

## Table of Contents

Old Gold Mountain	1
I Killed Sterling Franklin	17
The Wrong Sermon	32
Anesthetic Oblivion	45
The Houseguest	58
How Hai Yin Became Helen	71

旧金山  
Old Gold Mountain

Felicity had just sat down and was about to dig into her own burrito when her grandmother rolled up to the table in a wheelchair, took a sniff at the chili chicken burrito she made, and rolled back to the kitchen. Her grandmother shook her head the whole way to the fridge.

“What’s wrong, *po po*?” Felicity said.

Her grandmother opened the fridge door and the fridge light lit up her frowning face, transforming her deeply-etched wrinkles into illuminated lines converging at her knitted brow and pursed lips. She tried to grab something from inside, but unable to reach beyond her confining wheelchair she waved her arms like a grumpy old tyrannosaurus rex. Felicity got up. She knew what her grandmother wanted, but she took her time to the fridge, enjoying a small victory.

She grabbed a red-lidded Tupperware container out of the fridge and put it in the microwave. The container was full of short ribs and stir-fry that some guy in baggy jeans, sagging an inch below a Calvin Klein underwear band, had brought the night before. Right after she had just arrived, as she was carrying in her suitcase. He had addressed her grandmother with all courtesy like a “good Chinese boy,” as her grandmother had put it. Felicity felt insulted.

“I’m supposed to be taking care of you,” she had said.

“He’s just delivering for his parents,” her grandmother had said. “I’ve been here since the 40s. Everyone knows me. It’s a sign of respect.” And that was that.

The microwave beeped and Felicity used some oven mitts to pull out the steaming container. She grabbed a pair of embellished wooden chopsticks and reset the table for her grandmother.

“You know, the burrito has rice in it,” Felicity said. “It’s pretty close to Chinese food.”

“Close to is not the same,” her grandmother said before picking up her chopsticks with a flourish.

Felicity dumped her grandmother’s burrito onto her plate by her own burrito. She figured she was hungry anyway.



Felicity had volunteered to pack her bags and move across the country to San Francisco – or Old Gold Mountain, as the Chinese call it – to take care of her grandmother, who just had hip surgery. All she had done after college graduation was work as some part-time secretary at Cisco and bum around at home, not at all aligning to her parents’ dream of her becoming someone reputable: a doctor, lawyer, or business woman. She was their disappointment of the century. So she figured, she’d take any opportunity she could get. But also because they didn’t have any extended family here in the States, and neither her mother nor father wanted to go. They were at

some critical point in their oh-so-fascinating careers as doctors, though Felicity thinks its because neither of them could get along with her grandmother.

Her grandmother had never liked her father. Her grandmother had always referred to her son-in-law as a *noeng noeng hong*, a sissy, soft like tofu pudding, not someone who could fight and stand his ground. At least that's what Felicity's father claimed she had said every time they had to go visit. Felicity could remember the last time she and her family visited. She was in high school and they had gone for her grandfather's funeral. Her father had been sullen the whole weekend. Her mother and grandmother had gotten in a fight about the guests at the funeral. There were people who showed up that Felicity's mom had been adamant about not inviting, "unsavory characters" or what not. Felicity hadn't caught the whole argument, as she just attributed the whole mess of a weekend to a bad mother-and-daughter relationship and her own mother's paranoia. As a kid, Felicity hadn't been allowed to play by any street-facing windows. She could get shot, was her mother's reasoning. Never mind that they lived in a neighborhood – where every house was worth at least six digits – in the quiet, peaceful, boring town of Cary, North Carolina.



She had found her grandmother's modest flat in the heart of Chinatown, above the small, family-owned grocery store on Stockton Street. Some of her fondest memories where of playing scavenger hunt in that apartment, of looking in every corner and always finding new things. In her mind, in anticipation of her arrival, she had conjured up thick rugs, lush throws, big ink landscapes, small trinkets, bronze statues, and red and gold everywhere – the way it was when she had visited as a child. Only her grandfather's study had been off limits, a dark cellarage in her memory furnished with shady imaginings. The punishment for entering was being thrown out

to the streets, where members of the Triad would come get her and sell her to slavery. Or at least that's her mom had threatened. But Felicity never took her mother's threats seriously.

However, when she had entered the apartment for the first time her illusions of red and gold were shattered by wall-to-wall plants. The apartment was filled with ferns, a yucca cane, some bamboo, and various ficus plants – a green jumbled mass. The only evidence of human life was a table, two chairs, and a couch in the living area. Upon arriving, her grandmother gave her a two-hour tour of the flat with a detailed account of every plant. Where she got it, how long it's been alive, how much water it likes, where in the apartment it thrives, whether or not it likes air conditioning.

"They need more care than me," her grandmother had said.

Felicity had laughed.

"No, really. I want you to take care of them for me," her grandmother wasn't laughing. "I can't reach the sink or move around the pots in this damn wheelchair."

"I don't know anything about plants."

"Don't worry, you'll have time to learn."

Felicity had plans for her free time in the city and none of them involved plant care. She wanted to explore a real urban jungle packed dense with concrete, metal, people, and excitement. Not the sprawled-out, backwoods, mostly-white small suburban town. Which wasn't exactly a truthful depiction, but the way her relatives from China described it. Which was probably why they never came to visit. She was also excited to learn about her roots. Felicity's maternal grandparents had immigrated to San Francisco as newly weds in search of a better future. Her mother had grown up as an American-Born-Chinese, or ABC – a valuable term, as Felicity learned – used by Chinese-Americans to distinguish themselves from those FOBs, or Fresh-Off-

the-Boat. No one could really tell just by looking. Her mother had learned English and Spanish before going off to college in Chapel Hill and meeting her father, another ABC out of touch with his roots. Felicity was their family's only third-generation Chinese-American, but she was tired of being called a banana or a Twinkie, of being considered the diversity among her friends, of being asked where she was really from, and of going out with guys only to find herself a victim to Asian fetishism. She felt that the oldest and largest Chinatown in the nation was just the right amount of authentic and exotic, her chance to reclaim her identity. She knew she would emerge from this experience a newer, fuller person.



Throughout Felicity's first week, two other guys of the saggy-jeans variety sent over food and her grandmother set her up as the substitute overseer down in the grocery store. Her grandmother had two of the workers, muscular men who looked more like bar bouncers than grocers, carry her and the wheelchair as one unit down the two flights of stairs into the store just so she could introduce Felicity.

"This is my granddaughter, *Fei Li Si Ti*," she said in Chinese. "She doesn't speak any Chinese."

"Nice to meet you," the two bouncer-grocers and an older lady who ran the cashier said in accented English.

Felicity could see them judging her – the outsider, the other. And it wasn't even true. She understood what her grandmother had just said. She did know some Chinese. Her parents, probably out of guilt from their shamelessly American lifestyle, sent Felicity to Saturday School all through middle and the first half of high school. She had sat through countless hours of extra class time, of extra homework, and all in a language she never had a chance to use. Until now.

"Hello everyone," Felicity said in Chinese. "Nice to meet you all."

Instead of responding to Felicity, the three workers looked to her grandmother for a reaction.

“Ah, she’s just a show off,” her grandmother said, waving a hand in dismissal.

The three laughed a little too quickly, a little too loudly, and went back to work.



Felicity spent the days people watching along the grocery store’s five isles, exploring the variety of bottled, picked, fermented, chiled condiments, and taking turns with the cashier lady. At night, she would make her way around the apartment, watering and caring for the plants. By the end of the week, her grandmother handed her a twenty.

“Good job this week,” her grandmother said.

“That’s all I made from working at the grocery?”

“No. You get room and board for working at the grocery. This is for taking care of the plants.”

Felicity looked at the twenty in her hand, at Andrew Jackson looking woefully sideways, and wished he were Benjamin Franklin.

“Gee, thanks *po po*,” Felicity said.

“You’re in Chinatown now. You don’t need that much money.” Her grandmother was already rolling herself away, bored with the conversation. “Someone’s bringing me more food tonight, so you get the weekend off.”



On Saturday morning, Felicity ventured off Stockton to Grant Street with the single-minded purpose of spending that twenty. She passed throngs of tourists wearing hats, carrying large bags, and constantly taking pictures outnumbered the locals. Here, she felt more comfortable gawking at window displays. She stopped at almost every store, peering through the

window as if she was looking at a museum display. She took pictures of the emeralds, rubies, and sapphires. The jade pendants, necklaces, bracelets, earrings. The porcelain bowls, tea sets, vases. The golden praying, waving, laughing, meditating, levitating buddhas. All at 60 to 80 percent off! A man on a stilted unicycle rushed by her, his long blond hair waving in the air behind him.

The gust of wind from the passing bike blew up her skirt a little and she looked up from the window to the sandy-beige buildings surrounding her, with pagoda-like roofing, covered in multicolored signs and advertisements, connected by strings of faded-red lanterns. She felt like she was the star of an old-time movie. Felicity Cheung in *Old Gold Mountain*, the epic romance of the 90's.

As she looked around, a nondescript thrift shop just a block past the iconic Chinatown gates caught her eye. The Chinatown gate, with two golden dragons perched atop its pagoda roof, tunneled her vision like a spotlight to the thrift shop's display of colorful, vintage silk robes, drawing her in like a black-hole portal to the past.



When she got back to her grandmother's flat, the smell of sweetened beef and fried scallions welcomed her. Her grandmother was taking the last bite of a scallion pancake sandwich from another Tupperware.

"Hi *po po*," Felicity said and headed straight for her room.

Her grandmother looked up and stared at the plastic bag in her hand.

"You spent the money already."

"Yeah, I bought a souvenir. But it's practical too!"

"Don't forget to water the plants tonight."





Much to her surprise, Felicity was given her grandfather's old study to stay in when she had arrived. The room couldn't have been more different than how it had appeared in her childhood mind. There was no evidence of scratches on the wall from a pet Siberian tiger, like she had supposed because of the loud noises she had often heard from within. There was no secret panel along the wall leading to another room, though that was the first thing she had checked upon entering.

The room was completely bare, except for her suitcase and a mattress on the floor. Even so, she had treaded lightly at first. Every step had felt like an intrusion, like she was going to be thrown out to the streets, to become gang fodder. By the third day, she had gotten over herself, bought some cherry blossom wall deco and a full-length mirror from Target. When she decorated the room, she even felt a little powerful, being in her grandfather's old study, having crossed into the forbidden and claimed it as her own.

In her sanctuary away from her grandmother, Felicity carefully took out a dark navy-blue robe from the plastic bag and laid it out on the mattress. She traced the large, intricately embroidered character on the back of the robe with her finger. Though she couldn't read the character, she found the twisted curving legs to look like a mystical beast, a chimera of sorts. She could feel every strand of the golden thread, woven together, containing and protecting so many years of history. The robe resembled that of royal gowns, patterned with gold and red dragonheads and claws, but had a modern cut. The wide sleeves and bagginess of the robe reminded her of the costumes worn in martial arts movies. The kind that's thrown over and tie at the waist with a belt. It even had a little tough love – character: on the side of the left sleeve were three small bullet-like holes, and on the right lower front, a small rip.

Felicity threw the robe over herself, donning it as if it were a crown, and did some twirls in front of the mirror. Her twirls turned into fist pumps and jump kicks. She figured if the epic romance didn't work out, Felicity Cheung in Old Gold Mountain would be a boundary-pushing, cult-worthy, kung-fu film.

"Where did you get that?"

Her grandmother's voice made Felicity jump. She was parked outside Felicity's room, frowning as always from her wheelchair.

"Oh this?" Felicity hugged herself, feeling exposed. "I got this from a thrift shop off Grant."

"I wouldn't wear that outside this apartment."

Felicity didn't know what to say. Her grandmother may be old and grumpy, but that didn't excuse her for being downright rude.

"Why not? I think it looks pretty cool."

"Just don't do it," her grandmother said, rolling away again.



To spite her grandmother, Felicity wore the robe around the flat all the time, especially when she tended to the vegetation while in her grandmother's presence. One day, two weeks into her stay, she discovered dark lesions on the bottom leaves of one of the ferns, a sure sign of disease. Felicity's grandmother was so distraught, she even ate some leftovers from Felicity's cooking from the day before. She then sent Felicity out for some chemicals from a plant apothecary. Felicity was wearing her robe, but her grandmother was yelling from behind the fern, "Right away, right now!" so without changing, she rushed out the door.

The plant apothecary was supposedly located on a street full of restaurants. She passed signs after signs for Japanese Cuisine, Far East Café, Golden Dragon Restaurant. Her anxiety

and the smells of peanut oil, soy sauce, ginger, and garlic made her nauseous. No matter how hard she turned her head, she couldn't find the apothecary's shop. Two guys, skinny boys in muscle shirts and tapered sweatpants, were standing outside the Golden Dragon smoking. Felicity hesitated, put off by their attire and the way they pinched their cigarette, but figured she was more scared of her grandmother than these guys, so she approached them.

"Excuse me, do either of you know where Feng Shui Plants is?" she said.

The guys looked her up and down and exchanged looks. One of them pointed to the right.

"Behind the City of Hong Kong."

Felicity thanked them and turned, but she could hear the guys mumbling something in Chinese, in low but excited voices. She didn't have time to care and rushed off.



The shop was small and dark, the air dank. The place was more like a cave than a plant shop. The old man, with squinty eyes and a long chin beard, behind the counter had in front of him five jars of ingredients and a stone mortar and pestle. He was mixing the ingredients for the fern while muttering to himself, a plant magician wrapped up in his own world. To get some distance from the strange man, Felicity walked around the store, comparing the store plants to those in the flat. All of the plants, except for the ones against the back wall, had little name placards. The placards were all in Chinese, but Felicity could tell her grandmother apparently had half the store in her flat.

The plants along the windows were neatly placed, manicured and in nice glazed vases. But behind the display the rest of the plants had grown together, their different branches and leaves intertwined together, climbing over the shelves, walls, and floors of the shop. She felt like she had stepped into the abandoned arboretum of a haunted fairytale, not quite trusting her eyes as if it were all a mirage. She found a small opening along the window between the tangled

vegetation, the looking glass to the outside world. She could see, as she pressed her face forward, the two guys from earlier now across the street smoking in front of an Old Shanghai restaurant. She figured they were on a mission to ruin every restaurant goer's culinary experience. She watched as two more guys joined them. They passed cigarettes and lighters around.

"It'd done young lady," the storeowner said in Chinese.

