motion of our stride. We came around the corner, and saw our porch, and Hugh sitting on its bottom step.

"Jesus," I said; before my eyes flashed the thesis pages my professors would scribble with incredulous red. He was already up and belted me with one of his regional hugs so popular in the WWF. He handled Nathalie more gingerly, as if she were pregnant, though he was just trying to get his arms around the cage.

He smiled as if he might yodel but said, "It's just so good to see the two of you!" His constrained voice called to mind a 1950s housewife exclaiming *Isn't that swell!* Was this discord the result of his inner redneck going head-to-head with his budding computer geek / bookworm?

As I invited him inside, I asked him about the knit friendship bracelet on his big, sun-tanned wrist and the copy of Hemingway in his knapsack pocket. "I mean, how does that go over with the beards back home?"

He shrugged. "I haven't been home in a while, but I don't think there's anything strange about it. It's just stuff I got on the road."

Thence began the narrative that would last until 3 am, his way of speaking fluctuating, like a car radio caught between stations. His hillbilly rhythms verged upon taut, over-descriptive, even pedantic phrasing that caused him to slow, as a truck might, coming upon deep potholes. When he said *an e-gre-gious wrong turn*, he was careful to pronounce the g's properly.

All the same, he told his story with relish, conveying that he was doing the right thing, seeing the world in the footsteps of Kerouac and Miller and a few others I hadn't read.

"I've been as far south as Panama, and as far north as Kuujjuarapik, Québec, on the Hudson Bay. I haven't been to Alaska yet, but I figure I'll head up thataway after this little *de*tour." He elbowed me.

Two pages of red ink, take one down, pass it around. My thesis concerns had become a song one sings driving long distances.

He went on to describe states he'd passed through, people he'd met, communes lived on, meals shared. It sounded like a sixties coming of age, clichéd in all its short-lived glory.

"What's the arctic like?" Nathalie asked.

"In northern Québec, you're so close to the pole the earth is curved, like you're standing on a hill wherever you go. There's a clear three hundred and sixty degrees of horizon, and thick moss all over the ground. It's like walking on a mattress. The rock shows from the moss here and there, but it's been rubbed and rounded by the glaciers. I spent a month on an island in the James Bay, just beneath the Hudson Bay. I was living with this girl, Mélanie Boudreau from Montréal. She was up there studying bird migrations. She was all alone, and when she saw me in a canoe, she waved me over. She had black black hair and green eyes. Man, it was like something from the *Odyssey*. I got out of the canoe, and she asked me a bunch of questions in pretty bad English and then told me I should stay with her. So I did. I guess she thought God had sent her a man. It was like being Adam and Eve on the edge of the world. The coldest water ever. The sun bright but the air thin and cool. Night hardly lasted an hour. And, man, those French girls, they really know what they want."

He laughed, then suddenly turned classic tomato red, no doubt remembering that Nathalie was half-French.

"Oh, yes we do," she said and reached out and squeezed his big meaty forearm.

"You know," I said and feigned a stretch, "my thesis is due tomorrow."

"Hey. I'm sorry, bro. I shouldn't be distracting you."

The cage was on the table, the hamster racing in its wheel, and Hugh considered it. None of us spoke as Hugh's gaze got vague and unfocused and he finally said, "I took Dad's last name."

"Maybe you'll be the first Estrada to make it to the Playboy Mansion."

Hugh guffawed and slapped the table, as if nothing on earth could bother him. But what would my father have thought of his last name and hard-won idealism coupled with a passing reference to the king of smut? I didn't really know.

"Did you ever tell Nathalie how your mother chose your name?" I asked him.

"No," he said and grinned. "She saw a TV show about how Hugh Hefner lived and decided that if she had a son, he should be smart enough to get the women and live the good life and take what he wanted. Growing up, I always told myself I'd do a hundred times better."

"That's hilarious," Nathalie said, "and kind of sweet. She must really love you."

It occurred to me that they both had Teflon brains, that nothing could upset them.

"You know," Hugh said, "I'm a dual citizen now." He fished two passports out of his knapsack. He showed me the Canadian one. The picture was proud, his chest and jaw lifted, and that aura of redneck radiance that is pure, dumb vitality.

"I proved it," he said.

Nathalie's eyes were big. "I wish I had your courage."

He blushed and bit his lip and pushed up his cheeks and looked away. He was fabulously handsome, and I looked away, too. It wasn't courage—but something else, a word that had yet to be invented maybe, for selfish roaming in search of trivial pleasures. I asked if he was hungry.

"Damn, I been on the road all day," he said, his accent back in force. "My stomach feels like a hamster wheel spinnin'"—he smiled at Nathalie—"only there ain't no hamster."

She laughed, and I got up to feed him. We ate a bit, but mostly watched the coordinated destruction of my last Chef Boyardees and whatever decent foods Nathalie had smuggled in. Sated, he talked until his head balanced on his hand and his eyes drooped.

"Are you tired?" Nathalie asked.

"Nah," he said, "no way." He gave himself a bronco shake. "My face is just falling asleep."

That night, as I was sneaking into the kitchen for another cup of instant coffee with a shot of maple syrup (my current compromise to remain alert after Nathalie banned me from sucking on sugar cubes), the hide-a-bed creaked in the living room.

"Hey, bro, is that you?"

"Yeah," I said.

"How's the thesis coming?"

"It's not at the moment. I'm just getting coffee."

"Well, I kinda wanted to tell you something if you got a minute."

The mattress springs squealed as he sat up, his shoulders and back sloped in outline against the venetian blinds, like a sitting Grendel silhouetted against the paper-thin slits of streetlight. The room smelled of his opened knapsack, B.O. that had mellowed into an earthy, slightly fecal must, and I had the impression of stepping into a lair. My movement activated a white nightlight at the floor. It lit his face and hollowed his eyes.

"There's something I gotta confess," he told me. "You're not gonna like it."

"Oh," I said and sat on a chair. I switched on a lamp. The rugged redneck face I now saw was better than the other apparitions.

He crouched on the floor with his knapsack and took out a book whose pages looked so old they might have been parchment. The spine had fallen off, the stitching visible—simple and coarse, as if done by hand. A rubber band held the smudged, wordless cover in place. I'd never seen the book before.

