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The New Analects

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An abstract of
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Abstract

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By Jieming Fu

Shortly after graduating from college, Shiyan Jia returns to Northern California to nurse his dying mother. As Shiyan reconnects with his hometown friends, he reflects on his complicated friendship with Daniel Zheng, a deceased friend who played a pivotal role in his life during his senior year of high school. Interwoven with references to Chinese literature and mythology, this novella explores the academic and social pressures faced by adolescents and young adults in upper-class suburbs of Silicon Valley, a group that has received extensive media coverage for an unprecedented rise in occurrences of mental illness and suicide attempts – as well as general contemporary Chinese-American life in the Bay Area.

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Chapter 1

There's sun in my eyes, so much that it blinds me for a moment. Sunlight reflects everywhere from the international terminal façade, but particularly from the giant silver letters spelling out *SAN FRANCISCO*. It's sunset on a hot day, so hot that the weeds growing in cracks around the domestic arrivals lane have been seared to a crisp brown. It's the end of August, so my calendar tells me, but in the Bay Area the spring, summer, and autumn are all fused into one. Only winter is different; winter is wet and green, the season of growing things, but every winter in my recent memory has left us more parched than before. The whole state is dry tinder waiting for a good light.

I round the curve, picking up speed to pass an airport shuttle to my right, and as I overtake it I see Wenqing.

She's standing by the door of terminal nine, her hair cropped short on one side of her head, thick and slicked back on the other. It's different from the last time I saw her. Back in April she had a mix of blue-green-purple ringlets that made our mother threaten to disown her. Afterwards I told her that was a cruel thing to do to an old woman. "And if the old woman is cruel?" she'd asked. To that I had no reply.

I try to help her load the car but she waves me off. She has only a backpack and a sleek weekender bag, ever the efficient traveler. She slams the trunk closed and is headed for the door before I can ask for a hug.

"Let's go," says my older sister, getting into the passenger seat and shutting the door. "Quickly." She's buckled in before I have my ass in back in the driver's seat.

It's wrong to use three verbs to describe Wenqing when she does all of them at once. But that's who she is, brusque, with divine talent for conservation of motion. There's no order to it, none of that legs first body second stuff. It all moves as one mass, and then she reaches over and shuts the door with her right hand while grabbing the seatbelt with her left – all simultaneous, of course.

"You only just got here," I say, twisting the key. "What's the rush?"

"You were late," she reminds me. "I told you my flight arrives at six thirty."

"Sometimes people go to the bathroom, or pick up luggage -" I look at her. "Well, maybe you don't do any of those things."

This makes her laugh. Wenqing's laughter is also efficient and to the point, two quick huffs of air to purge the recognition of humor from her body and nothing more. "I have a conference to attend tomorrow."

"I thought your conference didn't start until Friday." I check the dashboard display, to make sure that I wasn't wrong. "It's Wednesday evening."

"Thursday isn't too far away. And then the conference begins after that. I have to prep." Wenqing flexes her fingers in turn. "And meet people for dinner."

"You're meeting me for dinner tonight," I remind her. "Family time."

"We're very good at family time." Her mouth twists. "We've had a lot of practice recently."

"I've had a lot of practice recently," I correct her, softly. "The last time you were home, you suggested that we consider getting Mom evaluated for a psych hold."

"Oh, and your way is better, is it?" Wenqing turns to me, fury in her eyes. Great, we've barely passed South San Francisco and we're fighting already. "Explain to me how."

"Can we not? Tell me about your flight. How was your flight?"

"You always give her what she wants," says Wenqing. "Always placating her. You think you're Neville Chamberlain."

"And you just compared our mother to the Nazis."

"She's dying," Wenqing says. When she's angry, she doesn't raise her voice, she lowers it. She lowers it so that you have to listen hard to understand every word she's saying, and that way she knows she won't be interrupted. She learned that from our mother, too. "Her cancer was, what, stage three? She would've been fine if she'd just stuck with the chemo treatment. But she threw a tantrum and you went along with it. She refused treatment and said that she wanted to go home to die, and you agreed."

"She was miserable. Was I supposed to let her go home to die alone? And you don't know for sure that everything would've been fine," I say, my knuckles white. "Nobody knows."

"You're helping her. You're giving her what she wants. She says jump and you ask her how high, and can I make you tea while I'm jumping. She says that she wants to go home, away from the *qi*-stealing shamans with their ceremonial stethoscopes and you said sure, Mom, I'll go home too and wait on you hand and foot -"

"Was I supposed to let her go home to die alone?" I interrupt. "Sorry, but I really don't see the point of this beatdown. Am I supposed to feel bad, for spending time with my dying mother? Our dying mother?"

"All I'm saying is," Wenqing sucks in a breath, lets it out. "You could've tried harder. We could've tried. Harder."

"Easier said than done." I look out the window. We've just passed Brisbane and route 101 is right over the water again, a straight causeway arrowing towards the glow ahead. "You know how stubborn she can get."

And unspoken between us was the undeniable fact that our mother was the master of disguises. A tyrant of bilingualism. The nurses knew her as a sweet old lady who showed off her many photo albums, full of pictures of chubby Asian children. To them she was polite and kind and always ready with a compliment. When Wenqing and I went to pick her up from the clinic they wished her well, for my mother had lied to them and said that she was going to seek treatment at a clinic closer to home. Once we got in the car my mother declared that at long last she was free of the Western shamans forced upon her by disrespectful children, that she would never again return to white-coated witch doctors who only wanted to funnel poison into her veins.

"I reading the Wall Street Journal," she barked at us. "You heard of this girl? Elizabeth Holmes?"

Wenqing said nothing. "I have, Mom," I said, patting her hand. "What about her?"

"Smart girl," mother nodded. "Get into Stanford. But too dumb to run a good scam. I read about how Wall Street Journal expose her. Americans, bah, you fall too quickly for impossible ideas. In the old country, scammers everywhere. So we are more alert as well."

I look at Wenqing. “It’s not so much stubbornness as her belief in, well, in Chinese superiority. In Chinese exceptionalism, in everything. Remember what she said about Elizabeth Holmes? ‘In the old country -’”

“In the old country, they do scams with discipline,” answers Wenqing. “And after that she said that we wasted our money on Western medicine for her, that Western medicine was also a scam. You give her too much credit.”

We slip into mutually agreed-upon silence, a compromise, neither willing to interrupt the temporary truce. Route 101 splits into fine hairs where it crosses Route 280, concrete skeins of spider silk weaving in and out of one another, unraveling and twisting together again. The sun flares to our west, one last burst of light before it flashes through the Sutro Tower’s prongs, and disappears behind wooded heights.

“Did Bernal Heights always look so brown?” Wenqing wonders.

“California is in a drought,” I say. “It’s looked like that for years.”

Five long years. Daniel brought the drought with him, and it stayed, while he departed.

Wenqing gives me a hard look. “I know.”

“It was all over the news last year, you know. El Nino conditions! It’s going to rain again! No dice. Southern California got all the rain. It all fell on the desert, and ran right into the sea.”

“Maybe it’ll end this year,” says Wenqing. “Anything could happen.”

The sun has gone by the time we reach my apartment, the hills dark as well, and Wenqing stops complaining about the drought. It’s a nice evening, a nice warm August evening with barely a hint of breeze. Wenqing throws the windows open after she leaves her suitcase in the guest bedroom, and leans out to survey the street.

"How much do you pay for this place?"

"Too much," I say, taking a drink from a half-empty glass that I'd left on the countertop. It tastes like the sun, dusty and far too warm. I consider pouring it down the sink, but my traitorous memory reminds me that there's a drought. On the bamboo in my windowsill, then.

The water dribbles out and drains into the stones. The potted bamboo was a housewarming gift from Jessica, I recall. Of the five branches, one is long dead, and the leaves on the adjacent stalk are starting to wilt. I really should water it more.

Jessica emailed me last week, saying that she was planning a memorial service for Daniel and she wanted me to help. Always good at asking favors, that was Jessica for you. I didn't want to help. It was her brother that died, not mine.

I look at the dead stalk. Maybe I should trim it. I think about it at least once a week, but I can never bring myself to reach for the scissors.

"Two bedrooms," says Wenqing from the other room. I can hear her unpacking. "What do you do with two bedrooms?"

I refill my glass and give it more water, this time covering the pebbles. I've misjudged. It overflows and spills, running over the grooves in the vase, parting where little ceramic frogs protrude from the sides.

"I store stuff in the second one. I use it as an office." The taste of pork and grease is still thick on my tongue. I fill the electric kettle and turn it on. "I'm making tea, if you want any."

"Mm." Wenqing comes to the kitchen. "Two bedrooms. How do you afford two bedrooms?"

"I make money."

"You're a year out of college, you don't make enough to afford a two bedroom in Outer Sunset on your own. Even if you work in tech."

That made me laugh. "You mean, especially if I work in tech. But that's a nice ego boost, thank you."

"Shiyan, I'm not joking."

That sobered me up quick. I go to the cabinet and pick out two mugs, dashing a teaspoon of oolong leaves into each, keenly aware of Wenqing's gaze burning through my back. "It's not – I'm not in debt or anything, Jesus. I had two roommates, and they moved out last week. The lease ends at the end of the month, and you said you were gonna be in town because of this conference, so everything worked out pretty well. Calm down."

"I thought you were a little too eager to move back home."

"The commute will be longer, I'm not looking forward to that." I shrug. "But I'll get to live rent-free, won't that be nice?"

"Mom thinks that you're going home to take care of her because of filial piety," says Wenqing. She says the word like it's cursed. "Because you're such an obedient son."

"Don't tell her," I laugh, but nervously. "I don't want to disappoint her."

The kettle clicks. I wait a minute for it to cool, and pour near-boiling water into both mugs. "Should we get started?"

While we wait for the tea to cool, we move everything into the common room. I feel a little bad for my neighbors – there's an awful amount of noise – but it'll be over soon. The bulk of it is stuff from college that I never moved back home, just shipped directly from Cambridge to San Francisco. Boxes of books, piles of old papers. I find cases of notebooks that I no longer

need but that I have kept out of some distant fear that the civilizations of the future will lose all knowledge of undergraduate organic chemistry. We make a ‘keep’ pile and a ‘donate’ pile and a ‘trash’ pile, for Wenqing has become a loyal apostle of the holy Marie Kondo gospel. Wenqing discovers my storage closet full of old shoeboxes and Amazon cartons and takes two hours to flatten each and every one so they can be sent out for recycling.

“You’re a terrible hoarder,” she tells me after tying up one last bundle of recyclable cardboard. “You should’ve gotten rid of all that stuff a long time ago.”

“I thought I might need it.”

“For what?” She sniffs in disdain. “Nobody has any use for shoeboxes anymore. Back in elementary school we still had to make those shoebox dioramas, but now they don’t make them.”

“They don’t?” I look up, surprised. “But then how do they learn about the different biomes?”

“Kids don’t have fun making them. I didn’t, anyways.”

We proceed to ransack my desk, clearing out all the little knick-knacks. In a back drawer Wenqing finds my diploma. “Are you kidding me?”

“I knew that was somewhere.” I reach out for it, but the heavy cream paper slips through my fingers and flops away. It catches the light and the three scarlet letters across the top wink at me. Their curves enwreathed in loopy flourishes, they seem more like lace than writing.

Wenqing almost shakes it in my face, but instead she cradles it to her chest and finds an envelope among her conference materials to protect it with. “This is four years of sweat and tears and blood,” she mutters while she fumbles the clasp. “And you shove it in a desk drawer.”

“Packing was hard. I had to bring all my books back, all my clothes…” I dump my t-shirt drawer onto my bed. The ones crushed at the bottom keep their shape atop the pile. “It was hard.”

“And that’s why you should rid your life of clutter,” says Wenqing, now channeling the holy spirit of Marie Kondo, our lady of the well-organized sock bin. “Only keep the items that bring you joy.”

She goes through them one by one and discards everything she deems stained, stretched out, or otherwise unwearable. “Why do you have so many Dropbox shirts?”

“Because they were free.”

“And this?” Wenqing brandishes a black-and-red shirt in my face. “Lit at MIT?”

“It rhymes,” I tell her, frowning. “I had to recite a poem during prefrosh for that. I earned it. Don’t throw it away, it brings me joy.”

“If you say so.” She picks up the next shirt, a neon-yellow number with a skull and crossbones design on the front. The skull is fat and scarlet, with a leafy green hat that marks it as a tomato. Wenqing and I stare at it for a minute.

“I remember this,” I tell her. “This is from that march you took me to. The one in Sacramento.”

“I took you and Daniel Zheng,” Wenqing adds. “And if I recall correctly, you marched on the side that was pro-GMO.”

"There was a guy selling these. They were too funny, I couldn't resist."

Wenqing shakes her head. "I can't believe you kept it, though. I don't even remember what Sacramento was like, only that Mom was pissed afterward. She yelled at me and beat you black and-"

I leave to fetch another trash bag for the discard pile, not wanting to hear any more. My tea has long since cooled, and I stick it in the microwave for a minute. It's a very long minute, waiting as my memory conjures my mother's shrill shout in the back of my mind, her phantom voice screeching about how unorthodox it is to microwave loose-leaf tea, how the radiation breaks the leaves apart and releases free radicals, aren't you afraid of free radicals? Your Western medicine teaches you that they cause cancer –

When my tea is done I yank it from the microwave and put my face over the mug, inhaling evaporated water. Bullshit, it was all bullshit. What did my mother know? Hot water is hot water.

Wenqing has gone to the bathroom, leaving my room a half-organized mess. I get back to work, yanking out my bottom left desk drawer. All the junk goes into a bag – pens, erasers, pencil shavings. Paper clips and binder clips, all sorts of office paraphernalia. Fat straws, thin straws. A green rock drops faster than my eye can track and hits with the floor, the collision sounding crisp and chime-like despite the layer of plastic between. I fish around in the sack and pull it out, the stone cold and round in my fingers. A jade frog, with two beady black glue eyes. I consider it a moment and drop it back into the darkness.

I struggle to my feet, carrying the garbage bags and a stack of framed photos to be sorted, when Wenqing darts forward. "You're going to drop those."

She catches a frame as it slips between my fingers, flips it over, and frowns.

"Is this you?"

I take the photo from her. It's me, Daniel, and two other guys from the math club, the Sunday afternoon that we climbed on the gym roof to get away from Josh Wu because he kept following us around after practice. You can see the bell tower coming out from behind Daniel's ear, a red line sprouting from his ear. I'm smiling like an idiot in the photo, with my mouth open and eyes squinted shut; the sky is so blue-bright that it washes out the circles under my eyes. In the back is Daniel, with his head tipped forward, his face washed in shadows. No light adorns him.

"I think so," I answer. "It looks like me."

"It's funny. I think I saw this posted online when you first took it. Was it one of those print-straight-from-Facebook type things?"

It was. I printed it sophomore year of college, at a media lab event that my roommate dragged me to. Robert pushed me out of my room to a lot of things that year – whether out of a sense of propriety, friendship, or charity, I don't know, but I appreciated it all the same. We went to the media lab and there was a booth where they were demonstrating a printer that allowed you to interface with Facebook and print out your photos, and out of some impulse I went to Kenny Shim's photos and selected the one we'd taken on the roof. I didn't want Daniel to disappear more than he already had, and for some inexplicable reason I was paranoid that Kenny would delete the picture from his albums.

We all looked happy except Daniel in that photo, but it wasn't him, really, it was just a trick of the light. Just a trick of the light. But he looked off, and that might've been justification

enough – it didn't fit with the story, that Daniel was a happy guy who left college and was trying to make kids' lives better through his small business. It didn't fit the narrative, that a guy like Daniel might've been discontent, and so I was afraid.

The photo was taken in March, I think, late March in the spring sun. When I got my acceptance letter to MIT and I thought my heart would burst out of my chest. We're all wearing jackets, all except for Daniel, dressed in a white shirt and blue jeans. He looks thinner than he does when I was in high school, but it's probably just a trick of the light. I'd just come off a long week of exams, so I look like a high-functioning, recovering zombie. The sunlight in that brief snapshot washes out the black smears beneath my eyes; it washes out everyone's face except Daniel's – he looks like a black blob, with the shadows filling in the hollows where the light can't touch.

I take the picture frame from Wenqing's hands and place it in a box with the others.

"I thought it was a cute photo," I told her. "You know, me in my high school days. I actually don't have a lot of photos from back then."

Wenqing snorts. "Yeah, we didn't do anything but test prep, and it's not like you went to prom. I think Mom always regretted that." She looks around. "But it's kind of a shame, I agree. It seems so long ago."

"Five years. A little more."

"Right. You're practically an old man now, little brother." She pats me on the head, and picks up a box of clothes hangers. "I'll sort these out."

I sink the floor once she leaves. Packing is hard. I don't want to go home, to face all these people again, all these memories. Logically I know that most of them will be gone now

that it has been five years, scattered to the winds. Like Daniel. But Jessica will be there, and my mother. I'm afraid, and I don't know of what.

Five years, it has been exactly five years since the September that Daniel returned, the last time he came back to us. The beginning of September, the end of August.

He arrived around the same week as I did, just in time to catch the end of the season and the start of the drought. I am fortunate that the drought occurred as it did – it puts a nice bracket on things, a start and end to an era. Dates, I find, are so clinical. Time is measured in numbers but memory is experienced, recalled, relived. Two thousand and thirteen years after the supposed birth of Christ means little to my animal hindbrain but drought is remembered in the bones. We didn't know it then but the peak of the drought was two years away, and for all our desperation there would be no relief to come.

"How've you been?" he asked me, the first time we met again. As though we'd just seen each other yesterday, as though distance were nothing, as though time had not gone by.

School had just started. I think it was just the beginning of the second week, maybe Tuesday, when I passed the old shopping center on my way home. To call it a strip mall is generous. It anchors the historical district nestled against the foothills of our town, a little slice of Middle-America transplanted to godless Silicon Valley, dripping with painful nostalgia. Wooden shingle and cowboy-themed font, to remind the neighbors that once upon a time, California had been the Wild West. But no longer.

It was the same path I'd walked every day for three years, turning the corner, kicking pebbles when the sidewalk ended in a gravel lot. I saw Daniel's shadow first, wavering through the heat mirages. He stood with his heels planted on the second-to-the-top rung of a gleaming

ladder, holding a nail gun in one hand and a broad drape of laminated canvas in the other.

He turned first. If he said something I didn't hear him, but as if to punctuate his presence the wind picked up and flung cool ocean air across my face. The breeze chased away the fuzzy heat so that I saw Daniel clearly for the first time, wearing a white tee and blue jeans, raising a hand to wave at me.

"How've you been?" he said, as I drew closer.

"Good, I guess."

"Are you taller?" Daniel squinted at me, from high on his ladder. I got a crick in my neck looking at him. I walked even closer, so the overhang shaded my face from the sun.

"Maybe. It's been what, three years?"

"Jessica's gotten much taller. I think she's still taller than you." His voice went softer when he mentioned his sister's name. "You two don't walk home together anymore?"

"Nah. She had – stuff. She's busy."

"I know, I've been home for weeks and I've barely seen her."

"Does she even know you're home?" I could feel how lame the joke was as soon as it slipped out of my mouth. "Because, like – she never mentioned that you were – back. You know what I mean."

"Not surprising," Daniel crumpled the canvas and pressed one corner against the overhang frame. The sound of the nail gun made me jump. "Jessica never cared."

"No, she's really busy. She's writing questions for tryouts." My mouth was running on autopilot – somehow it seemed the right thing to do, to defend Jessica so that Daniel knew I really did value her as a friend. "Science bowl – she's team captain this year, and club

president."

"Huh." Daniel looked at me again, smile hung lazy at the corner of his mouth. "And what are you doing, then?"

"Hanging around. I'm dead weight."

"No way, man." He descended his ladder and stepped backward until we were standing shoulder-by-shoulder. I was a good head shorter than he was, which was disappointing. There was a little twinge in my gut when I considered that I would never catch up to him.

"How are you?" I asked. "How's your leg?"

"That was years ago," Daniel answered, putting another nail into wood. "Does that look straight to you?"

I took another step back, and felt the sun burning through the soles of my sneakers. "Yeah, it looks close enough."

His banner, six feet of laminated canvas printed with colorful photos of rainbow smoothies and iced bubble tea, hung just a little larger than the actual storefront, which was still wreathed in plastic sheets and blue painter's tape. It was a bloom of color in the drab shopping center. I went there just a few weeks ago, and I can confirm – it's still an ugly little place. Wooden shingle, the store signs still done in that horrible cowboy-themed font. Stuff from the sixties, all in the same dirty shade of brown. Such a tired color.

"Rent is really cheap here," Daniel told me after we were done admiring his handiwork. He folded up his ladder, both of us wincing at the grating hinges. "I mean, look at this place."

Palm trees and gravel dotted the landscape. A stray cat scampered across the road and into the bushes, screeching at us, determined to outdo Daniel's ladder. It was three in the

afternoon but I knew the heat would linger for hours after sundown. We had so many of those, hot days in September where cloudless skies colored every breath with the taste of old sunlight. Over the past eight months the rolling hills had fried golden, grass crumbling away to dust till at last the dregs of the dry season were soon to pass. The morning fog trickled away lazily in midmorning instead of dawn. The dying summer was all there had been, and all there ever would be.

"I'll get you some water," Daniel said. He shouldered his ladder and disappeared inside the shop's interior. I followed him in, but the air conditioning didn't seem to be working, and the smell of plaster and sawdust made me sneeze. Little pebbles of sweat shook free from my bangs and wet the floor. I learned that if I stayed in the doorway, there was a nice breeze, and I could slick my hair out of my eyes while I waited for Daniel.

He came back with two dripping bottles, one for each of us.

"How is it, being back in California?" I felt awkward asking and so the words came out all wrong, tapered off soft at the ends. "Is it, I don't know, different?"

Daniel shrugged. Without looking at me, he drank half his bottle in one go and poured the rest over his head. "It's not too different. Forgot how dry it gets in the summer. Probably shouldn't have wasted all that water, huh?"

"It was only a little water," I told him.

He squeezed out the hem of his shirt and left wet streaks on his jeans, little tadpoles of indigo. "Shiyan, you're a smart guy, so I know I'm being redundant here. But let me jump on my soapbox for a sec, ok? We both agree that it was only a little water, but this place is so damn dry that yeah, I feel guilty for splashing it everywhere. Water's not supposed to be one of those

things that you ever completely run out of, but anything could happen, right? Anything could happen."

Maybe those weren't the exact words that he used, but I think I remember the gist of his speech. The easiest way to understand it is to remember that Daniel always cared a lot about the environment – he was one of those people who reminded everyone about 'Walk to school' Day a week in advance. But I remember how his face looked when he said that anything could happen, about the fear in his eyes when he contemplated the transience of something as constant as water.

Su Shi of the Song Dynasty wrote, on the twentieth day of the first month of Yimao in the Xining era, these first lyrics of *Dreams Remembered at Night*:

"For ten years we have been separated by life and death;

I attempt not to yearn,

but cannot forget.

"Thousands of miles away your grave stands alone,

Leaving me nowhere to speak my grief."

Chapter 2

Our mornings, that year when the drought began, started with multivariable calculus. The first bell began at eight in the morning, and by the last ring there were thirty teenagers crammed elbow to elbow with pencil and notebook open and ready to learn.

Imagine: students sitting together, laughing and joking. Suddenly the bell rings! The room goes silent. A young girl's voice on the intercom asks them to please rise for the Pledge of Allegiance. Desks squeak across the floor as everyone gets to their feet. The voice over the intercom – unsteady at first – begins the chant, and everyone follows. After the requisite smattering of school announcements, the teacher takes his notes to the front and begins the lecture. Today partial differentials, tomorrow Lagrange's theorem. For an hour our inspiring young teacher dispenses knowledge to these bright young minds, sprinkling them with water from the font of wisdom. Rinse and repeat, six classes a day, five days a week.

