

Hollow Bamboo

by William Ping, thesis submitted to the School of Graduate Studies in partial fulfillment for the
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Abstract

William Ping, the narrator of the novel, *Hollow Bamboo*, is a typical, privileged millennial. His life revolves around eating at restaurants and then posting online about eating at restaurants. This all changes when a dinner with his Chinese girlfriend's family forces him to confront both his biracial identity and his ignorance of his own Chinese heritage. Midway through dinner, Will suffers a potentially fatal injury and is visited by a dream-eating spirit named Mo who whisks him into the past to learn about the life of his grandfather, the first William Ping, who immigrated from China to Newfoundland in the 1930's. Based on a true story, the novel recounts the often brutal struggles, and occasional successes, faced by some of the first Chinese immigrants in Newfoundland. A speculative biography, rehearsing familial anecdotes and personal histories, tempered with the problematic authority of documented facts; this blend of historical material and magical imaginings renders the novel a unique look at the integration and disintegration of Chinese culture in the life of two William Pings.

General Summary

Written through an autofiction lens, *Hollow Bamboo* is a novel that uses elements of magical realism and satire to explore the history of systemic racism that early Chinese immigrants faced in Newfoundland.

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hollow bamboo noun

[**hol**-oh bam-**boo**] /'hālō/ /bam'bō/

1. the hollow, compartmentalized stem of the bamboo plant, used for various purposes.

2. English translation of Cantonese term jook-sing (竹升). A pejorative to describe

those of Chinese descent who identify more strongly with Western culture. As the stem of the bamboo plant is both hollow and compartmentalized, water cannot flow through it. Therefore, people metaphorically referred to as jook-sing cannot connect to either culture.

i am outside of
history, i wish
i had some peanuts, it
looks hungry there in
its cage.

i am inside of
history. its
hungrier than i
thot.

Ishamel Reed, "Dualism: in ralph ellison's invisible man"

As loved our fathers, so we love,
Where once they stood, we stand.

Sir Cavendish Boyle, "Ode to Newfoundland"

This is a true story.

More or less.

2020

The Oyster Shell

Let's run through the rules again, just so it's clear for me.

"Am I supposed to bow or something when I meet them?"

"Will, listen, you just let the elders eat first, and order first, and just let them do everything first."

"What about hugging? Do I hug? Or handshake? Is that allowed?"

What I want here is to make a good impression, you know, meeting her family for the first time. I already know what to wear, black Timberlands to give my height a boost, black jeans, a white v-neck undershirt, and my favourite Patagonia synchilla pull-over sweater. Just a plain grey one, looks smart and professional yet casual. But I need to make sure that it seems like I know and understand — and respect — their culture. Er, *our* culture. Thank you, Poppy Ping, may you rest in peace. It's times like this where I wish my one-quarter Chinese DNA came encoded with some innate understanding of cultural practices.

Since I've been dating Alicia, my first Chinese girlfriend, I've learned a lot about Chinese customs. Like last week, when she met my family, we cracked open some of those Christmas crackers, you know those things, those hollow tubes that go *pop* when you pull on their ends and inside there's a paper hat and a shitty toy and a trivia question with an obvious answer? My Mom stocks up on them during the after-Christmas sales, something to placate my niece when she comes to visit. Anyways, we all crack open a cracker, offer our toys to the child, read out our trivia (*What eastern Canadian city hosts the most easterly point of North America?*), and don our

ceremonial paper crowns. I like the crowns — the thin paper they're made out of blots the grease from my forehead, very refreshing after a big meal.

Alicia doesn't put her hat on, probably because she doesn't want to mess up her hair or her makeup or something. I let it go, but my niece asks Alicia why she isn't wearing her crown.

"In China," Alicia says, "wearing a green hat means that your partner is cheating on you."

Big yikes for me at the dinner table, but the whole Ping family is delighted by this knowledge of the cuck hat. Poppy Ping was Chinese, came all the way over here in the 1930s, and built a new life for himself, but he didn't really pass the culture on to his kids, or if he tried to, his kids didn't listen. I wasn't there, so who am I to say what did or didn't happen? One thing I do know: (*St. John's*).

But when it comes to meeting Alicia's family, I need to be a bit more prepared. She's fully Chinese, not mixed like me. A 'pure bred,' if you will. I've heard others say that, 'pure bred,' but it feels wrong when I say it. Alicia was born here in Newfoundland, but raised in Hong Kong. She and her Mom moved back to St. John's when she was around sixteen. I guess in a sense, she's more mixed than me, having gotten a taste of two cultures from a young age.

—

"Look, Will, if they want to hug you or shake your hand, they will," Alicia explains to me as she drives us to the restaurant. "Just be yourself, you don't need to worry so much."

"Ok," I say. "But, when I give them the cakes, how should I do it? Do I make a big to-do of it or do I just give it to them without saying anything?"

"You just give them the cake the same way you would give a cake to anybody."

"I've never given a cake to anybody. Do I need to bow?"

“Don’t bow, that’s racist. Bowing is for funerals.”

“So, I just hand them the cake, I just put the cake in their hands, that’s it?”

“Don’t worry!” Alicia says, her eyes unmoving from the road in front of her. “I know you want to make a good impression, but they already like you! The only thing they’ve ever wanted was for me to date a nice Chinese boy.”

“Okay, but they know I’m white right?”

“You’re kind-of white. They know that William Ping was your grandfather — you’re, like, local Chinese royalty.”

“Yeah, but my skin is white, they know that, right?”

Alicia lets go of the steering wheel with one of her hands, and makes a shrug motion, gently waving her flat palm back and forth as if to say ‘meh.’

“I told them you have a pale pallor. Just be yourself. They’ll just be happy to know that I’m not a lesbian.”

Her family is under the impression that I am Chinese and while a DNA test might point in that direction, one look at me can tell them I’m not. My skin is white. I guess I could say I’m white-passing, but really my skin is so white, it’s beyond passing, it’s past. And culturally of course, I’m entirely Western. My exposure to Chinese culture comes by the way of a couple Jackie Chan movies and some anime shows I never finished watching. I read a manga once and was underwhelmed. Don’t get me wrong, I have a respect for the culture. I want to know more. I’m fine with admitting my ignorance. But, in meeting Alicia’s family, I need to at least make an attempt to appear knowledgeable.

The only Chinese custom Alicia told me I really needed to follow, in regards to meeting her family, was that I needed to bring them gifts.

“It’s important to respect your elders,” she said. So, I bought them a couple of those jiggly Japanese cheesecakes from Montreal. Well, I should be clear, Alicia *told* me to buy a couple of those Japanese cheesecakes.

Me and Alicia were in Quebec for the past few days, which brings me to the second rule that I need to follow when meeting her family: don’t tell them that she, Alicia, was with me in Montreal. Apparently it’d be frowned upon to have her travelling with a boy so soon in a relationship. Whatever, so be it. It’s a small lie to protect others’ sense of themselves and her. It’s fine. And she also told me to not drink at the meal. That wasn’t a cultural thing — her Mom just frowned upon drinking.

“Very judgmental,” Alicia said. “Besides you just keep repeating yourself when you drink.”

She also said to compliment her Mom’s hair, which was a very expensive wig. Four rules: Pay respect(/give gift), lie about trip, don’t drink, and compliment wig. Okay. Got it.

—

The entrance to the restaurant is a quarter-of-a-way down an alley off Duckworth Street. We’re heading down the stairs now, Alicia and I, and it’s time for me to go in and do my little horse-and-pony show and be the good boy that her family would love.

“Wasn’t this place closed for a gas leak?” I ask Alicia.

“Was it?” Alicia says to me, gripping my arm so that she doesn’t fall on the icy concrete steps. “Are you excited to meet my Mom and Uncle Gucci and Auntie Versace?”

“I just hope they like me,” I say, grip tightening as my boots slip slightly on the unsalted stairs.

I stop to hold open the door of the restaurant for her. We got this: pay respect, don’t drink, compliment wig, lie about Montreal. Very good. The hostess greets us in the porch.

“Come in out of the cold, my son,” she says. “Welcome to Black Monolith.”

“Reservation for Ping,” I say, out of habit.

“No reservation for Penn,” the hostess says after quickly consulting her sheet.

“It’s not under your name,” Alicia says.

“Oh, right,” I say, realizing my mistake. “We’re looking for Uncle Gucci.”

“That’s not his real name,” Alicia says. “We’re here for Dr. Kris?”

Alicia does this thing where she gives nicknames to her friends and family so I remember who they are in reference to certain stories about them. For example, she calls one of the girls she works with ‘UTI girl.’ I don’t ask Alicia what their real names are, she seems to enjoy coming up with these private nicknames. Uncle Gucci gained his pseudonym because he’s rich and, like a lot of rich people, or just people in general, he has a penchant for luxury goods.

“Right this way,” the hostess says.

The restaurant is dark and probably used to be someone’s house, given its myriad of narrow hallways connecting to small dining rooms. Canvases depicting barren rural landscapes, salt boxes in the snow, rough waters crashing into the shore, hang from the walls and I have to watch my shoulders to make sure I don’t knock into them. The hostess takes us through a network of hallways: a left, a right, another left, up a quarter of a stair, down three more, deeper and deeper into the building until we enter a dining room that reveals Alicia’s family seated at a long rec-

tangular table. Uncle Gucci sits at the head of the table. A spry 89 year old, he springs to his feet to come greet us, as does his similarly elderly wife. They're both around four feet tall, and I can see how gravity has compressed the natural length of their spines during the course of their prolonged lives.

"I know William Ping," Uncle Gucci says as he shakes my hand with a stronger-than-expected grip. "I know your grandfather. Very nice man."

"Thank you," I say as the handshake ends and I turn to his wife, Auntie Versace, who smiles at me. I shake her hand, but she says something in Chinese and everyone around me says "No, she wants a hug." So, I bend over to hug her but I move a little too fast and my head collides with hers, leaving a ringing sensation in my ears. She's still smiling and nodding but her ears must be ringing too. God, I hope that doesn't kill her or something.

"Auntie Versace only speaks Chinese," Alicia says to me.

I hug Alicia's mom too. I can see it in her eyes: the disappointment that I'm white, that I have the name and the legacy but not the legitimacy. I can feel it in her hug, the way her arms aren't forming a welcome embrace, but a weak cautionary greeting.

"I brought you guys cheesecakes," I say, lifting up the cakes.

Was 'you guys' too informal?

Maybe.

No. It was casual, like 'this is no big deal, you guys.' Remember four rules: Pay respect, compliment wig, lie, don't drink.

"Oh, thank you," Alicia's Mom says. It occurs to me now that I don't know her name.

Uncle Gucci looks puzzled at the presence of the cakes, and says something to Alicia's Mom. She says something in Chinese, then in English:

"Cheesecake, cheesecake."

Uncle Gucci smiles and nods.

"They're from this bakery in Montreal," I add. "Uncle Tetsu's Bakery?"

"Why were you in Montreal?" asks Alicia's Mom.

"I was there to see Obama."

"Who?"

"Obama? Barack Obama? He used to be the president?"

"Oh, ok," she says. Then she turns to Alicia, "what he bring back for you?"

"He got me a cake as well," Alicia says.

"Your grandfather very kind to everyone," Uncle Gucci says. "He help all the Chinese here. Very honest man."

"Thank you, he was well respected," I say.

"He own a big house."

"It was a big house," I nod, thinking back to my limited memories of him.

"Nice house," Uncle Gucci says.

"Yes." An awkward silence falls over the table. Auntie Versace keeps talking in Chinese to Uncle Gucci. They're both looking at me, smiling, nodding.

"What are they saying?" I whisper to Alicia.

"It's too low for me to hear," she says. "I'm sure it's fine."

A beat passes. I can hear the clinks of forks and knives off plates in other dining rooms located throughout the web of hallways.

“I like your hair,” I say to Alicia’s Mom.

“Thank you,” she says.

Another silence, punctuated by the clinking of cutlery. Fork knife dances.

“I meet you before,” Uncle Gucci says.

“You have?” I don’t recall seeing him before.

“Yes, yes. A couple years ago, when we unveil monument.”

Ah, so that’s what it is. A monument for Chinese immigrants from my grandfather’s generation. It’s only a couple blocks from here.

“Oh, yes,” I say. “Yes. I remember you.”

“You speak Cantonese, William?” Uncle Gucci says to me.

“Uh, no, unfortunately,” I say.

“Okay, we speak in English to not be rude,” he says.

Auntie Versace smiles and nods.

“You order cocktail,” Uncle Gucci says to me.

“Oh no, I don’t drink,” I say.

“You no drink? You drive?”

“Well no, Alicia drove, I’m just not drinking too.”

“What your age? How old?”

“Uh, I’m 23,” I say, pausing for a moment to remind myself that I’m not 21, even though I keep thinking I’m still that age.

“You man,” Uncle Gucci says. “You drink, you order drink.”

“Well, if you say so,” I say as I pick up the cocktail menu. I won’t order from it, but I’ll look at the menu to appease Uncle Gucci’s desires. He truly lives up to his moniker. Tonight, he’s wearing a Gucci bomber jacket, with the double-G pattern embossed on the silk.

“Young man drink,” he says with a laugh. “You go George Street. Young men go George Street.”

George Street. The most bars per capita in North America. Terrible place. Reeks of filth and debauchery and crime and social circles.

“Heh,” I say. “No.”

The waitress arrives at our table. She’s one of those people that blinks a lot and talks fast, must be from around the bay although I don’t detect an accent. Just that general aura of a baymen — or bayperson, I should say — you just know she used to live in one of those tourism ads where a Technicolor quilt dries in the wind in front of a field of vibrating grass, so vibrant that you swear the field must be alive.

“Hi guys, welcome to Black Monolith” the waitress says, chipper. “Before you guys order, let me just tell you about our specials that aren’t listed on the menu. So, we have our famous seafood soup, it’s the house specialty, featuring cod, shrimp, and other types of fish that Newfoundland is really well-known for. We also have a seafood platter, featuring fried whelks, calamari, tuna tartare, and smoked mussels. All locally caught. For mains, we have halibut with a beautiful lemon-caper sauce. We only have three pieces of that left so I’ll let you guys fight over it.”

The waitress is primarily addressing me as she says this. I know why: I'm whitey white guy and I must be able to understand what she's saying even if the rest of my party doesn't. This is another thing I've been experiencing since I started dating Alicia: my whiteness. The way the waitress says "Newfoundland" and "caught locally," verbally italicizing the words, I can tell she's thinking that the Asians are tourists, maybe even that I'm a tourist. Uncle Gucci and his wife have lived here longer than the waitress has even been alive, probably somewhere in the vicinity of seventy years. And yet, they remain foreign.

The waitress continues droning on about the specials, "We also have Hare à la Royale, a classic French dish but delivered with an NL twist as it is paired with chanterelle mushrooms, pureéd parsnips and house-smoked bacon. The chef here really loves to celebrate our terroir and there's been an abundance of rabbits here this year. Finally, we have every Newfoundlander's favourite dish, a real local classic, fish and chips! Which you can get with either one-piece or two-pieces of deep-fried cod."

It's not this Newfoundlander's favourite dish, it's quite possibly my least favourite dish, an absolute waste of a beautiful fish.

"I'll leave you guys to consider the options — and to let you fight over the halibut," the waitress says as she turns to exit through one of the restaurant's narrow hallways.

"What you gonna order?" Uncle Gucci asks me. I don't need to look at the menu, I've been here before.

"I'll get a couple oysters and a half-rack of lamb," I say.

"Oh, very good order," he says, as he pats his stomach. "I used to love oyster. Now, is too hard on my stomach."

“He has to stand up for five hours to let his food digest,” Alicia’s Mom says.

“Is that right?”

“Yes,” Alicia’s Mom continues. “So he won’t be able to sleep after this until two or three in the morning. It will ruin his whole week.”

“Oh, wow.”

A brown-hatted man walks into our dining room with two suitcases, and rests them on the floor. His eyes widen when he sees us.

“Oops,” he says, as he picks up his bags and walks back out.

“Why does he have suitcases?” Alicia’s Mom asks.

“I think there’s a hotel upstairs,” I say, remembering the night that I spent in a hotel room upstairs. A night spent with Alicia. The telling of that story would violate the rule about lying, so I don’t elaborate.

“I love golf,” Uncle Gucci says, beaming at me. “I used to play golf in PEI. Man in PEI tell me PEI oyster are best, what you think?”

“Oh, absolutely,” I reply. Mere days before hand, I was slurping back oysters from PEI at an oyster bar in Montreal.

“Oh yeah, you think so? Ok, back when I golf in PEI, I order twelve oyster for myself in July and man say to me, ‘Oyster better in September,’ and I say ‘Oh, really?’ So, in September, I call man in PEI and I get him to send me one hundred oyster. I get big box of oyster, straight from airport. Then I open box and I realize... I not know how to open oyster! So, I go to Newfoundland Hotel with three oyster in my pocket. I walk into kitchen and I say ‘Chef, I need you

to show me how to open oyster.' He show me but I still not know so then I say 'Chef, I pay you come to my house, open oyster for me.' So, he come and open all the oyster."

Damn, this guy *is* rich.

"Wow, were they good?" I ask, but the waitress returns.

"Okay guys, you ready to order? Who won the fight for the halibut?"

I let the elders speak first, that was part of the rules. Pay respect, lie, don't drink, compliment wig.

Uncle Gucci orders first:

"My wife have steak. I have half-rack lamb."

"I'm sorry, can you repeat that?" the waitress says, moving closer to Uncle Gucci.

"My wife have steak. I have lamb. Half-rack."

"Okay, lamb, got it," the waitress makes note of it on a little pad. "And what about for the little lady herself?" She looks at Auntie Versace, who smiles and nods in return.

"No, he ordered for her," Alicia's Mom says. "She wants steak."

"Oh, okay," the waitress says. "How do you want it?"

"Medium," Uncle Gucci says.

Alicia and her Mom both order steak as well. I order my oysters and lamb.

"I want bottle of wine," Uncle Gucci says to the waitress after she takes the food orders, "Pinot Noir."

"I'll be right back and let you taste one," she says to him.

"Me and you drink it," he says to me.

"Ok," I say with a nervous laugh. Oy vey.

“Pinot noir is my number one wine. Merlot, my number three. Chiraz, very bad. What you think?” Uncle Gucci asks me.

“I like pinot too,” I say. In truth, the pinot varietals are so passé, I’ve been drinking pet nat and orange wines lately.

The waitress returns and lets Uncle Gucci taste the wine. He brings the glass to his nose. “Okay, I smell and it smell good. Is good wine. I like.”

As the waitress pours his glass, she looks directly at me and says, “You guys know there’s rumours that this building used to be a Chinese casino?”

I immediately feel an increase in my heart rate. Am I bearing witness to a micro-aggression?

“Yes, is true,” Uncle Gucci says. “Used to be Hop Wah Laundry. In back room is mahjong,” Uncle Gucci nods as the waitress begins to pour his wife’s glass. Auntie Versace smiles and politely shakes her head no. The waitress continues to pour.

“Apparently, there’s a ghost here from those days,” the waitress says, rushing to pour my glass. Apologies to Alicia’s four rules. At least I fulfilled three out of my four requirements. One failure out of four. Could be worse. It seems to me that it would be more rude now if I didn’t drink. I’ll let the old man drink the rest of the bottle, I’ll refuse refills. It’s fine.

“Heh,” Uncle Gucci laughs, “must be Little Joe. He live in casino. He live in back room. Heh. Little Joe always make sandwiches for the kids.”

“There’s all kind of ghost stories about him. You know, one time, the manager came in one morning and there was some bottles of wine and food missing. The staff said a ghost

must've ate it. That must've been Little Joe." The waitress winks at me and then, gesturing towards Alicia, asks me, "Could you pass me her glass?"

"Oh, no, I'm not drinking," Alicia says.

"I'm not drinking either," Alicia's Mom says, directing the words towards me.

"Is just me and him," Uncle Gucci says, pointing at me.

"Oh, okay," the waitress says. "Well guys, the food will be out in just a minute. I'll run back there and make sure Little Joe isn't eating the halibut."

Uncle Gucci takes a sip from his glass.

"Good," he says.

He takes another sip and then gently pats his stomach. Uncle Gucci points at his glass of wine.

"Is too much wine for me. Bad on stomach. You drink."

I can feel Alicia's Mom's eyes on me. I chuckle.

"Well, if you say so." He puts his glass in front of me.

"My wife not drink wine either." Uncle Gucci says. Auntie Versace smiles and nods. He puts her glass in front of me too.

I take a sip from my glass. Maybe I won't finish all these glasses, just let them sit there. Be polite and finish my glass. This is good wine though, quality wine. I take another sip. Light, yet flavourful. A good balance of tannins that will keep my palate clean for each bite. I take another sip. Ok, I'll finish my glass, and the other two glasses. But the rest of the bottle will be wasted.

I finish my glass.

It's fine, need to make a good impression: drink the wine, don't be rude, but don't drink too much.

I finish another glass.

I'm going to drink that fucking bottle.

No, I won't. I shouldn't.

I will.

Uncle Gucci leans back in his chair. He seems to be having trouble with his eyes, squinting and widening them. He puts on a pair of sunglasses.

"Lighting in here, bad for eyes."

I finish my second glass.

This is too many glasses to have around me, where will they place the food? There's not enough room on the table. I'll nurse the third glass for the rest of the meal and that will be that.

Auntie Versace says something to Uncle Gucci.

Then, he says, "Auntie Versace say you look very pale."

"Ah, yes, I'm white," I say. Then, after hearing Alicia's Mom choke, "Uh, yeah, I'm light, pretty light skin."

"You remember William Ping?" Uncle Gucci says to me.

"I am William Ping," I say.

"No, you grandfather," he says.

"Um, well, my grandfather was dead, to begin with." Wine talking, must self-correct.

"What I mean to say is, he died when I was young. But yeah, sure, I have memories of him."

"Like what?" Alicia's Mom asks.

“Okay, well I only have one memory of him, really. Sitting in his lap, watching Wheel of Fortune. You know, the game show? Spinning wheel, flashing lights? I would’ve only been three so I was probably just entranced by the glow of the TV screen, all those pretty colours.” There was silence at the table, so I continued. This is the way I get when I’m drinking, too talkative.

“Heh, maybe I just liked watching Vanna walk back and forth across the stage, touching those little screens, making the letters appear, shimmery dress, sashaying about.”

Again, silence. Forks, knives, hitting off plates.

“But, yeah, that’s my only memory of him. Watching TV with Poppy Ping, him not even realizing that he’s going to die the next morning.” I’ve said too much. “I mean, well, I don’t know for sure that he died the next morning, that’s just how I’ve always remembered it for some reason. Even if he didn’t die the next morning, the morning after Wheel of Fortune, he may as well have, because that’s the only memory I have of him anyway.”

Complete silence. I can’t even hear the fork knife dances. See, I wasn’t even planning on drinking, even before Alicia told me I couldn’t. I just get too talky, too eager to reveal. So, I continue:

“This memory, of sitting on his lap and watching Rota Fortunae, its one of those memories where you’re not even really sure that what you’re remembering is even the actual memory or just a memory of remembering that memory.” Alicia’s Mom is staring at me. Uncle Gucci and Auntie Versace smile and nod. I don’t want to see how Alicia is reacting. Ok, no more drinking for me. Uncle Gucci gets out of his chair and grabs the wine bottle, thank God.

“Might as well fill glass with rest of bottle,” Uncle Gucci says as he pours the remainder of the bottle into my glass.

“Oh no, I couldn’t possibly...” It’s too late, it’s already poured. This is good actually, having all the wine poured. It seems like it’s not as much of a waste if it’s all in the glass. I’ll just pace myself on this one.

The oysters arrive.

“They big? Let me see,” Uncle Gucci says as he leans in to eye my plate. They are around the size that oysters normally are, not overly big or small.

“They small, that good, more flavour in small oyster.”

He sits back down.

I slurp an oyster and take a sip of wine to clean my palate.

“Your grandfather, he help everyone,” Uncle Gucci slowly waves one arm over the table. “Everyone. He bring community together.”

Slurp, sip.

“Yes, he was well respected,” I say.

Slurp, sip.

“Everyone think highly of him,” Uncle Gucci says.

I take another sip.

“Well, yeah I mean, that might be the only memory I have of him, the Wheel of Fortune, but the memory of him, the communal memory of him, is kept alive and well by people like you,” I say, gesturing towards the table. “People I meet who knew him and tell me about him and what aspects of myself and my life would’ve made him proud.” I take another sip before continuing.

“He was a very respected man, very honourable man. But, you know, I didn’t know him. Not really. So, I can’t speak to this respect.” I pause for a moment, not wanting my message to land the wrong way. “I’m worried it might sound like I’m complaining or something. He was charitable, and benevolent, and he held a critical, uh, maybe even essential, role in establishing the Chinese community in Newfoundland. I know this. I know this to be true.” I pause, pick up the glass as if to sip but think the better of it and place the glass back down quickly, causing some of the wine to slosh over the edge.

“See, these are things to really celebrate and if it comes off like I’m complaining, just cause I don’t really know anything, then I’m going to seem like a jerk. And that’s not what I want. Everyone always tells me how proud of me he would be: for my grades, for being the first person in my family to graduate university, for dating a Chinese girl.” I raise my glass to Alicia.

“Okay, maybe I feel like I missed something sometimes, regarding all the respect for him. But it’s not complaining, I’m not, I have nothing but respect for my grandfather and all his... accomplishments.” It takes me a second to get that one out, ah-comp-lish-ments.

“That being said, you can only respect a man you don’t know so much, right? Like, there’s a finite level of respect for the unknown and the absent, inherited second-hand respect enforced by... by social conventions and, and, the opinions of others.” A gesture towards the audience with my glass.

“Informed by people, like you, telling you— er, I mean, telling me— telling me how respectable he was and how I should respect him, and of course, I do respect him, of course, but still, sometimes I have to wonder how to respect a mystery. A mystery to no one but myself that is, as everyone else knew him, and you all knew him and interacted with him and loved him and

respected him. And of course, even if people didn't love him or respect him, they would probably just tell me they did anyways. Because that's what happens when people die."

Alicia is shaking her head at me. Oh god, I'm talking. I shouldn't be talking.

"Anyways, you didn't come here to listen to me complain, which I'm not doing, I'm just saying that I don't know the man that everyone else knows."

Blank stares all around. I need a breather.

"I'm gonna use the washroom." I get up from the table and slightly trip on the leg of Auntie Versace's chair. Fucking chair. Don't look back.

I stagger down the narrow dark hallway and walk into a cleaning supply room, mops and off-brand cleaners. Wrong turn. Back down the narrow hallway, taking a left instead of a right at the door of my dining room, their dining room. A light at the end of the hall glints off the edge of a toilet bowl. I walk in, shut the door, lean on it for a moment, catch my breath for a second. I shouldn't have said that stuff. I guess I didn't really say anything bad. Maybe I'm overthinking it. This is a nice bathroom. Big rectangular tiles, the colour of green chartreuse, covering the floor and walls. There's a paper towel dispenser, but there's also fabric cloths, real hand-drying cloths. And a big flatscreen TV behind the door, cycling through ads of drink specials and discount condoms. This place, the epitome of class. Too warm. I take off my Patagonia, just to cool down for a minute.

I walk over to the toilet to rock a piss and check my phone, but I start to feel a little woozy. Must be the wine hitting.

I should sit down.

Black spots cloud my vision. I'm getting cold. Also, sweaty.

Oh fuck.

—

I'm slumped against the wall by the toilet. I think I passed out. Must've only been for a second, no one's looking for me. I feel... wet.

Oh geez, I pissed on the floor when I passed out.

Alright, I gotta clean this up. Cleaning supply room, go there, get a mop. I open the door to the bathroom and sneak down the hall, trying to not get noticed by my dining room. It's a lot noisier out here now, business must be picking up. Maybe I should take a quick peek into the dining room, just to get a vibe check. I lie against the wall, and peek around the door frame into the dining room, only... I must be lost again. There's a distinct smell of tobacco and... detergent? Three Chinese guys are sat around a little table, pushing little white rectangles around, dominos maybe. There's an empty chair, but an ash tray with a still-lit cigarette. An exposed bulb illuminates their table. Mahjong, not dominoes. One of them notices me. Our eyes lock together and he registers an expression that says to me that I should not be here. I pop my head back around the corner. New rules: supply room, clean piss, escape.

"Hey, Mister," a voice calls out to me down the narrow hall. I turn and nearly knock one of their paintings off the wall. "You look for laundromat?"

I stare at him blankly. He's a short man, in a tuxedo, carrying a raw halibut.

"That's ok, I'm just getting some supplies," I say.

"Hop Wah Laundry?" I realize now that it's the halibut talking to me, not the man

"Uh, no," I say, backing up.

“You cop? You come to arrest Little Joe?” the fish yells as the man brandishes a revolver.
“No one arrest Little Joe!” He aims the gun at me. Time to run.

I run down the narrow hall as fast as I can, and oh my god, I’m running and the hall is getting tighter and tighter and the man is shouting and I can’t breathe and the walls are closing in and —

wake up. Green tile, close to eyes, feels nice on face. I’m awake, I think, my body covered in cold sweat. Wet. I can’t see through my glasses, blood on them. I think I pissed on my pants. Blood everywhere. Push myself up, so that I’m standing. Stagger over to the paper towel dispenser, tear one off and smear the blood off my glasses. In the mirror, I can see myself, bleeding from the top of my forehead, right on the hairline. I guess I passed out. Would’ve been better off to stay in that dream. Hit my head off something. The toilet maybe, although there isn’t much blood around that. Maybe the sharp edge of the paper towel dispenser. There’s blood pooled on the floor where my head was and there’s blood on the shoulder of my shirt and there’s blood down the side of my body. I’m not in pain, just embarrassed. The feeling of hot blood rolling down my neck and jawline, dripping on to my chest. I have to go to the hospital. Now I’ll really make a bad first impression. Got so wasted off three glasses of wine that I passed out and gave myself a head wound in the bathroom. They’ll love that one. What a way to honour my grandfather’s legacy, by being an idiot in public. Do I bow? Should I bow? And what about the part

when I start bleeding from the head, is it better for me to just die? Just die, yeah? Yeah, that makes sense.

Maybe it's not so bad. Maybe I can clean it off. Go back to the dining room. Pretend nothing happened. Eat.

I dab at the blood with the paper towels. It is an unending stream. What a strange dream. Billy the Big Mouth Bass. Oh my. Hungry. Thirsty too. What did the fish say?

"Eat," I mumble, "my dream."

Heh. A certain ring to that.

"Eat my dream," I say again.

I need to write that down. Opening the Notes app on my iPhone, I smear my blood across the screen.

"Eat. My. Dream," I say, confidently tapping each word into the iCloud.

There's a dragging sound outside the bathroom door, like a heavy trunk being hauled across the floor. Then, a knock. Oh god, I didn't stop bleeding yet and there's still blood on the floor. Maybe I should just lay here and die. Or, get someone to call an ambulance.

"Better off to not die," a voice emanates from the other side of the door. An unfamiliar voice, genderless, alien. "Sober up and recall yourself. Flesh and bone and corporeal matter, foolish to die when it's not even the end. Wouldn't be for you anyways."

I stare at the door, blood starting to cloud my lenses once again. The hauling noise gets louder and a visible green gas starts to seep in around the edges of the frame of the door.

"Ay, someone'ssss in here...." I force out, getting woozy again.

The gas stops.

“You called,” the voice says.

Black spots in my vision. I should sit down.

Another time, once more.

The Necrotic Touch

Water. I need water. I drink so much fucking water every day, you don't even understand, I'm like CEO of hydration nation. Fuck.... where am I? Bathroom. On the toilet. Leaning on a wall. Hmmm. To be clear: seated on the toilet, but slumped onto the nearby wall, keeping me upright. Must've passed out. Weird dreams. Talking gas clouds and fish, and casinos, and a head injury. Guess I could drink from the sink. The sink. I think that's what I hit my head off of in the dream. Or the toilet bowl or paper towel dispenser or something.

Alright, stand up. Walk to the sink. Easy.

My legs feel weak.

One step at a time.

Stumble.

Hey, there's a body on the floor. That wasn't there when I came in here.

A young man's body, although I guess you can't presume that anymore. Around my age, with a face I've seen before, a face I've seen night and morning for my whole life. My face, bleeding. Just like my dream. Ohmygod, that's me. Woozy. I step back, then slide down the wall until I'm seated on the floor.

That's my face. With the dismal bathroom lighting, my features are pallid and shallow, like a lobster in a dark cellar. Expressionless, not angry or pained or drunk, just blankly staring at the ceiling. Wide open eyes, perfectly motionless. Hair tussled and sweaty. The livid maroon colour of blood obscuring all things.

“I’m sorry to interrupt,” the voice from my dream calls from outside the door, “but I really must come in.” The bathroom door flies open with a booming sound and a great burst of wind as pale green gas floods out of the flatscreen TV into the room.

I suppose this is intended to be frightening but there’s really only two options here, either I’m still dreaming or I’m dead, so it is what it is at this point. The talking gas cloud can feel free to use the restroom if it wants.

“Alright, just watch where you step— err... float, I guess?” I say, gesturing towards the body on the floor.

“I’m not here to use the chamber pot,” the voice from the cloud notes. The voice reverberates through the gas, like the waves a pebble makes when it’s dropped into a puddle, but I can’t locate a single point of origin. Soft and gentle, the voice is so low and distant it seems beyond this very room.

I’ll play it cool.

“Hey man, I don’t care,” I say. “I’m just waiting to move onto the next phase of my life in here, so go right ahead. I won’t watch. I’ll close my eyes.”

“You called me,” the cloud says with a solemn air.

“How, now? I never called you!”

“Yes, you did.”

“I don’t even... know who you are.”

“Well, be that as it may, you still called me.”

“How did I do that?”

“You asked me to eat your dreams.”

“What? No. No, I was saying ‘eat my dreams’ to myself.”

“What are you going to do, eat your own dreams?”

“No, no one is going to eat any dreams, I just liked how the phrase sounded, it’d be a good Instagram caption. Or a tweet.”

“So, you called a dream eater and now you don’t want your dream ate.”

“I... I don’t even understand what you’re saying, and besides, I have larger problems right now,” gesturing towards my doubled body.

The cloud lays there hovering. It seems annoyed. I hope it doesn’t think I’m rude. I was out to make a good impression tonight, anyhow.

So, I ask “Who are you?”

“Ask me who I was,” the cloud says.

I take a moment to think about it. If I’m dead, this guy is probably a ghost.

“Oh my god, are you Little Joe? I’ve heard so much about you.”

“I’m not Little Joe,” the gas cloud begins to spin and together into a smaller form. “I am not anybody anymore.”

“So... what you’re saying is, you were Little Joe?”

“I’m not Little Joe.”

“Yeah, I know, you were *once* Little Joe, now you’re... this? A sentient cloud of vibrating gas? I... I don’t know. How do you identify yourself? I’m sorry if that’s not P.C.”

“I was never Little Joe, I am a spirit with powers beyond your petty mortal understanding.”

“Okay, you’re a ‘spirit,’ that is noted. I will remember that.”

“You can call me Mo,” The Spirit says as its cloud condenses, at times bursting outward with pulsating, jagged edges.

“Okay, Mo” I say, wiping some beaded sweat from my brow.

An awful silence fell between us. It’s as if the gas cloud is staring at me, but it has no eyes. You don’t realize the value and importance of eyes until you can’t see them. It can see me so it must have eyes. Otherwise, it’s just a cloud, growing thicker by the second.

“Can you see me?” I ask the spirit.

“Yes,” Mo responds. For a moment, I can see a face in the gas. A strange figure, like a child. But, not really like a child, like an old person. I could make out a couple limbs, but what was bright one second was dark the next in the swirling gas: a thing with one arm, now with one leg, now with twenty legs, now a pair of legs without a head, now a head without a body. Dissolving parts, melting away, and yet the figure remained distinct and clear from moment to moment.

“Are you, like, here to take me to the afterlife?”

No response from Mo. The gas cloud is getting hazier and denser, to the point that I can no longer see the other wall of the bathroom.

“I don’t believe in any organized religion, so I don’t know if that impacts my destination or anything.”

Still no response. Mo’s cloud was beginning to bubble and boil like a cauldron.

“I will admit that I have thanked God on several, um, fortuitous occasions, so maybe I believe in Him? No particular sect though. I like the Pope. The pageantry and all that, not the

leading-a-cabal-of-molesters angle, that's bad vibes. Um, I like his shoes, right, that sort of stuff, the bulletproof car, the big hat, the foreign tongues. The new guy, he seems alright."

What was once a translucent pale green cloud is now as dense and deep as a slab of jade.

"Okay, I'm just acting dumb, yes, I know his name, I love Pope Francis, he seems like a cool guy. 'Who am I to judge,' and all that. You've seen the tweets, I'm sure."

"You don't believe in me." Mo responds, at last.

"Look, y'know, it's not that I don't believe in you, I just don't really believe in anything, and like, that's my body on the floor there..." I stop talking as I become speechless at the sight of what the gas cloud is solidifying into.

The Spirit has become a strange shape, something indescribable, rather like a pig but much longer than any pig I've ever seen. Around seven feet long and three feet tall, its body is a twisted amalgamation of things I could recognize separately but can't place when they're arranged together. It has a long snout, like that of an elephant, concealing two rows of short jagged teeth with ample space between them. Its skin is striped like a zebra, but textured like a pig, with multiple white dots dappled around the eyes. The eyes themselves are like that of a rhinoceros, emotive and small compared to the size of its head. On the end of its long back is a wiggly tail, like that of a cow. And it has the paws of a tiger, soft, furry and rounded. I wonder if it has toe beans. All in all, the gas-cloud-turned-beast seemed to be proud of its apparition and stood in a confident pose.

Not how I would picture a dream eater. Not how I would picture anything really.

"What are you?"

“I was created from the spare pieces left over when the Gods finished creating all the other animals,” Mo says, its snout wagging back and forth with every word. The Spirit’s movements are ethereal, and laggy as if it were under a bed of water, the snout doesn’t wag so much as it floats. The Spirit flashes a smile, and although I think it meant well by it, the ugly nature of its mouth shakes me.

“What evidence could you have of my reality, beyond your primitive senses?” Mo asks, as it saunters toward me.

“I.. well,” I shrug, unsure of how to answer.

Mo’s snout is close enough that I can feel air being exhaled through it. My glasses steam up in response.

“Why do you doubt your senses?” Mo asks.

“Dude, I literally just drank a whole bottle of wine and struck my head off something. You’re probably some concussion hallucination. Or, maybe some other thing altering my senses. A bad oyster perhaps, or a crumb of cheese or something. Look, I didn’t say anything back there, but I thought there was a little bowl of parmesan cheese served with the oysters. Turns out it was horseradish, because obviously. I ate a big spoonful of it and, boy, was I surprised. You could be that. You could be a big spoonful of horseradish rolling around in my tummy.”

No response.

“Spirit, what do you want from me?”

“I was under the impression that you wanted me to eat your dreams. Then, I show up, and you have the audacity to not even believe in me,” Mo is taking on the tone of a scorned lover, a tone I know too well. I half expect the Spirit to throw a cup of coffee at me and storm out of the

bathroom and not answer my texts or calls for a week. Alas, Mo saunters towards the mirror and looks at its body. It emits a thoughtful purr, before noting that, “I was once like you too, y’know? If I had heard about me, I would’ve never believed it.”

“How did you end up like this?” I say, pushing myself up from the ground but remaining hesitant of Mo.

“It is required of every person that the spirit within him should walk abroad among their fellow-people, and travel far and wide; and if that spirit goes not far in life, it is condemned to do so after death. It is doomed to wander throughout the world and witness what it cannot taste, but might have tasted in life, and turned to happiness.”

Mo walks in circles around my body, weaving figure eights between my legs, rubbing its head on to my calf the way a cat does.

“Mo, I don’t understand. You mean to say that there’s a Spirit in all of us, and that you have to travel a lot and if you don’t, in death you will be punished by... having to travel a lot?”

“I myself am uncertain,” Mo purrs from between my legs, “and I have no comfort to give in knowledge or belief myself. Nor would I tell you if I could.” One of Mo’s beady eyes winks at me with the delivery of that line. “I cannot rest, I cannot stay, I cannot taste. In life, my corporeal form disrespected the beings both corporeal and spiritual that preceded it. I did not venerate my ancestors and I lived in ignorance of their lives. As such, I no longer know myself, I do not know who I was or even when I was. I now bear witness to all things across this realm, from the births of universes to the deaths of the tiniest germs, I see it all. In penance for my ignorance, I have been granted total knowledge.”

“Well, it’s not total knowledge if you don’t know yourself,” I say.

“I know the incessant torture of remorse. No space of regret can make amends for one’s life’s opportunities misused.”

How can you have a space of regret? I hesitate to ask.

A cold air settles into the room and Mo begins to open its mouth rather wide, almost 180 degrees.

“There remains a chance and hope of you escaping my fate,” Mo says, his pointy tongue flapping back and forth in the wide-open space. “Let me eat your dream. Let me replace it with a better one.”

“No,” I say, “That’s quite alright.”

It's too late.

I struggle to stay still, as Mo’s mouth begins to emit a bright green light. A tremendous force of wind sucks our surroundings into Mo’s mouth, stripping the walls of their decorative paper, depriving the ceiling of its dim light fixtures. Mo even sucks my doubled body off the ground along with the floor tiles and pipes. Mo turns his beam of light towards me and I too am sucked into Mo’s wide mouth until I’m shut in tight like an oyster, I can’t escape. My body is surrounded by the green gas.

“You are small and you are brief. Do not presume you can understand what I am about to show you.” The green gas swirls and darkens, turning as black as a deep abyss.

After the words are spoken, I find myself standing on pavement. Suburbs. The bathroom has vanished entirely, no vestige of it to be seen. The darkness and cool air have vanished too, for it is now a spring day, that unmistakable dewy scent of renewal in the air. I recognize the neighbourhood.

“Oh my god, you’ve brought me to my grandfather’s house. Who lives here now?”

“Go inside,” Mo’s voice floats to me, close yet distant as always.

As I approach the door, there are a thousand scents in the air, each one connected to a thousand memories long, long forgotten. A thousand thoughts, hopes, joys, questions. The front door opens before me and that soupy scent, characteristic of the homes of the elderly, overwhelms the thousand other odours.

“Hello, is anybody home?” I call into the house.

No response.

“Mo, are you sure I should be here?”

“They’re in there,” I hear Mo’s voice once again although I cannot see where it is coming from. “They will never be able to hear you.”

“They have tinnitus, huh?”

“Go inside,” says Mo.

“I’m not walking into a stranger’s house. They could call the cops, or —”

“Go inside.” There’s a stern undertone not previously present in Mo’s voice.

“Very well,” I say under my breath as I walk in through the open door.

The house is just as I remember it. Long porch, followed by a narrow hallway, adorned with an old floral-printed wallpaper. I peek my head around the corner into what I think was my grandfather’s TV room. The Technicolor glow of a TV illuminates the edges an orange back of an old chair, its material fuzzy like burlap. It doesn’t look pleasant to sit in. Itchy, probably. Someone is seated in it; I can see the backs of their feet hanging underneath. It’s a familiar chair. I remember crawling around under a chair like that when I was young, and seeing a loose staple

on the underside, something I would gently touch with my pointer finger, enough to feel the sharpness but not enough to puncture.

“Spirit, is... is that my grandfather’s old chair?”

No response from the Spirit. I guess I know what it would’ve said anyways. Go inside.

I can’t go in there. The old guy in that chair is too deaf to hear me calling from the door, I’ll probably give him a heart attack if I just walked into his living room. Imagine some random guy with blood rolling down the side of his head just walks into your house. ‘Oh, my grandpa used to live here.’ If they don’t drop dead from fright, I’ll be lucky if they don’t kill me.

I need to go to the hospital after this.

“Spirit, can we take a swing by the Health Sciences Centre before we go back to the restaurant?”

Still no response. Go inside.

The tinny audio of the TV emits a crowd of thousands, all yelling:

“Wheel... Of... Fortune!”

No. It can’t be.

Can it?

I walk into the TV room as the jazzy theme song plays, trumpets and saxophones wailing.

“From Hollywood, its America’s game...”

On the screen, I can see the spinning wheel as the camera quickly pans around the game show audience. Looks like old footage. Must be a retro rerun on GSN or something. Does that channel even exist anymore? It’s an old TV too, not a flat screen, but one of those ones with the really big backsides. The way they used to be.

It cannot be. How is this possible?

“It’s a show the whole family can enjoy...”

I peer around the edge of the chair, not wanting to scare anyone that could be seated there. An elderly Chinese man, pinstripe shirt, and a wool vest with little tree patterns. A toddler in his lap.

“Filled with fun, glamour, excitement, and surprises...”

My grandfather and me, sitting on his lap, watching Wheel of Fortune. This is it, my memory. This exact moment.

“And now, the stars of the show, Pat Sajak and Vanna White!”

I feel woozy, uncomfortable. I want to sit down but I don’t want to be seen. I need water.

“Thank you very much for joining us here on Wheel of Fortune, we might have a three-day champion here in our midst, we’ll find out that a little later on, but we’re gonna meet some players who have some other things in mind.” Pat Sajak. Why do I know the proper way to spell that? Sajak, say jack.

“Do not worry, they can not see you,” Mo intones as he slithers out of the TV screen like that girl from *The Ring*. “They will never see you, they will never hear you. Your actions are limited in this realm.”

I look so small in my grandfather’s lap. The young me. Impossibly small. Like a little dog or something. And happy. Big smile. He looks happy too.

“It is easy to forget the states you used to inhabit, no? Even if you think you recall correctly, you do not get a full sense of what you were.”

Bouncing up and down his knee, the light of the TV illuminating us. Him. Them. The old me.

“Have you given thought to how ‘the old you’ and ‘the young you’ are the same being?”

Ugh. I want to make fun of that so bad, but it’s kind of right.

“... that’s more of a linguistic distinction than a temporal one,” I say under my breath.

I kneel down on the floor. The loose staple glistens in the glow of the television.

“Your sarcasm will be of no help to you,” Mo says. “I am here to replace your bad dreams with pleasant reveries.”

“Sorry, I guess I caught a case of irony poisoning when I knocked my head off the fucking toilet. Public washrooms being what they are.”

“Your arrogance does nothing for you. You will end up like me. You do not understand.”

Why does Mo even care?

“Oh that’s right, you said I would not be able to comprehend what I’m seeing here. I comprehend just fine, it’s the memory I just described in the restaurant. What a wondrous ability you have, to conjure the one fucking memory you already know I have. ‘You cannot comprehend.’ I thought you were going to show me the birth of the universe or something like that.”

“You wouldn’t have the intelligence to comprehend the birth of the universe,”

“Um, okay. Wow.”

“Don’t you wish to know how I bring you this shadow of the past?”

“Look, y’know, I hate exposition, let’s just move on. Bring me back to the restaurant, or to the hospital, or just let me die already.”

“It is not your time. You must see more of that which once was. You called me.”

“It is my time. You’re just a vibrating cloud of gas. I’m leaving, I’m leaving.”

I run towards the TV and pass straight through it, the walls of my grandfather’s house dissolving back into murky green gas. I burst through Mo’s mouth and find myself back in the restaurant bathroom. I dive for the door and push it open with all my might.

The restaurant is not as it was. The hallway is barren, empty. I run back to the dining room, only to discover that it’s empty too.

Everyone and everything is gone.

There are confused noises in the air, incoherent sounds, Wailings of lamentation, regret, sorrowful and self-accusatory. The air is filled with gas clouds, spirits, all different colours, if only by gradient. Spirits, wandering, floating here and there, moaning as they go. There exists a sadness. The palpable misery of them all.

“This is the fate that awaits you if you do not heed my call,” Mo says.

“I thought you said I called you,” I say.

I turn around to face Mo. It reaches it’s paws out to me, claws curled like hooks, and grips my shoulders. Mo’s nails penetrate my shoulders, burying its hooked claws deep within my skin. Before I can even cry in pain, Mo pushes me on to the ground, boring deep into my shoulders like a lobster pick. Another set of hands emerge from the cloud, pinning my arms to my sides and yet another set of arms hold down my legs. I cannot escape.

“No more!” I cry. “Mo, please.”

“They are mere shadows of things that have been. They are what they are, do not blame me. You must bear witness. You must remedy your ignorance. Let me eat your dreams and I will show you what you need to see.”

“Why?”

I writhe back and forth on the floor in a struggle to escape the Spirit’s grasp. If it can even be called a struggle, seeing as the Spirit is undisturbed by any effort I make to escape. I am trapped.

Mo raises an eyebrow as its mouth opens. For a brief moment I can see in Mo’s mouth the mutating jumble of body parts that I saw in the cloud before. In some strange way, there are fragments of every face I’ve seen in my entire life, from my Grandfather to Alicia to forgotten love interests and elementary school teachers. Mo suddenly closes its mouth.

“Hrm,” it says. “On second thought, you should really go to the hospital.” Mo releases its grip on me.

“Um,” I say. “What?”

“That head wound, it’s bad. You really need to go to the hospital.”

“I thought you were, like, taking me through time or something.”

“Yes,” Mo says, his snout starting to crumble like sand. “But later. You need help.”

With a bright flash of light, the gas clears out and the wailings stop and I’m staring at the ceiling of the restaurant’s bathroom and somewhere in the distance Robbie Robertson croons about a crazy river over the restaurant’s Bluetooth Sonos speakers. I pick myself up, look in the mirror. Still bleeding, still woozy, blood drip, dripping down my ear.

Big oof.

I open the bathroom door. It’s back to how it was, narrow hallways with inconveniently hung paintings, the sounds of fork knife dances piercing through the dining rooms. The hostess is just down the hall. I stagger out, unsteady on my feet, leaving behind a big pool of blood on the

floor. I still want to clean it myself, but I should tell the hostess to, like, put a sign on the door or something.

“Hey,” I call out to her, and she keeps walking down the hall.

“Hey,” I call out again, a little louder, walking a little faster to catch up with her. I stumble on a rug on the floor, and fall towards her, my arms outstretched like a zombie, grabbing onto the hostess’ shoulders from behind.

“Why, Mr. Pynn, what are you — OH MY GOD,” she screams as she see the blood running down my head, soaking my white undershirt.

“The bathroom,” I mumble, woozy. “My head. I hit it off something.”

“Glenda,” she yells. “Glenda, call an ambulance. It’s happening again. Mr. Pynn, let me get you a seat. Just breathe, okay?”

“Ping,” I say as the hostess gently pushes me into a spare chair in the supply closet. “P-I-N-G.”

“Oh my son, don’t strain yourself,” the hostess says, grimacing at the blood dropping onto her arms.

“I called ‘im,” a woman says as she walks into my vision. “You don’t tink the gas is acting up again now, do ya?”

“Sure, by, I don’t know,” the hostess says. “He gave himself an awful smack. He can’t even say his own name right.”

“My name is Ping,” I say. “I don’t need an ambulance, really.”

“Me son, your name is Pynn. And you really do need an ambulance.”

“Do I?” I say, touching the wet spot on the side of my head.

“Coming through,” another voice rings out, the sound of metal rattling through the myriad halls. “You’re lucky we were only a couple blocks over when the call came in.”

“We were just parked on George, waiting for somethin’,” another voice says.

“E’s right here,” the woman I presume to be Glenda says. “E’s after smacking ‘is ‘ead off a somethin’ in the bathroom.”

“Yeah,” the hostess says. “I’m not sure that he can even say his own name properly, he might be concussed.”

The two female paramedics lift my body on to their gurney.

“I’m fine,” I protest. “Really. All I need is some water. I promise.”

“Son,” the older paramedic says. “What’s your name?”

“William Ping,” I say. “P-I-N-G.”

“It’s Pynn,” the hostess whispers.

“I taught you said it was Pink,” Glenda says.

“How many fingers am I holding up?” the paramedic says, as she extends three fingers.

“Three,” I say.

“Hmm,” the paramedic says. “Probably he’s saying his own name right.”

They roll me down the narrow hall and we pass by the dining room seating Alicia’s family. I give a gentle wave as I roll by, blood still streaming down my face.

—

I wait for a couple hours outside the emergency room, sandwiched between other people waiting, some moaning in pain with no visible ailments, others wiggling on edge as a bone juts through their thigh. I sit there, feeling the chilly streams of my own blood roll down my head and

pool in my ear canal. A nurse who thought my name was King gave me a box of Kleenex to mop it up while I wait. *Breakfast at Tiffany's* is playing on the waiting room TV and I imagine Mo slithering out of the screen again like he did in my dream. Strange dream. Alicia calls but I don't answer. There goes that one, I figure.

"Mr. Pong," a female Doctor opens the emergency room door. "Come right in."

After clearing up some confusion regarding the name on the patient sheet, the doctor looks at the head wound and says "stitches or staples?"

I look at her, waiting for her to continue.

"You choose," she says.

"Oh," I say. "I... I don't... this is your work, whatever you think is—"

"Staples," she says, as she wanders towards a cabinet, taking out a staple gun that looks like the same one they use on construction sites.

"Okay," she says. "Lie down. This'll be over before you know it."