"This changed my life," he said. "I'm sorry. I took it from Dad's shelves when you weren't watching. I just noticed it, and I knew from the look of it how special it was. If there was one thing that would connect me to Dad, this was it."

He stared into my eyes, his blue gaze washing inside my head. I'd never noticed this book, but he'd glanced once at the shelf and known. I kept the rest of my father's books and notes in long plastic storage crates under my bed, and this one belonged with the others.

"Man," he said, "I can't tell you how surprised I was when I opened it up. I kept it hidden till I was on the plane. It wasn't even in English. But I knew I'd been right because I saw that the author's name was Raphael Maria Estrada. He had the same last name as you and Dad."

"So, you have no idea what it's about?"

"Oh, yeah, I've read it. It's called *The Angels Write Poetry in Blood*. I went to Mexico and learned Spanish. I mean, I'd taken Spanish in high school, but I couldn't get past *cómo estás*. I've read the book four times already, and I'm gonna keep reading it until every line makes sense."

"What's it about?" I asked, my throat suddenly dry. Here I was finishing a graduate degree, and I could barely decode French without the help of a dictionary. He was only twenty, and his life seemed so raw and authentic I could hardly breathe.

"It's about this young guy who's born in Mexico, in a rich and corrupt family, but slowly he realizes there are things worth fighting for. He's so hungry for life. Everything he does, good or bad, is because he's trying to figure himself out. It just made me realize how big the world is."

"I need to get back to my thesis," I told him.

"What about the book? You're not angry?"

I stood and turned to leave. I hesitated at the door. "Nah. I'm not angry. The name thing is probably just a coincidence."

I like to think of being a hippie as transformative, a sort of cultural conduit, a natural transition from redneck to bourgeois, and vice versa. I came up with that a few mornings later when Hugh, after days perusing Dad's books and trying to discuss the meaning of life, set off for Alaska. He'd done most of the talking, and I'd fended his questions of our father and what boiled down to teleology by telling him I had a thesis to write.

"It's too good to see you for me to want to go," he'd said at the door, no ticket, only an opposable thumb. I briefly considered asking for the book back, but I didn't speak Spanish and nothing would have sounded pettier.

"I'd like to read that book someday," I told him.

"I'll translate it for you," he said. "Maybe we can get it published when I'm finished."

He hugged me, and off he went, and with his departure, Nathalie and I began receiving emails with the story of Raphael, a young man born into a powerful political family before the Mexican Revolution. He reinvents himself repeatedly as he seeks an ideal not motivated by personal gain, fear, or animal desire. He craves the power of profound belief—a cause that will give him shape and strength. I wondered if he was in some way related to my father, if we had a history of self-sacrifice for ideals. I'd never really considered where I was going with literary studies. In high school, the students who liked reading seemed a privileged class, free of the mundanity of applied sciences, close to those great minds who'd lived fully. Above all, we were gifted with verbosity, capable of cutting others down with a few choice words and not having to pay for it because our school was virtually absent of jocks. But recently, one of my university professors, hearing some colleagues and me reminiscing on our high school days, muttered, "Gifted youth make for pointless adults." He'd said it so we could hear, but without looking at us, as if he was deriding a gaggle of catty teenage girls.

I always assumed I'd someday write a novel. I figured it would happen on its own, when the timing was right, like a deepening voice and the sprouting of body hair. But I'd felt no compulsion. I considered Raphael, his resistance to his father, his longing to assert himself upon the order of the world. Would I someday wake and find a truth in literature or my life, and be willing to fight? I worked on my studies, telling myself that I would, that my knowledge would reach critical mass and, like a sun imploding under its own weight, catch fire.

Hugh's emails added up, hundreds of them over the next two years: the story told a few paragraphs at a time, the writing clumsy and overwrought. The act of translation seemed the only constant in his life. Every few months he showed up at my steps a changed human being. He took college classes, for a while wanted alternately to be the next Faulkner or a Wall Street broker. He visited and talked about origins, his English too bookish, then Southern and ungrammatical, moving in mysterious waves and fluctuations, like light.

With each season, he seemed to burn through a lifetime of experience. But on his visits, he still searched through our father's books and notes, trying to connect him to Raphael Maria Estrada. I let him, telling myself that I was outsourcing research into my lineage, that maybe I'd learn something interesting—a good story for the post-lecture cocktails that graduate students and professors attended. My mother told me that our father had rarely spoken about his past other than to say he grew up in Colorado and came from an old American military family. I suggested to Hugh

that maybe our father had picked up the book because he'd had his last name in common with the author.

A few months later, Hugh headed to Montréal to be with his Québécoise girlfriend, Marie-Eve, but when she dumped him, he did a few Tough Man fights—maybe because he'd eaten up his inheritance—and then he moved to Mexico. He worked more on his translation and returned to Vancouver with Pilar, a young woman whose high, clear, dark forehead suggested intelligence. They got an apartment together, not far from us, in Kitsilano. She told me that he spoke Spanish at times like a *bandido*, at others like Borges himself, his dilemma chasing him across cultural boundaries.

When Hugh disappeared, she came around a few times, asking if we'd seen him. I went out looking for Hugh with her, taking her to the police station to see if they might know something. I asked her about him, how he was to live with.

"I am too sad to talk about him now," she said and just her accent, the way it stretched the vowels, made her sound sad indeed. "He *iis* never sat*iis*fied. He *iis* in *soo* much pa*yiin*."

That was all I ever got out of her. After two weeks, when rent came due, she returned to Mexico. I no longer received emails or translations from Hugh, but I didn't worry. He'd likely ditched her for another of his wild quests to uncover an unmanned edge of our great continent. And I was right. Eight months later, he showed up again, rail thin. He told us he'd been living in the Florida Keys, eating raw foods and doing yoga. When I asked about Pilar and why he'd left, he just waved his hand. He'd come to Vancouver to teach yoga, since, having indeed burned through his inheritance money, he needed a job. He said he had to start over, that his attachments had caused him suffering. The only relic of his past was the book, in a large Ziplock freezer bag, with a few silica moisture-absorbing packets, like the ones inside vitamin containers.

"Vancouver," he announced to Nathalie and me over dinner, "is going to be my home."