Of course, anyone who has ever stepped inside a public school classroom could tell you that the whole concept of public education was a convenient illusion that parents, educators, and students alike conspired to create. Public school teaching could be called education, in much the same way that Breyers' could be called ice cream. Eat at your own risk.

And besides, this was Godless California. We said the Pledge of Allegiance once a week, once every two if we got lucky and the administration forgot. Some stood, most slouched. The try-hards actually bothered to mumble the words under their breath. Most of us did our best impression of limp noodles, not even attempting the hand-over-heart gesture. Wenqing spent two whole years in middle school with her hand tucked uncomfortably against her right breast instead of her left, something that we still tease her about today.

"First period for me was history. And in seventh grade they taught us about the Chinese Exclusion Act," she laughs if you ask her now. "And you don't remember this, but that was the year that Mom took the citizenship test and I had to help her with flash cards after I finished my own homework. I knew I we weren't American, not on paper at least, so I didn't want to pledge any sort of loyalty to a flag of some country I didn't belong to. But kids are kids, so I thought someone would catch me. I would mouth the words and put my hand on the left side of my chest, right over the lung – that way it wasn't over my heart. Shiyan, you old man, don't you remember being young and having principles?"

If you ask my sister now, she'll tell you that school was hard for her too. That kids just don't quit. When we argue about this, I like to remind Wenqing that when she went to school they didn't have multivariable calculus, just regular old calculus. In fact, no one quite knows when multivariable calculus became a Thing You Had To Do.

Still, the trajectory is easy to imagine. Take a student – we'll call him Brian. Brian's parents want Brian to go to Harvard. Brian is a good student, so his mom says, "I heard from Amy's mom that Amy's brother's friend's cousin's piano teacher's nephew is taking multivariable calculus at the local community college. You will take multivariable calculus at the local community college too." Brian is then enrolled in calculus. A month later, Brian's father's old buddy from graduate school hears and enrolls his daughter in calculus too – they apply late but it doesn't matter, because his little girl is a good student and good students need to learn.

Then the concept morphs from 'multivariable calculus is a class that good students can take' to 'good students take multivariable calculus.' The difference is a couple of words, and the difference is everything. The window of 'things good students do' expanded infinitely. I bet that

even Guanyin the Merciful, the bodhisattva with a thousand eyes and a thousand arms, could go through four years of high school and be told by the end that, well, she could've tried a little harder to squeeze in one more AP Spanish Literature class.

It often seemed that attaining nirvana was easier than being a perfect high school student. The path to nirvana had only eight folds. Ours had SATs, ACTs, PSATs, APs, and all the extracurriculars and volunteering you had energy for. In our sophomore year the administration introduced a new form that you had to submit when choosing classes. You had to add up all your class time and homework time and extracurricular time until you could prove that you didn't need more than twenty-four hours a day for your schedule. The form came with one line prefilled – eight hours of sleep. We all thought that was hilarious.

So there we were, sitting in multivariable calculus at eight in the morning. The administration had a special contract drawn up with the community college that said we could get college credit through them, even if we took multivariable calculus at high school. We all signed permission slips that said a bunch of words like "campus extension class credit" – a string of colorful nouns, like streamers whipped from a magician's hat. Cool beans.

I'm complaining a lot but honestly, the class was fine. The most irritating thing that happened to me all year was that I sat right in front of Dr. Boleman's desk, and I was always paranoid that he was looking over my shoulder and at my laptop screen. Class was fifty minutes long, and he lectured for maybe thirty minutes at maximum, after which he would retreat to his desk at the back of the room and grade homework. He had a nice, droll voice, so it was very convenient for everyone when he would finally shuffle back to his seat, because that was the

signal of freedom. He flapped his hand a little, to indicate that we were now supposed to start on our homework.

Nobody wanted to be the first person to get up, but eventually someone would. And the class would slowly gather into little groups. Eventually Jessica would make her way over and sit on the edge of Suresh's desk, and poke me in the shoulder until I responded to her.

"You coming to practice tomorrow?"

"Yeah." I wanted her to go away. She was swinging her legs and kicking my desk with every repetition. We once had a confrontation – Jessica and I don't fight, we debate – about this issue, and she said that it was payback for AP biology, when she had to sit in front of me for an entire quarter and I jiggled my knee nonstop during class. I didn't see how her suffering for a quarter equated me suffering for a semester, but I was also wise enough to let sleeping dogs lie.

"Good. It's our first meeting of the year, I want you there." For a naïve second I thought that might be the end of it. "Did you hear about Jonathan?"

"Which Jonathan? Ho, Leung, or Sun?"

"Leung. Also, I would've said 'Jun' if it was Jonathan Sun." She was very awake considering that it was first period. "C'mon, Shiyan. Keep up."

"He told me he hates that nickname." But it caught on nonetheless, much to his chagrin. And now I was thinking about Jonathan Sun instead of Jonathan Leung.

"There are too many Jonathans. There's also Jonathan Chen."

"Who's Jonathan Chen?"

She flipped her hair over her shoulder. "The sophomore taking Physics B."

"Am I supposed to know him?"

"He came to every summer practice, so yeah, maybe. But wait, ooh, you skipped. I suppose that's why you don't -"

"I wasn't in town over the summer, you know that." I swatted away her hand when she tried to poke me again. "Jessica, stop."

"Neither was I," she pointed out. "I was at Stanford. Also, that's not even an excuse, you were done by the first week of August. You could've come to practice anytime after that. What, you don't think I know the program dates for RSI as well as SIMR?"

Jessica was a worthy foe. "I spent August in China. Visiting my dad's side of the family. I thought I told you."

My mom's favorite threat was that she would send me to China for the summer, and then I would really suffer. She finally made good on her promise, but it wasn't harsh at all. I got to see the village where my father grew up, the rice fields where he worked as a kid, and I had it drilled into my head both before and after the visit that if my father hadn't gone to school and placed first in his class until he was the first person from the village to attend university, then I would probably still be working those rice fields. Just like my father's father, and his father before him. "That's why you must go to college," said my mom. "No other choice. You can't even become farmer. Your father's family sold all the land when he graduated college. None left for you."

Jessica was unimpressed. "Ok, well, you can start coming to practice now. Whip the freshmen into shape."

"When is practice again?"

"Wednesday afternoon."

"Can't make it," I grunted. "I have stuff."

"Stuff that you can't tell me about?"

I stayed silent.

Jessica jumped off Suresh's desk. "I'll figure you out. And you'll come to practice."

And then she left, off to talk to her friends sitting in the far corner. Come to think of it, she never did tell me what happened to Jonathan Leung. That was typical for Jessica – you didn't have conversations with her, she deigned to talk to you. A little cool, a little scary, the kind of person who was arrogant if you knew her from a distance.

No normal person would point out Jessica Zheng as a cool girl on sight alone, but she was our school's version of a cool girl. A queen bee, even – is that the right terminology? In our yearbook valedictorian spread, she's sitting in the front row wearing a red hoodie and untied converse. Her bangs look long enough to cover half her face but the wind blows them across her face just so. She's smiling enough to reveal a tiny sliver of teeth. By senior year she was president of Academic League and a minor god to the various underclassmen who wanted a coveted team spot. And while I never put her on quite so high a pedestal, she always seemed to have her shit together and for that alone I wanted to trade places with her more often than not.

She was tenacious – that was her greatest strength and her weakness. Jessica never knew when to give up, and for that alone she terrified most people. Never willing to take no for an answer. If she just let me get a word in edgewise I could tell her that I actually wanted to

quit the club entirely – science bowl, ocean science, the whole lot. But my staying was good for the team, which was good for Jessica. And so I knew she would be back.

We saw each again at lunchtime. I was sitting under the Tree wrestling with my lunch thermos, watching Kenny Shim and Albert throw fries at each other, trying to catch them in their mouths.

"Need help with that?"

"I've got it. I always screw it on too tight in the morning." I shifted my grip and tried again. "And then there's the pressure differential, because it's cooled down – there we go."

"Yeah, I took physics with you. Don't mansplain." Jessica noticed Kenny and Albert. "How long have they been doing that?"

"Just started." I took out my little chopstick case and screwed the halves together to make a full-length pair. "Cafeteria lady gave them extra fries today."

"Oh, she shouldn't have." Kenny dunked a fry in ketchup and took careful aim. As we watched, Albert caught it between his teeth, then carefully licked up all the ketchup collecting around the edge of his mouth. "So. Tomorrow is Wednesday."

"I know that." I poked at my food. "And I'm really sorry, but I can't make Wednesdays."

"Why?" She whined. I looked around to make sure no one could overhear, but there were distractions all around. Kenny and Albert chased each other around the tree, making a wide circle to avoid people, leaping over stray backpacks. A circle of girls on the other side of the benches squealed all at once, their shrill song splitting the air. Jessica stepped into the shade of the tree to avoid Kenny and Albert on their next revolution, stopping until she was

standing almost straddling me. She held a binder up against her chest with both arms, like a shield.

"Because," I told her, uncomfortably aware of the closeness, "Wednesday is when I go up to Berkeley."

"What for?"

"I'm working on a thing. For Siemens." I poked at my food. Unidentifiable greens and mushrooms. A depressing lunch signaled that Mom worked late last night. "There's a lab."

I was always taught that the best lies were the ones closest to the truth. I did have a Siemens project, but I worked on that during weekends, not weekdays. But Jessica didn't know, and she didn't need to know.

"But our first meeting is tomorrow." She shook her long hair over her shoulder, black strands whipping me across the face. "I want you to come meet the freshmen. Impress them."

"Isn't that what you're for?"

She grinned, but it was more a quirk of her lips than a genuine smile. "Come and talk about how much fun it is going to nationals. Tell them we go every year. You know, a couple of them already know you as 'the guy who did RSI.' You should come say hi."

A couple people's heads turned when she said RSI – and I know, I could've made this up in my head, but believe me, she definitely said it louder than she needed to. I was angry with her, embarrassed, a little ashamed that she thought I might like this fact about myself announced. In announcing that I'd done this summer program, this most prestigious of summer high school science research experiences that was the equivalent of dressing up a college application in academic caviar and truffle shavings, she'd reduced me from a person with a face

and a name and a personality to a collection of high-achieving adjectives. And besides, what game was she playing at? What did she want from me? Was I supposed to return the favor, and preen over her and say, oh Jessica, you're so smart, you're so talented, you're the best of your generation?

My anger gathered and boiled off within but a second. "I'll think about it," I said. "Thanks."

"Ok. See you after school – I'm heading to the library -" She started to turn away, but I had to ask.

"Jessica, wait. Did you know that Daniel's back from college?"

She rocked back and forth for a second, a little sine wave of movement. I don't think anyone else noticed. In the end she turned around and said, "Yes?"

Almost daring me. That should've been my first cue to stop talking, but – "Daniel, your brother. I saw him the other day."

"That's nice. Yeah, he's back. You knew that already, so why ask?" She adjusted her backpack and waved. "I have to finish my homework. See you at practice?"

She stalked off. I ate my lunch and ignored Kenny and Albert, who had run out of fries and were arguing about how Android phones were better than iPhones. It wasn't much of an argument, because they both agreed that Android was better; they just disagreed about the magnitude. They stopped to ask my opinion, and I let out a breath. Wasn't about to be kicked out of the group just yet.

The Tree in high school was more than a place to eat lunch, you see. It was a community of like-minded individuals, gathered together to discuss subjects of common interest. Who am I

kidding, it was a clique. It was a complete and total clique, despite the absolutely bang-up job that the California Department of Education has done over the years, dispensing anti-clique propaganda. Nerds are excellent at creating cliques, despite what anti-clique propaganda might teach. Our ragtag band of students participated in a variety of organizations: Math Club, Programming Club, Anime Club, and the ever-reigning Academic League.

It's human instinct to form packs and tribes. We are social creatures, as the Department of Education liked to remind us in every year's Learning Standards. And our clan was a loose band of fifteen or twenty kids, gathered around a single tree during lunchtime. It was a nice tree. There was a bench built around the outside, and it occupied a few square meters of concrete outside the classroom of Mr. Booker, the cool math teacher who replaced the '3' on his classroom door with π because he was the cool math teacher. When it rained we would take refuge in his classroom, but otherwise we were outside wreaking carefully controlled havoc.

It wasn't tolerated well, within the territory of the Tree, to create conflict in the clan. Which was a thing I should've remembered before asking Jessica about her older brother, but hindsight is always 20/20.

All was forgotten by the last bell, though. After meeting at the library, Jessica and I walked up the creek path, between the eucalyptus trees towering on either side. The ones next to our school produced stringy park, thin paper-crisp strips that peeled away in long ribbons and littered the poured asphalt.

When I was younger I asked my sister why the bark peeled. All the other trees had bark that flaked, so why did eucalyptus trees peel?

"I don't know," said Wenqing. "Go away."

I repeated my question to Mom, who was busy doing dishes. "Why does the what peel?"

"The trees," I said. "The big ones with the red bark."

"Oh, hmm." She thought about it, putting her hand to her chin. "Because it summer. Sun is out and sun is hot, so tree get sunburn."

"That's not true," Wenqing piped up.

"I thought you didn't know," I told her.

"Well, trees don't get sunburn," Wenqing said. "Everyone knows that."

"Tree get sunburn, you get sunburn," Mom said. "That why both of you have to wear sunscreen! Don't run when I put sunscreen on you. For your own good."

Wenqing ignored her.

"Jia Wenqing, I talking to you," said Mom. "Wear sunscreen. You are a girl. Girl should aspire to be a *shunü.*"

"Shut up!" Wenqing ran upstairs with a scream, and Mom chased her. After that I don't remember. A lot of yelling, mostly.

Mom yelled at Wenqing a lot for not being a *shunü.* It's a difficult phrase to translate – *nü* means woman, and *shu* means a lot of different things. James Legge in 1871 published an English version of the *Shijing*, the Zhou classic of poetry, where he translates *shunü* as "modest, retiring, virtuous, young lady." Wenqing was never any of those adjectives, and for a long time she was proud of it, but her pride was tinged with bitterness.

Conversely, Mom called Jessica a *shunü* quite often. Even when we played together, usually hide-and-seek in the hedges dividing our houses – but now that I think about it, Mom never saw Jessica throwing dirt at me under the hedges, digging until her nails were black with clotting mud. She had certain faces reserved for certain people. When we walked up the creek path, just me and Jessica, that was when I liked her the most – she didn't need to pretend that she was the cool girl, or that she knew more than anyone else in the room. She was just a better person to be around.

And despite all this complaining I do, I think – I hope – that she always knew I could be trusted. I had so many embarrassing secrets about her that I could've written a whole book. Like the time in eighth grade when we were doing an English project together and she told me that Vivian Casselman had been making out in the band director's office with her boyfriend.

"But doesn't everyone see them?" I asked her.

"No, they close the door and turn the lights off." Jessica inched closer. "She comes out and her face is all red."

"The air conditioning would still be on if the door is closed," I pointed out. "That doesn't make any sense."

I had the distinct feeling that she and I were not on the same page, nor in the same universe.

Finally, Jessica shrugged. "She talks about it all the time."

"Ok."

"Hey." She put her weight on my knees so I couldn't move away. "Stay still."

"Ok."

I did as she told me to, sat frozen to the floor as Jessica closed the distance and pressed her face against mine. Almost nuzzling, a gentle graze at the corner of my mouth, soft and dry. The little hairs above her lip brushed my nose when she squirmed closer and made me want to sneeze. I squeezed my eyes shut and tried very hard not to breathe on her, and when I opened them again Daniel was standing in the doorway watching us. I blinked, and he was gone again.

"I need to go to the bathroom," I told Jessica. "I'll, uh, be back."

Jessica's mom was cooking something downstairs – I could hear the dull thud of her knife, over and over again. I turned the corner looking for Daniel, and found him just down the hall, shuffling around the door to his own room. "Hey," he said. And then, "Shiyan."

"Look, I -" And then I stopped, because I could not think of a single word to say. I didn't think I did anything that needed forgiving, but also I felt like I ought to say sorry.

"Don't apologize," Daniel said after a while. "I just wanted to warn you – tell you -"

He trailed off too. We stood there, each waiting for the other to speak.

"I feel like I should say," Daniel began again, "You have to understand. My parents – my parents are religious. Very Catholic. So just – don't do anything that makes them misunderstand. You know?"

I wondered what Jessica would say, if she knew that her brother had warned me off kissing her. Offended, maybe. I hoped she felt bad. Daniel was always looking out for her, in ways that she never knew. I wondered if he'd been caught once, and that was why he warned me.

We crossed train tracks on our way home every day. There was a faster route if you climbed through the drainage tunnel under the freeway, but you had to walk single file and

with your legs crooked at the right angle so that you didn't touch the water. Not that there was much water anymore, because of the drought. But back in March we were filming a video project for English in the Time Tunnel – that was what we called it – and Sailakshmi dropped her laptop into the belly of the canal, and even a twenty-pound bag of rice couldn't save it. Nice laptop too, a three-month old HP Pavilion. After that none of us wanted to go near the tunnel, out of respect and fear for the dead.

That was why Jessica and I crossed the freeway overpass instead, the long way around. Bad luck had us approach the same time as the train, and so we and stood waiting at the crossing, waiting for the railing to drop. The train approached, spurting a thin stream of black smoke.

"Hey," Jessica said. She had to raise her voice to a shout to be heard above the train crossing alarms. "Did you hear? About Gunn?"

"No," I shouted back. "Which is it this time, their debate team or their science bowl team? The debate team could beat us, but I don't know why you would care. Science bowl – I heard the sophomores have been practicing all summer, they'll be better than us at this rate -"

I saw her lips moving, so I stopped, and gestured for her to repeat what she'd just said.

"They had another suicide," Jessica yelled.

The train thundered past. The alarms stopped, and slowly the railing lifted, and I breathed in the bitter tang of burnt diesel as the rumbling faded.

"They had another suicide," Jessica repeated as we walked across the rails, the gravel crunching. "Guy walked onto the tracks."

I kicked a pebble into the weeds. “Great. We’ll hear about it in tomorrow’s news, I guess.”

“No, this is from last week.” Jessica walked across the railing first, several steps ahead of me. “You just don’t read.”

These days I look back at us standing on those railroad tracks, burning the rubber of our sneakers on the gravel, and I don’t have a clue what we were thinking. It’s a bubble. All of it’s a bubble. Like frogs sitting at the bottom of a well, we looked up and we saw the slice of blue, and that was what we went for. The way up and out was designed for us already, footholds carved into cracks in the brick lining, the trail walked by other people. Scoops of test scores sprinkled with extracurriculars, a little cherry of volunteer work on top. *Honors French and six APs, twenty-four hundred SAT.* It almost rhymes, but not quite.

Chapter 3

"You have to come to practice today," said Jessica, kicking at my desk. Cling, clang. "Come. To. Practice."

"I can't," I told her. "I have stuff."

"You keep saying that!"

"And every time I say it, it's true." I slammed my laptop shut. "Jessica, there are so many other people in this club, why do I have to be the one to show up to practice?"

We collected fifteen dollars in dues from every member, and last year we took in about eight hundred. You do the math. Most of that budget went to things like buzzer repairs and tournament fees, but sometimes we paid for travel too. When your club sent students to at least four, sometimes five national competitions every year, and the school district was too poor to fund extracurricular activities that didn't involve sudden and significant changes in momentum (what normal people call "sports"), money still had to come from somewhere. Money, people, time. I'd been through this dog-and-pony show of academic trivia recitation for three years, and if it weren't for my friends in the club, I'd have quit a long time ago.

"I want these kids to see what a good player looks like," grumbled Jessica. "You complain a lot, but you're good."

"Thanks for the compliment, I guess." I looked at the clock. Multivariable calc had ended extra early today, which meant that Jessica had at least another twenty minutes to hound me about showing up to practice.

"It's not a compliment. It's the unfortunate truth." She kicked my chair. "What's the point of being good if you're not going to commit?"

I had no answer to that. “I’m not the only person who’s good,” I insisted. “What about Kenny Shim?”

“He’s not well-rounded. He can do chemistry and literally nothing else.” She rolls her eyes. “Also, Kenny’s counseling appointments are on Wednesday, I guess you didn’t hear.”

I shook my head. “He meets weekly with a school counselor? Why -”

“No, you idiot, a college prep counselor.” Jessica drops to the floor and leans in so she can whisper in my ear. “He said that he’s on his seventh draft, or whatever, for UC essays. It sounded pretty intense.”

“Are you seeing one?”

“Of course. Are you not?” She searched my face. “Oh, right. Your parents are probably gonna have your sister edit for you, huh.”

“I guess. But I mean, I don’t have anything for her to read yet.” I shrugged. “Apps are what, two months away? I have time.”

“Oh, screw you,” Jessica got back up, her arms folded over her chest again. “Everyone else is freaking out about their college apps, and you’re telling me you haven’t finished a single draft? Whatever, man.”

She stalked away, and I wanted to tell her, no, come back. It wasn’t that I didn’t finish any drafts, it was that – well, mincing words doesn’t make it sound any better, does it? I’d lied to Jessica. Very casually, but it was still a lie.

Wenqing told me to do it. “If your friends ask you how far along you are on your app, what are you going to say?” she asked, one night as we were going over my third MIT essay.

“That you make me feel really stupid every day.” I minimized the window so I wouldn’t have to see her face. “I can’t write the way you do. You’re in grad school.”

“No, you tell them that you haven’t gotten any work done. Wow, they really don’t teach you anything in school anymore.” Her sigh came in as a rush of static in my headphones. “Never tell anyone how much progress you’ve made, that’s just giving away your advantage. At most you complain to them about how much work you still have left, and then they do the same for you, and maybe they let slip some detail about what they’re writing their essay about. Maybe they’ll all think that you’re so confident about your apps because you did RSI. Wouldn’t be the first time.”

“What if I don't really care what they’re writing about?”

The problem with asking Wenqing for help was how much I despised her advice sometimes. God, I hated it when she got all preachy about college application strategy, especially when she made it sound like I needed to plot out battle tactics against some invading army; usually all I needed was another synonym for ‘dreams and aspirations.’

“College applications are a zero-sum game,” said Wenqing, cutting to the point. Her silhouette dissolved into a cloudy soup of desaturated pixels and sharpened again. “You getting a spot means that someone else doesn’t get that spot. This is not the kind of thing where you collaborate with your classmates. Got that?”

I thought about this. Wenqing shuffled the paper in front of her and started to say something, but I cut her off.

“But wouldn’t that make it a negative sum game?” I had to ask. “If your only options are to not lose, or to lose more -”

"Please," Wenqing raised her fist and shook it at the screen. I hid a smile. "Can we focus? Ok, let's talk about this transition. How to make it better."

She acted like my manager in addition to being an older sibling. At the beginning of every school year we sat down and discussed what my plans for the summer would be. Not the summer that had just ended, the summer that was about to begin in nine months. It seemed insane when we first began, but I soon learned to appreciate just how organized she was, her deft grasp of deadlines. School started in September, applications were due in January, and the summer began in June. Repeat three times, and then once more for college applications. The wheel never stopped spinning.

"I think you should apply to RSI this year," she said last year. "Research Science Institute. It's a summer research program at MIT, and they take around twenty people a year. Twenty kids, from all over the world."

"Do you think I'll get in?" I asked, doubtful. "I mean -"

"We have to try." My mom came, and I turned up my speakers so she could hear. "If you don't get in, there are others. SIMR at Stanford, there's another program at UC Davis, and I can try some of my Berkeley contacts."