Warm Water Tastes Round

Two weeks rest, that's what the doctor ordered. I spent the first few days after I got stapled back together lying in bed, watching *John Wick* movies and dodging calls on my cell. I don't want to have to explain what happened to anybody, it's so embarrassing. There's a part of me that would like to never get out of bed, to just be in a constant state of recovery, to never have to face the world. But of course, a time comes where you realize you left your Patagonia sweater in the restaurant's washroom, and you think about how you bought that sweater at a Nordstrom in Vegas, and there's a real sentimental value to that sweater, in addition to a monetary value, and you realize you should go back to the restaurant to see if they still have the sweater. I could call, but I kind-of want to get a second look at the bathroom where it all happened. I haven't been able to stop thinking of Mo's grotesque visage since that day.

I skip down the alley off Duckworth to the restaurant's entrance. When I open the door, the hostess doesn't recognize me.

"Sorry," she says. "We're not taking walk-ins tonight because the DuMont Corporation has the restaurant rented out for a late Christmas party." A flash of recognition brightens her eyes as she sees the wound on my head.

"Oh, Mr. Pang," she says. "Oh my god, how are you doing? I've been worried half to death about you."

"Hi," I say, nodding towards her in such a way as to show off my stapled head wound. "I think I left my sweater here last week."

"Did you?" she says, her eyes affixed to the wound on my head.

“Yeah,” I say. “It was a grey Patagonia synchilla pullover.”

She shakes her head.

“No, my son,” she says. “I haven’t seen anything like that.”

“Hmm,” I say. I thought that might happen. Those are good sweaters. “Could I possibly take a look back there?”

“Well, I guess, if you want, but I’m sure I would’ve seen something like that.”

“Oh, I believe you,” I assure her. “I’ll just take a quick look in the bathroom, just to put my mind at ease.”

“Go ahead,” she says. “You know the way.”

“All too well,” I say with a smile.

“Don’t fall in,” I hear her call out as I make my way through the labyrinthine arrangement of hallways in this restaurant.

When I arrive at the bathroom, there’s a sheet of loose leaf taped to the door with the message “OUT OF ORDER” hastily scrawny across it. I open the door and see that my blood has stained the green tiles on the floor. Part of the toilet bowl is missing too, presumably having been shattered by my noggin. There is, of course, no sweater in here, but I shut the door behind me anyways. I look in the mirror at the staple scab just under my hairline.

“Eat my dreams,” I whisper.

I look around. Nothing happened. The washroom’s TV is advertising a Toonie Tuesday special on Brews and Dews, and the Sonos is playing a British rapper I used to hear all the time when I was in Europe last summer.

“I found my way home,” the voice raps over the speaker. “Then I saw my granddad's name on a gravestone. The same as mine, already dead. Nothin' to fear, I been here from time.”

“Heh,” I laugh. A bit on the nose.

“Eat my dreams,” I say again, shaking my head. “Eat my dreams!”

The lights flicker and the Bluetooth speaker skips a couple beats and then disconnects as the lights go out.

“You called?” Mo’s voice slithers into my ears, as the washroom’s TV turns back on, with a picture of the Narrows advertising a brunch special. Oh God, does that mean I just passed out again? The hostess is going to be pissed.

Mo twirls out of the TV with a burst of gas, having already assumed the form of the strange animal that it took on last time.

“Oh, it’s you again,” Mo says, its dry lips smirking, revealing yellow pointed teeth.

I stand there staring at him, speechless, as the lights in the washroom flicker back on.

“Well?” Mo says, its words trickling out of its mouth. “Aren’t you going to say anything?”

“I... I didn’t think this was real. I didn’t think that would work. Again.”

“My child,” Mo says as it floats closer to me again. “You knew this would work. You’ve taken heed of my warning. Be prepared, for it shall now begin.”

“I have places to be,” I say as I reach for the doorknob. “I really must be going.”

“Too late,” Mo says as its mouth opens extra wide.

The door disappears. Ugh, I guess we're doing this. The room becomes darker, dirtier. The walls shrink, windows crack; fragments of plaster fall from the ceiling, and support beams become exposed.

That better not be asbestos.

"I'm not the litigious type, but if that's asbestos, you're going to see me in court," I say to the Spirit.

Then the beams fall away and we're outside again.

Except, we aren't outside my grandfather's house this time.

It's hot. The kind of heat that hits you in the face the second the airplane door opens. Sweat dripping down my back already, t-shirt clinging to my body.

"Are we... in Florida?" I ask as I survey my surroundings. I can't see Mo around but if it's showing me this, it must be able to hear me.

No response.

The terrain is more desert-like than Florida. Sure, I can see greenery in the distance, but everything around me is gravelly and dirty. Dusty. Not quite sand.

"Vegas?"

Still no response.

The Spirit is ghosting me again.

"Mo, I'm not kidding, my friends are waiting for me. I can't stay here." By friends, I mean a marathon of *South Park*.

Silence, aside from a slight breeze blowing sand around. It's so fucking hot.

"If we're in a place this hot, I'm really going to need some water."

Mostly barren landscape, save for some rocks. On the skyline, I can see a couple towers. Watchtowers, maybe. Sparse cement and brick work, nothing ornamental. Various windows and perches, scattered across their four long walls. Just tall square buildings, dotting the horizon in an irregular pattern. They kind of look like the old firehall downtown, the one that had that painting of the firefighting Dalmatian on the side, spraying water from his fire hose.

Water.

I turn around and behind me is one of those towers overlooking a bridge with no water underneath it. Just outside the tower, I can see a donkey attached to some wooden-arm-thing, circling a hole in the ground.

Is that... a well?

“This isn’t Vegas, is it?”

I can barely keep my eyes open, it’s so fucking hot. Squinting at the donkey, I walk towards it.

“Pay attention,” Mo says, his lengthy body wiggling out of the iPhone in my pocket.

“We’re not leaving here yet.”

The donkey is drawing water from a well. There’s an old Asian man leaning on the other side of the well. He looks sweaty and has one of those big rice field hats on his lap.

“Hi,” I say. “Excuse me sir, do you mind if I drink some of this water?”

He blankly stares at the wall of the nearby watchtower.

“Hi,” I say as I crouch down in front of him. I do a little wave.

He stares right through me.

“I really need water, I think I might pass out.”

Nothing.

Geez, between this guy and the spirit.

I look at the wall that he's looking at. There's a child over there playing, jumping around, waving and aiming a stick like it's a rifle. I look back at the man.

"Sir, do you speak English?" I say as I reach out to touch his shoulder.

My hand goes right through him, as if he was made of water, and I lose my balance and fall straight through the man's body. He shudders and stands up, waving his hat towards his face like a fan.

"You will find that it is impossible to interact with anybody while in my realms," Mo says. "They cannot see you or hear you or feel your touch."

"Yeah, I just figured that out," I say as I pick myself up, rubbing the dust and sand off my pants. "How is it that I can have dust on my pants but be unable to touch anyone?"

"There are varying levels of perception from others in regards to your appearance here."

"Meaning?"

No response.

The donkey looks old and weak. His mane gone grey and tattered. He pulls around the well slowly, the bucket of water being a great strain on his aged body. He staggers and falls towards the inside of his circular path, but recovers quickly, always pushing forward. As he walks in circles around the well, a wooden thing that kind of looks like a Ferris wheel spins around and sloshes water into a hollowed-out piece of bamboo, leading the water into a bucket.

"Can I drink it?" I'm asking both the man who cannot hear me and the spirit who doesn't like to respond to me.

“Drink.” Mo says.

I crouch down to the bucket and look at the water inside. Looks clear. No excrement or asbestos-like substance floating around. Just water. I look to my left and right to make sure no one is watching and I lift the bucket up to my lips to drink.

What a relief. The water is warm but refreshing.

The water flowing through the bamboo pipe sloshes on to the dirt in front of me and the donkey stops to look at me. I put the bucket back under the pipe but the donkey keeps staring.

“The donkey can see me?”

“There are varying levels of perception from others in regards to your appearance here,” Mo’s voice rings out as he floats around the watchtower.

The man yells at the donkey, then slaps him on the behind with the back of his hand. The donkey continues to walk.

“What kind of dream is this?” I ask the Spirit.

“It’s not a dream,” the Spirit says. “This is how things were.”

I look at the donkey, and the sloshing water, and the old man, and the child and the watchtower, and the surrounding emptiness.

Beads of sweat form on my head and roll into my eyes as I stand there watching the donkey pump the water. The bucket overflows ever so slightly, catching the donkey’s attention and he once again stops.

The man calls out something to the child in a language I’m not familiar with. I mean, it sounds like Chinese to me, but I don’t know, it could be Japanese, Korean. Not English, that’s for sure.

The child attaches the bucket to the end of a larger, thicker piece of bamboo, and then unties the donkey from the water-pumping device. He smooths the donkey's mane and whispers something in the donkey's ear. The child turns his back to his father and reveals a small piece of a carrot that he had hidden in his hand and brings it to the donkey's mouth. The man calls out to the child again, as he fastens a bag to the other end of the thick piece of bamboo. The man and the child lift the bamboo stick on to the donkey's back, balancing the stick so that it doesn't tip on either end.

I stand by the well watching as the man and child and donkey begin to embark down the dirt road. Mo is hovering over the well, its face contorted into something resembling a smile. As the man and child keep walking, the donkey neighs and bucks, and his hind legs shake and give out slightly. The bamboo stick loses its balance and the bucket spills all over the ground. The man yells and shouts at the donkey. The child is crying and drops the stick he was playing with to the ground. The donkey tries to trot away from the man, back towards me by the well.

"Uh, Mo," I say, searching for a sign of something, as I retreat from the approaching donkey.

The man picks up the stick the child dropped and catches up to the donkey, slapping the donkey with the stick. The donkey is coming right at me, and I back up until I'm leaned against the wall of the well.

"A flower that blooms in adversity is the greatest flower of all," Mo says.

"Is that from *Mulan*?" I say bracing myself against the well wall. I swear to God that's from *Mulan*.

The man slaps the branch off the back of the donkey's legs so hard that the branch cracks in half. The donkey charges right at me, neighing repeatedly, and I throw my arms up in front of my face to try to stop him.

Except the donkey goes right through me.

His front legs crash into the wall of the well behind me, causing him to tip over and fall into that abyss, smashing through the wooden Ferris wheel thing and tearing the whole system down with him, his neighs echoing off the tubular walls.

The man screams in anger and waves the remainder of the branch right through my head, causing him to shudder once again as he throws the diminished branch down into the well with the donkey.

The man puts his head in his hands, saying something and pointing at the child. The child, still crying, runs over. The man slaps the boy in the face, knocking the child over on to the ground. The man collapses in defeat, sitting on the ground, leaned against the wall just as I first saw him. The child picks himself up and stares into the dark abyss of the well.

The donkey neighs again.

The child wipes away tears off his cheeks with the back of his hand.

Neigh, neigh, neigh, echoing into the hot air from that vast hole in the ground.

The child says something to his father while pointing into the well.

The father responds back in a snappy way.

“Spirit, I’m all for that whole ‘patience-is-a-virtue’ thing but like, I don’t know what language they’re speaking and I find it hard to follow what’s going on.”

The father stands up and stares down into the well too and lets out a deep sigh.

“The language they are speaking is Taishanese. We are on the outskirts of Hoiping in the Guangdong Province of China.”

Is this where they make iPhones?

The father walks over to the watchtower-like building, knocks on the door. Another man emerges with a rifle on his back. The father talks to him and points towards the well several times. The man with the rifle angrily shakes his head and walks away from the doorway, only to remerge a moment later with a shovel. He forces the shovel into the hands of the father, yells something at him and then shuts the door.

“The year is 1920 and the man you’re looking at is your grandfather.”

The father walks back to the well and begins shovelling dirt and sand into the well.

“That guy burying a donkey alive is my grandfather?”

“No,” the Spirit says.

“The guy with the rifle?”

“No,”

I look at the child.

“The child?”

“I have no perception of age or time, having been trapped in this state for so long,” the Spirit says.

“You literally just told me what year it is,” I mutter under my breath.

The donkey, realizing what’s going on, begins to neigh over and over again, in a panicked manner. This terrible noise, the sound of an animal dying a slow, imminent death, makes the child cry again.

The donkey stops neighing.

The father notices the sudden silence too and stops shovelling. The child, wailing all the while, peers over the edge. His wails stop and he tries to conceal a smile creeping along his face. The father walks over and pushes the child out of the way. His jaw drops as he looks into the well.

I walk over and peer down into the abyss too.

The donkey is standing on top of the dirt, its tail wagging back and forth.

The father picks up another shovel of dirt and throws it down into the well, except this time all three of us watch as the dirt falls down the tube. The dirt hits the donkey's back and he shakes it off so that it gathers underneath him.

The father and son look at each other, perplexed. I look at them too and try to share in this family bonding moment.

The father begins to dig again and for some time it proceeded like this: Him, throwing dirt down the well. Me and the child, watching. Soon, men from the watchtower came out, some of them helping to dig, others just watching. Then, men, women, and children came from down the dirt road to watch.

After a couple hours, the donkey's head could be seen poking out from the top of the well and soon enough, the donkey walked free. The father and some of the watchtower men helped the donkey off the ledge of the well. The child once again hugged the donkey and pet him. There was a generally triumphant sense in the air. Again, I don't know what anyone is saying, but you can tell people are happy that the donkey is free.

The sun is starting to set and the villagers head back down the dirt road and the watchtower guards go back into their tower. Soon enough, it's just like it was in the beginning, me and the donkey and the father and the child.

The child gathers up their possessions, the toppled bag and bamboo stick. The father walks towards the watchtower to hand back the shovel.

BANG.

The donkey drops to the ground, knocking its head off the edge of the well on the way down. I back up and feel the stapled-wound on my head. The child screams. The father turns around and yells at the child, gesturing downwards with his hands as he himself crouches down.

BANG.

Blood spurts from the donkey's neck.

A chorus of laughter echoes down from the watchtower.

After a moment, the father stands up, peers up at the tower and then walks over to the child. The child is crying again, but this time the tears run down his face silently.

The father says something to him and the child picks up the bamboo stick and the bag.

BANG.

The father drops to the ground.

"No," I say, reaching out to the man.

The child runs as fast as he can down the dirt road.

On the highest perch of the tower, a scope glints in the evening sun.

The donkey bleeds out next to the well overflowing with dirt, his blood rolling and expanding on the ground, mixing with the spilt water he used to pump.

Before I can even ask the Spirit a question, the donkey's corpse begins to rot away, maggots and birds rapidly swarming its carcass and in seconds there is no sign of the animal left on top of the soil, and the soil itself is the floor of the restaurant bathroom. A burst of wind blasts in my face and I see all manner of objects fly through the air. Carrots, suitcases, and dozens upon dozens of envelopes. One of the tiny envelopes blows onto my chest and the force of the wind keeps it there. Mo sucks the gas in the room back in through its snout as a knock echoes through the washroom door. The wind dies down and the restaurant appears normal again. All the objects I saw blowing around have disappeared, except for the letter that landed on my chest. There's another knock on the door, louder this time, more urgent.

"Sir," the hostess calls out. "Mr. Pang, are you okay in there?"

"Tell her you're fine," Mo whispers.

"It's all good," I say. "And the name is Ping. P-I-N-G."

"You didn't hurt yourself again, did you?"

"No," I say. "I'll be out in just a second."

"Hold on to that," Mo says, eyeing up the envelope on my chest. "It's been lost before."

I stuff it in my pocket.

"Sir," the hostess calls out again. "You can't stay in the restaurant, sir. As I said before, the DuMont—"

"I'm coming," I say. "Just a moment."

"You need to be in a more private space for a longer session," Mo says with a grin as the washroom's TV absorbs him back into the screen as an ad for Screech illuminates the room.

"That sounds gross," I say under my breath as the hostess knocks again.

“That bathroom is out of order, me son,” she says. “I don’t know what you did in there the first time, but the plumbing don’t even work the same in there now.”

I sigh as I open the door.

“It’s all good,” I say. “It’s fine.”

“Did you find the sweater?” she asks.

“Unfortunately, no,” I say.

“So, why were you in there so long?”

“Just trying to figure out what I hit my head off,” I say. “I don’t remember the impact.”

“It’s pretty obvious that you hit your head off the toilet,” she says, pointing towards the shattered bowl. “Are you sure you’re alright? If you needs to lie down for a moment or something, there’s lots of vacant rooms upstairs. My son had a concussion once and he had these bouts where he’d get lightheaded and have to lie down and —”

“Actually,” I say, an idea coming into my head. “Can I book one of the rooms upstairs?”

“You can just lie down in there for a few minutes until you’re okay again, it’s more than fine really,” she says.

“No,” I say. “Let me book out a room for the next two weeks.”

She looks at me, thinking.

“You’re sure you’re alright?”

“I’m completely fine,” I say. “I just want to rent out a room for the next two weeks.”

“Why?”

“Look,” I say. “I have to rest for two weeks, because of the whole head wound thing, and I can’t get any rest at home because people keep coming to try to see my wound or take care of me or whatever. But I could rest here. Nobody would have to know I’m here.”

“But, you don’t have any luggage?”

“Don’t worry about it,” I say. “I have money. I’ll pay, no worries.”

After some more haggling, the hostess acquiesces and checks me into a room upstairs. She hands me the room key and tells me where to go upstairs to find my room. It’s at the end of a long hall, the sounds of noisy children ricocheting off the walls.

The phone is ringing when I get to my room.

“Hello,” I say as I pick up the receiver.

“Mr. Kong,” the hostess says. “I’m really sorry about this, but I think I made a boo-boo. The credit card I have on file for your room says your name is William Ping, is that right? Or did I get your card mixed up with someone else?”

“Yes,” I say. “My card must be in there somewhere.”

After I hang up, I lie down on the small bed, fully clothed. It’s a nice little room, tiny flatscreen, tiny lamps and a tiny iPad that you can order room service from. I take the envelope out of my pocket. Its edges are tattered and yellowed. It’s addressed to a post office box in the Avalon Mall, but the return address is all written in Chinese. Presumably. I guess the characters could be from any Asian language. I put the envelope back in my pocket and close my eyes.

“Eat my dream,” I say as I get comfortable on the bed. “Eat my dream. Eat my dream.”

“Mmm,” Mo says. “Calling again so soon.” I open my eyes quick to catch a glimpse of Mo’s long body emerging from the iPad bolted to the wall.

“Show me everything,” I say to Mo as I close my eyes again. “Everything.”

Gotta Keep It Gentleman

“The year is 1931,” the Spirit’s voice reverberates through my body and when I open my eyes, I’m outside again, right where I was when the donkey’s corpse rotted away to dust.

It’s even hotter than before.

The well has improved over the last ten years. Instead of having a donkey walk in endless circles around the well, now a donkey walks in a gigantic hamster wheel-like device that pumps the water in much the same fashion. Wouldn’t be me, trapped on that treadmill in all this heat.

It’s a lot busier here than it used to be. People walk by in every direction, carrying baskets balanced on their shoulders or riding in the backs of rickshaws. The nearby bridge is now gated.

A young man in a suit stares at the wheel-well contraption. His hair is stylish, short and coiffed like an Asian Don Draper. This stands out as nearly every other man in the area has their hair tied in long ponytails. The young man is standing in front of some lit incense sticks and an orange with two red candles sticking out of it. He’s around my age, early twenties if I were to guess. The young man seems dazed, nodding his head towards either the donkey or the wheel, and waving to some of the people passing by. I would be dazed too if I were wearing a suit in this heat. He’s the only one wearing a suit, others are wearing more temperature-appropriate attire, loose fitting shirts and long, spacious robes.

Perhaps Suit-Man is a bit simple.

A man’s voice yells from the tower, and the busy commotion of people comes to a quick stop with onlookers looking up at the tower, or across the bridge, or an anxious mixture of both.

Across the bridge there is a small group of men gathered together, staring up at the tower. The tower man yells again. The men don't move.

Unlike everyone else, Suit-Man seems to be not concerned by this yelling. He reaches in his pocket and takes out some folded paper, money I think. With his other hand, he produces a match, striking it off his thumbnail, before proceeding to set the money ablaze and placing it on the ground in the same slow and controlled manner one might use to put a baby in a crib.

BANG.

On the other side of the gated bridge, a body hits the ground with a wet thud. The remaining gathered men disperse, their party having permanently lost a member.

Everybody on our side of the gate jumps or crouches in fright at the noise, myself included. Yet, Suit-Man is unfazed, standing as if he didn't hear the noise at all, staring at his burning money, and placing more folded money into the flames with slow, precise movements.

In the ensuing silence after the gunshot, the crowd of people slowly comes back to life and soon rickshaws are zipping around again and people are back to carrying buckets. For the most part, everyone ignores Suit-Man. This must be a common practice for him. I suppose every town has that guy that you learn to ignore.

There's a guy like that back home, Tommy. He gets drunk off Listerine and tries to fight people. He tried to fight me a few times, calling me 'Chris' and saying that I owed him money. I later found out that he calls everyone 'Chris' and we all owe him money. A barber told me that Tommy's family came from money, they own a local furniture chain, and that Tommy chooses to live this way. Imagine that, an heir to a furniture empire.

A brood of ducklings, undisturbed by the bustling crowd, waddles past Suit-Man and head up the old dirt road. Suit-Man follows them.

“Is there something wrong with him?” I say as I wipe sweat off my eyelids with the sleeve of my bloodied t-shirt. “How can he be wearing a suit in all this heat?”

“The man you’re looking at is your grandfather,” Mo says. “Obviously.”

“Suit-Man?” I ask Mo. “That’s Poppy Ping? Is he having a heat stroke? Is that why he’s acting like this?”

“Follow in his footsteps and you will learn,” Mo says.

“Cliché,” I mumble as I follow my grandfather following the ducklings.

We walk through the outskirts of town, shrubs and greenery encasing both sides of the old dirt road, dust and sand rising into air behind the waddling mini ducks.

Quack, quack, quack.

The ducks lead us to what appears to be the main street of this village, as dozens of people are darting around in every which direction. Poppy Ping walks with purpose and confidence through the crowd. Small concrete and brick buildings line the edges of the dirt road. Kind of a dirty place, small buildings and smaller alleys exist on the offshoots of this street. The ways are foul and narrow; the shops and houses wretched; the people half-naked, slipshod. Alleys and archways, like cesspools, discharging offensive smells, and dirt, and life, upon the straggling ‘main street.’ The whole quarter reeked with unhygienic filth and misery.

It’s just like George Street, except not as bad.

Unlike George Street, people live in these buildings. People are washing laundry outside, and hanging them to dry between adjacent balconies. More livestock than George Street too.

Sure, sometimes on George Street, you might see a police horse, a pleasant surprise when you've got a nice buzz on. But here, there are animals everywhere. Chickens roam and peck freely, seemingly belonging to no one but themselves. It stinks like shit, probably from the chickens, but probably from dogs too, as there's a number of them running around as well. Farmers drag equipment down the road, past the many stands that dot the street like a congested farmer's market.

The stands are selling everything. Fruits and vegetables, huge quantities of oranges and peppers and some sort of zucchini-looking thing that's bigger and thicker than my leg. Fish, both fresh and salted, both dead and alive, hanging and put in big soup pots being repurposed as makeshift fishtanks. Filets of whitefish, probably rotting in the sun, flies zipping around and nipping at an elderly stand keeper. Shrimp the size of my hand and pigs' feet with noodles served alongside buckets with writhing eels inside. A tray of raw chicken wings next to a tray of fried chicken feet. Others are cooking, mystery cuts of meat and vegetables being chopped and fried and rolled in rice paper. A boiling cauldron with a turtle shell rising to the top as the woman behind the pot drops what appears to be a tumorous log into the broth. Others are selling fans, iron, old rags, bottles, bones, baskets and greasy offal.

All the while, people are laughing and spitting and yelling and smiling and frowning and chopping and cleaning and coughing and breathing and moving and stopping and above all else, living. And even though I'm somewhat nauseated, deep inside me there is a wish that I could stop and taste the food, that I could understand what they were saying, that I could be part of something here. I guess it's the same reason as why I like to shop on Black Friday or Boxing Day; because even though the lineups are too big and there's too many people and everyone

kind-of disgusts me, I like being there because I feel like I'm part of something that's happening, something other people are doing too, something beyond me.

There's a procession of people on horses embarking up the road and I realize I have forgotten to follow my grandfather and the ducklings. I look up the street and back. Everyone here is as sweaty as me, shiny skin and ripped shirts, fanning themselves and drinking water straight from buckets. The only person not dressed for the weather is Suit-Man, my grandfather, an easy mark to find in the crowd.

He's about a block down the road, walking up the steps into a building that looks slightly newer than the rest. In contrast to the other buildings, this one looks a lot more ornate. Great solid concrete pillars hold up the roof and Chinese characters adorn the doorways. The building is twice as wide and tall as most of the others in the area.

I hurry through the crowd, passing through their bodies and causing shivers to fluctuate through the mass of pedestrians. I run into the building and catch a glimpse of a man in a suit entering a room at the end of the hall. Must be him. He closes the door behind him.

I burst into the room, swinging open the door. It smacks loudly off a chalkboard and a room full of young people behind desks stare at me. My grandfather standing at the front of the room, shakes his head, says something under his breath, and reaches to close the door. His hand passes right through me as he shuts the door, he shudders and then says something that makes the classroom laugh. That must be what this is, a classroom. And my grandfather, is the teacher?

He pulls on the handle of the door to make sure it's shut then returns to the front of the room. He picks up a piece of chalk and writes some Chinese characters on the board.

“Um, Mo, I hate to say this, but I don’t speak Chinese and I can’t follow what you’re trying to show me here,” I say aloud, hoping that that fickle spirit will respond.

My grandfather continues to write on the chalkboard, in addition to moving little wooden circles around on one of those really old calculators, an atticus or an abidance, or something like that. We have one at home that used to be Pop’s.

Wait.

“Spirit, is that the same abidance that I have at home?”

“It’s called an abacus,” the Spirit says, as it slithers out of a textbook.

Pop begins to draw a big circle on the board.

“Mo,” I say again. “Can you do anything about the language barrier?”

Pop begins dividing the circle into eight equal-ish pieces.

“Patience,” the Spirit says.

Now Pop draws a crude outline of a horse inside the circle and pantomimes neighing, eliciting gentle chuckles from the class.

“Is he drawing that new wheel at the well?”

“Yes,” the Spirit says.

Pop begins doing calculations, moving the little wooden things around, and gesturing towards his drawing of the donkey in the wheel.

“Is it in your wheelhouse of abilities to make it so that I can understand Chinese or is that something you can’t do?”

“You will understand Taishanese when the time comes,” Mo says.

“So, you don’t have the ability to translate it?”

“Yes, but that will come to you in time,” Mo says.

“But, Mo... I can’t learn whatever lesson you’re trying to make me learn if I can’t understand the language being spoken around me. As far as I can see it, I might as well walk back out to that main street and see what other types of food they’re selling.”

“You may not leave this space,” the Spirit boomed.

“If I can’t understand what’s going on then I’m not really even in this space, am I?”

“Your thinking...,” the Spirit says in a relaxed tone, “is headed in the right direction.”

Pop turns to address the class.

“While I designed this wheel-well,” Pop says, “I am not the inventor of such a device.”

Although there are no more audible words, his lips keep moving for a moment.

“Mo, did you dub this memory?”

“These are not memories, I am simply a presenter of things as they once were and always are,” the Spirit says.

“I encountered this design during my many years of studying well-pump technology,”

Pop says to the class with a nod. Again, the lips keep moving after the audio stops.

“Mo. This is so distracting. I can’t be immersed, watching the lips keep moving like that,” I say, squinting at my grandfather.

“Your options are to listen to them speak in Taishanese or listen to it like this,” Mo says.

“That’s it, those are the options.”

“Fine, fine.”

This is like the world’s worst VR experience.

“Okay, so the tread-wheel is powered by the weight of the animal, in our case a donkey, attempting to walk up one side of its interior. This design can be used to create electricity, steer boats, draw water from wells or even to turn meat on a spit.”

Pop gestures towards his sketch of the wheel.

“The tread wheel is balanced on a central axis, underneath which lies the base mount, upon which the crane is attached. The rope is attached to the central axis and in order to lift up the buckets of water, the axis must turn. Even to lift one or two meters, the axis must turn two or three times. This is because the diameter of the treadwheel is so much greater, the amount of effort you have to use to get the bucket to budge is spread out over a longer distance. So, for the one we have constructed here by the diaolou, the well is forty-nine meters deep.”

Pop wrote some characters on the chalkboard, doing equations of some sort.

“And, you’ll see when we complete these calculations that the wheel will have to move 255 meters in order to successfully bring up a bucket of water.

“Now, we get donkeys to do that work, moving the wheel constantly and we switch them out several times during the day as they get dizzy if we work them too long. Does anybody see any flaws in this system?”

A student raises his hand.

“Mr. Puy,” the student begins his answer to the question, but I’m too distracted to listen to what he says after that.

“Mo,” I say, scratching my head around the staples. “Why do they call him Mr. Puy?”

“His name is So Ho Puy. He is a fourth-class power engineer. This is his classroom.”

“So Ho Puy? My grandfather’s name is Seto Ping, like my name.”

“Patience,” the Spirit says.

“Are you sure you don’t have me paired with the wrong guy? The names sound kind of similar. It would be easy to mix up. People get my name wrong all the time.”

No response from the Spirit.

Mr. Puy’s teaching session went by without anything of note. He mostly spoke about calculations and engineering problems, the sort of stuff that it didn’t matter to me if it was in Chinese or English because I don’t know what they’re talking about anyways. Words like ‘net head’ and ‘flow rate.’ Something about hydro power.

At some point, class was over and as Mr. Puy exited the room, the walls crumbled and decayed around me as if it the whole school was built out of sand and a stiff nor’easter blew through the place. Now, Mr. Puy is at a restaurant. He sits laughing and conversing with other men in suits around a large round table in the back of the establishment, hidden away from the street stands he had passed by earlier.

They eat a whole roasted duck and drink room-temperature booze out of small glasses. The alcohol smells like soy sauce and it’s good at starting conversations.

It’s hard to hear what they’re saying, about a dozen guys talking over each other at this table, in addition to the riffraff in tattered shirts and pants in the rest of the establishment, everyone’s lips moving at a different pace than how I hear the words. But it’s not hard to tell that the guys in the suits are having a good time. They’re so comfortable here, sprawled out in chairs and addressing the waiters by name, they must be frequent customers. And even though I can’t quite make out what they’re saying, something strikes me as so glamorous about Mr. Puy and his band

of suited gentleman, living it up here with their cufflinked wrists and free-flowing drinks amid the squalor outside.

I'm sure Mo won't respond, but under my breath I ask, "are these guys gangsters?"

"No, they're teachers," the Spirit says, as if it was something I should already know.

If this is what the teachers look like, I want to see the gangsters.

Mr. Puy leans back in his chair and lifts his glass in the air, bespoke sleeves floating over spent duck bones. He is far from simple. Mr. Puy comes off to me as a gentleman, intelligent and kind, the type of guy who looks the waiter in the eye and tips handsomely. I wondered which lucky lady in town he might get paired up with.

Mr. Puy and his friends clue up dinner and gather outside for a smoke, spitting and chatting in a jovial mood. As the group disperses, I find myself transported once again to a new location as a butler opens the front door of a house for Mr. Puy.

"Welcome home, sir," the butler says. "Will you be requiring my services or may I head home for the evening?"

"Go home," Mr. Puy says as he slips the butler some cash. "Have a good night."

A young Chinese woman greets Mr. Puy, embraces him, and shushes him, before whisking him away to look through the doorway of another room. I pass through their bodies to see what they're looking at, causing a shiver to shake both of them. A very young boy sleeps peacefully in a crib. Mr. Puy loosens his tie as he quietly shuts the door, leaving me in the room with the baby boy.

I open the door of the child's bedroom and step into the next room, but a cloud of green gas obscures my vision and I find myself not in the next room, but outside in the middle of an afternoon.

Acres and acres of farmland stretch out as far as the eye can see, Chinese men and women tilling the land, mountain ranges hiding behind clouds in the distance. Mr. Puy and the young woman that I presume to be his wife are chasing a toddler around a field in front of the farm. Puy is in a white dress shirt with his sleeves rolled up, chasing the young boy around.

"The cat is going to catch you, Zhaohui," the Chinese lady yells. "You better run to Mama."

Puy playfully stomps back and forth, hunched over acting like a cat, with his hands raised up, and two pointer fingers extended, imitating the appearance of a cat's pointed ears.

"You rat better run," Puy says, affecting a faux-menacing voice.

The toddler giggles as he runs and stumbles with every couple steps. It looks like he only recently learned to walk. Puy lets the boy run into his mother's arms. She picks up the boy and twirls around, planting a big kiss on Zhaohui's head.

"Hualing, you should've let me catch the little stinky rat," Puy says as he tickles Zhaohui's ribs.

"You couldn't catch him if you tried," Hualing says with a playful tone.

"Oh really?" Puy says with a surprised laugh. "Put the boy down. Let's see how fast I can catch you!"

"Pshh," she says. "You could never."

Hualing places the boy down and pushes Puy's chest.

“Come get me,” she says as she backs up.

Puy takes on a stance that reminds me of a sumo wrestler, with his legs bent and ready to pounce. He jumps back and forth in front of Hualing, before he dives at her, easily catching her. They tumble into the grass, the two of them laughing, as he tickles her and kisses her, the greenery almost looking like it could swallow them whole. Zhaohui stumbles over with his little toddler legs and Puy picks the boy up and waves him over his head like an airplane.

A good life, a good job, a wife, a child, what could possibly make this man leave?

“Mo, why would this man ever come to Newfoundland?” I say, feeling as though I could cry for a reason I didn’t know.

Mo sticks its large head out of my pocket, its body presumably emerging from my iPhone again. With a flick of its snout, four walls rise up out of the ground around us and the happy family is permanently blocked from my view.

Abidance

The walls are made of cement, painted a sun-faded pink and there's slight cracks running through them. Mr. Puy, in a different suit, is standing while two older women sit at a table nearby, filling and folding dumplings.

"I never see you anymore," the younger-looking of the two women says.

Must be his Mother. She looks to be in her late forties, her hair rounded and framing her face nicely. She has a slim, lithe figure which is quite a contrast to the larger and, nearly catatonic, woman sitting beside her. There's a similarity to the women's features, the same nose, the same lips, but a great disparity of age. The other woman had to be nearing eighty, or otherwise not aging nearly as well. Must be Puy's Mother and Grandmother.

"I try to visit as often as I can. Between my family and my job, I'm very busy," Puy says.

"Sit down, help us make dumplings," she says.

Puy pulls up a seat.

"I hear that you have enough time to visit that bar with your friends every night, but not enough time to visit your poor mother and grandmother," she gestures towards the older woman who makes a small grunt in agreement. "Your poor grandmother. You don't know how lonely she is, ever since your Uncle left."

"Mom, you're lucky that I can even find a good job here that keeps me busy. Uncle Li had to leave to make money."

"Ever since your father died, really, Grandma has been so lonely."

Grandma says nothing but makes a small noise again. Mr. Puy seems disheartened by the mention of his father's death.

"We got a letter from your Uncle Li the other day. He said he's doing really well in Newfoundland. He wrote about the laundromat he owns. Imagine that, your Uncle owning a business! Him and his friend, they own the laundry. Washing all sorts of interesting things. Doesn't that sound wonderful?"

Puy nods and shrugs at the same time.

"Yeah," his mother continues, "and Uncle Li said he will soon have his debt paid off. Isn't that nice? It really is Gold Mountain," she says with a laugh that rings hollow.

"Good for him," Puy says.

The conversation reaches a lull. A pot of water begins to simmer and fills the silence. Despite Grandma's unresponsive contributions to the conversation, she moves with the efficiency of a machine in her filling and folding of the dumplings. Puy's Mom is focusing her attention on the conversation, rather than on her dumplings, some of which come undone after she folds them.

"But yeah," she says. "Uncle Li misses home, yeah."

"That's understandable," Puy says.

"Yeah, he misses mahjong and he misses his Mom."

A slight smile appears on the older woman's face.

"He misses these dumplings too, I bet," Mr. Puy says as he picks up one of the folded dumplings. "How many are you making?" he asks.

“Twenty-four, I think, and put that down,” his mother says, forcing Puy to plop the dumpling back down next to the others. “I’m sure he misses all this food. He said they eat a lot of fish over there. Salt fish, fried fish.”

“I can only imagine,” Puy says, then adds “twenty-four wasn’t enough last time.”

“Okay, we’ll do forty-eight,” she says as she folds a dumpling shut. “Yeah, your Grandma misses him and he misses her and you know she’s getting older, so who knows how much time Uncle Li has to see her again.”

“That’s the risk of going overseas,” Puy says with a weary resignation.

“Yeah, so you go to Newfoundland and replace your Uncle for a year,” his Mom says.

Puy laughs.

“Forty-eight is too many,” he says.

“Yeah, you go to Newfoundland,” she says as she scoops up a spoonful of the dumpling’s filling. “You take over his job for a year, and then you come back here and he goes back to Newfoundland again, ok?”

“Mom,” Puy says, confused. “No.”

“Yeah, you switch places every year. First, you go, then Uncle Li comes home, then Uncle Li goes, and you come home! Once a year.”

“Mom,” Puy says. “I have a family.”

“Yeah, you have me and your grandma and Uncle Li. One year is not a long time.”

“No, I mean I have a wife and a child, I can’t abandon my family.”

“Yes,” she says with a chipper demeanour. “You go and make money for them! Gold Mountain!”

“Mom,” Puy sits down at the table where the women are folding dumplings, “I understand that you and grandma are lonely. I can visit more. Uncle Li made this decision for himself to leave.”

“No, Uncle Li made the decision to leave for *us*. When he comes home, he’s going to bring us money. We will be doing better because of it. Now, you go and make money for us.”

“I can’t just leave. I’d have to save money for Hualing and Zhaohui too, I wouldn’t be able to give it all to you.”

“Yeah, you give money to Hualing, you give money to us, it’s ok! It’s only a year, right Grandma?”

The older woman releases a guttural noise.

Puy is speechless as the pot of water boils over.

“I...” he starts but trails off.

“Go take care of that pot,” his Mom orders.

Puy takes the lid off the pot, letting it steam off.

“Yeah,” she says. “You wouldn’t disrespect your mother’s wishes, your family’s wishes. You say forty-eight is too many? Maybe we’ll do thirty-three.”

“I don’t want Hualing to end up like Li-Zhen.”

“Ehhh,” his Mom says, waving away his concerns. “Li-Zhen and Mr. Koo never even consummated, Hualing won’t end up like her.”

“I meant that I don’t want Hualing to be alone like Li-Zhen.”

“Li-Zhen is married to that rooster, she’s not lonely.”

“A woman shouldn’t have to marry a rooster. A woman should marry her fiancé.”

“A man, a rooster, all the same! Are you disrespecting your mother’s wishes? You know, my days are numbered too. Next thing you know, I’ll be in the ground and then you’ll regret not going and helping your Uncle Li and putting a smile on Grandma’s face.”

A ghost of a smile creeps on to Grandma’s face. I wonder if she even knows what is being discussed.

“I don’t want to go,” Puy says, with a waver in his voice, tears welling up in his eyes.
“Please. Mom.”

“Yeah, soon enough, I’ll be with your father,” Puy’s Mom says as she twirls a dumpling shut. “Will you remember to burn joss paper for me? Or will you be too busy with Hualing?”

“Mom,” Mr. Puy says, “of course, I’ll burn joss paper for you.”

“Mmmm,” she says, unsatisfied. “Or will you be too busy with your friends at that bar?”

Puy puts his head in his hands.

“If I were to go, would you watch over Hualing and Zhaohui? Would you make sure they’re okay?”

“Of course,” his mother says. “Of course.”

Puy says nothing. He swallows.

“I don’t know why you fuss over Zhaohui so much anyways,” she says. “It’s not like the child is yours.”

Puy stands up.

“Zhaohui is my son.”

“Zhaohui is no more your son than Li-Zhen’s baby chicks are her daughters,” his Mom says with a laugh.

“Just because Zhaohui was adopted doesn’t mean that he’s not my son,” Puy says.

“You are raising someone else’s child,” she says, the laughter having dissipated like steam. “You support someone else’s child before you support your own mother and grandmother.”

Puy pauses for a moment and his hands close into fists.

“I know what it is like to grow up without a father around and I didn’t want to see that happen to another child,” he says, jaw clenched. “Zhaohui is just a baby. At least I knew my father for a few years. He would never know a father, or a mother, if Hualing and I didn’t step in.”

It appears as though Puy has finally gotten through to his mother as she didn’t snap back at this.

“Zhaohui is young enough that he won’t even notice that you are gone,” his Mom says, as she stands up and places a hand on Puy’s shoulder. “You will be gone one year. When you come back, Zhaohui will still be a baby. You will be his father.”

Puy stares at the floor and nods.

“You must do this to honour your family. It is your grandma’s wishes.”

Puy looks at his grandma for a moment before returning his gaze to the floor.

“You understand?”

Puy nods.

They steam the dumplings and eat them. Puy walks home.

Gone is his confident strut through the chaos of the main street. Now he walks with a light hunch in his back, staggering as if drunk - although I didn’t see him drink anything - walking slowly through the crowd until he is in a more residential area.

A strange area, as the homes were either crudely constructed huts, nothing more than mud and twigs, or they were bare bones buildings, constructed of concrete and vaguely resembling houses you might see back in the West. Puy makes a brief stop outside of someone's house and he sneaks a glimpse through their window. Inside, there is a woman seated across from a rooster. They are both enjoying supper, the woman grasping rice out of a bowl with a pair of chopsticks, the rooster pecking things off a plate. They are the perfect picture of a happily married couple, except for the fact that the rooster is a rooster.

I glimpse a tear in Puy's voyeuristic eye as he hurries down the road.

When Puy arrives home, he dismisses his butler and takes Hualing aside in their small kitchen and tells her the news about his future.

"I'm going to end up like Li-Zhen," Hualing cries. "With a rooster for a husband!"

"Don't be ridiculous," Puy says, trying to be a stern voice of reason. "I will only be gone for a year."

"Li-Zhen thought that too when Mr. Koo left, and now he's dead!"

"I won't be working in the industry Mr. Koo worked in, I'll be managing a laundry. I'll bring back money for us."

Hualing continues to sob and sputter out sounds that never quite form coherent words. Her sobbing wakes up Zhaohui who also begins to cry, probably confused by the air of anxiety which had now filled his home.

"I will not let Zhaohui be raised without a father," Puy says. "I won't die. I promise."

Puy embraces Hualing and they exchange a trepidatious look.

A flash of white light absorbs their embraced bodies and I lose sight of them in a puff of smoke.

Horsin' Around

"Eggplant!" The voice of Puy yells through the cloud of smoke.

It's not the same place anymore.

As the flash wears off, I see Puy politely posed on a stool. Another man, is standing hunched underneath a blanket attached to one of those really old cameras. His hand extends out from under the blanket to hold up the flash, the burning remnants of which linger and float in the air.

Mr. Puy remains posed for a moment. Wearing a suit as always, he beams at the camera. A young, boyish smile, ripe with potential and the sense that maybe there is always something to laugh about. As the photographer lowers the flash, so too does Puy lower his smile.

"You'll make sure my wife receives this, right?" Puy says, extending his hand to pat the photographer's shoulder.

"Yes, yes," the photographer says with a couple short nods, beginning to disassemble some part of the camera equipment.

"She needs to have something to remember her by," Puy says.

"Hm?" says the photographer.

"What?" Puy says.

"Remember her?"

"Oh, no, sorry, remember me," Puy says with a shake of his head.

"You want me to remember you?" the photographer asks, puzzled.

"No, I mean that she needs something to remember me."

“Ohhhh,” says the photographer, relieved of this linguistic mystery. “Yes, you are going in search of Gold Mountain?”

“Not quite,” Puy says, “I’ll be back next year. Just allowing a little family reunion. Plus, I’ve always wanted to see the West.”

“Oh, yeah? So, you’re just visiting?”

“Well, I’ll be working, but I’ll be back this time next year,” says Puy.

“Heh,” the photographer lets out an exasperated chuckle. “Okay. Whatever you say, Mr. Puy.”

“I’ll be back,” Puy says, defensive. “Just make sure that goes to my wife when its developed.”

“Will do, Mr. Puy,” the photographer says.

Mr. Puy nods and begins to leave, opening the front door and exposing himself to the noisy main street. Just as the door closes behind Puy, the photographer calls out:

“I’ll be sure to keep an eye on her while you’re gone.”

Puy stops for a moment and looks back at the photographer through the window as a snarl grows across the photographer’s face. Puy steps toward the door of the photo studio, but then checks his watch, and thinks better of it. He walks away.

I look at Puy, then back at the photographer.

What a dink.

I know a lot of Instagram photographers are perverts, but I didn’t know they were creeps back then too. Then again, photography, so voyeuristic. A medium for pervs, really.

Puy heads on down the busy road, but I’m not done with the photo studio yet.

The photographer is in a dark room, developing photos. I walk through his body, causing him to shiver. I walk through him again, another shiver. If Puy doesn't have the time to fight the photographer, the least I can do is annoy the shit out of him.

"Stop," Mo says, slithering out of a developing photograph.

I keep jumping back and forth through the man, like a game of hopscotch. He is shivering uncontrollably and starting to panic.

"You're interfering," Mo says. "You can't linger in this instant, you have to follow your grandfather."

"But, how will perv-man learn his lesson?"

"Stop," Mo says.

"Make me," I say, as I floss through the photographer's body. He looks ill, dry-heaving like he might throw up.

Just as the man begins to vomit, my surroundings become smeared like a watercolour painting that got wet in the rain. Everything blurry and indistinct.

"No haunting," Mo says. But can the future haunt the past?

Things sharpen into focus again and I'm outside. Puy is getting ready to ride a horse. Same suit. Must be the same day. His wife and child are there. And so too are his Mom, and Grandmother. The horse looks a little old, brown, save for a circular birthmark around his left eye, and muscular, yet there is a shock of grey hair in his mane.

Puy hugs all of his family members.

Grandma lets out a pleased-sounding grunt. His Mom smiles ear-to-ear. Zhaohui coos and extends clenched fists. Hualing's lips are pursed into an expression of ambivalence and concealed anger. She says nothing.

"The photographer has something for you," he whispers to her.

"Great," she says in a toneless voice.

Puy pauses for a moment, unsure of how to resolve the tension. He frowns. Puy's mother pushes him ever so slightly as she brandishes a suitcase.

"Okay, you bring this to your uncle and his friends, lots of reminders from home," she says as she jiggles the suitcase before forcing it into Puy's hand. "He will appreciate this. They will know you are honouring your family."

"Mom, I can't bring another suitcase, I already have my own packed."

"Yes, you can! You're a big shot teacher, you can afford a nice cabin, lots of space for two suitcases. Now, remember, you sell the horse at the Hong Kong Jockey Club, okay? You use that money towards a nice cabin. Your uncle will love this!"

Puy lets out a small sigh before fixing the second suitcase to the horse.

"I'll see you all in a year!" Puy calls out, chipper, as he mounts the horse. "I'll bring you back something from the West!"

Puy begins to ride the horse down the road, and after a moment he looks back.

His wife is still standing there, holding their baby, his mother and grandmother already headed back to their hovel. Earth tones surround her, from the ground to the walls of the nearby shacks. She stares at Puy, and she stares beyond him at the barren, isolated landscape in front of her. There is nothing.

Puy turns away from the shimmering, distant visage of the woman — women — he loves. A tear forms in his eye that he doesn't want to risk them seeing.

—

It takes us four or five days to get to Hong Kong. I can't tell you exactly how long it takes because I wasn't sure when Mo was washing away time, as it is wont to do. In the beginning, I tried to ride on the back of the horse with Puy, but I kept falling into him by accident and making him shiver. I ended up riding on the back of Mo, his tiny, pawed legs somehow able to keep up with the horse.

We ride for days. We ride through mountains and canyons. We ride through smooth, low hills in the sweltering heat. We ride through rivers and streams that are scattered like ribbons through valleys of clay. A beautiful mountain range wraps around us for as far as the eye can see and it offers pleasant reminders of the Patagonia logo, reminders which turn to sorrow as I recall that my sweater is still lost.

In the nights, we stop at inns in small villages, places where leering men spit freely and reveal teeth stained red from eating some kind of nut and leaf mixture. Sometimes we pass by puppet shows, where the puppets are as tall as children with beautiful carved wooden heads. Most times we would pass by nothing but nature.

Bamboo groves and patches of fir trees surround us day after day. So too do bats, and mice, and squirrels and rats, and otters and strange, scary looking cats, whose fur patterns simultaneously evoked cheetahs, zebras and racoons. Insects of every description can be found in abundance and it always makes me smile when a mosquito passes through my body, unable to

deprive me of my bodily fluids. At night when we camp, snakes pass through my body. Their squirmy bodies make me feel uneasy, even though I know they can do no harm to me.

We stop by a river so that the horse can rest and Puy can stretch his legs. A flock of flamingos are gathered in the water, picking through the mud and water. Puy stares at the long pink birds. I sit on the red soil and look off at the forest, thinking about when, if ever, I would be returned to my timeline. Although I guess I really brought this on myself so I shouldn't be thinking that way. It was a little impulsive though, just deciding to come here like that. Anyways, no time for regrets. The Spirit had said something about that, having no space for regrets.

It's a quiet day. They're all quiet days. Puy smooths down his horse's coat and offers him a carrot. I sit on the soil, keeping my eyes on them to make sure they don't leave without me. Then, there's a rustle in the bushes.

Is that... a large rock? Although, no, it looks like it's moving. Perhaps it's a boulder, somehow rolling horizontally on its own accord. Wait, that's a horn. Two horns. Looks like... an armoured pig walking out of the bushes.

I jump to my feet.

"It's a rhinoceros," Mo says.

"I know what it is," I say.

It lumbers about with a slow gait. Puy sees it too and mounts his horse. The rhino drops itself to the ground and starts to roll around in the mud.

We ride on.

We pass a stand selling rhino horns.

We're boarding a ferry. Puy's horse is rather sheepish about being on the boat, the waves of the water seeming to disturb the old animal, making him neigh in displeasure. Puy pats the horse and offers it a snack, trying to comfort it, but the horse is refusing to be appeased with carrots at this time, its greying tail swinging with anger.

Two white people, a man and a woman, board the boat too. Odd. Haven't seen their kind since I got here. The man is in a royal blue suit and has one of those curled moustaches, the type that must require some kind of wax to shape. From his top hat to his ornate cane, you can sense that this guy has money. The woman with him is wearing a dress with a large bottom that flows and expands outward. A poor choice in all this heat, and the drippy, melting makeup of the young lady reflects as such. Despite signs of an imminent heat stroke, she carries herself with a bubbly air that compliments the man's regal demeanour.

"My name is Sir Francis Cunard," the man says, with a British accent that's more pedestrian than royal. "And this is Lady Cunard," he continues, indicating the woman next to him with a flamboyant wave of his hand.

"You can call me Margret," she says with a bend of the knee and a blush that's both affected and sun-derived.

No one on the boat responds to them. I would presume that nobody on the boat even knows what they're saying. Instead, everyone stares at the Cunards. Puy tries to not stare too much, but he can be caught making frequent glimpses at the Cunards, pretending to be squinting beyond them at some imaginary passing ship.

Admittedly, I stare too.

“Darling,” Sir Francis Cunard says with a twirl of his moustache, “you’ll find that most — nearly all, really — Orientals can’t speak English. Not yet, anyways.”

“How fascinating! Do you suppose that’ll change someday?”

“All with due time, my fair lady,” says Sir Francis Cunard with a rat-a-tat-tat of his cane on the ship’s wooden floor.

For the most part, Sir Francis Cunard and Lady Margret Cunard stand admiring the horizon, shifting from looking at the range of mountains slowly shrinking in the rearview and the range of mountains quickly growing in the front. They enjoy the attention from the men on the ship, whispering things to each other and in turn, making the other stifle a giggle or cover their mouth with a hanky.

We’re approaching a city much more developed than anything me and Puy had passed through in the last few days. This city smears across the shore of an island, expanding along the coast and up the sloping sides of a mountain range, with buildings jutting out of the hill here and there, some looking like castles, others looking more pedestrian.

As we get closer to where the passengers would disembark, the waterways became more congested with boats going every which way. Boats that had wind masts that looked like a dragon’s wing, skeletal and flared.

“Junks!” declared Sir Francis Cunard, with another theatrical wave of his hand that made me think that he had perhaps prepared what he was about to say ahead of time. “Scores of junks find shelter and safety in the friendly harbours of Victoria, Britain’s pride of the East!”

I look out at the harbour that Sir Francis Cunard is talking about. The sun glares off the water into my eyes but I can still make out the vivid British harbour. The ferry is approaching a

dock under a steel overhang with the embossed words HONG KONG CANTON and MACAO STEAMING COMPANY LIMITED. Just underneath these embossed English words are some barely visible Chinese characters painted on the steel, faded and chipped in the sun. It's the first time I've seen English words in days.

"It is quite remarkable," Lady Margret Cunard says. I nod in agreement.

I can see even more buildings with English names as we dock. Large pillared buildings with names like 'The Peninsula Hotel' or 'St. George's Building' scrawled in gigantic gold letters.