His accent had almost vanished, and I found myself listening more closely. Now that his coarse Southern affectation was gone, maybe I'd see who he really was. But for the first time with Hugh, Nathalie had a guarded look, wariness or concern—I couldn't tell which. His gaze was open as always, but the corners of his eyes appeared pinched, as if with grief or just fatigue.

"So," she said, "what's the point of yoga? I guess I never really understood."

Tension gathered around his eyes, as if he had facial muscles the rest of us lacked.

"It's about the self, about stripping it away. It removes imprints from the body and therefore from the mind. It's like sanding the marks from old wood. But then you go deeper. You keep stripping away."

"So the goal is nothing?" she asked.

"It's giving up all the attachments that constitute the self so you can rejoin pure being."

"Why are you so eager to jettison your self?" I asked and studiously took a long sip of wine.

"It's easiest to give the self over," he continued, "if we dedicate ourselves to something. A mother can give her self over to her children, an artist to her art. You sacrifice the self to do it, to really do it and bring something beautiful into the world. A great leader can give his self over. A great soldier. But the final step is giving the self up entirely."

He and Nathalie were leaning forward over the table, staring at each other. A few furrows had appeared on her forehead, like the faint, rudimentary jottings of a protolanguage, and he considered them, as if these were the marks he would wash away to free her.

"I think they forgot my bruschetta," I said and reached again for my wine.

One afternoon while Nathalie was kickboxing, I sat at her computer. Fractals unfolded, splitting out from the edges of the screen. She could remain here for hours, ear buds in, eyes at once focused and relaxed, studying and letting the information permeate her. Former colleagues from Boston chatted with her and shared files, and she examined their web pages or databases, or read screens of computer code. If someone opened my computer and searched my emails or documents, what would she find? I deleted most of everything. It was all academic. Maybe I'd be outraged just to cover my embarrassment at having so little.

I wiggled her mouse. The fractal disappeared, revealing a dozen layered windows on her screen. The foremost was a discussion of malware and spyware. The few paragraphs I read were more interesting than I expected, the tone at once punchy and technical, faintly impatient. What else lay beneath all these windows? I sat until the screen went dark and the fractals returned.

That week, after Hugh was refused at a dozen yoga studios, he took a job in an adult video club, working the night shift, and a few days later, as Nathalie and I watched TV, the two airliners—clip after played-back clip—repeatedly struck the World Trade Center. I dropped in on Hugh, and he was at the counter, eating cold pizza and reading Bukowski, his accent like a case of strep. His eyes were different—entranceways into something abandoned.

I didn't know what to say to him. I hadn't known what to say to Nathalie either. She'd become addicted to the news. All of us had. In my graduate department, waiting around the microwave, a few of the more outspoken among us ventured that the Americans had it coming, what with their strong-arm politics and military support for extractive industries. But those who said this looked worried, even afraid. Nathalie did, too, except with her there was a tension, an air of expectation like that of a person whose loved one lay in a distant hospital.

Hugh was harder to read, so instead of offering my condolences, I asked where he was going with his life. He hesitated, downcast, almost fragile. Like an old shirt that keeps its smell no matter how you wash it, his redneck self had clearly survived the scourging and ablutions of yoga.

"Nothing expresses all of me," he said softly, with those rolling American vowels. "It's like in Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy*, the division between form and chaos…"

"Well," I told him, "there's more to philosophy than pop-psychology." If he'd studied properly, he would know this.

"I never found my voice," he said and stared at me. He had so many faces but always with this openness, this pleading, hungry gaze. "I got all these pieces but nothing to hold them together."

He didn't mention the attacks. Nor did he make any effort to search me out in the weeks to come.

Change, or my desire for it, arrived almost suddenly, the way a person might look in a mirror and realize he's gone gray. I'd begun a doctorate in comparative literature, a long program that felt like a remote one-lane road winding through low country at a slow and steady pace. To supplement my income, I taught the morning English classes at a private high school. I started Tai Chi, and though I acted as if I did so at Nathalie's insistence, I found prostatitis more convincing. My doctor diagnosed the cause as poor diet, lack of exercise, too much sitting. I felt the stagnation, a heaviness in my gut, weighing on my hips.

For years, I'd felt I was waiting on something. My doctorate seemed like the intellectual version of day labor—tasks but no vision or cause. Where did that come from? I'd long ago accepted that I had no compulsion to artistic creation. My inner world felt too neat and clean, the way an immaculate room inspired no story.

I decided that commitment and arduous conjugal tasks could do me good. I pictured myself a handyman in my own home, sanding floors, repairing balusters, newels and mullions (words whose objects I'd yet to identify), or reading Milton to a rocking crib. So I proposed to Nathalie.

"You're bored," she said. We were in a café of hardwood and rattan and shady, recessed ambiance, a place now swaying like a houseboat. I felt sick. I hadn't made a fancy occasion of the proposal because, even after five years, I feared rejection. I had to be at the café anyway, for a weekly school-sponsored reading, and having arrived early with her, I felt safe and, admittedly, a little bored. Marriage had come up like the weather.

"I want passion," she said, her voice reaching me as if through a funnel, starting loud and finishing whispered. "I don't want to get married because we've nothing better to do."

I considered the terror of starting over, struggling through messy firsts, making a relationship fit—of never again witnessing Nathalie's growing self-appreciation, the way she stood tiptoe in her underwear and admired her taut kick-boxer's legs in the bathroom mirror.

"I love you," I whispered across the table.

"You're bored," she hissed back. "And by the way, your brother called and wants to see you. He sounded depressed. I told him to meet us here."

"Great. Right from the very heart of iniquity."

"Well, maybe *we* should rent some of those videos," she said, a little too loudly.

By the time he got there, one of my students, her hair flopped to one side and Kool-Aid purple for the occasion, was at the podium reading terse, monotone considerations on suicide. The previous reader had gotten on her knees to beseech mankind to let their hearts dance the clear-cuts back to life. A boy had accompanied her on the bongos.

"Hey," Hugh said, his face heavy, the skinny yogi vanquished by Dominoes and smut. He was tight around the nostrils, but the V of concern on his brow disappeared when he saw Nathalie. He smiled and pulled out a chair and squeezed her knee with genuine affection.

"Ooh, that feels good," she said. "You should give massages."