"RSI," said Mom. "Apply that one first."

As I walked home from school alone – leaving Jessica to handle Academic League practice by herself – I considered telling Daniel about the advice I'd gotten from Wenqing. They were both older than me, Daniel by three years, Wenqing by five. And I wondered why. Would I feel better about lying to my friends, if Daniel affirmed that yes, it was the right thing to do, that college apps were indeed a situation of 'every man for himself?' Would I?

I turned the corner, walked off the sidewalk into the gravel lot. Daniel was nowhere to be seen, but the café doors were open a crack. I found him inside, pasting up big sheets of matte, black wallpaper.

"Hey, Shiyan," he said every time. "Here to help?"

When I told Jessica that I couldn't make it to practice because I had 'stuff', that wasn't a lie – I was helping Daniel set up his café. I told Mom that I was staying behind at school to do homework in the library, because even though she didn't come home from work until eight most days, she would check the security system to see if I had unlocked the garage door, and if I hadn't, she would assault me with a barrage of phone calls until I explained why.

So there was my life, constructed of papier-mâché white lies. Daniel was the only exception, mostly because his questions mostly consisted of, "Can you pass me that screwdriver?" And when his kitchen equipment started arriving, it turned into, "I made a new drink, want to try it?"

"This sounds arrogant, but I'd always planned on you being my first customer," he said as we finished papering the largest wall. "Now I'm afraid that you'll be sick of me by the time I finally get this place open."

"Nah, never." I grinned. It seemed like the right thing to do.

"Good."

"Can I say something though?" I thought Daniel's face froze up for a second, but maybe I'm remembering wrong. "The Bay area is saturated with places that sell milk tea. There's even that little stand in the Asian grocery store. You could've gotten a lot more business if you'd timed this place to open like a month ago. School's already started by now."

He relaxed. “It’s harder to open a business than you think, you little shit. Of course I know that. But hey, I heard Tapioca Express closed last year, so now I’ve got a monopoly on the high schoolers in our area.”

“True. And it has been hella hot this year.”

“Yeah?”

“I dunno. I was in Boston for most of the summer.” Now I sounded like I was bragging. I’d never voluntarily admitted to someone that I was in RSI – but Daniel actually went to MIT, he wouldn’t care, right?

“What?” His first reaction was to laugh. “No way, dude, we never ran into each other? That’s crazy.”

“Yeah – yeah.”

Wait, something wasn’t right here. I’d never asked, but I’d just assumed that Daniel was back in California because he graduated early or something. Now that I admit it out loud, that does seem incredibly naïve. But forever and always I thought that Daniel hung the moon and the stars, that he was capable of anything and everything – I’d simply never asked.

We stared at each other.

“Boston’s – it’s – it’s big,” I said. It sounded so lame, but I couldn’t find anything else to follow up with. “It makes sense we missed each other -? Don’t worry about it.”

“Shiyan,” said Daniel. “Did I ever tell you why I came back?”

When I looked blank, he cracked a smile. “Let me make you a drink. And I’ll explain.”

The blender was so loud – it sounded like it ran on diesel fuel or something. By the time Daniel finished up I wasn’t glad because I was holding a cold plastic cup of tea-and-cream

concoction, I was glad because the ordeal was over. Couldn't hear myself think over that racket. And it was loud because it was just so, so quiet.

"Here you go," said Daniel, handing me a green straw. I stabbed the plastic and watched a little spurt of lavender leap out the plastic barrel and onto my right hand. Daniel snickered while I licked my fingers clean.

"You're awful at this," he mock-scolded. "Go back to Asian training camp."

"This is really good, though," I told him, sipping at the swirling purple. "Taro?"

"Yep. I'm using fresh grated taro, not the powdered stuff. That's why the color isn't quite there. Don't distract me, I was going to tell you something important."

There was no furniture placed yet, so we sat down on the clean tile behind the counter, the only place not covered in plaster dust. Daniel pulled his laptop bag onto his knees and together we sat in comfortable silence, for a moment.

"My semester finished in May, almost June," said Daniel. "And I had – I had a pretty tough semester. So I told them that I was taking a year off."

"You said you were in Boston over the summer, though." I interrupted.

"That's right. Shut up, I'm trying to tell a story." He bumped his knee against mine. "I worked for a biotech startup in Boston for a summer, which I'd already applied for while I was in school, but by the time I decided to take time off, most places had already hired interns for the fall. I could've applied for research positions, but I didn't really – that's not really something I want to do."

"Right." Daniel had blended far too much ice into this drink, and my tongue was going numb. I decided that it wasn't worth it to make a fool of myself, interjecting into his story.

"I didn't think my parents would agree when I told them I wanted to open a boba shop, but my mom actually made the down payment." He covered his face with his hands. "Couldn't believe it. Of course, because she's the owner, she got to choose the name. I don't know if I like it."

I looked past him, to where *Café Victoria* appeared on the wall in large, swirling curlicues.

"If you listen to my mom explain – it's some combination of how high tea is a British thing, and British is equivalent to Victorian. I tried telling her that British afternoon tea is not even remotely the same thing as bubble tea, but she liked her idea. Classic, right?"

"If anyone tried to tell my mother that tea was British I think she would have a stroke," I told him.

"The fewer people that know, the better." He shrugged. "Anyways. On paper, my mom is the owner, and I'm the store manager. I know you're busy with school, so I won't ask you if you want to work here, but…"

He trailed off. And I wanted to say yes, I really did. But between practice and Wenqing's corrections and the inevitable grind of college applications, there was just no way.

"Can't, I'm busy," I said, and left it at that. Within a few days a jaunty *Now Hiring!* sign would pop up in the window.

For now, I helped Daniel erect tables and couches, and hang up the blackboard paneling that would eventually become the café menu. The interior took on a sparse but homely appearance; most boba cafes I'd been too had décor and lighting in excess, as though someone had smashed a kaleidoscope and turned the neon remnants into a room. Here the furniture

was calm and blue, and the black wallpaper turned out to be chalkboard paper. Easier than installing a blackboard, and much less wasteful than chalkboard paint. It was severe – not unwelcoming, but functional and only functional. No hanging incandescent lightbulbs, no crawler plants, no shelf of knick-knacks. It was the sort of space that looked fun when it was full of people, and quite sad without.

"It would be a shame to leave this place after just a year," I told Daniel. "What's going to happen to it?"

"I'll find someone else to manage it. Worst case scenario, we'll sell it. It was a fixer-upper anyways," said Daniel. Then he ruffled my hair. "I wouldn't mind. If you get into MIT, maybe we'll be classmates. I'd take that over this boba shop."

Kenny and Albert and I made a habit of spending our afternoons at Daniel's café, lobbying multivariable calculus answers and physics homework at each other over iced drinks. Sometimes Daniel joined in. One time he offered us a room in the back to work in, because it had more seating and more importantly big folding tables, not just the squat little coffee tables sprinkled throughout the front of house.

"The previous owner ran a restaurant here," said Daniel as we unstacked chairs and assembled the plastic folding tables. "He put up a wall, and made this additional room in the back. For private parties, I think. I wanted to take the wall out again but my parents said that it would be a shame. I couldn't say no – they were paying for everything, after all. Investing, excuse me."

He pointed at the southern wall, a curved pane of tiled glass that stretched from floor to ceiling. "They put that in too, the previous owner. I hate it so much."

"It's kind of weird," Kenny piped up.

"Yeah," Albert said.

"It reminds me of the Fish Tank." Daniel exhaled. "That's what my old roommate called it. It's this new lab for Materials Science and Engineering, that they just finished before I left MIT. One entire wall is glass, so that the tourists can see Real Scientists doing real lab science."

"That's so stressful," I said.

"You have no idea, I hated it so much. And that wasn't even my department." He turned to leave. "Finally I can put this space to some good use."

Kenny and Albert looked at each other when he went back to the front. "He's cool," said Kenny.

"Yeah," Albert said.

"How do you know him?" They turned to me.

"He's only three years older than we are," I said, confused. "You guys didn't know him?"

"Now that you mention it," Kenny said, "I remember seeing him in freshman year."

"Yeah," Albert said. "Wasn't he in a car accident?"

"He was in Academic League," I snapped. "He was president." Just like Jessica. "You guys seriously don't remember?"

"I didn't join until sophomore year," said Kenny. "Hey, man. I said he's cool. Chill."

"How do you know him?" Albert asked.

"We're neighbors. He's Jessica's older brother."

"No way," Kenny breathed. "They're related?"

"That's weird, dude," said Albert. "He's like, so chill. And she's like, dude."

"She's like, so not chill," said Kenny.

"Yeah," Albert said. "Dude."

I decided not to push the issue. And Kenny and Albert, sticking by their assessment of Daniel as a Chill Dude, brought more of our friends. We became a regular group, retreating to the back room whenever we could. Daniel let us stay late, provided that we helped him sweep up the front and stack chairs while he cleaned the drink making equipment. Afterwards we would walk home together, Daniel and I, and wave to each other before we each disappeared behind the hedges.

I've always remembered the bad more than the good, the storm more than the calm, and so I find it hard to remember anything more to say about those afternoons. They were fine. They were nice. They made me happy. Not to say that I didn't relish the calm – I did, each second of those halcyon days were more precious than the last. If I could go back, if, if. But time doesn't go backwards, and we can't raise the dead from their graves. This isn't Peony Pavilion, my mother's favorite play, where the heroic young scholar resurrects his deceased maiden love with the will of the gods. I was almost a failed scholar, and Daniel was no maiden, and there was no red string of fate that bound us. Only a road, a bridge, a set of railroad tracks stretching into the distance.

Chapter 4

One evening, sometime in October, I stayed out too long and got back even later than my mother. Or maybe it was that she came home early that day, but you have to really plan in advance if you want to be home early anywhere in Silicon Valley. Starting around four in the afternoon, traffic on 680 is blocked up all the way until Pleasanton, sometimes up to Walnut Creek. The map goes bright red from Morgan Creek all the way up to Concord, a daily head cold that lasts well into the evening. Often I wonder if my mother left work so late because of bad traffic, and not working overtime.

Usually I was upstairs when the cacophony began; the hum of the garage door, the final sigh of the car engine before she pulled the key from the ignition, and the squeaky hinge on the kitchen-to-garage door that Dad said he would oil last year but never got around to doing. That night the lights were on in the kitchen, and I could hear the rustling of plastic and squeaking Styrofoam.

"Jia Shiyan!" Her shadow appeared in the kitchen doorway. "Where have you been!"

When I have a project that I really need to complete, when I'm dozing off, I think about the sound of my mother's voice when she shrieks my full name. I can't forget the sound.

Dinner was on the table already, so I kicked off my shoes by the door and raced to the kitchen. Backpack next to my desk, done. Mom pointed at the sink.

"Hands," she said.

We always ate dinner together, just the two of us since Wenqing was off at school again, and Dad was in China. Well, I ate, and she watched. She had her tea – Iron Guanyin – and her iPad.

"Anything interesting?" I asked, poking my chopsticks through my rice.

"No. Blogs, just blogs." She sipped her tea. The mug made a hollow sound when she set it down.

Blogs meant anything, anything in Chinese. Things she didn't have the patience to explain, things I didn't have the knowledge to understand. From elementary school my mother drilled both of her children in everything Chinese – reading and writing, poetry recitation, the occasional dabbling in painting and calligraphy, and an inexhaustible five thousand years of history. Smatterings, here and there, of Classical Chinese.

But all the cultural enrichment in the world weren't quite enough for us to contextualize current events, and despite eight long years of Chinese School, it still took the better part of an afternoon for me to struggle through a page of the newspaper. So we coexisted in silence, my mother and I, and as high school began and the schoolwork began to pile up – biology, chemistry, American history and geography – we drifted further apart still. I used to have feet in two boats. Used to.

I thought of Jessica. About how Daniel seemed to not exist, to her; at least that was what Daniel had implied. But no one made a fuss over Wenqing when she came back to visit, so why was I demanding special treatment for Daniel? They were all a part of our lives – maybe Daniel himself was here for so long that his renewed presence was inevitable, unremarkable; and his return to our small city was like waking from a brief nap.

The idea came to me, and I didn't stop it. Words tumbled out, bubble-like, and I didn't grab hold of them until it was too late. You can't put back what's been spilled.

"I ran into Daniel today," I started.

Mom looked up. “Who?”

“Daniel Zheng. Jessica’s older brother,” I said. “You know, he went to school at-”

“Oh! Jessica’s – ah, yes.” She pronounced it *Jie-xi-ka*. “How is he doing? I haven’t heard much about him.”

“Really?” My mom and Jessica’s parents were neighbors. They gossiped like sparrows, and when they ran out of gossip, they simply invented more. “Well, we’re three years apart, so not much to talk about.”

“Mmhm. So what is it?”

“Nothing!” I speared a piece of fish and dropped it onto my rice, all the while feeling pinned beneath her disapproving gaze. When I removed my chopsticks there were two little holes left in the white flesh, like a vampire bite. “I just, I ran into him in the shopping center down the street. Valley Square. Looks like he’s with that new tea place.”

“A café?” She put down her iPad, instantly suspicious. “Jessica’s *gege*-”

I regretted everything, in that moment.

“The one who was in the car crash,” and it was like a light went off in her head.

“When I was a freshman, yeah.” No, wait. “And he wasn’t in a car crash, a car crashed into him, it’s different -”

“The one who goes to MIT? Why is he here? School start even for you.”

“He’s taking a year off.” And I’d walked right into it; my mother was starting to put pieces together in her own particular way. I could see it in the furrow between her brows. I never should have brought Daniel up.

"Polite way to say drop out." She sounded oddly triumphant. I pushed my bowl and chopsticks away. I had no appetite and the fish looked like lint, and just as edible.

"No, not the same thing. He's going back to school, he's just taking some time off." Daniel was never even competition in the first place, for the simple reason of being three entire years older.

"Take half a year off, come back and work minimum wage with his high school diploma," my mother made a soft *tsking* sound and picked up her iPad again. "Aiya, raising that kind of son – parents should have take money and play stocks instead. Better value."

The last line, she said it in English for me to understand. We sat there, with the table and an ocean between us.

October trickled by in sheaves of binder paper, worksheets upon worksheets, the dull metronome of school assignments marching us forward. I spent more time with Daniel and less with Kenny and Albert, and Jessica became a blur that I saw occasionally at lunchtime. The faces at the café multiplied, but as time passed I knew fewer of them. Seniors had their noses pressed to the grindstone trying to balance classwork and college applications and whatever other commitments they had overloaded on.

One afternoon I found myself sitting cross-legged on the floor of Daniel's café, trying to do English homework. It was a busy and all the chairs were taken, but I'd staked out a corner of the floor by the blackboard wall, bent almost double so that I could write with my textbook balanced in my lap. I could've had a much more comfortable time if I went home, but I had told my mother that I was doing work in the library, and I planned to stick by that statement.

"What're you up to?"

"English homework." I looked up at Daniel. "It's not even related to what we did in class."

"What did you do in class?"

"College app essays. Early deadlines are in two weeks." I scrubbed with my eraser and blew away pink flakes. "We're almost done, thank god."

The lady who taught AP English Literature – Mrs. Jooss? Mrs Joos? – asked every student for a personal statement near the beginning of the year. You had to be a senior to take AP English, so we all knew what she meant. The essays rolled in – Common App, UC application – they were all the same thing, really, because the prompts all wanted the same thing. She read people's essays out loud in class for the first three weeks of October and asked us to critique them. We did three per day because she stopped exactly after the six hundred and fiftieth word, because in her words, "People who work in admissions offices aren't paid to read War and Peace. Once you hit the limit, you're done." I couldn't tell you which was worse, having the class spend no time on your writing or too much time. Both ended in reddened eyes and a suspicious sniffle.

"I remember that," said Daniel. "It sucked, but at least it's anonymous."

"But you can usually tell who wrote the essay. People will write about competitions that they won and volunteer work that they did." I rolled my head from side to side. "It's a Catch-22. People want honest critique on their writing so they submit their actual essays, and they suffer the consequences."

Daniel shook his head. "So what's your homework about?"

"It's poetry stuff." I rolled my head from side to side. My leg was starting to cramp. "I hate poetry."

"Mm." Daniel peers over my shoulder. "Oh, I have so many mixed feelings about Ezra Pound."

"Uh huh."

"He was a shitty person with good taste," said Daniel. "And sometimes he wrote passable poetry."

"Tell me about it," I groaned. "This shit – Dream of the River-Merchant's Wife -"

"The River-Merchant's Wife, a letter," Daniel corrected me. "You might be confusing it with 'Dream of the Fisherman's Wife', which is a very nice woodblock print of a lady being ravished by two octopi. Octopuses? Octopi."

"I've seen it." Wikipedia was a great and terrible place. "I was going to say, the textbook keeps telling me that 'The River-Merchant's Wife' is a translation of a poem by the Chinese poet Li Po. First of all, the title doesn't even sound like a Chinese translation."

"Oh boy."

"Also, who the fuck is Li Po?"

"Li Po is actually Li Bai," Daniel explained. "I looked this up when we were assigned this poem in class too."

"Li Bai?" Ok, come on. "Li Bai, like 'Moonlight before my bed' guy, that guy?"

There's no English poetic equivalent to Li Bai – his poetry, the pinnacle of Tang dynasty culture, is ubiquitous in Chinese education. The well-known verses are more nursery rhyme than literature.

"Yeah, that guy," said Daniel.

"Li Po doesn't sound even remotely similar to Li Bai, what the hell -"

"It's the old Romanization system. Like how Tsingtao beer is from Qingdao, they're one and the same. Chiang Kai-shek is Jiang Jieshi." Daniel smiled. "It's not really important if you're just trying to analyze the meaning of the poem. But the translation history is worth learning a little about.

"So one day, Ezra Pound inherits some notebooks from this guy named Ernest Fenollosa, who had a thing for Japanese art and actually taught in Tokyo for a while. Fenollosa was trying to translate some famous Chinese poetry, but he died before he could finish. If you look at his notes, he writes down every character in Li Bai's poem in Japanese *kun'yomi*, and jots down the meaning of the character as well. Again, based on his knowledge of Japanese."

"You can't fucking do that," I sputtered. "Japanese kanji are mostly the same as Chinese characters but sometimes they mean totally different things. It's like, like, *niang* in Chinese means mother, or lady, but the same character is pronounced *musume* in Japanese, but that means daughter. You can't fucking equate the two even if they look the same."

"It was his passion project and he worked with what he knew," said Daniel. "Anyways, Ezra Pound took those notes, and then kind of – well he looked at the characters and imagined what form they were trying to illustrate. He loved the pictograph concept, that Chinese characters represented ideas instead of sounds. And he gets a lot of credit for interpreting the poem with modernist flair. And that's how we get 'Dream of the River-Merchat's Wife', which is a half-baked translation of Li Bai's *Chang Gan Xing.*"

"Chinese people aren't the only ones who make knockoffs," I said. "Right?"

"That's not the - it doesn't matter," Daniel rocked back and forth on his heels, and eventually got to his feet. "Sorry, I should leave you alone."

"No, finish what you were going to say," I told him. I wanted to hear.

"It doesn't matter whether Ezra Pound actually had enough knowledge to make a proper translation. What matters is he published it and was famous enough, and that people read his work. In the end it's his poetry that's in your textbook, and it's his name that you know." Daniel looked at the wall while he spoke, not at me. "If you make people think that you're competent, then eventually you become competent, yeah?"

No shit. Daniel looked at me with earnest brown eyes, and all I could think was, *no fucking shit, that's your profound advice?* We all knew that, we all played that game. What did he think I had been doing with the past four years, burning all the midnight oil that there ever was? 'Fake it till you make it' – what cliché, terrible advice.

I looked at Daniel again, at his earnest eyes. He really believed what he was telling me. I looked at Daniel and I felt disappointment clench around my heart, and then I heard my mother's voice whispering in my ear, and then I knew I had to leave before I said something stupid.

Mom arrived home at her usual hour. She was angry about something, maybe work-related, I'll never know. I heard her moving downstairs, making a racket in the living room and in the kitchen, and when she called my name the first time I pretended I couldn't hear her. Funny, isn't it? How things unwind from such small beginnings.

"Shiyan," Mom called again. "Jia Shiyan!"

"I'm working," I answered. I put my headphones on, so I had some sort of excuse as to why I hadn't answered her the first time.

She was on edge. I could tell by the footsteps pounding up the stairs.

"What are you doing?"

I pointed at the physics textbook and worksheets spread across my bed. In hindsight that was my first mistake – I should've said something, should've taken my headphones off. "Ignoring" her by not giving her my full attention and acknowledging her was disrespectful. I had that beaten into me, growing up.

"Come downstairs. Don't sit on your bed and work. You hunch. It is bad for your back." Mom paused. "When is that due?"

"Friday. I'm reviewing for my test."

"If it is due Friday then you can work on essays first." She turned around. "Work hard."

I mumbled as she left, "I'm working on everything." Then I held my breath until I was sure that she hadn't heard that.

Physics lasted for two minutes before she stomped upstairs again. "Shiyan, what is this?"

Mom slammed a plastic cup on my desk. Ribbed plastic, with a green straw stuck through the heat-sealed wrapper over the top. It was my drink from Daniel's café, earlier today – there were still dregs of milk swirling at the bottom, and two leftover tapioca pearls. I usually put my empty cups in the trash can under my desk and took out my own trash before Mom could see anything, but today laziness overcame me, and I'd used the kitchen garbage instead. That was my second mistake.

"You said you at the library," her voice rose in pitch. "You text me, say you studying at library!"

"I was!" I looked at her, third mistake. "I went to Daniel's on the way home, so what?"

"You can't be trusted." Mom slapped the back of my head. "Show me your essays."

She dialed Wenqing furiously while I opened up the right folder on my computer. "Hello?" said my sister's tinny, filtered voice.

"Why is she on speaker -" I hissed.

"Hello? Mom?" said Wenqing.

"Show me your essays," said our mother, in a voice that would tolerate no argument. "Qingqing, has he been sending you essays?"

"Yeah," she answered. "Mom, can I call you back tomorrow? I have an early class-"

"One second," said Mom. "That it?"

She jabbed a finger at my laptop screen. The LCD screen rippled. "Yes," I said.

"Too short! How this so short?"

"Mom," said Wenqing through a rush of static. "They're short answer questions."

"Look," I said, scrolling through the pages. "There's more than one. I've been working on them all, ok?"

"Up, go up." She pointed again. "Why this one blank?"

"Which one is blank?" asked Wenqing, the same time that I said, "I can't think of anything to write."

"Question four," Mom all but shrieked. "What you mean, can't think of anything to write?"

When she became very angry her speech degenerated into a scramble of Chinese and badly formed English. I jumped backwards, bouncing into the wall, as she swept my worksheets and textbook aside and unplugged my laptop, scooping it up along with her phone.

"You work downstairs," she said, snarling. "You work where I can see you."

"Why does he have to?" Wenqing complained over the phone as we descended. "You're not listening to him, and you're not listening to me."

"None of you brats do anything until I am standing behind your shoulder and watching your every move," Mom told her. "This for your own good."

They continued to fight as I took my seat at the first-floor desk and stared at my computer screen, reading and rereading the prompt for question four.

"Let Shiyan write," Wenqing was saying. "Give him some time and stop stressing out. It's a short answer question with a two-hundred-and-fifty-word maximum, and early acceptance deadlines are two months away. You need to relax."

"If the answer is so short, why he need so much time? He can write it now and finish."

Wenqing yawned. "Mom, it's so late, can we do this tomorrow?"