Felicity made her way back to the counter to pay for the expensive a-la-carte fern cocktail, taking care not to trip over any plants. She was already thinking about how she should – after the fern got better of course – ask her grandmother for a refund, so she didn't notice the old man looking over her robe.

"So you must be the new person," the storeowner said.

"Yes," Felicity said, trying to keep up with the conversation in her rusty Chinese. "I am new."

"Well, how about I just make that half off for you then."

She understood half off and couldn't believe how nice he was. She would tell her grandmother that she had bargained for the discount, knowing that would make her grandmother proud. As she paid, the front door opened and she could smell the cigarette smoke emanating from their bodies before she even saw them. The four guys from across the street were in the store and making their way towards her. They didn't look like the kind of guys who would tend to plants, unless it was for their smoking habit. To her surprise, the storeowner waved them over.

"Oh boys, have you met the new girl?" the storeowner said.

The two that had given Felicity directions nodded.

The storeowner leaned in towards the four guys and said in a low voice, “To be honest, when they said they were bringing in a new person to deal with Oyster Boy, I didn’t that they would send a girl.”

They all looked at Felicity. She just smiled and nodded, pretending like she understood what was happening. The old man turned back to her.

“Alright, if you wait here, I’ll just get these boys settled and then I’ll get the package.”

Felicity just smiled and nodded again. All she could understand was to wait for some package – probably something else for her grandmother.

The old man led the four guys into the back room and for a bit before returning with a large, cardboard box.

“Make sure you get this to Oyster Boy.”

Felicity took the box while smiling and nodding and backed out of the store.



When Felicity got back, her grandmother almost ran her over with the wheelchair. Felicity was put to work right away, applying the medication onto the diseased leaves with a brush. In her haste to save the fern, Felicity left the cardboard box by the foot of the table. It wasn’t until later, after Felicity had just stepped out of the shower and her hair was dripping wet when she heard her grandmother’s yell, a low howling noise from outside her room.

“Felicity!”

She went rushing out, leaving a trail of water.

“Did something happen to the fern?”

Her grandmother was parked by the box, now with its top ripped open and its side indented with a wheel print.

“What is this?” Her grandmother pointed at the box as if to accuse it of some crime.

“Something the guy at Feng Shui Plants gave me. I assumed it was for you, since people keep sending you stuff.”

She took a peek into the box. It was full of red cylindrical tubes and bags of black powder.

“What is this stuff for, *po po*?”

Her grandmother took a deep breath and wheeled herself around before saying, “Did you wear your robe out?”

Felicity didn’t understand the connection.



Late weekday afternoons were the busiest time at the grocery store. That was the time when Felicity had to play the role of manager, cashier, and grocer all at once. She was busy restocking the dried goods isle when a bald man, head as shiny and smooth as a pear and dressed in an all white, three-piece suit, marched into the store dragging in the old man from the apothecary. One of the cigarette boys from before followed closely behind. They walked around until the old man spotted Felicity and pointed at her.

“That’s her,” he said, voice shaking.

Felicity put away the bags of sunflower seeds and wiped her hands on her apron. She could see the old lady cashier watching her and calling up someone on the phone in a hurry.

“Can I help you?”

“Where’s my stuff, little girl?” the bald man said in English.

Felicity didn’t understand what he was talking about, but the way the light bounced off his head, his eyes glinting and voice smooth, reminded her of all those paranoid threats her mother used to make.

“Um...what stuff?”

She backed away slowly.

“I believe you’ve got a box that belongs to me.”

The sound of the backdoor opening caught all three of their attention. Unsure if it was safe to turn her back to this man, she stood still.

“You’ve got a lot of guts stepping into my shop,” Felicity’s grandmother said from behind her.

Felicity turned. The two bouncer-grocers were carrying her grandmother in the wheelchair, with the cardboard box in her lap, into the store. They put her down, and she rolled up next to Felicity.

“Elder Fong,” the bald man said, letting go of the plant shop owner.

“Oyster Boy,” her grandmother said. “It’s been a while. When did they let you out?”

“Last weekend.”

“Well congratulations. Should I send flowers?”

“No need.” He pauses, considering his next move. “My box, if you please.”

By this time, most of the costumers had cleared out. They didn’t want any trouble with their groceries. The only bystander was the old lady cashier, who had pulled out a cigarette and was smoking and watching from the counter, as curious as cat with a death wish.

Her grandmother mentioned for Felicity to take the box, so she picked it up and with shaky hands dumped it into Oyster Boy’s hands. Inside the box, folded up, was the robe she had bought. Shrimp Boy picked up the garment and rubbed it between his fingers.

“It’s been a while since I’ve seen this,” he said.

“Now you must forgive my granddaughter, she’s new and doesn’t know the proper etiquette.” Her grandmother shot Felicity a look before continuing. “However, you should have your boys keep a better eye on things,”

“I thank you for the advice, Elder Fong.”

Felicity’s grandmother waved to the door.

“I trust you will make sure to keep your business on your side of town from now on? I don’t want any trouble now.”

“No, neither do I.”

He left followed by the cigarette boy and the old man, the one person who still looked scared, who was still anticipating possible punishment.



That night, Felicity made fried rice for dinner, which her grandmother begrudgingly ate.

“No one has sent anything lately, because of all the commotion in the community,” her grandmother said. “I told you not to wear that robe.”

Felicity tried to apologize. She felt exhausted. She had made three rounds that night, trying to make sure she took excellent care of the plants. She looked up a special recipe for the fried rice, just so she could make sure it was authentic enough. She was sorry, but she still wasn’t sure what she had done.

“The robe was embroidered with the character for justice. But here, that’s the symbol for the Hop Sing Tong. Do you know about the Tongs?”

She shook her head. “Are they like the Triads?”

Her grandmother sighed.

“You know, your mother couldn’t handle it either. Growing up with her grandfather and I being...well, who we were. She was ashamed of us and our background. She didn’t understand



that's what it took in those days to survive as a foreigner in America. By her generation, no one remembered what it was like chasing the fantasy of Old Gold Mountain, coming to America and not finding gold. Finding nothing but bitter work, subjugation, hatred, and sometimes violent retaliation."

Her grandmother waved her chopsticks around as she talked, pinching them together at the air as if to catch invisible bugs.

"So she made sure she got into a good college and got out of here as fast as she could. She still doesn't realize she was able to do that because of what we did and had sacrificed for her."

Her grandmother shook her head and sighed. She cleaned out her bowl of rice and looked to the kitchen.

"Any more of this? I've worked up an appetite today...and this isn't as bad as I thought it would be."

Felicity got up and took her grandmother's bowl to the stove and refilled it. She smiled a little at her small victory. She felt like that was enough. Enough of a victory so that when her grandmother would lose the wheelchair and finish the walker stage – when her grandmother no longer needed assistance – she could go back home to the trees, the open air, the slow boring life. She would gladly leave behind the smoke and mirrors of the city's concrete, metal, and glass, where the buildings appeared charming at a close range, but given distance and perspective seemed to jut up like jagged teeth that blocked the sun and cast everything within its circumference in shadows.

## I Killed Sterling Franklin

I killed Sterling Franklin.

He was lying on the bed, asleep with his mouth slightly agape. The moonlight through my bedroom window reflected off his face and bare shoulders, which made him gleam as if he were levitating in the dark room, like he had reached a heavenly state and was about to float away. I sat up and took my pillow in my hands. I fluffed it a little before I placed it over his innocent, sleeping face. I pressed it down and smothered him. He woke up midway through, still drugged from the special tea I gave him earlier that evening, and started thrashing and clawing at me with the ferocity of a kitten.

It was the easiest thing I ever did.



Sterling Franklin was the gentlest creature on this good earth. He was an orphan boy that the Franklins had adopted back in 1938. The first child to be adopted in Babsville, and by

farmers at that. I had heard from my mama that the Franklins were growing old and needed someone to help keep the land. They had a big piece of land, too. Though I don't suppose they ever thought their little Sterling would grow up wanting to be a preacher. But with a name like Sterling, it was inevitable.

I first laid eyes on Sterling when he stood in front of the pulpit at age 16, spurring the words to his first sermon in stutters. The congregation of Babsville Baptist had looked on, smiled with encouragement and slight amusement. When Sterling choked on his words, he would caress his throat with his fingers and then run them through his thick wavy hair, so dark it was almost black. Something about his graceful fingers and the way the words fumbled over his pouty bottom lip got me hot in my seat. I was 14 years old, had just finished up my time at Lyons School, the identical white building a few strides east of Babsville Baptist, and started working as a clerk at my daddy's gas station. And though my parents wouldn't have known it, I knew about sex and orgasms. I read about it in those body books on the reproductive system, the books I secretly had shipped in from out of town. Scientific books that no library in Babsville carried.



My parents were quick to jump on the Sterling wagon – that being all the parents with daughters wanted Sterling to marry one of their girls before he went off to seminary in Chicago. Big city, exciting life, stable future. Everybody knew Babsville was a dying town, scorched and forsaken. Used to be considered The Hidden Pearl of the South, at least that's what my daddy would tell us. And I would have been supportive had my parents chosen to pair me up with him. I was the better fit, I was meant for greater things. But they picked Lydia – oh perfect Lydia, Saint Lydia – because she wasn't the freak who spent all her time drawing and making statues of naked people.

“An abomination!”

“An embarrassment!”

But they seemed to have forgotten Adam and Eve were made without clothing. In their purest, loveliest form, naked and unashamed.

I knew Sterling thought so. I caught him in the basement where my parents stored my works the first time we met. He was gazing at a nude sketch I had done of myself. He didn’t know it as me. I hadn’t bothered drawing my face.

My parents were throwing their mid-summer barbeque in the back yard, the annual event that brought the city people – the gas station, grocery store, mom-and-pop owners and workers – and the country people – the farmers and those who owned land – of Babsville together.

“Do you like it?” I said.

He jumped so high he looked like a jackrabbit about to get shot.

“I was just—” he tried to say. “This is lovely. Is this your work?”

I walked up to him, got so close I could see his heart pounding, a glowing red like ripe fruit for the taking.

“It’s me.”

“Yes, hi. Sterling Franklin.” He put out his hand. “Pleasure to officially meet you.”

He said “officially,” because of course he’d heard about me. The Whore of Babsville. That’s what the girls at school had called me, those little primroses in stiff peter-pan collars and knee-length skirts, egged on by their ever-so-respectable fathers and mothers. Even Lydia wouldn’t be seen talking to me in public. “She was adopted from a circus,” she would tell people.

I took his hand and held it until he blushed.

“I mean, the picture is of me.”



One doesn't just become the Whore of Babsville without any help. Mine was in the form of one Mrs. Roman. She was a short, plump woman who's skin was dimpled and pitted and who's hair was frizzy like it had been deep fried, but she drew the most angelic bodies and told the most fascinating tales.

She became our neighbor when she and Mr. Roman had first moved to Babsville. No one really knew why they came to town, not having any family or history here. But Mr. Roman worked as an electrician and Mrs. Roman made the best chocolate cake in town. When I was younger, I would go to her house every Friday where I ate a slice of cake and watched her work. She drew on everything – the walls of her house, cardboard boxes, old tablecloths. Sometimes she had clients – personal muses, models, she called them – in another room. On those days, she would send me away with a slice of cake in a little plastic container.

Our relationship changed to more than just cake exchange when I was in the sixth grade. I had licked my plate clean, but Mrs. Roman had wandered off to another part of the house, so I picked up one of her charcoal pencils and drew a miniature replica of her newest sketch on my napkin. When she came back into the room, a pencil tucked into her waistband and a brush into her hair, she began to clear my plate.

“Oh honey, did you do this?” She picked up the napkin.

With pudgy cheeks, a jolly belly, and chocolate smears in the corners of my mouth, I wasn't the most winsome child. But I wasn't afraid to take credit where credit was due.

“Yes, ma'am.”

“My, my, you've got some talent,” she said. “Talent like that must be fostered, trained, ignited.”

She went on as she moved about the room, a flurry of words and mass. When she finally stood still, it had been decided that I would be her apprentice.



The summer of that particular barbeque, the one where I caught Sterling secretly admiring my body as it were, had been particularly hot. In fact that whole past year had been unbearably hot and the land gone dried up. Even the river that went round the north side of town had grown real skinny, like a small garden snake. By the end of that summer, the farmers started selling off pieces of their land to this and that company, cutting off little slivers of Babsville and handing them to the highest bidder.

That was the summer Sterling had announced to the congregation of Babsville Baptist now that he had turned 18, old enough to be wandering off on his own, he was going to be leaving for seminary come next fall. He was only going to be around for another year, to prepare his heart and mind for the ministry: a deadline for the unmarried daughters of Babsville. He was going to be taking on some more roles to aid his preparation. Roles like teaching a Sunday school class. A class on Genesis and Psalms, on the beauty of creation and how it reflects the glory of the Lord.

For the next few weeks, the number of young female Sunday school attendants rose faster than yeast in warm dough. Young eager girls who would bring baked cookies and casseroles for Sterling and his aging parents. Young boring girls who knew nothing about the beauty of creation, not the way Sterling and I understood.



My parents had Sterling over for dinner one night, shortly after he started teaching Sunday school. Really, they were trying to set up Lydia and so they hadn't even told me about the dinner. When I got home from Mrs. Roman's house, my mama, daddy, Lydia and Sterling

were sitting around the table, about to say grace, about to eat. Sterling was sitting in my usual spot.

“Darling, I thought you weren’t going to be home for dinner,” my mama said with a pasted smile. Nothing wrong happening by her book.

“Why would I not eat dinner?”

“Weren’t you supposed to be helping Mrs. Roman with some house cleaning?”

“She came across an old world map of Mr. Roman’s and she cried so hard she couldn’t continue.” Mr. Roman had passed away the week before that, a preexisting heart condition.

I pulled up an extra chair and everyone moved over just a little bit, scraping the wooden floor with their chairs. Only Sterling got up and offered to help me with my chair.

“That woman,” my mama said, shaking her head. “She should have at least had the common decency to feed you something for helping out all day.”

I sat down and looked at my empty plate. I could see in its reflection, Lydia looking over at Sterling, and Sterling looking at me.



I trained with Mrs. Roman every weekend. She had started me with body proportions and little wooden mannequin dolls. Then I was allowed to move onto copying other artist’s work, until I got a good sense of the human body. While we worked, Mrs. Roman would tell tales of the ziggurats of ancient Mesopotamia, temples of Greece, cathedrals of France and Italy, and skyscrapers of New York City. Some of those places she had been to as part of her job handling artwork of monumental historic importance, the others she’s only inhabited with her mind. She told of the people of those places, the luscious bodies and glorious lives, and about how man will always build higher and climb further. She told me she had studied art history at Stanford and

therefore knew the inner thoughts of humans, the curiosities, the ambitions, the desires spanning across the centuries.