He withdrew his hand and tipped a look at me. "What's up, bro?"

"What's up, what's up?" I said with apathy more distilled than the water he used to drink.

He stared, almost in that old way of his, wide and unshuttered, the way a dog's gaze can seem to absorb the light. "I was thinking we could talk," he said.

"Yeah?"

"I kind of need to talk."

"Don't we all."

"You okay?"

"Sure." Just then one of my students came and sat and confessed he was reading Eliot, or rather that he didn't understand it. The girl, with the single long purple bat wing on her head, was reciting, "And they'll find me / sapped dry / like a potted plant / after the vacations."

I discussed one crisis to the music of the other onstage while Hugh struck up a conversation with Nathalie, who listened, leaning close, hair curtaining her as if to keep me from seeing how she pinched her earlobe and stared in my brother's canine way. He sounded more natural, more relaxed, and I tried to follow his story despite my student's questions of mermaids in Prufrock and why the narrator would wake from his dreams and drown. Hugh told Nathalie about a time when he'd lived in the Keys and had rowed out to an old lookout stand on a marshy island. He'd meditated and

fasted there five days, and on the fourth, a small plane had passed, seen him, and begun circling, the pilot thinking he was stranded.

"I kept waving him away. I didn't need to be rescued, and he finally left. Then I went to leave and discovered I was too weak to row. It took me almost a day to get home."

He tossed his head and laughed, briefly his old self again.

I got up as if to go to the restroom and instead stepped outside, into the rainy city that visitors can find hard to love, but that, with street lamps puffing drizzle into amber clouds, avenues streaked with taillights, and the sparkling dark filling everything, cleans and hides. I've heard it said Vancouver is the place you go to forget, to start over, to be anything, the California of Canada. I'd never really thought about why my father had come here, never asked him much, but I knew more about him than Hugh ever would. For Hugh, that sad simple past of a defeated man would always be verging on something immense, an epic in which he would find his answers.

As a child, hearing my father's stories from time to time, I believed him to be a great man, destined to write books that would change the world. But I'd realized that through his words he was forestalling my disappointment in him, teaching me to believe there was a reason for his absence, that his retreat not only from our family but also from society had meaning. Hugh would never feel how solitary our father had been, how embittered that everyone had so easily forgotten the battle that had defined him. He'd lived rewriting the same book, seeming to love nothing else and no one, renouncing his country over and over—the decisive act of his life.

With the gusty night, the absence of the usual celestial glimmer, no stars, no ski resort and highway lights like bright ladders on the mountains, I floated out along absolutely nothing. I walked until whatever I'd felt had been rinsed, until I was on my steps and soon undressed and asleep. I woke only to hear the front door open, the hushed exchange of goodbyes, but nothing else of her long approach to my unlit bed.

After Hugh left, Nathalie told me he'd enlisted. He was gone more than two years without a word. Enlisting had been what he'd wanted to discuss with me. He felt that his country needed him, she said. Maybe he'd felt that she would understand, both of them being American citizens.

Briefly I pictured him confiding in me and how we might have talked about the changing world, a story I could have related to my colleagues. They'd have listened gravely, nodding, none of them knowing anyone so close to the heat of things, to the history unfolding on our TV screens. Of course, the daydream was self-serving. I don't even know what I would have said. I tried to picture my own nodding gravitas, but I'd have given him a talk about how wrong the war was. Hugh had no

understanding of the big picture. His patriotism was a kneejerk reaction, at best. It made sense that he'd stopped translating, that he'd given up his literary and beatnik ambitions; the redneck had risen like a swamp thing from his soul and taken its place, prompting him onto the most redneck of paths. Nothing I could have done would have changed that. Later, I might have thought about him more, or worried when the war in Iraq started and Afghanistan rarely appeared on the news, but my relationship with Nathalie had become too difficult.

"I think I need some time alone," she told me one night in April. She'd made a chicken stir-fry for dinner. We'd eaten, and I'd just finished the dishes.

"Sure," I said. "Just tell me when works best for you."

"I mean, I think I should move out for a while."

I'd been wiping down the counter. I leaned against it.

"What?"

"I need some space. I need to get some distance on us."

"What do you need distance for? What's that going to change? We're doing great."

"We're in a rut."

"We just need to think about the next step."

"Maybe I want to move back to Boston."

"Seriously? I mean, every liberal American is applying for immigrant status to Canada. Boston must be a ghost town."

She didn't smile.

"Maybe we should talk this through. You've been doing the same job for as long as I've known you. What do you think the next step for you is?"

"Moving out. Being alone. Getting some space."

"Are you doubting us that much? I felt that we were on the verge of taking—"

"I know. The next step. But we're not. We've been stuck for as long as I can remember."

And then I saw her roller bag and backpack by the door, her laptop case. It was such a cliché —how could I not have noticed? I'm not sure I heard much of what she explained next, that she'd sublet the place of a friend who'd gone off to do consultancy in Silicon Valley.

She left quietly, as if just catching an evening flight, her long dark jacket on, the bags on her shoulder. She drew out the roller bag's handle and paused, glancing at where I stood across from her, the couch between us and my hands on its back. Outside, rain gusted past a streetlight. She lifted her hand, showing her palm, then turned and closed the door behind her.

I paced through the house. I turned off the lights, hesitating with each one, as if there were something I still wanted to do in that room.

One sleepless night a month later, I got up and switched on the lamp.

Under the bed, four long plastic storage bins held my father's books and notes. I slid them out and opened them. The smell of must and decay, and the stale tobacco smoke that had impregnated the paper filled the room.

I closed my eyes and put my knuckles to my forehead and pressed them there hard. Maybe on a good night he'd join us for dinner, coming up in one of the bathrobes he always wore and that my mother replaced for him every few years.

"How's it coming, boy?" he'd ask me, his gray hair frazzled about his head, broken red veins on his swollen face. I'd talk about school, about a science experiment in class or a book report, and he'd huff and shake his head and almost smile. He did that often when I talked. It reminded me of how the cool kids acted when I answered questions in class.