"She's right," I said. "And I have physics homework."

"See? Just let -" Wenqing's voice went silent. Mom put the phone down and stalked over to my desk, and this time she was really, truly livid.

"You and your sister, you think you can gang up on me?" When she got that angry her voice went soft and quiet and calm, and the only place you could see her fury was in her eyes. "This is your life! Your future! You want to put it off and have fun, go loiter with friends after school, you come back and talk back to me."

"I'll write the essay," I said, and looked her in the face. "I'll do it right now, would that make you happy?"

"Not about making me happy! You not writing essay for me!" Mom screeched. "Your big head is completely empty. I didn't spend seventeen years of blood and sweat raising stupid trash. Don't know good from bad, thinks the world owes you something. World owes you nothing."

"I – what do you want me to -"

"Talk back, always talking back." She circled to the back of her desk and my stomach cramped; my gut knew what was coming before I did. "Hand."

"No, no -" I got up from my desk. "Hey -"

"No hand? Then arm." She came back with the scratcher clenched tight in her fingers, and cornered me between my desk and the bookcase before I could dodge away. "Give me your -"

I twisted my arm away the first time but on the second pass she seized my sleeve and pulled it up past the elbow, stretching the fabric tight, and delivered three sharp raps to the inside of my left forearm where the muscle was thickest over the bone, where the vein from the crook of my elbow curved upward toward my wrist. I'd stopped struggling by the third strike, and she was swift enough that before I remembered to make a noise, any noise, it was over. I don't think I even heard a sound. This choreography was familiar enough that I could step out of my skin for a second, and just observe.

The trick is to leave pain, but no bruises. For that purpose the inside of the forearm works well – it's easily accessible and there's plenty of flesh to dampen the blow. Long sleeved

shirts are there in case bruises do happen. First comes numbness, then pins and needles, and then a slow shockwave of pain spreading up and down the arm like fire. Fingers feel like nothing if the strike is hard enough, but that only lasts a minute at best.

My mother stood over me, her jade bracelet at eye level. The light from my desk lamp bounced off the polished surface, polished green and white, smoky swirls. I watched the light change as my mother stood there, and her wrist moved with every breath. It was at eye level, so easy to see. Since when had I been on the ground?

I focused on the back scratcher she held. It felt good to think, to focus. I could use a distraction. It was three inches wide and about two feet long. Maybe a little less. A long flat piece, with curved edges, and an end that curved into a flat-ended claw. It was old, it had been in our house for as long as I could remember. The veneer was worn off at the sides, and there were traces of black paint where once there might've been some calligraphy. That was gone too.

"Do you want the other arm as well?" asked my mother. She shifted the scratcher in her grip. It was old, without a doubt. Wenqing and I used to play at swordfighting with it. We had the back scratcher and a meter stick, and we played rock-paper-scissors for the meter stick because it had the longer reach, and none of us liked the back scratcher. I wondered where the meter stick was now.

"No," I answered. "I don't need it."

She walked away, and I watched her feet retreat behind her desk, and then come back. "Get up," she said, and swung her foot into my shin, just below the knee. It didn't feel like anything. "Get up and work."

I watched her feet retreat again, and I heard her walk to the living room and say, "Hello?"

My mouth was open; I had been breathing through my mouth this whole time. I reached for my forearm and worked my fingers around, twisting. It felt fine.

College Physics by Serway and Vuille was waiting. I leafed to the chapter on circuits and realized that my worksheets were still upstairs – Mom had only brought the book down. She was in the living room, and it didn't seem like a good idea to pass her so I could go up the stairs. I could finish my notes, I supposed. Behind the wall I could hear Mom shouting at someone on the phone.

When she came back I was done with one chapter and had started on the next. "I made an appointment," Mom said, standing in front of my desk. "For you."

I said nothing, just looked at her. Focused on her clavicle, so that there was no way she would think I was making rude eye contact.

"Wenqing is not taking your college admission seriously," she said. "So I made appointment for consultation. For you."

"Thank you."

"Appointment is this Thursday. After school, come home. Then I will pick you up."

"Ok."

"Finish your essays before, you understand?"

"I know. I'll start right now."

I listened to her go, and then I opened up my laptop and reread Question Four.

Describe the world you come from; for example, your family, clubs, school, community, city, or town. How has that world shaped your dreams and aspirations?

I stared at the screen until I heard Mom coming back, heard the familiar creak as she descended the stairs this time. She put her phone on my desk and pressed speaker. “Tell him,” she barked. “It’s his life.”

“Shiyan? It’s *jiejie*.” Wenqing only referred to herself as ‘older sister’ in third person when she was trying to placate Mom. It was one of the rare times she played the obedient Chinese daughter, and I knew she hated it. “Listen, I don’t think this consultant is a good idea.”

Tell Mom, I wanted to say. She’s the one who’s pushing it. She’s the one who’s pushing everything.

“I have friends who have used services like that to get into college,” said Wenqing. “They look at your essays and check them, and keep you on track for your applications. Like a secretary, kind of. That’s all you’ll get if you go to see one. If we’d signed you up during sophomore or junior year, they would be helping you write applications for summer programs instead, maybe helping to manage your class schedule.”

“Ok.” Smile and nod, smile and nod. Mom liked to pretend that this was going to be my decision, like I had any agency.

“Sounds pretty good to me,” interjected Mom. “Why you say is not good idea?”

“It’s a lot of money,” said Wenqing.

“Money is not the problem,” Mom snapped. “As long as you go to college, I can sell car, I can refinance house. Money no problem.”

“I knew you’d say that,” answered Wenqing, her lips curling. “Don’t guilt trip him.”

"He want to go to MIT early. You know what MIT acceptance rate is? Eight percent."

"Would you stop with the eight percent thing?" I said. "I got into RSI."

"RSI, RSI," Mom pitched her voice up, mocking me. "You think RSI make you invincible? RSI is one sentence on your resume. You are danger. You are comfortable – what is word?"

"Complacent," said Wenqing.

Why are you helping her? I wondered.

"Cao Cao had eight hundred thousand troops at the Red Cliffs and all the land north of the Yangtze in his grasp, when Zhuge Liang burned his ships to the water and forced him to run with his tail between his legs." Mom was going on one of her Chinese history digressions again. "Xiang Yu had Liu Bang practically exiled to the edge of the empire, in the mountains of Sichuan. Four years later Liu Bang trapped Xiang Yu at Gaixia and crushed his army with a song."

"But to get back to my point," said Wenqing. "Everything that consultants do, with the summer apps and managing class schedules, Shiyan has done by himself. He's done it for three years now. And he has me to help."

"You should not be complacent," said Mom, glaring at me. "Complacent men die. You have eight percent chance to get into MIT in November."

"I have a twelve percent chance when I apply with the early pool," I said. "And practically everyone who doesn't get in gets deferred."

"Oh, yes, deferred. Deferred is same as not getting in." Mom shook her head. "You have so many excuses. Once you deferred, then what? You think you have better chance when it is January and you are one in twelve thousand instead of one in eight? Stay complacent, you will

lose. When Xiang Yu lose at Gaixia, he was so ashamed, he ride to the bank of the Wujiang and cut his own throat.”

Chapter 5

"Congratulations," said Daniel, "For being done with college applications."

"Thanks," I said. I was exhausted. My arms ached, in stripes. There was a tender spot right under my ribs that sent a sharp pain lancing up my side when I breathed in too deep. I shuffled over so that Daniel could sit down. "Thanks for coming here so late at night."

We were sharing a bench next to the faculty parking lot. Facing the hills, watching the palm trees sway. It was warm for November and it still hadn't rained.

"You were lucky. I just closed up." He watched me press at my side when I inhaled, and winced. "I thought your mom would be happy now that you're done with apps."

I thought so too. I was so glad, just then, that the school only had cheap sodium light bulbs. The light was piss-yellow and dyed everything the same color – everything turned either black or an ugly shade of saturated lemon. You couldn't see the puffy skin under my eyes, and the yellow rinsed away the swollen red.

"She found out that Wenqing drove us to Sacramento." We'd gone over the weekend, because Daniel knew someone who was involved with the fight over prop 37 that wanted some people to help him carry protest signs. Daniel thought it would be fun, and I agreed. It was the first weekend after I finished college apps, and I wanted to do something that wasn't staring a screen all day. "My mom found the tomato and crossbones shirt."

"And she – I don't understand. What?"

"I don't ask anymore." I just took it. "Look, I don't want to think about it anymore."

Daniel sat silent. When he spoke again, he stuttered a little. "Have you gone roofing before?"

"Roofing?"

"Yeah, roofing. Climbing on the roof."

"I – that's not what I expected, but ok – wait, can you do that?"

"Who said we can't?"

"Why?"

"Well we're here already, aren't we?" He got to his feet. The hairs on the back of my neck raised up as I looked at the empty campus. I'd never seen it so deserted. It didn't feel right.

"I can't believe that you're a senior in high school and you haven't been on the roof yet," said Daniel. "Where's your sense of adventure?"

"I didn't know we could."

It took Daniel some five to ten minutes to get all the indignation out of his system, but eventually he admitted to me that he was a bit of an expert in this particular subject. Maybe that MIT education was good for something. He'd applied his analytical eye to our school building, and determined that there were in fact three paths to the roof.

"I'll show you," said Daniel. He slapped the dust from his jeans, striding away in the direction of the arts department. Ignoring the ache in my arms and shoulder, I followed him down the sloping stairs.

The first path was through climbing the trees that surrounded the theater building. By day they were unremarkable, crooked limbs in brown and gray bark topped with some sad tufts of vegetation, but by night they were beautiful. The bark split in black and silver stripes, the

leaves twisting in the breeze. Daniel surveyed the various trees until he found one that he liked, and proceeded to hoist himself into the lower branches.

"It's a pretty easy route," he told me, patting the tree trunk. "Good climbing tree. But the problem is that you can't go anywhere, once you get on the roof here. The theater doesn't connect to any of the other buildings."

We circled around the back of the school, all the way around until we reached the English department. The janitors used the patch of gravel behind Mr. Morrissey's portable classroom to house the school's dumpsters and storage trailers. Daniel worked his fingers around the bars securing one storage trailer's doors and shimmied his way up the steel mouth like a spider. His height meant that he only had to make it halfway up the side before he could reach for the top of the trailer and use that to pull himself up. When I tried, I ended up slipping off the bars before I could grasp at the top. Daniel held his hands out to me the second time I tried scrabbling my way up, but that did nothing, because I couldn't even reach him.

"It's fine," said Daniel. "We'll try something else."

The high school was built sprawling across a slope, with the English department buildings at the bottom. A chain-link fence separated the Science buildings from the English ones, and because of the height difference, the top of the fence was actually a little higher than the roof of the English department's roof. This time Daniel had me go first. I stuck the toes of my sneakers in the chain-link diamonds, holding on tighter and tighter as I got further and the fence began to sway.

"You might have to jump," Daniel shouted from below. His voice echoed off the walls and into the eucalyptus trees.

There were two feet of empty air between the top of the fence and the roof. I clambered over the fence and half leapt, half rolled onto asphalt shingles. Grit clung to my neck, sticking because of the sweat, and fell out of my shirt when I got to my knees. Daniel was scaling the fence after me, his movements many times more graceful. When he jumped he did it in a single motion, and he landed on his feet.

"C'mon," he said, pulling me to my feet. "Careful, don't trip on the pipes."

It wasn't just pipes – the roof was littered in trash; discarded tennis balls, empty soda cans, and on the overhang by the cafeteria there was a single stretched out sock. Signs of other travelers, I supposed. Some of them were useful though. The cafeteria, for whatever reason, was much taller than the other buildings, and it would've taken us a running jump to get on top, but some previous delinquent had placed an upside-down trash can at the base to serve as a stair. It buckled ominously when I placed my feet on it, and when Daniel used it after me it groaned in a hollow mental *thunk*, the bottom inverting.

"You know that building across from where Café Victoria is," said Daniel, glaring at the trash can as we ascended. "The one on the corner."

"Yeah. Yellow warehouse doors, that one?"

"Yep. I found out the other day that it's actually a local history museum. They open twice a week, for four hours at a time." Daniel threw his head back and laughed. "So much for accessible learning. I had to make a reminder on my calendar to remember their hours, but last week I actually went."

"No way."

We'd put the English department far behind us, and next was the Math wing. "Did you know this school was built in the sixties?" Daniel asked me. "Back then the east bay was still mostly farmland. Orchards and stuff."

"Huh, really." The wind up here was stronger too. I zipped up my hoodie. "Like Brentwood?"

"Brentwood is more suburbs now than farms, so yes, you're absolutely right." We circled around the bell tower, avoiding patches where the roof sagged into the courtyard below. "The museum had all this historical memorabilia. Old farm tools and ladders and stuff. Milkman uniforms – we used to have the largest dairy in the county, did you know that?"

Surely that was also why this school took up so much space. All the buildings were single story, the separate wings connected to each other by covered walkways. If I ignored the endless housing developments and just looked to the hills and the grazing cows, I could imagine this city in the past, a farming town with a new high school, built large because they had so much land they didn't know what to do with it all.

"There was this big mural in the museum," Daniel said as we approached the library. "The placard said it was from the eighties. It had the whole city on it, from the mountains to the bay, with these little cartoon people and cartoon buildings. The Mission with a little priest outside pointing at the bells."

"Sounds cute."

The school library was built on the high end of the slope, and featured a gable roof that peaked only a little shorter than the bell tower. We both headed towards it in wordless agreement.

Daniel helped me climb onto the air conditioning unit, offering his shoulder as support while I lifted myself up. “Put your foot right there -”

I slipped, and the fall was so sudden that even my impulse to scream died in my throat as I lurched backward. But Daniel was there, with his arms around my waist, holding me up.

“I’ve got you, I’ve got you,” he repeated. “You won’t fall.”

“Ok.” I swallowed, straining because my throat was so dry. Trying to catch my breath. “I’m going to try again.”

The library was covered in black asphalt shingles and rose upward at a forty-degree angle. I climbed on with hands and knees first, and then straightened up into a forward-leaning stance, and found that I could still walk upright because the shingles had so much friction. Daniel joined me soon after, and together we walked towards the ridge, stopping at the top.

The view was fantastic. I could see everything – the creek surrounded by dark thickets of eucalyptus, the thin band of white and gold that was the Nimitz heading northward. Beyond that was the bay, a flat black shape surrounded on all shores by streamers of yellow glitter. If I squinted I could even make out the lines crisscrossing the water, Dumbarton and San Mateo bridge, now and then blocked by the spiky head of a swaying palm tree.

“Anyways, there was this mural,” said Daniel, folding his hoodie into a pillow. He placed it just below the ridge and lay down with his head facing the hills, so that the roof protected him from the ocean winds pushing at us. “And I spent a really long time looking at it, because it’s fun, you know? You see a lot of things you recognize, like the park and the Mission and stuff. But then I realized, that I was just looking at the different places, because the little cartoon people – they looked like my old teachers or people I knew from church, people who

were probably born in this town and were gonna die here someday – but none of them looked like me."

I looked at the hills and followed them south. South of us was the Mission, where once upon a time Spanish Catholics had tried to civilize the Indians in their own cruel way. Even though by the sixties their barracks had been empty for over a hundred years, it was still a farming town. And the Internet didn't take hold of the valley until the nineties. That was when our parents came to America, on planes instead of ships, with nothing except the clothes on their back and dreams for their children, but also with doctorate degrees.

When the tourists came to San Francisco they wanted to see the bridge, they wanted to drive down Lombard street, and the ones that went to Chinatown pointed at the grannies in their quilted jackets, bickering over vegetables. They pointed at the red lanterns and the big block lettered signs and stepped through oil-stained roads and scraps of burnt firecrackers and said, yes, this is Chinatown, where the Real Chinese live squeezed into three crumbling city blocks.

Our Chinatown was a web of towns, sprawling across the bay area and leaking across the hills. Wherever there were houses worth buying and schools worth attending, the sprawl infiltrated. Chinatown was the SAT center we attended when we were too old for daycare, and the boba tea cafes we congregated at on our precious breaks. Chinatown was the nameless, faceless corporate headquarters and industrial parks that metastasized across Mountain View and route 237 in lamellar sheets of glass and steel. Chinatown was the titanic Asian-American shopping center across from the Cisco Systems campus with the halal Chinese restaurant, the

one where the waitresses yelled at you over a sea of Formica tables even while they served sesame pancakes that were to die for. What a dissonant place.

I chuckled, a broken exhalation that stuttered out of my lungs. Daniel looked at me. "What?"

"I'm remembering English class in sophomore year." We'd stepped on my old classroom on the way here. "Mr. Morrissey was new that year. And you know how sophomore English is always world literature."

"Yeah." Daniel seemed to be drifting off. "Sure."

"He got really annoyed when we read *The Joy Luck Club*. He was making all these statements about the symbolism in the book and none of us were really responding, I guess, so he was so frustrated." I frowned. "He never said anything but I could tell he was thinking that like, most of his students were Chinese, and the book is about a bunch of Chinese children and their parents, and a lot of the symbolism is based on Chinese folktales, so why -"

I trailed off. My point was made.

"He expected you to know based on who you were," said Daniel. "Right?"

The last red streaks on the horizon faded to purple, to indigo, to ink and shadow. It was warm for November and the sky was clear, leaving only stars to fill the night canvas. There were no clouds and no moon, nothing to blot out the brilliance. Daniel raised his hand, tracing the path of a white streak blazing across the sky. Others followed, zipping past my head and into the shadow of eucalyptus trees.

Shooting stars. I remembered the news alert I'd gotten, while I was waiting for Daniel to come. The Orionids were here tonight. I followed their flight until they disappeared into the

horizon, then watched the next burst. The ground below was glowing, the freeways and the streetlamps and the school safety lighting. It was a shame – I'd see more shooting stars if we weren't surrounded by all this glitter. They'd stand out, then.

"We should've brought Jessica," I whispered. "She loves meteor showers."

We went stargazing once, when Jessica and I were in middle school. My mother took Wenqing on college visits and left me to the Zhengs, and Daniel and Jessica's parents let us camp in the backyard. Jessica lay on her back in the grass and watched the shooting stars until she fell asleep, and Daniel and I had to carry her into her sleeping bag.

"No, she wouldn't," Daniel sounded – sad. "She's busy."

"That's true."

But it was more than that. I knew it, and Daniel knew it. These little unspoken things, they piled up like stones. I knew that when Daniel started speaking again he wouldn't stop.

A dam breaking, a wall collapsing in the heart. Tightness building in your chest, intercostals straining until you let free and said all the words you needed to, gagging on the ones building up in your throat because you couldn't talk fast enough. I know now.

"I'm trying to give her space," Daniel started slow. Then he got up on his elbows and I knew it was real. "I'm trying, I really am. But she won't talk to me, you know? And it's been months. This goes without saying, but it's like – it's like I'm some kind of shame. *Dishonor on your family! Dishonor on your cow!* Like I'm trying to see it from her perspective, and I can and I can't. I know that she thinks I'm a quitter, like I gave up on school because I wasn't strong enough – something Darwinian that our parents fed her. No, scratch that. It's not mom and

dad's fault. Mom and dad – like, they get it now. But Jessica's acting out, it's not because of them. It's because of us. It's because of this whole place -"

He swings his arm in the wind, gesturing at the school around us, and smashes his fist into the roof tiles.

Darwin in the water, Darwin in the air. When you walked through the classroom doors and inhaled a big huff, it intoxicated you. The anxiety, the achievement, the want of it all. The want.

If it's not me, it'll be you, so it has to be me. I want I want I want –

"I don't know how to fix her. I don't know how to fix you." Daniel lies back on the tiles. "Any of us. I guess – it's not right, none of this is right. You try telling people that you feel this way and they're like, 'You're such a spoiled millennial, everyone goes through hardship.' But I'm not – like it's not even the hardship or whatever that matters. Like why is it so important that I'm in the top five percent or whatever the requirement is now? I don't have to make a lasagna in the top five percent of lasagnas in order for you to eat it. If it's in the top forty percent of all lasagnas ever made, I can promise you it'll be a bomb lasagna. But that's like a D grade lasagna."

I follow his lead and pull my hood up, lying down on the roof. "You kind of lost sight of your point, there."

Daniel clenches and unclenches his hands. "I know. And yeah, it's like – I'm always thinking about how I'd say this to Jessica, you know? If you make it too serious she'll just raise an eyebrow and say that I'm too melodramatic, she'll hear 'blah blah I'm older than you, listen

to my authority,' and that's not it! I'm trying to tell her that I've been there. I know how futile this whole game is."

The train passed, its low howl echoing through the trees.

The wind grew stronger on the roof, and I scooted further down, and closer to Daniel. It was past midnight, probably. I wondered if my Mom was going to notice anytime soon, that I'd sneaked out of my room. I had laid awake in my bed for almost an hour, listening as she showered, brushed her teeth, and went to bed. Then I left.

"So you're taking a year off -" here I didn't see Daniel flinch, but I felt it – "And that sucks. But why does Jessica care so much? Why does she hate you so much for it that she won't even talk to you? It's not like the things that you do impact how people think of her."

"But they do." He sounded so sad. "But she thinks that they do."

"Well, why?"

"My parents used to be so proud of how Jessica and I never fought." Daniel said. "Even when we were kids, we were such good friends. We liked the same shows, the same books, the same music. Then when we grew older she started saying that it was odd. Brothers were supposed to be annoying and they weren't supposed to be nice to you, she said. They weren't supposed to understand you, to know what to say when you were sad. To notice who she crushed on, and give her advice."

I shook my head. "The grass is always greener, except when it's not supposed to be green."

"Right? What was I supposed to say to that?" He sagged, as much as someone could sag when they were already lying down. "She started acting like this in middle school, and it was awkward for about two years, and then I went to college. We haven't been close since then."

"I still don't get it," I said.

"It's more than MIT."

I watched him struggle with the thing that he wasn't telling me. His chest heaved; he looked like he was in pain. "Daniel, you don't have to force -"

"I'm gay," he blurted out, at the same time. Our crosstalk blended together and echoed into the Orionids, the silver streaks carrying them away in a blur. We lay on our backs and watched them fade.

"I'm gay," Daniel repeated.

Huh.

"That's cool. I guess that could be easier on you," my mouth said, working on autopilot. "You wouldn't need to spend any time learning your way around a second set of anatomy."

"Shiyan, what the fuck." Daniel covered his face. "That's…that's not even a good joke."

"I'm serious," I insisted. "I hear things. That shit sounds difficult."

Daniel didn't move his hands. "I can't believe…"

I wanted to say – what should I say? Moving away from him would definitely send the wrong message, but would he think that I was interested in him if I moved closer? Up, then. Should I get up? But that also looked like moving away from him, didn't it. Down – how was I supposed to – well, sinking into the roof seemed like a good idea by now.

"Are you awake?" Daniel waved his hand over my face. I wanted to say something nice, that would make him feel better, but I'd missed my timing.

"But Jessica's not – she never seemed homophobic to me." I thought of all the times Elaine Lan had come to us at lunch and hounded people to attend the Gay-Straight Alliance meeting. Jessica had gone, and happily too.

"She's not," he said, forcefully. "Jessica and my parents, they're very loving people. They go to mass every week, they donate to charity, they pray for my soul. They write letters to our congressmen urging the repeal of the death penalty. They vote for Democrats even though they oppose abortion – my mom says that she can't force other people, people who aren't Catholic to adhere to her values."

"That sounds pretty reasonable."

"But I'm also not other people," Daniel pointed out. "I'm family."

I peered at him. "Are you still Catholic?"

Daniel laughed, hollow. "I should be. My sister prays for my soul very earnestly. She still loves me that much, enough to hope that I avoid eternal damnation."