The voice of Sir Francis Cunard grabs my attention again.

"Those little boats you see everywhere, darling, Chinese people live in them."

"No," Lady Margret says, aghast.

These boats look more like canoes and they don't offer much in the way of shelter.

"Incredible homes these, but millions live and die," says Sir Francis Cunard with a subtle shake of his head.

We are now fully docked and preparing to disembark. Puy begins to pet his horse, the horse happy to be leaving the boat. The pier is crowded with people, dozens of Chinese men and women are gathered around the stairwell leading down from the ferry.

"Oh Francis, it's so hot," says Lady Margret.

"Worry not, darling, our hotel is up in those verdant slopes. There's a cooler atmosphere near the peak, don't you know? You'll be able to lie back and look over this scenic vista and enjoy a nice, cold drink. We'll get one of the swanky Sikh policemen to grab us a sedan chair."

Sir Francis Cunard and Lady Margret Cunard make their way down the gangway, drawing the eyes and rapt attention of dozens of men on the pier, who stare at the British couple with inquisitive looks and dopey smiles. Other Chinese men and women are disinterested in the Cunards and they continue doing their respective tasks. Some men cut and filet fish dockside. Women slouch into the water, alternatively hitting wet clothes with a large stick or allowing them to dry on the edges of the docks. Much like Hoiping, people walk to and fro carrying boxes on their heads and buckets on their backs. Some carry large quantities of rope and there's even a child carrying a large lantern, much larger than the child himself.

After getting his horse off the ferry, Puy rides on. The well-paved roads remind me of Europe, London specifically, with ornate colonial-style buildings and double-decker street cars zipping around. Unlike London, this place is ensconced in mountains and thousands of Chinese people are coming and going in every which way. And upon closer inspection, older Chinese facades could sometimes be seen sandwiched between the newer European style buildings, and indeed even these European-style buildings were occasionally draped in fluttering Chinese flags.

Rickshaws and cars vie for space on the road. Planes can be heard flying overhead. A large pillar-like memorial for the British war dead stands not too far from an ornate Chinese archway protected by two lions made of stone. Busses drive along, passing by arcaded sidewalks providing shaded relief from the sun. Women dressed in form-fitting fashion-forward garments pass by, sometimes accompanied by other women who hold up umbrellas to provide shade from the beating sun.

We turn down a street that reminds me of the Main Street back in Puy's village, except this one is infinitely larger and gawking white people are dotted throughout the crowd, groping

silks and embroidered fabrics and watching the locals prepare food. There's sleeping babies, exhausted from the heat, strapped to the backs of women. There's congregations of men smoking from huge bamboo pipes. An old woman feeds soup to a toddler, alternating spoonfuls between herself and the small child. Teams of women pull large carts filled with dirt and trash and excrement. Buddhist monks mingle with businessmen. Stands and small shops flood the streets, but they're different here. At one stand, a Chinese man is pulling toffy, making the candy fresh out in the sun to an attentive audience of his peers.

There is simply too much going on to focus on anyone thing for long. A rickshaw buzzes by with a bald, elderly Chinese man smoking a small pipe in the back, his head enclosed by a feather boa, giving the eerie sensation that his is a floating head. Dogs bound around freely, dodging their way in and out of traffic, barking at whosoever should listen, making children scatter down the narrow alleyways, hiding their faces and giggling.

We pass by gated communities with British and Canadian flags raised high, guarded by turban-wearing policemen. Magnificent homes next to glorified shacks. Pairs of men line up on hills, waiting for the opportunity to carry seated people up the sloping mountain. For a second, I think I see the Cunards waiting for a chance to be carried on the backs of the Chinese up to their mountaintop castle, but before I know it, I'm being whisked down another street with its own share of things for me to gawk at.

Puy dismounts his horse outside a stadium-sized racetrack. Outside the arena is a large poster, painted on the wall. A smiling cartoon visage of a Chinese woman with short, curly hair beams over a drawing of a pack of gum that reads "On Lok Yuen's Che Wing Gum," then, in a more cursive style, 'Che Wing Gum.'

Puy leads the horse through the doors of the racetrack and we pass through dark, smoky dens where people gather to bet on games. Wealthy British and Chinese alike sit in the front rows, puffing and cavorting over the latest race in their fine suits. In the back of the room stands large groups of visibly poorer Chinese, tattered shirts and rice field hats, conglomerated together and all pitching in a small portion of their own funds to bet on the horses. A chalkboard promises potential winnings of up to six thousand British pounds in English, alongside some Chinese characters that presumably say the same thing.

Puy leads his horse to the stables and a borderline obese Chinese man greets him.

“You looking to sell?” he says.

“Yes,” Puy says.

The horseman lights a cigarette and sizes up the horse, walking around him and occasionally stopping to give the horse a little slap, or bending over to get a look at the horse’s sizeable member.

“Alright,” the man says as he counts out a couple of bills from a money clip. “I guess we got room for one more.”

“Thank you,” Puy says as he puts the horseman’s money in his pocket and gathers his belongings off the horse’s back. The horse neighs and bucks with a slow and quiet shuffle, unaware that it was a good being exchanged and nothing more. Puy offers it a carrot and looks into its eye surrounded by that strange birthmark. Then the horseman pulls on the reins and the horse is gone, sold.

Puy walks back through the smoky gambling den and pauses for a moment to look through the window’s panoramic view of the racetrack. He reaches in his pocket and pulls out

one of the crisp bills the horseman gave him. Puy looks at the chalkboard and then back at the bill. He walks towards the ticket booth and bets the bill on number eight and gets his wager ticket.

Walking away from the booth, Puy stops and turns around. He bets all the money the horseman gave him on eight.

Puy makes his way out to the observation deck and sits quietly in the stands. A real multicultural zone, white and Chinese mix together and I even see some African men and women gathered here to watch the races. Puy stares at the black people and I wonder if he's ever seen one before. There's a keyed-up excitement in the air, keeping the audience swaying with anticipation.

Down on the track, men in tuxedo coats and top hats lead the racehorses to their starting points, the jockeys already on their horses' backs, stern poker faces in play, a calm contrast from the crowd's frantic anticipation. The horses line up under the starter's eagle eye in a large watchtower.

BANG.

And, they're off!

Heads crane forward with an eager look towards the horses galloping down the straight, looking towards which number will be a winner and which will be losers. Glossy horse gear, silken colours, tight pressed spectators, all unite in a kaleidoscope of colour, until one by one, each horse makes it around the track.

Number eight wins.

Puy collects his money, having doubled it. He walks back over to the line up to bet money on the horses again.

“Mo, he’s not betting again is he?”

“You will see,” Mo says as he floats out of a poster for Che Wing Gum on the wall.

It’s easy to want to keep going when you’re on a winning streak. I’ve been to Vegas a couple times, but I’m not a big fan of gambling. First time I was ever in a casino, I see an Ellen Degeneres-themed slot machine. It’s a one dollar bet, so why not? I put in a dollar, next thing you know, I’m walking away with forty-five dollars. So now I’m thinking the Ellen machine is my lucky machine and every day when I walk past the Ellen machine, I bet a dollar on it. I never won again that whole trip. I did the same thing the next time I was in Vegas, but with a Mariah Carey-themed slot machine instead. Won something like thirty bucks, then never won anything again. That’s when I learned my lesson.

I see Puy counting out all the money he got from the horse.

“Mo, don’t tell me he’s betting everything on that horse,” I say.

“You must have patience,” Mo says.

“I’m not letting him do that,” I say as I walk through Puy causing him to shudder.

“Stop,” Mo says.

“He’s making a bad decision,” I say as I floss through his body like I did with the photographer.

“STOP,” Mo yells, his mouth flying open, pointed-teeth glinting in the low lights of the horse betting den. “You can not alert him to your presence.”

“I can not do it,’ as in I literally can’t or as in you don’t want me to?”

“There’d be so much paperwork,” Mo mutters with a wag of his snout. “If you continue to try to intervene, I will make it so that this story is not yours.”

That wouldn’t take very much work.

“Mo, this story isn’t mine? This isn’t from my life.”

“It is not your life that is your concern.”

I sigh and shake my head.

“It is precisely my life with which I am concerned.”

“Stop,” Mo says. “Or else.”

I step away from Puy and his shivers stop just as he reaches the front of the line. He collects himself and bets all his money on eight again. I’m starting to think I shouldn’t have told a Spirit to ‘show me everything.’ I’m pretty sure there was an episode of Oprah about something like this, where she said to never let a Spirit take you to a second location. Sorry, Oprah.

We go back to the stands and wait for the next race. We watch the horses zoom through the round.

Number eight loses.

All the horseman’s money is gone.

It’s time to leave Hong Kong.

The Neutral Zone

A gigantic steamship, the *Kobayashi Maru*, has entered the harbour, only serving to emphasize just how small some of the boats people call home really are. Ocean Greyhound meet ancient tubs. Deep black clouds pump out of its paired smokestacks, poisoned air dancing around the harbour.

Puy buys a ticket. Having lost all the horseman's money, Puy must now buy something called a steerage class ticket.

After he buys his ticket, security from the ship inspects his luggage. The security opens Puy's bag. It's fine: multiple suits, underwear, his abacus. Easily cleared. The security opens the other bag he is carrying. It's packed to the brim with dirt. The security rifles through the dirt pulling out pieces of dried fish, dried duck, salted eggs, flowers of some sort, nuts, and yams.

"This can't go to Canada," the security says.

"I'm not going to Canada," Puy says.

"Well, the ship is going to Canada, so that means this bag would be going to Canada, and if this bag were to be on the ship — the ship going to Canada — these items could easily fall into the hands of someone going to Canada. Meaning that these items can't go on the ship."

Puy stares at the security officer.

"So, either you allow me to confiscate these items and dispose of them," says the security officer, "or you can keep them and not board the ship."

"That's ok, you can dispose of them," Puy says. "I'll go on the ship."

The security officer smiles as he places the suitcase of contraband on a table behind him.

“You know, Spirit, I once took bonsais trees seeds across the border, from New York to Toronto. Nobody said a thing,” I say.

“The tree died because you didn’t take care of it,” the Spirit says.

“Oh right, I forgot, you know everything.”

Next, Puy has to be physically evaluated. A doctor inspects his whole body, looking for rashes, then gives him some vaccinations. They look under his eyelids and they inspect his stool. They sterilize the bag he was allowed to keep and finally, he is granted passage on to the ship.

Puy hustles up the gangway. The deck of the ship is filled with dozens of Chinese men huddled together. A noisy bunch, although a nervous apprehension comes across in their movements, stilted and hesitant. Puy surveys the crowd, looking for a familiar face, or at the very least, a friendly one. Other men arriving up the gangway push him aside, knocking Puy into a nearby man with an especially long ponytail that extends down past his butt.

“Hey, watch it,” the ponytail man says.

“I’m sorry,” Puy says as he tightens his grip on his lone suitcase. “I was in the way.”

“No shit you were in the way, you knocked into me,” ponytail man continues, prompting mean chuckles from some of the other men nearby.

The ponytail man looks a little older than Puy, maybe 25, and carries with him a strange air, a sense of belonging and not belonging, and even though he teased Puy, there was a jovial spirit to his words. He wears a pair of pristine white leather gloves, an odd sartorial choice for another sweltering day under the Chinese sun, and a pair of round glasses.

“My name is Shaowei Pu,” the man says extending his hand towards Puy. “I’m from Hong Kong, or should I say Victoria.” Once again, some chuckles are prompted by surrounding men.

“My name is So Ho Puy,” Puy says with a shake of Shaowei’s hand, “I’m from Hoiping.”

“Oh, a southern boy,” Shaowei says. “Not from a real city like me.”

“Heh,” Ping laughs. “No, although I did complete some of my education here in Hong Kong.”

“A learned southern boy! You don’t see that every day, hey fellas?” Shaowei seems to have preternatural abilities to elicit laughter from the other men on the ship. “What’s a well-educated gentleman like you doing searching for Gold Mountain?”

“My mother sent me,” Puy says, with his eyes cast toward the horizon.

Shaowei slaps a hand on Puy’s back.

“We’ve all been there before. Now, me and the fellas here, we’re just telling some jokes here before the ship gets sailing. Now, you’re not too much of a learned gentleman for some jokes are you?”

“Heh, no, I like jokes,” Puy says, blushing.

“Okay here’s another one,” Shaowei starts “so there is a government official who has just transferred to a new department. He’s illiterate. On his first day in the new department, he makes an inaugural speech in the office meeting. He says, ‘Comrades, I come here to be in charge of women’ — Shaowei takes a big pause, leaning in toward his audience — “’s issues!”

Everybody nearby bursts into raucous laughter, even Puy laughs, the first time he’s smiled in a while.

What?

“Mo, uh, what was that? Where was the joke?”

Mo slithers out of a newspaper, passing through the bodies of several men on deck, causing shivers to echo through the crowd.

“Lost in translation, I presume,” Mo says. “I see the humour in it.” His trunk wagged to one side to show me his grotesque smile. “From a Chinese point of view, a man chosen to be the head, or ‘in charge of,’ of a women’s group will become a laughing stock and is considered useless or good for nothing.”

“And that would be extremely funny?” Some of the men on deck are crying from laughter.

“Well, there’s more layers to it than that alone. There is no honour to be a man in charge of women in China. That pause between ‘women’ and its apostrophe? This phonetic device leads the audience to think that the man is in charge of women. Furthermore, when the sentence is considered as a whole, it can also mean, ‘I come here to fool around with women.’

“I... Ok,” I say.

Forget it, let’s move on.

“The joke is especially funny as it involves a government official,” Mo says as he wraps himself around a smokestack. “If you knew their language, this might be funny to you too.”

“Yes, I know,” I say.

“Oh, you know their language now, do you? Then, you won’t mind if I turn the dubbing off,” Mo says.

“No, you know what I mean, leave it on,” I say.

“But there’s just so much lost,” Mo says, as he floats in effervescent figure eights around my head.

Another man in the group is telling a joke now. He’s a little older than Puy or Shaowei, shorter and rounder too.

“So, this woman is fucking her neighbour,”— this elicits a few hoots and hollers from some of the nearby men — “when her husband comes home.” A hushed silence falls over their small audience. “There’s no window for this guy to escape from, so the woman stuffs him in a rice sack and tells him ‘Don’t move!’ Meanwhile, her husband is coming in, sees the rice sack in the bedroom and says, ‘What’s in that?’ His wife’s so scared, she can’t even think of anything to say. So, the husband asks again: ‘What’s in that bag?’ The guy in the bag is so scared, he yells out ‘rice!’”

Once again, the group of ponytailed men is laughing and cavorting, but Puy only offers a slight chuckle at this one, perhaps a polite fake laugh.

“That’s a good one, Gao,” Shaowei says with a drag from a cigarette before casting his eye on Puy. “Hey, Puy, you didn’t find that one funny, huh? What, do you know a better one or something?”

“Well, uh, let me see,” Puy raises a finger to his chin in contemplation. “Okay, uh, I think I know one. There is a husband and wife and the husband is taking a train, err no, wait, the wife is taking a train and, uh, the husband says ‘it’s worthwhile to send you away for three yuan’”

Puy stops as if he has reached his punchline and the nearby men look at him blankly.

“Mo, is something lost in translation again?” I ask.

“No, he is merely not proficient at telling jokes,” Mo says.

“Alright, well,” Shaowei says with a slap on Puy’s shoulder, “that one needs some work, but there’s something in there, I can sense it. We’ll have lots of time over the next three weeks to iron that one out.”

Shaowei pushes Puy aside from the group, as if to talk to him more privately than in front of the crowd. Alas, there is no privacy anywhere on this deck, with men crowding every available inch of space, all waiting for the ship to set sail and to watch the mountain ranges of Hong Kong fade into nothingness as they embark for Gold Mountain.

“Say,” Shaowei says, “where are you headed to anyhow?”

“Newfoundland,” Puy says.

“Hey, me too! I’m sure you’ve surmised that none of us are going to Canada but some of the fellas on this ship are headed to Hawaii.”

“Oh,” Puy says.

“You ever been to the West before?”

“No,” Puy begins but Shaowei almost immediately interrupts him.

“I have,” Shaowei says as he taps his glasses. “San Francisco. Lived there for a couple years. Then I came back to see the family, now I’m gone again.”

“Oh yeah? I’m returning here next year,” Puy says.

Various sailors are preparing the ship to sail, raising its anchors and pulling up the gangway.

“Like a year from now?” Shaowei says.

“Yes,” Puy says.

“That’s optimistic. Half the people on this boat won’t even survive the trip to Canada.”

“What?”

“What do you call a ship like this?” Shaowei says with a wave of his hand, an encompassing gesture that points towards the deck of Chinamen, the fluttering mast and the big pipes emitting coal black steam.

“A steamship?” Puy says, as Shaowei hustles him down a set of stairs leading below the deck.

“No, sir,” Shaowei says as they turn a corner and embark down another set of stairs.

“This is a coffin ship.”

Puy’s eyebrows raise, alarmed, as Shaowei ushers him down another set of steps, deeper and deeper into the ship’s hull.

“Typhoid, cholera, dysentery, the Cuban Itch, you name it, it’s infesting this ship,” Shaowei says, rounding yet another stairwell, wiggling his fingers in his gloves, “that’s why I’ve got these.”

Puy seems bewildered.

“You got a pair of gloves, right?” Shaowei asks.

“Well, uh, no,” Puy says.

“You’ll need them where you’re going, big fella,” Shaowei says as they round the last stairwell and Shaowei opens a door with an extremely loud creak.

It’s a long room, deep in the hull of the ship, with tapered-off and rounded walls. The arm of the mast goes straight through the centre of the room, near a small gate in the ceiling, letting in some light from the deck. A few portholes illuminate the sides of room, but these few

sources of light render the space like a dim dungeon, replete with a couple of rows of bunkbeds against the back wall.

“Welcome to Steerage,” Shaowei says. “And, word of the wise, try not to touch anything down here.”

“What do you mean? This is steerage? This is the ticket I paid for?”

“If you think this is bad, just wait till they make everyone on deck come down here.”

Puy reaches up to massage his temples, deep in thought and regret.

“Hey!” Shaowei says as he knocks Puy’s hands away from his face, “Don’t do that! Don’t touch your face!”

“What?” Puy says, as he takes a step back from Shaowei.

“Didn’t you listen to what I just said? I said, typhoid, cholera, the Cuban Itch. You know how you get those? By being a big dumb idiot and touching your face. So, don’t do it.”

“You’re crazy,” Puy says under his breath.

“Oh, I’m crazy, am I? I’m the crazy one? I’m just warning you, Puy. I’ve been lucky enough to survive this voyage twice. I’ve been unlucky enough to see a lot of people not even survive this voyage once. Now, I see you here in your suit, and your fancy bag, and your hair cut like a white man, and I think ‘there’s another goner. There’s another life gone down the drain. There’s another dumb bitch who’ll pick a bad bunk and get splashed with piss and shit every night till you croak and you have to be thrown overboard.’ So, either listen to me or don’t. But, I’ll be laughing on your grave if you don’t listen.”

Puy grips his chin and follows Shaowei across the dim room.

Shaowei bats Mr. Puy’s hand away from his face.

“Don’t. Touch. Your. Face.”

Shaowei and Puy reach the barren bunks, three layers high with misshapen boards nailed together in a haphazard fashion.

“Okay, I always do that joke telling thing upstairs to break the ice, it gets the crowd going and talking and having a good time above deck, which provides perfect opportunity for me to have the pick of the litter down here.”

Shaowei walks between the bunks, sizing up all the top bunks, feeling them with his gloved hands and occasionally pushing down on some of the boards, testing their weight.

“Alright, they call these ‘silkworm’ something or another. It’s two to a bed. You look pretty clean so you’re bunking with me. We’re gonna want a top bunk, plus we’re gonna want a sturdy one. My first trip across, I took a mid-level bunk. Big mistake. Guys on top of me are peeing and shitting through the slats, guys underneath are drowning in the piss and shit splashing around the floor.”

“Surely, it doesn’t get that bad,” Puy says.

“Oh, it surely does,” Shaowei says as he reaches a bunk that is seemingly to his liking, with boards resistant to his pushing on them.

“My second voyage,” he says, “I thought I’d be smart, pick a top bunk. Well, I ran down here right away. Big mistake, cause a lot of people followed me down. Anyways, I come right over to the bunks, pick the first top bunk I see. A week and a half into the voyage, boom, the boards give out on my bunk, and smack, there I am on the floor. Had to wait for someone to die to get another bunk. Luckily, that didn’t take long.”

“Where is the toilet?” Puy says.

“The toilet? The toilet? Look around you, this whole fucking boat is the toilet and we’re the logs of shit floating down the stream.”

Puy stares at him, waiting for a real response.

“There is no toilet, you dunce. There’s a public bathroom on deck. But if we hit rough tides, and rest assured, we will hit rough tides, they’re not gonna let you go up there and then you gotta piss and shit in one of those,” Shaowei says as points at a bucket like the one that Puy’s donkey used to carry water in. “And let me tell you a little something about rough tides, anything not nailed down to the damn floor will bounce around this hunk of tin. And that bucket is not nailed to the floor, I can assure you of that.”

Puy reaches towards his face, then, thinking better of it, loosens the tie on his shirt and pulls on his collar instead.

“If piss and shit got you feeling overwhelmed, just wait till they start throwing up. Half of what’s upstairs never even seen a boat before. Alright,” Shaowei pauses, “this’ll be our bunk, me and the learned gentleman, up here.”

Shaowei climbs up to the bunk, and Puy follows suit. Shaowei lays back on the bare, unfinished boards, arms crossed behind his head, self-satisfied. Puy sits on the edge of the bunk, once again surveying his surroundings. This was only the beginning of a long journey and the boat hadn’t even left yet. Hell, I’m not even born yet and I feel glum. Glum? Is that a word?

“What’s that room over there?” Puy says, pointing across the room at a pale green door on the other side of the hull. Aside from the stairwell, it’s the only place down here that isn’t open space.

“Don’t get me started on that,” Shaowei says, rolling over to one side. “Just take a deep breath, enjoy the air while you can.”

“What’s in there?” Puy says.

Shaowei rolls his eyes as he moves his lips into an O-shape and blows. Puy looks at him and then back at the door.

“Women of the night?” Mr. Puy says.

“What?” says Shaowei, sitting up, “No, there’s no women here. None of our women anyways. No, that’s an opium den.”

Puy stares at the pale green door.

“You don’t do that, do you?” Shaowei says.

“Oh,” Puy says, “no.”

“Good. Think of all the germs on the pipe.”

Puy doesn’t say anything.

“You know what?” Shaowei says, “I’ll let you in on a little secret. I used to run an opium den back in San Francisco. Yeah, I lost my job at the fish plant cause of this thing called the Iron Chink. That’s really what it was called. The white man made a machine to replace us and had the gall to call it the Iron Chink. They’d rather have fucking robots than...” “Shaowei takes a deep breath in an effort to calm himself. “Anyways, a guy’s gotta make money somehow, so me and my pal Leong Gor Yun, we opened up this opium den, see? But, it wasn’t really an opium den. It was just a place we opened up in Chinatown to give the space some colour, something to impress the white tourists. They would come in and pay us to smoke opium. Bunch of dumb whites, the only thing they were breathing in was flavoured steam.”

Shaowei lets out a hearty laugh but Puy doesn't seem as impressed. When Shaowei stops laughing, he leans in closer to Puy and says "Hey, I don't do the stuff. I never even heard of it before I went to the States. You know who brought opium to the States? It sure as hell wasn't Chinamen, although that's what they'll have you believe. No, Christopher Columbus brought Opium to the States. You know who that is?"

Puy shakes his head no.

"Chris Columbus was the first White man in the United States, and he was the one that brought the opium there. And yet, you'll see when you get there, they think it was us. All the whites think we brought opium to the West. They want people to believe that there's an opium den behind every laundry. They want people to believe we're corrupting society. You know why?" Shaowei doesn't even give Puy a chance to respond. "It lets them force us out. Exclude us. Separate us from our women and children. They want people to believe that white women will become enslaved to us because of opium. Ha. I wish. And you know what else? If it wasn't the opium, it would be something else. They say we steal jobs, they'll say we're rapists and murderers, they'll say we bring viruses."

With the boat beginning to set sail, more and more people are streaming down the stairs into the small steerage compartment, the door to steerage seeming to creak louder every time it swings open.

"And in a week from now, we'll be saying maybe they're right. In a week from now, we'll be praying we survive. In a week from now, you'll wish you could be anything but yourself. Maybe they are right. Maybe we are celestial scum, coming to corrupt their land. But, I bet

if you packed a bunch of whites into a space like this, the same thing would happen. The same thing would happen tenfold.”

Puy sits on the edge of the bunk, trying to process the information overload from Shaowei.

“So, what are you doing anyways?” Shaowei asks.

“What?” Puy responds, his voice softer than usual.

“In the West?” Shaowei says, looking at Ping as if he might be disabled. “What brings you to Gold Mountain?”

“Oh,” Puy says. “My Uncle. My Uncle’s laundry. I’m going to work there.”

“Typical,” Shaowei says. “Me too though. Which laundry?”

“Fong-Li Laundry,” Puy says.

“No way,” Shaowei says, excited. “On the corner of Holdsworth and New Gower?”

“Uh,” Puy says, confused. “I think so.”

“Me too,” Shaowei exclaims. “We’re gonna be seeing a lot more of each other! For years to come!”

“I’m only going for one year,” Puy says.

“Oh, right,” Shaowei says with a laugh as he lies down on the bunk again. “That’s what they all say.”

Puy sits on the edge of the bunk, watching his fellow immigrants cascade into steerage. What’s he thinking? Who am I to say. But, I think I know how he feels, just from the look of fearful trepidation in his eyes. As more and more people push and shove their way into this room deep in the ship’s hull, it must’ve really hit home that this is only the beginning.

“Seems like things can only get worse from here, hey, Mo?” I like to tell it like it is.

Mo slithers around my legs, his body emerging from a radio that one of Puy’s fellow immigrants is fiddling with, snout wagging all the while and says, “You’ll be joining them on this full journey. No more time jumps till we reach your home.”

“What? You’re making me stay on this boat with them? For how long?”

“You’ll see. Unlike them, you’re free to roam.”

I sit on the edge of the bed next to Mr. Puy. He couldn’t see me of course, but I could see him. I could always see him.

“Mo, I think I’d like to go home.”

“Now you know what he’s thinking,” Mo said with a point of his snout towards Puy.

“Mo, please,” I say. “I really mean it. I don’t want to be on this boat.”

“How do you think he feels?” Mo says.

“Yeah, but, like, I’m not from this time. I don’t have to do this sort of stuff, you know?”

Mo’s eyes light up as if on fire and his body grows larger and larger, until he completely fills the cavernous space that is steerage.

“I am sick of your constant buffoonery and I will not sanction this privileged outlook of yours,” Mo yells. “It has no place in this narrative.”

I swallow, unsure of what will happen next.

“I am revoking your first-person narrator privileges,” Mo says as I blip out of existence.

Steerage

This is how steerage was.

Endless days, passing slowly, melting, one into another, impossible to distinguish one day from the next. A redolent malaise. A festering smell, a sloshing vessel of unease and weariness. Hungry days, sleepless nights. The feeling of being in prison, of knowing you'll be seeing the same people for weeks, that even when the boat docks, you'll still be seeing the same people for weeks because most of you are going to the same place. The feeling that this ride is a long one, a dark one, an unpleasant one.

Cliques formed fast and conversations became recursive among them, addressing the same topics over and over until the stories began to take on notable differences, small details that morph and change with every re-telling, barely perceptible facets, melting and fading away as if the tides themselves were pulling and pushing these stories.

Shaowei often spoke of Western culture, trying to prime the others for what they'll experience there.

"Yeah, this boat, this boat is the West. Gold Mountain is a fuck. You see where we are, here?" Shaowei looked around the small table that he and Puy and some of the others are gathered around. It was the only table in steerage and time spent sat at it was sacred.

"They'll push you down, down as far as you can go, they'll push so you're beneath everyone and everything. You wanna learn English? Don't look to the white man for help. There's only one thing they want and that's these —" Shaowei flourished his gloved fingers.

“Gloves?” a chubbier Chinese man said. Hungzi Gao is his name and he’d been hanging around Puy and Shaowei ever since they first met telling jokes on deck.

“No, Gao, your hands. Your labour. And you’ll give it to them too. You all will. Me too. Cause what the fuck else are you gonna do?”

“I’m sure it’s not as bad as you say it is,” Gao said while he scratches his receding hair-line, the remaining hair braided into a ponytail like Shaowei’s.

“Oh, yeah? Just you wait.”

“Hey,” a taller moustached Chinese man approached the table, “you lot have had enough time at the table. Move”

Mr. Puy and his group of comrades gathered their few belongings, empty bowls, cups, and staggered back towards their bunks. A rough day on the water. When it’s rough on the water, no one’s allowed out of steerage. It’s too dangerous to be on deck and there’s nowhere else they’re entitled to go.

“Okay, so like I was saying...”

Shaowei was starting in again, now that his group was settled in their bunks. The bunks is where they spent most of their time, both awake and asleep. Although Puy was at first uncomfortable sleeping next to a stranger, he had found that sleeping next to Shaowei had been mostly fine, although he noted that Shaowei was a light sleeper, often getting up and leaving his bunk all hours of the night. Puy often found himself awake anyways, sleepless nights spent thinking of how if he didn’t waste his money at the horse track, he could be sleeping in nice rooms, eating nice meals. The regret that kept him awake for days.

“The white man is not gonna teach you English, that just ain’t gonna happen. So, let me tell you everything you need to know about being able to speak English, okay? You’ll never learn a lesson more valuable than this, okay? The learned gentleman over here —” Shaowei playfully punches Puy’s shoulder, “— he’d take six months to a year to teach you what I’m about to tell you. And you gotta promise not to tell anyone else, okay? We gotta look out for each other. I’m looking out for you guys by telling you this, okay? And if everybody on this ship knew what I’m about to tell you, and they knew how to use this, *this* being what it is I’m about to tell you, it would be very bad. Very bad. The white man would figure out what we’re doing and then it’d be dunzo. They’d put it in their fucking papers, that’s how bad it would be. Front page news—“

“What are you even talking about, man?” Gao said.

“I’m getting around to that, I’m getting there. Okay, so this is the one thing you need to know in English,” Shaowei paused and leaned in, gesturing with his hands for the other guys to lean in too, and then in a whisper, barely audible over the noise of all the other men in the room, the words in choppy English: “It’s always the way.”

Shaowei leaned back with a big smile, stretching out his arms in triumph, before placing them behind his head. “That’s it boys, that’s all you need to know. ‘It’s always the way.’”

“What does that even mean?” Gao asked.

“It means everything,” Shaowei said. “Everything. Anytime someone says something to you in English, the only thing you have to say back to them and I mean the ONLY thing you have to say back to them, is ‘it’s always the way’.”

“What do the words mean in our language?” Gao said.

“It’s always the way. Meaning, like, ‘things always happen that way,’ or ‘that’s just the way it is’ sort of thing. It’s always the way. Just say it back to them in the same tone that they just used and it works. It can buy you more time to think of another response.”

The men sat around thinking about this and nobody really said anything.

“Okay, like, for example, and you boys’ll be thanking me for this in the long run, like, uh, ‘there’s no rice left,’ then you say back to them ‘it’s always the way.’”

“White people will ask you for rice?”

“I mean, it’s not impossible. Okay, maybe a white person will say something like “some-one ate all the plums,’ well fuck, maybe you’re the one that ate the plums and well fuck, you don’t even know what the word for plum is in English. Now you’re fucked right? Wrong. You just say to them, in the same tone they used, ‘it’s always the way.’”

Again, no one said anything.

“Look, these abstracts, these hypotheticals, they might not amount to much now, but a day will come when you’re over there in WhiteWorld and you’ll think to yourself, ‘Wow, I’m really glad Shaowei told me that information, this must be the best kept secret in the English language.’”

Splash! The boat hit a particularly rough patch of water and the chamberpots flipped over. No one reacted much, for this happened fairly often. The chamber pots would knock over and the piss and shit and vomit would splash around.

It’s always the way.

Soon, the men from upstairs would bring down a big pot of rice for everyone to eat. That was all the food they were ever served, some rice, scraps of fish, maybe some stew leftover from the better cuts of meat reserved for the first and second-class passengers.

“Consider yourself lucky you’re eating this,” Shaowei said to Puy early on, “at least we get real Chinese food. Upstairs is nothing but white people food.” Shaowei pantomimed vomiting, pulling and contacting his stomach in the same way a cat does when it has a fur ball.

In steerage, you could barely get a cup of water. The men would have to line up at certain times of day just to drink water and, once a day in the evening, a big bucket of hot water would be brought down for everyone to clean their bowl. You were expected to bring your own mug and bowl. Puy was lucky that Shaowei packed extra. He was prepared.

Weeks passed, the cliques got tighter. Shaowei, Puy and Gao became inseparable. They would pass the time together, sometimes in silence, sometimes with efforts to distract each other. Sometimes they would play mahjong with pieces that Gao had brought with him. Other times, Gao would sing them a song, with a voice so deep and so baritone that it almost sounded as if he swallowed the ship’s foghorn:

“I endured the separation from my mother.

Drifting on a voyage of thousands of miles,

I reached the Flowery Flag Nation to take my chances.

Sorrow is to be so far away from home.”

“Gao, this is too depressing,” Shaowei said.

The thing they did most of all to pass the time was talk. Talk about everything and anything, talk, talk, talk. Women they slept with, women they wanted to sleep with, books they had read, stories

they heard, things that happened to them in the past, things they hoped would happen to them in the future. They even talked about religion.

“Okay, so in the West, everyone believes in Jesus,” Shaowei explained. “They’ll try to make you believe in Jesus too. Certain groups of whites, that’s what they love to do, try to teach us about Jesus. You might as well do it. Even if you don’t believe in Jesus, just tell them you do and they’ll back off.”

Gao and Puy nodded. At a certain point, it became pointless to even say anything to Shaowei because he was just going to keep going whether you agreed with him or not.

“Every Sunday, all the Whites will put on their best clothes and go to a fancy building to listen to one special white talk about Jesus. They call these churches and priests and whatever. You’ll get the hang of it when you’re there. Now, if you’re working at the laundromat, this is the big day. You’ll have this day off, the weekly Jesus day, but you’ll also have to work hard before that day to make sure that the White’s clothes are real clean for that day, okay? And sometimes on the afternoon of that day, concerned Whites will come to where you live to tell you about Jesus. Like I said, just listen to them and nod along and agree to believe in it. That’s all they want. If they come around enough, they’ll ask you to go to the Jesus building with them. Now, you won’t get to go there at the same time as the whites, no. But, they’ll set aside a time for the Chinese to go. You’ll hate this, but they make the Japanese go at that time too. And the Blacks and the Indians. That’s right, we Chinese don’t even get a special time to go to the church. But, go anyways. You don’t always have to go, but I’d advise to go occasionally. When White people think you believe in Jesus, they like you more. Okay? They won’t think you’re making the

women smoke opium. Well, some of them will still think that. Just don't get too close to the women. Carry around a bible or something. That's the book of Jesus stories."

Puy and Gao were nodding off to sleep.

"And let me tell you something else about Jesus, something you will never find in that book, something the Whites will never tell you. But, Jesus, okay, they think he's the son of God, right? But let me tell you something about Jesus that they don't even know. So, the story begins when Jesus is born right? And there's a whole to-do about it with barnyard animals and gifts and stuff and that's a really big deal to them, you'll see about that. But anyways, the story begins with Jesus' birth and then next chapter, boom, Jesus is thirty-something. They don't tell you what happened in those thirty years in between. I'll tell you what happened. When Jesus was old enough, I think probably around our age now, maybe a little younger, he started walking and he kept walking. He walked for days and nights. And eventually, he walks into this big gated community and he meets a guy under a tree. And this guy, he starts telling Jesus all of this knowledge, kind of like what I do with you guys, right? Tells him all about the right way to do things, and tells him to not be attached to things or to desire shit, and this guy, he even teaches Jesus how to stand right, and how to pose, y'know, put this hand flat like this and take your other hand and lift up your robe, that type of shit. Anyways, Jesus hangs around this guy for months, becomes a student of his, really, then he walks back home, with all this knowledge right?

"And when Jesus gets back home, he starts teaching this stuff to whoever will listen. Now, Jesus, he's smart, he figures he can change a few words here, a few words there, add a little bit of his own thoughts, and then he passes off all this stuff the other guy taught him as his own, as if Jesus came up with it all himself. Jesus, he's smart, he knows no one is going to walk to

fucking India and that India guy isn't going to walk to Jerusalem or Rome or wherever. And even if someone did, he'd just go to his Dad anyways. So, Jesus, he starts teaching this stuff, and soon he has 12 followers, and then those 12 followers, they start teaching these lessons to their own followers right? So, let's say the original 12 followers, each of them gain another 12 followers, right, respectively, and that's how it grew. And somewhere in that time period, Jesus got killed or something, the Whites will tell you all about that. But anyways, you know who that guy was, the guy that taught Jesus everything?"

Puy and Gao say nothing. Gao is asleep but Puy is just too tired to talk. He's used to eating more food than this.

"The man that taught Jesus everything, and I mean everything, that man's name was... Siddhartha Gautama. Better known as... the Buddha!"

Shaowei had expected a big reaction to this reveal, he was leaned all the way into his audience of two and a big smile was on his face. After realizing that Puy and Gao aren't going to react, Shaowei leaned back in his chair.

"The fucking Buddha. Taught Jesus everything. Don't tell the whites about that though. Don't even ask them about it. Don't even say the word 'buddha' in the presence of a white." Shaowei looked unimpressed and he leaned back further in his chair. One gloved-hand reached up as if to stroke his moustache, but he caught himself in the act, staring at his fingers in disbelief. "Hell, I probably shouldn't have even told you guys that. You weren't ready for it yet. It's always the way."

Puy and Gao still sat there groggy.

"Hey, Puy, what's the matter?"

Puy struggled to speak, his voice was hoarse and he had the appearance of weakness.

“This isn’t enough food... or water. I... we... need more.”

“Hey, if you think this isn’t enough, just wait till you get where we’re going.”

“I... need... more water.”

The voyage was to end in the coming days and it had become a trying time for all.

Shaowei observed the room. All throughout steerage, men were huddled together like animals, shivering in terror at the motion of the water, croaking hoarsely in the patois of their villages, mumbling prayers at impromptu shrines. Some passengers were already dead, their bodies thrown overboard, their absence felt in the suddenly larger bunks of their bunkmates. Unlike the others, Shaowei was in fair health, the motion of the water didn’t bother him and he seemed like he got by just fine on what little rations they were provided. Shaowei laid down in the bunk next to Puy.

“You got a fever?” he asked Puy.

After a moment, Puy said “I don’t think so.”

“I’d check but I’m not going to take my gloves off.”

Puy said nothing, shivering.

“Hey, don’t you die on me now. Imagine if Jesus just dropped dead right after Buddha taught him all that shit. Wouldn’t be very good would it?”

Puy shakes his head no.

“That’s right,” Shaowei said. “Better off to not die.”

Shaowei rolled closer to Puy, his mouth inches away from Puy’s ear, so close that Puy could feel the miasma coming from Shaowei’s mouth.

“There’s a secret to why I thrive while the rest of you fellas don’t,” Shaowei said as quietly as possible into Puy’s ear. “Can you still walk?”

“I think so,” Puy said at full volume.

“Ay, quiet down!” Shaowei whispered. “I’ll get you all fixed up, okay? I got a plan.”

For a couple hours, Shaowei just lay there next to a semi-conscious Puy, his hands clenched over his stomach. Seasick, or maybe hungry, or maybe dehydrated, or maybe something worse. Shaowei lay awake staring at the ceiling and occasionally lifted his head to survey the room. It was the middle of the night when Shaowei arose again fully, moonlight drifting in through the hatches in the ceiling, casting the room into bluish white light. Shaowei once again puts his mouth close to Puy’s ear.

“Hey,” he whispered, eyes darting back and forth, looking to see if anyone is watching.

“Can you walk?”

“Unh,” Puy said, disturbed from his restless bouts of drifting in and out of consciousness.

“What?”

“Quiet!” Shaowei said fast in a hoarse whisper. “Can you or can you not walk?”

“I think I can,” Puy said.

“Okay, we’ll get you some help,” Shaowei said, helping Puy down from the top bunk.

“But you gotta be quiet as shit, okay?”

“Mmm” Puy said, still half in dream land.

Shaowei and Puy walked across the room in a quiet and deliberate manner, making sure to avoid the rolling chambers pots and their capsized puddles. When the two men reached the door to go upstairs, it was locked.

“Where are you taking me?” Puy asked as he rubs his eyes.

“Shhh!” Shaowei said. “Don’t touch your face.”

Shaowei took his glasses off and removed the rubber tip from the end of one arm. The exposed tip of the arm was a mangled piece of metal, with a series of bumps and jagged edges. Shaowei inserted the glasses’ arm into the lock, jiggled it up and down for a few seconds and turned the arm as if it were the key.

Pop!

Shaowei slowly pushed the door open, careful to not make too much noise with the creaky hinges. He held the door open and motioned for Puy to walk through the doorway, flicking his hand in a series of quick waves. Puy walked in and Shaowei carefully closed the door, removing his glasses from the keyhole and putting them back on.

Puy looked at Shaowei and Shaowei grinned back.

“It’s always the way,” he whispered.

Shaowei led the way upstairs, crouching down and moving with a slow deliberate pace, stopping often to peek upstairs. It was darker in the stairwell than it was in steerage, with the only lighting being provided from a small window in the door at the top. Once they were about halfway up the stairs and Shaowei was sure they were on the enclosed stairwell alone, he began to tell Puy his plan.

“Okay, here’s what we’re gonna do: we’ll get you some water. We’re gonna go upstairs, cross the deck, go into the First Class dining room and get some water, maybe a snack. You won’t want to eat too much from there anyways, it’s garbage stuff. Western food, it would make you sick on a regular day, let alone while you’re like this.”

Shaowei paused and eyed up Puy. Puy still looked unwell. His movements were staggered, possibly due to the rollicking seas, possibly due to the conditions of steerage.

“So, we’re gonna get you some water, some fresh air, but, listen,” Shaowei continued, “you gotta do as I say at all times and I mean it. You gotta keep up the pace with me too. If we get caught, I don’t know what they’ll do to us and I’d prefer to not have to find out. Now, listen, I do this every night, and it’s the only thing that keeps me going, keeps me thinking clearly. But I swear, if you get us caught, if you fuck this up for me, I’m kicking you out of the bunk and you won’t be one of my disciples anym—“

A loud creaking noise from the top of the stairwell made Shaowei stop talking and with a hush, he raised a finger to his lips. Puy’s mouth lolls open and Shaowei quickly hushes him with a finger to his mouth as well. Puy bats his hand away and backed up a little as if to say, ‘I thought we don’t touch faces.’

Shaowei peeked up the stairwell again, holding his breath. He ascended a couple steps to get a better look up the dark, cavernous stairs. He waited there for a moment and then motioned for Puy to come up the stairs with him. When they reached the door at the top, Shaowei stood up from his crouch to take a quick glance out the door’s porthole. There was a full moon in the sky and no one visibly on deck. Shaowei crouched back down next to Puy.

“There’s a night guard out there somewhere. I’ll sneak out there first, figure out where he is, then come right back to tell you what to do.”

Shaowei pushed down on the door’s release handle until it — pop — opens enough for him to slide out, then shut it again, leaving Puy ensconced in the shadows behind the door. His

fingers gripped his stomach. The moon shined through the porthole, its light beaming in, casting a tubular shape of white light across the floor and into the abyss between the dark sets of stairs.

The door handle slowly began to move and Puy's eyes widened. What if it isn't Shaowei? What if Shaowei was caught? The door opened a crack and Puy let out a heavy exhale.

Shaowei paused when he saw the expression in Puy's eyes.

"You look like you've seen a ghost," Shaowei said.

"I didn't know if that would be you or not," Puy said.

Shaowei didn't say anything for a moment, thinking.

"Okay, so the night guard is out there, he just walks around the perimeter of the upper deck, he walks through where the first and second-class cabins are, and he walks through their dining hall. Sometimes he takes a little snooze on a stool outside of the cabins, near where they steer the ship. Anyways, most of that shit doesn't matter to us, because all we're doing is crossing the deck, then taking the stairs down to the upper classes' dining hall. We're not going by the cabins, we're not going by the captain's quarters, we're going to get a drink of water and come right back. We'll go out on the deck, hide behind some barrels, wait to see the night guard, figure out which direction he's walking and then time it from there. Got it?"

Puy nods again and says, "What should we do if he sees us?"

"I got a plan for that, don't worry. But, if that does happen, we should stop moving and hope he don't see us. He's got a big whistle. If he sees us sneaking around, he'll blow that whistle and then we're done for."

Puy looked surprised.

"Wait, what?" said Puy. "What if he sees us and we stop moving and he can still see us?"

“You know why cats hate rats?”

“What?”

“All the zodiac animals were on a boat together, and you know what the rat did? The Rat pushed the Cat overboard. Then, that was it for the Cat. That’s why the Cat isn’t on the zodiac, he never even got a chance to be a zodiac animal because he wasn’t on the boat.”

“I asked if you had a plan for if the man sees us.”

“Well, the moral of the story is, you better hope you’re the rat. You better hope you’re close enough to him to push him overboard. Even that might not be enough to stop us from being found out.”

Puy grabbed Shaowei by the arm and said, “You can’t be serious. What if we kill him?”

“Eh, a sailor should know how to swim. It’s us versus them, rats versus cats. And let’s be clear, if it comes to that, it’s him or us, and it’s most likely gonna be us anyways even if we do push him overboard. You think one of those men rotting away down in steerage wouldn’t rat on us in a heartbeat? The only reason they haven’t already done it is because they probably think we’re off fucking each other somewhere.”

Puy looked completely dumbfounded.

“Are you in or out?” Shaowei asked. “We haven’t gone so far that you can’t just go back downstairs to bed. You can go back to bed, back to being hungry and thirsty, back to breathing in that putrid air, back to whispering prayers that you’ll ever make it out of this coffin alive.”

Puy said nothing.

“As for me, I’m gonna keep going. I know what’s good for me and I know how to get what I want. So, you’re either in or out.” Shaowei once again quietly pushed on the door handle

and let himself out of the stairwell, exposing himself to the fresh air of the deck and the possible eye of the night guard.

Puy stopped for a moment and thought about going back to bed. With a slight shrug, he slid into the cold, salty air of the open deck. He's completely exposed. Aside from the light of the moon, it's hard to see anything out here. No night guard. No Shaowei. He could see nothing but a couple of barrels and behind the barrels, crouched perilously close to the edge of the deck was Shaowei.

Puy and Shaowei stayed crouched behind the barrels for some time, listening to the sounds of gulls and water splashing. Many creaks echoed through the air and Puy realized that the ship had a dialect of its own on the water.

It felt like hours passed between when they crouched behind the barrels and when they first saw the night watchman. He emerged from a door on the other side of the deck — “A good sign,” Shaowei whispered — and he was dressed like a policeman, with a blue brimmed cap and a long blue trench coat. A whistle bounced around his chest and a night stick holstered on his hip. He whistled a tune and the sounds of it echoed through the sea air. After staring out at the water for some time, the night guard went up a set of stairs on deck and entered into another door.

“Okay,” Shaowei said. “Now is our time. Keep up.”

Shaowei, remaining crouched, hustled across the deck into the doorway they saw the night watchman emerge from. He pushed the handle down fast, causing a loud creak and swings the door open, holding onto it tight so that it doesn't slam into the wall. Puy ran through the door and Shaowei slowly closed it behind him. After taking a moment to catch their breath, Shaowei

led the way down the dark stairs. Although it was just as dark, these stairs were clearly cleaner than the stairs to steerage, based on the scent alone.

After heading down a couple flights in the dark, Shaowei paused and put a hand on Puy's chest to indicate that he too should pause. Shaowei began touching and feeling the wall in front of him, until he found a handle hidden in the dark. They had found the dining hall.

This room was entirely distinct from the rest of the ship. Illuminated by candles in holders sticking out from the walls, Puy could see just how much better the other classes dined. The floors were carpeted and the red velvet-y fabric extended up the walls, punctuated by huge port-hole windows that gave an excellent view of the sea and the horizon. A seemingly limitless number of ornate, sturdy wooden chairs and huge, round dinner tables adorned with pristine white tablecloths crowded the room.

Shaowei grabbed a corner of one of the tablecloths and said, "Let me tell you, you're gonna be seeing a lot of these."

Shaowei led the way through the series of tables and chairs to a room in the back that was separated from the dining room by a high marble counter. Behind the counter stood two large, long, rectangular tables, featuring dozens of silver trays with floral patterns carved into their edges. Shaowei walked between the two tables stopping occasionally to lift a tray lid to look at what was inside. One tray simply had globs of butter, the next had a big hunk of prime rib, cut open to reveal a still pink interior. The next tray had a partially sliced honey ham, the sauce glazed on the meat oozing onto the tray.

"They just leave this here all night?" Puy asked.

“Yeah, the other classes can eat whenever they please,” Shaowei responded as he opens up another tray. There was nothing inside this one but a bed of spinach leaves. “Oh, you should see what goes in here. Water first.”

At the end of the two tables were two big vats of fresh water, with a little spout to dispense the water into cups. Next to the vats was a table lined with water cups and a pyramid of empty champagne coupes.

“Seems unwise, right?” Shaowei said as he poured a glass of water for Puy.

Puy nodded as he drank the fresh water.

“I’m not sure what they do with these glasses,” Shaowei said as he picked up the coupe at the top of the pyramid. “They’re so wide, you’re bound to spill a glass like that.”

Shaowei put the coupe down and poured up a glass of water for himself before he rested for a moment next to the vats of water, idly opening a tray. Inside were big spherical pieces of bread, with ornate patterns in their crust.

“Look at this,” he said as he took off his gloves. His hands were pristine and smooth and even in the low light the candles provided, his hands glistened, maybe with sweat, maybe as a sign of their cleanliness. Shaowei ripped open the round bread. Inside is a big steak. Beef Wellington.

“White people are crazy,” Shaowei said. “Big steak like that hidden inside bread. You have to get used to these kinds of tricks in the West.”

The men stood there, drinking the water, taking in the upper classes’ luxe backdrop.

“What’s in there?” Puy pointed toward the walled-off darkened area behind Shaowei.

“Oh, that’s just where they cook the food. Stoves and ovens and such. It wraps around to the other side of the tray table there.”

Shaowei tore off a piece of the beef and nibbled on it, before ripping off another piece and giving it to Puy.

“I thought you said don’t touch anything,” Puy says as Shaowei drops the piece of beef into his mouth.

“Gloves. I’ve never touched anything,” Shaowei says as Puy reaches out for the beef. “You on the other hand...” A roll of his eyes. Another torn piece of meat.

It went on like this until the beef was gone.

“We can’t stay for long,” Shaowei said as he wiped some crumbs off his hands. “It’s only a matter of time before the watchman comes back.”

Puy nodded, resigned, before helping himself to his feet. They snuck back out of the dining area, past the tables, and back to the darkened stairwell leading to the deck. They crept up the stairs, one by one, guided only by the light of the porthole, casting shadows down the dark passageway. When they reached the top landing, Shaowei motioned to Puy to stay crouched as he peeked through the window.

“Oh shit, oh fuck,” Shaowei said, both hands gripping the porthole window.

“What? What’s going on?”

“Did you leave the fucking door open? The one back down to steerage?”

“I don’t know, why?”

“The fucking night guard is over there now, looking at the open door,” Shaowei said, as he crouched back down behind the door.

“Oh my god, will he go down there?”

“Yes, yes, he will go down there. He’ll go down there and he’ll see we aren’t in our bunks and then we’re fucking goners—“

“Okay, what do we do?” Puy asked, his voice wavering.

“Jump overboard. Swim back home.”

“I thought you said you had a plan if this happens!”

“That’s the plan, that’s it,” Shaowei said in a hoarse whisper.

“We’re too far to swim home!”

“Okay, let me think,” Shaowei said, closing his eyes. “Just let me think, dammit!”

Shaowei placed his fingers on his temples and hunched over.

“Fuck, okay, we have to act fast. Run back down to the kitchen area. We’re gonna have to lure him down there and sneak back to steerage.”

“How—“

“Just run, dammit!”

Puy ran down the stairs as fast as he could and Shaowei kicked open the door at the top of the stairwell with a loud clang before running to catch up with Puy.

“You should be running faster than this,” Shaowei said.

“I’m tired,” Puy said.

“You better not be tired when we run back to steerage.”

The two men arrived in the dining room area and the sounds of the night guard coming down the stairs echoed through into the lush red velvet interior, the classy-looking walls now taking on an air of foreboding menace.

“What do we do? Why didn’t he blow the whistle?” Puy said.

“I don’t know, just hide under a table and hope he doesn’t find us,” Shaowei said as he crawls under one of the dining table’s lengthy white tablecloths.

Puy took one look at the table and one look at the kitchen area.