Most nights, when I was already in bed, I'd hear him leave the basement and turn the microwave on without opening it to see what my mother had left for him. Some days, after school, I'd sit and read by his basement door. My mother didn't like him much, so I told myself I didn't like him either. But when I heard him get up from his chair, its springs creaking, my heart tossed about in my chest. Wanting to run, I put my ear to the wood. His feet shuffled to the bathroom only he used. I listened, as if the sound of his piss hitting the water, the clacking toilet handle, and the flushing mattered in some way.

Were there clues in his books, not just to link two Estradas by a strange, foreign name, but to him, to whether he'd loved my mother when they'd met, whether he'd seen me as more than the seal on their arrangement: he paying the bills, rich with family money, while my mother kept the house and excelled in her career as an academic editor. What would he have thought of the person Hugh was becoming, of his adventures and literary ambitions and his decision to enlist? My father had spent his life denouncing state violence, and yet I felt that though he'd never have admitted it, he would have admired Hugh's choice.

I took out his third novel, *A Song from Far Away*, about an antiwar musician whose songs no longer mean anything to anyone, a man who ages poorly in his enthusiasm, growing increasingly angry at a world obsessed with materialism, with New Wave and Glam Rock.

Page after page, I saw how the narrator misses the United States, how he studies his conviction. Even after President Carter pardons the draft dodgers, he doesn't return. In his mind, it is the United States that needs the pardon.

There was a scene that, as a teenager, I discovered and read over and over with titillation: his encounter with an eighteen-year-old girl from rural Virginia.

He has just played to a half-empty bar. The men, who've come to British Columbia for the forestry boom, have their backs to him, drinking and talking or shooting pool as he strums songs that once elicited cheers and chants. He meets the girl just as she's coming in the door, as he's leaving with his guitar case.

"Hey," she says, and immediately, from the way she smiles, he knows she wants something. "I need gas money to get home," she tells him.

"Where's home?"

"Virginia."

"I'll help you," he says. He has it in his head both to go with her and pay the way, and to convince her to stay, that it's better here and there's no reason to go back. He buys her a drink and food, and he keeps promising to give her money for the road. She tells him she's on her way back from Alaska where her father went to work on the pipelines.

She stays with him in a motel, in North Vancouver, and for five days, he doesn't tell anyone where he is—doesn't call the woman he's been living with, the mother of his son.

Maybe my father made the scene up. I vaguely recalled my mother reporting his absence, in the same way I'd gone with Pilar to the police station after Hugh's disappearance.

In the novel—if that's what it was—my father tells the girl his story, but she doesn't get it. She's tall and thin and full of reckless youth and so hungry for sex it feels like a fight. Everything about her, the way she drawls or smokes, her assumptions and prejudices, turn him on. But gradually the scene makes clear that this encounter is nothing special for her. She just wants to out-drink, out-fuck, out-fight the father who abandoned her, and even as my father tries to make her understand his convictions, she's cracking a can of beer or straddling him again in bed. Her two older half-brothers went to Vietnam, and she doesn't care to hear cowardice and bravery redefined. One morning, when he comes back from the 7/11 with a fresh stock of beer and cigarettes and chips, her car is gone.

Reading the scene again, I longed for Nathalie. I hated Hugh. I blamed him for no reason I could explain—for Nathalie, for my father. There were too many people in my head, too many emotions. It was ridiculous, that the scene of Hugh's conception was turning me on, that the naked,

eager, menthol-thin body of his mother could inhabit my father's world of literary obsessions more fully than my academic mother or I ever had. The book's narrator had "a son." This was told in passing, the way one might offhandedly confess to a failure or weakness, a shirked, unwanted obligation.

Hugh must have read these novels, too, though he never mentioned them to me. Did he think I'd ignore him or tell him that they were just novels? Who else did he have in his life to talk to? He'd cc'd Nathalie with the translations of *The Angels Write Poetry in Blood*. Had he written her other messages? I vaguely recalled her mentioning that she'd answered questions he had about the Internet and computers, how he sometimes needed help researching his passion du jour. Would Nathalie tell him that she'd left me? I no longer knew if I should envy his missions, his need for a quest, or even if he was still alive.

April, May, June, the Iraq War hogged the news. I went to the gym every day, to Tai Chi three times a week. I watched movies when I couldn't sleep.

Nathalie never made up her mind about Boston. She hurt her knee kickboxing, and loneliness got the better of her. She began sleeping over, and those first summer days were long and vivid. We made love often. I gave her massages. We ordered in, ate out. I bought a sushi roller and learned to cook. We didn't talk about our relationship until a weekend when we rode the ferry to Nanaimo and swam off the small rocky islands along the coast.

The sun was nearing the horizon, the water darkly luminous, its surface like a mirror in an unlit room. Nathalie's back was to me as she watched it, her hair twisted into a bun. Her neck appeared slender and regal, and I wanted to kiss the curve of her shoulder.

"How come you never moved back to Boston?" I asked.

She didn't look at me, and I barely made out her words.

"Because then it would have been over."

I turned in the water with the motion of the waves: the dark wet jumbled rocks of the shore and the trees above; the dim eastern rim of ocean beyond which lay Vancouver; and back to Nathalie, the sunset radiating from her shoulders. She was facing me now, a single sun freckle dark beneath the corner of her eye, strangely visible in the half-light, like the imprint of a tear.

"Will you come back to Boston with me?" she asked.

I moved my hand as if to clear water from my face. I nodded. I glanced just past her, at the light. I said, "Okay."

She paddled close and wrapped her legs around me. She put her head to my shoulder.

I'd never felt so wanted. I kissed her neck even as I sank slightly, salt stinging my eyes with each wave, getting in my nose. There are moments when I can't help but think that if I'd been someone different, if I'd somehow prepared and made myself more ready and worthy, the moment I was in would be perfect. Then I would have held her afloat with ease. But we had only a few minutes until the stress of treading water for two got the better of me. She let go just as I began to pant. We swam to shore, and there, clambering on the rocks, I asked—as if I'd failed the moment and wanted to prove it—whether she'd heard from Hugh.

"No," she said, her eyes distracted, bothered by the sunlight against the water. I almost asked again, but I didn't want to risk our happiness.