He hadn't really answered my question, I thought.

"It could be worse," said Daniel. "No matter how bad it is, it could be worse."

Overhead, the Orionids had started fading.

"Decisions come out in a month," murmured Daniel. "Are you ready?"

"Yeah," I said, grateful for the change in subject. I didn't want to say the wrong thing to Daniel about his gayness. My issues were much easier to parse. "Wenqing said my essays were good. So did the consultant."

"You hired one after all?"

"My mom said it was a good idea." I closed my eyes. "She said that I should rely on Wenqing to save her some money, but at the last minute she changed her mind. Or got cold feet. One of those."

"Mm. And you applied to…"

"To MIT." There was nowhere else.

"Did you like it there? You did RSI, right?" Daniel coughed. "Sorry if you've told me already. I feel like everyone must ask you that question."

"I liked Boston," I said. "It was fun, but I didn't think that I deserved to be there. It's like when everyone around you tries so hard, and they finally attain a goal and they're happy about it, and you're there too – I was happy but I wasn't their level of happy, you know? So then I wondered if I was meant to be there at all."

I twist and massage my forearms, the sore streaks where I'd been blocking blows.

"I'd written all the essays, I had the scores and everything. All the letters. I had a rec letter from a lab that I worked for up in Berkeley." I didn't mention that it was Wenqing who found the lab, who pushed me to apply, who half-drafted the email asking for a recommendation letter when I didn't have the courage to write it myself. "But it was like – was I at RSI because I wanted it? Or was I there because it was where I should be?"

"Yeah. Yeah, I get you." Daniel folded his hands across his chest. "I get you."

"I don't know who – what I want." I sat up. "This one time, Jessica made me go to quiz bowl practice with her. I was telling her about a question that I powered afterwards, something about *Journey to the West*."

"Jessica and I watched a few episodes as a kid," Daniel reminisced. "One of our relatives gave us the DVDs for Christmas."

"The eighties version, right -"

"That's the only adaptation worth watching! According to my aunt." He shook his head. "I found a clip on Youtube the other day. The CG is so bad. When they're fighting the skeleton lady, and they just fade the actress out and fade some bones in – oh my god, I could not stop laughing."

"Yeah, exactly, that one." I pondered where I was going with this line of thought. "You remember how it ends, right?"

"It's been a while, but I think Sun Wukong defeats the skeleton spirit, but Tripitaka revokes his disciple status because he thinks that the monkey has killed a person instead of a spirit. Then Tripitaka gets captured by the next monster because he doesn't have the protection of Sun Wukong -" Daniel looks at me. "That's all I remember."

"That's not what I was talking about," I told him. "But you have a good memory."

"Yes." Daniel did a little fist pump.

"I was talking about the ending overall. The ending to the journey."

"Jessica and I never made it that far, sorry."

"Well there's a whole back and forth after they arrive in India about whether Tripitaka deserves the scriptures, but eventually he gets them from the Shakyamuni Buddha, and he goes back to China and deposits them in the palace of Chang'an. Then Shakyamuni summons them back, and he tells Tripitaka that in a previous life, Tripitaka was a disciple, but he had been demoted in reincarnation. Basically he's like, *hello my prodigal son, welcome back, do you want*

to be immortal now? Then he moves on to the disciples, and he tells the Monkey King that because he's been so good at protecting Tripitaka, that the Monkey King can also become a Buddha.

"Keep in mind, this is the same guy who fought Heaven at the beginning of the story and was crushed under Buddha's finger-mountains. He starts off as only a monkey, but he becomes a leader and a warrior and eventually he fights the inevitability of death, and then Heaven itself – but in the end he's begging for a place next to Shakyamuni Buddha's Lotus Throne.

"We're supposed to believe that along the way, fighting all these monsters, the Monkey King was converted to the Noble Eightfold Path? Or does he become the Victorious Fighting Buddha because otherwise, he's going to be crushed under a mountain again for saying no?"

"I think you kind of lost sight of your point, there," said Daniel.

"I just never understood that ending," I said to him, staring up at the stars, searching for constellations. "Why he changed his mind. What's that supposed to tell me about who I am and where I'm supposed to be? What I'm supposed to want, or strive for?"

"That story is about the Monkey King. That's not you." Daniel's hand found mine in the dark. "You're you. Shiyan Jia. Don't choose your path based on other people's stories. We're our own person, each and every one of us. We're only people, aren't we? Not stories."

I watched him get up, shake the dust and grit from his hoodie and swing the jacket around his shoulders.

"It's cold," said Daniel. "We should go."

We stood up on the ridge of the library roof, and I had one more look at the bay and the Silicon Valley sprawl that surrounded it. All the flat buildings, stretching for miles and miles and

connected by dense lattices of roadwork. All the squat warehouses piled up in their rows and rows.

As a child I thought that circuit boards were city maps. The microchips were little buildings, the etchings the roads that ran between them. Three-dimensional maps of planned cities, and every time my mother laid down a road on the green board I imagined a new one springing up out of the ground via some strange magic, my mother drawing paths for other people with a twitch of her fingers. My mother brought her work home when I was young, circuit boards stuffed in padded envelopes lining her work bag, and I would wriggle into her arms or peek out from behind her shoulder, watching her solder the delicate connections. Sometimes she took my hand in hers and we drew the paths together, and she would tell me what a good job I'd done, and how smart I was. How far I'd go.

Daniel pointed at the hills. "Look at that."

The hills were pale, the same way that clouds were still discernibly white even against a night sky. They were that color because they were so dry, I realized. The yellow grass brittle and white, flaking away in the wind, like handfuls of hair that had been bleached one time too many.

"It's spooky," I said, finally.

"It's November," answered Daniel. "It's late November and it still hasn't rained."

"Do you think it will?"

"I can taste when it's going to rain," said Daniel. "So no, I don't think so. Not yet."

I followed him, retracing our footsteps back to the English department, the point where we climbed up. At the sight of the chain-link fence I took a deep breath, ready to do my

awkward scramble over the top again. Out the corner of my eye I saw Daniel leap from the roof.

"Daniel!"

I ran to the edge. He stood calf-deep in the pine needles, waving up at me with a huge smile across his face.

"It's fine," he shouted, happier than I'd ever seen him. "Jump! It's soft."

"Are you sure?"

"It's a faster way to get down, and I'll catch you," he said, spreading his arms. "Come on."

I leapt. It felt like flying, for a few seconds, when I soared weightless through the air. I had just enough time to think how odd it was, that feeling weightless was the same as surrendering myself wholly to gravity, before I landed in the dense mulch and felt Daniel's arms wrap tight around me. In the dark he smelled like detergent and clean sweat, and in that moment forgot who he liked, who I liked, or even why it mattered in the first place; I closed my eyes and only wished for to him to never let me go.

Chapter 6

My family has lived on Laurel Court for as long as I can remember. Wenqing can recount the long history of how we got to Laurel Court, including a long sequence where she and Mom arrive at SFO and make their way down to the arrivals terminal, where she promptly jumps into Dad's arms, but I think it's all embellishment. She was five years old.

The house hasn't changed much at all since I was in high school. I pause at the foyer, on the way in. The hinges, never oiled, still screech in the same pattern, one that I can recite in my sleep. It soars high and then dips into a croak. All throughout my childhood I waited for this sound, for the door hinges to yawn a warning when Mom came home from work. I learned to recognize it even when I was sitting at my desk with headphones on, and in time I came to dread it.

No, it has changed somewhat. The sofa arrangement in the living room has shifted, although I don't know when my mother ever found the time to do that. Changing up the furniture was routine while I was growing up – my mother always said it was good for rerouting *feng shui*, but I could never tell if she was joking or not. Wenqing says that she changed the furniture placement because she didn't want dents in the carpet.

"We don't have any carpet in the living room. On the entire first floor," I protest.

"Mom was always thorough, no matter what. Change one side table, change everything."

Through the living room and into the kitchen, then across to the dining room. Or, what used to be the dining room. Mom moved the furniture in the house everywhere except here. It's open to the kitchen, and the back wall is across from the sliding doors to the backyard –

during daytime, it's the most well lit room in the entire house. The walls are covered up, lined with bookcases, and the three desks spaced at various intervals herd the walkable space into a snaking path between different workspaces. These were our little cubicles – Wenqing by the kitchen, me in the middle, looking out into the yard, and Mom's desk in the back so that she can oversee our work.

Starting in middle school, for me, she had both me and my sister sit with our backs to her, so that she could constantly monitor the content on our computer screens if she so cared. Then Wenqing graduated, so it was just me.

Wenqing's fourth-grade Styrofoam model of Mission Nuestra Senora de la Soledad, the size of a basketball, takes up an entire corner of her desk. I take my phone out and snap a picture, send it to her. *Hey*, I type. *Remember this?*

My mother's tea things occupy two drawers in the kitchen. I fill the electric kettle and turn it on, and then take out a plastic bag from the bottom drawer. It's printed with the emblem of her Chinese pharmacy of choice, and it holds five paper bundles of various herbal remedies, her prescription for the week. I unwrap a package and dump the contents into a clay pot on the stove. Slices of ginseng and dried mountain yam, and an assortment of other twigs and leaves and possible animal parts that I can't recognize. I add water until the contents are covered, then set it on the stove. It needs to boil for five hours, according to the scrawled instructions on the packaging. Pharmacist handwriting is cross-cultural.

My phone pings. It's Jessica, asking if we're still meeting today. I don't bother replying.

My mother's tea is next. I get a mug and add a two-finger pinch of oolong leaves and a dried jujube fruit, massaged gently so the thin black skin cracks and reveals amber flesh. I measure out wolfberries, orange-red raisins that fill the hollow of my cupped palm.

Behind me, the electric kettle clicks. I pour boiling water into the mug and head upstairs, ever-so-careful. Freshly waxed floorboards and my socked feet are not a great combination when I'm also carrying a scalding mug filled almost to the brim.

"Don't put it there," my mother says when I try to set the tea down on her bedside table. "I can't reach."

"Oh, sorry." I help her up and pass the tea directly into her hands instead. Her skin is crepe-like. "Here."

While she drinks tea I toy with the edge of the bedspread, like I did when I was a child. She wouldn't let Wenqing take this one to the hospital for her. It's a simple rectangle, made of cheap red silk and edged in white cotton, with a plum flower design woven into the silk. As children, Wenqing and I loved to touch it, to feel how smooth the cloth was, but nowadays the threads catch on my calluses if I try.

"Jia Shiyan," says my mother. "What are you thinking about?"

I can't tell her the truth – that I was thinking about Daniel, and leaping from the roof into his arms. Jessica's fault. She keeps emailing me about a memorial service for Daniel.

"About the laundry," I lie. "I know you wanted me to air it in the backyard, but I'm afraid it'll rain."

"It never rains in September," she coughs.

We have good days and bad days, and we measure good and bad relative to each other. That's it, really. So simple. I chant it like a mantra when I see my mother now, my mother with her fragile hands wrapped around her mug of tea – oolong, wolfberries and jujube. My mother whose voice is now more sandpaper than silk, whose words can no longer penetrate the lofted ceiling of my childhood home.

"Shiyan," she says, with haughtiness benefiting Wu Zetian, "Give me my iPad."

Today is a good day. If I say it enough, I'll believe it.

She holds the mug out to me and I take it with my palm supporting the base, almost dropping the heavy ceramic when my hand truly takes the brunt of the scalding. It's hot, too hot by far – I don't know how she drinks this without burning her lips and throat but there must be some secret to it.

If you ask her, she will tell you that tea must be taken hot, a practice so old it may as well be a fact of the universe. Tradition holds that it was *Shennong* the God-Farmer who first gave the Chinese the gift of tea, and it was he who discovered that the leaves must be infused in boiling water to draw out their true essence. In a particularly gruesome version of this myth that I learned as a child – and I have, to this day, never been able to find a source for this myth – *Shennong* is a mutant, born with see-through organs and skin. His unique disfiguration allows him to eat various plants and watch the effect that these potential medicines have on his internal system. Years into his labor, he ate some leaves of the tea plant, which scrubbed corruption and blackness from his organs, and so *Shennong* learned that tea had restorative powers.

I wonder if it is worth mentioning to my mother that this version of the myth makes tea sound an awful lot like chemotherapy. Would she roll her eyes at me and tell me, of course, do you finally understand this obvious piece of ancient Chinese wisdom?

"Did you sleep well?" I ask her, setting the tea on the bedside table.

"Oh, much better than in the hospital. Leaving home is not good for health, Shiyan-ah." She takes the iPad from me, pressing her index finger to the touch sensor. Her hands are still very steady.

"Turn down the air conditioning," she says. "Waste of money."

"It's summer, it's hot." I go to the thermostat anyway.

On second thought, the tea removes the blackness and corruption – so maybe the tea is supposed to wash away the chemo?

I watch my mother, idly scrolling through stories on her iPad, and wonder if she remembers the end of that tale. I was five when I first heard the story, watching a Taiwanese cartoon while Mom was making dinner. Looking back, I'm amazed that this kind of story was even incorporated into a children's cartoon, but I suppose that death in mythology is not senseless violence, but culturally relevant narrative drama.

As a child I remember that Wenqing laughed at me, because I cried watching the ending to the episode. In this particularly gruesome version of the myth – and this was adapted for a children's cartoon, mind you – *Shennong* falls ill after he consumes a poisonous plant, one whose poison spreads too quickly for even all-healing tea to defeat. It bleeds him black from the inside out and ruptures his organs, whereupon he ascends to heaven as an agricultural god. He dies cradled in the arms of his students, from whom he has extracted a promise that they

will write down his teachings and pass them on to the next generation.

I think about just how arrogant you would have to be, to think the details of your life worthy of being passed onto the next generation. You'd have to really believe in your own importance.

It could be nice, to believe in yourself to that degree. I look at my mother.

"More tea?"

"No, no more tea." She places a hand over the mouth of her cup. "Where is Wenqing?"

"She's in the city. Conference, remember?" I take her hand and smooth my thumb over the back. "She'll come home for dinner."

Wenqing skipped dinner with us yesterday and met up with a colleague instead. I hoped she would come tonight.

"If she is at work, what about you?" my mother exclaimed. "You are young, you are new to your company, you cannot just skip when you feel like it -"

"Mom. Mom. It's Saturday." I hold her hand. "I'm not going to work on a Saturday." I put in my fair share of overtime last month.

She relaxes. "Good."

"I am meeting up with Jessica this afternoon, though." I tell her. "So I might be gone for a few hours."

I'd planned this out in advance. My mother usually took an early afternoon nap around two or three, so I could leave for a few hours then. Jessica asked to meet me at a boba shop near the old shopping center. It's close enough that I can walk there, pass by what used to be Daniel's café on my way. I take the long way around, and drive instead.

The address Jessica gave me was for the new shopping center, a tangle of commercial buildings across the street and a little further down. There used to be a little bed-and-breakfast place there, a tall Victorian house. They bulldozed the whole thing and built a shopping center. It has a Spanish look to it, so it blends in with the Mission. Jessica is late, so I park and walk around the exterior while I wait.

It has everything – a gym, a Kumon – yeah, there's a Kumon! There are fourteen or fifteen test prep centers on that street now. MIT Prep, Berkeley Prep, Elite Test Prep, Little Academics Prep, Kumon – I don't remember all the names, only the big ones or the ones that made me laugh. I go back to the front of the café, and still no Jessica.

To kill time I walk the main road, all the way down to the Mission and back. It's all test prep centers and real estate offices now. I'm counting down the days until they turn the Mission into a test prep center. How many students could they can fit into the pews? Sit there while the college admissions counselors lecture us on the importance of showing leadership and initiative and well-roundedness, and cross ourselves as they conclude: "In the name of the GPA, the SAT, and the extracurricular activity log."

Sounds preposterous, but I could see myself saying that prayer in high school.

Jessica is waiting for me when I return, sitting by the little fountain in the middle of the shopping center. Her heel clicks against the floor in perfect time with the clock.

"Where were you?" she asks.

"Exploring," I tell her, wiping the sweat from my forehead. It sounds lame, even to me. Jessica leads the way to the boba café and waits for me to hold the door open for her. Inside, I watch Jessica place her order, still sweating.

She would be my worst nightmare if I still worked behind a counter, but as a bystander I can only watch with pity for their staff as she describes her very, very specific requirements to the cashier. The barley milk tea, one-quarter sweet. No ice, it's fine if the tea is lukewarm. No, that's why she wants the tea one-quarter sweet, that way it'll still be drinkable without the ice to dilute it. Red bean jelly topping, not red bean, and can you swap in coconut milk instead of skim? Please and thank you.

"And what will you be having, sir?" asks the cashier.

"The, uh, Hong Kong style milk tea. With pearls," I answer.

It's the weekend, but nobody is resting. I watch the cashier record our orders and send it to the kitchen, her fingers blurring when she types.

"Ice, sugar?"

"Just whatever you usually do," I say.

Jessica gives me a disapproving look, and for the life of me I can't figure out why. The cashier finishes typing. "Your total is nine dollars and thirty-seven cents," she says, and I hand her my card.

"They give you too much ice here," Jessica whispers in my ear. Somewhere between a whisper and a hiss. "You should've asked for half ice. Three-quarters at the most."

"Do you come here often?" I ask.

The cashier swivels her iPad towards me, and I punch in the requisite answers. Tip? Sure, twenty percent, I'll pay the Jessica Tax. Apologies that my friend is making your lives so difficult. I press the touchpad twice in a row and accidentally request a receipt to be emailed to me. The iPad asks for me to input my email address, and there's no back button.

"Hey, sorry, how do I…"

The cashier looks at me like I'm draining her life force, bit by bit. Jessica glances at her watch.

"You really haven't changed," she says while we're waiting to pick up our drinks. "I remember when we went to Chipotle in high school and you made me order for you because you were too awkward to say your order out loud."

"It was because I didn't want to shout. And besides, that was in freshman year. I was short back then."

"You were. Remember Winter Ball that first year? My mom told me not to wear heels because it would make me even taller than you were – and Daniel told her that she was being ridiculous."

"Did he really?"

We stare at each other.

"There's no line for the restroom," says Jessica. "I'm gonna – pick up my tea for me if it comes, ok?"

She's still not back by the time I've gotten both drinks, so I choose a table in the very back and observe the café interior. It's two in the afternoon, and the street outside is blazing white, heat rolling off well-greased asphalt in long, uninterrupted waves. There are passerby, but not many. The lights inside here are dimmed to allow the natural shadows to cool the room.

They've filled the vaulted ceiling with slabs and slabs of stone, lined up perpendicular to the door. It separates the overhead space into four long corridors, each opening to the sunlit

storefront. It's supposed to be some kind of artistic statement, I know. A sense of peace and orderliness, the stone formations welcoming heat into their impervious being.

All I can see is a cemetery overhead. The monolithic gray, the color of serenity, of a house of dust. Tranquil, certainly. Quiet. The dead always are.

"Shiyan?"

Jessica slips her fingers into mine and takes her tea back. I hadn't realized that I was still holding both cups. Her bangles clink against the table, breaking the spell, and the noise of the room floods both my ears. A little girl leafed through the bookshelf by the counter, scattering the newspapers piled on top. I noticed the high school newspaper float to the ground, a tattered copy of the June edition. The June edition had always been my mother's favorite, and the favorite of all the parents. The centerfold had the names of all the seniors and all the colleges they were going to attend. It sold the most copies by a wide margin, the Swimsuit edition of our community. And for that reason, it cost a dollar more than the usual.

I focus on the four people seated behind Jessica. It's a bar with a bamboo counter, two couples chatting while they watch a blonde-haired man whisk tea. His technique is fine but his very presence is out of place. "I thought this was supposed to be a Hong Kong style tea café," I say.

Jessica follows my line of sight. "What is that?"

"A Japanese tea ceremony. See the whisk?"

"Well. Haven't you heard? Everything's fusion these days." Jessica hangs her purse over the back of her chair, followed by her blazer. There's a bow on her blouse with ends that flop over her wrist as if she carelessly let it fall there, but knowing Jessica, nothing about that was

careless. “It’s pan-Asianism. We aren’t supposed to leave anyone out.”

I shake my head. “My mother would have some choice words about pan-Asianism. ‘That sort of thinking used to get you killed.’”

“And she’s not wrong, but that’s also her response to everything.”

“Mm.” I’m still watching the faux-tea ceremony. The blonde man is ladling streams of smooth green brew into four blue-brown tea bowls.

“It used to. Not anymore. There’s no detriment to being Japanese in Hong Kong,” says Jessica. “Or Taiwan. They like all things foreign. They take pride in being a shining examples of globalism.”

“That’s because they have nothing but diplomacy and globalism. The Hong Kong economy is in decline, soon to be eclipsed by Shenzhen. Hell, it’s already eclipsed. Ironic, isn’t it? They like to pretend that the mainland is a corrupt and dying empire, when ‘dying empire’ applies more to them than anyone -”

“Keep your voice down,” says Jessica, kicking me under the table. She takes a long gulp of her barley-one-quarter-sugar-no-ice-with-red-bean-jelly-and-coconut-milk, and carefully rubs the lipstick stain off the lid with a napkin. “I didn’t ask you here so that you could channel your mother at her worst.”

“I know.” And I know what we’re here for, it’s not to talk about my mother. But ever since Jessica went to college, she liked to do these preposterous exercises in small talk first. I blame Stanford.

“Your impression of her is dead-on.” Jessica folds her hands together. “How is she doing?”

“She couldn't be better. Is that what we’re here to talk about?” I’m sweating even though we’re sitting right under the air conditioning vent. “Because I was under the impression -”

“I’m just asking.”

“My mother never gave up on the idea that we would date and become a power couple,” I tell her. “She thought we would get married and make smart Chinese babies together. Smart, Harvard-attending Chinese babies that play piano and violin and could destroy opponents at the ping-pong table.”

“That’s not true,” Jessica huffs, but I can hear the hint of a giggle in her voice.

“No, I’m serious.” I turn my gaze to the ceiling, to the gravestones. “She had a lot of nice things to say about you, nice in her own way. She said that you were smart, that you had a lot of potential. She said that you were *qinkuai*, hard-working. Not hard-working in the way that you busted your ass in school or finished first in the league for cross-country, because you did all that too. Hard-working in the sense that you were really helpful in the kitchen and always cleaned up after us at academic bowl meetings even if we weren’t meeting at your house. She meant that you were good wife material.”

Jessica shrugs.

“My mom was a sexist piece of shit,” I say, thinking of Wenqing’s hacked-off hair. Mom hadn’t thrown a tantrum over her new haircut, but she came damn close. “Still is. Does that answer your question?”

“Our parents are friends. They ask me how she’s doing.” Jessica says. “I just thought that I’d ask.”

"Get to the point, Jessica." I suck up a tapioca pearl and watch her with wary eyes. "Why are we here?"

"We're friends, can't we chat?"

"The memorial service. Get to the point."

The guy at the counter behind her is washing out the tea bowls, and the two couples are leaving. Jessica is in the way, so I can't see their faces. I wanted to see them grimace, because I remember the first time I tasted Japanese green tea, a thick green syrup that coated the inside of my mouth. The taste lingered for days. Everyone thinks matcha is an awesome health drink, because green tea and antioxidants and all that jazz. It's probably good for you, but it also tastes like kale gallbladder, if kale were a mammal and had gallbladders. It's hard to say which was worse, the taste or the texture, so thick I thought I would choke. The fact that everyone said it was good for you meant nothing.

My phone buzzes. Wenqing, asking me if I could come pick her up from the convention center. She's probably referring to dinner, but she hadn't specified a time for me to go fetch her, so this is perfect for my purposes. I show Jessica my phone. "See? I have to go soon."