“I have an idea,” Puy said as he ran towards the kitchen, the footsteps of the night watchman growing louder until they stopped with a definite thud, a sign that he must have reached the carpeted interior of the dining room. Puy crouched down by the trays of food, listening for any sign of the watchman and moving quickly towards the tray closest to the vats of water. He reached his hand up and moved the top of the tray as quietly as possible. He succeeded in moving the tray just enough to be able to grab a Beef Wellington, but when he pulled the Wellington out of the tray, the Wellington’s spherical sides knocked the top of the tray off the plate with a loud piercing clank off the floor.

“Hey!” a loud, husky British voice calls out.

Puy crawled into the darkened food prep area that Shaowei had pointed out only minutes before. Puy couldn’t see anything as he navigated through the darkness and he collided into a glass wall. He could hear a faint sloshing after the collision.

“Ay, mate, wherever you are, just come out,” the watchman calls out as he lightly taps his baton against the buffet tables. “I promises we won’t go that hard on ya’s.”

Puy rested his head upon the cold glass for a moment, trying to time his departure from this area just right. CLUNK. Something hit the glass. Puy recoiled but remained silent. A lobster claw was faintly visible through the dirty glass wall. A lobster tank.

Puy crawled out of the other entrance to the food prep area and could see the watchman near the vats of water. Puy moved, as fast as he could while crouched, across the carpet to the table that he thought Shaowei was under. He lifted the cloth.

No Shaowei.

He lifted another cloth.

No Shaowei.

Puy took a couple frantic glances around the tables surrounding him. Nothing but wooden legs and blood-red carpet. He crawls towards the door to the stairwell. Just as he reached the door, he stood up and lobbed the Beef Wellington towards the pyramid of champagne coupes.

SMASH.

The glasses exploded into millions of tiny shards, sparkling as they flew through the air. Other glasses just fell straight to the table beneath them, shattering other coupes on the way down.

“Jesus blarney,” the night guard called out as the back of his neck was sprayed with minuscules shards of glass.

Puy ran up the stairs as fast as he could, as fast as he’s ever run he thought, swinging open the door at the top of the stairs, running, running across the deck, a mist of salt water spray in the air, running through the steerage stairway door, once again leaving it open, running down the stairs so fast, right up to the locked door. He tried the handle and to his surprise, it was open.

“Get back in the bunk, quietly.” Shaowei was crouched nearby, with the lock pick arm of his glasses at the ready.

Puy moved with stealth and speed across the room, watching out for the rolling chamber pots, the puddles of spittle. He climbed back into his bunk and peeked back at the door. Shaowei was still fiddling with the lock until a —POP— echoes through the steerage chamber and Shaowei put his glasses back on.

BAM! Something slammed into the door. Despite the forcefulness of the slam, the door didn't budge. Must be the night watchman. Must've thought the door would be unlocked. Must've ran right into it.

Shaowei climbed into the bunk with Puy, out of breath.

"I didn't think I'd see you again," Shaowei huffed out.

"Why weren't you under the tables?" Puy said as the watchman noisily fluttered with keys outside the door.

"Shut up or he'll know it was us," Shaowei said with a terse tone, eyes already closed eyes, pretending to sleep.

Puy waited a beat but couldn't resist:

"I threw one of those steaks wrapped with bread through the stack of glasses."

Shaowei rolled over and mouthed: "No way!"

POP.

The door creaks open wide and the confident footsteps of the night watchman stride across the wooden floor.

"Aight, you lot," the night watchman called out. "I know none of you Chinamen can understand me, but wot I'm about to say is important."

The night watchman took another step forward and looked around the room. He looked up at the moonlight pouring in through the gate. He looked at the dozens of men crammed together in small wooden bunks. He looked at the filth, the uncleanness. He looked down at his boots, the toes of his right foot submerged in a mystery puddle. He took a couple quick breaths through his nostrils. His stomach blew out and his cheeks filled up in quick succession, followed by a splat across the floor, stomach acid sprayed onto his shiny black boots.

His left hand reached out to the leg of one of the bunks to hold on to for support. His right hand took out his baton as he wiped his mouth on his shoulder.

“Okay, listen, I don’t know which of youse was just upstairs, messing around in the other cabins, but we can’t have none of your unhygienic business goings on upstairs, okay?”

He smacked his baton off the leg of another bunk in an effort to wake everyone up.

“Ay, I’m talking here, you gots to listen when the men in charge are talking,” he said as he walks into the centre of the bunks. “Ay, wake up,” he said in a more quiet tone.

“Alright, listen,” he said, knocking his bannister off the bunks around him. “Everybody.”

“I,” he said, loud, gesturing to himself with both of his hands, “can’t have,” he said as he waves his arms in an X-motion in front of him, “nun of dis,” his gestures widened, outstretching his arms and making circles with both of his hands, “upstairs,” he pointed up with both his arms. He then put his arms down and raised his eyebrows, looking at the awakened faces around him.

“Okay,” he said as does his pantomimes again, “nun. And if I catches one of you upstairs, you’ll be made to walk the plank.” The night watchman held up his baton horizontally and walked two of his fingers across it, before making the two fingers jump off the edge. The night watchman rotated as he did this.

Nobody said anything.

The night-watchman exhales and then, under his breath, “Chinks.”

Puy watched all this from his bunk. The night-watchman walked back across the room and once the door locked —POP— Puy let out a deep breath.

They were safe. Puy breathed in through his nostrils and realized that the putrid stench of steerage only became stronger now that he had returned from upstairs. The stench of 200 men huddled together in small bunks, sweat intermingling, spilt human waste, uncleaned bowls and plates because the water doesn’t stay hot for long enough for everyone to clean their dishes. The stench of death, the coffin ship.

Puy and Shaowei laid low for the next few days, it having become too risky for Shaowei to make his nightly expedition to the other classes’ dining hall. Four nights later, Shaowei and Puy snuck out again, and yet when they arrived at the doorway across the deck, they found that the door was locked and there was a sign that read:

DINING HALL CLOSED IN THE EVENING DUE TO ROUGH SEAS. PLEASE
CONTACT THE NIGHT CONCIERGE FOR ANY FOOD OR BEVERAGE INQUIRIES.

They slunk back to their rooms with the knowledge that they would both now have to persist on the limited amounts of food and water with which they were provided each day.

Their voyage didn’t last much longer, as just two days after that, they could see, faintly on the horizon, just under an inviting sky of brilliant orange and yellow hues, the silhouette of a mountain range. It looked like home, all peaks and valleys. Except, it wasn’t home. It was Vancouver. A city in a country they weren’t allowed to be in.

By the time the boat docked, the sun had dissipated and a rain had begun to fall. After the first and second-class passengers disembarked, the men in steerage lined up on deck. Puy breathed in the fresh air and thought that it smelled like Hong Kong, but it wasn't as hot. After the ship's doctor inspected each of the men on deck one by one, the healthy ones were sent off the boat. The sick ones remained behind to see if they could survive another tumultuous series of weeks at sea.

Puy, Shaowei and Gao are among those in the clear. Once on deck, the men were ushered into a caged area and awaited their release. Eventually, a Canadian immigration officer showed up with a translator in tow, a young Chinese woman.

"Okay, ladies and — err, don't tell them that part. Okay, Gentleman, welcome to Vancouver."

The translator stares at the immigration officer.

"Go on, tell them," the officer said.

The translator addressed the audience of caged men, repeating the immigration officer verbatim. After she had finished, the immigration officer continued his speech, pausing every so often so that the woman could translate what he said:

"You may think you are standing on Canadian soil," the officer said, lazily, as if he had delivered the speech before. "You aren't.

"You may think you're breathing in Canadian air," the man paused again. "You're not."

As the translator caught up with him, many puzzled expressions came across the caged men's faces.

“You may even think that you are now in Canada. Well, you aren't, and, quite frankly, uh, you will never be. No gentleman, you are still somewhere in the Pacific Ocean. That's what it says on my records —” the officer tapped a small book strapped to his hip “— it says your kind aren't allowed in Canada. So, as far as I'm concerned, you're not in Canada. It's my job to ensure that all of you celestials get straight from that boat—” the officer points to the ship they disembarked “— to that train.” The officer shifted his gaze so that he could point inland, towards a train station not too far from the dock.

“But before I do that, I need to figure out who each and every one of you are,” the officer said as he walked closer to the cage. “I need to know who you are, where you're going, where you came from. And I need those answers to be correct. These are my needs. If anyone of you doesn't satisfy my needs, you'll be put back on that ship,” the officer pointed back at the ship, “and sent back to Chinaland.”

The officer looked at the translator and waited for her to catch up.

“Okay, so here's what happens next: I interview each of you, one by one, and after the interview's over, you'll be sent to that train which will be your home for the next few weeks as you continue to pass through the Pacific Ocean. Understood?” A smile cracked the officer's face, as he let loose a small chuckle.

“I understand,” Shaowei muttered in Taishanese.

“What was that?” The officer said, searching through faces in the crowd. “I will have no back talk during this process, not in my language and certainly not in yours. I don’t want any of that flim-flam-ching-chang bullshit unless I directly address you.”

Shaowei acted as if it wasn’t him, looking around the crowd as if he too was searching for the culprit.

Puy was the first of his friends to be called for an interview. He was escorted by an armed guard into a small office filled with bookcases.

“Alright, what’s your name?” the officer asked. The translator took care of the language barriers.

“So Ho Puy,” he told the translator, who says nothing, letting the name stand for itself.

“Do you know where you’re going?”

“St. John, Newfoundland,” Puy nodded and smiled towards both the translator and the officer.

“Who do you have there?”

“What family do you have there?” the translator says to Puy.

“My Uncle Li,” Puy says to the translator.

“He setting you up with a job there or what?”

“Fong Li Laundry,” Puy says.

“Alright,” the officer says, cracking open his book, “what did you say your name was again?”

“So Ho Puy,” Puy repeats with a smile and a nod.

“Seto Ping, huh? Alright, let me see, your name is now...” the officers eyes darted around the room, skimming over the numerous books crowding his shelves before settling on a copy of Othello with gilded edges.

“William!” the officer exclaimed, scratching something down on to the paper in front of him, “William Ping. That’s you.” The officer pointed at Puy.

“So Ho Puy,” Puy repeated again with a nod and a smile.

“William Ping,” the officer said, resting his pen on the desk with annoyance. “You’re William Ping.”

Puy pointed at himself and again says, “So Ho Puy.”

“Fine, fine. William Seto Ping. Happy?” the officer scrawled something down and then said to the translator, “Go on, explain to him his new name.”

“Your name in Newfoundland will be William Seto Ping,” she smiled and nodded at Puy. The officer passed him a document with his name and the armed guard escorted him to the train car.

Another armed guard sat on a stool in the front of the train car, thumbing through a newspaper.

“Got another one for ya, Howard,” the escort said as he pushed Puy into the car.

“Take a seat anywhere you like, big fella,” Howard said to Puy, and then called back to the other guard, “He better pick a comfortable one, hey, Ben?”

Both of the men exhaled tired chuckles. Puy stood looking at Howard.

“Go on, go sit down,” he said as he turned his attention back to the newspaper.

The train car had several rows, with pairs of chairs facing each other in blocks so that four people could sit together. Puy was excited to be on a train, having studied them in his engineering courses but never having stepped on foot on one in his whole life. Puy liked the smell in the air, of exhaust or fuel or whatever it was, like the steam boat but different. He looked out the window at all the white people running around the platform. Some kids stopped and made faces at him. Puy chuckled and looked in his lap at the certificate, running his fingers over the freshly scrawled, *William Seto Ping*, cryptic symbols written in a language he did not yet understand.

The next person on the train was Gao, who was followed by Shaowei. Gao's new name was Upton Gao, Shaowei's new name was Sinclair Pu.

"Stupid name, stupid officer," Shaowei complained. "Thinking I can't understand what he's saying, it's always the way."

"I like my name," Gao said, "Upton, Upton." He repeated his new name over and over, stressing the syllables in different ways each time.

With three of their four seats taken, the men rested uneasy waiting to see who from the ship would take the fourth.

"I hope it's someone clean," Shaowei said, peering out the window at the platform, trying to eye up any potential seat mates.

A small young man climbed up the train steps and staggered toward the empty seat, the weeks at sea having clearly done a number on him. Either he had lost a significant amount of weight or he was just preternaturally thin for his age, with clothes so baggy and limbs so skinny that he had the appearance of being nothing more than cotton draped on bones.

"Can I..." he said.

“Yes,” Puy said, before glancing at a grimacing Shaowei.

“What’s your name?” Gao asked him as the small man took his seat.

“Wong, or well, it used to be Wong, now it’s ...” the man said as he held up the sheet the officer gave him.

“What’s your new name?” Puy asked, before adding “I’m William Ping.”

“Don’t let them tell you what your name is,” Shaowei said, aghast. “My name is Shaowei Pu, Gao hold on to that boy’s sheet so that I can read it.”

“Why can’t you do it yourself?” Gao asked.

“Just do it,” Shaowei said as Gao held up the young man’s sheet. Shaowei studied it for a moment, sounding out the letters with his mouth, before announcing: “Ignatius. I think. Ignatius Wong. Huh.”

“What?” Wong asked.

“Well, I just thought they were giving us Western names, I’m not certain if yours is Western or not.”

“Well, you’d be the expert on that,” Puy said with a smile.

“Ha ha,” Shaowei said without a smile. “Wong, how old are you?”

After a moment, Wong says “Eighteen.”

“Wong, you don’t look eighteen.”

“Yeah, everyone says I look small for my age.”

Shaowei leaned in closer to him and said, “Wong, I’m only going to ask this one more time and if you lie to me again, we can’t be friends. How old are you?”

Wong looked around to make sure Howard wasn't near. He was still sat at the front of the train, reading his paper, so Wong leaned in and said, "Fourteen."

"What?" Puy said, at full volume.

Shaowei makes the 'shhh' motion with a gloved hand and then said to Wong, "Don't worry, your secret is safe with us." Then, after a moment, "Wong, do you know any jokes?"

"I... I can't think of any right now, no," Wong said.

"Puy, tell him your joke,"

"Shaowei, he's just a kid, he doesn't need to hear that filth."

"Oh, yes, he does, why, you heard the man, Wong I mean. He's eighteen years old. He's no kid. He can hear some dirty jokes."

"C'mon, Puy," Gao said, "tell your joke. It's not even dirty. The kid'll love it."

"We worked on it for all those weeks on the boat and you still can't tell it?"

"Alright, fine," Puy said. "Okay, so there is a husband and wife and they are— hold on, wait." Puy took a moment to think before continuing. "Okay, so there's a husband and wife, and the wife, she's about to go on a long train ride. The wife says to her husband, 'Oh, husband, I know you'll miss me while I'm gone' and the husband says 'Miss you? It's worthwhile to send you away for three yuan!'"

Gao and Puy looked at Wong to see if he'll laugh. A polite smile crossed the boy's face.

"Okay, Puy," Shaowei said. "That one still needs some work."

"He's too young to get it," Puy said.

"Where was she going?" Wong asked.

"Who?" Puy said, looking around.

“The wife. In the joke.” Wong said.

“Oh,” said Puy. “Uh, I’m not sure. I guess, um, a family funeral maybe.”

“That’s not very funny,” Wong said.

“No, I know,” Puy said.

“See,” Shaowei said, “this joke of yours, Puy, it’s all wrong. Now there’s a death involved.”

“No, look, the joke is that the husband is happy that his wife is leaving him alone for a few days.”

“Why isn’t the husband going to the funeral?” Wong said.

“No, there is no funeral, the wife—“

“You said there was a funeral,” Wong said.

“No,” Puy said, exasperated.

“Hey, Wong,” Shaowei said, “don’t listen to him, this guy doesn’t know jokes. Gao, tell Wong the one where the wife is cheating on her husband and she puts the guy in the bag of rice?”

“You just ruined the ending,” Gao protested.

“No, I didn’t,” Shaowei said.

Puy stopped listening, annoyed from being around these people. He looks out the dirty window, the last couple of Chinamen are boarding the train now and soon enough, the next leg of the journey will begin. With each successive part of the journey behind him, he’s one step closer to going back home, he thought. One step closer to being with his wife and child again, a wife and child that he would gladly pay three yuan to see, or any amount of money for that matter.

It'll be nice to see Uncle Li again, he reminded himself, it's nice to be on an adventure in the West. He'll have so many stories to tell when he goes back.

With these thoughts racing through his head, Puy drifted off to sleep, the windowpane of the train car acting as his pillow. Not even the slight jolts of the train starting to move wake him.

—

“Hey, wake that guy up,” a voice said, interrupting Puy's slumber.

Howard is who woke him.

“Okay, my name is Howard. I'm the guy guarding this train car. We got a few rules to go over. I'm the one responsible for making sure none of you guys enter Canada, so that means I'm the one making sure none of you leave this train car. Now, listen, don't give me any trouble and I won't give you any trouble. It's as simple as that. The bathroom is up by where I sit at the front of the car, you can go one at a time and there's no lining up for it either. You wait your turn from your seat.” Howard paused. “Do any of you speak English?”

Puy looked at Shaowei who says nothing.

“Aw, geez,” Howard said. “Does anybody in this train car understand me?”

Howard waited for a moment, surveying the crowd.

“Okay, well, I see a couple of you smiling, so I'm going to take it that some of you understand me and can explain what I'm saying to your friends. Now, again, you give respect, you get respect. Now, listen, the train is going to stop pretty frequently but you're not allowed off. Matter of fact, you're not even allowed to look out the windows. I'm supposed to make sure that blinds are always put down so you don't see what's going on out there. Now, I'm a nice guy, I'll

let you look out the window, but, that's only if there's good behaviour. Like I said, give respect, get respect."

Howard paused, raising his eyebrows, looking for any sign of understanding in his audience.

"That being said, when we pull up to stations, I need to have all the blinds closed so that I don't get in trouble."

Howard paused again, looking beyond the people, seemingly trying to remember something.

"Oh yeah, I guess I'm supposed to go over the itinerary with you guys but I don't figure any of you will care to know it anyways because it's not like you can get off the train till we get to Montreal. There'll be a lot of stops between now and then, and like I was saying, you're not allowed off. And listen, you really don't want to get off this thing, people don't want to see your kind and I can't be sure how they'll react. But, yeah, um. We're traversing a lot of ground over the next few days, you'll see a lot of sights through your windows so keep them clean. I'm not sure how long it will take us to get to Montreal. Depends on the number of stops, I guess. You guys would know better than me, you were the ones that built this thing," Howard said with a chuckle.

"Uh, well, I guess that'll be it for now. I'm up here if anyone needs me," Howard said as he retreated to his seat at the front of the car and cracked open his newspaper again.

"What'd he say?" Puy asked Shaowei.

"He said we're gonna be on the train for a few days."

"That's all he said?"

“Yeah, that was basically it.”

“It sounded like he said a lot more than that.”

“That was just white people noise, he said we’re on the train we’re for the next few days, that’s it.”

—

They were on the train for the next few days, that’s it.

After the train departed Vancouver, a space not unlike Hong Kong, the men agreed, the train went for days and days through the Canadian wilderness. A peculiar introduction to the West, as there were several days of travel through seemingly endless expanses of forests and prairies. Evergreens and mountain ranges quickly devolved into flatlands and blowing wheat crops.

The men enjoyed it. It was a lot better than steerage. There was enough water to drink, enough food to eat, and the space was less crowded and far cleaner. Sure, there were no beds, but the ragged chairs of the train car were rather luxurious in comparison to the weeks they had spent on barebones wooden bunks. And there was more to look at, with windows showing an endless land of promise and uninhabited space.

One night, the train made one of its frequent stops. Howard had ensured that all the blinds were pulled down, however, when he looked out his window to the platform, his jaw dropped.

“Oh my,” Howard said. “Open the blinds, open the blinds.”

Shaowei opened the blind near their seat and all the men jumped in fright. The window did not show a forest, or a mountain range, or a prairie. Outside the window looked grey and wrinkly, like a tough piece of leather, with many almond shaped folds. At the centre of all the

grey was a large burnt-yellow circle with a smaller black circle at the centre. It was the eye of an elephant.

“That’s a circus train across the track there,” Howard explained. “Better hope the big fella there don’t run in front of our train when we leave. It’s happened before.”

When the elephant walked away from the window, the men could see the circus train across the track. Train cars covered in bright yellow and red stripes, animals of all types being led into their respective cages, the cages being pulled into their respective train cars. The sides of the cars were adorned with images, ads for the type of attractions the circus had to offer. The Bearded Lady, The Wonderful Monkey Man, The Ohio Mammoth Girl, and, of most interest to the men, a poster advertising The Chinese Lady.

“What does it say?” Puy asked.

“It says, ‘The Chinese Lady, Astonishing Small Feet, A Chinese Costume, A Chinese Song.’”

The poster showed a young Chinese woman, in a Chinese dress, surrounded by vases, chairs and textiles, all of which covered with things that looked like Chinese symbols but didn’t really mean anything.

“White people do that sometimes,” Shaowei explained.

After a few minutes of looking at the circus train, the men’s train started up again, and the circus train flew by them in a blur, receding far into the rear view until all they could see once again was a blurred never-ending line of evergreens.

What a way to view a country, through a train window. Perpetually drawn backwards at high speeds through some of the most magnificent scenery in the world, leaving the men with a

dizzy irritation. It's like life that way, you never see the good things until they've past you and then they're gone for good. And if you try to look back at the sparkling golden peaks of some bygone mountain, well, you just missed the next new splendour and now that's gone too. A dizzy irritation doubled when you think about how many Chinese men died to create this railway, a railway in a country that no longer even wanted to see the Chinese, let alone let them live off the land that they helped develop. When you look back, you can almost see the blood still staining the soil, places where rocks are still scarred and tarnished from demolition blasts, empty platforms where hangings took place.

Wong kept straining himself to look at things outside the window, constantly just missing whatever it is he sought to see.

"There's some story in the Bible about this," Shaowei said. "Something where some guy's wife looks back and she turns into a pillar of salt. Tasty, delicious salt. But, salt isn't that good for you anyways."

Compartment C Car

When the train finally pulled into Montreal, the men were more than ready for some fresh air. Howard let them off the train one by one into the hands of another policeman, Pierre, who spoke English, but it sounded like English in italics, all nasally with weird intonations. Shaowei explained to Puy and the others that this was another language, possibly a Canadian version of the Spanish which he had often heard in California. Pierre wasn't as lax as Howard and strictly enforced the rule about the blinds being kept closed on the train from Montreal to Sydney.

And the days dragged on, and the men again spoke in recurrent conversations. Having been now travelling for more than a month together, it seemed that each of them knew everything about each other's relatively short lives so far. They knew each other's desires, but only in the same way that all men know each other's desires: money and sex on the surface level, but underneath, it's family, an end to hunger, an ability to appease the people in our life, a sense of belonging earned or otherwise. The ability to sustain yourself and maybe a couple of others if you're lucky, your parents, maybe a nice girl. But you can't have a bird without a nest. And really, that's what it was all about, all this Gold Mountain stuff: being able to build a nest and then do what you want with it. That's the dream, the dream they were sold, the dream they bought.

The days felt like dreams too, the sluggish chugging of the train, shaking you back and forth, just a little bit.

"Yeah," Gao said during one of their conversations. "I can't wait for you guys to meet my uncle Charlie. He's a great guy."

“Oh, yeah?” Shaowei said, somewhat annoyed from being around these people day in and day out. “What’s so great about him?”

Gao paused for a moment and Puy couldn’t tell if his expression was one of annoyance with Shaowei or of considered thought.

“Well,” Gao said. “He’s been there for a long time. I think seventeen or eighteen years now. I guess I don’t have many memories of him. I was just a kid—”

“So, you’re saying he’s great, why?” Shaowei said as he tried to peek out the shut blinds of the train car.

“He was known as a great cook,” Gao said. “Everyone always said he made the most amazing pickled turnips.”

“He was known as a great cook because he dumped turnips in some vinegar and then left them in a jar someplace for a long time?” Shaowei asked.

“No,” Gao says with a fake laugh. “I’m sure there was more to it than that.”

“So, you’re headed to Gold Mountain so you can learn the pickled turnip secret? Are pickled turnips a big seller in Newfoundland?”

“Well, no,” Gao said, visibly frustrated. “I don’t know. I guess I was sick of the farming life and him being over here gave me a great opportunity to leave, try to do something more. Work at his restaurant.”

“Women’s work,” Shaowei said with a roll of his eyes.

“So is the laundry,” Gao said.

“It is what it is,” Shaowei said, a master of the banal platitude.

“Where will you be working, Wong?” Puy asked.

“Oh, uh,” the boy said, scratching his head. “Kam Laundry, I think.”

“Me and Puy are at Fong-Li Laundry,” Shaowei said. “You looking forward to getting your hands wet, Puy?”

“Heh,” Puy said, realizing that he had never told Shaowei that he would be taking a management position.

“I’m just going to be a bag boy,” Wong said.

“Nah, me and Puy are gonna be elbow deep in it, right?” Shaowei nudged Puy with his elbow.

“Heh,” Puy said again. Shaowei raised an eyebrow.

“What?” he said.

“What?” Puy said.

““Heh,”” Shaowei said, doing an impression of Puy. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Well, uh, my Uncle Li, I’m replacing him and I think he has a management position.”

Shaowei doesn’t say anything for a moment.

“So... what? Were you just planning on not telling me that?”

“No,” Puy said. “I didn’t think it would be a big deal or anything.”

“So, what you’re gonna be my boss? My bunkmate one day, my boss the next.”

“It’s not like that,” Puy said. “I don’t know what I’ll be doing there yet.”

“Mhmm,” Shaowei said, looking away. “I’m taking a nap.”

There was silence for a moment, before Gao cleared his throat and looked towards Wong.

“What family do you have at your laundry, Wong?”

“I... I, uh,” the boy looked confused.

“Gao, don’t ask him so many questions,” Shaowei said with his eyes closed, caressing his own lengthy ponytail. “He’s like me, made of paper. Now I’m taking a nap and I need quiet.”

The conversation between the four men slowed and stopped after that day. There’s really only so much you can take of the same people day in, day out. Where once Gao’s deep singing voice charmed and entertained, now it annoyed and sounded out of tune. Where once Shaowei’s attempts to educate the other’s about Western life enlightened, now it came across as grating know-it-all behaviour. Where once Puy’s quiet nature seemed to welcome conversation, he now appeared aloof and cold. A couple days passed by in relative silence and they didn’t even have the redundant, repetitive scenery to look at, due to Pierre enforcing the rule that the blinds must be shut in their cabin.

Until the day the train stopped.

Pierre let the men off the train one by one and exposed them to sunshine for the time in days. Except it was an overcast day with a mist in the air heavy enough to be classified as rain even though it wasn’t really raining, but regardless, the Chinamen weren’t prepared for this kind of weather. Armed guards walked them across the train station — don’t forget your luggage — to the nearby ferry terminal. The men had arrived in Sydney and it was time for another boat ride.

The *SS Caribou* was maybe half the size of the *Kobayashi Maru*, still a big ship but it only had one smokestack on deck. Puy let out a big sigh when he saw the boat — back at sea, for who knows how long — floating there in the harbour, surrounded by a grey sky and a chilly breeze.

Puy and the other Chinese men were once again put in a caged area and they waited to be let aboard the ship. It was the first time since they left the *Kobayashi Maru* that Puy could get a

good look at the crowd around him and see how many fellow immigrants were also going to Newfoundland. He thought it must've been around fifty Chinese men going to Newfoundland. The men waited there in their little caged area and watched in the cold drizzle as all the white passengers boarded, and then various provisions were loaded on to the ship, followed by cattle and a cage holding two moose. Only after everything else was on board were the men escorted over to the ship and led up the gangway. Once again, they were made to go into steerage and this time, they weren't even allowed to socialize on deck before they set sail. Just straight to steerage and that was it.

The men descended down to the steerage deck and they were surprised to encounter two white men coming up from down below.

"Yeah," one of the white men said, "I'm pretty sure they're brother and sister but we're just going to let them loose and see what happens."

In the centre of the *S.S. Caribou*'s steerage quarters were the two caged moose. The two animals repeatedly made long guttural moaning sounds, the type of sounds that seemed to portend doom. Their branch-like antlers made them slightly too big for the cages they were in and they were ramming their antlers into the top of the cage. Puy wasn't sure if they were trying to escape or get comfortable.

Steerage was dimly-lit and overcrowded. Sure, there was less of them here now — some of the men back in Vancouver had gone to Hawaii instead of going across Canada— but this place was smaller, there were less portholes and gates to allow light in, the bunks were smaller, and there was also two noisy caged animals.

"How long will this take?" Puy asked Shaowei, as they sought out a bunk.

“A couple weeks maybe.”

They settled into their bunk for the night; they'd been unable to get the cherry pickings of steerage. And even though the bunk was stiff and uncomfortable, and even though the moose kept making long wavering moans, the men were happy to once again be lying in a bed.

—

“B’y’s you gotta get up, ’s time ta go.”

Puy and Shaowei and all the men in steerage were awakened by the voice of this man. A white man in an ill-fitting blue uniform stood in the middle of the steerage room, tapping a baton off the back of a tin mug.

“We’re ‘ere now, I don’t know wheres you all going to but you can’t stay here.”

For a moment, Puy wondered if he had been asleep for weeks but soon he got his bearings and he realized he had only slept for a couple hours.

Puy and the men were escorted up to the deck and down the gangway. The voyage had only taken nine hours. The moose were freed from their cages, running into the forest.

“Welcome to Newfoundland,” a man on the dock said, “I need to see your immigration certificates and we’ll be needing you to pay some fees now the once.”

Head Tax

Three hundred dollars later and they were on the road once again.

Not that any of them could really afford to spend three hundred dollars right now.

Shaowei did the math and said that it would take around thirteen years back in China to save that much money. Here in the West, they could probably pay it back in about one year. Lucky for them, their uncles and brothers and ‘family members’ already in Newfoundland had been able to front them the cash for the time being.

This notion, of owing money to his uncle, didn’t please Puy at all. It was another obstacle between him and his family. But, he reasoned, it would give shape and meaning to his year here in the West: let his uncle go back home, earn money to repay his uncle, then go back himself.

After the men paid their dues at the ferry terminal in Port aux Basques, they boarded a train for St. John’s. They were allowed to look out of the window of the train now, but the sky was grey and the tree line was so close to the railway tracks they couldn’t see much. The men caught glimpses of the landscape, when the trees thinned, but all they saw were barren plains and hilly terrains. Dull, brownish grass, glorified moss really, and large, dirty rocks jutting out from the soil. The wind shook the train car, as if the landscape itself was opposed to anything being here.

After a couple hours, the train finally pulled to a stop in St. John’s.

“Well, boys,” Shaowei said as he stepped off the train, “welcome to your new home.”

Ping looked around the train station. It was rather small compared to some of the ones they had passed through in the past few weeks, almost claustrophobic. Dull beige brick walls,

with painted advertisements for TETLEY TEA and CARNATION MILK and DUMONT SHIPPING. There were people everywhere, mostly white people, on the platform, carrying on their affairs and sitting in tiny cafés, and a couple of Chinese men waiting in the crowd to greet some newly arrived relative or other.

Puy left his friends behind on the platform as he spotted Uncle Li in the crowd.

“Li,” Puy called out as he approached his Uncle.

“Puy, is that you?” Uncle Li adjusted his glasses and leaned in with a squint. “Why, it’s been so long. The last time I saw you, you were this tall. Heh, I was expecting you to still be that small.”

Puy and Li shake hands and Puy smiles ear-to-ear. It was good to see family again. Puy couldn’t think of anything to say; there was simply so much, and as a result, an awkward silence fell between the two men. Li looked around the platform, nervous eyes darting back and forth.

“Okay, Puy,” Li said, “Let’s go, I’ll show you where we’re staying.”

Puy looked around the platform too and saw that the once bustling pace of the white people on the platform had slowed down. Moustachioed men whispered to each other, while sharing furtive glances at all the Chinese men on the platform. Women raised eyebrows behind teacups. A child said something to his father about ‘chinks.’ The father looked mad, not at the child, at the chinks.

Puy looked at his fellow travellers, fellow immigrants. There was about fifty of them all told, and while Puy felt like it was a small group before, he could see now, surrounded by the whiteness of the crowd at the train station, that fifty Chinamen would make a big impact in this town.

“Let’s go,” Li said, hurrying to leave the train station.

Puy followed Li out of the station and on to the open street outside. It was a cold spring day, the sky an impenetrable bright grey. The first thing Puy noticed was the smell. It was the worst smelling place he had ever been. Horse manure was everywhere and garbage blew along with the sudden blasts of wind. Goats, pigs, cows, they all roamed the street freely. He couldn’t believe it. All that he had heard about the west, about Gold Mountain, and this was the result. A place dirtier than home, as if the wealth of Gold Mountain had inspired people to shit on their own doorsteps. As Puy and Li walked down Water Street, the smells only grew worse. Urine, and booze, half-naked drunk men sweating profusely on street corners even though it was only late afternoon. Men stumbling every which way, like the animals. Not even Hong Kong was this bad.

They reached a point where Puy could clearly see out to the water, to a narrow opening between two hills where ocean water flooded in and filled the small harbour. Wharfs jutting into the harbour like a toppled matchbox. The smell of fish guts, fermenting in the sun, blood and innards sprayed on piers. Puy was speechless.

They went up to the next street, Duckworth, and kept walking fast. This street was more of the same, streetcars, horse drawn carriages, a couple of noisy cars pattered by, but again Puy was greeted with the foul brew of animal droppings and the excesses of man. The street was dotted with storefronts, signs Puy could not yet read, but he could infer what was inside from the windows. He paused outside of one. Inside, there was a big kitchen, he guessed, with appliances and devices he had never before seen in person. A big rectangular metal box stood next to a large sink, the walls covered in orange tiles. A mannequin of a woman stood at the sink, an uncanny smile painted beneath her lifeless eyes. From this angle, Puy could see his reflection in the glass

and it almost made it look like he was in there, standing next to that woman. The door of the store swings open.

“You,” a man says as he pushes Puy’s shoulder, disturbing him from his daydream. “I knows you.”

Puy looks at the man, a tall, wiry white man, with a small moustache and a comb over. He was wearing a suit that looked a little too big for him, as if the man had suddenly lost fifteen pounds and his clothes didn’t have time to adjust.

“I knows you didn’t forget me now,” the man says. “Cause I knows I didn’t forget you.”

Puy had no idea what the man is saying, or if he was even speaking English.

“I knows your face,” the man says, getting more angry.

Puy started to back up. A small group of people gathered around them.

“Don’t pretend like ya can’t understand me now, chink.” The man got a laugh out of the crowd. “You thinks you can cut off your ponytail and now you can just look in a store window, can ya? Is that what ya thinks?”

Puy turned to walk away, but the crowd had closed and they wouldn’t let him out.

“Just where do you think you’re going?” a chubby man asked Puy, pushing him back towards the first man.

Puy turned around and — SPLAT!

Puy felt it before he even knew what happened, the hot smack of something hit his body, the soreness in his chest where it collided, the flecks of something ricocheting on to his cheek and forehead. He looked down to see that a large piece of mud has been thrown at him, splatter-

ing all over his suit, staining the shirt underneath. He looked up just as a child threw another chunk of mud — might be mud, might be manure — at his stomach.

SMACK.

Winded, Puy leaned over.

“You fucking celestial chinks,” some man in the crowd said, leaned in close to Puy’s face. “You think you can wear a suit and be one of us and take our jobs and women. Fuck off.”

He spit in Puy’s face, eliciting loud laughter from the crowd around him, their mouths hanging agape with delight.

“Excuse me, gentleman,” a lyrical male voice shone through the laughter, dissipating the crowd around Puy. “Whatever seems to be the problem here?”

“That’s the fucking chink that stole my job,” the tall, wiry man said.

“Well, I am certain there must be some misunderstanding here, sir,” the lyrical voice continued. Puy looked and saw the man who owned this voice. He cut a strange figure among the crowd. He must’ve been around 6’5, easily the tallest person Puy had ever seen, a couple heads taller than most of the people he had seen in St. John’s so far. He wore what appeared to be a long black robe that did little to conceal his large beer belly. His face looked old and weathered but he couldn’t be any older than forty. His hairline had mostly receded, leaving a strange tuft of hair in the centre of his head. His mouth was framed by a handlebar moustache and a patchy beard that left him looking like his cheeks had dandruff. The man extended a hand to Puy to help him to his feet and it was then that Puy noticed a small square of white on the man’s black collar. A priest of some sort.

“Nah, Reverend, that’s the fucking chink,” the wiry man said as he took a step closer to the priest and Puy.

In turn, the priest simply extended a flattened hand to the wiry man and said, “Did you work in the laundry?”

“No, Reverend, I worked in the fisheries, and I made good money too, until this lot came along.”

“Sir, the Chinese do not work in the fisheries, they work in the laundry. Some of them work in restaurants. You must be mistaken.”

“It’s these celestial fucks that —“

“Must I remind you that celestial means from the sky, the sky, y’know, where God lives? With his son Jesus? So, every time you call one of these men ‘celestials’, you’re calling ‘em angels? Now, is this any way to treat a heavenly body?”

“I—”

“Sir, I recommend you visit me at the parish where we can continue to discuss this matter. But, for the time being, I plan on walking this gentleman home and getting him cleaned up.”

The priest escorted Puy down Water Street and his presence continued to ward off any negative influences of the street.

“Sir,” the priest said, “may I ask you your name?”

Puy looked at him blankly, then paused and reached inside his jacket pocket. He handed the priest some of his immigration documents.

“William Seto Ping,” the priest said, reading from the sheet, “Why, Mr. Ping, it says here you just moved here today.”

Puy and the priest stood in the middle of the sidewalk and the city moved around them.

“What a terrible welcome to your new home,” the priest sighed. “Alas. Welcome to the Rock.”

Ping offered a weak smile and nodded.

The priest sized him up and said, “Well, I guess you don’t know what I’m saying just yet. You’ll need to have some defences around here. There’s a lot of nice people, but there’s a lot of sour people too. And the sour ones are usually the loudest and they have a way of making the nice ones quiet. Your number one, best line of defence, is definitely Christianity.”

The priest thought for a moment and then continued.

“Well, now that I think about it, your number one, best line of defence, would probably be a gun. Guns are the most important technology of our time. And if you have a hunting gun, you can get away with a lot more... But, no, you should go to my church. Every Sunday, after my sermon, we have little classes where you can learn English.”

Puy continued to stare at him and started to smile and nod.

“Well, actually, learning English right now would be your number one, best line of defence. Then, once you know English, you can read the Bible. And by the time you finish doing that, you’ll probably have enough money to buy a gun. There’s a great gun store down on Water Street, just tell ‘em Reverend Riley sent you.”

“It alway the way,” Puy said in English, trying to mimic the priest’s tone.

“Huh? Do you know English?”

“Alway the way,” Puy said again.

“Is that... is that the only phrase you know?”

“Alway the way?” Puy once again mimicked the priest’s tone, this time mimicking the high-pitched intonation which, in English, means that you put a question mark at the end of your sentence instead of a period.

“Yeah, I’m not too sure about that one.”

“Puy!” Uncle Li was peeking around the corner of a nearby alleyway. “Puy, what happened?”

Uncle Li rushed over to Puy.

“Now, Frederick,” the priest said to Li. “Are you supposed to be minding Mr. Ping here?”

“Yes, yes, I just showing him where we live, Reverend Riley,” Li said, his broken accent making Riley sound like it starts with a W. Then Li turned to Puy and addressed him in Tais-hanese. “Why are you so dirty now? Why didn’t you follow me better?”

Reverend Riley could sense the anger in Li’s voice and raised a hand to calm him.

“Frederick, I trust you will escort Mr. Ping home safely. I tried to tell him about church on Sunday but I’m not sure that he can understand me.”

“Yes, Reverend Riley, I make sure he attend,” Li said as he patted Puy’s shoulders. “I take him home now.”

“Be careful out there,” Reverend Riley said as he walked away.

The men left Duckworth Street and headed on to New Gower.

“What are you doing back there? Your suit’s all dirty now. What do you think, we can do whatever we want here?” Li said to Puy. “No, you have to walk fast and keep up with me.”

“Where were you back there?” Puy said, angry. “I can’t understand anything, I don’t know where I am, I need you—“

“Oh, you need me? I had no one when I arrived here, you’re lucky I even came down to see you. You know how hard it was to get time off to come see you? Now, we waste all this time here and you’re dirty.”

“What do you mean, get time off work? You own the laundry, you don’t have to work.”

They were stood a couple doors away from a building on the corner of Holdsworth Street with a sign hanging over its door that read FONG LI LAUNDRY.

Li stopped there, a couple doors away, and takes a couple peeks to make sure no one saw him.

“I don’t own the laundry anymore,” Li said.

Puy was silent for a moment. “What do you mean?”

“Well, I used to own the laundry. I’ve been here a long time you know, fifteen years. But, you know, there’s not much to do here. Not too many places to go. On Sundays, we go to church and then we hang out in the back of the Tai Mei Club. You know, how it is, a few smokes, a few drinks, some chatting. Then everyone plays mahjong and you bet some money. And I lost some money doing that is all, but I’ll win again soon. My lucky nephew is here now, you’ll help me win!” Li said that with a big smile but his eyes looked sad.

“No, I’m not helping you play mahjong. When do you go back home?”

“Well, you see, like I was saying, I lost a lot of money at the Tai Mei Club. I’ll win it all back. That’s how mahjong works. You win, you lose, you win again.”

“When do you go back home?”

“I... I don’t have the money to go back home.”

“What?”

“Look, I was on this winning streak. I could feel it in my bones, I felt like everything was coming together, I just knew that if I bet a little more, I could win double that amount. And double that amount. And double that amount. And we were playing for hours. And then, I picked up a bad piece and... I lost some money. Then I lost a little more money. Then I lost a little more. And more. And then next thing I knew, I was betting the laundry on it. Well, not the laundry, but everything I use to pay for the laundry, you know, the money for the wages, the money for the supplies.”

Puy found himself speechless once again.

“And I lost everything. I couldn’t afford to pay my workers. I couldn’t afford anything. So, I sent a wire out to my business partner and he bought me out for three hundred dollars. Three hundred dollars! Just enough to pay for you to be here, the exact amount! That’s how I know you’re my lucky charm. We’re going to win it all back.”

“What?” Puy said.

“Yeah, we’ll win enough money to send me back to China. Then, you’ll do my job here for a year and then we switch.”

“Your job managing the laundry?”

“No, no, I don’t manage the laundry anymore. I lost that job. I work the laundry now, I clean the clothes with everyone else.”

“So, that’s what you’ll have me do? Work in the laundry with everyone else?”

“Well, yeah! Just for a year.”

“You’re supposed to go back for a year! Now, you’re not going anywhere.”

“Puy, the plan is simple, we play mahjong. We get the money. It’s as simple as that.”

“Who manages the laundry now?”

“Nobody yet. My business partner, he’s coming back to select a new manager.”

“Coming from where?”

“Jamaica. He’ll be here in a few months. He’s a very wealthy man. If we haven’t won the money by the time he returns, I’m sure he’ll loan me the money to go home.”

Puy put his head in his hands. For a brief second, he recoiled, remembering what Shaowei said about hands and faces. But he couldn’t help himself. He wanted to cry. He couldn’t believe this.

“How much are we getting paid?” Puy forced out.

“Oh, about a dollar a day,” Li said.

Puy said nothing. It would take years to save up enough money to send Li back to China.

“Hey,” Li said. “You know, if you have any money now, you can give it to me to help me get out of here.”

“Just bring me to where we’re living,” Puy said, struggling to not cry.

“Okay, I’ll have to go back to work for a little bit after I bring you in. You can get started working tomorrow.”

Li led Puy inside of the building marked Fong-Li Laundry. They walked through the backdoor and through a small hallway at the end of which Puy could see some tubs. It was hot in here, reminding Puy of home, and it was noisy too, reminding Puy of being on the ships. Li opened a door into a little room that had a long table at its centre and a number of chairs surrounding it.

“You can put your bag under the table, I made sure there was a chair next to mine for you to take.”

“I’ll put my baggage in our room,” Puy said.

“Oh,” Li said. “This is our room.”

“I mean the room for sleeping.”

“This is that room.”

Puy looked around. There were no beds. Just the large table and chairs. Li pulled out two chairs.

“Okay, so this is my chair where I sleep every night. And then this chair,” Li said, tapping on the chair next to his, “this can be your chair to sleep on.”

“I... I don’t understand.”

“Like this,” Li said, as he flips the chair around and sits in it in such a way so that the front of his body is leaned against the back of the chair. “I find this to be the most comfortable position to sleep. I lean over when I sleep so I put the back like this so I don’t keep waking up.”

“You can’t be serious,” Puy said.

“Well, I mean, there’s not much time for sleeping anyways, but this is the way I do it when I can get an hour or two here and there.”

Puy sat in the chair, defeated.

“It’s a long trip, hey?” Li said.

“It’s not over yet,” Puy said, already slumped over the back of the chair. “The trip won’t be over until next year when I go home.”

“Well, you know, that should be more of a floating timeline, really it’s a year from whenever I leave, right? So, we have to get my money first!”

Puy slumped over onto the table and held his head in his hands. He didn’t respond to Li. Moments later, a familiar face walked into the room.

“I thought management would have a better sleeping arrangement than this,” Shaowei said.

“Huh?” Puy said, still half-asleep. “I’m not the manager.”

“What? What are you doing down here, leaning on the table like this?”

“This is my bed,” Puy said. “This is the bed.”

“Good, ol’ iron bed. That’s what they call these y’know?”

“I’m going to sleep,” Puy said, his head hidden in his crossed arms.

“You’re not the manager?” Shaowei said, with a smile unseen by Puy.

“I don’t want to talk about it.”

Laundry Day(s)

“We made the news,” Shaowei held a newspaper up to Puy’s face. “Headline on the paper on our first day here, we’re doing good.”

It was around seven in the morning, the work day would soon begin. But for now the laundrymen of Fong-Li Laundry were rustling awake from their iron bed. Shaowei was holding the paper close to his eyes and reading the words aloud, slowing down occasionally to sound something out.

“It reads: ‘Fifty Chinamen Arrive,’ was there really that many of us? Anyways, ‘By the express this morning fifty Chinamen arrived. There must now be nearly hundred and eighty of the celestials in the colony.’ Huh.”

“What else does it say?” Puy asked.

“It says that they’re worried there’ll soon be thousands of us and that ‘soon they will be invading other domains of labour.’ Then, a few lines later it says that ‘the experience in every Christian country is that Chinese immigration is not only undesirable but positively injurious.’”

“What does that mean?”

“In..jur..i..ous. Not sure. Seems bad.”

“It’s always the way,” Puy said.

Shaowei let loose a quick smile then added “It also says ‘We should be up and doing and keep them out before its too late.’ So stupid. Too late for what? I’m just here to wash their clothes.”

A bell rang in another room.

“Alright, boys,” Li said. “That bell means it’s eight a.m., it’s time to start working.”

“Oh, Li,” Puy said as he stood up. “Before we start work, I was wondering, where do I have to go to send a letter back home? I know that Hualing is probably waiting to hear —”

The entire room bursts into laughter.

“Good one, Puy,” Li said. “Now get dressed.”

“No, really,” Puy said, confused. “Where is the post office?”

“Oh,” Li said. “You’re not kidding.”

“He’s not really one for jokes,” Shaowei added.

“There is no way to send a letter home,” Li said.

“What?” Puy said.

“Yeah, well, didn’t you ever wonder why you got so few letters from me?”

“Yes, but we still got letters from you.”

“Well,” Li said, “there is one way to send a letter home. You give it to someone who you know is going back to China and hope that they deliver it for you.”

“You can’t be serious,” Puy said, this trip to West making him much more incredulous than he would’ve expected.

“Who knows if they’ll even survive another trip on those coffin ships,” Shaowei said under his breath.

“Now, the two of you stop lallygagging and get ready to work,” Li said. “You’ve got a long day ahead of you.”

Puy put on a fresh suit from his suitcase and he and Shaowei followed Li into the main laundry room.

“Puy, don’t you have more appropriate clothes?” Li raised an eyebrow.

“A suit is always appropriate,” Puy said with a smile. “You gotta keep it gentleman.”

“Okay, well you can keep it gentleman on Sundays but on the weekdays, I expect you to be able to work.”

There were two big windows at the front, looking out onto the street. Another grey day. Natural light poured in through these windows, rendering the other half of the room dark with passing shadows. There were two huge sinks in this room, tubs really, easily six feet long and three feet high and wide. Their surfaces were ragged and rough, with some pointy edges looking like they could cut a man if he wasn’t careful.

“The one on the left is for washing, the one on the right is for rinsing. I don’t have the time to introduce you to the others, maybe later tonight.”

There was seven men on staff, not including Li, Shaowei or Puy, and some of them stood over the tubs, some sat on their knees, but they all worked these tubs together. Some washed, some rinsed, and every now and then, they would switch positions. The group didn’t say much to each other, stopping every now and then to analyze some mysterious stain, strategizing the best way to remove it with the limited equipment they had. They mostly looked like hardened men, prematurely aged.

Puy noticed their hands right away. They looked almost as rough as the edges of the tub, their skin dried out and peeling, layers upon layers exposed, knuckles raw. Puy’s hands, even after weeks of travelling, were still pristine and smooth, the un-calloused hands of a teacher.

“Step up to the tub,” Li explained. “Pull up your sleeves and get in place. Scoop up the water, pick up the soap. Work up a lather, rub it on the clothes. Douse and souse, rub and scrub.”

Shaowei gulped as he peeled off his white leather gloves, shaking his head. He let out a heavy exhale as he dipped his clean hands into the sudsy water. He knew what he was doing, but he hated having to touch the dirty laundry.

Puy set to work too, but Li's instructions were somewhat unclear and not nearly detailed enough. So Puy decided to imitate Shaowei's movements in washing the various garments that would get dumped into the large sinks. Puy hesitated in putting his hands in the water, working gingerly with the garments in an effort to keep the cuffs of his suit jacket dry. It only took a few minutes for him to realize this wasn't going to work. He took the jacket off, undid his cuff links and rolled up his sleeves before sticking his hands back in the bath.

The youngest man on staff had a different job than the others. He wasn't a man because of his age, but because of his circumstance. He was a child like Wong really, no older than eleven Puy figured, and every now and then the child would walk in through the front door of the laundromat carrying large blue bags filled to the brim with dirty laundry, bags almost as tall as the child himself. Li would take the bags from the child, weigh them, count and list all of the contents and then sort everything, first by colour, then by fabric. Silks and rayons, cottons and linens, and woollens, all separated.

After one load had been moved out of washing and into rinsing, Li would dump one of these sorted bags of unwashed garments into the sink, tablecloths clanging at the bottom of the tub, forgotten silverware unknowingly wrapped between stained white sheets. Sometimes Li threw items in one by one, sheets of sheer linen and thick silk and fine flannel, which lost their folds as they fell and covered the soap suds in a many-coloured disarray. The heap of laundry would grow larger and larger throughout the day — shirts with stripes and scrolls and plaids in

coral and apple-green and lavender and faint orange, with monograms of Indian blue. Dresses, gowns, tights, collars, ties, sullied handkerchiefs, holey socks, shit-stained underwear, grass-stained trousers, yellowed bedsheets, white t-shirts stained dark red, maybe with pinot, maybe with exposed veins, all of this dumped into the sinks in an endless stream of garments and fabrics to be laundered.

Hours passed by and Puy's arms were getting tired, all the scrubbing on the rough edges, all the harsh soap drying out his skin. His trousers soaked from the constantly splashing water from the tub, soaked in such a way that it made it look like he pissed himself. Puy stopped for a moment, taking a break to wipe a bead of sweat from his brow. He noticed how much water there was all over the floor, looking like a sinking boat. Most of his colleagues were wearing hip boots under their traditional flowing garments of the East.

"How much longer will we be doing this for?" he asked Shaowei.

"Several years, I figure," Shaowei said, furiously scrubbing the bottom of a pair of denim pants, stained brown either from mud, manure, or self-defecation, or, perhaps some mix of the three.

"No, I mean, what time do we get off for the day?" Puy asked, still taking a breather.

"It's noon right now," Li interjected. "We take a break for supper when the washing and rinsing is complete for the day."

"What time will that be?" Puy asked.

"Around 2 a.m. usually," Li said.

"What? 2 p.m.?" Puy said, turning around to look out the window at the street.

“No, 2 a.m.. So, around 14 hours from now, we can take a little break. The work won’t be over, but we can take a breather, eat a little snack, then get back to work.”

Outside the window, to Puy’s surprise, was a small audience of white people, children mostly, but a pair of young couples stood gazing inside too.

“Oh,” Li noticed Puy looking at them. “There’s always an audience. We actually put in larger windows so that more people could watch. You should see it in the nighttime, there’ll be dozens of them out there watching. I swear sometimes there’s hundreds of them.”

“Why do they watch?”

“It’s entertaining to them, they enjoy it. We do more business when they can see us, they want to see their shirts and shitty underwear get washed by us. Now get back to work or you’ll draw their ire.”

Puy returned to the sink tub but his arms were still tired and he wanted more of a break.

“Can I use the washroom?” he asked Li.