“The largest ziggurat was in Babylon, named Etemenanki. The ‘Foundation of Heaven and Earth,’” she said to me once, not too long before Sterling began preaching.

She was posing for me because we couldn’t find any other willing subjects. Her lumpy potato-like body bared on top of a wooden stool – the last step of my training, drawing from live, breathing, fleshy bodies.

“Can’t you just see it now in your mind? Those huge steps climbing up to the heavens – how many layers of brick, how many broken backs! It was more like earth reaching to the heavens,” she said, using her eyes and voice to build up this grand image, keeping her body still. Then she sighed. “But it was in ruins by the time Alexander the Great conquered the kingdom. One man’s greatness over another. Such was the fate of the Egyptians and their pyramids, the Aztecs and Incas and their temples. Such will be the fate for the metropolitans we’ve got now. They’re all the same. We’re all the same.”

“Not Babsville,” I said.

“No. Not Babsville. We didn’t even see this place on the map on our way to Jackson, it’s like two decades behind everyone else. But that’s why we stayed.” She turned her head and broke her statuesque stillness. “Are you done?”

“Yes ma’am.”

I held up the pad of paper for her to see. She walked over, letting her lumps flop free as she did. She took the pad of paper into her hands and scrutinized it through narrowed eyes.

“Why did you come,” I said. “It must be so boring compared to all the places you’ve been.”



“Well, it wasn’t my first choice, but Mr. Roman needed a change of pace – a place where he could rest peacefully until his heart wore out. You know, he followed me city to city all of his youth, so I guess this is all I can do for him now,” She put the pad of paper down. “I guess you can’t have it all, can you.” She didn’t sound convinced.

She put my drawing down and made her way back to the wooden stool. Her rounded hips swayed like a pendulum.

“Alright, time to do the back.”

There was a moment of silence as I picked up the pad and sketched a pencil-thin crucifix down a fresh page, the artistic skeleton of the human body.

“Why don’t you teach at Lyons?” I said as I made my way down on the page from the neck to around the shoulders.

“Me teach at Lyons? Could you imagine the parents’ outrage if I taught this at school?”

She was right of course. When my parents found out that I was no longer eating chocolate cake at Mrs. Roman’s but gazing and studying all the little nooks and crevices of the human body, well they came that close to strapping me down to my bed and refusing me the light of day.

“What would I teach, how to draw apples and grapes? Still lives are not my thing. They’re so stiff and uninspired.”



The number of attendees began to drop after my daddy and Mr. Franklin announced Sterling and Lydia’s engagement. I still went to Sunday school every week, though. I sat there with my head down, drawing pictures of Sterling Franklin all over the holy, inspired words of God. I drew his eyes and lips and what I thought he looked like underneath his button-up and khakis in the white spaces between the words and the front and back covers.

Once, Lydia's friends saw. They poked Lydia in the arm and started whispering amongst themselves with righteous indignation, their noses turned so high they'd drown in a rainstorm.

"Just like her to do something like that."

"Blasphemous, going on like that."

Lydia looked out of curiosity, but when she recognized the face she glared at me.

"How dare you," she said, hot breath shooting out of her mouth. "He's *mine*."

"Don't worry about her. He don't like whores."

"Yeah. She'll get what's coming to her."

Their falsely hushed voices caught Sterling's attention. He stopped his lesson and walked down the isle.

"Is there a concern, ladies?"

They pointed accusatory fingers at me. He walked by and caught a glimpse of half a body squeezed in by the seventeenth chapter of Revelation. He didn't laugh or look away, but just held my gaze for a second. And I saw a real yearning, a hunger, and I knew he was mine and no one else's.



When I folded up the last of Mr. Roman's socks, and all his clothes were in boxes, I said, "I think I'm going to marry Sterling Franklin."

"That young preacher boy? Isn't he engaged to your sister?" Mrs. Roman said as she rolled up some old canvases.

"Not for long."

"Good for you. I got to tell you the truth, I don't like that sister of yours too much," she said. "Maybe once you married, you'll get out of here and you can come find me."

"Well, you'll come to the wedding of course."

“I’m leaving.” She avoided looking at me.

I surveyed the room I spent half my adolescence in. “Leaving?” I said, feeling the ground become unstable underneath my feet.

“I’ve got to get out of here,” she said. “Drew’s gone, and I’ve got no reason to stay anymore.”

She didn’t, I don’t suppose, consider me a reason worth staying. But she was right about one thing. I needed to make sure I could obtain that Sterling Franklin shaped ticket out of town.



I asked Sterling if he would like to pose for me. He pulled up one Saturday in the driveway in his chipped-up 1945 Buick, with the wide leather seats and multiple glove compartments. Ever the pragmatic, down to his car. He came in that early fall afternoon with a box of something for Lydia that his mama had packed. My daddy was out hunting with his buddies from the gas station and my mama and Lydia were out dress shopping for the engagement party. A little premature, if you ask me. But by then everyone in town was apparently on board for a Lydia and Sterling union and excited for the party – the social event of the season – so who was I to say anything? But of course, I did say something.

“Pose? You mean for one of your sketches?”

“Yes. You can be my muse,” I said with a little smile.

He smiled back, but he said, “I don’t think that’s quite appropriate.”

“I just need some practice with the male body. I’ve drawn so many females, I don’t think it’s fair to neglect the other half of what’s been made in God’s image.”

“Well, I won’t need to be naked, right?”

I shrugged. “No, you can just remove your shirt if you’d like. I can imagine the rest.”



The day Mrs. Roman left me for Spain was the day after I secured my way out as well. Sterling turned out to be no David, far less brawn than the bodies I had penciled into the empty spaces of my Bible. The day he modeled for me, we went up to my room where the sunlight came in strongest, and he took off his shirt and sat stiff as a fence post on my bed. To get to him to lighten up, I showed him the sketches in my Bible. He flipped through the pages silent, until he got to the end.

“I don’t look like that,” he said.

“I had nothing but pictures of old sculptures to base you off of. They never made a sculpture of a skinny Southern preacher before,” I said with a tease.

“I could look like that,” he said. “Maybe if I had worked on my daddy’s farm more growing up.”

“You can be anything you want on paper,” I said.

He looked at me with a tilted smile. “I suppose you can.”

After that, I tried to help him pose by shifting his arms and legs around in a way I thought would bring out some of those hidden muscles. I even snuck in a kiss while doing so, which he at first protested with a gargling sound from the back of his throat, but then gave in. He didn’t protest when I helped him out of his pants, to which I said, “This would help me make a more realistic drawing of you.” He didn’t protest to anything I suggested after that. We never got to actually getting that drawing done.

The next day, I went to see Mrs. Roman to tell her I’ve found a way out and I’d be joining her soon. She was halfway out the door and told me to look for her in Spain. She decided to go there first because she’s got royal blood, dating back to some Freula Roman who had been the regional king of Galicia.

“*You* have a gift, a purpose,” she said as she handed me a whole chocolate cake.

“Babsville won’t be enough to contain you for long.”

She gave me one last, long hard look and said, “But you already know this.”



I saw Sterling Franklin in nothing but what God gave him, and a lot of him. He came over almost every day ready to pose – one could say – for me on those short brisk afternoons as fall fell into a mellow winter and hunting and social season began. Whenever daddy was out hunting and mama and Lydia were out having tea. And in those days, daddy did a lot of hunting and mama and Lydia had a lot of tea. By the time the new year rolled in, we could have consummated a thousand marriages, and I had mapped out his body with my hands and could draw him from memory – though I never did. He didn’t want any evidence lying around, especially not in the house so close to Lydia.

“You don’t mean you’re still going to marry Lydia, do you,” I said once, after he had gotten dressed, about half an hour before mama and Lydia were about to come home. We had practiced the routine down to a science.

“No, I suppose I can’t now,” he said. “Not that I want to! I love you, and I want to marry you.”

“That’s good. You’d be so bored with her in a big city like Chicago anyway,” I said. “She wouldn’t last a week there. She doesn’t have that kind of mettle.”

“I just don’t want her to find out *that* way. I’m going to tell them – your family – I will.”

I kindly reminded him that he was leaving at the end of summer and time was running out if he actually planned on marrying me before he left. That night Sterling stayed until daddy, mama, and Lydia came home to tell them that he was in love with me and couldn’t in good consciousness continue the engagement with Lydia. Instead, he wanted my hand in marriage. I

can't say I didn't enjoy the looks on their faces. They were so stunned and angry their faces bloated up as if a big bee had just came in and stung them each in the neck.



A week and half before the engagement party – the one that was going to be Lydia's but was changed to mine – I got a package that was rough at the edges from travel. I ran my fingers over the faded brick-brown and jade-green stamps along one the corner, tracing the perforated edges as if they were little railways. It was a letter from Mrs. Roman about her visit to the Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela along with a small packet of dirt from its graveyard. I carried that packet of dirt as I went along with everything, with dress shopping and smiling pretty at the engagement party. My mama was at least somewhat pleased with me, not with anything I had achieved, but because I was getting married.

The night of the engagement party, I took Sterling's hand and led him up to my room, in between the dancing and the cake cutting, because the party was just too boring. He sat me down on my bed and gulped so big he could have swallowed a frog.

"What's wrong?" I said.

He didn't say anything immediately.

"I was thinking – let's not get married 'til we get to Chicago," I said. "Let's just have a small little wedding, and let's not invite anyone from this town."

He sat down, teetering over the edge of the bed, and he sighed a big sigh that seemed to come from the bottom of his stomach, all the way up to his shoulders, and back down.

"We can't go to Chicago."

"What?" I said. "That's fine, we can go elsewhere to get married. We have time before you start seminary."

He turned to me, all sad, every breath a small white cloud that obscured him more and more.

“No, I mean I can’t go through with seminary. Not now, not after what I’ve done. So we’ll get married, and we’ll stay here and make a living.”

I couldn’t say anything. I couldn’t understand.

“You understand, right?”

He couldn’t look at me.



Sterling had written a letter to send to Moody Bible Institute detailing that he had sinned and needed to live with the consequences, and therefore would have to defer his seminary training indefinitely. I switched it out with the forms they had sent with the acceptance letter, which I completed on Sterling’s behalf, when I sent his mail off to the post office. He didn’t know because he was trusting and because he was a fool. I didn’t know what I had in mind then, other than I knew we were still going to go. But as the days neared the wedding date, I figured it out. I figured a little bit out every day I had to smile behind the gas station counter and each time I had to endure people’s “Congratulations!” even though I could hear all of them muttering “whore” behind my back.

So with only a few days until the wedding, I suddenly came down with wedding jitters and inability to sleep through the night, for which the Babsville physician prescribed lithium along with a nightly cup of valerian and chamomile tea. The last night Sterling and I ever shared a bed, the night before our wedding, I crushed half the lithium from the pill bottle, with the mind of keeping the other half for future emergencies, and put it into a hot cup of chamomile tea for him. Then we made love, him full of tenderness that night for his bride to be before he fell asleep. And then I placed my pillow over his face and smothered him. I ran my hands over his

still-warm body one last time so that through my fingertips I'd remember how he felt, before I took the covers and pulled it over his eternally sleeping face. I took out my suitcase from the closet, the one I had packed the day before, and in the middle of the night I got into his practical Buick, pulled out a map from one of the compartments, and started driving north.

To stay awake, I ran over my plans as I drove. I'd drive to Chicago. I felt I had to, like I owed it to Sterling or something, and find money somehow to get to Spain. I'd come up with another name for myself. Any other name would be better than the Whore of Babsville. It wasn't until the sun had rose and I hit the Tennessee borderline when I felt the sudden urge in my fingers to draw Sterling out, put him on paper like I never got around to. My hands shook so much I couldn't continue driving, so I pulled up to the side of the road and pulled out my pad of paper and a charcoal wedge. Under the rays of the new sun and with the singeing of still-fresh memory, I drew every inch of his body. When I was done I looked into Tennessee and felt heavy, as if pulled by gravity and grief and awaked by a realization.

I had killed Sterling Franklin. But I had also loved Sterling Franklin.



### The Wrong Sermon

Jared Lee sat in his seat and stroked his snow-white goatee. He held in one hand the Bible and in the other a Coke in a standard airplane-issued plastic cup. He laughed to himself as he thought about just how horrified Jean would be if she saw him with his goatee and his Coke: messy and unkempt and feeding heart disease on the fast track to death. Well, he didn't have to care, did he? She wasn't here with him.

He maneuvered the ice cubes out of the way with his tongue and drank the last bit of Coke, letting the carbonation sting his lips and the roof of his mouth like small electric shocks. He swished the liquid around in his mouth until the bubbles died down before he swallowed with a gulp. The sweetness lingered. He thought about how nice it was to have been asked by the congregation of Cary Chinese Christian Church to speak at their annual retreat at the foothills of

the Appalachian Mountains. He was already planning on taking some short hikes in between activities, to get some fresh mountain air, filtered and rejuvenated just so by the plethora of trees.

Two weeks prior Allen, the retreat coordinator from CCCC, sent an email asking if Jared wanted to maybe reconsider, considering he had just buried Jean that same week. Jared sent back a polite but firm email saying he was glad to be taking a break from the carbon-monoxide-filled streets of New York City. He also needed a break from that the French café across the street with the beignets that Jean liked to get every Saturday morning. From the apartment that still smelled like her chamomile soap. From fifty-two years of memories. But he didn't include that in his emails. He imagined Allen to be an older man, a good listener, and maybe a little bald at the top, but even so he couldn't just tell all this to a man he never met.

He set the cup down just as a flight attendant walked by with the trash bag. He shook his head at her when she asked for his cup, wanting to keep it for when the ice melted so he could drink the Coke-tinted ice water. He cracked open his Bible to the Gospel of John and looked at the rainbow array of highlights. His heart beat faster in excitement as he thought about how his introduction sermon to the weekend's theme of "A Life Well Lived" would inspire people to live richer lives. He planned to live out his preaching that weekend.



The taxi ride was more eventful than Jared had expected. He found pleasure in the unexpected black-with-whiteness of the taxi, a fresh take on the yellow New York version. The seats were worn thin, which was uncomfortable for his osteoarthritic back, but the conversation stimulated his mind, just a little. The taxi driver, Arthur, had been a construction worker before he had a work-related accident that gave him a bad concussion. He had been in a coma but awoke just in time, before the doctors were going to pull the plug.