It was in Boston, two months later, after I'd taken a job as a substitute high school teacher, and we'd moved into an apartment in Cambridge, near Central Square, that I proposed again. For the first time, we'd found a harmony in shared activity, in changing cities together, in choosing a neighborhood and a place that we painted and furnished. But for me there was always the lingering question of what would happen when we had nothing else to do and fell back on old ways. So I planned the proposal, each element, including myself—sure to be gym-fit and tanned from a carefully observed quota of hours outdoors. I researched marriage proposals online, learned how to select a ring, reserved dinner flambé in a place where people knew to bow from the waist, tipped the evening's violinist beforehand to strategically wring out his heart.

"On one condition," Nathalie said, romance fluttering off like sparrows around a kicked soccer ball. Other patrons were watching, murmuring, fluttery themselves, and I wished the hard ball of her voice would scatter them, too, or else that she'd be happy, however briefly.

"What?" I whispered, on my knees, gripping the table as if begging for food.

The violinist, a small, dapper Vietnamese-American man, noticed us. I expected dulcet tones —mood music—but he began to move his arm violently, the rising waves of sound giving me the impression that I'd accidentally purchased tragedy, not romance. He played as if Agamemnon were about to sacrifice his daughter in exchange for fair winds to Troy. I'd given him a hundred, so maybe he wanted to prove he'd earned it.

Nathalie hesitated, scanning the room, taking stock of the people watching us, and briefly—I wasn't sure I was seeing this right—there was fear in her eyes. She seemed to shake with self-restraint, hunched up on herself like a cornered animal.

"That you take risks," she said.

Each time neither of us spoke, the violinist jammed in trills or crescendoed, and each time he noticed our lips moving, he dropped to near silence, though he occasionally punctuated our words by plucking a string. I wanted to take the wine bottle to the son of a bitch's head.

"Okay, okay, okay," I lipped as subtly as possible and gestured, and the muscles of her face pulled in different directions. A smile began to take shape, and I think I heard sighs of relief at the nearest table. She started to speak, and the violin fell toward silence, and I knew we'd reached the eye of this musical hurricane, that this was the word I'd been waiting for.

"And you have to take sexual counseling with me," she said.

"Yes," I told her and moved to fit the ring onto her finger. The violinist's bow jerked on the strings, a spasm of sound I couldn't believe was intentional, unless avant-garde. She drew her hand back, pushing the ring the rest of the way, staring at it as if with caution. The violinist regained control and once again started his climb. He plateaued with one interminable note as if beyond this moment the story were over and there was nothing else.

It came to me then that she might be saying something was wrong with our lovemaking.

"Yes," she said.

But the question had long left me, and I had no idea what she was talking about.

There's probably some part of our brains that's smarter than we are. Millions of years of evolution —of hunting and danger, competition for food and sexual rivalry—selected for this. While the dumb self sits at the campfire, bragging or flirting or shoveling in food, the command center is churning information: every glance and gesture around us, every shift in the mood, in the weather, every potential tool and weapon.

I had a sense of impending change. If I'd been an ancient shepherd, I'd have expected raiders from the hills, at the very least wolves. My solar plexus ached. Deep behind my eyes—a tightening knot of apprehension. Were ancient prophets simply the ones who could access this place? Were they the ones who could, as Hugh had described, let the self fall away?

It was Hugh I had on my mind: a sense that I would see him soon. I pictured that cartoon redneck waiting outside, behind a lamppost. Ever since my visit to Virginia years ago, he'd lived in my memory as if sketched in the panel of the comics: his eyes bulging, his face lit up with awe and enthusiasm as the monster truck raced close. But no matter how I remembered them, Hugh and his friends remained inaccessible: jungle headhunters in loincloths, me the baffled European. Why did some Americans crave so badly for purpose? Why did they believe it was their lot to change the world, often for the worse, though they claimed to be saving it?

I sat before Nathalie's computer, in a different room this time, a different city and country. In an age when security is the subject en vogue, she didn't even have a password—at least not here, at home. I couldn't say what she did to protect herself from the world at large.

I opened her inbox. There was his name. I found it hard to breathe. Over and over: Hugh Estrada. I clicked to her earliest emails, then went to the place, eight years ago, when he came into our lives. There were just a few of his messages back then, many of them the same that he'd sent me, with the exception of his questions to her about the Internet, clearly announced in the subject lines: *can emails get lost in the mail?* or *does somebody keep track of everywhere I go on the internet?* I didn't open them. I wouldn't invade her privacy; I was proud of not being that kind of person.

I scrolled through her inbox, through the period when he began sending the translations to both of us, and I considered *The Angels Write Poetry in Blood*, that story of Raphael's self-transformation and discovery, and of Hugh's.

Where his emails to me had dropped off—the time of his enlistment, of my first proposal to Nathalie: a simple calculation that I struggled with, my brain balking, suddenly exhausted—they continued to her. They were punctuated by periods of silence, but these absences became shorter with each passing month, from a few weeks to a week, to a few days, to now, more recently, no more than a day or two. Each time I saw his name, my pulse thudded in my ears, so that the increasing pace of their correspondence came to me as an accelerating soundtrack, reminiscent of the theme to *Jaws*.

I was sweating hard. I got up from my chair and paced the apartment, looked in the rooms, out every window. I would see him soon. My lungs kept grabbing at the air.

I hurried back to the computer and opened a recent email. It was a translation from *The Angels Write Poetry in Blood*, a piece of the story I recognized from years ago, about Raphael falling in love with a woman whose social class was the enemy of his ideals—a hackneyed trope but retranslated, the sentences taut and evenly paced, his control over the language at once muscular and delicate. I read Nathalie's response as well—*I never realized before how similar Raphael's journey is to your own, how much you have both examined yourselves and taken risks to learn and grow, knowing that you could fail and lose everything*. I went back and read his translation again, no longer hearing the guffawing cartoon redneck but a clear voice—that of a man at once assured and determinedly self-doubting, intent on the object of his love even though he knew he could never have her.

I was hurrying to the first class in a week-long course (The Path to Ecstasy: Tantra and Sexual Liberation), jogging to catch the train, when I heard him call my name. My joints didn't rattle. My

organs didn't squelch. I just stopped and turned, as if we might continue the conversation in my head, talk about the emails I'd read, about his translations.

He had the tanned, lined face of military men who have seen too much, and was sitting on a bench, derelicts and drug addicts on either side. He looked stern and clean cut, like a soldier from an older war.