"You said you had all afternoon," she crosses her arms over her chest and pouts. It's a perfect balance of cute and guilt-tripping. She's very good at it, but it doesn't work on me, because I've known her since we were five. "You promised."

"I made no promises." I text Wenqing a quick reply and slide my phone back in my pocket. "Come on, get on with it. The memorial service."

"I've been thinking about holding it since we graduated from college. My parents said it might be a good idea," says Jessica, twirling her hair around her fingers. "I was thinking maybe

before Thanksgiving, because people will be home then. A lot of people still come home during breaks, you know. Even though it's been five years."

"Daniel passed in March. It's August right now." I count in my head. "It's been four years and a little over five months – let's say four and a half years."

"Sure, four and a half."

"And why November, when he passed in March? Just because people are going to be home then?" Jessica's face was unreadable as I plowed on. "Are you afraid nobody would come to a memorial service for Daniel if it was in March?"

"How are you so cold?" Jessica started. "I thought you -"

"You thought I what?"

"I don't understand. I thought that you had – with Daniel – you know." She struggles for the words. "You guys had a relationship."

"We were friends. We had a friendly relationship."

"You're being difficult on purpose," says Jessica. She's uncomfortable, good. I want her to be uncomfortable. "Why are you like this?"

"It's five years and you can't even ask me if I dated your brother," I finish my drink, leaving a bottom of black pearls. They stare up at me like eyes. "No, I didn't. But I find it incredible that it's been five years and you don't know, and you never thought to ask."

Maybe today's the day I burn this bridge. Who's going to stop me? Jessica's eyes look abnormally shiny, but I know she can cry on command as well as pout. She's always been talented.

"I just wanted your help," Jessica says while I check my phone again. "Planning this

thing, inviting people – I can't do this by myself."

She has the same eyes as Daniel. Earnest, and brown. This is a bad idea, agreeing to do this. I know it's a bad idea.

"What do you need me to do?"

Jessica perks up. "Finding a venue," she says. "I've already asked St. Joseph's, but they said that they're booked for the week before and after Thanksgiving. I think it has to be on a weekend. And I'll send you lists of people that I think we should invite – I can ask our friends from high school, but I was hoping you could come with a list of people from college…"

"Daniel and I never went to college together," I remind her. "We almost did, but."

"But I thought you would know some of them."

I pick up my empty cup and move to throw it away. "I'll look into it," I tell her. "But I have to go. I have to pick up my sister."

Jessica offers to drop me off at home but I decide to walk instead. The streets are quiet, most people still choosing to avoid the afternoon sun. I let my mother know that I'm heading out, and turn on NPR as I head north on the Nimitz, hoping that the dull drone of public radio will stop me from thinking about this memorial service. They held a memorial service for Daniel when he passed, during my first year at MIT, but I had class then.

"-findings from the epidemiological study that began in February of 2016," drones the cool, collected NPR voice filtering through my speakers. It was different from the usual Trump and Clinton drivel. I started listening. "Following a media firestorm in late 2015, the CDC initiated…"

When I switched from 680 to 92 everything had been fine, but as soon as I pass the toll gate on the San Mateo bridge the traffic begins to slow, turning from molasses to dead stillness as I inch onto the causeway. The truck next to me belches loud smoke, and the engine roars. I turn up the volume on the radio.

"The final report will be released in 2017, concluding a year-long study on youth suicide clusters in Santa Cla-"

I turn the damn thing off. Why is there this much traffic at eight in the evening? Extreme, even for Saturday.

"Ok, Google," I said. "What's the traffic like on the way to the Moscone Center?"

My phone tells me that traffic is severe. Traffic, all the way up to the 101. No shit, I'm swimming in it. I contemplate the idea of dictating an email to Julian Shen, the only friend I have that both works at Google and responds diligently to petty complaints, but then I remember that he works on AdSense.

I inch forward through traffic, listening to my engine instead of NPR. The bay crashes against the causeway, the sea the same gray as the sky. It had been sunny just hours ago. Minutes fall away and I'm still in the same place, watching the long lines of red and yellow-white signal lights disappear in the distance toward the peninsula. There's a point where the block seems to disappear, at the base of the arch. Car accident, maybe. I suck in a breath, thinking. Remembering.

Su Shi wrote, on the twentieth day of the first month of Yimao in the Xining era, this second stanza of *Dreams Remembered at Night*:

"Even if we met you would not recognize me;

My dust-filled face,

My frost-like hair.

"Night comes and my dreams spirit me to my hometown;

Through your small window,

You brush your hair."

The sun falls and the moon rises. On my left, electrical transmission towers march parallel to the causeway, their great grey skeletons casting shadows across my dashboard. Dappled moonlight falls through the girders and coats my face in silver fish scales. I catch a glimpse of myself in the side mirror, gazing up at the moon, the pale light turning my skin translucent. A plane soars overhead and into the clouds. Come on. Not much longer now. A big soccer van in front of me lurches to the left, and then I see it – the big orange sign, the caution lights. *MERGE LANES AHEAD.*

Daniel had been in a car crash. Car accident. I merged with the lane to my left and put my foot on the gas. Starting the slow climb to the top of the bridge arch.

"It was senior year, right after finals," he told us – us being the group of kids that stayed late at his café to do homework, a club that never had a name. "I walked into the intersection of Mission and Lincoln when the light was green. There's a part where the road curves around a grove before it passes the church."

He said it so matter-of-fact. "Why did you pick that spot?" someone asked him.

"I planned it out for a very long time," Daniel said. "I knew I wanted to die, and I knew that the curve happens just after the freeway exit. Everyone is driving very fast. It's hard to see,

with all the trees. I did all the math, too. What happens to a person when hit by a two-ton vehicle going at fifty miles an hour."

We were quiet. Kenny Shim had joked, two weeks prior, that this gathering was a discussion group for students to get together and talk about our mental health issues. "Like Odyssey of the Mind, but with all the monsters from the actual Odyssey," he cackled. But until Daniel started telling his story that day it didn't feel real.

I don't recall who even asked him in the first place, only that the room was dead quiet. Daniel sat, in the corner, and we stood around him listening. Like in elementary school, when you gathered around the teacher and waited for her to pick a picture book, only so much worse.

"Afterwards in the hospital my sister told me that I was being selfish. That I probably traumatized the guy who hit me, for life. And I told her that she was right, that I was selfish, that I was a bad person." Daniel clasped his hands together in his lap. "She asked me why I chose that stretch of road. I said it was because I wanted to die, and then she told me that I had failed."

Chapter 7

"Wenqing texted me this morning," I tell my mother. "She asked me if I was going to start work on the office room downstairs."

"I thought you took her to the airport yesterday," says my mother.

"Well, yes." I bring her morning tea but she doesn't take it. "She – she landed already?"

Dinner the night before Wenqing left had been an awkward affair. I was so used to just me and my mother that having Wenqing there threw a wrench in my usual plans. We bumped into each other trying to get chopsticks for our mother, after she dropped her first pair. How was that for filial piety?

"On the way to the airport. We discussed how to make you more comfortable at home," I amended, trying to catch my mother's attention. "Wenqing said that we should try to have you live on the ground floor. That way you wouldn't have to go up and down the stairs every day – it would be safer. The downstairs office faces the backyard, and you'd get some sun every day."

"Hmm. Office is full. Very cluttered."

"I'll clean it out." Not too hard. "I'll move everything -"

"Clean out?" She's instantly suspicious. "No, no. No throwing away, no trash. Everything there is important."

"I wasn't going to throw anything away! I was planning to move everything up here -" I wave my hand around her bedroom. "All the books and the papers. I'll turn this room upstairs into an office."

"We kept all of your workbooks and old assignments," she shakes her head. "And Wenqing's too. Boxes and boxes."

"Most of that stuff is in the garage, but sure."

"We kept everything. But what for? When are you going to use again? Aiya, whole year of alphabet. One week on each letter. Letter S, Sam cook sizzling sausages in the skillet. Took you a whole week. When your father and I studied for the TOEFL-"

I rest my forehead in my palms. "You just told me I shouldn't throw anything away."

My mother insists on coming with me, so that she can supervise me as I attempt to clean out the office. We struggle down the stairs, her hand in mine, my other hand wrapped around her waist. She did the same for me once, when I sprained my ankle in sophomore year of high school. On her request, I move a big armchair into the breakfast nook so that she can watch me start boxing up the contents of Wenqing's desk.

"This definitely her idea, not yours," she sniffs all the while. "She read that Japanese lady's book and now she thinks key to bliss is garbage."

"I don't think that's what Wenqing took away from reading Marie Kondo, do you?"

"Everything Japanese have, they steal from Chinese," says my mother, reciting another one of her mantras.

Despite her presence, I make pretty good progress on the desks and bookshelves, and soon my mother is just watching me work. I separate the books into piles – novels, textbooks, and miscellaneous projects and assignments. Wenqing's old violin books are hidden in a box under her desk, with a binder of Chinese song covers on top of the pile. Everywhere you look, there is my mother's obsession with being perfectly, suffocatingly Chinese.

Two children, and she never threw away a single thing. The recycling bin won't be able to hold all of this.

We take a break for lunch, and then the real combat begins once when I start on my mother's space. She hasn't touched her desk in months – because of the numerous hospital visits and inpatient stays, among other things. She tells me that I can't throw anything away, so I settle for packing up all of it, moving the books into the garage. Easier said than done. She has more books than I thought possible, as much as mine and Wenqing's stash combined: Chinese history, Chinese literature, volumes and volumes of poetry. Traditional medicine takes up an entire bookshelf. There are the Confucian classics and the modern classics, the historical histories and the modern histories, a volume of plays that I've never seen before.

"I thought you didn't like opera," I say, waving it at her. I've cleaned about two-thirds of the office. Almost there.

"*You* didn't like opera. It's one of the great Chinese traditions, why would I not like it? Ah, when you were a child all I read to you was Journey to the West. Which is a great classic, of course, but also because it is the only one appropriate for children. You lacked the emotional depth to comprehend Peony Pavilion. Goes without saying." She meanders around the boxes. "Where is my iPad?"

"You left it upstairs." I offer to help her up, but she's insistent that she can make it on her own. Ok then.

Peony Pavilion. I leaf through the pages once she leaves. It's my mother's favorite play, the greatest dramatic work of the Ming dynasty, a play that incited a craze among lovesick female fans at the height of its popularity. The Twilight of its time. In Peony Pavilion, sixteen-

year-old Du Liniang meets a handsome young man in a dream – when she wakes and finds him to be an illusion, she dies of lovesickness. Sometime later, the young man, who happens to be a traveling scholar named Liu Mengmei, visits the Du household on his way to the capital. After Du Liniang's ghost comes to him in a dream, Liu Mengmei goes to the garden and digs up her corpse, whereupon she is resurrected by the power of love.

You'd think that this play hinges upon true love, but it also hinges on Liu Mengmei's ability to write a good essay. After Du Liniang is resurrected, her father accuses Liu Mengmei of witchcraft, and he is about to be executed when the Emperor enters and announces that Liu Mengmei has written the best essay out of all the scholars. Because he has placed highest in the imperial examination, the judges pardon him, and Liu Mengmei goes to accept his hard-earned cushy civil service job with an attractive, definitely-not-dead bride.

Moral of the story is that in Imperial China, your SAT scores could save you from capital punishment. Study hard, kids.

I'm being facetious, but this is the world that my mother believes in, that our parents believed was possible. Meritocracy for all. When we had everything, why shouldn't we achieve more? We were the fortunate ones. We were the children who were born in the in-between; the children who never knew the old world, who seemingly embraced the new without needing to be taught or told.

We were the children who grew up in a place where the sun shined but did not burn, where rain fell but not too much – we were the children who lived our days stirred in a warm brew of privilege-induced numb, never to know pain, never to know cold – what was good was ours, for we were the fortunate ones.

We were the ones who were supposed to make it. We were the ones who were supposed to have our sights set high, for we had already arrived here riding on the shoulders of others. We were the ones who were supposed to succeed. We had the path laid out in front of us, the way out dented by the previous tracks of other hundreds of feet. A perfect GPA, AP credit accumulated at 88 dollars per hour, the ability to speak three foreign languages and play four musical instruments. Extracurriculars. Leadership. Holistic development and inquiry-based learning and all the other buzzwords that ran in one ear and out the other, branded into our brains along with *partial derivatives* and *Spanish-American War* and *Mitochondria are the powerhouse of the cell.*

We were perfect, but not too perfect, just enough that our parents tolerated us and our friends thought we were still cool. We slept pathetic hours and played terrible video games and binge-ate shrimp chips while browsing Facebook in secret under the covers with laptops stacked atop SAT prep books. We scraped at blackheads between classes with violin-blunted nails and left moon-shaped scars in our skin. We wanted to date girls or kiss boys but we didn't, didn't know how to even begin. We didn't care, not that much, because there was too much else at stake.

We were supposed to be the fortunate ones. Frogs, waiting at the bottom of the well. All that soared overhead was ours for the taking.

When I open my eyes again I see Daniel. I'm sitting cross-legged on the floor, in front of a coffee table. The room is familiar and strange and I know in my bones that this room shouldn't exist, that I am dreaming. But the dream is so sweet that I don't want to leave.

"You have that metaphor all wrong," Daniel tells me. He's standing at the counter, pulverizing ice and kiwifruit. Sodium-yellow light filters in through the windows, coming from the single flickering streetlamp that stands at street's edge. We're alone together, and night is coming.

"The frog is at the bottom of the well, yes. But the point is that he has no desire to ever escape the well. In the well he is the master of all, he can look over his territory and know that all the mud and rock and water within belong to him. He looks up and sees a little slice of blue, but it does not register to him as anything to be wanted. The well has everything he desires."

"Daniel, it's raining." The sky outside is dark blue, almost indigo, and if I look towards the community college there's just a hint of dark green – the hills, they're green. "Look, it's raining!"

"One day a turtle from the Great Eastern Sea comes by to visit the frog." Daniel sluices down the sides of his blender with green tea, then pops the lid back on and sets the motor to pulse. "He says, 'Friend, why do you dwell in such a small, cramped space? Surely you would like to come visit the vast ocean.'"

I press my hands against the glass and watch the clouds roll in, great towering piles of black and gray that blot out the sky, that paint the heavens in thick streaks of storm and stress. There are puddles of water littering the parking lot, their surfaces overcome by an odd stillness, the calm before the worst is to come. The door slams open, pushed by the wind. I run outside to feel rain streak across my face, as the storm unleashes its full force upon us.

"And the turtle says, 'Why would I want to visit the ocean? My well is my kingdom, my well is paradise. Come, see how nice it is inside.' So the terrapin tries, and he puts one claw

inside, but the well is too small for him to fit another. In frustration, he tells the frog, 'The sea is so vast that in the time of Yu the Great, the land flooded nine years out of ten, and the sea level did not increase. In the time of King Tang of Shang, there was drought in seven years out of eight, and still the sea level did not decrease. Even disaster of such scale does no change to the ocean.'" Daniel spoons black pearls into a cup and pours his kiwi-tea mixture over. "As told by Wei Mou to Gongsun Mou in the outer chapters of *Zhuangzi*, from the Warring States period."

"How did you know that?" I ask him, turning around. "You haven't read *Zhuangzi*."

Daniel beams at me. He comes around the counter carrying the drink he's just made, green swirling through ribbed plastic. "Of course, research says that by 2100, global sea levels could rise as much as four feet, and that turtle's probably going to be dead by then. All turtles could be dead by then."

He keeps walking, but he never seems to get any closer. The door closes and I can't go back in. "What's your point!" I scream at him.

"You've got the metaphor all wrong," he repeats. "The frog never makes it out of the well. Shiyan, the frog never makes it out."

"Daniel," I beg him, pounding the glass with my fists, "What the fuck are you talking about?"

"The frog never mak-" His lips freeze on the A just as lightning cracks overhead. I should be worried; I'm outside and the wind is blowing sheets of rain at me, soaking me head to toe, but Daniel –

"What's your point," I'm mumbling, lips barely moving.

"You freeze like this, stupid boy." Mom is draping a jacket over my shoulders. One of my hoodies from high school. "*Yang qi* escapes from the upper back and you sleep in t-shirt at night, you will let *yin* invade your body and give you cold."

"Mom, why are you up?" And how had she gotten downstairs?

"Lights on," She gestures at my desk – not mine, my mother's old desk, in the office room that we've converted to a bedroom for her. My desk is gone, that's because everything was moved upstairs, right, to turn this room into a bedroom for her. God, my head is full of mush. I snatch at the desk lamp still alight on my desk, flipping the switch off just as she says, "Can't sleep."

"Oh. Sorry."

"Hmph." She shuffles back to bed. I look around, surrounded by old tomes of history and literature, a book of fairy tales open under my arms. I'd fallen asleep with my arms pillowed on an open copy of the *Fengshen Yanyi.* "I talking to you, about Zhuangzi."

"You were?" This hoodie doesn't fit anymore. The cuffs end a few inches before my wrists – so I have grown a little, good to know.

"I look up and bam, you are asleep." She pulls the covers up, and I go to help tuck her in. "Like little boy."

"I probably wouldn't use 'bam' to describe someone going to sleep, but sure." I smooth out the red silk coverlet. "Really sorry for keeping you up."

"Not trying to sleep. Trying to talk to you." She cups my face with her cool dry hands, and I freeze. It is unexpected, and tender. "You sleep on books, you get hunchback. Not good."

"Sorry, I'll try not to." I gently extricate myself from her grip. "Bad habits."

"You did this since you were little boy. I had to lock all the flashlights in the closet," she shakes her head. "Hide under the blankets at night and read books. I wake you up in the morning, you are asleep and you bend the pages under your big, big head."

She's laughing a little, and I am too. "I think I stopped in middle school though."

"Why?" Mom shuffles to the wall-side, making more room for me to sit on the side of the bed. "I always wonder."

"Oh, come on. A lot of things change. I also stopped wetting the bed around kindergarten, that changed too." Mom tugs at my elbow. "Hm?"

"Lie down. Straighten out your back." She settles back on her pillows, and I can see her eyes begin to close. "Stay with me…"

"I will," I say to the ceiling. "I won't leave."

"Stay with *mama*, Yanzi," she says. Something she hasn't called me in a long time.

Yanzi is my nickname; it means swallow, like the migratory bird. Swallows go south in the winter, but always come home.

My mother sleeps into the morning. I get up first to prep breakfast, careful not to wake her. After checking the rice porridge in the Instant Pot, I start prepping side dishes, sliced pickled radish and diced century eggs. I rinse the radish in water to get rid of the chili and the salt solution, because my mother is supposed to avoid spikes in sodium and overly-spiced food. The hospital recommends plain bread and applesauce and maybe tapioca pudding as a treat, but I think I can do better. The Chinese in me can do better.

The century eggs prove to be more difficult. When Jessica rings the doorbell, I answer with red mud still staining my hands.

“Shiyan, what is that?” She kicks off her heels at the door and follows me inside, careful not to touch the mud-stained doorknob. “Jesus, get a Clorox wipe or something.”

“I’ll clean it up in a sec, don't worry.” I go to the kitchen, where Jessica frowns at the curtain stretched across the hallway-slash-breakfast-nook. “Did you install this?”

“Shh, my mom is sleeping.” I scrub my hands off in the sink, and pick up an egg, also washed clean. The shell is pale green and covered in black spots, textbook-perfect. “I did, are you surprised?”

“It’s better work than I expected.” She watches me work, separating the solid greenish-black yolk from the whites, which are now solid and amber. “Wow.”

“This is the traditional method. Made these from scratch.” I put the yolks in one bowl and dice the whites. “You wrap eggs in very alkaline mud and let the base do the work. I should salt the mud, too, but without is healthier.”

“I’ll clean off the mud you left on the door,” says Jessica, rifling through my kitchen cabinet. “You’re talented, but a talented mess.”

By the time she comes back I’ve finished setting the table as well, and all that’s left is for my mom to join us for breakfast. We go to the living room, where we can talk without waking her up. It’s Saturday again, exactly one week since we last met for boba at the new place in town.

“So,” says Jessica. “Have you thought about it? Daniel’s memorial service?”

“I’ll pitch in,” I say. I almost want to tell her that I dreamed of Daniel last night, but no one needs to hear about that. “You convinced me.”

“Good. I wanted to apologize, too, for…”

“Don’t sweat it.” I hear a clanging noise from inside, the sound of ceramic colliding with metal. When I dash back in I find that my mother has dropped a bowl in the sink.

“It didn’t break,” she says.

“That’s good. Mom, you haven’t seen Jessica in a while, but…”

I’d forgotten that Jessica has always gotten along well with my mother. They sit on the couch and gossip about the neighbors while I start the tea and my mother’s medicinal brew. We ask Jessica if she’s staying for breakfast, but she declines, polite as ever.

The minute the door shuts, my mother grabs my wrist. “I heard you talking to her. About memorial.”

“Oh yeah. Jessica’s organizing something.” I pull free of her grasp and reach for the pickled radish, scraping some into my porridge. “It’s for Daniel.”

“You will not go.”

My spoon froze midway to my mouth. “What?”

“You will not go,” she repeated. “Memorials are not good.”

“It’s -” I couldn’t believe my ears. “I’m sorry. I don’t know what you think this is going to be. This is going to be, like, people that I knew from high school. We’re going to get together and some people are going to make speeches. We’re going to remember our friend.”

“Memorials are selfish.” My mother had that hard look in her eye again. “Ask yourself, who are they for? You are not doing this for Daniel, I will tell you that.

-

First you must promise me that when I die, you will not play *aiyue* at my funeral. Absolutely no to any funeral music. Wenqing can play the piano instead. If you must play something sad, play Debussy. *La cathedrale engloutie* is good.

On second thought, no. Not good. Drowning is not for sane people. Play something else instead, you can choose. Anything but *aiyue*.

When he was young, my little brother – that would be your uncle – was so fond of shrimp. Could never eat enough shrimp. Then when he was eleven we moved south to Anhui, and on the first harvest he had so much shrimp that he ate himself sick of it. It is called *chi shang,* an eating wound. And it was not in the sense that he had indigestion one night. He honestly could not see shrimp anymore without wanting to vomit. Your grandmother said that it was a mind problem, and that it was ok to just leave him like that, because shrimp was expensive.

Aiyue is the same, a mental wound. I was ten when Chairman Mao passed from this mortal realm, and for almost a year they played nothing on the radio except funeral music. Somber with wailing reeds and *erhu* so that we could all contemplate the grief we felt for our dear, departed leader. Mao died in September, with the harvest, and I remember that year I was very excited to celebrate the Spring Festival, but all they would play on the radio was funeral music. They banned fireworks too. It was considered unseemly to celebrate anything when the Great Chairman had just left us.

In the Analects, Confucius quotes the Zhou Book of Rites and prescribes that children should observe their parents' grave for three years after their passing; they should quit their jobs and government positions if they have those, live simple lives and erect huts to live in

outside the grave. They should give up wine and meat for three years. They should give up music. And that year, since the Chairman was father to all of us, it stood to reason that we should mourn him. But the world marches on, even if we all try our level best to stop it from doing so. So we went to school and went to work, and in the evenings we would sit at the kitchen table and turn on the radio and listen to funeral music.

Your uncle hated funeral music even more than I did. He was three years younger than me, so he was seven, and he didn't understand why the radio had to scream all the time, why it had to play such old and awful music. Your grandmother would slap him on the head and tell him to hush. I thought it was because she was tired of hearing him ask, but really it was because she was afraid the neighbors would overhear your uncle's questions.