“Wow, that sounds like a sure miracle,” Jared said, already planning how he would use this as an example in his sermon. He thought about how Jean would have appreciated that. “It’s good to be alive, huh?”

“Sure is, man,” Arthur said. “You won’t believe the sex my wife and I had after that.”

Jared’s eyebrows twitched a little and he turned to look out the window at the passing mountains peeking from the distant fog. That part sure wasn’t going to make it into his sermon.

“It’s good to have the wife around, I guess,” Jared said. “To share in life’s pleasures.”

Arthur just laughed, a little too familiarly.



The Ridgefield Conference Center was a newly built, very modern but architecturally unimpressive collection of buildings: some three-storied with multiple gathering rooms of varying sizes, some log-cabin-meets-motel scatterings, and a grand strip of buildings that looked like office buildings on the outside but contained hotel rooms on the inside. Jared was given a nice hotel room with two double beds in the grand strip. He surveyed the room and figured he could sleep on one bed and nap on the other. He wasn’t going to waste a bed. He didn’t have enough time before the scheduled sermon to survey his room thoroughly, so he dropped off his luggage on a floor by the desk, took out his Bible and some notes, and headed back out.

The walk between the hotel building and the conference center was hilly and a bit windy, but the air was crisp and the trees a friendly green. Jared took it all in. The climb up a hill reminded him of the time Jean was complaining about laundry. He had lectured her about how the right path wasn’t always easy but eventually rewarding. She had rolled her eyes and threw one of his dirty underwear at him. Then he thought about the extra pack of underwear he had bought two days ago for when he was packing for his trip here. He hadn’t wanted to do laundry.

Jean had always done it for him, folding and separating his clothes just the way he liked it – a skill he never had to develop. He breathed as deeply as he could, pushing Jean out of his head and packing away as much revitalizing mountain air as his 79-year-old lungs could take. He talked to the trees: “Hello trees, God’s creation.” The wind blew and the only yellowed leaves, the first sign of the end of one life cycle, fluttered down by Jared’s feet. “You just hang in there,” he told the rest of the leaves. He enjoyed himself so much he was late for the first sermon.

The moment he stepped into the conference center, a tall man with a full head of hair rushed to his side and grabbed him at the elbows.

“Oh thank goodness, I thought something had happened,” a man said as he ushered Jared through the front doors. “I’m Allen by the way.”

Allen extended one hand for a handshake as he carried Jared by the elbows with the other. They shook hands all the way down the hallway. Allen wasn’t anything like how Jared had imagined. And he couldn’t have been older than his late thirties.

“Something happen to me?” Jared was insulted. “I’m tough as nails!”



The sermon went swimmingly. An older woman stood by his side the whole time, translating his sermon by the sentence into Chinese for those in the congregation who didn’t understand English. He opened with a joke he had found a week earlier on a Humor-for-Your-Sermon website.

“A poor man living with five others in the countryside complains to his pastor, ‘Life is miserable. There are six of us living in one room. What should we do?’ The pastor told him to take their goat into the room and come back in a week. After a week, the man comes back more distraught than ever. ‘We can’t stand it, the goat is filthy.’ The pastor told him to let the goat out

and come back in a week. And you know what happened? The man comes back and exclaims, ‘Life is wonderful! We enjoy every minute now that there’s no goat – just the six of us!’”

The congregation laughed appropriately.

“The theme for this weekend is ‘A Life Well Lived.’ Tonight I will go over what that should mean for us as people of the Word, and throughout the weekend I will outline for y’all several steps to achieving our life’s full potential.”

Jared licked his lips in preparation and opened his Bible.

“Now if all of you will turn your Bibles with me to John chapter 10. We will be spending our time here and in a few places in Psalms.”

The congregation flipped in unison, the whispering sound of flipping pages echoed through the room.

“Now, let us read chapter 10 together.”

Jared led the congregation in reading the passage, the voices layered on top of each other in a cacophony of English and multiple dialects of Chinese. To the untrained ear, the mixture of languages could have easily been mistaken as tongues. When they reached the end, the conference room feel silent and those seated looked on to Jared like sheep, ready to receive.

“In verse 10, Jesus states that he has come so that we may ‘have life, and have it in the full.’ As believers, we have access to that full life, though often we fail to live up to it. Why is that?” He paused for effect. “It says in Psalms 118:24: ‘This is the day that the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.’ Today is the day! You and I get to make a choice every day, whether or not we will live a full life.

“Abraham Lincoln once said that most people are as happy as they decide to be. If you’re not happy with where you are now, you sure won’t be happy once you get to where you want to

be. Because you'll always be chasing something you don't have. *This* is the day, the Lord tells us. He has given all of us a choice and extended his offer of a full life under him. He loves us, but he won't force us – that's the beauty of free will. It is up to each one of us to decide, to make that choice."

He went on for about thirty-five minutes – a respectable amount of time for an opening sermon – and concluded with the story of his taxi ride with Arthur, and how Arthur miraculously woke from his coma. The congregation had sat in silence, their body language loudly attentive. They had amened. Some of them might have even cried.

"God gave Arthur a second chance at life that day, and every day since. Just as God gives you life every day – live it to the fullest today!" he said at the end.

He raised his arms to the air, pointing to the plain conference ceiling as if there were Michelangelo fresco of God reaching down to this very congregation. His body shook a little from an overpowering surge of energy, and then he took his seat in the front row. The congregation stood up and clapped. Allen walked up to the podium, gave the closing announcements, thanked everyone for coming, and reminded them not to forget about the photo-scavenger hunt after dinner for church-wide fellowship building. As the congregation dispersed for dinner, Allen and his wife Claudine came up to Jared, who was still seated.

"That was beautiful, Pastor Jared," Claudine said as she rushed to Jared's side.

She grasped his large-knuckled fingers in her small, delicate hands. Jared recognized her as the woman playing the keyboard during the singing before his sermon.

"Please, just Jared," Jared said.

He got up and found himself towering over the baby-faced and extremely petite Claudine. He was at first surprised to find her barely half the size of Allen, but then at the strength in which she gripped and shook his hand.

“We thought we’d accompany you to dinner, since you are our guest of honor,” Allen said.

“Oh, how delightful.”



They walked out of the conference center, through an overpass that led to straight to the cafeteria. Various bridges and walkways, like veins, linked all of the center’s buildings. Around the 5 p.m. hour, people from all sorts of congregations from all over the South pulsed through these walkways, all heading towards the heart of this web, the cafeteria. Jared, energized by the sheer number of people and encouraged by the grumbling of his stomach, kept the pace for Allen and Claudine.

“C’mon slowpokes!” He said. “Don’t want to be late for the food!”

They laughed. But he regretted it once they were in line, grabbing their trays and silverware. His heart beat a little too fast. Jean would have told him to slow down, that he wasn’t a young man anymore. Jared smiled at the irony. Back when they young, in their college days, it was Jared who had to tell Jean to slow down. That was before her rededication to her faith, back when she was the wild one and all Jared wanted to do was tame her and make her his.

Allen’s fingers slipped from his tray and his silverware clattered all over the floor, breaking Jared from his musings. Before Allen could do anything Claudine had picked up the fork and knife as if she had anticipated the incident. She could not, however, reach the spoon, which had fallen under the buffet counter. Jared tried to help, but cracked his back instead.

“Don’t worry about it,” Allen said. “The cafeteria workers will get it.”

“I told you that you needed more rest,” Claudine said to Allen. “You’re just dropping these all over the place these days.”

Jared looked at the couple, so young with so many years ahead of them, and smiled in amusement.

“Oh it’s nothing,” Allen waved her comment away. “I just have butterfingers,” he said to Jared.

“Jean would have said the same thing,” Jared said. “She was always telling me not to work so hard.”

“He barely got more than five hours of sleep each night this week preparing for this weekend. He’s been complaining about a headache these past few days.” Claudine avoided eye contact with either of the men.

“It’s nothing,” Allen said.

“He’ll be okay. Young and strong – like a bull,” Jared said and clapped Allen on the back.

They got their food. Jared got an extra helping of the mac and cheese and peach crumble, despite the protesting Jean in his head.



They sat at a large, round table near the drink station with two other couples. The two other couples had introduced themselves at the beginning of dinner, but Jared couldn’t remember their names anymore. He felt something he couldn’t quite describe, sitting at a table full of couples. He tried to ignore it by focusing on the slightly burnt aroma of the macaroni, drowned in creamy cheese sauce, and the gritty but syrupy texture of the peach crumble. The table smelled a little like ammonia, which was ruining the experience of the food. He wasn’t a big fan of the lima beans. For some reason, their mild taste reminded him of how he always imagined breast



milk to taste. He shook that image out of his mind. He missed Jean's cooking: good, authentic southern Chinese food, and especially her sour fish and chili chicken dishes.

"Are you going to join the photo-scavenger hunt after dinner?" someone said to Jared. Her name started with an "E or "T," or something like that.

"Yes, of course, I wouldn't miss it!" Jared said. He looked at his watch. Already 6:30 p.m. He figured he should probably get some coffee.

"Allen, you going to be on my team?" the E or T-something woman's husband said.

"I think we're going to just rest after dinner," Claudine said, looking at Allen.

"Oh c'mon," said E/T. "We were counting on your photography skills!"

"I did organize the retreat after all," Allen said to Claudine, with a playful smile.

"It would be bad for him not to be there," Jared said.

Claudine looked at the other couples. "Yeah, okay."

Jared winked at Allen, amused at his own deviousness, and got up to get coffee.



As Jared sat in the back, the moderator, a fat young man wrapped into a tight blue polo, went over the photo-scavenger rules. The moderator would pause every sentence or so, so that the older woman standing next to him could translate what he said into Chinese. Pictures had to be sent in within an hour of starting. One point for easy things like a picture of a Bible or a cross. Two points for getting a stranger into the picture. Three points for having the funniest picture in the same category. Five points for acting out scenarios like David and Goliath, Samson and Delilah, Jonah and the whale.

Jared yawned so hard his jaws clicked. He had a hard time staying awake despite the cup of coffee he had. If Jean were sitting there, she would pinch him right now on the arm. She'd whisper in his ear so no one else would hear, so he wouldn't be embarrassed, and tell him to

wake up and that he would love this game. He knew he would. This and charades. He had made Jean and the rest of their family play endless games of charades during the holiday get-togethers. But he couldn't keep his heavy eyelids from falling. He figured it was probably from all the traveling he did. He hadn't had such an eventful day since the funeral, with the wake, the reception, and the sermon he gave to the mourners himself.

The moderator was droning on about forming groups. No more than five. Each group must have a youth, an elder, and someone in between. The point of the game was to help integrate the congregation. A good half of the congregation that showed up to participate. Those seated began to shuffle and buzz and they tried to form groups. The awkward moving around and testing the waters here and there was not unlike a roomful of blind mice. Jared figured, if past experience served him well, no one would ask him to join their group, usually because they were all intimidated by his authority as pastor and guest speaker. He allowed himself to fall at least half asleep in his seat. Until the end, when a group of three awkward adolescent boys – a combination of with braces, pimples, and thick-lensed glasses – and one middle-aged woman needed an elder to complete their team. They approached Jared.

“Excuse me, pastor,” said one kid with a lisp.

Jared blinked several times to shake off his sleep before he could see the kid standing in front of him. He saw that the kid was a little more unfortunate looking than the rest, but took a liking to him immediately for being bold, for daring to approach him, but most importantly, for waking him. He figured at school, the kid probably overcompensated by being either the class clown or the yapper, speaking out when other kids couldn't or wouldn't. He remembered when Jean said that if they had child, their child would probably be like Jared. Not a looker, but a talker.

“Will you be on our team?” the kid said.

“Unless you just want to sit and rest,” said the woman, pulling the boy back. Definitely a mother.

“Oh, no. I’ll join, I’ll join!” Jared said a little too loudly. “I still got a good number of years left in me. You’ll see, I’ll keep up.”

He tried to keep up during the game. He followed the hollering boys around the center, sat down whenever he could find a flat surface, and huffed his way through the hour. At one point, when they group was by a small man-made pond trying to figure out the picture for Noah’s ark, Allen and Claudine’s group passed by. He watched them hold hands as they walked, how naturally her delicate little hands fit into Allen’s large grasp. Then he thought about Arthur and his wife and how they must have cradled each other after his coma, how well their bodies would have fit together. He watched the boys fold a piece of paper into a flimsy arc and thought about God’s command for all animals to enter the arc in pairs. It occurred to him just how strange the transformation was for a person to be born as a whole, only to become half of a whole once married.



When the scavenger hunt was over and the pictures sent in to the moderator, the woman walked Jared back to his room, despite his protests. As he brushed his teeth, the bristles rubbed against his gums. He rinsed, then drank some water, tasting the fluoride. He washed his face with a soft terry towel. He made sure to get in between the wrinkles. He put on his silk pajamas and crawled into one of the beds. He opened the drawer and found a Gideon’s Bible. He closed it, satisfied with his find. He turned to shut off the lamp and saw the empty bed. The image of Jean, in a dress with white lace, her hands folded, her wedding ring still on her finger, and the skin on her face and neck a pale, dead purple-gray, popped into his mind. He wished he hadn’t seen her

like that. He wished that wasn't the last time he saw her. He tried to get the image out of his mind by reflecting on the day, allowing all the senses to flood his mind. It had been a good day, a day well lived, he told himself and before long he fell into a deep sleep.

Jared was not an easy man to wake up once he was asleep. He could sleep through anything. A thunderstorm, a loud airplane, the apocalypse. When the loud banging at the door, which had entered Jared's dream as a helicopter drone, eventually woke him up, he thought he was back in his one-story ranch home in the suburbs outside of the city, disoriented.

"Pastor Jared?" said the voice outside. "Pastor Jared, open up! We have an emergency."

Jared recognized the voice as of the moderator. He opened the door to the man, sweating and face bright red.

"Allen collapsed and the EMT is here to take him to the hospital," the man said.

Jared didn't know what to say.

"Some of the congregation have requested for you to come and pray for Allen," the man said, already moving towards the elevators. "They're on the second floor."

Jared followed the man, shuffling behind him in his silk pajamas and his slippers. When they got to the second floor, Jared found the hall congested with people from the congregation. A few of them took notice of Jared. He could hear through the open door to Allen and Claudine's room the booming voices of medical personnel.