“Oh yeah,” Li said. “Go ahead, you don’t need to ask me.”

“Okay. Where is it?”

“Oh, right,” Li said. “I’d show you but I have a lot of work to do. Just go out the back-door.”

Puy walked to the back of the laundry and out the backdoor. There wasn’t much outside here, a gravel-filled alley between the laundry and the house next door, and a very small patch of green grass. Puy couldn’t see an outhouse or anything of the sort so he went back inside.

“I don’t see a washroom out there,” Puy said to Li.

“Yeah, just go on the ground or wherever. Don’t shit near my garden though. And be careful of the fire alarm back there too.”

Puy returned to the backyard, but found himself too uncomfortable to pee like that, right outside the door on a bright day. It was nice to get some fresh air but a chill breeze caused him to shudder. The small patch of green grass must be Li’s garden. The garden was mostly uprooted, grass toppled, soil spilt everywhere, flowers torn to shreds. Carrots and turnips had been pulled up and whoever did it had thrown the vegetables on the ground and repeatedly stomped on them, leaving liquidy nubs of orange and white in the shape of boot prints around the garden.

Puy went back inside and straight to Li.

“Uncle Li, your garden!”

“What?” Li said.

“Somebody smashed all your vegetables!”

“Meh,” Li said, “that happens pretty often. You get used to it. The vandals won’t steal the vegetables because we’re Chinese.”

“What?”

“Yeah, I don’t know, I guess they think we make the food dirty or something. You get used to it. Get back to cleaning their clothes.”

Puy returned to the tub alongside Shaowei, who whispered under his breath “it’s always the way.” And so the men worked, repeatedly washing and rinsing garments, stains and fabrics and shapes, all blending together underneath the oily filament on the water. Different fabrics requiring different water temperature, different stains requiring different chemical solvents and de-

tergents. An infinite series of suds and clothes, until each and every blue bag was left hollow and empty on the floor.

It went like this for fourteen more hours. Day turned to night and there were no breaks, no respite from the labour. Puy couldn't believe it, he could barely stay awake, he could barely even move his arms. His back ached, his knees ached. It was as if in the course of one day's work, he had aged by 20 years. And all the while, a chorus of locals would pass by the windows and stare and point at the Chinamen and the dirty laundry, even into the late hours of the night.

"I can't do this for much longer," Puy said.

"Don't worry," Li said. "It's supper time."

Supper consisted of a bone marrow stew with a couple pieces of carrots and turnip served over a tepid bed of rice. There wasn't much of it to go around and it reminded Puy of steerage. They ate at the long dinner table which also served as their bed. They ate in relative silence.

"Alright, let's get back to work," Li said.

Li led Shaowei and Puy into a different room this time, attached to the main laundry room but with no window for the onlookers. Puy had noticed earlier in the day that one of the men was constantly bringing the freshly-washed and still-wet clothes in here. The first thing he noticed about the room was the intense heat and humidity; beads of sweat on his brow doubling, Puy felt as if he was on fire. It was hotter than anywhere he'd ever been. The room had a pot belly coal fire stove and dozens of clotheslines criss-crossed the room, with each line of hanging cloths representing a single customer's laundry load. All the clothes they had been washing all day were hung on the lines, drying. The bright flames of the coals illuminated the room with a hellish orange light, casting imposing shadows on the dripping laundry and surrounding walls. A

scent of stew hung in the air and Puy realized that this must've been where the meal was cooked. There were a dozen cast-iron irons resting on either side of the pot belly stove and each of the men picked one up, the iron glowing an orange hue nearly as bright as the coals themselves, and got to work, picking out dry garments and ironing them into the crisp shapes that their customers desired.

After ironing everything else, it was time to move onto the starched collars and cuffs. Hundreds of collars were to be starched and ironed, requiring the collars to be soaked in small vats of starch after being washed and then ironed and pressed into their intended shapes. The cloudy liquid in the starch vats reminded Puy of rinsing rice. Then, once everything was ironed and starched, it was time to wrap the customers' orders in brown paper packages, secured with twine.

Puy felt out of sorts, like he had been awake for weeks. He found himself without thoughts, his movements slow and mechanical, trying to take in all the new skills he had to learn but finding it hard to focus.

When the last package was wrapped, Li said, "Now, boys, you're done for the day. You can rest."

When Shaowei and Puy emerged from the ironing room, they were surprised to see the washing room once again lit bright with natural light from the large windows.

"What time is it?" Puy asked.

"It's around 6 a.m.," Li said. "Now get to bed, we have to start again in two hours."

The entire staff stumbled into the bedroom and found their chairs and slumped over on to the table, their iron bed. They tried to sleep. Every muscle in Puy's body ached, he had a pound-

ing headache and he felt nauseous. He slumped onto the table and fell into an uneasy slumber, dreaming about the onlookers in the window, youngsters laughing and pointing with their mouths agape, lovers gazing at their new garments being put through the rinse cycle.

Puy mumbled through fraught dreams, half-asleep, half-dead, “I used to gaze.”

One Great Furnace Flamed, Yet From Those Flames, Darkness Visible

The next day, every muscle was sore. Puy felt it every way he moved. The tightness in his arms, in his biceps, his triceps. He could feel it in his legs, the way they had strained to support him for so long. He could feel it in his ass, in his knees. His hands were dried and scabbing, his wrists and forearms slightly discoloured. He ached and felt disoriented, he was exhausted, dehydrated. And although Shaowei was more accustomed to this type of labour than Puy, even he was disquieted, his gift of gab seemingly washed and ironed out the evening before.

When Puy arose from the table after a humble two hours of near sleep, the bell rang once again and Puy put on another suit from his luggage. He didn't have the robes the others had, he hadn't lived a life like theirs in years. His legs struggled to support him but after a few wobbly minutes, his staggered steps steadied and he walked out the back door. A heavy rain was coming down and in his exhaustion, he felt it was easy to piss here like this. Yellow liquid mixing with rainwater, streaming through the nearby gravel like an illicit river.

Puy walked back into the laundry and headed to the washing room. Li stopped him.

"Now, Puy, I know you're new here, but that bell doesn't mean it's time to wake. That bell means it's time to start working. I'll let it go for today, but starting tomorrow, I'm going to need you to be ready to work by the time that bell rings."

Puy sat at the sink, waiting for the water to reach right temperature, waiting for Li to dump the first sorted load so that they could start working. In a strange sort of way, Puy felt the same way that he did when he used to go out for drinks with his teacher friend's, like time was dilated and there was a heaviness in his head that made him want to sleep. Except when he was

with his friends, it gave the effect of being cheerful, of wanting to dance. Now it just really made him want to lie down and stay down.

And so the day proceeded as it had the day before. Wash, rinse, repeat. An audience of white people still gathered at the window despite the heavy rains. Puy imagined that the rain was coming from the sink, but struggled to put together the physics of such a notion.

It must've been around six p.m., after ten hours of working, that Puy mustered the strength to say to Shaowei, "I want to give up."

"You can't," Shaowei said. "There's nowhere else to go."

And rather than argue with him or try to come up with an idea as to why he was wrong, Puy began to cry. There was no sobbing, no theatrics. Just simple droplets, rolling down his cheeks, dropping into the sink, mixing with suds and solvents. Washing the laundry with his tears.

"They're such beautiful shirts," he said, his voice muffled by the splashing sounds of the laundry. "It makes me sad because I've never seen such — such beautiful shirts before."

Later, after supper — another stew, less vegetables than the day before, a trend he predicted would continue — when Puy was back in the ironing room, surrounded by the heat of the potbelly stove, wielding the fiery hot iron, Puy wondered if they had reached the end of the universe, if out there, beyond the narrows of the harbour, was the edge of the Earth and that if he took a boat out there, maybe he would fall right off the edge. It was a passing thought.

But, it didn't pass fast enough as while he was imagining this, he lost focus on the ironing for a moment and accidentally rubbed the iron past the edge of his thumb.

“AHH,” Puy yelled in pain, clattering the hot iron to the floor — CLANG — causing puddles of water under the drip-drying clothes to sizzle and scatter. Tears once again formed under Puy’s eyes and he was in so much pain that he was rendered momentarily silent, his face formed the shape of a scream but no sound, no voice.

Li smacked him on the shoulder and said, “Ah, welcome to the club. You’re broken in now.”

To soothe the burn, Li told Puy to submerge his hand in a vat of starch. At first, the pain disappeared, but soon enough the pain came roaring back and the starchy liquid was no longer any help.

“It could’ve been worse,” Li reassured him.

There were no more passing thoughts in the ironing room after this.

The next day Puy went back to work as usual, his burn stinging in the soapy water but the pain forgotten as the hours toiled on. Wash and rinse, wash and rinse, iron, iron, iron, starch, starch, fold, wrap, sleep

This is how the whole week went.

Until one morning, the work bell didn’t ring. Instead, the men slept past eight a.m. They slept until there was a knock on the back door.

Reverend Riley knocked three times before just opening the door, his tall frame contrasted with so many Chinamen sleeping at the table.

“Hey guys, you know what day it is,” Reverend Riley said with glee. “Come on, everyone get ready, wear your best clothes, I’m gathering everyone up. I’ll be back in a half hour.”

“You can take a bath in the sinks,” Li told Shaowei and Puy after the Reverend left. “We do two baths at a time, one in each sink, so that it doesn’t take all day.”

A bath in the rough, ragged sinks was not pleasant, but the water was hot and it was a bath all the same. Puy and Shaowei both found themselves dozing off in the sinks — this being their first opportunity to bathe since they set sail on the *Kobayashi Maru* over a month ago, as well as a rare, opportune moment in the laundry where you could lie down and get away with it — however their time in the tubs didn’t last long before another pair of men came into the room and demanded it be their turn now.

Thankfully, the blinds were closed.

All of Puy’s suits that he had brought with him were a little disheveled by now, but he picked the cleanest one he had and put it on and went outside to wait for Reverend Riley to return.

“Mr. Ping,” Riley called out as he walked through the narrow gravel path between the laundry and the neighbouring home. “It seems that you’re settling in well.”

Puy couldn’t understand but he recognized “Mr. Ping” and knew Reverend Riley was addressing him. He smiled and nodded in response to the clergyman.

Trailing behind the Reverend was a group of Chinese men that he had gathered from the other laundries and restaurants where they all worked. Puy could see Gao in the crowd. It was nice to see a familiar face, even though it had only been a few days.

“Puy!” Gao called out, rushing to catch up with the front of the crowd to greet his friend. Wong followed close behind him.

“Gao! I almost forgot you lived here too,” Puy said with a smile.

“How’s managing the laundry going?” Gao asked as Li came out the back door.

“We’ll talk about that later,” Puy said to Gao. “How’s working for your Uncle Charlie?”

“It’s good, it’s good. Very busy the past couple days.”

“So in your great Uncle’s restaurant, do they let you serve food to white people?”

Shaowei said as he joined the conversation.

“They don’t know we work there,” Gao said. “We stay in the back, cooking the food and white waitresses bring the food out to them.”

“Ahh,” Puy said, enlightened.

“Puy, you should see some of these waitresses. They’re nothing like the girls back home.”

“I’ve got a girl back home, Gao.”

“We’re following that priest?” Shaowei asked, looking towards the Reverend.

“Yeah,” Gao said. “Charlie was telling me that we’ll be going to Sunday School and that there’ll be white women there to teach us English.”

“What’d I tell you back on that boat?” Shaowei asked. “I told you, when we get there, they’ll try to push Jesus stuff on us.”

“Oh, is that what this is about?” Puy asked.

“Yes, that’s what this is about,” Shaowei said. “And you remember what I told you right. Smile and nod and agree with them and they’ll like you better for it.”

“I’ll believe anything if it means we get introduced to some of the girls,” Gao said.

“Gao, you don’t even know English. You think you’re gonna marry one of the girls when you can’t even talk to them.”

“A boy can dream,” Gao said as Reverend Riley embarked down the gravel-filled alley, his Chinese recruits following him on a makeshift parade through the city.

They walked down to Duckworth Street to retrieve some more Chinese men and Puy once again caught a glimpse of his own reflection in the window showcasing a model kitchen. Wong lagged behind him.

“Hey Wong,” Puy said.

“Hi,” he said.

“How’s work?”

“It’s good. I’m a bundle boy for the Kam Laundry.”

“That’s a perfect job for a boy like you,” Puy said.

“I’m not a boy,” Wong said. “I’m a grown man like you.”

“Ahhh, yes, that’s right. My apologies.”

“I work just the same as you.”

“What do your hands look like?” Puy asked.

Wong shows him his hands. Small, unblemished, save for a couple blisters around the bases of his fingers. Stubby, underdeveloped fingers, the hands of a child.

“Look at my hands,” Puy said.

The skin on all his knuckles had dried out to the point that they were frequently bleeding and the burn on his thumb had become swollen, blackened and bruised. Wong raised his eyebrows.

“Stay a bundle *boy* for as long as you can,” Puy said.

It was a short walk. Reverend Riley led them down Holdsworth Street and around the corner and Puy once again caught a glimpse of the narrow passageway in the harbour and he felt a twinge of hot pain on his thumb. The street reeked of hops and yeast. Bums were sitting along the sidewalks and horse drawn carriages were unloading kegs into burly white arms.

“This is George Street,” someone in the crowd said. “Nothing but taverns and junk shops and mechanics. Save for the church overlooking the whole thing.”

A large white church overlooking a street of untold sins, something which seemed strange but was just good city planning. Of course, the place where sins shall be forgiven should be placed near the place where sins shall be committed. Reverend Riley led them into George Street United Church and instructed the men to fill up the pews in the back of the church. The Chinese men who could understand what Reverend Riley was saying were to translate it to the rest of the group. The men sauntered in the pews and Puy sat sandwiched between Wong and Shaowei.

Numerous white people filled the pews in front of them and Puy could’ve sworn that he washed some of the clothes they were wearing. The men all wore suits like him, with starched collars and cuff-linked wrists. The women wore nice dresses and extravagant hats. The whites occasionally looked back from their seats with disdainful glances at the Chinamen. Children especially loved to look at them, Puy noted.

Reverend Riley stood at the front of the room and read from a book and Puy didn’t know what he was saying but it seemed cheerful overall. Shaowei wouldn’t translate any of it for him — “It’s just Jesus stuff” — but towards the end, Shaowei began to translate when what was being said seemed relevant to him.

“He talked about how we were in the newspaper,” Shaowei said.

“What did he say?”

“He said something about loving a stranger because we were all once strangers in Egypt.”

“I’ve never been to Egypt,” Puy said.

After the service was over, Reverend Riley came back to the pews with the Chinamen and told them to wait. After most of the white people had left, and only a few white women remained, Reverend Riley instructed the men to follow him into the church’s gymnasium which was a basement underneath where they had been seated. There were a few tables and chairs strewn around the gym and cobwebs had formed between the basketball nets and their backboards. A couple of small windows near the ceiling let in streams of light like portholes. The white women who had remained upstairs followed them into the gym.

“I was right,” Gao said, excited.

The Chinese men gathered on one side of the gym, the women on the other.

Reverend Riley stood in the centre, looking almost like a referee and said, “Okay, well, those of you who come here weekly, you know what to do, find your buddy. For those of you who are new, you’ll get paired up with one of these women here who have generously donated their time to help you learn English.”

Reverend Riley looked at the crowd of Chinese men and then said, “Those of you that can understand me can translate for the others.”

Shaowei explained to Puy and Wong and Gao what was to happen. Reverend Riley walked around and introduced each of the new men to a woman who would be his language buddy for the foreseeable future. Puy is the last one to get paired.

“Well, Mr. Ping, you’re next! Let me see, which lovely lady will help you understand me...” Reverend Riley looks round the room and then scratches one of the hairless spots next to the lone tuft of hair atop his head. “Well, uh, that’s strange, there should be enough of them, I swear we had enough volunteers. Let me count again.”

Reverend Riley counted all the paired-up groups in the gym. “Well, geez, I’m sorry, Mr. Ping. I guess I didn’t get as many volunteers as I thought. No worry, you can be my language buddy, err, I can be your language buddy. I mean, I’m sure you’ll have lots to teach me too. I love foreign perspectives, they’re so... enlightening.”

“It’s always the way,” Puy said with a smile and nod, oblivious to what exactly Riley was saying but painfully aware that there was no woman for him.

“Oh, that’s right, you only know that one phrase. Let me get one of these here language books,” Riley said as he walked toward one of the tables and chairs, motioning for Puy to follow him.

Just as Puy and Riley were to sit down, there was a loud clatter down the stairs and a slam of a door somewhere in the distance. A woman emerged from the stairwell, sunglasses on. She looked younger than Ping, maybe in her late teens, and she had a bony figure with messy, curly hair. Something seemed off about her, ragged like the laundry’s sink, and yet she moved with a precision and a confidence that called attention to her.

“Oh, Ethel,” Reverend Riley said. “I knew I had gathered enough volunteers, this is —”

“Yes, I knows b’y, I was out for a smoke,” Ethel said.

Puy noticed that Ethel spoke very fast and it reminded him of the way that women spoke back home, breathless and almost abrasive.

“Yes, well, this is Mr. Ping, uh, I seem to have forgotten the front half of his name but you can establish that no doubt. Mr. Ping, this is Ethel Squibb.” Reverend Riley said the last few words with a slow determinedness and loud, for some reason, as if being louder would help Puy understand what English words mean. “Ethel. Squibb. This is your language buddy, ok?”

Puy nodded and smiled.

“Now Ethel, you know my thoughts on smoking— “

“What? You think you can tell me where I can have a Jesus smoke now too.”

“Ethel, please don’t take the Lord’s name in vain in here,” Reverend Riley said. “Or anywhere for that matter.”

“In here? In the gymnasium? What, did the fadder, the son and the holy ghost have a game of free throw in here?”

“Always a delight, Ethel. I’ll let you two get to it.”

Puy smiled and nodded at Ethel repeatedly.

“Oh, Jesus, I didn’t know what I was singing up for,” she said, looking around the gymnasium to see if there’s anybody around that she knew. “What do you know in English?”

Puy didn’t say anything, only smiled and nodded.

“Alright, you’re a difficult one now, aren’t ya? Tell me what’s your name.”

Puy smiles, nods.

“Name? Name? Jesus, b’y, whaddya wanna be called?”

Puy felt somewhat intimidated by the harshness of her tone but there was something about her that was radiant, that her brusqueness was somehow charismatic. At least she wasn’t flinging mud at him.

“Ethel,” she said as she pointed at herself. “Ethel. My name is Ethel. Your name?” She pointed at him.

“Oh,” Puy said and produced his immigration papers from the breast pocket of his suit.

“Whaddya expect me to read now too, Jesus Christ tonight,” she said as she took the papers. “William Set-o, See-tow, Ping. Huh. William Ping. William See-tow Ping.”

Puy smiled and nodded. “William,” he tried to say, the syllables technically correct but colliding together in a way that made them sound unnatural.

“That’s a good name,” Ethel said. “There’s a ring to it.”

Puy nodded, having once again lost track of what meaning she intended to impart.

“Let’s look through this frickin’ language book,” Ethel said as she picked up the book. It was an oversized book and inside were pictures of various objects and emotions, the essential words one would need throughout a day. The first picture was of a toilet.

“‘S’pose you knows what that is?” she asked him.

Puy smiled. Back home, there weren’t really toilets like this, more like holes in the ground, and he and the others had found it difficult using the Western style toilets they had encountered on the many ships and trains they’d taken to get here.

“Toilet,” Ethel said, pointing at the drawn image of toilet. “That’s where ya go when you need to take a shit. Take a shit, y’know. Toilet.”

“Toilet,” Puy repeated.

“Alright, let’s see what small wonders the next page holds,” Ethel said as she turned the page.

The page depicted a plate of food, what might've been a steak or a pork chop next to some vegetables. "Food," she said. "That's the stuff you shit out. Food."

"Food," Puy repeated.

It went on like this for a while, Ethel defining the words for simply drawn images and Puy repeating them. It was hard to say how much Puy would retain, but they covered a lot of ground, from "Car" and "Shower" to "Happy" and "Sad."

After about an hour of this, Reverend Riley stood in the centre of the gym and announced that the language session was done for the week. He stood by the door and thanked each woman as she left and shook hands with all the men. When Puy went to leave, Reverend Riley said to him, "I'm sorry for that mix-up back there and I know Ethel can be a little, well, abrasive, I guess. I'd love to make it up to you though. My wife is making a nice turkey dinner for lunch today and we'd be honoured if you and maybe a couple of your friends would come by the house and partake."

Puy stared at him blankly and Reverend Riley said, "Oh, right, darn. You don't know what I'm saying."

Shaowei was lingering nearby and said, in English, "I translate for him."

"Ah, do you know each other well?"

"We together for weeks," Shaowei said. "Feel like I know him whole life."

"Alright, well I was just inviting Mr. Ping here, and yourself too of course, to my house for a nice little dinner my wife is making. Could you tell him that?"

"Oh, thank you sir," Shaowei said before explaining the situation to Puy, who couldn't suppress a large smile from forming on his face.

Puy accepted the invitation and Reverend Riley said, “Well, you boys can come with me to my house now if you like.”

Reverend Riley led Shaowei and Puy to his house, which was only a few steps from the church. It was a nice spring day, a stiff breeze but the sun was shining bright. Children in paper-boy hats played nearby, and the occasional car would pass them on the road, in addition to the rampant horse-drawn carriages and roaming farm animals.

Reverend Riley lived in a tall, but thin, house. The porch smelled of must, like the windows and doors were rarely open, and Puy and Shaowei were both surprised by the numerous pairs of shoes in the doorway of the Reverend’s home.

“Dad, is that you?” a voice of a small girl called out from within the bellows of the house. It was a dark house, with narrow stairwells and narrow hallways. The Reverend led the men into a living room wherein there was a loveseat couch and one ornamental sofa chair with a high-arched back. So too was there a piano of some type, an organ, pushed up against a wall, adjacent to a fireplace. There were no decorations, just the chairs and the organ. It seemed that the Reverend and his family lived a simple life.

“You boys can have a seat there if you like,” Riley said to the men. Shaowei sat on one side of the tiny loveseat and motioned for Puy to join him. They sat there cramped, looking at Riley as he settled into his sofa chair.

A little girl ran into the room, with her hair in pigtails. Puy recognized her right away as one of the children who was sitting near the front in church. She seemed unsurprised that her father had brought guests home. This must have been a regular occurrence.

“Dad, Dad, Mom says dinner is almost ready. Where have you been?”

“Why, you know my routine darling. I was helping these gentleman learn English. Fellas, meet my daughter Addie.”

Addie quickly waved at them and then turned back to her father.

“Dad, when are you going to get that thing out of the bathtub?”

“Oh, hush about that now, let our guests introduce themselves.”

The two men sat uncomfortably for a moment on the loveseat, their arms and legs squished together from the smallness of the sofa.

“My name is Shaowei Pu,” he said in English, before turning to Puy and saying in Taiwanese, “Tell her your name.”

“My name William Seto Ping,” Puy said.

“Why do you got a name like our people but you don’t?” Addie asked both the men.

“Oh, now, don’t go asking about their names, it ain’t polite,” Riley said. “Why don’t you go play a song on that there organ for the men to enjoy while we wait for lunch?”

Addie hopped up on the organ’s seat and began to play a couple notes, awkward, strange sounding notes, as she found her footing with the instrument. Then she began to play something soft and slow, or as soft as the droning sound of an organ can allow.

“What a fellowship, what a joy divine,” Addie sang out the words as loud as she could, but her voice wasn’t yet quite strong enough to be heard above the sound of the organ. “Leaning on the everlasting arms; What a blessedness, what a peace is mine, Leaning on the everlasting arms.”

The men smiled. Riley was proud, gently tapping his hand on his knee in beat to the music, Shaowei had trouble understanding just what exactly Addie was singing, and Puy didn't know even a single word but he smiled at the kindness he felt in this house.

"O' how sweet to walk, in this pilgrim way," Addie's voice cracked trying to reach some of the notes but she pressed on. "Leaning on the everlasting arms."

As Addie sang the hymn, a short, plump, homely-looking woman emerged from the hallway into the room. She wore an apron over a light pink dress — Puy wondered if he had washed it this week — and she too tapped her hand on her waist in time to the beat of Addie's performance.

When the last note on the organ had been struck, the woman chimed in: "Dinner's ready, my duckies. Moses, I see you've brought some wonderful guests! I hope you b'y's like Jiggs!"

"That's my wife, Martha," Riley explained.

"That's me husband, Moses," Martha explained.

Moses led the way down the narrow hallway, and the men passed by several dusty oil paintings of previous Reverends culminating in Reverend Moses Riley himself. The dinner table was in the kitchen, mere feet away from the stove. The table itself was small, with several plates crowding the tabletop, but there was still room enough for everyone's seat.

"I guess I'll do the honours of cutting the turkey," said Riley, "but first let me say grace... O, Father..."

Riley droned on in the background, flailing his hands, sometimes manically, other times affecting a solemn air, as Puy surveyed the plates in front of him. So many things he had never seen before. The bowl nearest to him was filled with an indiscriminate yellow mash, looking as

though someone had smashed something into shaggy little chunks. The next plate had an indiscriminate white mash, of similar shape and consistency. The next plate was familiar, carrots and chunks of cabbage, looking dull and wilted after having been boiled. Next to that was a plate of pale, rotund pudding, beige and porous except for punctuations of blueberries, their colour bleeding through the doughy canvas. And then a plate with chunks of dry beef, shining blood red, like an entirely raw tendon, a paradox. And then in the centre of the table was the fattest bird Puy had ever seen.

When Riley finished his little speech, they were free to eat. Riley helped served the food to the men — he cut the turkey — and instructed the men on how best to eat this vaunted cuisine.

“Have some carrots,” he said, before gesturing towards a mason jar filled with small green chunks swimming throughout a yellow liquid. Riley told them, “You’ll want to put some of these mustard pickles there on your plate too, and some of these pickled beets.” Riley brandished another jar, this one filled with small red chunks floating in a purple liquid.

Puy and Shaowei ate gingerly. This was the first time in weeks, maybe months, that they had eaten, or even been privy to, a meal of this size and their stomachs had shrunk to accommodate the small rations they usually received. And, to make matter worse, this food was so weird. Puy chewed the turkey meat and was under the impression that it was chicken. Privately, he was puzzled by it. Flavourless, dry, it was like a chicken from another planet. And these accoutrements, bizarre. Overwhelming flavours of vinegar from the mystery jars mixed with the bland, bitter taste of vegetables that had been boiled for too long. And this thing with the blueberries in it, it tasted sweet like dessert. And, this beef, why was it so salty? It made him feel like spitting. Puy was thankful for the meal and for a respite from the labour, but this was just strange. He

supposed that this is the type of food you eat when you live on Gold Mountain, that your chickens grow big and don't taste the same anymore.

Nothing tasted the same anymore.

Shaowei had more familiarity with this type of food, having eaten turkey before at Thanksgiving celebrations in San Francisco. He preferred the dark meat to the white that Riley had cut for them. Still, neither Puy nor Shaowei could muster themselves to eat much, partially from the fact of the strangeness of it all, partially from the fact that they just couldn't eat much after eating so little for so long.

"Do you guys like the food?" Martha had noticed the Chinamen's low appetite. "Do they like the food, Moses? Do you like it? Do they understand me, Moses? You understand?"

"Martha, calm down," Riley said as he shovelled another forkful of the dry turkey meat into his mouth. "One of them can understand you and one of them can't."

"It's just, I'm afraid I might've overcooked the turkey, and, and, I might've boiled the vegetables too long, we were at the church for a little longer —"

"Martha, enough. These are working men, they work hard, this is their one day of leisure. Let them eat leisurely."

The family went silent, except for the sounds of the knives and forks hitting the plates.

"Pa, can I talk to our guests?"

"Yes, Addie," Riley said.

"How far away is China?"

Neither of the Chinamen respond as Shaowei struggled to swallow a small piece of the salt beef. Puy nodded.

“Oh, hush now, Addie,” Riley interjected. “It’s further away then you can possibly imagine.”

Once again, silence in the house. Puy noticed a hunting rifle mounted above the table.

“Moses,” Martha said, “what are your plans for the rest of the day?”

“I’m not too sure yet,” Riley said. “I might go join the band practice at church later. See if I can be of any assistance.”

“Why don’t you get rid of that thing in the bath tub?”

Riley placed down his fork on the table.

“Martha,” he said. “I have told you already that the men from the museum will be here in due time to take care of that.”

“It’d be nice to have a bath in peace again, is all.”

“This is a cultural endeavour, Martha, I found it and I kept it so that men of science can learn from it. This is what God would have wanted.”

“Well, it makes me uncomfortable having that, having that ... *thing* in the house.”

There was silence again for a moment. The plates were as cleared as they were going to be.

“You guys want to see something historic?” Riley said to Puy and Shaowei as he stood up from the table. “Watch your step on the stairs, some of the bannisters are broken right now, so there’ll be nothing to grab onto if you fall.”

There was a splashing sound echoing through the house as Reverend Riley led them upstairs and stopped outside a door at the top of the stairwell, placing his hand on the knob but not yet opening it.

“Now, I never seen nothing like this before,” Riley said. “I asked everyone I know, ‘you ever see something like this?’ You know what every single one of them said? They all said ‘no, sir.’ Now, some of ‘em had heard stories of it before, sure, but nobody had ever seen one. That’s why I contacted those museum guys. They’ll come take care of it for me, make sure everyone can learn from it. Now, I’m thinking, you fellas on the other side of the world, now maybe this is something you see all the time, maybe it’s a daily occurrence for you, so that’s why I want you to see this. There’s a bucket next to the door if either of you need it.”

Reverend Riley slowly turned the doorknob and opened the door. The room was barren, save for a clawfoot bathtub, surrounded by a curtain. The light from a nearby window made the porcelain tub shine like a well-basted turkey, as well as illuminate the slow, erratic movements of something behind the curtain. It seemed a normal tub, fancy, sure, but normal, until something flopped over the edge of the curtain. A long pinkish tentacle.

Shaowei and Puy cautiously approached the tub, as Riley pulled back the curtain. Draped over an iron bar suspended six feet above the tub, a giant squid, quite a bit larger than anything Puy or Shaowei had ever seen before. Its skin was dusky red and tough as leather, the tentacles as thick as a man’s wrist. It was hard to say just how long the squid was, as its many arms draped over and around the bar several times. Its tentacles were still flexing, attempting to suction on to the side of the tub, its slightly deflated head almost looked as though it were attempting to breathe. Against all odds, this gigantic thing was still alive.

Shaowei vomited upon seeing the squid, whereas Puy merely felt uneasy looking at the thing.

“See, now that’s why the bucket is there,” Riley said as he approaches the tub with the squid in it. “I’ll take that reaction to mean that you fellas don’t see these things in China either. That’s just as I expected. See, I wake up one morning and I hear a knocking at my door.

"Why, I open the door, expecting to see a beggar or a parishioner. Why, no! It’s one of these tentacles banging on the door. I walk outside and this thing is just on the ground outside. I couldn’t believe it, something so big. Still alive too, tentacles moving about. You can’t tell from the way I got him wrapped around the bar, but I think he’s about 55 feet long, I mean just impossibly big. Anyways, this thing is on the ground outside the house and I don’t know who put him there, I figure some fisherman caught this thing somehow and dragged it to shore and I guess they brought it to the Reverend’s house thinking I’d know what to do with it. Heck if I know.

“My first thought was to drag it back to the ocean, throw it in there. But some of my neighbours saw me dragging it down the road and just about everyone said they had never seen anything like this before. ‘No sir, only in the stories.’ So, then I think to myself ‘What I have in my possession here is what all the savants in the world could not know, what all the museums in the world could not contain.’ That’s when I realize, what this *thing* is. It’s a sign from God. Warning us of all the evils that lurk below. That’s why I’m getting the scientists and the museums to take a look at it.”

Riley leaned in closer to the still-vomiting Shaowei and whispered, “Don’t tell Martha and Addie, but, we’re waiting on a zoologist from Yale down in the States to come up here and take a real good look at this thing.”

Puy stood there staring at the big giant creature, with all of its many arms folded around this one piece of iron stretching across the room and he wondered where it must think it is, to live its whole life in the ocean and now to be here.

Reverend Riley walked towards the big squid and grabbed the end of one of its tentacles.

“Now, look here,” he said. “I am shaking hands with the veritable arm of the hitherto mythical devilfish.”

—

After the encounter with the squid, Shaowei and Puy went on with their day. They thanked Riley and his family for the meal and they started walking back to the laundry. They didn't know anywhere else to go.

“That thing should've stayed in the ocean,” Shaowei said.

“I completely agree,” Puy said, but felt as though they might've been thinking so for different reasons.

They walked in silence down the busy commercial streets of St. John's. There wasn't much to say and they were tired. Tired from work, tired from eating turkey, tired from life. People on the street stared at them, some snickered, some pointed, some crossed the street to get away from them, others crossed the street to get closer to them. Shaowei was their run of the mill celestial, with the long ponytail and the strange Oriental clothes. Puy stood out for a different reason, his hair was cut and coiffed like a Westerner and his wearing of a suit was a concept foreign to the local conception of foreigners.

Yet, despite the snickering and the pointing and the staring, they walked freely down the roads back to their home base, Fong-Li Laundry. When they arrived there, they saw that Gao and Wong were waiting outside.

“Where were you guys?” Gao said.

“We thought you were in there,” Wong said, pointing towards the laundromat.

Shaowei and Puy catch the other two up on everything that had transpired, from their respective English lessons — “Stupid white people bullshit,” Shaowei said, “forcing their beliefs and their toilets on us” — to lunch at the priest’s house — “His daughter starts making all this noise,” Shaowei said, “and we’re just supposed to sit there and listen,” — to the appearance of the giant squid — “I looked it right in the eye,” Shaowei said, “it didn’t seem that big to me.”

The four of them went on a walk through their new town, the rest of the afternoon still stretching ahead of them. There wasn’t any place any of them knew of that they could go to without white people staring at them — even now some were on a corner across the street gawking at them— so Wong, who had seen more of the town than the other three, had the idea to walk to the other side of the harbour, the South Side, which appeared to be a mostly unadorned hill. They walked down by the harbour, past the train station, down around the loading docks, past the DuMont Shipping Yard, to the other edge of the harbour. To Puy’s surprise, they hadn’t attracted too much attention from the locals on their walk. Sure, sometimes somebody would point and yell “Chinks” or something like that, but hell, Puy, Wong and Gao couldn’t even understand what they were saying and as for Shaowei, well, he had seen enough of the Western world that it took more than words to hurt his feelings now.

They reached the Southside Hills just as the sun was setting and the sky was alight in a wondrous gradient of colours from orange to red to a deep pink. Wong was right: there wasn't much of anything or anybody over here. A couple of wharfs, but mostly just tall grass for as far as the eye could see. The men skipped rocks across the harbour, then sat in the grass, idle amongst the blades.

"We should head back before it gets too dark," Shaowei suggested and it seemed he was right. While the sky was still full of colour, the sun itself had disappeared and none of the men wanted to be stuck wandering around in the dark.

They began the long walk back, and in the distance they could see the outlines of people approaching them. Two kids on bikes. They were approaching fast.

When the kids on bikes reached the men, they drove in circles around them, slow circles but fast enough to force the men to stop where they were.

"Hey b'y's," one of the kids said. "Beautiful night, wha?"

"Red sky at night," the other kid said. "Sailor's delight."

"Red sky at morn," the first child said. "Sailor's scorn."

"White people bullshit," Shaowei mumbled in Taishanese.

"Yes, b'y," the first kid spoke again. "Come on now, don't go speaking that gook shit, b'y. We're being nice to ya's."

Puy found the children's constant circling around them to be dizzying and he wished for nothing more than for the two kids to just ride away.

"Nice suit you got dere, buddy," the second kid said.

Puy didn't say anything, oblivious to what they were saying.

“Wha’ now, cat’s got your tongue?”

“Buddy, what are ya, too good to talk to us, are ya?”

“Yeah, buddy, what do you think, you’re too fucking good for us?”

“We, uh, no speak uh, English,” Shaowei said.

“Oh, so you lot thinks you can come over here and not even speak like the rest of us? And this one here thinks he can dress like us? Me fadder can’t even afford a suit like that, buddy, and he’s a barrelmaker.”

The kids got off the bikes. It had been hard to tell before when they were driving around, but the two boys must’ve been about twelve years old. They approached Puy.

“We, uh, no speak uh, English,” Shaowei said again, more deliberate and slow this time.

“Come on now, we’re just trying to be friends with ya’s,” one of the kids said. “Let me try on that suit jacket.”

“He no speak uh English, he no speak uh English,” Shaowei repeated.

“Let me see that jacket buddy,” the kid said, reaching out to grab Puy’s lapel. Puy took a step back and Gao stepped between him and the kid.

“Get out of the way, chink,” the kid said as he walks around Gao, “I just want to see the blazer is all.”

The kid reached out and grabbed Puy’s lapels again. Puy slapped his hand away and a tense silence fell among all parties.

“Did you just hit him?” the other kid said.

“He did, this fucking chinky gook thinks he’s tough. You think you’re so fucking tough, I’ll show you tough, buddy.”

The kid punched Puy's stomach as hard as he could, winding him and bringing him to his knees. Out of the corner of his eyes, Puy saw Wong picking up a rock.

"Wong, don't," he said.

"There he goes talking that ching chang bing bang shit again," the kid said.

"You think you can just walk around here in a suit? You think you can just walk around here willy nilly? Your kind don't deserve to wear this type of clothes, you fucking gook," the kid said as he grabs on to one side of the blazer. "Wear your chink clothes."

"Yeah, wear your dirty chink clothes," the other kid said as he grabbed the other side of Puy's blazer. The two kids pulled as hard as they could and the blazer ripped in half from behind.

Wong threw the rock and it sailed through the air, missing the kids altogether and hitting Puy square in the chest.

"Run," Shaowei said as he picks up one of the kids' bikes and throws it into the harbour. Gao followed suit and threw the other kid's bike in the harbour too.

"What are you doing? That's my fuckin' bike," one of the kids yelled as he let go of Puy's torn-asunder-blazer.

Puy struggled to his feet, his muscles still sore from the laundry. His feet slipped in the fragile soil but he began to run away.

"We won't forget this" one of the kids yelled out. "We know where you live, we know your face."

"Look at 'em run," the other kid said. "Scatterin' like rats."

Puy ran as fast he could, catching up with the others. Wong was the fastest out of all of them.

“I’ll lead the way,” Wong called out. “I know the roads better than you guys.”

“Rats! Rat, rat, rat!” the kids yelled out from behind.

Wong led the men around the shipping port, past the train station, back on to the roads they remember. Then he brought them into steep alleyways with long stairwells, dark spaces like caves, and past buildings that look like Gothic castles. A frantic mix of left and right turns, that caught the attention of various local drunks.

“The chinks are running!” someone called out as the men darted through the streets. Wong stopped in an alleyway off George Street, not too far from the alley they would need to turn down to get back to Fong-Li.

The four of them crouched down and waited to see if they had successfully evaded the children. A hand reached out of the darkness and gripped Puy’s shoulder.

“Now,” the lyrical voice said, “why is it that every time I see you, you’ve got some sort of issue going on with your suit?”

Reverend Riley offered a gentle smile and although Puy didn’t understand what he was saying, he looked down at his own body. Half of his suit jacket was still on, the other half was presumably blowing around in the wind on the South Side hills, a hollow sleeve acting like a wind kite.

Shaowei explained to Reverend Riley what happened, with the kids and the taunting and how their nice view of the sunset had become tarnished.

“Let me tell you three things you need to know,” Reverend Riley said to Shaowei, “and please translate this to the others. First thing is, you never work on Sundays. Second thing is, you absolutely need to learn English as soon as possible. Once you know English, you can talk your

way out of things. And more importantly, you can do some business. And the third thing is, and this is important, don't let people take advantage of you. Go on, tell the others what I said."

They were gathered outside Fong-Li Laundry now and Shaowei told the others what the Reverend said.

"Alright, now you know what the common ground between those three rules is?" Riley asked Shaowei. "Going to church. Keep going to my church every Sunday and we'll get you on the right path, we'll get you speaking English in no time. And, I told Mr. Ping this before, but I don't think he understood me, but owning a gun is always a good step too."

"It's always the way," Shaowei said to the others after he translated Reverend Riley's words.

Shaowei and Puy headed inside the laundry and Reverend Riley promised to escort Gao and Wong back to where they lived to make sure no trouble happened.

Puy and Shaowei returned to the iron bed at the big table and Uncle Li was there waiting for them.

"What the hell?" Li said, "Where were you?"

"It's a long story," Puy said.

"Long story, my ass," Li said. "We were supposed to win some money today, remember?"

Puy had completely forgotten.

"I completely forgot," Puy said.

"You forget your own Uncle? Your own poor Uncle? Look at your suit jacket, this is what happens when you're not there for family, when you can't even be bothered to help family."

“I was —“

“I don’t want to hear your excuses,” Li said. “Too busy for your own family. Ridiculous. You get what you deserve. You stay with me after church from now on, stay out of trouble.”

Puy rested his head on the table and his mind wandered back to what the kids were saying as they ran away. Shaowei said the kids had called them ‘rats.’ Scattering rats. This angered Gao and Wong, but Puy thought of the story Shaowei had told him back in steerage. The rat pushed the cat off the boat and the cat never made the zodiac. The rat won.

But it was still a rat.

The Man Comes Around

Life was work. That's how things proceeded for them, every day was wash and rinse, wash and rinse. Soreness turned to strength; tiredness turned to bitterness. There was never much conversation between the laundrymen beyond the topic of the laundry itself and different techniques to use whilst cleaning. Everyone felt the same so there was no need to talk about their feelings, their wants, their desires. Puy cried often, and soon realized he wasn't alone. The laundry was washed in the tears of the Chinamen.

The only day that ever really differed from their schedule was Sunday. Sundays were the only respite from work. Every Sunday morning, they would bathe in the tubs they did the laundry in, avoiding the rough edges as best they could for fear that it would draw blood from their already fragile skin. Then, after bath time, Reverend Riley would come and lead them to church, shepherding his flock of sheep. Then they would learn English in the gymnasium. Ethel wasn't a great teacher and she often showed up late, but she knew how to get Puy to repeat words and within a couple of weeks, he began to retain these keywords — toilet, happy, sad, yes, no, thank you, please, stop, English, church, Jesus, Chinese. After the language session, Puy and all of the Chinamen would join Li and go to the Tai Mei Club.

This began on their second Sunday. Puy and Shaowei were careful to not repeat the mistakes made on their first day of the Lord and they knew that the only way to do that was to avoid being in vulnerable positions. And the only way to be invulnerable was to avoid the general public, the white people, as best they could. The second Sunday had proceeded much the same as the first Sunday and indeed it would become a prototype for their future Sundays.

After their language lesson, Li escorted the men to the Tai Mei Club. It was a relatively short walk from the church, only a couple of blocks away. They walked down George Street, passing the previous night's drunks still strewn on the street. They went up to Duckworth and then made another turn to reach a building where a sign read HOP WAH LAUNDRY. Li led Puy and his friends through a myriad of narrow hallways connecting to small rooms. It struck Puy that this seemed more like someone's house than it did a laundry. Li took them through a network of hallways: a left, a right, another left, up a quarter of a stair, down three more, deeper and deeper into the building until they entered a room with a long rectangular table, not unlike the iron bed back at Fong-Li. But instead of being a makeshift bed, the table was pushed up against the back wall, acting as a makeshift bar, a backdrop for the hubbub of activity and noise in front of it. Chinese men were all around the room, seated around several smaller tables, clinging to the sides of the wall, smoking, yelling, spitting, sweating and most of all gambling. A persistent clanking noise rang through the air as mahjong tiles were pushed and passed around the table in speeds heretofore unknown. Money being thrown on to tables, drinks being poured.

"Welcome to the Tai Mei Club," Uncle Li said as he hastened to join a game.

Puy and Shaowei went over to the bar, where a very short Chinese man was standing on the table and making drinks. From a distance, they had thought he was a young child in a suit but when they got closer, they realized he was a man slightly older than either of them.

"A dollar a drink," the short man said.

"That's everything I make in a day," Shaowei said.

"Hey, that's all anybody makes in a day. Except here at the Tai-Mei Club. You can make a hell of a lot more than a dollar here, bub."

Shaowei and Puy exchanged a look, the meaning of which is clear to neither.

“Fine, give me a drink,” Shaowei said.

“You can have tea or rum,” the barman said.

“I’ll have the rum,” Shaowei said.

“Do you have any baijiu?” Puy asked.

“Not unless you brought it with you,” the barkeep said with a laugh.

“I’ll have a tea,” Puy said.

“Okay, money first,” the barman said.

The barman poured a shot of rum from a bottle with no label, before turning to a nearby tea pot and pouring up a cup of that.

“Have at her, gentleman,” the barman said in English.

Shaowei takes a sip of the rum before spitting it out with a violent yell.

“What is this shit?”

“I just told you what it is,” the barman said as he screws the cap back on the bottle. “It’s rum.”

Shaowei slammed a dollar bill into the barman’s hand and said, “I’ve never had rum that tastes like this.”

“Well, you must be new here,” the barman said.

“Well, have you ever seen me before?” Shaowei asked sarcastically.

“Hey, watch your mouth, big guy. It’s a privilege to be here at the Tai-Mei Club.”

A tall man, taller than any of the other Chinese immigrants, in a long dark suit emerged from around the corner, seemingly sensing a conflict about to form. The skin on his face looked

as though it had been pulled taut like a skin graft and his hair line was receding. He was closer to Li's age but still young, maybe in his mid-thirties.

"Hey Little Joe," the man said. "What seems to be the problem here?"

"This lowlife is giving me a hard time about the booze, and the price and he's got a mouth on him too."

"I don't believe we've been acquainted," the tall man said. "My name is Hop Wah and I run this here establishment."

Hop shook hands with Puy and Shaowei as they introduced themselves, then he said "Were you giving my bar keep a tough time?"

"It's just this rum doesn't taste right," Shaowei said. "I used to live in California and —"

"Yeah, well, that's how they drink around here," Hop Wah interrupted him as Little Joe passes him a glass of water. "The fisherman trade the lowest grade fish to the blacks and in exchange they give them these big casks of rum. Then the fishermen sell these casks to the rich people. Now the stuff they drink, apparently that's the good stuff. That's not what we're drinking here. What we're drinking here, well... after the rich people finish their casks, they throw out these old barrels, or at least they used to throw them out before they got wise to what happens next. Inside those empty old barrels is this sludge left over from making the rum. Street urchins fill up these barrels with water and roll them up and down the hills here, get the sludge circulating. Then they bottle it."

"What do they call it?"

"They call it rum. Trust me, you'll get used to it." Hop Wah turned back to Little Joe.

"Hey, Joe, give me four dollars."

Joe handed him the money from out of an old mason jar. Hop Wah gave two one-dollar bills to Shaowei and two to Puy.

“Hey, I don’t want to be indebted to you—“ Puy began.

“You’re not indebted to me. I’m sorry for your troubles. You guys are new here, I can tell. You didn’t know what you were getting yourself into. So, the first round is on me. And then I gave you another dollar so that you can go join in on the fun and games. This is the Tai-Mei club, this is your weekly respite from all the work you have out there. You’re here to relax. So, relax!”

“I don’t want to take your money,” Puy said.

“You’re not taking my money. As a matter of fact, I don’t even know what you’re talking about. If you try to give that money to me, I’ll be offended, I’ll have you kicked out of here! So, go. Play.”

“Is this even enough to cover the table fee?” Shaowei asked.

“At some tables it is,” Hop said. “Depends on how big you want to play.”

Shaowei walked away from the bar and sat down at a table that was getting ready to play. Puy stuck by the bar. Hop Wah nudged himself a bit closer to Puy.

“Not ready to play yet?”

“I’ll just have my drink first,” Puy said.

“Hey, that’s fair. Need to size up the room, figure out who the real players are, I get ya.”

Hop Wah eyed up Puy for a moment and then continued.

“Hey, so, I’m wearing a suit and you’re wearing a suit and all the rest of these chinks are wearing their chink clothes, so what gives? You managing a laundry or something?”

“Heh,” Puy laughed in a pained way. “No, not really. I used to be— I’m a teacher. Or, I was. I’ll be a teacher again when I go back.”

“Ou, a teacher, must have a big brain in there” Hop Wah said with a laugh. “Whereabouts are you headed back to?”

“Hoi Ping,” Puy said.

“Oh my god,” Hop Wah said. “You must be Li’s boy. Yes, oh, yes. He’s been talking about you.”

“I’m his nephew,” Puy added.

“Yeah, yeah,” Hop said. “He’s a great guy, Li. One of our best customers. Maybe too good of a customer. He can be quite a skilled player at times.”

“Yeah, I bet he is a great customer,” Puy said as he stares across the room at Li throwing handfuls of money onto a table.

“So, that means you’re one of my employees too I guess,” Hop Wah said. “For the time being anyways. Li lost the laundry to me, but I hear that Fong Choy is coming up from down south to settle the matter.”

“When will Fong Choy arrive?” Puy asked as he sipped his tea.

“Next couple of weeks, I figure,” Hop Wah said. “Could be any day at all really. He’ll come and make me an offer to buy me out. I’ll accept it too. You have to respect your elders. You know he was the first Chinese person on this island?”

Puy lowered his tea. “Really?”

“Yeah, the very first one. Can you imagine what that must’ve been like?”

“Did he know English?”

“Did he know English? Pshhhh, he knows most languages.”

“Are you... is this a joke?”

“I’m not kidding. He was from the same village as you actually, Hoi Ping, and when he was a teenager, he left town. Just started walking. Until one day, years later, he hit water. He was in London. London, England. The man walked right across Eurasia.”

“Oh, wow,” Puy said sarcastically.

“I’m not bullshitting you. He leaves London, goes to Montreal, starts a laundry, sells it, goes to Halifax, starts a laundry, sells it, comes to St. John’s, starts a laundry, doesn’t sell it but then one day, he just up and leaves. Doesn’t even tell anyone where he’s going, other than just saying ‘South.’ Couple months later, we hear he’s in the Caribbean, then Jamaica. Which kind of made sense when you think about it.”

“Why?”

“All of Newfoundland’s most valuable assets get traded down there,” Hop Wah said as he finished his glass of water. “Now, who am I, the Fong Choy expert? Stop listening to me and go play a game.”

“Alright,” Puy said. “I’ll think about it.”

The scent and smoke and sweat of a secret casino are nauseating at three in the afternoon. Then the soul-erosion produced by high gambling – a compost of greed and fear and nervous tension – becomes unbearable and the senses awake and revolt from it. Or at least that’s how Puy felt, thinking back on how an ill-timed horse bet led to months in steerage. It occurred to him that that was the moment, the very second, that things got bad for him.

Puy floated around the room for a few hours, hesitant to lose anymore than he had already lost. Every now and then, he would fetch a drink for Li between sessions. Sometimes, he would share a couple words with Shaowei or Gao between sessions. But, mostly he just floated around. At some point, he realized Shaowei wasn't in the room anymore. Rather than risk going outside to try to look for him, Puy found his way back to the bar and bought himself another tea.

Little Joe poured up another cup. Puy looked at him as he poured, at his little legs on top of the table.

"Hey," Puy said. "I have to ask, you seem—"

"Short, huh?" Little Joe interrupted him, offended. "That what you're gonna say? Gonna ask why my legs are so small? Let me tell you something, some people are just born short and that's it."

"Okay," Puy said. "I was going to say that you seem like you've lived here for a while."

"Oh," Little Joe said, "I'm sorry, I thought you — you don't know how hard it is, to be like me. To be so — so short. I mean it's bad enough being Chinese in this town, can you imagine being three feet tall? There's piles of manure out there taller than me."

Puy and Little Joe shared a laugh.

"You don't mind being called Little Joe?"

"Nah, it's just a name. There used to be a regular-sized Joe, and he was around first. So, I was Little Joe. He's gone now, but, y'know, the name stuck."

"So, how long have you lived here?"

"Oh, just a couple years."

Puy thought for a moment.

“I’m sure this is hopeless,” Puy said, “but I’ve been hoping to send a letter home and I was wonder—”

“No,” Little Joe said with a laugh. “I don’t know anybody going home and, if I did, you’d already know about it because they’d have a mail bag about this big.” Little Joe placed his hand on the top of his head.

Puy laughed and sighed at the same time, creating a sad noise, just as Shaowei walked into the room and joined them at the bar.

“I’m getting hungry,” he said. “Do you wanna head out? Gao says he can get us a good deal at the restaurant he works at.”

Puy, Shaowei, Wong, and Gao all endeavoured to head out. They struggled to find their way out of the myriad of hallways, accidentally walking into a bathroom and then a supply closet, passing by a stairwell to a higher floor before eventually finding their way out to the street.

“It’s good to get some fresh air,” Wong said as he lit a cigarette.

They walked back to Duckworth, then on to Water Street, over to the Globe Restaurant. A big awning hung over the front door, but the men passed by that and went down a nearby alley so that Gao could let them in through the back. The restaurant was closed on Sundays, closed to the general public at least. On Sundays, the Chinese men could come in here and eat. They couldn’t eat here on the other days. The locals wouldn’t want to eat here if that was the case. But on Sundays, they would close the blinds tight — partially so that the locals wouldn’t see them, partially so that Reverend Riley wouldn’t see them — and have a little scoff.