"Hugh," I said. At that moment, when I was struggling to throw plot, climax, and denouement all at once into my love life, my first test now awaiting me in a Pilates studio sublet for group therapy, I knew I should make this encounter as short as possible. I was sweating. The street seemed to glisten. Heat lines rose, blurring the air like fumes, as if the world were drenched in gasoline and any word I might speak would ignite it.

He stood and came toward me slowly, his eyes moving in careful increments, as if taking in my posture, whether I might hug him or shake his hand or strike out. He shook my hand.

"I've been wanting to talk to you for a long time," he said.

Through a grate at our feet came the chiming of subway passengers inserting their cards. Metal wheels screeched on the rails and hotter air billowed up beneath me as the train arrived.

"Yeah," I managed to say, "we've been long overdue for a good catch up."

"Nah," he said. "I mean, we should really talk, about real things."

I just nodded.

He hesitated. "There's so much going on in the world," he told me, softly, his eyes searching to the only available distance, at the end of Mass Ave. "These aren't good times. No one's willing to face it. If we want to survive, we have to reinvent ourselves."

I didn't think he'd come to discuss politics, and the tone of his words was at odds with his military face.

"Are you still translating the book?" I asked.

"Yeah. I don't think I ever sent you the ending. I found something about Estrada on the Internet recently, a web page about him. It says he moved to Colorado at the end of his life and stopped writing, so maybe he is related to Dad."

The train rumbled away, the sidewalk vibrating. There was no reason to rush now, but I told him I had to go. I gave him my cell number and offered to meet after my class, not thinking of course that Nathalie might expect me to practice what we'd learned.

"Alright, brother," he said as if we'd just finished a long hard task, as if I'd been to war with him. He half-lifted his hand even as he was turning away.

On the subway platform, I stared at the tracks, a Starbucks cup and a sodden copy of the *Phoenix*. I tried to quell panic. What did I hope to achieve with Nathalie? Marriage had become an artificial structure, cleanly evacuated in the postmodern age, and there were no more endings, much less a stable definition of happy. At least that's what I'd come to believe after years of reading critical theory and cultural studies. Maybe it was for this very lack of story I was failing. I'd never felt the urgency Hugh did. Maybe humans were hardwired with a need for quests. I hadn't even fought to be on time. Was I becoming a masochist, a fanatic, the Rambo of failure?

When I arrived, ten couples and Nathalie stood at a buffet, watching pornography, their expressions a clear loss of appetite, food held like fish guts. The teachers, a skinny asexual couple, were rocking on their heels with pleasure, and I learned that the program had started with an informal talk, then the buffet, and that the TV, positioned like a bomb, had been turned on half-way through their meal and cocktail chatter, *in medias res*, as the critics say, of a heated sex scene. Afterward, we discussed our responses. The couples were mostly administrative and educational types with secretarial wives, the exceptions being a stately attorney and his blond figurehead, a large Haitian man of indeterminate age and his unaffected wife, and Nathalie. Most admitted to being shocked, or aroused, and when it was my turn, I said, "I felt really guilty," not because I meant it, but because I didn't want to sound like everyone else, and besides, an extreme scene merited an extreme response on the basis of literary standards. Everyone looked at me, and the teachers hummed and twiddled their fingers like villains. The discussion then turned to more scientific things, diagrams of reproductive organs, the myth of the g-spot, angles of entry, glands and lubrication and pressure points.

"Pretty dry," the woman teacher punned, and we all went, "Uh-huh."

"You see, sex starts with your feelings," she said and elaborated the way a magician unfolds a handkerchief into a parachute. Had we signed up not for the 101 but the 001 class, remedial sex, no credits offered, pass/fail only? My peers did not seem dysfunctional at this level. She told us we had to start with the basics, and that later we would learn wild things, the poetry of postures, diving crane, tiger and gazelle, knotted snakes, bee on the stamen. Her androgynous and interchangeable partner was now distributing questionnaires.

"Take these to your corners," he said, "and fill them out in total honesty."

We were given pens. We answered the questions: threesome, foursome, anal sex, preferences, fantasies, infidelity. Then the pens were taken away. Men and women were made to line up against opposite walls, the way we'd done at elementary school dances before the teachers picked partners.

"Now," said one of the instructors as rolls of tape were passed around, "attach the questionnaires to your chest and go and let everyone read them. I want you all to read them, then look the person in the eye and focus on accepting—not forgiving because that implies something wrong was done. Just accept."

I taped and roamed, and no one appeared impressed by the others' sheets until I saw the stately attorney reading Nathalie's and nodding gravely, as if to say this was a case he wasn't likely to take. She was staring at me from across the room, blushing, her eyes glassy with fear or shame. She strode from the attorney and let me read. She had a lot of little ticks and checks absent on my own sheet and, with all this administrative energy, I couldn't see why they shouldn't be dated. Then I read the last one. *Have you been unfaithful to your significant other?* I didn't look her in the eyes. We returned to our walls. The instructors brought folding dividers to screen off the women as if, misery instilled, it was time for synagogue.

The light from the big studio windows was muted by the division, evening sudden and atilt and ceremonious. The instructors explained the first ritual of acceptance, the apparition of the woman not with her earthly baggage but as goddess.

"This is the dance of Shakti," Instructor A said solemnly, as if addressing the audience at an avant-garde theater. "The woman comes to you as the primal female force. Men tend to be closed and limited, and their judgment is severe. It is only by accessing this energy that a woman can become free. Today we will learn this. The women must lead. Tomorrow, the men will perform the dance of Shiva."

I grimaced and clenched as one by one, the women were made to leave the screen and dance for us, big and lumbering at times, in business skirts and dark blouses, but all embarrassed and enthralled and with a predilection for Indian hand gestures and a gyrating of the body common to Hula dancers.

Then Nathalie stepped out, fierce and red in the face. Lilies and orchids and roses had been set in pots, incense lit on brass plates and smoking from the stipples on pyramids, the cardinal directions marked with lavender mantles. She moved and twisted, Martha Graham and Twyla Tharp and Mary Wigman. I'd never seen her like that. She finished with an entreaty, staring at me, crouching and moving her arms as if pulling a chain. The Haitian man gave me a wide look of envy and amazement, and I stood and fled the smoky fragrance into the cool and empty night.