"One, two, three, lift!" an EMT said.

Jared surveyed the hall. Some of the people in the hall had been crying. One man, around Allen's age, was near howling. Others were kneeling on the ground, praying fervently.

"How is he?" Jared said to woman nearby.

"He was responding a few minutes ago, but I think he's unconscious now."

Two EMTs rushed out with an unconscious Allen on a stretcher.

“Out of our way people,” said one of the EMTs, a buff woman.

The people parted. Claudine came out of the room behind the stretcher, a tissue in hand.

When she passed Jared, she looked at him. Jared reached to touch her shoulders and caught a glance of Allen, lying there with his eyes closed, his face pale, but looking peaceful, restful.

Looking on, Jared couldn’t help but wish that it were him on the stretcher, instead of Allen. Then Allen, the stretcher, the medical personnel, and Claudine disappeared into the elevator.

Slowly, all the people in the hall took notice of Jared and turned to look at him for guidance. Their eyes wide and blank, like lost sheep. He felt the weight of their expectation push him to his knees. He held the hallway wall for support on his way down.

“Pastor, won’t you please pray for us,” someone said.

“For Allen,” someone else said.

Jared tried to raise his arms up, to pray over the people, but every joint in his body was stiff. He felt so tired, and he just wanted to slip back into his bed and rest. Some kind of rest from this everlasting stretch, the thinning of his soul. He looked at the people, their eyes closed, their heads bowed, ready to receive, but he realized he had nothing left to give. He felt like he had led them astray earlier, that he had preached the wrong sermon. Life was constant work, a never-ending race, and death was rest and renewal. Perhaps life was overrated and death the better option. The renouncing of the body, the rest of the soul in eternity. And at that moment, all he wanted was to stop and lie in rest with Jean.

### Anesthetic Oblivion

Miranda felt stuck in her cubicle crunching numbers, like her mind was being punched in and churned out along with them. Her life had been ruled by numbers. Eight hours a day at her cubicle. Give or take 30 to 45 minutes for lunch spent in front of her Sharp QS2130 desktop calculator and a never-ending stack of receipts. Every day, for the past two years. Twenty-five years of existence, 21 one of them normal happy ones. Four years parentless, one year in hopeful bliss. The most recent year spent fighting off the urge to quit, sell all her things and take out her savings account, buy a ticket to Tahiti and a suitcase of morphine, and wait for death to take her. But she didn't, because everyday, for the past 327 days, she got out of bed and thought that maybe, just maybe, this was the day that Johnny would come back.

At 3:42 p.m., at the lowest point of her midday slump, she stepped out of the office building for a short walk. The air was swollen with wet heat, a thick calm between the black, low hanging clouds with its electric pulses and pouring rains. She saw a big puddle reflecting the

building behind her at the base of the stairway leading to the parking lot. To her the puddle was like the intersection of the heavens and the earth, water vapor free and colliding, accumulating and growing heavy, and then the inevitable fall. She curled her lips slightly, an idea forming thick like the calm in her mind. How the mighty always fell. The happy as well. She knew she would be no different. She took a few steps back up and from the middle of the staircase she jumped.



She told the paramedics and the co-workers that had gathered for the show that she was trying to cross the puddle without getting wet, but had slipped and fell. An accident, a loss of balance, completely understandable, to be fully covered by insurance. As they pulled her onto the stretcher and into the back of the EMS truck, a paramedic was already drilling a needle into her arm. He kept missing the first two or three times because of her shriveled-up veins, so he kept pulling the needle in and out until it finally struck blood. The red and blue lights flashed on and off like a disco ball and the morphine started flowing. She felt lighter than the air, rising like the water vapor in heat, ascending above the clouds where the sun always shone. The fallen will rise. She smiled. She had made the right choice. This was just the beginning, the appetizer round, not even comparable to the anesthesia that accompanied the inevitable surgery.



Entering the hospital through the back doors via the emergency room was vastly different than entering through the front. No smiles or greetings, no “How may I help you.” Instead, just scrubs running around, face pulled tight and hair pulled back into paper caps, reading off charts, shooting off questions.

“Name?”

“Date of birth?”

“Current medications?”

“Medical record number?”

“How did you fall?”

“Is it your right or left hip?”

“Can you rate your pain from a scale of 1 to 10, 10 being the most excruciating?”

“Do you have any family you would like us to contact?”

All of them stupid questions, all of them penetrating her morphine haze.

Miranda Liao, May 3, 1991, daily vitamins, MN3981, accidental slip, how should she know, she only felt cracking and pain, a 6 no maybe a 6.5 well an 8 now because of all the questions. Pain that she felt she deserved because, and was reminded of again by the last question. The one that froze her tongue, the one she dreaded because the answer was a product of her doing, her own fault.



Miranda’s first surgery was an intestinal embolism. By then she had already been in the hospital a month, getting pumped with all kinds of toxins, flushing out the cancer, killing off everything else. Her hair gone, her runner’s muscles gone, her life put on halt, her body bloated. Water retention, the doctors told her. With no proteins in her diet, a diet of cream-colored liquid flowing through a tube into her chest, the water floating free expanded her body like a water balloon. Once her intestinal bleeding stopped, she could eat again: chicken broth, soft noodles, pudding – anything her heart wished for that was the equivalent of baby food.

Her parents had been there with her then, every day of the month, coming in early in the morning while she was still passed out from the Ambien or the Ativan or the IV Benadryl. They would alternate or come together, depending on their work schedule, and sit with her until nighttime before leaving for home, almost an hour’s drive away. They were overworked and



overstressed, often falling asleep on the armchair next to her. But she was their only child, their baby girl, their one and only, so close to graduating from college.

Both of them came to hold her hands before her first surgery, a relatively minor procedure but monumental to her. The first: the opening of a door, the threshold to a long, dark hallway of never-ending suffering and pain. Or the first: the blind optimism, the naïve hopefulness, the road to recovery and normality. It could have gone either way. She had been scared, she had cried a little.

They stayed until she woke up, late into the night. They pressed their hands on her forehead and her cheek, told her they loved her. She asked them not to leave, at least not for a while. She wanted them to be there for just a little longer. So they stayed past midnight, after she fell asleep. When they did leave for home, they had to endure the long drive into the night, trying to bear the passing time, hurrying to reach rest, sleep catching up to them. It only took their heavy-lidded eyes, a little momentum, a flash of a bright light for them to run off the highway into concrete, into darkness.

When they told her the next day, she had no energy to let out the scream that was echoing in her mind but could only hug her pillow as she lay in bed, whispering over and over again, “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.”



She was tucked away into a curtained section in the back of the ER and left with another dose of morphine. They said they were waiting for the orthopedic surgeon to arrive. No one else would be able to fix the cracked ceramic in her bionic hips. She was getting cold. They had stripped her of her clothes and loosely tied a hospital gown around her broken body. She was getting impatient. It had been a while since her last surgery, since the soothing calm of anesthesia

ran through her veins, slowed her heart, dulled the pain of being awake, alive. Her anesthetic oblivion where she can sleep the peaceful, deep, content slumber of the near-dead.

A nurse pulled back the curtains and peeped into the partitioned room. She looked like a charitable woman, a sign of hope.

“How are you doing? Okay?”

Miranda nodded. “Can I get a warm towel?”

“Sure.” The nurse paused, a little unsure, before saying, “You have a family member here to see you?”

“No?”

“Well, a ‘Johnny’ insists he’s *like* family and needs to see you.”

Not charity or hope after all, but a forerunner for bad news.



Since Miranda’s intestinal embolism, she had gone through another five surgeries. One was a small bowel resection, because the embolism cinched off the blood supply and left a section of her small bowels dead, unable to expand and contract. The forming waste that passed through rubbed the intestinal lining raw until it ruptured, the waste spilling into her abdomen. The next were two total-hip replacements and two partial-shoulder replacements, because the aggressive chemotherapy had damaged the capillaries that ran into the porous bone, the lack of blood supply killing her joints, bone growing soft and flattening. The small bowel resection and the two hip replacements came soon after she found out about her parents death, after the money from their life insurance continued to provide her medical insurance, taking care of her even from the afterlife. She became numb from guilt and immobilized by her medical condition.

She welcomed those three surgeries following her parents death, each more than the previous, like steps ascending down into an abyss, Penrose stairs to a personal hell. Each time,

the slow drip of cool liquid into her veins became more familiar, passing through her body, levitating her out of reality. Each time, she would fall into a darkness to wake and find her body permanently changed. A monster, a cyborg, inhuman, damned – her initial fears. What had they planted inside of her besides metal, plastic, and ceramic? Secrets that were logged, signed, and stored away by the hospital. But her desperate thirst for that heart-slowing ether derivative grew each time. She craved its ability to transport her for a few hours, fewer hours to be awake.

But eventually, they patched her up and let her back out into the normal world, cursed into remission. She did the best she could. She finished up her undergraduate degree online, got an apartment, got a job as an accountant like her father had always wanted. The monotonous life of eat, work, sleep made interesting only by the occasional laugh at fate's ironic sense of humor and the immense burden of guilt for her parents' death. Until she met Johnny. Johnny with his brawn and flippy hair and well-cut suits. He came to one of the after-work functions, a little cocktail party for a newly engaged co-worker. He was a friend of the betrothed. He was in the area. He worked upper level management at the building across the street.

He took a liking to Miranda, the girl downing the manhattans by the bar all by herself, the girl living on the edge, unconventional. That's what he told her after they had been together two months, his first impressions. Even after six months, even after he had seen the large scars along the side of her hips and down her stomach, scars like mountain ranges along the topography of her body, he only had good impressions. Sure she had dark moments. Days where she could do nothing but lay in bed, sudden outbursts of tears during dinner or out on a walk, nights when she would wake up shaking and drenched in sweat. But through his gentle coaxing, his words of affirmation, and little random gifts of affection, he made her better. Her parent's death wasn't her fault, getting sick wasn't her fault, the world owed her and he was there to pay up. He told her

there wasn't anything bad that could happen to her that he couldn't make better. He had what it took to make her happy forever. He had more than enough physical prowess, enough positive energy, more than enough material possessions to take care of her forever. Forever, like family forever. Like until death do them part forever.

How could she have known he wouldn't have enough emotional endurance, enough mental sturdiness?



She hadn't seen Johnny in almost a year. And now he was standing there by the curtain, strumming his fingers on his thigh, tapping his foot on the floor – headache-inducing sounds – looking healthy and ashamed.

“They called me when you came in. I guess I’m still your emergency contact,” he said.

“Oh. I should change that.”

A threatening silence.

“Maybe you should leave,” she said. “You’re good at that.”

“That’s not fair.”

She laughed, a little too hard, and felt a small crack in her left hip, her man-made hips probably tectonic plates by now.

“Don’t tell me about not fair,” she said, suddenly serious. “You don’t get to tell me what’s fair.”

She pressed the call button. Where was the nurse, where was the anesthesiologist, where was the damn orthopedic surgeon? She breathed in deep, in three seconds, out three seconds. She focused on holding her facial muscles taut, no crying now.

“How could you show up now, after almost a whole year? I waited for you every day, for 327 goddamn days.”

The plump nurse, the forerunner to bad news, peeked her head through the curtains.

“You rang?”

“I need more morphine.”

“The surgeon has arrived and the anesthesiologist will be in shortly,” the nurse said.

“We’ll have to hold off on that for now.”

The nurse looked at Johnny then back at Miranda’s taut face.

“You going to be okay? Want another warm blanket?”

Miranda closed her eyes and shook her head. A warm blanket was no morphine. Miranda waited for the nurse to leave before continuing.

“Just go. I’ll call someone else to pick me up after the surgery.”

“Who are you going to call?” He didn’t budge.

“I’ll call a taxi if I need to, damn it!” The heart rate monitor connected to her fingertip started beeping faster, the waves spiking. “Why do you care? When you couldn’t even show up to a simple pre-op appointment?”

“Look, I’m so sorry. What I did – that was a dick move. Worse than a dick move. I’m sorry, but I was scared, you know?”

“You think that excuses what you did? You left me when I had no one.”

“I didn’t realize what I was getting myself into.”

“What’s that supposed to be? A line you memorized from some movie?”

He sighed and slumped into the chair next to her. The chair meant for visiting family members to say their well wishes before the loved one was wheeled off to the cutting table, not for an overdue confessional.



Miranda's first partial-shoulder replacement occurred three and a half years after her parent's death, two years after her last hip replacement, nine months after she met Johnny, five months after Johnny put a ring on her finger. She thought the universe was being kind again, paying her back for all the tragedy in her short time of life, a balance of karma. Then, out of nowhere, her shoulders, left first then right, began to ache, then pinching pain, shooting pain, debilitating pain. At first Johnny tried to cure her pain through motivational speeches and self-created meditational massage sessions that would align her chi. But when the condition got worse and she couldn't lift anything heavier than a 300-page hardcover book, couldn't reach up over her head to tie her hair, couldn't wrap her arms around Johnny without crying out, he started to act differently. He began taking Advil constantly for headaches. He worked overtime, all the time.

He lasted through the first shoulder surgery. He sent her to her appointments when she wasn't able to reach the wheel and drive herself. He came to see her before the surgery, before she had to sign papers, while she was getting anesthesia. It had been so long since she had gone through a surgery, a distant memory, a different life. She had felt scared again. She had so much to lose this time. She squeezed Johnny's hand until his joints cracked. After the surgery though, he avoided looking above her torso, avoided touching her body, avoided making future plans. Future plans like wedding plans.

He stayed with her, holding on to some sense of human decency, until one day he was supposed to meet her at the doctor's office, the pre-op consultation for her second shoulder replacement. He didn't show. After her consultation with the doctor, three x-rays, and a round of MRIs, she went back to the apartment and found that he had packed up and moved out.



The anesthesiologist was standing over her bed, reading from a clipboard. HIPAA papers, insurance documents, consent forms, acknowledgment of the risks. Heart attack, lung infection, stroke, possible but rare chance of death. She had to sign to get the drugs. It had never been an obstacle until now. Now that Johnny was sitting in the chair, slumped like a spineless man.

The anesthesiologist didn't have to finish reading. Miranda already knew what the papers were about. The memory of signing copies after copies rushing back into her mind like little visions, little false prophets. Nothing would happen, nothing ever happened. She always woke up again. She stopped the anesthesiologist mid-sentence, took the pen and signed all the forms. She knew exactly where the X's were, where the lines were, where her named needed to go.

The anesthesiologist left the room to process the papers. Johnny looked up at her.