The Globe was owned by an old Chinese man, Gao’s Uncle, who went by the name of Charlie Jin. Charlie is what the locals had called him since he arrived here and he preferred that

everyone call him Charlie now. He was one of the first immigrants here, Fong Choy had sent for him to work in the laundry and he had done that long enough that a day came when he could open a restaurant. He prepared food the locals would like — fried cod, salty stuff — and he had all the recipes written down in a tattered old book that a local housewife gave him. How exactly it came to be that he received this book, well no one knew for sure, but people liked to imagine all sorts of theories.

Puy and the gang had some salt fish fried rice and Charlie only charged them ten cents. Business was good, he could afford to not charge his own people too much. As it turned out, this was a frequent stop for many Chinese men after a day at the Tai-Mei Club and soon enough, the dining room was filled with worn-out gamblers.

“How much did you lose back there?” Puy asked Shaowei.

“So negative,” he responded. “Why do you think I lost? Maybe I won a lot of money, you don’t know.”

“The fact that you didn’t just brag about how much you won tells me that you only lost,” Puy said. Gao and Wong laugh.

“Oh, Mister Funny Guy, why don’t you try to tell us the one about the wife at the train station?”

Puy smiled as he tapped a cigarette out of a pack.

“Well?” Puy lit a match.

“Well, what?” Shaowei said, placing his fork down.

“How much did you lose?”

“I was riding big, okay? Back in San Francisco, we used to play Mahjong with all these white women all the time,” he said.

“Bullshit,” Gao said.

“No no, it’s true, Jewish women, they loved it. So, I’m pretty good at playing competitively, so I was riding big, I mean I started out with a dollar on the table and before I knew it, I was up to forty.”

“Forty dollars? That’s more than we’ve made since we got here,” Wong said.

“You did not win forty dollars,” Puy said with a laugh.

“Yeah, I did. Then I bet the whole forty trying to double my money and I lost it all. But it’s like you said, Wong, this is the way to make big money in this town.”

“That’s more than we can make in a month,” Wong said, excited.

“That’s where you’re both wrong,” Puy said as he stubs out his cigarette. “If mahjong were completely random, you’d win 25% of the time. Maybe the best players can win 30% of the time. That means that even the best player loses 70% of the time. And, in order for you to actually make a profit, you have to win enough to cover the table fees. The only people in there making money are the people receiving the table fees, the people running things.”

“But Puy, there’s a strategy to it,” Gao said. “There’s a way to think about—”

“It’s just pure luck,” Puy said. “There’s no strategy, it’s all random.”

“I’ll win eighty dollars next week,” Wong said.

“Look, the boy is inspired,” Shaowei said.

“You guys can do whatever you want,” Puy said, “but I’m not playing. A dollar in hand is better than—”

“Aren’t you supposed to play to help Li go home?” Shaowei asked. “So then you can go home?”

“There are legitimate ways to earn money,” Puy said. “Ways that don’t involve me losing what I already have.”

“There is such a thing as a smart bet,” Shaowei said.

“There is no such thing as a smart bet,” Puy said.

The back door swung open and Li walked into the dining room.

“You,” he said, as he stormed towards Puy’s table. “Where were you back there? All I saw you do was stand up and talk to Hop Wah and drink with Little Joe.”

“I was watch—“

“You watching things isn’t going to help me get the money I need,” Li said, throwing his hat on the table. “I need you playing, I need you winning.”

“Well, maybe you shouldn’t have lost all that money playing stupid games,” Puy said.

A hushed quiet fell over the room, leaving even the most rowdy patron struck silent.

“How dare you speak to me that way,” Li began. “I am your elder and I demand respect. I ___”

“I came here,” Puy said as he stands up, “under the pretenses that I would be managing a laundry for a year while you visited Grandma. I did not come here to gamble with you. I did not come here to work 24 hours a day. I had a life back home, you know? I had a wife and a son and I had a good job too. I was a teacher. I had respect.”

“Oh, you were a teacher? You think you’re better than the rest of us cause you could live over there in peace and wear your stupid American clothes and have lots of money. Well, if money comes so easy to you, why don’t you just go back and leave me here to rot?”

Li picked up his hat and stormed out of the restaurant, through the front door, causing a silent frenzy from all the men inside, hoping no one notices what’s going on in here.

Puy, still standing, said “You see that? That’s the most that placing your hopes on gambling can get you.”

Charlie walks out of the kitchen and over to the table.

“Gao,” he said. “You said these were good guys and they wouldn’t cause no trouble here. Now, these types of ruckus, I just can’t have. They could —“

“Don’t worry, sir,” Puy said. “I was just leaving.” He threw a dollar on the table, enough to pay for his whole group and he heads to walk out the front door.

“Hey,” Charlie called out. “Back door.”

“Right,” Puy said as he walked through the kitchen and back into the alleyway outside.

The weather had taken a turn for the worse, with heavy cold rains. Rainwater was rushing down the sloped alley like a river, leaving Puy’s feet soaked.

Charlie walked out the back door.

“Hey,” Charlie said as he lights a cigarette. “Look, here at the Globe, we don’t have any of these outside arguments happen here, okay? I don’t care what’s going on out here in these streets, I don’t care if a guy says he banged your wife, I don’t care if one of these guys just took you for your money’s worth at the club, I don’t care about any of that. The Globe is a neutral territory where the community can gather in peace, okay?”

Puy nodded at him.

“Okay, I’ll see you next Sunday, pal,” Charlie said as he walked back into the restaurant.

Puy took a deep breath in through his nostrils and shook his head and started back to the laundry, his shoes filling with water. He wasn’t even mad about his feet being wet, he was mad because all he can think about is that this is how his feet will be for the next six days.

—

That night, the iron bed was tense and quiet. None of the men spoke to each other, which wasn’t that unusual. Things were often silent among them. But there was a fraught nature to the silence this night that transferred over to the rest of the week at the laundry. The following days broiled with a quiet intensity as the men returned to the washing and rinsing, the washing and rinsing, the drying, the ironing, the starching, the folding, the wrapping, the sleepless nights bent over on a table, the tears.

On Wednesday, Puy discovered something strange during a rinse cycle at the laundry. Mixed in with the bed sheets was a round piece of white fabric, only a couple feet in diameter. Near the centre were two holes torn in the fabric, strange tattered holes. There was a man on staff, Hong, who could sew things back together, a talented tailor whose skills were often put to work if a piece of fabric was torn on the sinks’ jagged surface.

Puy presented the piece of fabric to Hong who merely shook his head no.

“But there’s two holes torn in it?” Puy asked.

“The locals, sometimes they put these over their heads and go to each other’s houses for fun.”

“What?”

Hong ignored this question and returned to his duties.

Puy brought it back to the rinsing tub and finished the job. He would've normally asked Uncle Li, but they still weren't speaking to each other. He showed it to Shaowei and asked if the white people did this in San Francisco. The colour drained from Shaowei's face and he dropped the sheets he was holding into the sink causing a splash of water to soak the sternum of both himself and Puy.

"There was something like this, but they were a very dangerous group of white people. They had big pointy hoods. Hong said they go to other white people's houses?"

"Yeah," Puy said. "For fun."

"In my experience," Shaowei said "the type of white person who wears a hood like this isn't going to other white people's houses. They go to houses like ours or negroes' houses. Especially negroes."

"For fun?"

"Maybe fun for them," Shaowei said. "Groups of them would go around and try to kill Chinese people. Any type of people that weren't white they would try to kill. They burned down the church I went to there. A friend of mine, they cut off his finger to steal his ring. Then they hung him from a tree."

Puy looked at the circular sheet floating in the sink in front of him, realizing now that the two uneven holes were torn so that someone could look out, so that they could see the pain they inflict. He pushed the mask under the suds. If they would hang a man for his ring, what would they do if they saw Puy in a suit?

It was a silly idea and Puy tried to push it out of his head. A ring was worth way more than a suit and besides, Shaowei had said that their hoods were pointy. This was round. Still the thought remained.

—

The week progressed in an even tiredness that was routine for the men, so routine that it was almost like they were robots, carrying out the tasks assigned to them until their one day of freedom.

Sunday came and that meant bath time, followed by church and language lessons, then swing by the Tai-Mei Club, a light supper at the Globe and then bed time, the only day of the week where they could get a full night's rest. Before bedtime on Sundays, Puy would work on his letter for home. With every passing week, there was more to be told but there was also less energy to write it out. Most weeks Puy just read over what he had written after the first two weeks.

The strange thing about the Tai-Mei Club was how quiet it was. Aside from ordering drinks, or the occasional reaction to something in a game, the men were silent. Dozens of men, pretty much the entire Chinese community and yet they had nothing to say to each other. Smoke filled the air where the words should be. These men were tired and this was all they had. There was just nothing to say.

Puy went to the Tai-Mei Club again this week, despite his newfound hatred of gambling. There was nowhere else for him to go where he could feel safe. Plus, he had realized that he was going to have to gamble this week, no matter how he felt about it. He needed Uncle Li to talk to him again, if only just to make things more peaceful at work.

He sat at a table and paid the fee. It sickened him to do it, to the point that he couldn't even really pay attention to the game. Before he knew it, he had two dollars. Then four dollars. Then eight. Sixteen. That was more than what he could make in two weeks. Thirty-two. Zero.

After losing his first dollar, Puy excused himself from the table. He should've quit while he was ahead. He went to the bar and ordered himself a drink.

"This is a loser's drink," Little Joe said as he poured the tea. "I can just feel it."

"Say," Puy said, "Little Joe, you've been here for a few years. Do you know anything about locals going around with sheets on their head?"

"Heh," Little Joe laughed as he polished a rocks glass. "Let me guess, you were doing the laundry and found a white hood and now someone's got you scared that the Klan is here?"

Puy nodded.

"Nah, they're not the Klan. They can be troublemakers sure, there's a few rotten apples in every bunch, but they mean well over all."

"So what do they do?"

"They're musicians, partiers. They're just drunks from down on George, but they're creative drunks. These men, they put on women's clothes, and they put these sheets over their heads and they go around to each other's houses and they have fun, they sing songs and do voices, and then people have to guess who's under the masks."

"So, they don't burn down churches?"

"Well, listen, there's nothing safe about a drunk man in a mask, and there's definitely nothing safe about a drunk *white* man in a mask but these guys are just local idiots. They hate us,

don't get me wrong, but they're not about to burn down a church or anything. They call themselves mummers."

Puy stood there by the bar for a little while drinking his tea, when he saw Hop Wah walk into the room with another Chinese man in a suit. This man was older and immaculately groomed. His suit was newer and in nicer condition than Puy's or Hop Wah's, with an additional jacket that hung on his shoulders like a cape. Like Puy, he had his hair cut short like a westerner, and he had a fine, manicured moustache, so thin it looked as though it had been drawn on with a pencil. He was older, maybe in his 60's, distinguished and clearly a man of wealth.

Fong Choy had returned.

The man Puy presumed to be Fong Choy surveyed the room and the silence in the room felt different, and everybody's movements became slower as they realized he was there. Uncle Li stood up and Fong merely shook his head, causing Li to sit back down. Fong's eyes glazed over the room, resting for a moment on Puy, eyeing up his suit, then Fong returned his gaze to Hop Wah and they went back down the hallway.

A few minutes later, Hop Wah came back into the room alone. He headed over to the bar where Puy was and Little Joe handed him a highball glass filled with water.

"Hey Puy," Hop said. "Your boss just arrived."

"I thought that was him, Fong Choy right?"

"Who else could it be?" Hop said as he sipped his drink.

"Where is he now?"

"Upstairs," Hop said.

"Why?"

“To sleep,” Hop said.

Puy looked at him blankly.

“Oh, we got all sorts of little rooms upstairs,” Hop explained. “Rooms for my workers to sleep in, rooms for these animals in here to settle things, if you know what I mean, rooms for out-of-towners to stay in.”

Puy sipped the tea, then asked, “Is he going to come down and play?”

“Nah,” Hop said. “He’s like you. He hates gambling.”

“I was playing earlier.”

“I saw you and your Uncle’s outburst at the Globe last week, I know how you feel about all this. You can have your moral high ground, but I bet there’s something in you that makes you just as much a sinner as the rest of us.”

“I never said anything about sinners,” Puy said.

“Mm,” Hop said. “You don’t need to actually say things for people to know how you felt.”

The two men stood there at the makeshift bar, looking through the smoky haze at the dozens of gamblers.

“I want to be clear though,” Hop said. “There’s no hard feeling between us. I mean, you’re here, you’re drinking. You’re putting money in my pockets. But, y’know, Charlie puts his whole business on the line by letting us go there on Sunday’s. That’s not a place to settle any disputes.”

“I know,” Puy said. “Charlie told me that already. I’m sorry.”

“It’s not me you need to apologize to,” Hop said. “It’s your Uncle. Go, help him win some money. Cash is the best way to heal any wound.”

After he finished his tea, Puy sat at another table. He paid another table fee, not even paying attention to how much it was as he didn’t want his losses to be something to dwell on later. Games were never his strong suit. He found it hard to follow and remember the rules. His wife would often try to explain the rules to him, but he’d always forget. His wife. In all the chaos of the past few weeks, he was ashamed to realize he had let his family slip from his mind ever so slightly. That’s who he was here for, that’s who he was returning to. He put another dollar on the table.

After a couple of hours of playing, Puy emerged even, having won just enough — two dollars — to earn back what he lost. No loss, no gain.

The men set off for to the Globe in waves. Everyone couldn’t go at once or a local would see them and figure out what was going on. Instead, they’d split into smaller groups and head over at intermittent times.

Puy and his three friends headed over a little after 6 p.m..

“Guys,” Wong said, “I won a hundred dollars.”

All of the men reacted negatively.

“No way,” Gao said.

“Wong,” Puy said. “No.”

“You’re lying,” Shaowei said. “Let me see.”

“I’m not taking my money out here,” Wong said. “It’ll blow away in the wind.”

Supper at Charlie's once again consisted of salt fish fried rice. Charlie greeted the men with a smile and a nod as he put the food on their table. Li walked in soon after and the air became still in the restaurant.

"I saw you playing the tables today," Li said. "Thank you."

It was the first time that he spoke to Puy in a week.

Puy slowly nodded his head and said, "Yeah."

Li nodded his head too.

"How much did you win?"

"Nothing," Puy said. "Even keel."

"You tried," Li said. "That's the important part."

Li moved on and sat at his own table.

Puy slept well that night.

Belonging

Mondays meant back to work. The day started as it always did: with the ringing of the bell, then wash, rinse, wash, rinse. After an hour or so, Fong Choy walked into the laundry. He was wearing another regal purple suit, with an additional long jacket that flowed like a cape. Li put down the blue bags so that he could go greet him but Fong once again waved him away. Li was silenced with a flourish of a wrist. Fong instead walked deeper into the room, stood at the head of the tubs and watched the men for several hours. Puy found it difficult to work knowing that he was being watched, but most of the men around him seemed completely oblivious to Fong's appearance. After all, they always had an attentive audience at the windows, but it was different having someone like Fong Choy just standing a couple of feet away, watching.

He stayed for several hours, then left around 5 p.m..

Of course, the washing continued for several hours after that, and then the drying and the ironing and the starching and the folding and the wrapping.

The next day Fong Choy returned, watching in silence again, until he pointed at Puy and said, "You."

Puy looked up from the soapy water and dirty sheets. He had caught a couple glimpses from Fong, looking at him but he had been trying to keep his eyes to himself.

"Me?" Puy said.

"Yes, you," Fong said. "You're having supper with me tonight."

"Okay, sir. At 2 a.m.?"

"Heh," Fong laughed as he walked out the door. "You're a funny one."

Shaowei gave Puy a look of jealousy, maybe even anger, reminding Puy of that time on the train when Shaowei insisted on taking a nap. The other labourers, the ones who had paid attention to what Fong had said, also looked at Puy with contempt. Puy wouldn't even look in Li's direction, knowing already that he must be fuming.

It was hard for Puy to focus on his work that afternoon.

At around 7 p.m. that night, Fong Choy came back to the laundry.

"Ready?" he asked.

"Yes," Puy said as he dried his hands.

It had been a nice sunny day, but it was turning into a brisk evening, clear skies and cold breezes.

"Your name is So Ho Puy?"

"Yes, sir," Puy said.

They were standing just outside the laundry, at the mouth of the long, empty alley by the house next door. Fong took an expensive looking cigarette holder out of his breast pocket, pulling one out and lighting it with a match.

"Do you want one?" Fong asked, offering the holder to Puy.

Puy took a cigarette out and put it in his mouth. Fong lit it for him.

"My name is Fong Choy."

"Heh," Puy said, looking down. "I know who you are."

"Your Uncle told you about me?"

"Well not very much, Hop Wah told me more about you."

“Don’t listen to a word either of those guys say,” Fong said as he spit on the ground.

“What’s a good place for dinner around here? It’s been a while.”

“The Globe is the only place I’ve been to.”

“What is that, Charlie’s place?” Fong furrowed his brow. “There must be something better than that.”

Fong and Puy headed down George Street to turn on to Water.

“What’s with the suits?” Fong said. “You caught my eye at the Tai-Mei Club. I said to myself ‘what’s one of these laundrymen doing in a suit?’ Then, I go to the laundry, and I see you in a suit again.”

Puy let out a small laugh.

“I was a teacher, back home,” Puy said.

“Back in Hoi Ping?”

“Yeah, that’s where you were from too right?”

“Yeah...” Fong said, absent. “I don’t like to think about the home country too much anymore.”

Puy and Fong walked down the street for a little while.

“If you were a teacher, why did you leave?”

“I... well, Li told us he owned a laundry over here and my grandmother wanted to see him again before she died, so it was arranged that I could come over for a year and take over his duties and then I’d go back.”

“And then you got here, and you realize your Uncle lost the laundry?” Fong shook his head, angry.

“Well...” Puy said, awkward.

“That fucking guy.”

“It’s not so bad,” Puy said.

“You know what that calls for? Forget supper. Let’s go have a drink.”

Fong turned around and they headed back to George Street.

“I...” Puy stuttered. “I’m not sure that any of these places will serve us. People like us.”

“Let me teach you something, kid. As long as you have this,” Fong produced a twenty dollar bill from his pocket and pulled it taut, “any place will serve you.”

Fong led them to the side of a fish and chip restaurant, opening up a fire exit door. A young white doorman sits behind a podium. He seems surprised to see them. Fong reached out for a handshake and palmed the twenty into the doorman’s hand.

“Right this way, gentleman,” the doorman said.

The kid led Puy and Fong down a set of narrow stairs, then through an even more narrow, winding hallway with low ceilings. They reached a red curtain which the doorman pulled back with a smile.

An underground bar. Candles hang from the walls, illuminating the uneven stone tile work on the wall and floors. It looked as though random pieces of rocks had just been cemented together, with no attention to size or uniformity. Overhead, a series of thick wooden beams, holding the place together and hiding the secret bar from the upstairs fish and chip spot. Booths line the walls, save for one wall with a long marble bar. The place smelled of alcohol, tobacco, and jazz, and, on occasion, a slight huff of musk would pass through the room. Bottles of champagne

were being popped and cocktails were being shaken. Fat men in tuxedos were surrounded by young, beautiful women. And everyone, except for Fong and Puy, was white.

“Do you want a seat at the bar or in a booth?” a young lady asked Fong.

“A booth.”

The lady leads them through the room towards a booth, making a slight pause at one point to instruct the men to “Avoid the trapdoor,” pointing towards a square of space in the flooring which resembled jail cell bars. When they walk past it, a low growl could be heard emanating from it. A group of men seated in a corner booth yell towards Fong and Ping grimaces, readying himself for some sort of altercation. Instead, Fong smiles and waves towards the men as the waitress readies their booth.

“Do you... know them?” Ping asked.

“Of course,” Fong said. “The DuMonts. Shipping magnates. They’ve helped me out a time or two, I’ll tell you that.”

“Your seats are ready for you, gentlemen,” the waitress said.

Fong and Puy sat down and Fong ordered for them — for obvious reasons — and then the waitress walked over to a bucket and produced a raw fish. As she walked back to the bar, she dropped the raw fish through the grates of the trap door.

The growl stopped.

“First thing you need to do,” Fong told Puy, “is learn English.”

“You’re not the first person to say that,” Puy said.

“And I won’t be the last either. But, you need to do that if you ever want to get out of the laundry industry. Have you been learning English?”

“I get some instructions once a week at church.”

“Make it five times a week.”

“Okay,” Puy said, reluctant.

“What? What is it?”

“I work so much, I’m not sure that I can make the time to learn.”

“If you want something, you can make the time for it,” Fong said as he lights another cigarette.

The waitress returned and placed two Old Fashioned’s on the table. The men both took a sip.

“We’ll need another round of these five minutes from now, and then another round five minutes after that,” Fong said to the waitress.

After the waitress left, Fong turned his attention back to Puy.

“How do you feel?” Fong asked.

“I’m good,” Puy said.

“No, I mean, moving all the way over here, leaving Hoi Ping.”

“Oh,” Puy said. “It’s not too bad.”

“Tell me the truth,” Fong said.

“It’s fine, really,” Puy said.

“Listen to me. I’ve travelled the whole world. There was a time when I was your age and I had just left home and you know how I felt? I felt terrible. Every day, I wished I was dead. I would wish for things to kill me. I would walk in front of trains. Tell me, how do you feel?”

Puy took a moment to think, taking a sip from his drink to try to look casual.

“I feel like one day I woke up in another life. I feel like... like I’m in a dream.”

“Too optimistic,” Fong said as slurps down his entire drink. “Give me truth.”

Puy closed his eyes and exhaled.

“Every day, I feel like giving up. Every day, I feel like stopping. But there’s nothing here, there’s nowhere for me to go. I can’t even try to go back home, I don’t have the money and Uncle Li—“

“Okay,” Fong spoke over Puy. “So, here’s what I wanted to talk to you about. How much money do you owe your uncle?”

“I... I’m not comfortable saying.”

“I’m only asking to be polite. You owe him three hundred dollars for the head tax right?”

“Yeah,” Puy nodded.

“Okay, well, that’s taken care of.”

Puy scrunched his eyebrows.

“I have to help Li get the money to go back home,” he said.

“You don’t need to worry about that,” Fong said.

“It’s just... family, you know.”

“Listen to me,” Fong said as he looked straight into Puy’s eyes. “You don’t need to worry about your Uncle Li anymore, okay?”

Puy paused for a moment, wondering just what he meant by that.

“You’re paying for him to go home?”

“I’m only going to say this one more time: you don’t need to worry about Li anymore.”

“Okay,” Puy said.

“Okay, next order of business. You came here to manage the laundry, right?”

“Yeah,”

“That’s what your uncle promised you, right?”

“Yeah,”

“You don’t gamble, right? That’s what Hop Wah told me.”

“Yeah, well, I mean a little bit to try to help —”

“Okay, well, now you’re managing the laundry.”

Puy was rendered speechless.

“I... I — thank you.”

“Don’t thank me, I’m only giving you this job because you’re not a gambler,” Fong slammed his empty glass onto the table and waved the waitress over to order another. “But, you gotta promise that you don’t plan on doing this job for the rest of your life like Li. There’s no future in this and a young man like you oughta have some more ambition.”

“What?” Puy said, surprised. The work was hard but there wasn’t any other opportunities for people like them as far as he could tell.

“Don’t stay in this industry. Take any opportunity — any opportunity — to get out of this business.”

“I... I don’t understand.”

“You’ll go nowhere washing clothes like this. Now, learn English as fast as you can. Whoever is teaching you English, ask him for more lessons. The faster you learn English, the more opportunities you’ll have.”

“But, you work in the laundry?”

“I don’t work in the laundry. I own the laundry. I am the laundry. Now, they give you a Western name when you came here?”

“Yeah,”

“What is it?”

“William Seto Ping,”

“Okay, that’s your name from now on. Take that and use it to your advantage.”

“I... why?”

“Integrate yourself into the community. Go to church every Sunday. Open businesses. Make sure they call you William. It’s too hard for them to learn a name they’re not familiar with, so just use the one they gave you. Make it so that you’re one of them.”

“A white person?”

“A Newfoundlander.”

“I don’t think I’ll be a Newfoundlander.”

“Why?”

“I... I feel like I don’t belong here.”

Fong Choy stopped for a moment and grabbed Puy’s hand.

“You belong here.”

“It’s just the people here, they—“

“No. You belong here. You belong here just as much as any of these white fucks. What do you think, they were born here? That they rose from the water with the fish and the waves? They’re immigrants too. They’re British and Irish and French and German. And they feel like they belong here. They forced their way here, they fought battles for it and now there’s so many

of them here, I bet you can't imagine what the place would look like without them. I bet you haven't even tried. To think of the harbour front surrounded by forest. To think that even right here, where we're sitting, was once trees and Indians. Where are they now?"

Puy sat there for a moment, puzzled.

"What about this building? Do you think it belongs here?"

"Yeah... Well, no. I never really thought of it that way,"

"Let me tell you something about this building. This is the oldest building in St. John's. It's not the first building ever built here, no, that building disappeared long ago. This is the oldest building in St. John's because it survived the Great Fire. You know about the fire?"

"No."

"Well, I'm not going to explain it to you. It was a fire. You know what a fire is right?"

"Yeah," Puy said with a laugh.

"This building is the only one that didn't burn down. Whole city burnt down except for this building. And the fire tried to take it down too. Look at the beams."

It was hard to see in the dark bar, but the flickering candlelight provided just enough illumination to see char marks on the thick beams.

"This building does not belong here. But even a Great Fire couldn't take it down."

The men sat in silence for a moment and then a young white man with a severely receding hairline approached the table.

"Fong Choy, is that you?"

"Joseph," Fong said in English, standing up to shake the man's hand. "How are you?"

“I’m good, I’m good,” the man laughed. “I thought we traded you to the Caribbean for a barrel of rum.”

Both of them laughed.

“Well, you know how businesses are, always requiring attention. I’m just here to select a new manager for the laundry.”

“Ahh, your partner...?”

“Gone back to China. For the time being. This is the new manager, William Seto Ping.”

“Nice to meet you, Mr. Ping,” the man said extending his hand.

Puy smiled and shook his hand.

“He’s not too keen on English yet,” Fong noted, “but I bet next time you meet him, he’ll have the gift of the gab like you, Joseph. I’m glad you kept this place open.”

“I don’t know for how much longer,” Joseph said. “I’ll shift gears soon, I think. I’ve been trying to write a book, but the bar life takes up so much of my time. I think I might give up and start pig farming.”

Fong took a slow puff from his cigarette.

“I can’t believe you still have that thing in the trapdoor,” he said.

“Tom drinks twenty beers a day now,” Joseph said. “If you can believe that.”

“No,” Fong said, aghast.

“Yeah, holds on to the glass himself and everything.”

“Do you bring him up still?”

“Usually only to break up a fight, but uh, seeing as I’ve got an old friend and a new face here, let me see what I can do...”

Joseph walked over to the bar and rang a bell to get everyone's attention.

"It is time," he said, and the bar erupted in a murmur of excitement. "We must keep the noise to a minimum so that he does not get frightened."

Joseph knelt down by the trap door, unlocking the several barricades put in place. He pulled the grate off the floor and threw a raw fish onto the tile flooring, just in front of the hole. A low growl once again echoed from the floor, followed by the sound of heavy footsteps on creaky wooden stairs. The whole room became quiet with anticipation, people straining to look over each other to see what was about to unfold.

A paw emerged from the hole and then another paw. A black bear, who proceeded to eat the fish with a hearty gulp. Around the bear's neck was a solid steel leash attached to a chain leading back into the cavernous darkness from which the bear had emerged.

Joseph slowly approached the bear and presented it with a pint glass filled with beer. The bear shuffled itself around for a moment, struggling to get comfortable before it sat on its hindquarters and extended its paws to hold on to the glass. The bear gripped the glass with its paws and raised it to his mouth, drinking the pint and not spilling a drop. When he finished the beer, he passed the glass back to Joseph.

Although Puy's eyes opened wide with surprise and fear, he wasn't particularly surprised by this. It seemed to him that every white person had a wild animal, tamed and hidden somewhere within their own domiciles.

—

Puy and Fong had a couple more drinks before they found themselves wandering back into the cold air of night.

“Let’s go on a little walk,” Fong said. They walked down Water Street, much further than Puy had ever gone before, passing by various businesses, fishermen and drunks. They came to a stop at the foot of a glamorous stairwell leading up to a monument that Puy had not yet seen. Graduated plateaus holding bronze statues of various figures. A statue of a woman on top, holding a torch and a sword, and on either side beneath her were bronze men looking on the horizon, one with a rifle, the other with a looking glass. And beneath those two men, were another two men, a fisherman and a lumberman. Fong and Puy sat down on the stairs in front of the monument. They look out over the harbour and its seemingly endless series of wharfs. Even now, at this late hour of the night, fishermen were unloading basket after basket of cod.

Puy kept looking back at the statues.

“It’s for the war,” Fong said. “A lot of people from here died.”

Puy sat there. It was a cold night, and it might’ve been the booze in his system but he felt warm. Fong took a cigarette out of his holder and lit it.

“You know I was the first Chinese person here,” Fong said as he leans back on the stairs. “A lot of people here hadn’t even heard of China. I might as well have come from a different planet. People tried to wash my skin. I’m not kidding. They didn’t understand that people didn’t all look like them. Of course, we’re talking about people that stare at fish all day so what do they know anyways?”

“So, what did you do?” Puy asked, absent minded, watching the ships dock.

“Well, after they figured out that they couldn’t wash the Chinese off me, that was when they started talking about us in the paper, right away, first day I arrived. A reporter started asking me questions about why did I come here and where did I come from. And I knew English very

well by then already. So I told him, I lived for seven years in Halifax, then I moved to Quebec, then I moved here with the intention to open a laundry. Then the guy writes the article and puts this whole thing about ‘Chinamen are prepared and able to work for a mere nothing and live on less.’ I read that and I say to myself ‘what?’” Fong shook his head and laughs.

“But, that’s life,” he added. “You get used to that. I was here long enough that eventually their arguments turned into, ‘Well, Fong Choy, he’s one of the good ones, but we can’t let too many more in cause they’ll take our jobs’ and all this nonsense. Nobody was doing laundry here before me. Nobody. Neither white nor yellow. I didn’t take anybody’s job.”

Puy, a little too buzzed to respond, just stared at the monument. They’re pretty statues and it’s nice how they have the stairs done.

“Sir, I gotta ask you,” Puy said. “Have you been to Egypt?”

“What,” Fong laughed. “No. Why do you ask?”

“They told me you walked across Eurasia and the Rev—”

“Heh,” Fong laughed even louder. “Is that what you’ve heard about me?”

“Yeah, you walked through everything to get to London.”

“I took a boat from Hong Kong to London. You can’t believe anything people say, not about themselves or others. No one ever really knows what happened. Everything is just reveries, just... chinatowns.”

This answer confounded Puy long enough for Fong to butt his cigarette and let out a deep sigh.

“Let’s get you home,” Fong said.

The walk back to Fong-Li Laundry was mostly silent, interrupted only a couple of times by noisy locals, yelling indecipherable arguments into the night air, their words echoing off the dozens of conjoined homes lining the streets. It was something Puy hadn't paid much attention to when he was sober, maybe too distracted by all the staring and name calling and violence, but the houses here were weird. Some of them were short and stout, others tall and narrow, all attached together and each one painted some vibrant colour or another. As Puy and Fong walked down Gower Street, it looked like they were walking down a big, empty, kaleidoscopic tube. And save for the occasional sound of a bottle breaking or a frantic yell, it seemed as though they were the only two people left alive in St. John's. There was something uneasy in that notion, seeing these streets usually filled with people become empty and hollow.

When they arrived back to the laundry on Holdsworth, Fong stopped a couple doors away as a small audience had formed at the windows as always.

"Just so you know, I had to put up a lot of capital to buy out Hop Wah's stake in the laundry. I paid him more than the place is worth probably, but that's business. Anyways, you'll still only be paid a dollar a day. I know managers are supposed to make more of a livable wage, but I'm sure you can understand how some sacrifices must be made in a situation like this."

"Oh," Puy said. "Yeah, sure."

Fong paused for a moment and took a deep breath.

"You know, your Uncle wasn't always like this. Anywhere you go in the world, Chinese people love to gamble. He just... he took it too far."

Puy gave him a slow nod, unsure of what to make of that message. They walked in through the back door, making sure to avoid the puddles scattered around the gravel.

Upon seeing Fong and Puy, Li threw a pad of paper on to his desk and said, “Puy, get back to work.”

“Mr. Ping will be going to bed now, Li,” Fong said in a loud voice. “That’s how you are to refer to him now. Mr. William Seto Ping.”

All of the labourers stopped their work to look at Fong, tablecloths and napkins dropped to slosh in the water.

“Mr. Ping is the new manager here,” Fong continued. “An arrangement that was promised to him for when he arrived here.”

There was not much of a reaction in the room, aside from Li who scrunched up a piece of paper with his fist.

“Li, come with me,” Fong said. “And bring your belongings.”

Mr. Ping walked into the room where they all sleep and rested his head on the iron bed, the booze making him forget about the soreness of his back. Li came into the room to grab his suitcase and cashbox. He gave Ping a quick look and shook his head with disdain.

“Oh, Li,” Ping said, as he took an envelope out of the breast pocket of his suit. “If you’re headed home now, can you take my letter for Mom and Hualing?”

Li snatched the letter out of Ping’s hand and scrunched it into a ball, throwing it into a corner of the iron bedroom as he walked out to join Fong.

That was the last time Ping ever saw his Uncle Li.

An Idea

It was not an easy transition into being a manager. Fong never came back to explain this turn of events and many of the long-time laundry workers questioned whether this promotion was true and why they weren't the ones to get promoted. And it was never clear to Ping what role the manager was supposed to play, other than be the one to count and divide the cash amongst the laundry-workers. After having worked the laundry for the past few weeks, Ping couldn't fathom just sitting around all day while the others still worked all day and night. The next problem was Li's disappearance. Ping came to believe that Fong had either brought Li with him down south, or ponied up the funds to send Li back to China. Neither of which seemed particularly likely to Ping, but the alternative was something he didn't want to think about. After all, how could he know when to return home if Li could never return?

The following morning at the laundry, the morning after Fong took Li out the back door and neither were seen again, Ping and the others waited around for a bit to see if he would return. Soon enough, it was 9 a.m. and no one had rung the bell and no one had begun sorting the blue bags of dirty laundry. Ping took it upon himself to ring the bell, finding it bolted to a steel beam near the front door. It was a nice little brass bell, with a rope underneath to swing back and forth to make it ring. Ping swung it once and it produced a faint ring, certainly not loud enough to rouse people from the iron bedroom. Ping swung it again with more intensity, loud enough this time, maybe too loud. The laundry workers began shuffling into the workroom, filling the tubs, adjusting the temperature.

The next matter of business was sorting the growing pile of blue bags. Ping took a look at it and quickly realized that he didn't have the English abilities to be able to do this job. He couldn't read the notes, he couldn't make the lists of what belonged to who and from where.

"Shaowei," Ping said. "You do this."

"What happened last night?" Shaowei asked as he opens the first blue bag to begin sorting.

"He took me to a bar and told me that I don't owe Li any money for the head tax now," Ping said.

"He paid your uncle for you?"

"Well, no, I'm not sure. He told me not to worry about it."

"He definitely killed Li," Shaowei said as he dumps a bag onto the floor.

"He didn't kill Li," Ping said. "Isn't that the type of thing you would complain about white people saying?"

"Yes, but I'm not a white person, so I can say it. Fong killed Li."

"Fong didn't kill Li, stop," Ping said. "They'll be back later today."

"Whatever you want to believe," Shaowei said. "So, what? You're the manager now, you don't have to work with the rest of us anymore?"

"No, no, I'm still going to do the laundry with you guys, that just wouldn't be right."

"Why is he making us call you by the name they forced on you?"

"He said I should try to really become a part of this community. That by using the name they gave me, I'll have an advantage."

"You gotta learn English to have an advantage," Shaowei said with a roll of his eyes.

“Yeah, he told me I had to do that too.”

“If having a Western name is so important, how come he doesn’t have one, huh?”

“Well, I don’t know,” Ping shrugged. “He’s an old man, things were different when he came here.”

“I wonder if he personally killed Li, or if he got someone else to do it.”

“Shaowei, this isn’t funny.”

“Maybe he got Hop Wah and Little Joe to do it. They seem like the type to have guns.”

“Shaowei, please, this is rude.”

“You know, we should get guns. Reverend Riley said we should have a gun.”

“What would we need guns for?”

“Self-defence. He’s killing Li today, he could be killing you tomorrow. Or me.” Shaowei pantomimed a shocked face.

“Nobody is killing anybody. We’re here to wash clothes, that’s what we’re going to do.”

“I need to get a copy of today’s paper, see if there’s any articles about Chinamen being found dead.”

“You can do that later, we have a lot of work to catch up on.”

“Oh, you think you can boss me around now, I see how it is.”

“You know, Hop Wah wouldn’t kill Li. Li is one of his best customers, he told me that before.”

“A guy like Li, he’s only as good as his last bet. Maybe he owed Hop Wah money.”

“Just sort the laundry, okay?”

Shaowei sorted the laundry, and Ping resumed his station at the washing tub. The day proceeded as normal, but there was a strange feeling in the air. Plus, everything was being pushed back by an hour, the late start threw everything off. Shaowei gave the bag boy a couple of coins to bring back the paper and during the supper break at 3 a.m. that night, he skimmed it with his soup.

“So?” Ping asked.

“What?” Shaowei said. “Oh, you want to know if it says Li was found dead.”

“I just wanted to prove to you that you were wrong.”

“Well, I guess I’m wrong for now because it doesn’t say anything about a dead Chinaman. Listen to this though, ‘Our own people have to go abroad to earn a livelihood and yet even the heathen Chinese can come here and prosper.’ Yeah, they call this prospering,” Shaowei said as he eyed up the table they call a bed.

“It’s still more money than you’d make back home,” Ping said.

“Not for you it isn’t,” Shaowei said. “Big fancy teacher becomes big fancy manager. Don’t try to speak for me.”

After a moment of tense silence between them, Shaowei continued to translate the article in the newspaper: “The ‘Heathen Chinese’ have now quite a colony established here, and if they continue to come in such large bunches we will boast of a local Chinatown of larger population than in much more pretentious cities. The yellow peril is not greatly appreciated by our workmen, who fear that in a short time they will be branching out in other than the ‘washee-washee’ business.”

“What’s all this about?” Ping asked.

“Something called ‘The Fisherman’s Protective Union’ thinks we’re going to steal their jobs,” Shaowei said. “I’m not taking the fish out of the god damn water.”

He slammed the paper back onto the table and they went back to work.

—

The week passed as it usually did, and with each passing day it became clearer that Fong and Li weren’t coming back. Ping looked forward to Sunday so that he could go to the Tai-Mei Club and ask Hop Wah if he knew anything. When Sunday did arrive, Ping woke up a little earlier to count out the money to pay the labourers. Six dollars each for the week, the rest of the money to be transferred by wire to Fong Choy’s bank account in Jamaica. Shaowei was assigned the duty of buying the detergents and soaps as Ping did not yet have the language capabilities to do this himself. This ‘promotion’ in duties brightened Shaowei’s attitude as it had soured towards Ping since his meeting with Fong.

It was funny, Ping had never really gotten to know any of the men he was working with up until he had to pay them. For weeks, he hadn’t even learned their names, despite working side by side, elbows rubbing in the tubs. Only due to payroll did he slow down and actually learn about the men around him. Hong, Kai, Gin, Zhang, Jun, Qieng, and Aiguo. Hong was the oldest out of all of them and the closest thing to a leader in their presence. He was a skilled tailor, a helpful person to have on staff if you came across, or perhaps accidentally caused, a tear in some garment.

Kai was probably the second oldest man on staff and Hong explained that he was “accident prone and mute.” He had been a railroad worker and ended up in St. John’s some years ago. No one knew why he was mute, it was just the way it was.

Gin was of a shy comportment, blushing and not willing to talk freely.

“He’ll need some time to warm up to you,” Hong told Ping.

Zhang was the grumpiest out of all the workers, and he regarded Ping with a mean-spirited and cold energy. He was afflicted with a condition that left him with one eye shut at all times.

Jun was unwell since he arrived in St. John’s, constantly sneezing and coughing, seemingly having never adjusted to the vast difference in climate between his old home and his new one.

Qieng was perpetually tired, always yawning and stretching, his desire to sleep seemingly weighing down his head.

Aiguo, the bag boy, was the only one among them who Ping could describe as happy, with a jolly air about him, always laughing and having fun, somehow, despite everything. Ping figured that the boy wasn’t old enough to be jaded yet.

And it was that Sunday morning that Ping came to know these men who had been around him for weeks, the men who slept on the same table as him.

Reverend Riley came around and led them to church. After church, they had their English lesson. Once again, Ethel sat with Ping, her hair a frantic plateau of curls, and walked him through the basic, ‘essential’ words once again. After the lesson was over, Shaowei came over to assist Ping in asking Ethel for more lessons.

“Mr. Ping would like ask you something,” Shaowei said to her.

“Yes now, what is it b’y?”

“He require more English lesson. He become manager at Fong-Li Laundry and he need know English better fast.”

“Oh,” she said, “yes now. Fancy that, me walking around town with one of you. The FPU’s liable to scald me.”

Shaowei was uncertain what exactly she meant, Ethel spoke too fast and her accent was already difficult for him to understand.

“You help him in evening?” he asked.

“Mind now,” Ethel said with a huff.

“What’s she saying?” Ping asked in Taishanese.

“I have no idea,” Shaowei said to him. “The words I understand, but she’s arranging them in ways I can’t understand.”

“Tell her I’m a gentleman,” Ping said.

“He want me tell you he a gentleman,” Shaowei said.

“G’wan, wha’s this a date?” Ethel rolled her eyes as she lit a cigarette.

“No, ma’am, no date. He have wife. Just want English lessons.”

“Oh me nerves! Fine. I’ll drop over by and by. What odds.”

Ethel put on her sunglasses and headed out of the gymnasium.

“What did she say?” Ping asked.

“I think she agreed, but I’m not sure.”

After church, the men headed over to the Tai-Mei Club. As they walk to Hop Wah’s Laundry, a child, another urchin, ran behind Shaowei, jumped up and pulled on his ponytail as hard as the urchin could. Shaowei fell to the ground while a smattering of laughter from nearby locals rang through the street. The child ran away laughing with glee. Ping knelt down and helped Shaowei get back on his feet.

“Are you okay?” Ping asked.

“I’m fine,” Shaowei said, as he caressed his ponytail. “These are the people you want to integrate with?”

Ping sighed.

“It’s not like that.”

“It is like that, that’s who these people are,” Shaowei said.

“Integration means that we don’t have to be subject to this type of treatment anymore.”

“I’ll believe that when I see it,” Shaowei said.

Once they arrive at the Tai-Mei Club, they took their usual spots. Shaowei took a seat at a table for eight rounds and Ping stood drinking tea by the bar. It occurred to him that he doesn’t need to be here anymore, he doesn’t have to appease Li. Alas, nowhere else to go. Plus it was nice to see people like himself gathered together.

As was tradition, Hop Wah later entered the room and joined Ping at the bar with a tall glass of water.

“Hey Puy,” he said.

“Oh, uh, I go by my Western name now,” Ping said. “William Seto Ping.”

“Ohhh, Mr. Ping! That must mean that Fong Choy gave you the old motivational speech. Been hearing that one for years. “

“Heh,” Ping said. “Yes.”

“Let me guess, he took you to Bear’s Beer Bar, then said you belong here and all that sort of stuff?”

“Well, yes.”

“Yeah, that old coot will say that to anyone who’ll listen. I’ve had it happen to me a couple of times, he doesn’t even remember that he told me it before.”

“Oh,” Ping said, a little deflated. “Where is he now?”

“He just up and left one morning earlier this week. He paid me a pretty penny for my stake in his laundry, let me tell you.”

“And Li?”

“Yeah, he told me he was going to take care of Li,” Hop Wah said with a wink.

“What do you mean?”

“Eh,” Hop said with a wave, “don’t worry about it. Enjoy managerial life.”

Ping shrugged.

“He must’ve told you that ol’ chestnut about learning English too?”

“Yeah.”

“Yeah, well, I find the best way to learn is by going to the picture shows. I go every weekend. I saw *The Public Enemy* today. Oh, boy, what a picture! It’s guys like that that made me want to dress the way I do. The way we do.” Hop Wah preened his lapels as he leaned in closer to whisper to Ping. “You want to see something?”

Ping shrugged again. Based on the way things were in this town, Ping figured that Hop probably had an oversized animal in a cage somewhere in the building.

Hop rested his drink on the bar and slyly opened his suit jacket just an inch so that Ping could take a glimpse inside. A small handgun in a holster.

“It’s the same one they used in *Little Caesar*,” Hop said. “Isn’t that cool?”

“Yeah,” Ping said, although he doesn’t know what *Little Caesar* is. A gun would probably come to good use in this town, he thought.

The next few hours passed by without note, nothing but wins and losses, until there was an angry outburst at Shaowei’s table. Shaowei and another man were yelling at each other, until the other man angrily pointed up and they both stormed out. Ping started to follow them but Hop Wah placed a hand on his chest.

“Let them work it out,” he said.

“He’s my friend, I have to help him,” Ping said.

“He doesn’t need your help,” Hop Wah said with a laugh. “Trust me.”

“He’ll be mad if I don’t help him,” Ping said, pushing Hop out of the way.

“Oh,” Hop said. “You’re into it too, I get it.”

Although Ping was puzzled by that remark, he pushed on. He heard Shaowei and the man go upstairs and he went up there, listening closely to hear if there was any sort of noisy ruckus happening. The stairs led into an extremely narrow hallway, barely enough room for Ping to turn around. It’s quiet until there’s a clang on the floor behind a door at the end of the hall. Ping ran there as fast as he could and swung open the door.

A naked man sat on the edge of a bed, his robe on the floor. Shaowei on his knees in front of the man, his head burrowed in the naked man’s lap. Ping’s jaw dropped a little and he tried to close the door as fast as he could. Shaowei looked up from the man’s crotch, just long enough to see Ping on the other side of the door.

Ping made his way back down to the bar. He felt embarrassed by what he had seen.

“Ohhhh,” Hop said when Ping returns to the bar, “I was wrong! You were right Little Joe, he’s not part of the matter upstairs. Here’s your money, you bastard.”

Hop slid a couple dollars over to Little Joe, who counted the bills with glee.

“Why do you look so sad?” Hop asked. “Did you think you guys were exclusive or something?”

“What? I.. no, I just, I didn’t know that it was... that he was... like that.”

“Like what? That’s not gay,” Hop said. “There’s no women around so what else are you going to do?”

“I just, I thought him and that guy were in a fight or something.”

“Nah, nah, you’ll see guys play rough like that here all the time,” Hop Wah said as he turned his attention to something else in the room.

A few minutes later, Shaowei and the other man returned downstairs. It occurred to Ping that if he hadn’t walked in on the scene upstairs, he would’ve never known that anything was going on. He decided to pretend that that was the way it was, that in fact he had never been upstairs and didn’t see what had happened.

A couple hours later, Shaowei came over to the bar and said, “Do you want to go to the Globe now?”

Ping, Shaowei, Gao, and Wong headed down to the Globe. Shaowei and Ping weren’t talking so Gao and Wong dominated the conversation.

“Guys,” Wong said, “I won five hundred dollars.”

“Wong, you don’t need to lie to hang out with us,” Gao said. “That’s literally impossible.”

“I’m not lying,” he said, “I really did! Really, fellas!”

Supper at the Globe was quiet that evening. Ping and Shaowei hadn’t said much of anything to each other, until right after Shaowei finished his plate of fried rice.

“I’ve been thinking,” Shaowei said, “about something you said a few weeks ago.”

Ping looked at him, unsure of how to act casual, and waited for Shaowei to continue.

“I remember you saying something about how the only people making money at the games are the people running them? I’ve been thinking, now that you’re the manager, maybe we should open our own mahjong parlour. At Fong-Li.”

Gao and Wong both looked at Ping who remained quiet.

“Well,” Ping said as he put down his fork. “I think that Hop-Wah has a nice set up there for himself and I wouldn’t want to interfere with his business in any way.”

“No, no, it’ll be like back in San Francisco, when I was running that fake opium den, just a small, little, tiny, side hustle. The Tai-Mei Club is way too crowded and, I think, there’s enough of us here that we could have two casinos and that it would be fine. Business-wise I mean.”

“I’m not sure,” Ping said. “I’m trying to avoid all this gambling stuff. Besides, we all seem to enjoy getting together at the Tai-Mei.”

“No, no, you don’t get it. The reason why we came to this country is money, right? Well, maybe you didn’t come here for money, but wouldn’t it be nice if you could make some more money to bring back? Wouldn’t that put a smile on your wife’s face?”

Ping folded up his napkin and threw it on his plate.

“We don’t have mahjong sets,” Ping said, stern. “We don’t have the space that Hop-Wah has, we don’t have anything to drink. We don’t have anything. Why would anyone come to our casino?”

“Variety,” Shaowei said. “Aren’t we all already a little sick of the Sunday routine?”

“We don’t have rooms upstairs like Hop-Wah,” Ping said, with a slight squint in his eyes.

“Don’t need them,” Shaowei said.

Ping leaned back in his chair.

“I’ll think about it,” he said.

“I have a mahjong set,” Gao added.

Soon after that, the men walked back to their living spaces. Shaowei and Ping said good-bye to Gao and Wong, and they headed up to Holdsworth. It was a quiet walk, silent expect for the sounds of the city surrounding them.

“That’s them, that’s two of’em anyways,” a child yelled.

Ping and Shaowei had passed by a group of children just moments ago, but didn’t pay much attention to them. Both of them were so focused on that afternoon’s incident that neither of them were paying much attention to their surroundings.

“You sure?” an older child asked.

“Yeah, yeah, I remember cause of the suit. There’s only a couple of those chinks that wear suits. The one with the ponytail, he’s the one that threw my bike in the harbour.”

“Those fucking gooks, let’s get ‘em b’ys.”

The children swarmed around Ping and Shaowei. They were young teens, four of them, two of whom Ping and Shaowei could remember, two of whom they hadn't met before. The children were carrying pucks of mud and manure and flung them at the men, all the while yelling.

"Gook!"

"Rat!"

"Chink!"

"Fuck you, scum."

The boys took Shaowei and Ping by surprise and the first pelting of mud and manure hit their bodies with hard, stinging thuds, splattering over their clothes and skin.

"Run," Shaowei said.

The two men broke through the loose circle of kids and ran to reach Fong-Li. The children ran after them, chucking the mud as hard as they could.

SMACK!

Right in the back of Shaowei's head.

SMACK!

The back of Ping's knees.

SMACK!

Splattering over the unpaved road.

The children were still chasing them when the men reached Fong-Li.

"We shouldn't have led them here," Ping said as they burst through the back door. Ping tried his best to hold the door closed as the children are banging and yelling outside.

Shaowei said nothing and instead ran through the laundry, into the ironing room, and grabbed two hot irons right from the side of the coal fire. He ran back through the laundry, towards the back door. Ping, seeing the irons glowing orange with heat, dived out of the way, allowing the children to force the door open. With a great scream, Shaowei threw the irons through the door at the children.

“Yaughhhhhh”, Shaowei yelled, dropping to his knees. “Fuck! Fuck, fuck, fuck.” His head drops into his hands as he begins to whimper.

Ping looked out the door. One of the irons was sizzling in a nearby puddle of piss and the other iron was nestled in the grass. The children had dispersed. Ping picked up the irons and went back inside.

Shaowei was crying on the floor, his hands dabbing at the tears. ‘Don’t touch your face,’ Ping thinks, then realizes something. He hadn’t seen Shaowei wear his white gloves in weeks.

“I know,” Ping said as he helped Shaowei up off the floor. “I know.”

Circus Circus

The following work week continued as normal, the washing, the rinsing, the repeating. The work never got easier, but they did lose a sense of just how long the hours were. As the weekend approached, Ping took a moment during their supper break to ask Shaowei a question.

“Okay, so, if we were to open our own casino, how would we do it?”

“That’s a stupid question,” Shaowei said. “We’d do rounds of mahjong at this table.”

“And we’d charge a table fee?”

“Yeah,” Shaowei said. “Maybe even have lower fees than Hop Wah, just to get things going.”

“And people would pay those fees?”

“They do now, don’t they? It’d be easy for us to do.”

“Yeah, but like, where would we even get mahjong pieces?”

“Stupid,” Shaowei said. “Gao said he has a set, plus, there’s hundreds of Chinese here. You think no one has mahjong pieces just cause you don’t?”

Ping didn’t ask any further questions, partially because of Shaowei’s sour mood, partially because he didn’t want anyone to get the impression that he was seriously considering the idea.

Ethel didn’t come by that week. Ping thought maybe there had been a miscommunication with Shaowei, or maybe she just didn’t want to do extra language lessons. Shaowei said she probably just didn’t want to be seen with a Chinese person. Ping thought that although that could be true, it might even be dangerous for her to be around them, she didn’t seem like she cared all that much about her appearance.