Mother, your grandmother, was always been remarkably conscientious of the people who might be listening in. She taught me to be that way too. I remember that summer when I called her with the news that your uncle did not come back from Beijing. I had waited until my floor was asleep so I could cram myself into the telephone booth outside my dormitory, and shut the door tight.

Wuhan is so hot in the summer, hot during the day, hot during the night. I'd closed the door and there was no breeze, and the sweat was dripping all over my face, down my chin, onto my knees, and my palms were so wet that I couldn't hold the phone properly. I called your grandmother and I wanted to tell her that I had waited at the train station for days but he wasn't there, but before I could, she asked me why I was calling, and told me to hang up.

"They came by to search our house!" she whispered into the phone. "We were searched for extra long time because in our family we have two university students, and they wanted to

know where you were, and I told them no, my son and my daughter are at school. They turned the place upside down looking because they thought I might be hiding people in the house and I said no, they are at school! I told them that I have been a loyal member of the Communist Party for thirty years and I have worked at Tongling Power Station in Anhui province for twenty years, you know all this."

I told her that I had to go, that I had a big test the next day, that I just wanted to call and ask her how she was doing. And then I hung the phone back on the hook, and because no one was outside waiting in line I decided that I could stay in the phone booth for a little while. It was such a hot day, Shiyan. I never took you and Wenqing to Wuhan because Wuhan is so hot in the summer. I had been talking to your grandmother for maybe five minutes and the windows were all steamed up, like a sauna. I was sweating everywhere, sweat dripping down my face, from my chin onto my legs. So much sweat.

She never asked why I had waited so long to call her. Your father was in Beijing too, you know. He went to interviews in Beijing, for graduate school. When we went to school only rich people could afford to stay in hotels, so your father stayed with a classmate from high school who was going to Peking University. All good kids, all very smart kids. By the time your father got to Beijing the students were all protesting. All these smart kids, the brightest in all of China. They marched from Peking, from the triangle plaza outwards, down Chang'an Avenue. Thousands and thousands of young people with their ideals and their dreams. It must have been a sight to behold.

I don't want to talk about whether Hu Yaobang was thinking about the future of the country, or whether Zhao Ziyang did the right thing. I spent years and years in politics classes

learning about the history of the party and the lives of the party elders. In all the weeks that he sat in Tiananmen Square your father never caught a whiff of a party elder's fart. The story of the party elders is not the story of your grandparents, not the story of your father, and certainly not the story of your uncle.

Your father demonstrated at Tiananmen for weeks, like I said. His friend from Peking was there and so he was there too. He ran messages and participated in the hunger strikes. He left the protests for one day only, and that was to go to his interview at Tsinghua University. You know Tsinghua, it is like the MIT of China. Your father's dream was to go to Tsinghua, like your dream was to go to MIT.

The professor that met him there was impressed with his grades, but he was disappointed that your father had not finished his thesis yet. He told him that if he wanted to get into Tsinghua, he would go back to school this instant and finish his thesis. Nobody back in Wuhan noticed if your father was there or not – all the students were demonstrating, the teachers too. But your father cared if he got into Tsinghua or not. Even if the world was demonstrating, that would end one day. And then after that end all the people demonstrating would have nothing, but he would have a degree from Tsinghua.

So he came home. He didn't even bother going back to Tiananmen, or back to Peking University – he went to the train station with the clothes on his back and came back to Wuhan. He told me that Beijing Station was a sea of people, that when a train came he saw people at the front disappear under the waves. They packed into the trains trying to leave Beijing and the summer was so hot that the sweat stuck them together, and it was a miracle the train moved at all. He begged me not to go to the station but I had to, I said, my little brother is not home yet.

So I went to the station and I waited. Shiyan-ah, Wuhan is so hot in the summer. Sweat dripped down my face and so did tears, and they taste the same so I could not tell the difference. I wept all the tears I had for him and he did not come back.

There is an old story from the Qin dynasty about a woman named Meng Jiang, whose husband was a serf enslaved by the emperor as a builder. In the cold winter she walked many leagues to bring him winter clothes, but when she reached her destination she found that her husband was dead, his body buried beneath the Great Wall with all the other builders. She knelt and wept by the wall for ten days and ten nights, and on the eleventh the wall collapsed and returned the bones of Meng Jiang's husband. I wept for ten days and ten nights, and in the end your uncle's bones were still nowhere to be found. He was simply gone, like hundreds of others. Simply gone.

When Wenqing was born we left the old country. You would not be here, if we had not left – you would be an afterthought, snipped away before you took form. I cried when you were born too, my baby boy, and I wondered why your father did not cry. You see, when I left China I took everything with me, but he left his heart behind. His friend, the Peking University friend, he was working for the government by the time you were born. Despite all the protesting and anti-party pamphlets he had written in his youth, your father's friend was welcomed back into the fold. "So go," I told him. "Go, if your heart is there." I wanted nothing to do with them – your grandparents who still talk about how Deng Xiaoping gutted the country like a catfish, and your father who insisted that Deng Xiaoping did great things, how he brought the dawn of the New China upon us. I wanted them all gone, and I wanted my brother back, but to live is to be tempted by wishes we cannot have granted.

Your story is not their story. Your story still lies ahead. And young men, young and idealistic men – like my brother, like your Daniel – there are always young men who die in vain, young men who die before their time. Memorials are for the living. Will the dead know or care if you remember them? Will my ancestors smile upon me more if I sweep their graves for three years, wear sackcloth, give up all the pleasures in life? Will the dead know? No, Shiyan, the dead stay dead. Do not dwell on them, they are not worth your time.

-

It was a good speech. It made sense, if you know my mother. It explained so much about her that I already knew – why she was afraid of our failure, why she would rather hurt me and hurt Wenqing with her own hands than let the world hurt us.

“But I have to go,” I tell her. “You know why.”

Chapter 8

December 2010, December 1st.

"You headed anywhere for winter break?"

"Nah, man. Gotta write apps. Parents are breathing down my neck and shit. You goin' anywhere?"

It took me a minute to realize that they were talking to me. "Huh?"

Kenny and Albert blinked in unison. "You ok, man?"

"I'm fine." I pulled my hoodie a little tighter around myself. It was mid-December, and the classroom that had been sweltering hot at the beginning of the school year was now freezing. The people sitting in the front rows were closest to the space heater, but all the way at the back of the classroom, sandwiched in front of Dr. Boleman's desk, I had no such luck.

"You look like shit, dude," said Kenny.

"Yeah," said Albert. "Like total shit."

"Like a shit sandwich, with shit on the side instead of fries." They high-fived.

"Guys, I'm fine," I told them. "Go annoy Jessica."

"Jessica's not here, dude. She skipped class."

"I'd skip this shitty class too," started Kenny, but Albert jerked his head to the side and he stopped. All three of us looked up to make sure that Dr. Boleman hadn't heard us. Not because we were scared of him, but because two weeks ago Maria and Lillian had invited him to attend their Advanced Theater class performance of *Oedipus at Colonus*, and he was full-on sobbing by the end. No one wanted to see that again.

"I'd skip this shitty class too," whispered Kenny, "if I got into MIT."

"Yeah, man." Albert said. "What a beast."

My head hurt. The fluorescent lights were so bright. Kenny and Albert left as I started kneading the muscle just above my temples, squinting. God, if only Kenny hadn't said it; but that was giving him too much credit. I thought about it often, and spontaneously. The email.

Deferred. I thought about it in the shower, standing zombie-like afterward with my toothbrush in hand, squeezing a blue gel rope of Crest that missed and landed in the sink. I left it there. *Deferred*. It echoed in my head at breakfast, lingered on my tongue and at the back of my throat and bled all taste from my food. I couldn't remember what I'd had for breakfast. *Deferred*. Did it matter?

School happened in a blur. I played with my phone and didn't check my email. If I did the letter would still be there. *Deferred.* Kenny and Albert at lunch, throwing tater tots today. They pointed and laughed at everything. I imagined them pointing and laughing at me. *Deferred*.

My zombie feet carried me towards Daniel's shop but when I rounded the corner and came to where the sidewalk ended in the gravel lot I discovered that I didn't want to go forward. I didn't want to be greeted with his smile.

I ended up in the drainage tunnel under the freeway, the only place I thought I could be alone. You could hear the cars overhead but they were only a faint echo. Dead leaves crunched underfoot, as I wandered through the tunnel, a house of dust and darkness. Last summer there had been the barest trickle of water underfoot, now even that was gone. Only the scent of mildew remained.

Deferred. The word echoed in my head and in the tunnel too. *Deferred.*

I couldn't see anything and so it was even easier for my brain to conjure up the image, Amanda in her collared blazer and clinking bangles, shuffling folders in front of my mother and intoning her numbers, her sacred truth – early action, twelve percent, the rest deferred, cast aside like so much chaff.

"That's where we want you," Amanda had said, her manicured nail stabbing the printout, her nails bright and gleaming. "Because otherwise, this is what happens."

Out of six thousand they picked seven hundred, and the leftovers they threw back in the pot, to stew for three months before they came again, and this time they would take a thousand out of the seventeen thousand. They took Jessica and cast me aside.

"The chance of you getting into MIT, in the case that you are deferred, is less than one percent." Amanda's nails echoed in the tunnel, click click click. "We can help you avoid that."

Empty words, empty everything. *Deferred*, echoing in my empty head.

I walked and walked and the whole time I thought – you can't escape a well by travelling across flat ground, if the well is the size of the world. The only way out of a well is up. I had my chance to escape, I saw the sliver of blue and I followed the prescribed path walked by the people who came before me, but the footholds escaped me and I fell. I fell to the bottom and the hole closed up, and now here I was in the dark, forsaken. *Deferred*.

When I emerged from the tunnel it was night. The moon was gone, and the stars that remained were sick and pale. The eucalyptus leaves whispered as I walked on, their peeling bark crunching beneath my feet as I crossed the grove of trees and kept walking, away from home. In the distance I heard the train.

In the dark I didn't notice the bark tangling around my ankles like bandage strips and tripped, bracing my fall with my arms. I hit hard, grasping at gravel, feeling the ridges bite into my hands. I pulled myself up onto my elbows and laid there for a while on my stomach. If I followed the tracks I might be able to find the train crossing, and the main road, but I had no desire.

Deferred. Mom didn't know yet. I didn't know how to explain *deferred.* I thought of her with bamboo in hand, and doubled over when my gut clenched harder than it ever had before. *Deferred*.

It was December, and the wind chilled the back of my neck. I was numb, the night was cold, I was numb all over. I stuck my hands in my pockets and stepped out of my body, looked at my pathetic form sitting indecisive by the train tracks, and thought about how inconvenient it was that in the twenty-first century, I was waiting for a train the old-fashioned way.

The stars overhead were brighter now. I got to my feet, and noticed that my palms were wet. Wiped them on my jeans. Still wet. Wiped them again. I exhaled and watched my crystalline breath blow away in a cloud between Orion's legs. So it was cold, after all.

Brilliant light swept over my eyes, brighter than any star. I turned around.

"Shiyan?"

It was Daniel. He turned off his flash and put his phone away. "Good," he panted. "I found you."

"Shouldn't you be at work?" I asked.

"How about you?" He stepped closer. I stepped back. "Shiyan."

"I think you should go away. I don't want to see you right now."

"Shiyan, please." I loathed him, for saying my name so often, and in my heart I found a tiny shred of hate and clung on. "I just want to talk."

"So talk, then."

Daniel took a deep breath, and let it out. Sucked in another. "You always come by after school. Always. And when I checked the calendar – I saw that early decisions came out today. I was worried. About you."

He took another step closer. "Shiyan, did you get rejected?"

"Rejected? No." I stepped backwards. "Deferred."

"Deferred -" Daniel bent over. I thought he was going to collapse, but he braced his hands on his knees and stayed standing, panting hard. "That's good."

"Fuck you," I spat, with as much venom as I could muster. "Go. Fuck off."

I backed up further, until I tripped over the rail and fell, catching myself with my hands. The gravel pierced my palms and I felt the impact ripple up my arms, followed by pain. It was nothing, empty, nothing.

"Shiyan," said Daniel, his eyes wide and black. "Come here."

"I said go!" I clenched the rail behind me, rust crumbling on my fingers. "Just – go."

"I don't think you want to die." Daniel moved closer. "You've been deferred to regular action, which sucks. But you can still get in."

"It's false hope." I curled up on the rails. "Don't come."

"Ok, ok. I'll stay here." Daniel raised his hands. "Why does it have to be MIT?"

I watched him, but he really didn't move. "Why MIT?" Daniel repeated. "Shiyan, c'mon. Work with me here."

"It just -" *Deferred*. "It has to."

"You're talented, you're brilliant. You have one of the best minds I've ever known, at your age." Daniel shrugged. "Why does it have to be MIT? Caltech, Cornell, Georgia Tech – don't underestimate UIUC either – why does it have to be MIT?"

He pushed harder when met with my silence. "Is it because you went to RSI? Look, that wasn't an easy feat, but even RSI alumni status is not a one-way ticket to -"

"I needed to not feel like -" I licked my lips. "That I wasn't there just because of dumb luck. That I deserved it."

"You did! You got in, didn't you?"

"No, that's not -"

"Shiyan," Daniel shouted, "That's not how life works! That's not how anything works! You're talented, you're brilliant. Sometimes brilliant and talented people don't get what they deserve. Sometimes dumb, shitty people get what the smart ones deserve. Who gives a fuck? Ezra fucking Pound gets called a translator of Chinese poetry when he didn't know shit! You will do other things in life besides go to MIT and get a degree. You will go on, but first you have to survive."

We both heard it, in that moment. The low howl of the train, in the distance. Daniel's face blanched. "Shiyan, come here," he said, desperate. "Come back home."

"I can't – I let everyone down -" My hands are wet, my face is wet, my eyes are stinging. "Daniel, I can't -"

"I don't think you mean to die," Daniel walked up until he was a foot away from the rail. "After I caused that car accident, Jessica asked me in the hospital why I'd chosen that road, that

intersection. She said that it was awfully selfish of me, to try and traumatize an innocent driver for life. Truth is, I wanted people to see, I wanted that driver to see me, I wanted them all to see me dying. I craved the sympathy of strangers because to everyone else my pain was invisible, and I wanted help but I didn't know how to ask."

He pulled at my arm but I was a dead weight – I was detached, existing outside everything, watching Daniel drag at my useless body and feeling nothing. "Shiyan, please," he begged.

The train came closer, so close we could hear the wheels screaming against the rail. I could see it in his face, his fear. "Please, please," he repeated. He didn't want to die, not here. "Nothing changes if you do this. But if you don't – if you live – then there's a chance, right? Something could change if you live. Go to college. Don't go to college. Please, *do* something. Even if you fail – even if you keep failing – at least you're living, at least you're still here -"

The scent of burning diesel rounded the hill and the light enveloped us, and I watched Daniel's face twist. He threw his arm up to block the blaze but he kept the other hand on me, dragging me around the collar.

"You'll stop feeling like this," Daniel shouted in my face. "One day. You think you want this now but it'll pass. You're tired of fighting but this isn't the way out, this is surrender. Shiyan, *please*."

The light and the noise overcame him, and I watched as Daniel's words turned to ash, but he never stopped pulling. It broke my heart. I couldn't do it, I couldn't be selfish and leave him with something he couldn't fix. I owed Daniel more than that.

I fell with him, and together we tumbled into the gravel and grass as the train roared past. I rolled onto my back and watched the breath from my lungs float into the stars again. I was still breathing. I was still here.

Daniel groaned, and rolled onto his back and drew the sign of the cross. We laid on the ground for a while, in silence.

"What did you do after school?" he asked.

"I went and sat in the time tunnel," I said.

"Ok." Daniel shuddered. "I've never liked it down there."

I gazed at Orion. "Why?"

Daniel didn't answer. "What changed your mind?"

"You said that I was surrendering." My heart was pounding hard. "It's the last of the thirty-six stratagems. After all else, retreat. The worst thing is to surrender. It's losing everything, and gaining nothing."

"So you retreated. And you live to fight another day." Daniel sat up. "Thank you, for that ancient piece of wisdom."

"You're welcome." I cleared my throat. "And thanks. For. You know."

"Yeah, well." Daniel noticed my hands. "You're bleeding!"

"I'm not," I protested, but he dragged me up anyway. "Where are we going?"

"I'm taking you home, idiot. You're bleeding everywhere."

I thought he would let me stay at the café overnight – with a sinking feeling I realized that I had no idea what time it was, but it was definitely very, very late, and what was my Mom doing?

"Don't worry," Daniel said, still telepathic. "She knows. I called her."

"You called my Mom? Daniel, that's," I didn't know what to say. "What did she…"

"Well, I texted her that I'd found you, but then you decided to walk in front of a train. Hang on," Daniel stopped to find his phone. "I should let her know that I found you, and that you're safe this time – I feel like I'm tempting fate by saying that – ah, my screen's shattered."

"I'll help pay for it."

"With what money?" Daniel finished typing. "I'm the adult with the adult job."

"I always meant to ask," I said. Trying to stave off the panic, trying not to think about my mom. "Why a boba café?"

"Well. I like boba. And I like seeing people smile." We crossed the intersection of Mission and Lincoln. "It's a surprisingly complicated drink, too. You have to brew the tea just right, you have to boil the pearls and soak them in syrup, you have to make all the different bases. It's childish but there's an art to it. It's modern, it's innovative. It's Asian."

We rounded the corner towards home. "I don't want her to hit me," I said.

Daniel said, softly, "I don't think she will. But – I'm here. If."

Years and years ago, I was practicing for a piano recital, and Mom's temper was high because I was acting out during multiplication practice, and now I was purposefully making mistakes at piano. I told her I was uncomfortable practicing for so long, that I was going to pee on the bench if she didn't let me go. I told her she was a bad guy, a villain like the skeleton spirit from Journey to the West and that one day I would get Sun Wukong's gold-hooped staff and smash her evil spirit to dust. After one too many tantrums she made me hold my palms out,

and told me to count off the strokes for her. I cried after the third, so we started over until I could count to five. Because I was five.

"You found me hiding," I said. "In the hedges between our houses."

"That was when I found out that your mom hit you."

"Me and Wenqing." I wiped at my face. "I don't know if she had it worse, honestly."

"We played hide and seek in those hedges the week before, when it was my birthday party," said Daniel. "I don't know why I remember that."

"I was sticking my hands in the mud because it was cold and my hands hurt," I said, and suddenly I was laughing because I thought of Daniel, at eight years old, saying this with a solemn look on his face. "You left, and then you came back with an ice pack, and told me that an ice pack would stay cold longer than mud would."

"Always knew I was going to be an engineer," said Daniel. He looked at me like I was crazy. "I was trying to help."

"You did! You still do," I amended. Because it was true.

The porch light at my house was turned on to full brightness. Daniel waved goodbye, and when I turned back to my house I saw my mother standing on the doorstep, her face red-purple. She came closer, and I fought the urge to run. The lines around her eyes were deep, as though this time they had been carved permanent into her face, and she was hiccupping in the way that people only do so when they have been ugly-crying for a long, long time.

"Mom," I called her. "*Mama*."

When I looked back Daniel had disappeared.

This is the story I think about, all throughout Daniel's memorial service. This is the one

that matters, this is more important than all the dreams put together. This is the debt that I cannot repay, because the person I owe is no longer around to collect it.

There is an old Buddhist parable that I've heard so often that I forget where it came from, but it goes something like this. Two monks, one young and one old, approached a stream. It rained recently, so the ground was muddy, and the water was shallow but quick. Standing on the riverbank was a beautiful woman, who asked the two monks to help her across.

"Of course," said the older monk. "Here, climb on my back."

His student, following close behind, was doubtful of his master's words. His master had always taught that holy men should not be tempted by women, and yet here his master was, disobeying his own teachings! But because he was afraid of contradicting his master outright, he held his tongue.

Several days later he could not shake the contradiction from his head, so he came before the older monk and asked, "Master, why did you carry that woman across the river?"

The older monk said, "I picked that woman up and put her down on the other side of the stream. Yet you picked her up, and are carrying her with you even now!"

I am carrying so much on my back that I don't know what I should keep and what I should throw. I'm like those people you see on those reality shows, hoarders buried waist-deep in things that they don't need, but I wonder if their lives aren't little easier than mine? I think it would be easier to throw out a stack of magazines, a garage piled to the ceiling, a woman carried upon your back. A physical object I could let go of. What about the weight I carry in here, in my heart?

Chapter 9

"Let's take a walk," I tell Jessica. Her nose is a little red – because of the wind, I hope. Not because of that memorial service. Good god, what a preposterous exercise. Dr. Boleman, of all people, showed up.

"So," he said, just as awkward and pudgy as the last time I'd seen him. "How's everything going?"

By now all the attendees have scattered. Jessica's parents, who were in Taiwan because of a delayed flight, had tried to Skype in. Either they had a bad connection or they just didn't move a muscle the whole time. Most of our friends from high school who came only knew Daniel because they knew Jessica. Nobody who knew Daniel at MIT was in the area, but they all sent their condolences.

They all left after lunch, and now I was the only one left, following Jessica up the trail. We head north, tracing the coast, past the concrete ruins of the Sutro Baths. The Pacific, still drenched in fog, crashes onto the rocky beach to our left like clockwork.

There are lots of things I want to say to her, her lonely form hiking up the trail in front of me. It's a windy day – It's always a windy day at Lands End.

"Why did we come here?" I shout at her.

"What did you say?" She's climbed far ahead of me. The stairs here are steep, wooden slats set into the earth. I haven't hiked like this since college.

The baths are far behind us. It's just pine trees and rocks now, and the gravel beneath our feet. Daniel would have appreciated this, the coastline sparse as he was in life.

Did I expect something more? My skin crawls when I remember the memorial service – a whole cadre of people who never knew Daniel at all, who spoke about "honoring his memory" like he'd meant something to them. I read my little poem translation but it was so pale. Perhaps we should have done memorials the way we did in the old country; sweeping grave mounds, candles and joss paper to burn for the dead. A sense of rite and ceremony to substitute real emotion.

Ghosts of all kinds abound in Chinese lore, and in all old world cultures, but in China the devotion has always struck me as so, so absolute. There are ghosts of all kinds – ancestral ghosts, benevolent ghosts, malevolent ghosts; ghosts that lament their deaths, ghosts who pose as dead lovers, ghosts who demand justice, hungry ghosts, ghosts who possess the living until they are unceremoniously chased away by incense-wielding priests. Cohabitation with the dead, in other words.

There is no need to sweep graves in America, but now there's no reason to sweep them in China either. In the south where my father was from, graves are still mound-shaped, but now they are encased in concrete for the sake of modern convenience. They need no tomb-tenders. In my father's village, the graves are situated on a small wooded hillock that rises out of nowhere from between the rice fields, clustered between the trees. The people who have died recently are buried under terraced concrete, stacked Towers of Hanoi scattered throughout the grove. The people who died long ago are nowhere to be seen, their mounds scattered to the wind and the sky.

Sometimes I dream that the ghosts are coming home to roost, at three in the morning, beating their wings white under the blazing moon. Seven feet of concrete can block even

gamma radiation, but nonetheless I see the ghosts arise from their tombs, cluttering the rafters in a blur not visible to corporeal eyes. By day we rush from home to work to lunch to work to home to dinner to sleep, and by night we sleep in happy ignorance beneath, ignoring what shapeless forms gathered in our eaves. But deep in the south, in my father's village – now that the people have all gone, their tiled roofs shattered, the wooden rafter beams rotting – where will the ghosts go now, with their roosting box gone? It haunts me and I don't know the answer. I wake up and I'm thrashing in my sheets, reaching for their phantom wings, grasping at empty air.