"I want you back in my life," he said.

"What?"

"I want you back." He looked around, nervous.

"No you don't."

"Yes I do! Let's get married, I still have the ring."

"And why would I do that? So you can leave me at the altar? Leave me when I'm in need again?" The heart rate monitor began beeping faster again. "Or better yet, you can leave me on my deathbed."

"I won't, not this time. I've got things under control now."

"Control? You think you have control in this situation?" Her mind was pacing over the entirety of the past two years. Engaged to be married after only six months, missing three months worth of red flags during her first shoulder surgery, and 327 days reliving the day he left and the day her parents died. The numbers didn't add up, the formula to happiness she had believed in

when she first met Johnny. What had she been thinking? But that was the problem. She didn't want to think. Thinking required digging deep into the back of her mind, still a fresh grave of unwanted thoughts and emotions. And when she did think, her mind always brought her trouble. Like earlier in the day, seven hours ago, when she had decided to jump. Like now, how her mind raced towards the idea of having Johnny back. Did her subconscious know, when she jumped, that Johnny would show up, that he was still her emergency contact?

"I see a therapist now," he said, getting up from the chair and taking her hand. "I've got medication for my anxiety now."

Medication, of course. Medication for all of their problems, why the hell not? Miranda laughed again, a dry, parched laugh. In the heavy silence of the room, echoing the desperation during his year of absence, her laugh sounded like a storm.

The anesthesiologist came back with a handful of sterile items: needles, alcohol pads, medicine vial, and gauze.

"Shall we start?" she said, looking between Miranda and Johnny.

"Yes," Miranda said, desperate for a distraction.

The crinkling of unwrapped packages, the needle puncturing the vial, the swishing of the syringe sucking up the clear liquid, and the breathing of all three bodies was deafening in the silence.

Miranda couldn't hold it in anymore. "Where were you this whole time?"

"I did a little soul searching, you know? Trying to find and understand myself."

Miranda looked at the anesthesiologist's face, wanting to see someone mock him. But she had no expression. Just work, concentration, correct dosages.



“I couldn’t stand not being able to help you, when your shoulders got bad. I needed to be able to help you, make you better. But then after I left, I realized that I needed you more than you needed me.”

She saw a faint smile on the anesthesiologist’s face. Was it encouragement? Or jeering? Did she believe him? She started to feel hazy. She closed her eyes.

“You’re seven hours too late,” she said.

“Time’s up.” The bearer of bad news came back to usher Johnny out.

“I’ll be here, waiting, for when you wake up,” he said.



On the way to the operating room, she tried to fight the sleepiness she had wanted for so long. Johnny had wanted her back, and the anesthesia was kicking in faster than she had anticipated. Shallower breathing, muscles loosening, heartbeats slowed to a murmur, her mind levitating. Would she come out the same or completely different? A monster, a cyborg, damned, unlovable? Would he really still be there, after she woke up? Would she wake up to reality or a dream? Rise and fall before rising again, her body’s cycle slowing. How many more cycles would her body complete? Would it endure the surgery, the long awaited oblivion?

They wheeled her into a bright white room. A table by a wall of computer monitors under a circular fixture of exposing lights, each light in its own hexagonal cell, like the eye of a bug. They moved her by her sheets onto the cutting table, the reaping table, every procedure an experiment in success and failure. She turned her head, time stuck in slow-motion, to look at the glittering, sterile instruments laying on lined trays. She had signed and assumed all possible consequences. But the instruments were so sharp, and Johnny wanted her back, and the oblivion felt like a lie, a cheap magic trick that left her more jaded each time it was performed. And as her

eyes closed and darkness formed in her mind like thick clouds, Miranda wanted, for the first time in a long time, to stay awake.

### The Houseguest

One late February, he showed up at the front door with a paper bag full of Wal-Mart fruits and a stuffed pig, bring pink in red-and-white heart boxers with fat angel wings. Behind him was a beat-up suitcase, half unzipped, clothes sticking out. He gave the bag of fruit to her parents before stepping through the door, but he waited until he had taken off his shoes and brought in his suitcase before he held the pig out to her.

“Just a little gift,” he said while looking at her parents.

“Where are your manners, Laura Di?” her mother said.

She just stared at the pig, at the sad, grotesque excuse of a stuffed animal. Her mother nudged her on the shoulders, so she grabbed it, mumbled a thanks, and ran upstairs to her room.

Her parents had asked her earlier that week if it was okay with her if a friend of theirs stayed at their house. If she would be okay with him sharing the upstairs bathroom with

her. If she would be okay with him sending her to school and picking her up. He was in between jobs and was in a bad situation with this girl. He was really rather pitiful. He was from their hometown of Heifei. And they could use some extra help at home, since they were both working overtime at their entry-level programming and waitressing jobs to pay off their new house. And it wouldn't be for long since he would be making good money selling mechanical parts on eBay and fixing people's computers. So really, they weren't asking but telling, justifying to her how it was to be. When she asked how long he'd be there, they had told her it was just temporary, only until he got his own apartment.

In her room, Laura squeezed the pig in anger, her fingers digging into the cheap, static-inducing fur. Her fingers pushed on something hard and the pig's wings began to flap and its boxer-covered bottom began to wiggle. She jumped up and threw the pig on the ground, where it wiggled and sang in a deep, raspy voice, "I'm too sexy for my pants, too sexy for my pants."

Her face grew hot and she felt like there was an audience of a hundred watching her. She quickly buried the still writhing pig underneath her lavender bed sheets and tried to muffle the sound out. She pressed so hard that by the time the pig stopped singing she felt as if she had suffocated him. She felt dirty.



By the time Laura went into the bathroom to get ready for bed, his toiletries had already taken up the empty sink at the other end of the counter. There was a razor with little stubbles of hair like bristles sticking between the blades, a bar of soap with similar bristles, a new toothbrush and tube of toothpaste that Laura's mother had given him, and a bottle of some sort of manly liquid. She approached the sink, *his* sink, with her toothbrush in hand and her breath held. She looked at the razor, the light reflected off of each individual blade differently because of the

nicks and dings on each piece of metal. She couldn't get over just how thick the little pieces of stubble were. They seemed unnatural, beastly.

The day before, her parents had set up the lavender and maroon-striped bedroom, which was down the hall furthest away from Laura's room. To give her more privacy, they had told her as they patted her head. What they didn't know and what Laura couldn't quite explain was that, that was also her bedroom. When they moved in two months ago, she found she had the whole second floor to herself. At first, she was scared of the vast space, the darkness at night, and the creaking noises of a new second-hand house. But she had worked out a system by the end of the week. She would sleep in her official room with the baby-blue walls and flying sheep wallpaper on the weekends, Wednesdays, and when she had friends over. The pale-green room was for Mondays and Fridays. And the lavender-maroon room for Tuesday and Thursdays. But now *he* had taken it, along with half of her bathroom counter. She could no longer shed hair here and there, pee with the bathroom door open, run around in her underwear. She could no longer do what she wanted when she wanted, the end of a short-lived era.

When she heard sounds outside the bathroom, even though she had locked – barricaded if she could – the door, she rushed back to her side of the counter. To her own sink. The comfort of her plastic frog toothbrush holder, her half-rolled tube of toothpaste, her bottle of unscented, dermatologist-recommended lotion, and a sample bottle of Tommy Girl perfume, never used, allowed her to breathe deep.



The next night, one of the rare nights where both her mother and father were actually at home at the same time, they sat around the dinner table talking about their houseguest while he was out getting the rest of his stuff. Boxes of computer parts and electronic gadgets he buys wholesale to resell on eBay. Laura sat at the table, pretending to read a book.

“I still can’t believe Shi Dong almost married that crazy bitch,” her mother said while cutting apple slices.

Her father cleared his throat.

“I mean, I guess that’s what happens when you go to China and bring a random girl back,” her mother said.

“I don’t think that’s the problem,” her father said as he stretched his neck out like a giraffe, eating the apple slices out of her mother’s hands.

“She probably doesn’t even love him,” her mother continued. “She probably just wanted a visa.”

Laura put down her book. The words on the page were blending together.

“What’s happening with Shi Dong?” she asked.

“Nothing,” her mother said. “Want some apples?”

“Now,” her father said, staring Laura down. “You should call him Uncle Wang.”

“Who’s Uncle Wang? We’re related?”

“Wang Shi Dong. And no, that’s the polite way.”

But Laura knew she wasn’t going to call him Uncle, at least not behind his back. He was the pig-bearing intruder. The man who shed bristles all over *her* bathroom. Bristles. She liked that and she laughed.

“What are you laughing at,” her mother said. “Here, eat some apples.”



The first time Bristles walked her to the neighborhood bus stop Laura tried to walk as far ahead as she could. He didn’t actually know where he was going and was so out of shape he huffed and puffed his way behind her up the hill, to the bus stop by the big oak tree at the intersection of Park Hill and Halls Mill. She made it to the stop a good two minutes before he

did, thinking he'd just turn around and head back. She miscalculated. He walked all the way to the stop, bent over to catch his breath, and then waved goodbye at her. The four other kids at the stop stared at him and then at her. She wanted to climb the tree and hide between the branches, she was so embarrassed by his breathless heaving, his long, oily hair that fell over his face, his ill-fitting turtleneck. He always wore a turtleneck, even though it was sunny and warm and no one had worn a turtleneck for the last two years.

Her friend Cassy giggled and pinched her arm after he left. A fierce little fat kid standing nearby said, "Who's that? Your *boyfriend*?"

Laura couldn't remember the fat kid's name but knew he was only in the sixth grade. She wasn't going to let someone younger pick on her. She tried to shove him over. He was too sturdy to fall, but he did take a few steps back. That was enough for Laura to lift her head in triumph.

"Don't ever say that," she said.

Then she pulled Cassy away from the rest of the kids. She told Cassy about how betrayed she felt by her parents, who had given her reign of the whole second floor when they moved in a few months ago and now were forcing her to room with this *dude*.

"Ew, gross." Cassy understood. "He's not even cute."

"I know right?"

"He's like...a dorky Asian wanna-be Nick Carter."

"I don't even know how old he is, you know. He's probably like 25 or something."

"That's so old."

Then Laura told Cassy, only in a whisper and only after she glanced over to make sure the fat kid wasn't watching, about how the pig was inappropriately clad because he's too sexy for pants.

“What does that even mean?” Cassy said.

“I don’t know.”

The bus rolled up and sighed exhaust before swinging open its doors. The fat kid pushed his way into the bus before anyone else. Cassy and Laura stepped on last. Despite the rowdiness only middle-schoolers could produce so early in the morning, Laura stayed quiet, her mind overanalyzing all the possibilities of what a singing pig in heart boxers could mean.



The second and last time Bristles dropped her off at the bus stop, she felt like she had to make a stand in front of her peers.

“Uncle Wang, I don’t need you to take me to the bus stop anymore,” she said in a very polite tone.

“Your parents want me to make sure you’re okay,” he said, also very politely.

“I’m almost thirteen years old,” she said.

He gave her a lopsided smile, harmlessly eccentric but it caught her imagination like a baited hook. She quivered a little and felt that thirteen years was nowhere close to enough.

“Well if you’d like, I’ll just go home now,” he said, too kindly.

“Okay.”

“And please, don’t call me uncle.” He turned to leave. “Shi Dong is perfectly fine. I’m not your parents’ age.”

After he was gone, Cassy turned to her and asked, “What does he even do all day?”

That made her mad, and she didn’t talk to Cassy for the rest of the day. It wasn’t until lunchtime, while she was trying to steal Johnson’s strawberry gushers that she realized she was angry because Cassy kept asking questions she didn’t want to know the answers to. And because



she didn't know if she should hate the guy for calling her house his home or be excited that he didn't want to be an Uncle to her either.



The feeling solidified when Laura was at home playing the free trial of Text Twist on the clunky, beige computer sitting on the study-room floor. She was in the middle of level three, trying to get the full word for RQIEREU when she heard Bristle's heavy footsteps.

"What are you playing?" he said, looking at the screen over her shoulder.

She could feel his warm, moist breath sticking to the back of her shoulders and neck. She felt her stomach churn, like it was moving up her throat lodging itself there. She thought she was going to throw up. She tried to move but was paralyzed by his proximity.

"Text Twist. It's a word game."

He shifted into her left peripheral vision, continuing to breathe on her.

"You want to play?"

Then she bit her lip to prevent more words from coming out, and turned to look at him. He was about to take a seat next to her when she saw that the neck of his black turtleneck was bent outward over his right shoulder, revealing a glaring patch of raw and shiny skin, bright pink like the stuffed pig. She must have been staring, because he quickly straightened out the neck so that it covered him all the way up to his chin.

"Sorry." She almost asked it.

He paused halfway between sitting and standing, and held his hands around his neck as if to protect it.

"No problem," he said with a bit of a stutter. "They're just some burn scars."

"How did you get burned there?"

"You know, just, sometimes you think you know someone, but you really don't."

She had no idea what he was talking about.

He sat down next to her. “So, how do you play?”

She explained to him how making different words give different amounts of points, and how all of the letters have to be used in one word in order to move to the next level. He just nodded his head and bent his tall torso over into a scoop to see the computer screen. He sat so close to her, his sleeve brushed against her naked arm. The accidental touch made her think about the bright pink his scar and how she didn’t really need to throw up. She felt bad for him, felt that he was clearly misunderstood, and that was somehow related to scar. She also leaned in, and after a few minutes he was no longer Bristles to her, he was Shi Dong.



Shi Dong was supposed to cook dinner when her parents had to work over time. Usually he would just order take out, but then he started taking groceries out of the fridge. Laura guessed that was because something her mother had casually said, one night after coming back from the restaurant, about fake-Chinese food being bad for a growing child.

He was washing string beans in the kitchen sink when she came out of her room and saw him from the second floor hallway, her favorite spot in the house. She watched him wash, getting the beans caught between his lengthy, awkward fingers. He looked at the beans, not really knowing how long to wash them for, running the water for a good five minutes. She was getting hungry and dinner was nowhere near done.

She came pounding down the stairs but casually walked into the kitchen. He had the beans clumped between two hands, about to drop them into a heated pot.

“What’s for dinner?” she said.

He looked up and gave her that lopsided smile again. “Salmon and green beans with rice. Your mother said it was your favorite.”