Sunday rolled around and it was beginning to seem like even this one day of freedom a week was just as much a part of their labour as anything else. Bath, church, language lessons, Tai-Mei Club, the Globe, then sleep. There had to be more to life than this.

After the language lesson — “that’s a picture of a car, me duckie, repeat after me, ‘car’” — Shaowei and Ping once again attempted to get Ethel to agree to give extra lessons to Ping.

“Excuse me,” Shaowei said, straining to say each syllable, “Mrs. Squibb, can you please give Mr. Ping more language lesson time?”

“Oh my Jesus, buddy,” Ethel said. “I’m nobody’s missus.”

“He just need more time learn. Even one more day a week.”

“Yes, b’y’, like I gots time for that.”

“Please, Mrs. Squibb. He not look for anything else. Just want learn English.”

“Whaddya want? I don’t own the bloody language book.”

“Just speak him. Help him learn.”

“Sure, b’y,” Ethel said, flustered. “You knows English well enough, why don’t you teach him?”

Shaowei exchanged a look with Ping, who was smiling and nodding.

“She said I should teach you English,” Shaowei said to Ping.

Ping stopped nodding for a moment.

“Why didn’t we ever think of that?” he asked Shaowei.

Another stroll to the Tai-Mei Club, another afternoon sipping tea and watching the games. Another supper at the Globe, except this time Shaowei requested a copy of the menu so that he could try to teach Ping some of the words.

Shaowei pointed at the first listed item.

“Fish and chips,” he said first in English, then in Taishanese, then in English again. “Fish and chips. It’s like deep-fried fish with fired potatoes.”

“Okay,” Ping said. “Fish and Chips,” he repeated in English, slowly sounding out the words.

Gao and Wong sounded out the words too.

“Fish and chips, fish and chips.”

“Fish and Chips is terrible,” Gao explained. “It’s disrespectful to the fish to be cooked like that.”

“Okay,” Shaowei continued, “next is shrimp and chips.”

“Shrimp and chips, shrimp and chips.”

“Yeah,” Gao said, “this is like fried shrimp with fired potatoes.”

The next menu item was scallops and chips, then wings and chips.

“Why is everything with chips?” Shaowei asked.

“It’s like rice for white people,” Gao explained.

“It wasn’t like this in San Francisco,” Shaowei said.

“Guys,” Wong said, “I have a secret.”

The men looked at him blankly.

“I have over a thousand dollar in winnings from the Tai-Mei Club now.”

“Wong, please,” Ping said, “you really don’t need to make things up to hang out with us.”

“I’m not making it up,” Wong said. “It’s true.”

“Okay, if it’s so true,” Gao said, “why don’t you buy a house or something?”

“Well,” Wong said, defensive. “Maybe I will.”

After supper at the Globe, the men said their goodbyes and Shaowei and Ping headed back to the laundry as fast as possible, anxious to avoid a situation like last week.

They made it home safe and Shaowei picked up a copy of the newspaper.

“Come here,” he said, waving at Ping. “Let’s read this.”

They sat in the main laundry room so as to not disturb the other men who already settled in on their iron beds for the night. Shaowei would say the words and then Ping would repeat them, sounding them out in a slow and deliberate manner.

“An... In vay shun... An Invasion... Fr, fr, om, from.. th, th, ee, the... Oh, O, Or, ri,... ent, Orient. An invasion... from the orient.”

“Good,” Shaowei said. “Good. Let’s keep going.”

And it went like that. Shaowei read out the words and Ping repeated them.

Sometimes Shaowei would get carried away and read a passage too long for Ping to be able to remember enough to repeat it.

“An inferior type,” Shaowei read aloud, “lower in the scale of humanity and civilization than are our people. It is undesirable to have a large colony of them here to live. They are a most peculiar people, nowhere do they merge with the people among whom they live. They keep to themselves, and could never be expected to become what might be termed ‘Newfoundlanders’.”

Shaowei put the paper down and let out a deep breath.

“You read out too much,” Ping said. “Never expect be Newfoundlanders,” Ping said in English, then in Taishanese, “That’s all I caught. What does it mean?”

“Let’s read something else,” Shaowei said, flipping the page.

A full page ad depicting a cartoon elephant with two women in short dresses balancing on its head, arms entwined and outstretched.

“What’s this?” Ping said.

“It says ‘Alfred J. Hennessy and Son’s Royal Circus.’”

Ping repeated the words slowly.

“Hippo, dome... Hippodrome,” Shaowei said. “Hmmm, never heard of that word before. ‘Menagerie, and Museum.’”

They continued to translate and read the ad until Ping could successfully read aloud all of the words: “The Royal Circus Company will comprise of lady and gentleman equestrian artistes, gymnasts, acrobats, and equilibrists, selected from the finest companies across Europe and America. Also featuring Hennessy’s Clowns and Grotesques, Hennessy’s stud of Educated Horses and Ponies, Professor Brown and his Maritime Minstrel Jubilee, the famous Trained Elephants, an appearance from the Great Wazini and a chance to peek at The Chinese Lady. The whole entertainment will be found morally instructive and amusing as can be testified by the reigning royalty, nobility and clergy of the United Kingdom. 3 days only. Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday evening and positively no longer.”

“We should go to it,” Ping said after repeating and learning the words for an hour.

“We can’t get the time off for that,” Shaowei said.

“I’m the manager now,” Ping said.

Neither of them said anything for a moment, then Shaowei noted “The others will be mad if we just abandon our posts.”

“Yeah, you’re right,” Ping said.

“We should get to sleep,” Shaowei said. “Not much time to rest like this.”

“I know,” Ping said.

The two of them remain sitting there for a moment.

“Unless, we tell them that we have to make a special delivery that night,” Ping whispered.

“What do you mean?”

“We tell them that a client paid us extra to do their laundry quicker than normal, that they need it back by that evening. So, around 7 p.m., we just leave, say we’re going to drop it off, then go to the circus for an hour and come back.”

Shaowei thought for a moment. “This can’t work, we’d need to have laundry to wrap up and take with us.”

“Our own clothes?”

“They’d recognize our clothes.”

“We could just take a random laundry order and do it.”

“Do what?”

“Like actually deliver an order early.”

“Then they’ll expect that all the time. And if other clients found out that someone is getting their order early and not even paying extra—“

“Alright, alright,” Ping said. “What if, we washed Wong and Gao’s clothes?”

“They’ll recognize the clothes, they’re Chinese clothes.”

“Yeah, but they wouldn’t recognize them to be Wong and Gao’s clothes, they’d just recognize them to be Chinese clothes.”

“Your point?”

“We collect Wong and Gao’s clothes, we tell everyone the clothes are from the circus and they’re paying extra so they can have it done before showtime.”

Shaowei thought about this for a second.

“Yeah. Yeah, that could work.”

—

The biggest obstacle in their plan was obtaining Wong and Gao’s clothes. Although Ping’s status as management meant that he didn’t have to be part of the washing and rinsing team, he still participated in that labour anyways as a show of good faith. On Monday, he walked out the back door a couple times during the morning and complained of a bad belly. The third time he walked out the back door, he continued walking. He walked down to the Globe and knocked on the back door. Gao and Charlie were doing food prep, which was mostly comprised of preparing potatoes to be chips. He explained the situation to them — “I’m not having any part of this,” Charlie said. “You know this is a no conflict zone.” — and Gao handed over his clothes.

“One condition,” Gao said. “I get to come too.”

“You can’t get time off for that,” Ping said.

“I bet I could,” Gao said. “Hey Uncle Charlie, with the circus coming to town, I figure it’ll be a slow night. Think I could have an hour or so off to go check it out with the fellas?”

Charlie wiped his hands with a rag and threw it over his shoulder.

“Fine,” he said. “But if we get swamped that night, I got no qualms firing you and finding someone who appreciates me more.”

“Charlie,” Gao said. “Of course I appreciate you. I appreciate having this time off!”

Next, Ping went to find Wong, which he knew would be more of a challenge. He walked down to Kam Laundry which, although only a few blocks from where he lived, was still unfamiliar territory for him. He waited outside, hoping to catch the bundle boy before he brought in a load. The windows here were smaller and Ping noticed that there wasn't as much of an audience here as there was at his laundry. He saw Wong approaching from a distance, skipping down the sidewalk, bag of laundry slung over one shoulder and in his other hand, a stick. As he skipped down the street, he held the stick out so it would tap off the nearby metal fences, creating a ding-ding sound with each hit.

It was easy for Ping to forget how young Wong was and yet seeing him skip down the road like this was as clear a reminder as ever. Watching Wong made Ping think of his own son and he shuddered. There was a big difference between a toddler and a preteen but for a moment, Ping saw a similarity between the two. Out of reflex, Ping touched the crumpled envelope in the breast pocket of his suit, the letter for Hualing and his Mom.

"Hey Ping," Wong said as he approached. "What are you doing here on a weekday?"

"Me and Shaowei were hoping to collect your clothes so that we can wash them. We'll return them tonight."

"What are you trying to say, that I stink or something?"

"No, no, it's just— we're working on a special project. I have Gao's clothes too."

Wong squinted his eyes and stared at Ping for a moment.

"You're thinking I have my winnings stuffed in my pockets, huh?"

"What," Ping said, surprised. "No."

“Well, I’ll have you know,” Wong said waving a clenched fist in the air, “I have my cash box stuffed in a place that no will ever find it.”

“No, no, I’m not looking for your money, we’re just going to the circus.”

“The circus?” Wong’s ears perked up. “Is it the same one that we saw on the train that night?”

Ping had forgotten about that, remembering it more like a dream.

“Oh,” he said. “Hmmm. I’m not sure, it might be.”

“Okay, I’ll go too,” Wong said as he walked away.

“No, wait,” Ping called out to him. “I need your clothes.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Wong said as he heads inside the laundry.

A few minutes later, Wong reemerged and gave some clothes to Ping.

“You can look through the pockets,” he said. “You won’t find a damn thing.”

Ping headed back to Fong-Li. He had Wong and Gao’s clothes inside one of the blue bags, but he had to hide it for the next couple days. He snuck into the iron bedroom and tried to quickly and quietly rearrange the contents of his suitcase so that the others’ clothing could fit in. To his surprise, there was almost enough room. It just needed a little more space. He had to take out his abacus, and then everything fit in just fine. Then he returned to work, giving Shaowei a subtle nod as he entered the room.

—

The next day, after ringing the morning bell and waiting for the iron bedroom to clear out, Ping took Wong and Gao’s clothing out of his suitcase, stuffed it in a blue bag, then snuck out the

back door and crept around front, knocking on the front door and leaving the blue bag on the step, then came back in through the back door and walked casually into the main laundry room.

Shaowei was standing by the front door with the blue bag.

“This is laundry for the circus,” he announced. “They’re paying us extra to do this as fast as we can and have it ready for tonight.”

“Did you tell them they must pay extra?” Ping said, extra loud so everyone could hear him.

“Why, I didn’t have to ask, they offered!” Shaowei said, equally loud.

“Wow,” Ping said. “I’ll have to go with you to bring the bag back to them later tonight so that I can thank them in person.”

The entire laundry room said nothing in response to this conversation, they barely even stirred. It occurred to Ping that their elaborate plan may not have even been necessary. No one cared.

They put a rush on Wong and Gao’s clothes and had them fully laundered, ironed and wrapped, by 6 p.m.. Shaowei and Ping headed out with the bag, and no one in the room even seemed to notice them leave.

After returning the clothes to Wong and Gao, the four men headed to Bannerman Park to see the circus. They saw the pointy, round roofs of the circus tents, jabbing into the sky, before they saw the fairground itself. They walked through the circus, enticed by the dazzling lights, the multicoloured confections and tapestries, ranging from pale pink to electric blue, from cherry red to banana yellow.

To the Chinamen's surprise, the locals mostly left them alone as they walked amongst the tents and booths, the games of chance and other exotic attractions distracting them from doling out their usual spate of harassment. Maybe they thought the Chinamen were part of the attractions here. Nonetheless, for the first time since they arrived in St. John's, the four men felt as though they were no longer being stared at — there were more interesting things surrounding them.

Shaowei translated the names of the booths and the various attractions as they walked around. Although it was free to be here, it cost money to participate in anything.

"Okay," Shaowei said as he squinted towards a booth. "That says, 'Spin the Wheel,' I guess you pay to spin the wheel and then the wheel gives you a prize or something. That one says, 'Bobbing for Apples,' it looks disgusting, everyone sticking their mouths in the same bucket of water. Uhhhh, over there, that one says, 'Ring Toss,' now, see, I saw this one before in San Francisco, it's actually not even possible to get the ring over the milk bottle. Um, let's see, what else? 'World's Biggest Tomato,' looks like it's probably a fake tomato to me, just a scam to try to sell you baskets of the world's most regular tomatoes. Uhhh..." Shaowei continued to scan the fairgrounds.

"What's that one? What's that one?" Wong said, pointing towards a small booth where a chubby white man in a turban was sitting on a stool. Out of all four of them, Wong was by far the most excited to be here.

"Um, let me see..." Shaowei said. "Okay, that one says, 'I can guess anyone's age.' Could've came up with a better name than that... Hm, I guess he tries to guess your age and if he gets it right, you have to pay him a nickel, and if he gets it wrong, he pays you a nickel."

“I want to do it,” Wong said, excitedly.

The four men walked towards the booth and Shaowei said, “His English not good, he want to play.”

“Alright,” the man said, struggling to stand up from the stool. “Money first, put it there.”

Shaowei translated for Wong and Wong eagerly put a nickel on the man’s table.

“Okay, sit in that there stool,” the man said. The man waved his hands in circular motions in the air and closed his eyes, looking towards the sky, breathing deep through his nostrils. He touched the front of his turban, then touched Wong’s forehead. The man’s eyes flew open and he stared intensely at Wong’s smiling face. Then the man closed his eyes again.

“You are... seventeen!”

“No,” Shaowei said.

“Awe, geez, I don’t know,” the man said. “You people age differently anyways, it’s impossible to know how old any of you coolies are.”

The man hung his head in shame, then added, “I’m keeping the nickel because it’s not fair, looking at you people.”

The four Chinamen moved on from his booth.

“Say, uh,” Ping asked, “where’s the Chinese Lady?”

Shaowei surveyed the surroundings and then pointed towards a large line-up of local men.

“Let’s go see her,” Gao said, running to join the line.

The lineup moved fairly fast, groups of five were admitted to her tent at a time. While the Chinamen waited, they could hear elephants roar, audiences cheer and the faint sound of whirly

music, giving the night a whimsical air. A nearby barker yelled “Pictures in the paper moon, only two dollars.”

“I knew that was you guys,” a woman’s voice rattled off the words quickly, “what about are y’all doing here instead of the laundry?”

Ping turned and saw Ethel, flanked by two women.

“Who’s dis, Ethel?” the shorter of the two women said. “The celestial from church?”

“Yes now, who else ya think it’s gon be?” Ethel said, then said towards Ping, “These are my sisters, Marge and Vile.”

All three of the sisters had the same, chaotic curly hair. Marge was tall and thin, with glasses and a constant expression of wondering. Of the three sisters, only Marge had a full head of tight, brown curls. Vile was shorter, a little rounder and her hair was jet black. She had a mean face, as if it was cast in a permanent snarl. Ethel struck a balance between her two sisters, neither as tall or as short, neither as thin nor as fat.

“I said these are my sisters,” Ethel repeated, louder than the first time. “Oh Jesus, that’s right, you don’t know what I’m saying, now do ya?”

“Mrs. Squibb—“ Shaowei began.

“Missus Squibb, whadreya married now, Ethel?” Vile interrupted Shaowei with a harsh look towards Ethel. Marge continued staring through her glasses as if in a daze.

“I keep telling them I’m not a missus, b’y, Vile,” Ethel said. “They don’t know the right words yet, lay off ‘em.”

“Mrs. Squibb,” Shaowei began again, this time ignoring Vile’s outburst.

“By da Jesus, he’s at it again,” she said.

“Mr. Ping been practicing English with me,” Shaowei said. “He learn many words and some sentences.”

“Das good! Whaddareya in line for? Da Chinese Lady? Must be missing home, huh, fellas?” Ethel laughed.

“C’mon, let’s go see Richards and the boys,” Vile said.

“See ya on Sunday,” Ethel said with a wave.

“I like them,” Marge said as they walked away.

“They’re weird,” Wong said.

When they finally got to the front of the line, they each paid a dollar to see the Chinese Lady. A white man was let in with them to fill out the group of five — “I saw this four times already” he said.

It was a small tent, standing room only for the five men, a little red velvet curtain in front of them. The curtain pulled back to reveal a woman hidden behind several large paper fans. A record played some Chinese-sounding music, although it was a tune that none of the men recognize. The fans slowly fluttered away to reveal a woman sitting cross-legged in a qipao dress, the high neck of the fabric making the lady look ever more fragile. The dress was a quite bit shorter than what the men had seen back home, exposing a lot more leg than normal. Her face was turned away from them and all they could see was her hair, which had been stroked back at the forehead and knotted at the top of her head. She turned around with a dramatic flourish of a fan she held in her hand. The men were surprised.

Her eyes looked almond shaped, slanted even. But upon closer inspection, they were drawn on with makeup, winged eyeliner slanting upwards. She wasn’t Chinese, she was white.

She danced around her little stage for a couple minutes, kicking her leg dramatically, playfully dropping her fan and bending over, posing with various vases and fabrics. When the record stopped, the curtain closed and all the men were escorted out through a different way than they entered. Another room in the same tent, except this one was selling vases like the ones the lady posed with, fans like the one she dropped on the floor, all the products inscribed with Asian-looking hieroglyphics that meant nothing to any of the four Chinamen.

“I can’t believe you fellas would leave a country where you could see that everyday,” the white man said. He left the gift shop and lined up outside to see The Chinese Lady again.

“That wasn’t a Chinese lady,” Shaowei said.

“I want to go see her again,” Wong giggled.

“Look,” Ping said, “we don’t want to be gone for too long. We should see one more thing and then leave.”

They looked around the fairgrounds. No one wanted to see the animals and it was an hour and a half before the next acrobatics show. Professor Brown’s Maritime Minstrel Jubilee only played once and it was earlier in the evening. The Great Wazini was taking the stage in a couple minutes, there was no line to get in and it only cost twenty-five cents to see him. The decision was easy.

The four of them tried to sit near the back, mostly out of a desire to not be seen by the locals. The Great Wazini took the stage. He was a middle-aged man with a handlebar moustache that looked like it had been dyed black with shoe polish. He did a couple tricks, pulling a rabbit out of a hat, making a hanky levitate. Then, he asked for volunteers.

“What’s he saying?” Wong said.

“He wants people from the audience to go on stage,” Shaowei explained.

“I want to go,” Wong said, raising his hand.

“No,” Shaowei said as he swats Wong’s hand down. “He’s asking for women.”

Wazini selected a woman from the audience and she ran to the stage with glee. He put her in a box and sawed her in half. Everyone laughed, including the woman who had been divided. Then he asked for volunteers again.

“Is he asking for volunteers again?” Wong asked, excited.

“Yes,” Shaowei said. “But, please, don’t.”

Wong threw his hand up in the air, jumping and bouncing to get Wazini’s attention.

“You don’t even know English,” Shaowei said, but it was too late.

“Yes,” Wazini said, pointing at Wong. “You, the boy in the back.”

Wong ran to the stage as fast as he could. A murmur went through the audience as he walked onto the lighted stage.

“Oh, um,” Wazini said. “What’s your favourite card game, my child?”

Wong smiled and nodded.

“52 pickup,” someone yelled, eliciting laughter from Wazini and the audience.

“Go on, boy,” Wazini said. “What’s your favourite card game?”

“It’s always the way,” Wong sputtered out

Wazini laughed as someone in the audience yells, “Get off the stage, yellow.”

People began to boo. Wong stood there smiling, waiting for Wazini to do something magical. Shaowei stood up and yelled in Taishanese, “Get off the stage, Wong.”

SPLAT.

A tomato, thrown at Wong's head, turning into a chunky mixture rolling down his cheek.

SPLAT.

Another tomato hit Wong square in the chest, the blood-red tomato juice making him look like he'd been shot.

SPLAT. SPLAT. SPLAT.

From all over the room, audience members were throwing tomatoes at Wong, soaking his clothes in viscous liquids, his yellow skin speckled red. He ran off the stage, tomatoes flying through the air, some plopping near Wazini, others completely missing their now-moving target.

"We gotta get out of here now," Shaowei said to the others. When Wong reached the back of the tent where they were, they all left as fast as possible, walking past all the booths and dazzling lights, out of the park, back onto the narrow streets that led to their respective homes.

Wong sobbed, as quietly as he could, and nobody said anything. They walked Wong back to Kam, then Shaowei and Ping said goodbye to Gao and headed back to the laundry.

They walked in and nobody stirred or had much to say. They resumed their positions. Wash, rinse, repeat. Everything was normal.

The Rock

The rest of the week proceeded as it always did, backbreaking labour and stoic silence, aside from the sounds of the splashing suds and the chorus of spectators outside the window. By the time Saturday rolled around, it felt like the circus incident had been a hundred years ago, like they had imagined it instead of really experiencing it.

Saturday was the best day at the laundry, because you knew that at least tomorrow was a break. That, even if only for a couple hours, you could be free from the sinks and the soaps and the hot irons. And even though it was the end of the week, and everyone was exhausted, you could get a second wind and try to finish a couple hours early so you could get ready for your single day of rest.

Saturdays were also the days where they had the biggest audiences outside. Sometimes the crowd would be rowdy enough that you could hear them through the glass, laughing and pointing, saying words the men preferred not knowing the meaning of. Sometimes vendors even set up outside the window, selling peanuts roasted over an open flame. Still, this was all background noise for the Chinamen's labour and eventually they would forget they were even being watched.

One Saturday evening in the summer, the audience had gotten particularly rowdy and later on, Ping wasn't sure if he had heard the smash first or felt the shards pepper his neck. He could've sworn he felt it first, millions of tiny shards of glass exploding like shrapnel, flying gracefully into the soapy suds of the tub, bubbles being popped by the shiny miasma. Then the sound of the shattering glass, the rock hitting the floor with a thud and a crunch, the audience of

locals hooting and hollering, some decrying the barrier being broken, others cheering on the destruction. Someone had thrown a rock through the window and although some of the Chinamen jumped when it happened, Shaowei noted that he was surprised this hadn't already happened, the way things are around here.

Indeed, it was a rare incident in that it made the entire labour force of Fong-Li laundry stop what they were doing for a moment. Small pieces of glass were littered everywhere and it would take some time to clean it up. And although it was an evening in the early summer, the stiff cold breeze of the Atlantic Ocean still blew in through the window.

"Alright," Hong said, taking charge as Puy was uncertain of what to do. "Something like this happened before. First thing we gotta do is drain the tubs and make sure that there's no minuscule pieces of glass hiding in the laundry we're working on. The glass on the floor can wait until our super break."

"What happened before?" Shaowei asked.

"You don't need to worry about it," Hong said. "Let's deal with the problem at hand. You and Puy, give me a hand with the paper."

Ping, Shaowei and Hong tried to close up the hole in the window by covering it with some of the laundry's brown wrapping paper, affixing the paper with twine to nearby poles. It didn't take long before someone outside walked by and punched a hole through the paper, then yelled something into the hole. The man was too belligerent to be understood, but after Shaowei assured everyone that it was likely some variation of 'chink,' they got back to work.

"Fellas," Aiguo said. "It could be worse."

“Shut up, bag boy,” Zhang said, as he ran his hands over a tablecloth repeatedly, trying to make sure that every small fleck of glass was found and removed.

“The kid’s right,” Jun said, before pausing and lifting a wet Oxford cloth button-down shirt to his nose. “Ah, ah, ah, AH-CHOO.” Jun sneezed into the shirt, and with a look of fear, his eyes darted to the broken window which was thankfully covered by the ripped brown paper.

“Nice going,” Zhang said with a roll of his eyes. “What, were you hatched from a rock?”

“Zhang,” Hong said. “This is not the time for your impetuous nature.”

“My impetuous nature?” Zhang said. “Jun is the one that just sneezed on a shirt. Can you imagine if they saw that? There’d be a lot more than a rock through the window, they’d burn the place to the ground.”

“Enough,” Hong said. “Focus.”

After a moment of silence, Shaowei raised his head and said, “What did you say about this happening before?”

“I’m sure it comes as no surprise to you that something like this has happened before,” Hong said.

“Does it happen often?” Puy asked as he shook out a long sock over the sink.

“No, no,” Hong said. “They used to break the windows here all the time and beat us up and take all our money. You should be happy, things are a lot better around here now.”

The men continued to sort through the laundry in the tubs, shards of glass being crushed under their wet boots. The police briefly showed up, after some concerned local reported the incident. They spoke to Shaowei for a moment, to confirm they were at the right laundry, then they

looked at the hole in the window, took the rock and left. Nothing ever came of their investigation.

“This type of thing, y’know, it happens,” the officer said. “And it’s absolutely terrible, but something like this, it’s almost impossible to ever find the culprit. But definitely let us know if this sort of thing happens again.”

Shaowei never bothered with telling him that this sort of thing happened all the time.

After the tubs had been drained and cleaned and inspected for any remaining shards of glass, and the soggy laundry — long tablecloths and short napkins, as well as a couple waiter uniforms— had been inspected for glass, and all the glass was removed, the tubs were filled back up and the laundry began again. A return to the soap suds, soundtracked by the crackle of torn paper flapping in the wind.

During the supper break, Ping took Shaowei aside.

“How are we going to fix this?” he asked.

“We’ll have to buy a new window,” Shaowei said. “We can ask Reverend Riley tomorrow if he knows a place. Or ask Hong, he probably knows.”

“But, what about tonight? We can’t leave the window unsupervised.”

“What, you think someone’s going to come in and steal the sink?”

“No, not that, I’m concerned about... well, anything could happen. Someone could come in and pour all the detergent down the drain. Or... Or those kids could come back and throw the hot irons at you while we’re asleep.”

“During that half hour where we’re not working?”

“Yeah, I don’t know,” Ping said. “Anything could happen.”

“Then sit out there and watch it to make sure,” Shaowei said. “Just don’t sleep tonight.”

Ping slowly nodded his head then added: “How are we going to pay for the window?”

“Aren’t you the manager?”

“Yeah, but... we send all the profits to Fong’s account. I’m sure he would let us borrow some money to fix it. I mean, he’d probably tell us to take some of his money to pay for the window. But I’m not sure that we should take the money without asking him.”

“Oh,” Shaowei said, loud. “So you’re thinking Fong did kill Li?”

“No, no,” Ping said, waving this away with his hands. “I’m just saying that we probably shouldn’t mess with another man’s money.”

“Li messed with his money,” Shaowei said, raising his eyebrows.

“Shaowei,” Ping said.

“I’m just saying,” he said with a shrug. “So, what? You’re just never going to sleep again until you hear from Fong?”

“Well, no,” Ping said. “We need to fix this immediately. I’m just thinking, do you remember playing mahjong with Gao on the ship?”

“Yeah,” Shaowei said.

“Well,” Ping said with a smile, “maybe we should get him to bring them over here tomorrow.”

—

Sunday morning. The window is still broken and some of the men volunteered to skip church so they could keep an eye on the building. Everybody wants to go to Heaven, but nobody wants their cashbox stolen while they’re working on getting there. Some of them never went to

church anyways, devout Taoists and Buddhists who weren't going to appease the local priest just so they can fit in.

Ping decided it was imperative for him to go to church. First of all, it was important that he continued to learn English. Second, he needed Reverend Riley to recommend a window maker. Third, he needed to talk to Gao.

Reverend Riley poked his head in through the broken window early on Sunday morning.

"I can imagine what happened here," he said with a deep sigh.

When Ping finished getting dressed for the day, he walked out and greeted Reverend Riley. Shaowei accompanied him.

"Reverend Riley," Shaowei said. "Our window broken."

"I saw that," Riley said.

"You tell us where to go buy new one?"

"I think I might know a guy," Riley said. "But glass is expensive, y'know. Do you fellas have the money for that?"

"Not yet, sir," Shaowei said. "Sometime soon."

Reverend Riley paused for a moment, bringing a finger to his chin in thought. Then added, "You guys didn't happen to see that Chinese Lady this week, did you? I got half a mind to write the government and ask 'em to allow you guys to bring them over here."

Shaowei faked a laugh and said, "Yes."

When Reverend Riley began leading all the Chinamen to church, Ping hung back a bit and sauntered alongside Gao when he passed by.

“No, no,” Ping explained. “It’s not a casino or a club or anything like that. This is more of, a, uh, charity thing. And, the guys, they don’t want to leave the laundry today, on account of the window being broken and all. They figure somebody might come in and steal their things or vandalize them or...”

Gao looked at him blankly.

“But, why don’t you just ask Hop Wah to raise some money?” he asked.

“No, because Hop Wah wouldn’t raise me some money, he would give me a loan,” Ping said. “And I don’t want to be indebted to him. And the guys, this is the day they play mahjong, they shouldn’t have to forego that just because someone threw a rock through the window.”

Gao sighed.

“Okay, but how long are you going to hold rounds there?”

“We’ll do it long enough to pay for the window and then maybe if there’s a little extra money left over, you can have it as a payment for letting us use your mahjong pieces.”

Gao nodded.

“This is agreeable,” he said.

—

The church service was fine. Ping was beginning to recognize some of the words, especially “Christ,” “Christians,” and “Christianity.” The English lesson afterwards was good too, Ethel began to teach him the alphabet.

“‘Spouse we shoullda covered dis on da first day,” Ethel says as she flicks her hair. “But, what odds?”

After church was over, Ping and Gao walked to the Globe so that Gao could get his mahjong pieces. Charlie wasn't there, having already gone on to the Tai-Mei Club. Then it was back up to Fong-Li to begin the game.

"We're going to play mahjong here today," Ping announced to the laundry staff when he entered the building. "This is your day of games so you shouldn't have to sacrifice that just because of the window. Reverend Riley is working on putting us in touch with a glass maker to have it fixed so hopefully it will be resolved sooner rather than later. Now I know, you probably don't want to pay a table fee, especially seeing as you already live and work here. But we're not making any profit with the table fee, we're just collecting it so we can pay for the window."

"I'll need to see the receipts," Zhang said.

"Think of it this way," Shaowei said. "The table fee here today is less than what it would be the Tai-Mei Club."

And so the games began. As it would turn out, some of the staff had mahjong pieces in their luggage too, and soon enough there was two sets of rounds going on in the back of Fong-Li. Despite the awkward seating arrangements for the games, they had figured out a way to seat the two games at the one long table. The entire staff was there, as well as Gao and Wong.

The rounds went for hours, long enough that they didn't even make it to the Globe for supper. They sent Wong down to the Globe see if he could get some takeout, but the incident with the rock made it so that he was afraid to walk around by himself. Ping went with him, not much of one for games anyways.

"You know," Wong said on the walk there, "I have a lot of money from the Tai-Mei Club. I could probably pay for the window if you want to pay me back."

“Wong,” Ping said. “There’s no way you’ve won that much. We don’t even have a price for the window yet. Besides, the guys, they enjoy it. This is what they do to relax.”

When they arrived at the Globe, Ping asked if they can get food to go.

“I can’t afford to just give out take-out boxes like that,” Charlie said.

“What’s the matter, boys?” Hop Wah, said as he stood up from his table. “Ping, how come your crowd wasn’t at the Tai-Mei today?”

“They’re asking for takeout,” Charlie said with a dismissive laugh.

“Oh,” Ping said, “someone threw a rock through my window, our window, last night and the laundrymen have decided to stick around today to make sure no one breaks in or whatever.”

“So it takes all nine of you to watch over that little place?” Hop said. “Plus Gao and Wong?”

“Mahjong,” Wong added. “They’re playing mahjong.”

“Oh really?” Hop Wah said, tone flat, eyebrows raised.

“Yeah,” Ping said, a blush forming on his cheek. “But it’s not like the Tai-Mei or anything. They’re just playing for fun. It’s a Sunday thing, right? It’s not a regular thing, it’s just cause —“

“Cause of the broken window?”

“Yeah,” Ping said.

“Boys,” Charlie interrupted them. “This is beginning to sound like an argument.”

“No,” Hop Wah said as he strode back to his seat. “There’s nothing to worry about, Charlie. Just some friends catching up.”

“No takeout,” Charlie said as he threw open the door to the kitchen.

“You shouldn’t have said that,” Ping said on the walk back to Fong-Li. “About the mahjong.”

“Well, it’s true, ain’t it?” Wong said.

“Yeah, but sometimes, you don’t need to tell everyone the truth. You can tell them part of the truth.”

“What about the rest of the truth?” Wong asked as he skipped down the road.

“What about it?” Ping said, angry with the boy.

“Well, if you don’t tell the whole truth, then isn’t that lying?”

“Sometimes lying like that is necessary. You just tell people what they need to know, or want to hear, and you don’t need to tell them anymore than that.”

The rounds of mahjong went late into the night and Ping began to regret having them set at the long table which doubled as their iron bed. Qieng had fallen asleep at his usual spot at the table, sandwiched between the two rounds. Ping felt jealous of that man’s ability to sleep through all manner of noise and commotion.

A knock came on the door around 8 p.m., an oddity regardless of the time. Reverend Riley let himself into the building, then indicated with his pointer that he wanted Ping and Shaowei to come talk to him privately. They stepped out on to the back porch.

“Okay, boys,” Riley began. “Now, look. I’m awfully sorry for what happened to your window, and I think a great deal of the community is sorry too. I passed around the collection plate today and told people that I would be donating the money to your cause. And I reached out to a window maker I know, his name is Ralph Barrellman, and he’s agreed to make the window

for you at a discounted rate. When I counted the collection and looked at the discount he was giving, I realized, I have your window paid for completely here. You guys don't have to worry about a dime."

"Oh, thank you," Shaowei said, then looks at Ping and says in Taishanese. "He's paying for the window."

"What?" Ping said.

"He said they're giving him a discount and he raised money from white people to pay for it."

"Wow," Ping said in Taishanese, then added, in English, "Thank you, thank you."

"Thank you, Reverend Riley," Shaowei said with multiple nods and a smile. "Thank you, thank you."

"Why, it is no problem," Riley said with a warm smile. "I'm pleased to be in a position where I can even offer this to you guys. You shouldn't have to feel put out just cause some hooligans are always out here teasin' you."

"Is not the same people every time, Reverend Riley," Shaowei said. "Is different people all the time."

"I know," Riley said with a slight stutter. "These, uh, exclusions and prejudices are a problem the community will need to rectify. But, for the time being, I'm glad to help. The window man, he'll be by in the next couple days to get the measurements and then he'll be back again to install it."

After Reverend Riley left, Shaowei and Ping stood outside the back door for a brief moment. Inside, they could hear laughter and the clacking of tiles.

“I guess we don’t need to make this a weekly thing,” Shaowei said.

“Yeah,” Ping said, as he peeked in through a window, at the gambling laundrymen and a pile of discarded Bamboo tiles. “It looks like they’re having fun though.”

“Well,” Shaowei said, “I guess it could continue. It’s not like we’re turning it into a club or something. Even if we only make a couple bucks, it’s fine.”

“Yeah, exactly,” Ping said. “It’s not going to be a club.”

The Hong Heing Club

The Hong Heing Club, as the space in the back of Fong-Li laundry came to be known, was a roaring success. It started off slow, just the staff of the laundry, a couple friends here and there. But, with every passing week, more people started going to the Hong Heing Club. It was, inferior, in many ways, to the Tai-Mei Club. There was no bar, only one table with awkward seating arrangements, more of a potential of being caught, no private rooms, and fewer mahjong games. But these drawbacks created an exclusivity. If a venue can only seat eight people then the eight that get to sit there must be pretty goddamn special. Eventually, Shaowei and Puy were using the table fees to buy more tables, to have better seating arrangements and more games. Once they could sit sixteen players, the table fees started finding their way into Shaowei and Ping's cashboxes. They were doing well.

English lessons were going steady too. Shaowei had begun helping Ping learn the alphabet, reinforcing Ethel's lessons — "There's simply too many letters," Ping had said at first — slowly and methodically writing out each letter dozens of times on torn-off sheets of brown wrapping paper.

When he first started writing out the letters, Ping felt sad as he remembered that he had still not sent a letter to Hualing or his Mom. He hoped they'd forgive him, he hoped they'd understand. On Sunday nights, he used to re-read the letter he was trying to send to them. Now he counted the table fees between bouts of practicing the English alphabet.

Due to Reverend Riley's generous donation, the window was repaired in a matter of days. But, there was an allure to turning this space into their own parlour, their own club, a sense of

ownership, of being able to invert the drab prison that was their job and turn it into a place that they wanted to be, to an activity at the laundry to which they could actually look forward. Of course, the day-to-day labour continued, there was always something more that needed to be washed and the men worked from sunrise to sunset to sunrise again. Yet, it was late summer and they finally had something that was their own: their games.

Hop Wah was quick to notice the staff of Fong-Li Laundry's absence from the Tai Mei Club, although he let it go for a period of about five weeks. One Sunday at the Globe, weeks later, just as September was beginning, he ended his silence.

"Hey," he said approaching the table seating Ping, Shaowei, Gao and Wong. "How's it going, fellas?"

Things had been polite and cordial between the four friends and Hop Wah, and although Hop knew that some of his customers had been taken away, he didn't appear to be overly bothered by the loss.

"It's good," Shaowei said.

"I never see you guys at the Tai-Mei anymore," Hop said. "You should come some time. Catch up with everyone."

"Yeah," Ping said. "Maybe we will. Maybe next Sunday, we'll drop by."

Ping meant this earnestly. It would be good to switch things up, get out of the house.

"You guys still playing mahjong every week?"

"I don't play," Ping said. "But, yeah, yeah, there's usually a few rounds going on."

"That's interesting, and so, you just play the rounds for fun or what?"

"Well, no, the men, they bet their earnings."

“Oh,” Hop Wah said. “So it’s like the Tai Mei Club.”

“It’s extremely similar,” Wong said.

“Wong,” Gao said in a harsh way.

“Hey,” Hop Wah said. “Don’t silence the kid. Let him talk. What about table fees?”

“I’m not a kid,” Wong said fast.

“Look, we don’t want any trouble here,” Ping said. “You know Charlie’s rules.”

“I’m not giving you any trouble, and as a matter of fact, you know damn well that I know Charlie’s rules cause it was me that taught you them. Now tell me, do you charge table fees?”

“Well, you don’t seem to be following those rules,” Shaowei said.

The kitchen door swung open.

“Hey,” Charlie called out. “Keep it down. Why is it I always got to remind you guys what’s at stake for me here?”

“It wasn’t me,” Hop said. “Your boy was just trying to silence the kid here.”

“I’m not a kid,” Wong said fast again, but louder.

“Hey,” Charlie said, throwing a rag over his shoulder. “Keep it down.”

“Charlie,” Gao said. “We aren’t arguing here, Hop just came over to the table—“

“No,” Charlie said, interrupting him. “I don’t want to hear any excuses. None. Zip.”

“But—“

“Zilch. No excuse. No arguments. This is a place of peace.”

A silence fell over the men in the restaurant.

“Charlie,” Gao began again, only to be immediately interrupted.

“Get out,” Charlie yelled. “Get out, get out, get out! I’m tired of you, bringing this trouble around.”

“Charlie,” Gao said. “I’m not bringing any trouble here, this ain’t an argument.”

“I don’t care, I don’t care,” Charlie said as he grabbed Gao by the shoulder, pulling him out of the booth and dragging him to the front door of the restaurant. He kicked open the door and flung Gao outside. He landed in the gutter with a splash. “And stay out! Find a new job too, you bum!”

There wasn’t a sound to be heard in the restaurant, except for the gentle ringing of the entrance bell and a far-off sizzling pan.

Charlie wiped the sweat off his brow with his rag.

“All of you,” he said, pointing at Ping’s table. “All of you. Get out.”

The men silently stood up, threw a couple dollars on the table and endeavoured to head out the back door. Hop Wah returned to his seat.

“You too,” Charlie said, waving his arm in a slow and tired way. “You’re just as bad as the rest of them. I don’t want to see any of ya’s.”

Hop Wah stood up fast, outraged, and with a snarl of his lip, he put on his hat and walked out the back door.

Then there they were, all of them, Ping, Wong, Shaowei and Hop Wah, in the alley beside the Globe.

“You lot,” Hop Wah said, pointing a finger into Ping’s face and then Shaowei’s, “you need to learn your place here. I don’t want to see or hear tell of you lot running a mahjong ring. Now I only asked about table fees to be polite. I know you’re charging table fees and I want a

piece of it. And if I don't get my piece, you're stomping on my grounds and I'll do whatever it takes to make sure that my grounds remain my grounds."

"Okay, sir," Wong said.

"Shut up," Hop Wah said as he walked out of the alley. "Kid."

Ping, Shaowei and Wong stood there for a moment.

"Geez, fellas," Wong said, placing the back of his hand on his forehead.

"Shut up," Shaowei said.

Gao walked up the alleyway, clothes soaked in gutter water.

"Can I stay at your place tonight?" he asked Ping and Shaowei.

"Sure," Ping said.

They walked out of the alley and stood on the sidewalk in front of the Globe for a moment.

"Excuse me," a strange and nasally voice called out from across the street.

A frail looking, old, white, bald man was sticking his head out of the business across the street. HANS' SHOE SHOPPE, the sign read.

"Excuse me," he repeated. "Is there some sort of problem over there, gentleman?"

The four men said nothing. Ping had obtained a pretty good understanding of written English over the past few weeks, but he still struggled with speaking it or listening to others. But this man, he could almost understand perfectly. The man had a slow way of speaking, a way of sounding out all the individual letters and sounds. In a strange way, Ping thought, this man sounded like them, the Chinese immigrants.

“It’s just,” the man continued. “I heard you get thrown out the door and when I peeked over, it looked like a number of you were inside.”

Again, the men said nothing. Shaowei looked both ways and then crossed the street.

“What happen in there,” Shaowei said, getting close to the man’s face. “is none of your concern.”

The man nodded and closed the door.

As Shaowei crossed back to rejoin his friends, he realized that Hans probably wasn’t the only one who saw the outburst at the Globe. Women were sitting in windowsills with cats, children were hiding behind corners and street poles. There were eyes everywhere, peering out of every window, every bush, every passing streetcar.

“Let’s go,” Gao said. “Come on.”

As the men walked back to Fong-Li, Ping pulled Shaowei aside.

“You didn’t have to talk to that man like that,” Ping said.

“I’m tired of feeling like we’re being watched all the time,” Shaowei said. “Everywhere, anywhere, there’s always people watching us, criticizing us, waiting to throw something at us.”

“I understand that,” Ping said slowly. “But that man back there, that shopkeep, he heard an argument outside and he looked out the window to see what the matter was. You would do the same thing.”

“No,” Shaowei said. “No. That man looked out the window because he heard Chinese people arguing, he wanted to look and see the ‘heathen chinee,’ he wanted to see if what they say in the papers is true.”

“Shaowei, c’mon, you’re reading into this. He just wanted to know what was going on.”

Shaowei shook his head and walked away from Ping.

It was a quiet night at the laundry. There wasn't quite enough room for Gao at the Iron Bed, so he slept on the floor. This seemed like it might be better than the iron bed, but a cold draft blew in from the baseboards and Gao was left shivering all night. Ping closed his eyes and slept fitfully, waking several times during the night, haunted by dreams.

What he didn't see that night, what no one saw, was a man wearing a rounded white hood approach the Globe. He knocked on the door a couple times, loud angry knocks that woke up Charlie who was sleeping in his little perch at the back of the restaurant. Charlie, dazed, still rubbing the sleep from his eyes, opened the front door, expecting to see Gao return. Instead, he was greeted with a boot to the face, a boot that is attached to a broomstick with multiple nails and bottle caps sticking out and an old tin can attached on top, a bludgeoning tool if there ever was one. Although momentarily blinded, Charlie acted quick enough to slam the door shut on the intruder, shutting whoever it was out of the building. The man forcefully shoved the door a couple times, but Charlie placed the full weight of his body on the door, keeping it closed, until — BANG. Charlie's body dropped to the floor.

The masked man fled. Gunshots have a way of attracting attention and that's the last thing he wanted. Charlie didn't flee. He stayed on the floor, until the next morning, when the milkman stopped by to drop off a crate of milk. The milkman was shocked to see Charlie's lifeless body on the ground, a pool of blood surrounding his head. The milkman dropped a crate of milk to the floor with a shattering clatter, splinters, glass, milk and blood, all mixing together at the Globe.

White Roses

A white rose bloomed in the garden behind Fong-Li that morning. No one had planted it and, to be honest, no one even noticed it, nestled as it was among the tops of carrots and turnips. After all, it was Monday morning at the laundry and no one had time to be looking at flowers.

It was an average morning at the laundry, except now Gao was here and Ping had to teach him how to wash the clothes.

“Step up to the tub,” Ping explained. “Pull up your sleeves and get in place. Pick up the soap. Work up a lather, rub it on the clothes. Scrub and scrub. The rest of the rules will become more clear as we go along. I find you can only really learn from experience.”

And so they began, washing the clothes in the sinks.

“You know,” Gao said, “I’m happy I lost my job at the Globe. Charlie hated when I sang. Now, I can do it here.”

“That won’t last for long,” Zhang said, electing rare laughter from the staff of Fong-Li.

“Everywhere they know me as a truly noble man,” Gao begins to sing.

“In search of wealth—

Greed led me on the road to Gold Mountain.

Denied landing upon reaching the shore, I am filled with rage.

With no means to pass the border, what can a person do?”

“Thanks,” Shaowei said from his perch at the front of the room where he sorted the clothes. “I hate it.”

The front door of the laundry swung open, toppling a pile of blue bags. Hop Wah stormed in.

“Which one of you did it, huh?” he yelled.

“What?” Shaowei said.

“I said which one of you did it, god damn it,” Hop Wah yelled as he pushed Shaowei off his stool.

“Hey,” Shaowei said as he lands on his feet. “What the fuck? Don’t touch me.”

“I’ll touch whoever the fuck I want,” Hop Wah yelled. “Until one of you confesses to killing Charlie.”

A silence fell over the room.

“Wh-what?” Gao said, his voice wavering. “Charlie’s d-dead?”

“It was you, wasn’t it?” Hop Wah said, stomping towards Gao’s position by the tub.

“What? No,” Gao said, “I would never hurt Charlie.”

“You fuck,” Hop Wah said as he grabbed Gao by the collar and pushed him into the washing tub, submerging his head under the water. Oxygen bubbles float to the surface as Gao flails his arms around, trying to push Hop Wah off him.

“Get off him,” Ping said as he dived towards Hop Wah. “He was here all night, he didn’t do it.”

Ping and Hop Wah fell to the floor, causing Hop to lose his grip on Gao. Gao gasped for air as his head comes out of the tub water, his eyes bloodshot from the detergent.

“Like I’m going to believe you,” Hop Wah said. “You never tell the truth. You lied to me for weeks about the mahjong.”

Shaowei helped Gao to his feet, still struggling to catch his breath. The front door swung open again. It's the cops, same officers as a couple months back when the rock came through the window. They look at the scene around them. Two Chinamen in suits, engaged in a scuffle on the floor, another Chinaman, head soaking wet, seemingly unable to breathe, a room full of Chinamen not doing their jobs and instead watching the chaos that has unfolded.

"Hm," the officer said. "I guess you guys are investigating the Chinamen's death too."

Hop Wah pushed himself up off the ground and says in Taishanese, "When I find out which of you did this, you'll pay for it with your life. And after that, I expect each of you to leave town. I don't care if you weren't involved, if you were the friends with the killer, I want you gone."

"Hey, hey, hey," the police officer said. "No, don't talk your language right now. Look, I'm not here to cause any trouble or make any arrests or anything. I'm here to enforce law and order. Now, as I think you know, there was a murder last night. We're simply looking for information. The people we've already spoken to, they said that the staff of this laundry had a big argument with Charlie yesterday?"

None of the men say anything, then Hop Wah cleared his throat and says in English, "Yes, officer."

"Alright, well-" the officer began.

"He got in argument with Charlie too," Shaowei said.

"I see," the officer said. "We also heard that Charlie may have had a disgruntled former employee as well and that he might be hiding out at this laundry."

"That's him, officer," Hop Wah said, pointing at Gao. "That's the man."

“Alright,” the officer said. “Well, we’re going to have to take some of you in for questioning. You two that were on the floor, the wet one, and you—“ the officer said, as he pointed at Shaowei.

“Me? Why me?”

“You spoke up a minute ago, didn’t you? You must have information to share if you’re here talking to me.”

—

The police investigation went on for the rest of the week. Questioning was rather simple and not as menacing as it had sounded. The men were escorted to the police station, where they sat in a nondescript office and waited until they were questioned one-by-one. Ping, Shaowei and Hop Wah were all dismissed fairly quickly. Their stories were all consistent with one another — they had supper at the Globe, a small argument over a game of mahjong broke out, Charlie, who hated conflict, kicked them all out. Gao’s story was consistent too, although he was kept for longer than the others.

He was the prime suspect. An employee who lived at the restaurant, publicly fired and humiliated in front of his friends, thrown into a gutter outside the front door, an incident which even several locals could corroborate, including a German shoe store owner who swore that there was never usually any trouble from the Chinamen, that this was a rare exception.

After a couple days in the holding cell, Gao was dismissed too. There was a boot mark on Charlie’s face, a size 13 boot, a size far larger than Gao’s feet, far larger than the feet of anyone in the local Chinese community. And there was nine people who could provide an alibi for Gao, the entire staff of the Fong-Li Laundry swore that Gao slept there on the floor all night. And the

police couldn't find the murder weapon, the gun. No one had ever heard of Gao owning a gun, no one had ever seen Gao with a gun, Gao swore that he never even handled a gun. So, Gao was let go on Thursday afternoon.

It remained a mystery, never solved. The murdered Chinese restaurateur found dead by the milkman, an oddity. Of course, the reporters picked it up and ran with it, this violent turn-of-events perfect for the sensationalist papers' attempts to paint a picture of the Chinese immigrants as a violent and chaotic element of the island's still-burgeoning society.

Gao returned to Fong-Li that afternoon and after some brief catching up in the main laundry room, he sat at the iron bed in the back and sobbed over everything that had happened. No one checked in on him, there was work to be done. The situation remained the same on Friday too, Gao alone at the table, sobbing all day. On Saturday, the police returned, once again looking for Gao.

Shaowei and Ping led them towards the iron bedroom and Gao was still there sobbing. The police asked if they could be in the room alone with Gao and so Shaowei and Ping excused themselves.

"What do you think?" Shaowei said. "Did he do it?"

"No, he didn't do it," Ping said.

"He could've gotten up at any point during the night. We don't know for sure."

"Shut up," Ping said with a roll of his eyes.

"So, what do you think? Are they going to arrest him?"

"I don't know," Ping said, wiping his brow. "Probably, yes."

“If this was San Francisco,” Shaowei said. “He’d already be hung in the town square.”

A moment later, the policeman walked back into the laundry room, said a quick thanks to Shaowei and walked out. Shaowei and Ping look at each other, puzzled. Gao walked out of the iron bedroom, into the main laundry room, holding some papers in his hands.

“Uh, guys,” he said. “I think there was some sort of misunderstanding. They thought I was Charlie’s son?”

“What?” Shaowei said.

“Well,” Gao said, “I remember telling them that Charlie was like a Dad to me, but I guess maybe I said it wrong? They thought he was literally my Dad. I just inherited his restaurant.”

All of the labourers at Fong-Li stopped and looked at him.

“You mean,” Ping said. “You own the Globe?”

“Yeah,” Gao said, looking at the papers in front of him. “I guess so.”

“Did he have a real family?”

“I’m not sure,” Gao said. “He never mentioned them.”

Ping stopped for a moment. How often does he mention his own family? Rarely. Some-days go by and he forgets they exist. A twang of guilt strikes Ping so hard that his eyes begin to well.

“That’s great,” Ping said, holding back tears. “Really great. Great for you.”

“What are you going to do?” Shaowei said.

“What do you mean? I’ll work at the restaurant.”

“No,” Shaowei said. “Everyone who reads the paper knows that a Chinamen was murdered there, they know a former employee was suspected, they even know about how we all eat

there on Sundays. There was even a comment from some government official saying that having so many of us in a tiny space is grounds to close the business. That restaurant is as dead as Charlie.”

“Shaowei,” Ping said. “Please. You don’t need to be rude right now.”

Gao paused for a moment, then sat down on a nearby box of detergent.

“No, no,” Gao said. “He’s right. I’ll sell the place. I’ll move somewhere else.”

“There’s nowhere else to go,” Ping said.

“Well, I’ll move home if I have to,” Gao said. “But he’s right. I can’t work there anymore. I’ll just have to sell it.”

“Bay Roberts,” Aiguo said. “That’s the place to be.”

The men looked at him.

“Where is that?” Ping asked.

“About an hour outside of the city.”

“I was thinking more so, off the island,” Gao said.

“Nah,” Aiguo said. “Bay Roberts. That’s the place to be. Lots of opportunities for our people there. That’s what I’ve heard.”