Hugh's arrival, as it turned out, was timely. Tonight was clearly not destined for a practice session. We walked the waterfront without speaking. I wanted to find some hint of his innocence in his face so that I could speak, but I couldn't look at him.

"I have to do the dance of Shiva tomorrow," I said just to break the silence, hoping that my words would lead to him speaking about Nathalie in such a way that I could determine his guilt. "Who is Shakti anyway? I'm Shiva. Isn't Kali Shiva's wife?"

"It's not so simple," he told me and sighed as if relieved to talk about something so abstract. "Shakti is a god's wife, mainly Shiva's. She's female energy. But she has two sides. Destructive and creative. Kali and Parvati."

We were briefly silent, looking out at the water.

"That's what I want to talk about," he said. "That's exactly it."

I turned sharply, and he seemed incalculably old and tired. I had the impression that despite his many selves, this was the real Hugh, lean and military, weathered like a rock, and that whatever he said now would be the truth.

"It's the changes," he said, "the Kali Yuga."

This wasn't about Nathalie. I didn't see the connection even to Shakti and I told him so.

"The Kali Yuga is the age of darkness in the Hindu calendar, the machine age, the time when we are farthest from God. The prophets say this will be an age of chaos and madness."

He looked at the sky as if a great flaming ball had lit the night, though there was just an airplane leaving Logan, passing high above with a reedy slip of air. I couldn't tell if the inane talk was to hide his guilt or if he was becoming a spooked, war-ruined vet.

"Haven't people always been crazy?" I asked.

"Not like this."

I tried to picture Nathalie's face the day after he walked her home from the café. I couldn't remember his from earlier that night, even though it was the last time I saw him for two years. He no longer seemed the same person, and I had the sense that I'd never known him. If I read her inbox, would I find the entire miraculous history of his life that I had always refused to listen to, or some version of hers she hadn't shared with me?

He glanced at my eyes and hesitated. "I have a book coming out."

I turned to him, failing to hide my surprise.

"It's a collection of blogs. I wrote them about the war. A memoir, I guess... But I know it's a copout. It's not real literature."

I shook my head slightly, as if I disagreed.

"Remember after Dad died," I said, "and you told me you wanted to be a writer." I tried to speak the words as if I were proud, as if I'd believed in him all along.

"I always knew what you thought of me," he said.

"What?"

"I was some dumb redneck trying to steal your father from you. Let's just get it out."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Aw, you fucking coward," he said, but not with rage. He was still staring at the sky, as if not arguing with me at all. I kept silent, ready to wait this out.

"I made a promise to myself. I wasn't going to be afraid of anything. I read Dad's books. I saw how much he'd invested in one big idea. He was afraid to change, to let go of it so he could live the life he wanted. Meeting you and learning about him, and reading and translating Estrada, I realized that 'me' is pretty much just an idea. So I kept pushing."

I still didn't speak. I had questions, but I wasn't sure I wanted to hear their answers. I'd never needed to test my limits where I'd been told that—theoretically speaking at least—there were none. Had he attempted to try on my life like he had so many others?

"The categories don't work anymore," he said. "Look at us, here, together, brothers."

I wanted to tell him, 'Yeah, you think this is new? Imagine how the Persians felt mixing with Alexander's people, how the Gauls felt watching their Roman fathers and brothers leave with the army.' But all I could picture was *Asterix* comic books, the puny Romans and the hearty and magical and defiant Gauls.

As if reading my mind, he said, "I should have been just another oafish country boy. I still think about how much I loved working construction and hanging out with my friends and the high school girls at the Summerduck racetrack on Saturdays and sneaking beers."

"Honestly, I don't remember my visit to Virginia as pastoral bliss."

He looked at me and for the first time I saw hostility.

"Do you ever go home?" I asked, ratcheting my voice to a near whisper.

"My mother died when I was with Pilar. That was the last time."

"That's why you left?" I couldn't remember much about her, just a tall, thin woman whose indifference to me I'd found frightening. All that came back was the scene in my father's novel, her hunger for contact, for something, and that she'd named her son after Hugh Hefner, intent on finding, despite her limited knowledge, a symbol of greatness.

The water was almost still, the tide a slight ebb, and the city preserved us in the impression of endless dusk as he started his story all over again, how he met me, how after our father's funeral

nothing satisfied him anymore. He'd gotten his GED, traveled, fought and loved women and been educated, but never belonged. I thought of all the times he'd visited, always different, as if he'd come through simply so that I could see. But I couldn't recall having been faced with anything other than affectation, the burly husk of an obsolete archetype.

"I had to step outside of myself. It was the only time I ever felt okay."

"Maybe you should try being one person for a while," I said.

"Maybe you should see if you have the balls to be someone else, to look like a fool just to learn something. I have no illusions. How could you study all those writers—Faulkner, Joyce, Proust, Woolf—and not see they were trying to put a broken world back together? They had no choice. It was painful for them. It wasn't just a bunch of fuckin' ideas."

The space beneath my ribs felt tight and hard and hollow. He'd gotten tripped up in the surface of things, in emotions—hackneyed inevitable stories beneath which were the real subjects. What if I'd talked to him about this stuff years before, if he'd been able to put all that redneck vitality into something clear? I thought of Nathalie's inbox, whether by reading it I would understand what she'd seen—him searching and grieving, or afraid, running through desert in an ancient rite-broken realm closed to my conjecture.

I glanced away. People strolled here or there, prim figures like cutouts in the evening. Where was Nathalie now? And if I read his emails, how would I see her—a muse adored? Through his eyes, would she share his urgency, his determination to overcome fear, to give up even what she loved?

Faint waves pulsed against the seawall. I thought to speak, to ask the perfect question, the one whose answer would lead to a confession. But what difference would it make now, his guilt or my further humiliation? Maybe I should just accuse—*You, my own brother*… But could I? Did I have the right?

Neither of us spoke, standing next to each other, facing the ocean, until he sighed.

"Don't you wish we could just stay like this," he said, so softly I had to tilt my head.

Then he walked off and left me there, as if he hadn't been speaking to me at all.

dn'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.

•

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 *haam 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.

•

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 malls, 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 10th, 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 93rd 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 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 forehand. 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.