She watched him drop the green beans in the pot. He knew her favorite dish. She walked around the kitchen, opened random cabinets, leaned over the counters examining the ingredients to boxes of noodles, bags of squid jerky, tubs of trail mixes. She tried her hardest to be preoccupied with the things in the kitchen as she watched him fumble with the heat dial, turning it up, down, back up again. He waved the spatula around with the finesse of a seal smacking its flippers on the ground.

“Do you need help?” she said.

“Is this done? I don’t actually know. How do you know if it’s cooked?”

Overcome by hunger, and a little dizzy from the heat from the stove, she took the spatula and his hand and demonstrated how her mom used to do it, before the two shifts at the restaurant kept her from actually cooking at home.

She didn’t realize what she was doing until she felt his breath on her neck again. He was standing behind her, about half a foot over her, his arms wrapped around her side, his hand and the spatula under her hungry grip. She realized quick enough to deny the whole thing happened. She released her grip and backed away.

“Just keep doing that for a few minutes.” She was halfway back up the stairs. “Then add some water and cover the lid for another five minutes or so.”

She ran back to her room and closed the door. They didn’t have dinner that night until 9:30 p.m. because in his confusion he had forgotten to defrost the salmon beforehand.



Cassy had generously shared, as she did with flashy pencil toppers and bedazzled Lip Smackers, true and made up details of Laura’s houseguest. Soon all her friends and then some knew that there was an older man staying at Laura’s house. There were whispers behind locker doors and giggles exchanged by the water fountain. At first Laura was uncomfortable, ashamed

even, but then the cool girls with their hair-sprayed poufs and pink, frosted pouts began to look at her in jealousy, in awe, in admiration. Tori Woodard even made an offhanded comment about “how womanly” it was “to have a man around.”

So despite being one of the last girls to get her period, Laura embraced her plunge into womanhood. But that meant having responsibilities. It meant she had to live up to the “And then what happened?” which was something she learned to anticipate and prepare for. She prepared by looking for moments alone with him, which wasn’t hard. She started using her Tommy Girl perfume, spraying it on her wrists like she’s seen people do at the beauty stores in the mall. She would spray a little before school to show everyone how much more enticing she had become, and a little more when she got back home to close the age gap between him and her.

One particular evening, as she was pacing back and forth on the upstairs hallway feeling particularly antsy about having to recite a poem for Language Arts class, he stuck his head out of his room. He wanted to know if she was okay and then invited her to recite the poem to him as practice. She entered the once familiar room with some hesitation. She wasn’t sure if she was ready yet, it was happening so fast.

She walked into the room like a stranger entering her own hometown. Instead of Teddy the oversized marching-band bear, there were electric cords sprawled all over the carpet like the entangled roots of a haunted forest and cardboard boxes big enough to fit her inside. The heaps of clothes on the bed and floor released a dense, moist body odor. She felt overwhelmed by the foreign objects. He invited her to sit on the bed, so she did. He put his hand on her shoulder and then she recited her poem.



One Friday night, a week before Laura’s thirteenth birthday, her mother sat down on the couch with her as she was watching *Jackie Chan Adventures*.

“How’s everything going with Uncle Wang?” her mother said. “Are the two of you getting along?”

Laura wanted to be able to tell her mother about these feelings, desirable yet disturbing, and about all the proximity, but she didn’t think her mother would understand. So she just said, “Yeah sure, mom.”

“I just wasn’t sure if you’d be okay with a 35-year-old around, but I’m really glad it all worked out,” her mother paused for a moment to watch cartoon Jackie Chan jump off a building. “I feel so bad, your dad and I have been so busy these days, so we’re going to throw you your best birthday party yet!”

Laura nodded, her eye glued to the screen. Her mother gave her a quick side hug and then left. Towards the end of the show, she realized she had completely underestimated Shi Dong’s age. She sat on the couch long after the show had finished and recounted all the interactions they had together in her mind, every moment made new by that extra decade.

Later that night, she was changing in her room but forgot to close her door completely. When Shi Dong walked up to the bathroom, she was in her daisy underwear and a training bra she had gotten when she went grown-up shopping with Cassy and Cassy’s mother. He was in a wife beater and jersey shorts, and the vibrant pink-red scar she had seen on the side of his neck extended down to his chest and below his clothes. Their eyes met before he slid into the bathroom and she slammed her door closed.

She put on her thickest and longest pair of pajamas and pulled the covers up to her ears. Not long after she fell asleep in a drenching sweat, she dreamed that he had come into her room. He was walking on his two feet, dressed in his wife beater and jersey shorts, but he had a snout and a curly tail. He whispered something in her ears before crawling into her bed. She could feel

his fingers, stubby and thick like hooves, touching her skin creeping along like goose bumps. She could feel a surging heat from below her abdomen. She was squeezing it away as hard as possible. And then when the heat washed over her completely, drowning her in agony, she lurched up from her bed. Sweat was falling from her forehead and down her cheeks, as if her body was crying. She sighed relief as she shook off her dream and realized that she just needed to pee.



He left a day before her thirteenth birthday. Laura's parents said he had found a new apartment and he was making enough money from his online business to be on his own. They were happy they had helped him out. She was happy to get her bathroom and the second floor back to herself, but on the day of her birthday party she couldn't help but feel a little abandoned and insulted. He should have at least stayed for the party. Even Cassy asked about him, in between a game of Marco Polo in the neighborhood pool before the pizza and cake.

"How come he didn't stay for your birthday?"

Laura just shrugged.

"Well maybe it's better that way," Cassy said. "He probably would've given you another weird gift."

When they got back from the pool, still dripping wet, Laura's mother made them all go to the bathroom to dry off and change. Laura finished before all the girls and came out to the kitchen right as her mother was unpacking the cake. Her father was setting up the table with the pizza boxes and paper plates.

"Do you think he'll go back to her?" her mother said and looked to her father.

He shrugged. Neither saw Laura standing by.

“But she poured scalding water on him, just because he didn’t agree with her about getting furniture. She even threatened him with their kitchen knives once,” her mother said.

“He’d be stupid to get back with her.”

“Not our business anymore,” her father said.

The other girls came out of the bathroom and Laura blended into the crowd, pretending innocence. They gathered at the table and guzzled down the pizza. When her mom brought out the cake, lit with thirteen reused candles that she had collected over the years, everyone sang happy birthday to Laura.

“Make a wish!” her father said.

“Yeah, make a wish!” the rest of the girls joined in.

Laura closed her eyes and all she could think about was Wang Shi Dong and his half-scarred body. She wished that maybe, if they were to meet again when she was older, he would be scar-free and she would make him happy.

## How Hai Yin Became Helen

### **April 1996**

Hai Yin came to the United States of America in a Delta plane when she was six, when gas by the gallon was still under a dollar and bread was still made with gluten. When she had landed, she was still holding onto a small bag of peanuts, which she had in mind to save forever as a souvenir but in a moment of weakness ate a few days later. Her father, who had already been there for a year as a visiting scholar in North Carolina State University's department for tobacco science, had brought a bouquet of wilting flowers. She wasn't sure if they were for her or her mother, but they each held it for a part of the taxi ride back to the house.

The house belonged to a hippie couple named Jack and Jill. It was a particularity she didn't pick up on until years later, after she and her parents had moved out into their own apartment, when she heard a perverse version of the nursery rhyme from a red-headed potty



mouth. A little something about brother and sister Jack and Jill, high on a hill, who had too much fun, then had a son. To her at the time, they were just a white-haired couple who's house, hidden at the back of a expansive wooded neighborhood off of Blue Ridge Road, was just as wrinkly, dusty, and knobby as Jack and Jill themselves. In fact, the whole neighborhood was filled with Jacks and Jills, tarnished houses, and ancient trees older than the founding of Raleigh. With so many trees, so unlike her hometown in China, Hai Yin believed she had moved into the woods where they were going to live like beasts.

Jack and Jill had a furnished room in the attic that they rented out for cheap or nothing at all to State's poor visiting scholars: charity along with the full American experience. The room came with a bare queen-sized mattress on the wooden floor and a twin-sized mattress on the wide bench along the wall. A small bathroom was attached to the room, by the door. The ceiling sloped downwards towards the back end of the room, so that when Hai Yin first walked through the room, she felt something like Alice in Wonderland – had she known who Alice was at the time – growing bigger as the room got smaller. Other occupants of the room and the house included palm-sized cockroaches and spiders in various degrees of fuzzy, which Jack and Jill would not allow Hai Yin or her parents to kill but only gather and shepherd out of the house. They were valuable contributions to Mother Nature and friendly neighbors.

She didn't meet the last occupant of the house until the next day, after her parents took her to a nearby elementary school to enroll her in kindergarten and a special ESL class. When she had gotten home, after her father left for campus and her mother to find a job, she went straight for the plate of cookies in the living room. As she was crossing the hallway, the door at the end opened and a crouching figure rolled out of the room. Hai Yin had thought perhaps a

wolf-like monster from the woods had broken into the house with an appetite for children, and she screamed until her voice cracked.

“Oh dear, I seemed to have startled you,” said the frail old woman, barely a fleshy mummy, more ancient than Jack and Jill. The old woman, who Hai Yin’s mother later explained was Jack’s mother Eleanor, turned her wheelchair towards the living room.

Hai Yin didn’t understand a word the old woman said, but when she had calmed down, they went into the living room and ate cookies together.



### **May 2011**

Helen sat at the dinner table across from her father, who read from a red, white, and blue booklet. Behind them, in the kitchen Helen’s mother was scraping a metal spatula against the bottom of their William and Sonoma wok, stir frying lotus roots with green peppers. The industrial ventilation fan, a Chinese model shipped specially from California, was whirling as loud as a helicopter.

“What are two rights of everyone living in the United States?” her father said over the noise in a slight accent, before turning to the kitchen and saying in Chinese, “Stop scraping my wok so hard!”

He had bought that wok a week ago, after scouring every home goods store within a 30-mile radius for a traditional wok with a rounded bottom. “Flat-bottom woks are no good,” he had said with a shake of his head.

He got up and went into the kitchen. “You’ll ruin the metal.”

“Then you cook,” her mother said without stopping.

At that, her father sat back down at the table. He picked up the pamphlet and repeated the question.

“Freedom of speech,” Helen said with her eyes squeezed shut, visualizing the text from the booklet. “Freedom of worship. Freedom of assembly. Freedom to petition the government...”

She had received the booklet in a massive envelope full of prep material for the civics test soon after sending in her application near the end of spring semester. Now that she was home for summer break, she had roped her father into helping her study. A new round of presidential elections was on the horizon, a little more than a year ahead, and she wasn’t going to be left out again this time.

Her freshman year, groups of news reporters canvassed the campus for politically-minded students to shed light on the new generation of civil responsibility. She had been chosen for an interview. She had felt special and she had opinions to share. But when they found out she wasn’t a citizen and couldn’t vote, they cut off the cameras and turned the microphones away. Then in the months leading up to the election, she witnessed from the sidelines her friends turning 18, registering and voting, bonding over a whole realm of discussions she couldn’t participate in.

Overtime, she decided enough was enough. She was tired of people clutching their chest, wide-eyed after finding out about her citizenlessness, like she was some alien. She wasn’t, she was a permanent resident – there was a difference. So she filed an application, checked off the requirements, and began her full-blown, down-to-business, become-an-American personal campaign.

Her father flipped the page as loud as he could, breaking Helen off from reciting more answers.

“It just says to name two,” he said. “Name one branch or part of the government.”

“Legislative. Executive. Judicial.”

“It just says one.”

“Just trying to be prepared.” Helen opened her eyes. “Plus, this stuff is easy. I learned all this in middle school social studies and AP U.S. History.”

“How about...name one of your U.S. Representatives?”

She stalled.

“Ha. You don’t know,” her father said. “I know. David Price!”

She picked up her phone and opened up Google. Her mother carried the plate of lotus roots into the dinning room along with other dishes and bowls of rice.

“Time to eat,” she said in Chinese.

“You’re right,” Helen said without looking up from her phone. “How did you know that?”

“I read the news. I keep up with the politics,” her father said, reverting back to Chinese.

“Food is ready!”

“Why don’t you guys apply with me then?” Helen said and turned to her mother. “We can all go through the process together!”

“I just want to eat,” her mother said and clinked her metal chopsticks against her bowl, the ringing sound like that of a dinner bell.

“We don’t want to lose our Chinese citizenship,” her father said.

“We’re going to go back one day,” her mother said.

“When we retire...Maybe. If the pollution doesn’t kill everyone first.”

For a few minutes, they ate in silence.

“But don’t you want to vote and have rights and everything?” Helen couldn’t help it, even though she knew better.

“Rights?” said her father, mid-chew. “You think those *yang ren* actually want us here? They may tolerate us now, but one day, they’re going to throw us out.” Those *yang ren*. Those *foreigners, westerners*.

Her mother stopped eating and grabbed his shoulder. She ducked her head and looked over her shoulder. “Don’t let them hear you say that!”

“Let them hear me!” her father said.

“Okay, first of all, that makes no sense, dad. How can they be the foreigners when we’re living in their country?” Helen said. “And second of all, mom, we’re not in China. No one is going to come arrest you. There’s freedom of speech.”

“Freedom of speech *ge pi*,” her mother said. *Flatulence*. Freedom of speech *bullshit*.

“What happened to being afraid of them hearing you?”

Her mother shrugged.

“She’s right though. They’ve probably already bugged our phones.” Her father went back to chewing but didn’t stop talking. “You think Chinese censorship is bad. At least they do it publically.”

A piece of lotus root flew out of his mouth and landed in Helen’s bowl. Helen shook her head and bit down on her chopsticks. They ate in silence again until her mother got up to pour herself a cup of hot water – the only acceptable temperature of drinking water, so says 4,000 years of Eastern medicine, so her mother always said.

“So...want to hear a funny story?” her mother said, disappearing into the kitchen. “Today I had to stick a catheter into a 350-pound man.” When she reappeared with the cup of hot water, she said, “I couldn’t find the guy’s penis under all those folds.”



May 1996

Hai Yin wandered off to the neighborhood playground unsupervised for the first time one afternoon a month after starting school. By then, her mother was gone all hours of the day cleaning strangers' homes and her father was out of town at some tobacco farm. The playground was tucked away towards the back of the neighborhood, down a hill and through a patch of dense trees: a right, right, left from Jack and Jill's house. From the house, Hai Yin could see the faded-red roof of the playhouse and found her way easily to the lot. She spent a good amount of time climbing up the slides and crawling on top of the monkey bars. She wasn't one for playing traditionally. She also spent a good deal of time, all the way to sundown, standing on the swings, alternatively thrusting her pelvis and bottom forward and backwards, swinging up down up.