The pine trees clear, and I emerge onto one of the many small outcroppings that dot the coastline. Here the trail arcs out, a semicircle of concrete with a view of the ocean, and there is a bench for people who want to sit and watch the sea. That's where Jessica has stopped to wait for me. A simple rope fence separates us from the water. Marin lies straight ahead, and if I crane my head to the right, I can see the north tower of the Golden Gate Bridge. The south tower is hidden behind yet more pine trees.

"How can they call it Lands End," Jessica says, "If you can see more land over there?"

"It's the end of land if you look to your left." The sun is starting to come through the fog. "It looks like the end of land, at least. If you ask Google how to walk from here to Japan, it tells you to kayak."

A trio of seagulls land atop the trash can and start picking apart the grease-stained paper and protein bar wrappers. I take off my backpack and start rifling through the contents. Jessica watches me dig. "What are you looking for?"

"I had a thing of – found it." I pull out a chip bag. "Doritos. Stole 'em during lunch."

We crumble up the Doritos and make a small pile of orange dust, to feed the seagulls. Old funerary traditions, food offerings, and original cheddar Doritos were Daniel's favorite. Jessica shapes the crumbs high like a pyramid, like the bowl of mandarins that used to sit at my grandfather's altar, real mandarins and later plastic oranges when my father's family cared less about the dead and more about their own purses. Giving it to seagulls was better. It was a waste to serve good food to dead people who couldn't eat it.

I have a memory, a hazy one, of a summer morning in a strange land. There is white draping over the table, white rosettes over the chairs, strips of white hung over the doorways framed by sashes of white. My grandmother is shouting, and my mom is shouting right back. I'm three, I'm looking at the big painting on the altar with the candles and the food and wondering why we're giving food to a picture of great-grandpa. Pictures can't eat. Mom is shouting, grandma shakes her head and walks away. In the end our mother didn't win, and the plaque on grandpa's burial mound has my uncles, my male cousins, my dad's name, and me. Wenqing is nowhere to be found. The name *Jia* is something that did not belong to her, or my mother – it is a loan, something that will be stripped away once the time comes. They chipped my name off after my parents divorced. I saw it when I went to visit my father when I was seventeen. He showed me around the burial grove and made no attempt to hide the gravestone.

The character for grave has an earth radical on the left and a writing radical on the right. Words upon the earth. My great-grandfather's gravestone had rows and rows of writing, all the names of his sons and daughters and their sons and daughters, but not my name and not

Wenqing's. So what? It's just a stone, and the dead old man in the earth will never know whose name was carved there. Funerals are for the living, and graves are no conduit to the dead.

A gust of wind tears through the coastline, sending the trees every way, blasting a hole right through the fog. The sun comes out at just the right angle and strikes the Golden Gate Bridge, setting the dull red aflame. Jessica rubs her eyes.

"I keep thinking about that girl," she says. "The girl that jumped. Did I ever tell you about this?"

"No," I say. Even with the sun out, I'm still shivering.

"This happened about a month before Daniel," says Jessica, and she leaves that sentence there. Untouched, silence begins to fester. "You'd fallen out of touch with everyone back home, so you were out of the loop. Over summer break I heard from some of the Academic League alums that a student killed herself. They told everyone during morning announcements. They didn't give any details on who or how but it didn't take that long for the grapevine to find out. Doesn't ever take them too long."

"Yeah," I said. More of a grunt than a word.

"I wasn't as plugged in so I didn't hear the worst of it, but the rumors were vicious. Daniel heard a lot of them just by being at work every day. The younger kids didn't really know her, and they just repeated everything. Like, she was failing all her classes, she cheated on a big project, or worse – she was pregnant and couldn't get an abortion, that one was really bad."

I sucked in a breath. "Seriously?"

"You couldn't believe some of them. Daniel says that he heard a kid say that she drove her car off the Golden Gate Bridge." We both look to our right, to the orange-red towers on the

horizon. “First of all, that’s fucking impossible, and second -” Jessica kicks at the concrete barrier separating us from the sea, scattering the seagulls perched atop. “I don’t remember my second point.”

“Jesus.” I’m shivering. “What was her name?”

Jessica’s face scrunches up. “I don’t know.”

I hold my tongue and said nothing. I feel like I should give her an easy time, after that memorial service. What a farce. We stood around on the cliffs in a circle and said nice things about Daniel, going in order. Dr. Boleman was one of the first to give his little speech – and he meant well – but somehow he’d assumed that Jessica was Daniel’s girlfriend instead of younger sister. Nobody bothered to correct him, or bothered to point out that Daniel had no interest in women in the first place. I found out in college that Daniel had come out to most of his Cambridge friends, but among the high school alums it was a total crapshoot, trying to figure out who knew that he was gay. And it was petty, but I didn’t want to repeat the explanation for every person who didn’t know. It seemed wrong, like even at this guy’s memorial he still needed people to make excuses for him.

“Let’s keep walking, I can see that you’re getting cold,” says Jessica, and so I follow her up the trail.

“Someone told me afterwards that my brother was doing some kind of mental health thing out of his boba tea place,” Jessica continues. “Did you know about this?

“It wasn’t formal,” I tell her. “He just liked to talk to people, listen to their problems. He gave some pretty good advice.” Sometimes he pulled people off railroad tracks.

"Huh." Jessica scrapes her hiking boot across the trail and kicked a pebble. It shoots forward several feet and then tumbles into the tall grass.

"He helped a lot of people." I want her to know.

"I know that," says Jessica. "The girl that jumped, they told me that she went to Daniel's café a lot. That's why I keep thinking about her – I wonder if she gave him the idea."

"No," I pull my parka tight around me. "I don't think so."

"But that's what copycat suicides *are*. I've been reading the news coming out of Palo Alto. One kid jumps in front of a train and a bunch of others follow. What if Daniel, what if Daniel watched this girl jump and so he also -"

"First of all, you don't know if she jumped. You told me you heard rumors that she jumped." My arms are prickling. "And what would change if we could prove that he was imitating the first girl who jumped? What would change?"

"I don't know," cries Jessica. "A reason. I'd have a reason."

I'd read the CDC report as well, I wanted to tell Jessica. But Daniel died three years before they started writing that report, and the first time he tried to kill himself it was 2008 and no one had 'investigation' on their lips. Kids died all the time. We only notice now because the bodies drop with more frequency.

"Daniel did a lot of good," I say to Jessica. "Let's remember that instead."

"With his boba shop?"

"That wasn't just him, though. He said that your parents helped him pay the rent." The sun warms my back, and the wind flings sheets of salty spray into my face. It's disconcerting, the hot and the cold. "Kind of them."

"Yeah, well, he convinced them that it would be a good investment. We didn't know how long he'd be staying, so it made them feel better if they knew he had a job." She wipes ocean mist off her face. "He didn't have a long-term plan. Never did."

"No," I said, confused. "Wasn't he only supposed to take a year off? Until -"

"What?"

"I never assumed -" I cleared my throat. "Look, I didn't think that Daniel not getting readmission was all of the issue, but it was part of it, right? I'm sorry if I'm assuming."

"No, no. There was never any readmission." She stares at me. "What did he tell you?"

"He said." The ocean was so loud. "He said that he was withdrawing for a year, and then he was going to apply for readmission."

And then he didn't get back in. The gates were closed, and so was his way back onto the rightful path, the path that everyone expected him to get back onto.

"I saw his transcript. My parents filled up his voicemail before he would send it to them." Jessica's voice is breaking. "He failed all his classes, there was no way they would've let him apply for readmission. I know. I spent days looking through MIT's academic policies with my parents. There was no way. Shiyan, he lied to you."

I blink to get ocean spray out of my eyes. They sting. I'm blinking and blinking but it's not going away.

"Makes me feel better," Jessica says. "I'm not the only one he kept secrets from."

"Yeah, well." I'm still processing.

"Did he honestly never hit on you?" Jessica asks. "Not once?"

"I don't know." Just because he liked men didn't mean he liked me. I didn't find myself attracted to every girl that I met. The one walking to my right was Example 1A.

"You guys spent so much time together. But I guess you're so stupid you wouldn't be able to tell if he *was* hitting on you." Jessica slaps me on the back. "You little nerd."

"Maybe," I allow. "I don't know."

We've come to the base of the bridge. Hundreds of feet away, the waves lap at concrete, and from the concrete rises the tower, a colossus of vermilion steel that pierces the sky. We stand at the edge of the water and look up and even with my feet planted upon the ground I feel dizzy and out of breath. Just looking up. I don't think I could bear to look down.

"Sometimes I think he was strong for holding out so long," says Jessica. "Then I remember that he gave in, so he must've been weak."

It's never so black and white. Never is. "He was both, I think."

She opens her backpack and pulls out a bundle of envelopes. "One of my roommates in college said that she had a father who passed when she was younger, and that sometimes she wrote letters to him. I tried, but they don't make me feel better. I ask who and I ask what and I ask why – was because he flunked out of college? Because Mom loved him but only when she could pretend that he was normal? I don't know, Shiyan. I feel like I never knew him. I'm grasping for straws in the dark."

"No. No, no." I'm so weary of this conversation. She walks closer and lets her forehead fall into my chest.

"I don't know anything," Jessica mumbles. "I didn't know him even though we lived in the same house for my whole life. And I keep wondering – I keep thinking what could've

happened, what could have changed. There was a guy who jumped off the bridge and survived, you know? He flipped in midair and he landed in the water with his legs first, and he says a sea lion carried him to the Coast Guard. Why didn't my brother deserve a miracle?"

The bridge is the alpha and omega, the beginning and the end. We came through the bridge, crossing by sky and by sea, and some of us left through the bridge. I press my face to Jessica's hair and let the grief crush inward, swelling, tidal waves in my heart chamber. "I know, I know," I say to her. "I know."

I found matches and we burned the letters. Jessica folded them first, like joss paper, and together we watched them blacken at the edges and crumble into the realms of the ancestors. Together we scattered the pinches of ash into the water, like she had done for Daniel, all those years ago.

Su Shi wrote, on the twentieth day of the first month of Yimao in the Xining era, this last stanza of *Dreams Remembered at Night*:

"We behold each other with no words to share,

Only thousands of tear-streaks running down our faces.

"Yearly I return to the place where my heart breaks;

A bright moon in the night sky,

Short pines on a hill."

There are good days and bad days, and these days we have more bad than good. I look at my mother with her hands folded over her blankets, and rotate the bowl in my hand. "More tea?"

She nods. To an outsider the motion would be imperceptible, but we have cohabitated for so long that even the movement of her eyes speak to me. I raise the bowl and scoop up a spoonful of tea, blowing over the surface before I bring it to her thin, wrinkled lips. Ginseng, wolfberries, and jujube. Never enough ginseng.

"I went to Jessica's memorial service," I tell her. Once she told me that she liked the sound of my voice, and I have never forgotten. "Well, it should be called Daniel's memorial service, because we were there to honor his memory – but funerals and memorials are for the living. This one was for Jessica."

I put the tea aside. "I think a lot about what it means to be good. When Daniel died I spent a lot of time wondering why. I was a terrible roommate to Alex during those months. I talked his ear off about how I couldn't believe that he was gone, that it really was true that the good die young. Herodotus says in *History* that those whom the gods love, die young. The best go first. I moaned that if the good ones all died young, then what did that say about the rest of us?

"Eventually he lost it and told me that quoting Herodotus made me sound like kind of a pretentious prick, that "Only the good die young", to him, meant Billy Joel lyrics and sleazy pick-up lines. I had to look it up. It's about a guy who's trying to sleep with a Catholic girl – she's a good girl and he tells this girl, Virginia, that only the good die young, that it's better to experience things, to experience things with him…"

My mother looks half-asleep, even though it's late in the morning. She naps more now, and even when she wakes up she is always exhausted. I close the curtains halfway and keep talking. "I thought that was so coincidental because, well, people spent most of high school

telling me that I should ask Jessica out – it's not related at all, but I was just thinking. It's odd. But anyways, the song had me thinking, that being good isn't all there is to aspire to – and at the memorial service I found out, that in all honesty Daniel wasn't so good himself.

"He told me forever that he was withdrawing from MIT for a year, you know – I told you that, years ago, and you told me that was a polite way to say that he dropped out. How did you know? It doesn't matter, it doesn't matter. Jessica admitted that he flunked out, so you were right from the beginning, only I didn't believe it, couldn't believe that Daniel could do something like that. But it didn't surprise me, when Jessica told me that he had flunked – it relieved me, in fact – it was a moment of, oh, so he wasn't good either – what does that matter, if at all? He wasn't angelic but he was an angel to me in the moment – do we question the people who save us, if they are angels or not? That would be insane, wouldn't it?"

It's late in the morning but it could be dusk and we wouldn't know the difference, the clouds are so thick. "It looked like this too, when I first heard about Daniel's suicide. You couldn't even see any streaks in the cloud cover, just a solid slab of gray, like the sky had frozen – I went to an interview for a summer internship and then I was supposed to go meet some friends for dinner – and when I left campus it had been snowing for a while. It was March, and it was a late snow.

"It's so pretty when it snows in the north, when it's still powdery and fresh. You look ahead and everything is smooth and perfect, and behind you there's a single trail of footprints, your footprints. The ground moves under your feet. It was snowing so hard that the flakes were catching on my face and filling up all the hollows between my eyes and nose, and I had to wipe them away – I walked through the wind and it was blowing snow in my face, and I remember

crossing behind a parking deck and seeing a rabbit jumping across the sidewalk and towards the concrete.

"I was thinking about – there's an old idiom that you taught me and Wenqing, the one called '*shou zhu dai tu*' – waiting at tree roots for rabbits. Once upon a time," I try to imitate the smooth, honeyed voice that my mother used for ancient stories, "There was a poor farmer who worked his fields every day, but the soil was thin and he was often hungry, or cold, or both. One day, while the farmer was resting under a tree and having lunch, a group of hunters passed by his fields. A rabbit fleeing the hunters came toward the farmer, slammed headfirst into the tree, and promptly fell over dead. The farmer took the rabbit home and had his first hearty meal in a long time, and thought, 'Waiting by the tree for rabbits brought me much more food than working my fields – why don't I do this every day?' After that, he waited every day by the tree for another rabbit to come and sprint into the tree, but the rabbits never came. And so the poor farmer starved to death.

"I watched the rabbit run away and thought about how going to a good school was like having rabbits run into trees all around you, all the time – if you look in the right places there is always some new opportunity, something there for you to take advantage of – hell, Alex monitored the free food emailing list so well that I don't think he spent any money on groceries during the first three months we lived together. I thought about the rabbits and I wondered how Daniel was doing, if he was going to come back to MIT soon – I didn't know when readmissions decisions were going to be handed out, but I thought it must be soon, because it was March already. It was cold and it was snowing, the kind of snow that's beautiful at first and eventually painful because of how numb I was getting, because I wasn't prepared for the

weather – so I hurried to grab dinner with my friends, and afterwards we stayed up playing board games over hot chocolate, and I was dead tired when I went home, I fell asleep almost immediately. In the morning I woke up to my phone ringing nonstop. It was Jessica. You know how the rest of that goes.

"While I was outside admiring the blizzard, Daniel called me. Just once, he never tried again. And while I was bantering over vegetarian diner food and triumphing at Pandemic, Daniel was probably standing on the Golden Gate Bridge. He left a voice mail, and it's just thirty seconds long. Just thirty seconds of his breathing. It must have been a calm night. Normally the bridge is so windy, but in the voicemail his breathing is so clear. I can hear everything."

I take the paper from the bedside. "I read this poem for Daniel, at the memorial service. I learned about it in college, when I took a seminar on Imperial Chinese literature. From Su Shi, based on the lyric form of *Jiangchengzi:*

"For ten years we have been separated by life and death;

I attempt not to yearn,

but cannot forget.

Thousands of miles away your grave stands alone,

Leaving me nowhere to speak my grief.

Even if we met you would not recognize me;

My dust-filled face,

My frost-like hair.

Night comes and my dreams spirit me to my hometown;

Through your small window,

You brush your hair.

We behold each other with no words to share,

Only thousands of tear-streaks running down our faces.

Yearly I return to the place where my heart breaks;

A bright moon in the night sky,

Short pines on a hill."

My mother opens her eyes when I finish. "Is that Su Dongpo?"

"I always wondered why you didn't teach me any Song dynasty poetry." I fold up my translation and slide it back into my pocket. "It's very pretty."

"Song Dynasty was weak," says my mother. Of course she wakes up only to debate me on points of historicity. I should have expected no less. "Conquered by the Mongols."

"They invented gunpowder," I point out. "And paper currency, and movable type."

"Mongols," says my mother. She coughs, and it sounds terrible.

"Point taken." I pick up her tea again, and spoon some up for her. It had been long enough that I didn't need to blow on it this time. "Better?"

She settles back onto her pillows. "Yes."

"I always wondered," I say to my mother, "Why you made me learn so much Chinese. Not just the history, but the literature, the constant memorization, the poetry and the classics and the Analects and the I-Ching and all the other things. The calligraphy and the dancing, for Wenqing. All the old things."

"Culture is forever." She folds her hands, veins showing through paper-thin skin. The cancer had wasted her away, gnawing at her until she was a shell of the woman who once

terrified me. She couldn't hold her own bowl anymore, never mind a bamboo stick. "The Mongols and the Manchu and all the other barbarians conquered China, but we turned them Chinese. They had Chinese names, and they wrote Chinese words, and their government was staffed by Chinese."

"The culture is gone," I point out. "There was a revolution."

And after the revolution, there was another, and another. Constant revolution, demanded the chairman, and millions of Chinese died so he could have it.

"And that is why you had to learn it. You had to learn what other people forgot."

"I don't know," I tell her. "I've learned some poetry, but that's about it. All I've learned by memorizing Confucius and Mencius, Hanfeizi and Mozi, all those guys from the Hundred Schools of Thought – all you've taught me is to talk in other people's words."

"You talk well by yourself. You were talking before I fall asleep, and you still talking when I awake."

"It's a shield," I say. "You hide behind culture. Everything you do is 'because we are Chinese.' We go to school because we are Chinese, we pay out the ass for school because we are Chinese. We hit our children because we are Chinese. We come home and serve our parents hand and foot because filial piety is important, and why is it important? Because we are Chinese."

"You don't understand the first thing about being Chinese," says my mother, her voice straining. "Even now you argue with your mother on her deathbed."

That shut me up quick. "I didn't mean it," I tell her. "I just – I'm sorry."

"*Yanzi*, you think that hurt me? We fight harder many times. And I know you give up job to come home."

That part was not true. That was something Wenqing made up to garner sympathy for me, to make me look like a good son. A classic Wenqing move. I was still working from home, and I had a whole rig set up in the childhood bedroom I'd turned into an office. One day, I decide, I would tell my mother the truth. Just not now.

Outside, the sky grows darker, and the wind rattles the windows. I get up and close the kitchen windows, lock the door.

"You don't even understand this poem," says my mother, back to her usual self. "This poem by Su Dongpo."

"What didn't I get right?" I get my translation out again. "I liked it, even if it's kind of melodramatic. He's mourning the death of his wife."

My mother scoffs. "That's what you get for only paying attention to surface reading. Go look at analysis, in Chinese. Su Shi wrote poem for his second concubine."

"Oh." I look at the text again. "But that doesn't change the meaning."

"Hm?"

"It's about love," I say, quiet. "It's written for someone he loved very much, someone who is in a faraway place. The subject doesn't matter."

My mother closes her eyes. "If you think so."

The house is quiet with just my mother and me. Like how it was before. I can't imagine what it was like in the years when I was in college and Wenqing was in graduate school, when my mother came home to this cavernous house. Cluttered and empty all at once.

There's a light touch on my wrist. "Call Wenqing," says my mother. "Tell her to come home."

"I have." Wenqing lived on the east coast, though. Whenever we spoke I went outside, because eventually she would shout at me to get our mother evaluated again, that she wouldn't last the winter if she relied on traditional herbal medicine to cure her cancer. I can't force her to go, I always said. She's still very lucid.

"Where is she?"

"She's angry with me," I say. "I'll talk to her."

"Wenqing is angry that I am sick." My mother squeezes my hand. "She's angry because I am not doing what she thinks is best for me. I know."

I know, too. I spent all my youth fighting my mother and the things that she thought were best for me. And now that the tables are turned, now that my mother is not doing the things that are what she ought to do – Wenqing is angry. I've accepted it.

"This is the way you've chosen," I affirm for her. "This is what you want."

"Yes," says my mother. "This is the Way."

Outside, rain begins to fall. We watch the clouds coalesce and flatten, emptying all they can carry onto the parched land. Thunder rumbles in the distance, a sweet sound that I have not heard since I came back to California. The raindrops form streaks when they hit the windows and the sound of individual droplets multiplies and folds until it is all one tone, a singular drumbeat reverberating with the earth.

When my mother says the Way I know that she is referring to the Daoist Way. The flow of the universe, the order of the world, the whatever of whatever. It's not fate. It's not random

chance, either. The *Dao* is everything that you knew was inevitably going to happen, after it's happened.

In my sophomore year of college the political science department sponsored a talk by a famous statistician. It was just after the 2012 election, and he was doing a book tour because the election had made him famous. The organizers held a lottery, and my roommate convinced me to enter. "If you enter too, the chance of either of us getting a ticket goes up, right?" he said. "Be a bro, c'mon."

By some amazing stroke of luck, both me and Alex got seats.

Sure, I could sit down and work out the exact chances of that happening with a binomial curve and some elbow grease, but despite all the math it still feels divine when things go right just like that. Because we're human, we're very good at ignoring chance – or is it the other way around, that because we ignore chance, we're human? Either way, chance doesn't feel right. The existence of random chance takes away choice, autonomy, the ability of a single person to affect change and thus outcome. And maybe that's why I went to the talk in the end, even though I didn't give a single shit about politics or statistics or data journalism – I could've sold the ticket but it felt like a capital-S Someone up above was jabbing me between the shoulder blades and saying, '*You should go, look, I've laid it all out for you.*'

The speaker was a middle-aged man with thinning hair and a speech tic, a habit of ending his sentences in a rising tone that made him sound like a preteen girl. He reached for his water so often that halfway through, a staffer had to dash out and refill his glass. But he was mesmerizing. This quote isn't word-for-word either, but here's what I remember.

"In the media, we like to point to certain events and say, 'That one was a game-

changer.' But the truth is -" And when the speaker said this he sat a little straighter, and I felt as though he was looking right at me, though the glare from the stage lights prevented me from seeing his eyes – "A single event never has enough power to affect the overall outcome. What we describe as a 'game-changer' is usually just a single happening that confirms and supports previous trends and assumptions."

Beside me, my roommate nodded furiously and scribbled in his notebook, muttering about Romney and gaffes. The moment gone, I took my phone out of my pocket and thumbed the case backing. Look, I still have it here – Werner Heisenberg, smiling from behind clear acrylic. The torn edge at his left shoulder is there because I tore his portrait out of my high school physics textbook after the funeral.

I keep Heisenberg with me to remind myself that uncertainty is inevitable. Not-knowing is inevitable, so there's nothing to be afraid of. Our decisions are informed by, but not dictated from, the biochemistry in our heads. If we can't predict the course of an electron to the precise angstrom because the constraints of time and space prevent us, Schrodinger be damned, then perhaps the world really is random. And then, we ought to believe that we do have free will, and our minds are not just a collection of quarks and gluons and what-have-you bumbling around in empty space according to predetermined patterns, and maybe nobody could've seen that funeral coming. Maybe Daniel's bloodless face in that too-small box could never have been foretold from the start.

All those funerals, all those burned letters. All those frogs, mired in their wells forever. All those ashes.