She didn't notice the time until it become completely dark and she remembered to become frightened. She made her way quickly up the hill, but since there was no marked path and no breadcrumb trail she ended up on some neighborhood street she didn't recognize. She did come across a woman walking a dog.

"Can you help me find my home?" Hai Yin said in Chinese.

The woman smiled at her. "Hello there."

"I don't know how to get home, please help me!" Hai Yin could hear the words come out her mouth, but felt like she was mute.

"Are you okay?" the woman asked. "Where are your parents?"

Hai Yin's tongue rolled in her mouth trying to get out words the woman could understand, but her brain refused. Instead, she just sat down on the ground and cried.

The woman knelt down and took her hands. The dog came up and licked her all over the face. That made Hai Yin giggle and she stopped crying. She remembered that she knew one word the woman might understand.

“Eleanor,” Hai Yin said.

The old woman in the wheelchair had made her repeat that word over and over again over the plate of cookies they shared the first time they had met.

“Eleanor? Do you mean Eleanor Johnson, the old lady in the wheelchair?” the woman said as she made hand gestures of rolling two wheels at her side.

Hai Yin nodded her head and clapped her hands to confirm. To her that word, like “open sesame” or “abracadabra” in a time when neighbors actually knew each other, magically registered. And so the woman with the dog walked Hai Yin back to Jack and Jill’s house.



### **June 2011**

The last week of June was the week Helen’s father and mother had scheduled days off from work, planned ahead of time so that the whole family could go together to the Outer Banks. Unfortunately the government ran on a different time and Helen’s civics test was scheduled for the first day of their trip. Helen asked her parents if either of them wanted to go with her to her appointment before going on their vacation.

“Not really,” her mother said.

“What would we do there?” her father said.

“Sit in the waiting room, I guess.”

“Well then, no thanks,” her father said. “I’d rather not expose myself to the government more than I need to. Plus, every time I go to into one of their offices, they’re just rude to me.”

“What do you need us to be there for? It’s just a test,” her mother said.

“I also want to change my name. Officially.”

“Oh that.” Then her mother smiled to her father and said, “Hey husband, what if we change our names too?”

“I think I’d be a Lawrence,” her father said. “That name sounds important. I was an important man once upon a time.”

Her mother laughed and said, “Lawrence sounds like an *er bai wu*.” A *two hundred fifty*. An *idiot*.

Her father pretended to be mad and shook his head vigorously.

Helen rolled her eyes a full circle until they landed on the wok, set apart on a stand in the kitchen, polished and glimmering like an idol. They could laugh all they want, but she knew her parents didn’t actually hate their life here. They liked their wok. They liked their house. They liked their trips to the Outer Bank. They were pretty much American anyways. They just needed to over come their irrational fear, probably just PTSD from the communist days. Then they would see how much they would gain by giving in, like she was. She just knew it.



### May 1996

Hai Yin needed to be educated about the culture, and Eleanor was adamant about seeing to that. First lesson was in hugs, the most appropriate greeting. Eleanor loved to give Hai Yin hugs. Whenever she would first encounter Hai Yin on particular day, she would say, “Hey Yen, come here dear,” uncurl her back, and beckon with open arms. The old woman also had a perpetually leaky nose, so that when she wrapped herself around Hai Yin she would inevitably drip cold wet snot onto Hai Yin’s cheek or neck. Hai Yin had learned to carry tissues around with her, so that she could help Eleanor wipe her nose before the hug.

The second lesson came when Eleanor had Jack and Jill purchase a Monopoly Junior Carnival Edition one day. “It’s the quickest way to understand the economy and a favorite pastime,” she had said. That night after dinner Eleanor asked Jill to set up the board while Jack helped wipe her nose. She sat at the head of the table, and with a wave of her hands had everyone



sit around the table while Jack explained the rules of the game, piece by piece then square by square. The old woman, who had seemed like an apparition to Hai Yin upon their first meeting, now seemed like the queen of the house.

Jack became the banker and handed out the bills: white ones, yellow twos, green threes, blue fours, and red fives. Hai Yin picked the blue plastic car, her favorite color, and was allowed by Eleanor to go first. She didn't like having to wait for her turn, and sometimes tried to move other people's pieces. She also didn't like getting money, so she tried to give hers away. She would cheer when she had to pay someone and sometimes made donations to others out of turn.

Eleanor, who sat next to Hai Yin was concerned at the rapid pace she was losing money and so would occasionally hand her money over the table.

"Take this, dear," Eleanor would say.

The first time this happened, Hai Yin shook her head no and said, "Money is bad! I don't want it!" She knew from some kind of ingrained ideology, some kind of osmosis from a previous life.

Her father, however, leaned his head down to whisper in her ear, "Take the money, child. Do as she says."

Hai Yin did and so learned her most important lesson: do as Eleanor says.



### June 2011

Helen had been sitting in the Durham U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services' waiting room for almost an hour and a half. She had been reading an old copy of *The Joy Luck Club* for 45 minutes before she remembered how much she disliked Amy Tan. It was maybe the way she portrayed the Chinese as overly superstitious, but most definitely the way her words sucked the

joy out of Helen's soul. But it had been the first book she grabbed off of her bookshelf before she left home, something she had had to read in high school.

After she put her book down, she decided to survey the room. She saw mostly those of Latin, Asian – of which she could distinguish four types – and African decent sitting along the rows of chairs. She was thrown off the few times she saw a Caucasian but reminded herself that Europeans sometimes also wanted to become American.

One Latino family, sitting in the corner along her row, caught her eye: a flustered mother, a maybe-sleeping father, and three children of similar varying ages running around their parents. The mother kept trying, in vain, to shush her children and Helen was pretty sure the father was just pretending to be asleep so he could avoid his half of the responsibility. She saw his eyes twitch when the smaller daughter poked him in the belly. When the mother gave up, she just pulled out her phone from her purse and kept her head down.

Then Helen heard hushed whispers of a language she felt like she should understand. She turned her head to see three Asian women two rows down, appearing to be a daughter, mother, and grandmother. They were speaking softly in a dialect of Chinese, of which Helen could only pick out a few words, about something on the papers they were holding. As Helen mindlessly stared at them, the teenage daughter looked up and caught her gaze. The daughter said something softly to her mother, and the two older women looked up. The grandmother mouthed a few words, inviting a response from Helen who could do no more than shake her head, her tongue bound. The two older women immediately looked away slightly horrified, as if they were ashamed to have revealed themselves and become vulnerable to a stranger. Helen wondered if her parents would've been able to understand the dialect and bridge the gap between of lost connection between two peoples of the same background, sharing the same desires. The daughter

didn't look away so Helen smiled, trying to send her telepathic good vibes. She smiled back and shrugged.

Helen picked her book back up and realized she was at a crossroads. Down one path were the children of immigrants who could run around and look people in the eye because they were entitled to this place. This was their stomping ground, their land, no need to be apologetic. And down the other path were the immigrants who were applying for American rights but somehow didn't feel like they deserved those rights. They were the ones sitting hunched over, distracting themselves with their phones, papers, books – anything to hide their faces, which bore the shame and discomfort of being foreign.

She looked at the book in her hands and then understood perhaps why her parents didn't want to join her, didn't want to be like the other immigrants in the room, and why they wanted to go back to their homeland. Because no matter how hard they worked, their successes would always feel borrowed. Then she tried to read, to distract herself from feeling like she was too old for innocently extravagant optimism.



### **June 1996**

Sometime into Hai Yin's third month in America, Eleanor sat her down at the table in front of a piece of paper with the words Lisa and Helen scribbled across.

"I think, dear, it would be good for you to pick an English name. No one can pronounce your Chinese name," Eleanor said, pointing a finger at the paper. "I've picked two of my favorites. Why don't you choose one?"

Hai Yin looked at the paper, the letters of the English alphabet just barely familiar.

"This one," she said, pointing to the word Helen, because it looked more symmetrical than Lisa and therefore would be easier to remember and spell.

“Well, Helen it is,” Eleanor said, pulling her in for a hug.

The cold wet drip from the old woman’s nose landed on Hai Yin’s cheek, anointing her with a new identity.

“Now, dear you are officially Helen.”

But aside from Eleanor insistently calling her Helen around the house, Hai Yin didn’t use that name herself until she graduated from the beginners’ ESL class a year later. She spent the meantime writing out the letters H-E-L-E-N over and over again on scratch paper and mouthing the word in front of a mirror.



### **June 2011**

Helen sat at a desk, across from the government clerk, a cheery, middle-aged blonde. She had just concluded her civics test: 10 expected questions and a few unexpected ones concerning whether she’s ever dealt drugs or participated in prostitution, to which she answered, “Not that I know of.”

The clerk had laughed and said, “Sorry, we’ve got to ask these questions, you know.” She then pulled out a stack of paperwork and scribbled down some notes. When she finished with her notes, she said, “Before we sign your paperwork, would you like to change your name?”

The clerk turned the stack of papers towards Helen and gave her a pen. Helen looked down at the name on the paper: Hai Yin Li. She rarely looked at official documents – only when she had to fill out paperwork for school or when she took out her driver’s license. But it had always felt weird, incomplete to see.

“Yes, actually. I would like to have my first name as Helen.”

The official took the papers back and made some more notes.

“So, Helen Li?”

Helen didn't have to think. She knew she could only be Helen since the time in middle school when she told some classmates Helen was her middle name, the secondary name. Michael Grant, the devil incarnate, who a week earlier had asked her if she had limited eyesight because her eyes were so small, had said, "So...your name is Helen Helen Li?" Everyone had giggled and Michael took a bow. Helen had tried to smile, but in her mind she learned that having a non-Anglicized name was somehow unconceivable. That there was no space for Helen and Hai Yin to coexist. That in the minds of others, there was only one or the other – she could either be an outsider or one of them.

"Yes. Helen instead of Hai Yin."



### **March 2003**

In eighth grade, Helen won first place for art in the PTA Reflections Contest on what the word integrity means. She brought home a certificate congratulating "Helen Li" and a voucher for a free Chick-fil-A sandwich. Her mother took the certificate, excited to frame and place it next to her Chinese school medals and piano competition ribbons, but stopped when she saw the name inscribed in bold italics.

"Why does it say Helen Li?" her mother said.

"I don't know. I go by just Helen now," Helen said.

"You know, it was cute and all when you said you wanted an English name and just randomly decided to be a Helen, but your father and I spent weeks before you were born picking out the perfect name for you." Her mother still had the certificate in her hand, and she whipped it in the air as she spoke, indenting the paper where her fingers gripped.

Helen didn't bother to correct her. Neither her mother nor her father knew it was Eleanor who gave her the American name. They hadn't been around a lot back then, and to them Eleanor was just Jack's mother, an old woman who liked to give their child hugs.

"This doesn't fit," her mother continued. "All your other awards say Hai Yin Li."

"How was your day, Hai Yin?" her father said when he entered the room that was their apartment's kitchen, family, living, and dining rooms all-in-one. He had just come back from work and set down his bag.

"She's not Hai Yin anymore," her mother said and left the certificate on the counter, where it sat for weeks before Helen framed it herself and put it up with the other awards.



### **July 2011**

Helen put on her brightest, most colorful dress and braided her hair. She came down from her bedroom into the family room to find both her parents dressed in head-to-toe black.

"Why are you guys all wearing black? This is supposed to be a celebration, not a funeral!"

Her mother exchanged a look with her father before saying in Chinese, "Technically the ceremony is a funeral." She paused for dramatic effect. "The death of a Chinese citizen."

Her mother laughed and her father coughed strangely, hesitant to full commit to a full-on laugh, ever the neutral ally.

Helen frowned. "If you guys don't want to come, then you don't have to."

Her father then squeezed her mother's arm and said, "Oh, no. Of course we want to come! The truth is, we actually do need to go to a funeral after this."

"Oh."

“You know the old lady who used to live with Jack and Jill, when we first came to America? She passed away recently and today is her memorial service,” her mother said.

“Oh.” Helen took a seat, an image of the old woman in her wheelchair coming to mind. “You mean Eleanor?”

She hadn’t thought about Eleanor in a long time, not since they had moved out of that room in the attic. Hadn’t had to since she had took on her full-time role as Helen. She hadn’t thought to, but suddenly wished she had, invited Eleanor to her naturalization ceremony. Perhaps the old woman would have held on for one last hug.

“Yes Eleanor! What a memory you have,” her father said. “We didn’t tell you because we thought you wouldn’t have remembered her.”

“Maybe I come to the service as well?”



At the memorial service, Helen sat by her parents as a man of the cloth stood in front and went on about a life well lived. Then others, including Jack and Jill, went up to the podium and said a few words about Eleanor: their favorite memories, their admiration for her patience and kindness, the impact she had on their lives. Helen learned a few things about Eleanor, things she had never thought to imagine for the old woman as a child. Things like how Eleanor got stranded in Thailand once, back when she had been a nurse in the army, but decided to stay and help manage a small hospital along the Thai-Vietnamese border. She had also been a teacher sometime later in her life. She had fallen in love with her husband Henry when she was 19 but then didn’t see him again until she was 26. And that’s when they started dating and got married a few months later.

As she listened, Helen couldn’t help but think back to the naturalization ceremony and what her mother had said about it being like a funeral. She could see it now and now couldn’t

unsee it. The passing of a life. All of its accomplishments and its impact on the rest of the world. At least the funeral allowed time to celebrate that life. The ceremony did not even give a time or place for people to mourn who they used to be, who they had to give up to become a citizen. There was only the oath, the oath that made you swear to deny allegiance to all other sovereigns, so that if there were to be a war between China and the U.S., Helen would have to fight against all her family members still in China.

When the service was over, they allowed people up to the front for a viewing, for any last words to a dead, embalmed Eleanor. Helen picked up her purse and looked at the naturalization certificate and the little American flag in her purse, documentation and memorabilia. She wondered if Eleanor would be proud of her, or if the old woman would even recognize this Helen, the Helen that was no longer Hai Yin.

She took out the flag and got in line with her parents. She followed the line up to the deep mahogany coffin. Jack and Jill stood to the side, holding on to each other, waning smiles on their tired faces. She approached the coffin and upon seeing that pale familiar face, she felt a little disoriented, a little unsure. She placed the flag, its staff a feeble piece of wood no thicker than a toothpick and its red, white, and blue printed on rough nylon, into the coffin among the roses and carnations and lilies. She bent down a little and whispered, "Eleanor," hoping that perhaps that word could once again help her find her way.