“Like what?” Shaowei said.

Aiguo shrugged.

“Don’t listen to him,” Shaowei said. “Stupid.”

“I have an Uncle in New York,” Gao said. “Maybe I’ll go there.”

“You can’t go to New York,” Shaowei said. “They don’t let Chinese into America anymore.”

“Not legally, no,” Gao said. “But there must be a way. All those boats coming and going from here. There must be a way.”

The men didn’t say anything.

“Okay,” Ping said, as he walks towards the bell. “Get back to work.”

—

On Sunday morning, after church and language lessons — they had progressed now to simple conversations, Ethel leading the way, often saying sentences too fast for Ping to understand. “There’s this guy, Richards, Jesus, he won’t leave me alone. I tells him just cause you got money doesn’t mean I wants to go out with ya” — when they had returned to Fong-Li and the familiar set of labourers were beginning their rounds of mahjong, Ping took Shaowei aside.

“Let’s go to the Tai-Mei Club,” Ping said.

“Are you out of your mind?”

“No, no,” he said, shaking his head, “I just want to clear the air between us and Hop Wah, y’know, bring him some business, catch up on everything that’s going on.”

“I think it’s a good idea,” Wong said. Shaowei and Ping hadn’t noticed him sidle up next to them.

“I think it’s a bad idea,” Shaowei said.

“Let’s just go,” Ping said. “Say hello, then leave.”

“You can go,” Shaowei said. “I’m staying.”

“Alright,” Ping said. “I’m going to see if Gao wants to go.”

Gao was still hanging around the laundry. The Globe remained an active crime scene.

“Aw, geez, Ping,” Gao said. “I don’t think we should do that.”

“Things will only get worse the longer we go without talking to him.” Ping paused for a moment, then added, “Charlie wouldn’t want this type of conflict in the community.”

Gao sat there for a moment, slumped over.

“Fine,” he said. “I’ll go.”

It didn’t take that long for Ping, Gao and Wong to walk to the Tai-Mei Club. After they had navigated its labyrinthine hallways, they walked into the gambling den and a hush fell over the room. Smoke hung in the air and nobody moved. Ping approached the bar.

“Hey, Little Joe,” he said.

“What?” Little Joe said.

“Uh, I’ll have a tea.”

“No,” Little Joe said, terse. “What do you want?”

“A tea?”

“What are you doing here? Why are you showing your face around here?”

“My face? I didn’t do anything.”

“You pounced on Hop Wah like a bitch. You overextended his knees when you did that.”

“Oh my god,” Ping said, apologetic. “I’m sorry. I didn’t realize. I was just trying to get him off of Gao.”

“Gao?” Little Joe said. “Don’t you mean Charlie’s murderer? Or did you have a piece of the action too?”

“Little Joe, we didn’t have anything to do with it, I swear. The police cleared him of it.”

“Oh, I know what the police said. They came by here, measuring all our boots, even measured our feet. That was pretty slick of you, to leave a giant footprint.”

“Is Hop Wah here?”

“Oh, so you don’t deny that it was slick to use a big boot, huh? You don’t deny it, it must be true!”

“Little Joe, please, we just came here to see Hop Wah.”

“He’s at the picture show, his usual routine. I don’t know how he’ll feel seeing the likes of you lot in here.”

“Well, we’ll wait for him.”

Ping, Gao and Wong waited at the bar for him to arrive, between angry glares from the tables and Little Joe.

When Hop Wah showed up about a half hour later, the mood of the room further soured.

“You,” he yelled. “You. Get out. All three of you. Is the other one here too? Get out.”

“Hop,” Ping said. “We wanted to smooth things ov—“

Hop brandished his revolver, loading the chamber and pointing it directly at Ping. Several men at the tables duck down and dive for the floor.

“Whoa,” Ping said. “Okay, we’ll leave.”

“Maybe you didn’t hear me earlier this week,” Hop said, his hand shaking. “I said that I was going to kill which ever one of you killed Charlie and that I expected you all to leave the city. I did not say ‘come to the Tai-Mei Club and we can be buddy buddy.’ You don’t belong here.”

“None of us did it,” Wong said, frantic, nervous.

“Shut up,” Ping said through pursed lips. “Okay. We’ll leave. But I’m not leaving the city.”

“You know it was him, don’t you?” Hop Wah pointed the gun at Gao.

“I swear—“ Gao began to say.

“Shut up,” Hop yelled. “Get out. Get out. If we weren’t in my business right now, I’d shoot you where you stand.”

Ping nodded and led the way out of the building with Gao and Wong in tow. Hop Wah followed them too, keeping the gun trained on them until they’re outside the building. Ping, Wong and Gao stop outside the door of the Hop Wah laundry.

“Shaowei was right,” Gao said.

Ping nodded.

“I mean, he’s the one with the gun, I don—”

The door swung open behind them.

“Move,” Hop yelled. “Get away from here.”

The three started moving down the street and Hop followed them.

“Yeah,” he said. “That’s right, keep going.”

As they walked down the street, Hop followed, just a few paces behind, walking slowly with one hand buried deep in the pocket of his overcoat.

The weather had changed since earlier. The sky was grey, no clouds, no sun, no hint of blue, just grey as if the entire city had been wrapped in a cloud. A light mist was falling that seemed to be a prelude to bigger storms.

“I don’t think we should walk back to the laundry,” Ping whispered to Gao.

They walked past the streets they would normally take to go home and continued walking straight down Duckworth.

“Best to be on these crowded city streets,” Gao said. Except the streets which were normally crowded weren’t. The rain had driven people indoors and it was a Sunday after all. Nothing was open.

They continued to walk further and further down the street, with Hop following them all the way, wincing with the occasional step. Maybe he did overextend his knee, Ping thought. They reached the back of the War Memorial where Ping sat with Fong that night, only a couple months ago but it felt longer.

“How far are we walking?” Wong asked. “I’m tired.”

“I’m not sure,” Ping said. “He’ll leave us alone eventually.”

“I want to look at the statues,” Wong said as he walked away from Ping and Gao to the front of the memorial.

“Wong, stay with us,” Gao said. But Wong didn’t listen. He stood in front of the memorial, staring at the bronze statues, glazed in the heavy mist. Hop Wah followed Wong to the front of the memorial.

“Hey,” Wong said. “What’s the big idea?”

Hop stood there, a snarled grin across his face.

“If you like the statues, you should see this spot on July 1st,” Hop said. “Big parade, all the veterans.” Hop shook his head.

“July 1st,” he said again. “Humiliation Day.”

“Mister,” Wong said. “None of us did it. It was probably a local or something. Go home!”

Hop still stood there, smiling, both of his hands in his pockets, giving him a hunched-over look as rain began to fall, collecting on the brim of his hat, drip, drip, dripping in front of his eyes.

“Wong,” Gao said, stepping in front of the memorial.

“You did it,” Hop said. “You son of a bitch, you did it.”

“He didn’t do it,” Wong yelled. “He didn’t, I swear.”

“You’ll pay,” Hop said.

“Just leave me and my friends alone,” Wong yelled with a quavering voice as he dived at Hop, attempting to tackle him. But Wong was only small. Still a child really. His attempt at a tackle merely knocked Hop off balance, causing him to stumble backward, trip over a rock and — BANG.

Ping didn’t flinch.

It wasn’t even clear what happened at first. Hop had fallen to the ground but so had Wong, who fell sideways onto the granite base of the Memorial. Gao walked over to help Wong to his feet then stopped and stumbled backwards himself.

“Oh my god,” he said.

Hop laid on the ground with a look of utter confusion on his face, looking between Wong and a newly formed hole in his overcoat pocket, a hole from which smoke drifted out.

Hop had shot Wong, by accident. His grip on the gun in his pocket had tightened when he fell over and he accidentally pulled the trigger. The bullet had hit Wong square in the chest.

Ping surveyed the scene and surmised that this is what had happened. He knelt down by Wong, blood pumping out of his chest wound, staining his clothes, and pouring on to the ground,

running into the space between the granite tiles like a macabre rivulet. It's going to be a son of a bitch trying to get that stain out, Ping caught himself thinking before he embraced the boy's body.

"Ping," Wong struggled to say, "I... I slipped."

The boy's body went limp in Ping's arms. He laid him down gently on the ground, then proceeded to rip Wong's clothes, trying to get at the wound to apply pressure to it. It was too late. Ping pushed down on the wound but the only thing that achieved was smearing Wong's blood on his own hands. Ping looks at his hands, bloodied and rough, calloused. The hands of a laundry-men.

"Look," Gao said. "All the money."

With Wong's clothes ripped apart, some of his pockets had been laid bare and exposed. They were all stuffed with cash. Bills fluttered down the Memorial's grand staircase, steeped in blood and rainwater.

Hop was gone. Must've ran away. It was no matter. The cops arrived quickly. After all, even though nobody was around, you couldn't shoot a gun in the centre of the city on a Sunday afternoon and expect to get away with it. Eyes from every corner, every window had seen the scuffle and numerous people, locals and foreigners alike, identified Hop Wah as the culprit. Eyes had been everywhere from the Narrows to the Spirit of Newfoundland herself.

—

The police arrested Hop Wah, but Ping and Gao were taken in for questioning anyways. Again, they sat in that plain office for a couple hours and again their stories were corroborated with other witnesses. A highly suspicious situation, being now connected to two separate murder

cases in the space of a week. Hours later, Ping was released and began the long walk back to the laundry. It wasn't that long of a walk really, five, maybe ten, minutes. But Ping was walking slow because he knew that the news of this event would've already travelled back to the laundry and he knew exactly what Shaowei would say. I told you so. Obviously, this would happen. Stupid.

It was late, Ping wasn't sure of the time. Eleven-ish. It was possible that everyone had gone to bed, that the news hadn't travelled. Ping opened the back door to Fong-Li as quietly as he could, hoping everyone was asleep, hoping not to wake them.

All the lights were off and the only form of illumination was from the burning wood fire in the ironing room. The door of that room had been left open so that the heat could travel through the building and the bright orange light of the flames cast flickering shadows over the main laundry room, making everything look like it was shimmering and, most importantly, casted light on half of Shaowei's still-awake face.

"You idiot," Shaowei said. "I told you not to go there. You know that right?"

"Shaowei," Ping began. "I — I, didn't know it would..."

"You didn't know what? You didn't know you were risking yourself and others, going over there?"

"It was an accident," Ping said. "He didn't even mean to shoot Wong. He was just trying to scare us off."

"Oh, it was an accident, was it? It was an accident when he killed our friend, was it? It was an accident when Charlie was killed too, right?"

"He tripped," Ping said.

“Oh, and then the gun fell from the sky into his hand and it shot Wong by itself?”

“I knew he had a gun, I just didn’t think—”

“You knew he had a gun?” Shaowei yelled, outraged. “You knew he had a gun and you still went there? And you brought Wong along with you?”

“You weren’t there,” Ping said, tears streaming down his face.

“I don’t need to be there to know what happened. I don’t need to be there to know this is your fault.”

“How is this my fault?”

“You,” Shaowei snarled, “with the gambling.”

“That was your idea,” Ping shouted.

“It was your decision, you said no. Then the window breaks and you bring it back up. It’s on you.”

Shaowei stepped out of the darkness. His head is completely bald, his ponytail gone.

“Wh-“ Ping stammered, shocked by the sight of him. “What happened to your hair?”

“You,” Shaowei said, throwing the severed ponytail, still knotted together, at Ping’s chest.

“I didn’t do this,” Ping said, incredulous.

“I was worried about you, about all of you. You were gone for hours. So, I went out looking for you. I went to Hop Wah’s Laundry and the cops were there, taking him away in shackles. Little Joe told me what happened. He told me that if ever sees me again, he’ll kill me.”

“Little Joe wouldn’t kill you,” Ping said.

“You’re an idiot,” Shaowei said. “You know that right? Stupid.”

“So you shaved your head?”

“No” Shaowei said, throwing his fists up in frustration. “When I was walking back to here, some drunk guys came up behind me. and they pulled on my ponytail again, and then they pushed me down into the mud and— and, one held me down on the ground, while the other one cut off my ponytail.”

“Jesus,” Ping said.

“You would say that, ‘Jesus’,” Shaowei said in a high-pitched voice. “You would take their words and use them. You want to be just like all those ignorant whites.”

“What?” Ping said, surprised. “No?”

“Yes, you do. Ever since Fong Choy showed up. Making you use the name they gave you, forced on you. Trying to learn their language so you can fit in. You think you’re too good for the laundry, admit it. You think you’re too good for the work the rest of us do.”

“I’m on my hands and knees, doing this work, day in and day out, same as anyone else.”

“What are you even doing here? You don’t need the money.”

“I’m here,” Ping began, emphasizing each word, “to replace my uncle until he returns.”

“Li is dead. You know that right?”

“Stop fucking saying that.”

“He’s dead,” Shaowei said, shaking his head. “He’s dead. Fong killed him or Hop Wah killed him but he’s dead.”

“No, I meant how you keep saying ‘you know that right,’ it’s so fucking annoying.”

“He’s dead and it’s your fault,” Shaowei said. “Charlie is dead and it’s your fault.”

“No,” Ping said, “it’s not.”

“Wong is dead and it’s your fault. This,” Shaowei said, gesturing towards his head, “is your fault. And it’s your fault because you think you can integrate yourself into this community of dumb hicks because you think if you can make enough money that they’ll forget you’re a chink.”

“It’s not a bad thing to want to be integrated here,” Ping said. “It’s not a bad thing to want to fit in.”

“I never want to fit in with these people,” Shaowei said. “I will never want to be a part of this ignorant community.”

“You told me to go to church to ‘appease the white man,’ you said that yourself.”

“I don’t want to appease anybody,” Shaowei said. “I just want to be myself. I want to be called by my own name. I want to be allowed to walk down the street in peace, without being watched or mocked or humiliated. I don’t want to be integrated, I just want to exist.”

Ping paused for a moment, his heart beating so rapidly that he could barely even hear what Shaowei was saying.

“We should leave this place,” Shaowei said. “Me and you. Get far away from here.”

“There’s nowhere else to go,” Ping said. “I can’t leave bec—“

“Oh, shut up,” Shaowei said. “What about Bay Roberts?”

“I don’t think that’s even that far,” Ping said. “Do you really think life will be any better there?”

Shaowei said nothing as he sat down on a detergent box and hung his head.

“We belong here,” Ping said, sitting down next to him and patting a hand on his shoulder.

“We will never belong here,” Shaowei said.

“I know you may not like this, but that’s what Fong Choy told me. He said ‘you belong here.’ We just have to persevere.”

Shaowei yelled, “What the fuck does Fong Choy know about belonging here?”

“Well,” Ping said, “he was the first Chinese person to step foot on the island.”

“And before that,” Shaowei said, “he was in Halifax, and before that, he was in Montreal, and before that he was in America, and before that he was in Europe and before that he was in a million different fucking places all over the planet and even now he’s somewhere fucking else. You know why?”

Ping sighed through his nostrils.

“Because,” Shaowei continued, “because our people, people like you and me, don’t belong fucking anywhere. Fong Choy had to move every ten fucking minutes because there is no place on Earth for us. And I don’t give a fuck if Bay Roberts is just as bad as here, but we can’t be here anymore. Little Joe and the Tai Mei Club have made that expressly clear. We don’t belong here.”

A silence fell between the two men and Ping stared at the roaring fire through the doorway to the next room.

“Maybe you’re right,” Ping said, deflated.

Shaowei sat down beside Ping, grabbed the back of his head, and kissed him on the lips. Ping, surprised, stood up and pushed him back.

“I—I’m sorry,” Shaowei said, blushing. “It’s just— I thought—“

“No,” Ping said, confused. “No. I mean, I don’t judge you or anythin—“

“I don’t want to talk about it,” Shaowei said, averting eye contact.

“You can do whatever you want,” Ping said. “We can be friends, it’s just — I’m not...”

“Just, stop,” Shaowei said. “Let’s go to bed.”

Ping stared at him for a moment.

“Not like that,” Shaowei added.

They headed to the iron bedroom and nestled into their chairs amongst everyone else, both of them struggling to go to sleep for hours. Much to think about, much to regret.

—

The following morning, when everyone awoke, Shaowei looked at Ping and said, “Give me five dollars.”

“Why?”

“I’m going to Bay Roberts,” he said.

“Shaowei, c’mon,” Ping said. “Stay here. You have friends here.”

“I don’t think it’s safe to be here and I want to explore other options. I don’t want to work in this laundry my whole life.”

Ping stared at him.

“Fine,” he said. “Fine.”

Ping took out the cashbox, counted out five dollar bills and slapped them into Shaowei’s outstretched palm. Shaowei stashed the money in his cashbox and stood up to leave.

“Hey,” he said. “Never forget what I taught you. ‘It’s always the way.’ Use it.”

“I’m sure I’ll see you again soon,” Ping said. “You’ll need to come back to the city eventually.”

Shaowei nodded as he walked out the backdoor.

Ping sighed. Maybe Shaowei was right, maybe he needs to skip town too. As Ping stood up to walk back to the main room of the laundry and ring the bell to officially signify the start of the work week, he noticed something peculiar. Shaowei's suitcase was still here. Ping poked his head out the back door, looked up and down the adjacent alley.

"He'll be back," Ping said to himself as he headed back inside.

While Ping had to start the workday without his sorter, his writing and reading skills had improved now to the point that he could do the job himself, sorting the clothes and making a list of what exactly each item was. He only needed to stop a couple times to ask his co-workers what the English words are for certain garments. This continued, smoother than he would've expected, until the cops showed up again.

—

When Shaowei left the laundry that morning, he walked down past the War Memorial, past all the wharfs, down to a gun store he had heard Reverend Riley speak of. MARTIN ROYAL HARDWARE STORE. He used every dollar he had in his cashbox to buy a revolver and six bullets. The total came to fourteen dollars. The old man behind the counter, presumably Martin Royal himself, squinted at him and for a moment, Shaowei thought that this guy probably won't even sell him a gun. But, he did sell him a gun and six bullets. After all, that's what old men who work in gun stores do. They sell the guns and the consequences thereof, well, it's not really their fault, is it?

Shaowei left the gun store armed with a weapon and an empty cashbox. He left the cashbox at the base of the War Memorial then walked way down the street until he got to the Hop-Wah Laundry. He walked in through the front door and raised the gun.

“Bring me Little Joe.”

The entire laundry stopped moving. Little Joe wasn't there, or at least, not anywhere visible to Shaowei.

“Put the gun down,” someone said. “And we'll tell you where he is.”

“No,” Shaowei said. “You tell me where he is, or I'll shoot one of you.”

Some brave soul stood up and pelted a bar of soap at Shaowei's head.

BANG.

Shaowei shot him.

Another man ran at Shaowei, carrying hot irons in both hands.

BANG. BANG.

Shaowei shot him twice, the man's body dropping to the floor with a clatter, his irons skimming across the concrete floor like stones on a lake. Shaowei paused for a moment, looked at the body in front of him, looked at the other body on the floor, then looked at the gun. Shaowei raised the pistol to his own head.

BOOM.

Something strange happened. The police later concluded that the man at the gun store somehow must've sold Shaowei one bullet that was too big for this gun. Instead of the bullet traveling through the chamber as it did with the other three shots fired, this bullet was too large for the chamber and instead exploded inside the gun, peppering Shaowei's face with metal shrapnel from the combusted bullet.

Shaowei, blinded in one eye by the blast, screamed in pain and fell out the front door on to the ground outside, his face bleeding profusely. The gun was left on the floor of the laundry,

smoking. Half of Shaowei's face had been torn apart by the bullet, but he wasn't not dead. Far from it.

A man living next door to the laundry, Chesley Noseworthy, heard the gunshots and the screaming. He looked out the window, saw a man lying on the sidewalk bleeding, and despite Chesley's wife's pleading to not get involved, he put his hat and jacket on and went outside. First, he pulled the fire alarm attached to the outside of the laundry then he ran to fetch Dr. McDonald who lived nearby. Within fifteen minutes, the police arrived. But before the police could even arrive, street urchins surrounded Shaowei's body and searched his pockets. They stole the remaining bullets out of his pocket, the missing bullets becoming a mystery that the court will find themselves unable to solve.

Shaowei was arrested and charged with two counts of murder and one count of wounding with attempt to kill. The case was an easy one for the officers to solve and the trial happened unusually quickly due to public demand for the celestial murderer to be punished swiftly. The newspapers covered the case breathlessly. It was there that Ping learned most things about the case. Sure, the police called him into questioning again and he was once again dismissed. But it was the papers where he really learned about what happened, or what the reporters thought happened.

The first headline read, "Two Murders Committed and a Third Attempted — Chinese Slayer Turns Gun on Himself— Most Sensational Crime in The History of Newfoundland — Is Last Night's Tragedy the Beginning of a Local Tong War?" The following day the headline read, "Was Shooting Premeditated? Slayer Purchased Revolver on Monday — All Theories So Far Point Towards an Ancient Chinese Superstition." The headline the day after that read, "Chinese

Murder Trial Opened To-Day — The King vs. Shaowei Pu.” And then, “GUILTY! Death Penalty Imposed on Shaowei Pu.” And then, “Chinese Murderer Dies on Scaffold — Extreme Penalty of Law Carried Out — Trap Sprung at 8:09 This Morning — Shaowei Pu met his End Calmly — Execution Arrangements Perfect.”

Ping didn't need to read that headline as he had been there. Him and Gao found their way over to His Majesty's Penitentiary early that morning. It was a part of the city they had never been to before and they got lost a couple times on the way there, thinking they were at the wrong place because this was a beautiful lake. The water was calm, the sun was shining, but the air was cold, indicative of the winter that would soon arrive. Eventually, he noticed it, the plain blue building hiding behind big brick walls and realized that this must be the place. It was on the other side of the lake and Ping and Gao would never make it around in time. So, they sat there in the tall grass, looking over at the large crowd assembling around the jail where Shaowei was being kept.

Dozens of reporters, children, couples, people of all kinds were gathered just outside the brick walls, everyone gathered to watch the Chinaman hang. It was the biggest crowd Ping had seen since he arrived here, other than the circus. Ping had been told that Reverend Riley was going to visit Shaowei in his cell that morning and say a prayer for him. Ping could think of nothing that Shaowei would hate more, to listen to this church shit then be hung in front of an audience of adoring whites. Sometime after 8a.m., Shaowei was led out to the top of a scaffolding that the prison had set up by the brick wall, especial for this occasion. The trap was sprung and he hanged there, feet kicking back and forth, body flailing, while the audience below hooted and hollered and cheered, until Shaowei's body stopped flailing at all. Instead, it swung back and

forth slowly, the wind guiding the lifeless corpse's direction, at which point the audience offered solemn applause and then promptly dispersed after his body was dragged up the wall and dropped back on to the prison grounds.

He was buried somewhere in there, beyond the brick wall.

It was funny, in a macabre way, Ping thought. From the distance where he sat, it could've been anyone being hanged over there. There was no way of him knowing that the man hanged was the same man who traveled across the world with him, who had been his steady companion for months, who had taught him so much. No way of knowing at all.

But, of course, that was Shaowei hanging over there. His body and its lifeless dangles, 'he' rendered 'it' as fast as you run out of breath.

—

On the walk back to the laundry, Gao said to Ping, "I'm leaving town."

"Yeah?" Ping said.

"Yeah," Gao said. "I'm selling the Globe."

"Oh," Ping said.

"Yeah," Gao said. "Yeah. I want you to take Charlie's cookbook."

"Wh-why?" Ping said. "You should have that."

"It hurts me to look at it," he said. "But someone should have it. I don't care if you give it to someone else. I just don't want it to be thrown away."

"No," Ping said. "Of course. I'll take care of it."

"Okay, good," Gao said.

They walked quietly for a little longer.

“Where will you go?” Ping asked.

“New York,” Gao said. “I’ll hide in the back of a shipping container. I know a guy who can arrange it.”

“Huh,” Ping said. “Maybe I’ll visit you some day.”

When they returned to the laundry, the men once again missed the white roses blooming in the garden. They were harder to miss now, a whole bush had developed, five flowers blossoming, their white petals unfurled out of season. The men never noticed the roses and eventually a local passed by and plucked all five of the flowers and gave them to his sweetie, who put them in a vase until they showed the first sign of rot and then promptly threw them in the trash.

The St. John's Peace Accords

"We need to smooth things over," Ping said on the afternoon of the day Shaowei was hung. "Before there's any sort of... retaliation."

"That wasn't such a good idea last time," Hong said.

Gao had already gone down to the Globe to prepare his affairs. The only people left to speak to were Ping's co-workers, his employees. They were sitting around the tub; Ping had taken the job of the sorter.

"Sunday," Ping said. "I'm going over there."

"Why do you wanna go and do that?" Zhang said. "Haven't you seen enough death?"

Ping paused for a moment.

"If we want to be accepted here," he said, "then we need to smooth things over."

"You know what?" Zhang said as he angrily scrubbed another shirt. "I'd say it's your funeral, but you just might kill us all at this rate."

"What do you think," Jun began to say before a brief bout of coughing began and subsided. "You're going to be the big hero and be so noble to save us all?"

Ping ignored them and returned to his work. It wasn't an exercise in nobility, he wasn't affecting the stance of a hero. No, rather, after everything that happened, Ping couldn't help but hope that maybe Little Joe would kill him, that maybe the guilt he felt over everything could end like that.

—

On Sunday morning, Gao came by and dropped off the cookbook.

“Thanks,” Ping said. “I— I’m going to see Little Joe this afternoon.”

Gao stopped.

“Huh,” he said. “Bad idea.”

“I just,” Ping stammered. “I just can’t live with myself knowing about there’s all this ill will, th—“

“It’s fine,” Gao said. “Be careful. Maybe I’ll see you in New York one day. I’ll send you a letter when I’m settled away.”

Ping nodded. Gao left.

Later that morning, when Reverend Riley arrived, Ping was still sitting in the same spot, considering just what he should do.

“Hi,” Riley said. “How are you doing?”

“Good,” Ping said in English.

“You know, I said a few words for your friend this week. I saw him in his cell before, uh... Well, I saw him in his cell and he was at peace. He wanted you to know that.”

“I watch from across lake,” Ping said.

“Oh, that’s an awful shame. I would’ve hoped none of you people would see that. It’s an awful shame. Everything that happened.”

“It’s always the way,” Ping said.

“Yes,” Reverend Riley said. “Yes, that is true. You’re probably feeling a little low now but you know what will always help you feel better? The word of the Lord.”

Church passed by uneventfully and the language lesson with Ethel mostly focused on her trying to ascertain whether the rumours she heard were true or not.

“That was the fella always talking for ya, right? By da Jesus, I never woulda expected that out of him. I said to my sisters, I said, ‘Jesus, Mary and Joseph, that’s the guy that always speaks for my guy.’ Papers said he did it as part of an ancient Chinese ritual of da Tongs or something like dat, dat true?”

“Meh, no,” Ping said, struggling to understand exactly what she’s asking. “I not sure why he did it, maybe revenge, not sure.”

“Yeah,” Ethel said, “but the papers, they was saying that it was a Chinese thing, like this was something you guys do back home.”

“No, no,” Ping said. “Violence, very unexpect. Not sure why. Probably Wong die and he angry. Someone cut hair.”

“Whats dat mean? You cut your hair and you goes on a murder rampage, is dat what it is?”

“No, no. A local. Local push him down, cut his hair. He angry, very very angry. And Wong die.”

“By da jumpins, you people and your ways are a mystery to me,” she said. “What about you? You going to murder anyone?”

“No, no murder. I want no murder. After this, I go talk. Talk about peace and no more murder.”

“It might be dangerous for a young lady like me to even be around someone like you,” Ethel said, touching the top of Ping’s hand.

Ping was confused by this remark. The words on their own made it seem like she might be scared of him, but the way she said them contradicted the meaning of the words. The flutter-

ing of her eyes, the raising of one hand to her blushed cheek, the touching of her other hand off of his. Confusing.

“Is no danger,” he said. “I not danger. I peace. I not involved in murder. I want no murder. I wash the clothes. That it. Washee washee.”

After the language lesson, he headed over to the Tai-Mei Club. He passed by the store with the kitchen display, he peeked at the reflection of himself in the window of the ideal kitchen. He continued on to Hop Wah’s Laundry. He paused outside the door, his heart beating so fast that black spots were obscuring his vision. He felt like he might pass out. He took a deep breath and opened the door. Wandering through the endless halls, narrow little spaces with rooms and stairwells around every corner, wandering until he finds the right one, the one with the billowing smoke and the clacking of mahjong tiles.

He walked into the room. Everything stopped, no sound, no movement. For a second it seemed as though the smoke was dissipating. There were less people here than normal, presumably having been scared off by the violence and the heavy police presence outside the laundry.

“I never known the likes of you in my life,” Little Joe said, walking out of the nearby kitchen with a halibut in his hands. “You got an awful gall to show your face around here, bub.”

“I want to talk,” Ping said. “I don’t want anymore violence in our community.”

“Our community? This is their community, bub. We just live here. You, on the other hand, I’m not sure how much time you have left.” The men in the casino laughed.

“Please,” Ping said, approaching Little Joe. “Let’s work something out.”

“I’d kill you right now if I didn’t think there was police outside watching the place. I’ve got no qualms about killing you. But you and I both know the cops are probably expecting some-

thing like that, they're expecting us to try to kill each other. So that means I gotta wait to kill you. And if you're wise, and don't get me wrong, I respect you, you seem wise to me, if you're really that wise, you'd leave town. Go to Bay Robert's or Joe Batt's Other Arm, or get in a little row boat and row the fuck away from here." Several men in the room yelled after that, words unintelligible to Ping.

"Look," Ping said. "I don't want to leave here. I have a responsibility to my family to be here. Let's just talk in private. We can work something out, I'm sure of it."

"You're bold, I'll give you that," Little Joe said. "But you and your men are responsible for the death and imprisonment of my men, so I don't want to talk in private. We can talk right here, in front of everyone."

"It would be better if we could talk in private," Ping said.

"You're lucky I'll talk to you at all. It's here or nowhere," Little Joe said.

Ping sighed.

"I want to unify the community. I want it to be a peaceful community. It's what Charlie would've wanted. The quicker we can achieve that, the quicker the general public will accept us into their society."

"Oh yeah? That doesn't bring my men back from the dead. That doesn't release Hop Wah from prison."

"Look, I lost men too. I know the pain of losing people close to you," Ping said.

"You didn't have someone walk into your place of work, trying to kill ya, though did you?"

Ping thought for a moment of his scuffle with Hop Wah on the floor of the Fong-Li but declined to mention it.

“No,” Ping said, “but I still can fear that. I fear that I could end up dead like Charlie or Wong.”

“Hey, whoa,” Little Joe said, “it was probably one of your men that killed Charlie. Probably that Gao.”

“None of my men killed Charlie,” Ping said, defensive. “Probably one of your men killed Gao.”

Little Joe gently placed the halibut he was carrying on the bar in the back of the parlour.

“You got a lot of nerve saying that in here, bub.”

“Well, come on,” Ping said, backing down. “It was probably some local that did that to him. People here, you know how they are. They hate us. This is our chance to change that.”

“How do you figure that?”

“No more mahjong at my laundry.”

“That’s it?”

“That, and, we should abolish the clubs. We should abolish this conflict. We should form one group, one club.”

“You’re going to come in here and tell me to abolish this business? I got responsibilities too, y’know, I gotta keep this place afloat while Hop Wah is locked up, I can’t abolish—“

“No, no,” Ping said. “This place stays as it is. We just start an association where we unite the whole community, where everyone is together and there’s no ill will. Like what Charlie wanted the Globe to be.”

“And what? I just forgive and forget all the deaths around me? I’m understaffed here now, we can’t even make as much money as we used to.”

“Please,” Ping whispered. “I’m prepared to make you an offer but we need to talk in private.”

“Fine, fine,” Little Joe said.

Little Joe led Ping upstairs into one of the small bedrooms peppered throughout the building.

“What is it?” Little Joe said as he closes the door behind him. “What’s the big deal, that you can’t even talk about it in front of the others?”

“I’ll do anything you want,” Ping said. “As long as it’s not violent and it doesn’t attract negative press.”

“This is the offer you couldn’t say in front of the others?”

“Yes,” Ping said. “I’ll do anything.”

Little Joe sat for a moment and then a devilish grin crossed his face.

“I want your staff,” he said.

“All of them?”

“Yep,” Little Joe said. “Clients too.”

“Well, how do you expect me to run the laundry?”

“You don’t need to run the laundry,” he said.

“I have a—“

“I know, I know,” Little Joe waved his hands. “You got a responsibility to your family and all that jazz, but let me tell you something. Li doesn’t own the place. Fong Choy will be fine without it. The only thing you owe your family is a job for your Uncle when he returns.”

“So my uncle is alive?”

“How the fuck should I know?” Little Joe said. “He’s your Uncle, not mine.”

“Yeah,” Ping said.

“So, do we got a deal?”

“If you take all the laundrymen, and all the clients, then there’s no job for my uncle.”

Little Joe sighed.

“Let me spell it out a little clearer for you,” he said. “What I want is for your laundry to be gone. Now, it doesn’t have to be harsh. Your men will work here, they can live here, I’ll take the clients. You can find a new job. You can work here too. But what I want is for Fong-Li Laundry to be gone.”

“I... Fong Choy, he knows we do good business, he’s not going to let me just —“

“Oh my god,” Little Joe said, exasperated. “I’m gonna burn your laundry down. There will be no laundry. No big handover or anything like that. Your laundry will be burnt down and things will proceed naturally from there. Fong don’t have to know, nobody needs to know.”

Ping sat and thought for a moment.

“Hmm,” he said.

“I’ll tell everyone you paid me off or gave me a settlement or something. I’ll tell ‘em I became a part owner of Fong-Li. That’s what I’ll tell ‘em. You gave me a cut of the business.

Then, in a couple weeks, I'll burn it down. Maybe even a couple months from now, when the heat's died down."

Ping still sat there considering it.

"Look," Little Joe said. "I don't want any more violence. I know you don't either. But there's a pressure on me to avenge these murders, you know? Something has to be done."

"Fine," Ping sighed, wincing as he spoke. "Do it."

"Alright," Little Joe said. "Let's shake on it."

They shook hands. Little Joe began to laugh.

"You're one cold son of a bitch, you know that?"

"Why?" Ping said

"You're willing to risk having your whole staff go homeless during the winter here just so you can smooth things over."

"Why?" Ping said. "Is the winter bad here or something?"

Discontent

The winter was settling in and Ping had never seen anything like it in his life. At first it was nice, the white particles floating down from the sky, gathering in small svelte piles, smooth and ephemeral, shaped into objects by locals. But as the weeks wore on, the snow became less ephemeral and soft and more packed and tough. Snow would fall and gather for hours, until it was up past the door of the laundry. A fierce cold wind seemed to be blowing at all times of day and drafts would pour in through every crevice in the walls of the laundry, leaving everyone shivering, noses running. At night, after all the work was done, they would move the iron bed closer to the ironing room to get more of the heat from the roaring fire. Sickness after sickness passed through the ranks of the laundrymen, germs presumably picked up from the soiled garments they washed every day. Sick as they may be, they could not stop working. Even when the snow was piled high outside the door, they could not stop working. People needed things washed.

When it wasn't snowing, it was raining. A cold, slick rain that would build up in thick patches of ice all over the street. Another hazard walking around town: the chance that you could slip and fall on a patch of ice on a hill, roll right down into the harbour and drown to death, if you were lucky, or otherwise freeze in the water and feel every bodily organ slow down and fail. The narrow passageway into the harbour, that too became clogged with ice, large chunks of ice floating in from somewhere out beyond, making it so that even the boats couldn't come and go.

These were hungry, cold times for all and Ping once again caught himself wondering if nobody was ever meant to survive on this island, that the very climate of this place was predis-

posed to make each person hate themselves and their neighbours, to develop a sour comportment and an ambivalent desire to see others fail and yourself prosper. Sometimes, on Sundays, Ping would walk around the neighbourhood and the streets seemed so lonely, the wide streets he walked on with Fong Choy rendered narrower and narrower as the snowbanks piled higher and higher. And always, an uneasy thought in the back of his mind, that the laundry could catch fire at any time, that he'd had have to rush in there and gather his belongings and run.

It wasn't the same as before. Sure, he knew all of his co-workers, his employees, for months now but he could never truly connect with them. He always had a sense, perhaps only a feeling, not based in reality, but felt nonetheless, that this group of people were a team before he came along and that there was no real way to reconcile his membership into that team. On Sundays, everyone went to the Tai Mei Club. That was what Ping told everyone the deal made in the truce was: no more mahjong at Fong-Li, plus a cash settlement. Only him and Little Joe knew the inevitable truth.

The locals were preparing for Christmas now and it was reflected in the garments being washed. The clothes became more winter appropriate, jackets filled with bird feathers. And seasonal styles became prevalent, velvet green dresses and strange men's suits made of red cloth and rabbit skins.

"Santa suits," Hong explained. "It's for the kids."

Although Christmas Day was to be a holiday, on Christmas Eve, the men at the laundry were still working. There wasn't as much to be washed as normal, but there were still table clothes, napkins, curtains, the occasional fancy dress, the odd suit.

Supper break was early that night, around 7p.m., far ahead of schedule. The same tepid stew as always, however, Reverend Riley had promised to cook a grand Christmas dinner for the entire staff tomorrow. This was something to look forward to, the type of thing that made you forget just how cold it was.

And they stood around the iron bedroom, eating and slurping the soup in silence until Hong put down his bowl and said:

“I think I smell smoke.”

This wasn’t particularly unusual as they always kept a fire burning. But Ping instantly knew what it was.

“I’ll go check on the fire,” he said, excusing himself from the break room.

A dark smoke billowed out of the ironing room and when Ping peaked his head in, he saw the walls engulfed with flames. The smoke made him cough and made his eyes sting. But he stood there for a moment anyways. He had to let this happen, he had to let it burn.

“I heard you coughing and I just had to che—“ Jun said from behind Ping. “OH MY GOD. THE LAUNDRY’S ON FIRE.”

The men in the break room abandoned their soup as quick as they could, fumbling to reach their luggage, to grab their cashboxes, to rush outside and away from the building, bowls of stews splashing on the floor, ceramic shattering, spoons clanging. They threw on their jackets, their hats and ran across the street as fast as they could. Ping thought for a moment about trying to grab something to remember the place by, but thought better of it and grabbed his cash box and luggage instead.

As he hustled out of the building and across the street where the others were, he realized that nobody had pulled the fire alarm. He ran to the back of the laundry and flung open the alarm box. The wires on it had been cut. At first, he thought that this was part of Little Joe's plan, a way to ensure the laundry burned to the ground, but he noticed the cords were soggy, the wires rusted. Someone had cut this alarm long ago. Ping sighed and hurried back to the others. As he's crossing the street—

BANG. BANG. BANG.

A chorus of gunshots rang out across the neighbourhood. Ping dropped his luggage and crouched down on the street, shielding his head with the cash box. The laundrymen laugh at him.

"It's a Christmas thing," Hong said. "Relax."

"The alarm," Ping yelled out. "It's been cut, we need to— we need to get someone."

The men dispersed through the streets, running to find other fire alarms, running to the fire station, running for help. Ping had thought of this day for weeks and he knew exactly where to go. Reverend Riley's house.

Ping walked there as fast as he could, slipping on ice all the way, with a constant chorus of gunshots ringing out, people standing on their porches and simply firing their weapons into the air, their families cheering them on, then going behind closed doors and getting drunk and arguing for the rest of the night. Ping passed by a man on a sleigh, wearing one of those red suits they had been washing recently, the ones with the rabbit fur collars and cuffs. The man wore a beard made of cotton and his sleigh was being pulled along by a caribou or some animal like it and the man rang a bell. Ding. Ding. Ding. Ping continued to walk as fast as he could on the ice.

It was dark at Riley's house when Ping arrived, then he remembered: Christmas Eve Mass. Reverend Riley had wanted the laundrymen to come to it, but they couldn't stop working until the next day. Ping ran to the nearby church, swinging open the doors and storming in between the pews.

The place was filled with people, sitting everywhere, even standing alongside the edges of the room. A choir of children sang at the front of the room and the audience was quiet. Ping stopped in his tracks, but a number of people had heard his noisy entrance and they were turning to look at him, gasps and chuckles throughout.

Reverend Riley was sitting in a grand chair at the front of the room, just to the left of the choir. He was smiling and in a jovial mood, tapping his hand in beat to whatever tune it was the kids were singing, something about it being a quiet evening. When Reverend Riley saw Ping standing there, his smile disappeared and turned into a scowl.

"Ping, what's happened to you?" he said as he stood from his chair. "You're covered in soot."

Ping looked at himself, and indeed his suit was covered in a dusty greyish black powder. Multiple audience members stood up from their seats in the pews.

"The laundry on fire," Ping said before entering a coughing fit.

"Sit down, sit down," someone said as they led him to take a now-vacated seat in the pews. He looked up to see who was around him, no one he knew, no one he could have known, although he recognized a couple of garments. That pinstripe shirt, that plaid skirt, that starched collar with the monogram on the pointy bits. And Ethel, her arms wrapped around the arms of

some white man in a tuxedo, replete with bow tie and top hat, tastefully not worn in respect for the sanctity of the church. Reverend Riley handed Ping a bowl of water.

“Drink this,” he said, bringing the bowl to Ping’s lips. As he drank, he saw himself reflected in the water. His skin and hair darkened by soot and he wondered if they’d try to wash it off him.

—

By the time Reverend Riley and Ping made it back to the laundry, the building was entirely engulfed in flames. The beams which lined the interior walls were exposed and the orange flames like that of the coal fire burned bright against the walls. And while much of the wood had burned off, certain things could still be seen. The bell remained fixed to a beam, the irons still rested on the side of the stove. Ping could’ve sworn he saw the edge of a white glove catching fire, but he couldn’t tell for sure. He could do nothing but watch. Reverend Riley and the Chinamen watched the building in flames and waited for the firefighters to arrive.

When they arrived, the Fong-Li had fallen to the ground with a clatter and the professionals got to work at dousing the flames. The bones of the building stood there tall and alone, burning and making the darkness visible. A freezing rain began to fall and everything became slick and stinging cold, like little pieces of glass were falling hard on your face. It was easier to cry that way. The flames went out quicker but the building was still gone.

Reverend Riley took in all the laundrymen that Christmas Eve. They slept on every available surface. The floor, the piano stool, the table, the bathtub, the stairs. And the next morning, little Addie ran downstairs to find a litter of Chinamen under the tree, right next to a toboggan and a pair of black leather skates.

And the Chinamen stayed there all day and took part in the Christmas festivities. A slab of birch was placed in the fire and Martha spent the day baking a big goose, and a leg of lamb in case the goose wasn't enough for all their guests, and Addie sat at the piano playing Christmas carols. They drank some sweet libation made with partridge berries. Reverend Riley said it was "bitter as the varge" and even the most accomplished English speakers among the Chinamen weren't sure what he meant. But the drink was sweet and cool and loosened the men's spirits, bringing a rosy plum complexion to their cheeks. They were served cold fish and brewis for lunch, and in the evening after the grand meal, a couple of women came over. Riley's older daughters apparently, and Riley encouraged the men to dance with them. The Chinamen wouldn't dance with them due to an overwhelming sense of embarrassment, sorrow over having lost their livelihood, and their retained cultural teachings that this wasn't the way that men and women should mix. All in all, the whole day had been so cheerful, so jovial, that it was almost as if they hadn't lost their homes at all.

But they had.

On Boxing Day, Little Joe came by Reverend Riley's house and offered all the Chinamen jobs at Hop Wah Laundry, just as he promised he would, and he offered them room and board too, in those numerous little rooms found in the narrow, zig-zagging hallways of that building. And so that settled that, and the Chinamen vacated Reverend Riley's home that evening. Their work resumed in earnest the following day, with garments needing to be looking spiffy for the coming New Year's Eve celebrations. Ping had been demoted back down to laundryman again, yet he still made the same wage as before. And the work remained as laborious as before. In fact, pretty much nothing had changed. He was still sitting at an oversized sink with the same people

around him. Wash, rinse, repeat. Everyone had their own bed now at least, real beds too, and small rooms to call their own.

And so they worked until New Year's Eve, at which point the clock struck midnight and the year became 1932 and not much of anything changed.

1938

I Was Told We'd Cruise The Seas for American Gold

Her figure cut such a minor outline in the horizon, she could easily be obscured by a passing boat or a tall building. But she was standing there anyways, clinging onto a book in one arm and a torch in her other. Her facial expression was unreadable, at least from this distance, but it didn't look like she was mad or anything like that. Other than her crown, it reminded Ping of the statue back home — er, his temporary home that is, it was easy to get the two confused after all these years. The boat had passed by her on the way to shore, but he had been distracted, first by the awe-inspiring sight of the tall towers in the sun, then by his focus on making sure that all his papers were ready for examination, thinking over and over again just what exactly it was he had to say to the immigration officials.

'Hello. I am here to conduct business and buy machinery for my endeavours in New-foundland. I have the proper documents to approve this. I am not immigrating here, I will only be here for two days,' he thought, repeating the words over and over again in his mind, as he left sweaty fingerprints on the documents. He tried to calm himself down— he didn't need to be so nervous, he was telling the truth. But it had been his experience that the truth was often not enough in the West. Oftentimes, luck was more important than truth.

The process had been far easier than he anticipated. After he disembarked the boat, a man in a little booth asked him what his purpose was here, Ping did his lines, the man silently looked at his papers stamped them and handed them back.

"Welcome to New York," the man said.

"Thank you," Ping said.

It was Ping's understanding that this was not a common occurrence, being able to come to New York to do trade like this. In fact, he had only ended up here for two reasons. First was a letter from Gao talking about the fantastic and whimsical laundry machinery they had in New York.

"Revolutionary," Gao's letter had read. "Literally, the laundry tumbles in revolutions."

Ping had received this letter a couple years ago, part of a chain of ongoing correspondence between him and Gao, and not thought much of it. Ping hadn't worked in the laundry industry for years now and although it was fun to imagine what such a machine might look like, there ultimately wasn't much he wanted to do with this information.

That changed when Sir Humphrey T. Walwyn decided to retire three months ago. It had been a pleasant six years and Ping had enjoyed his butler position at the Lieutenant-Governor's house but alas, the old coot had decided to abandon his post and go live in Dorset. The new Lieutenant-Governor didn't care to have a chink living in his home, nor did he want such a thing to be on his payroll, so Sir Humphrey asked Ping just what he thought he might do next.

"I probably go back to laundry, Sir," Ping said.

"Why don't you go home, ol' chap? That boy of yours must be quite a height by now," Sir Humphrey said.

"At home," Ping explained, "is very bad war. I not want go back. I want family come here."

Sir Humphrey sat back in his chair and let out a big sigh.

"I wouldn't count on that one," he said after taking a puff from his ivory pipe.

Sir Humphrey helped Ping obtain the proper papers and documents to allow him to travel to the USA to buy state-of-the-art laundry equipment, a final act of good will before Humphrey boarded a ship and set sail across the Atlantic to go to his retirement home.

So, now Ping stood there on the dock in New York, looking across the harbour at the green lady rising out of the water on her grey pedestal. And all he could think of was the one at home. Except the one at home wasn't green, or at least not green like this. And this one here, she wasn't surrounded by men. And the crown. The crown. Did the one at home— er, St. John's— have a crown? He wasn't sure now. If it did have a crown, it wasn't like this. He'd have to check when he got back.

Ping checked his watch. 7a.m.. He had a meeting in a warehouse in Brooklyn at 10 a.m.. The chaotic hustle and bustle of the streets, people everywhere, reminded him of Hong Kong. Ping paged a cab. There were only two things he was here to do, buy laundry equipment and see Gao. The cab drove him through the streets, past the tall buildings, past the crowds of people, past the street cart vendors peddling everything from collared shirts to collard greens, and up into Midtown. He was staying at someplace called the Herald Square Hotel instead. A travel agent back in St. John's had assured him that Chinamen were allowed to stay in this facility.

"New York is a little different from Newfoundland," the agent had said. They sounded the same to Ping.

The hotel lobby smelled of smoke and although it was a relatively small space, just the clerk's desk, a tiny elevator door, and the base of a spiral staircase, the room was wrapped in mirrors, which made the place feel larger.

“Name?” the white clerk said, a rotund man with a curly moustache, decked out in the velvet long coat and a tiny fez cap, the kind that hotelmen always wore in the movies Ping saw. But unlike the picture shows, the clerk’s rotundness strained the gold buttons on his long coat and his hat sat slightly askew and an overflowing ashtray lay smoking next to him.

“Ping,” he said. “William Seto Ping.”

“Alright,” the man said, briefly laying his cigarette down to check a ledger. “Top floor, room 2046. Elevator’s broken so you gotta take the stairs.”

Ping took the long walk up the spiral stairs, pausing several times along the way to catch his breath and check the time. He was thankful that he packed light. But he pushed on up the stairs and eventually found his room at the end of a long hallway, lined with red velvet curtains, slightly fluttering due to a broken window in the stairwell. The room was tiny, just a bed, a sink, and a shower, and a small barred window that showcased the spire of one of the nearby skyscrapers. Ping wasn’t sure, but it looked like the spire of the building the big ape climbed on in that movie he saw a couple years back. That was a good picture. He was happy with the room.

The time: 9a.m.. Ping rushed back down the stairs and hailed a cab and headed out to a warehouse in Brooklyn. Cabs, it’s a funny thing. A couple years ago, he would’ve never thought to even get in a cab. Too expensive. Plus, St. John’s didn’t even have that many cars. But the travel agent said this was the best way to get around here.

“You put your hand in the air, these yellow cars stop, you tell them where you want to go and they take you there,” the agent had said. The way the agent described it, Ping had imagined those sedan chairs in Hong Kong where the Chinamen would carry white people on their backs up the hills. Yellow cars.

The man that greeted him at the warehouse was a large man with a bald head and a long red beard. He wore suit pants with suspenders and a pinstripe white shirt. He shook Ping's hand. The two of them stood in front of a large warehouse, a big bridge not too far away, and all around them teams of men were moving huge crates, both around the dock and onto nearby ships.

"How 'ya doing?" the bearded man asked.

"I'm good," Ping said.

"I'm Mario Ventura," the man said. "Although, I'm sure you already know that. You are Mr. Ping, I presume?"

"Yes," Ping said.

"Now, you're looking to step up the laundry game back in Newfoundland, right?"

"Yes," Ping said.

"Alright," he said. "You ever been to New York before?"

"No," Ping said.

"Yeah," Mario said, "I figured that. Let me tell you, in New York, we like to keep things fast, okay? So, we're gonna go in there—" Mario pointed at the warehouse — "Imma show you what we got to sell you and I'm expecting you to make a decision right away, okay?"

"Okay," Ping said.

"Okay, follow me," Mario said. Mario led Ping in through a door of the warehouse. It was a noisy place, with men cursing and yelling and large boxes being scraped against the concrete floor of the warehouse.

“This is our little showroom area,” Mario said as he opened another door into a room with a bunch of sideways metal cylinders, about four feet wide, and ranging from six to twelve feet tall. A couple of men stood, hands crossed, in front of the cylinders, wearing loose fitting suits with their hair greased back, gobs of pomade shining in the dim showroom.

“Let me introduce you to my business associates,” Mario said. “This is Calvin J. Scallion.”

“Hello,” Calvin said with a nod of his head.

“And this is Rock Carignan.”

“Hello,” Rock said with a nod of his head.

“Where’s Tommy-Joe?” Mario asked the men.

“He popped out for a piss,” Calvin explained.

“Alright, whatever,” Mario said. “Okay, this is the equipment.”

He walked Ping towards the cylinders.

“You got these cylinders, they got these sliding doors, see?” Mario opened the door, exposing another smaller hollow tube inside the bigger hollow tube. “You open the door, put the laundry inside. There’s another cylinder in there, see? That one spins around and around, back and forth, water gets let in and out of this thing through valves.”

Ping nodded. Mario walked him over to another machine, with Calvin and Rock following close behind.

“This is a centrifuge,” Mario explained. “It spins around a couple thousand times a minute, all the water drains out of the clothes. They get so fucking dry, so fast, you won’t believe it.”

Ping nodded again.

“If that’s too luxurious for you, we got some of these,” Mario led Ping to the next product, a strange metal contraption consisting of two metal rollers placed close together and a hand crank. “These are the manglers, you feed the clothes in between those rollers there, you spin the wheel, they squeeze the water out of the clothes. Now this thing is a lot cheaper than the centrifuge, but a lot more dangerous. It’s called ‘the mangler’ for a reason, which I’m sure you can surmise. Say you’re using this thing, you’re thinking about something else, something, uh... I don’t know, Calvin, what would he be thinking about?”

“Say he’s thinking about his next meal or something, the hell should I know?”

“Okay, yeah,” Mario said. “Say you’re operating this thing, pushing the clothes through, you’re thinking about how long ago lunch was, boom, next thing you know, you after running your damn hand through the mangler and now you’ll never work another day in your life, okay? You don’t want that, I know.”

Ping nodded.

“Okay, next is just the small stuff. We got a mini centrifuge here for making those starched collars. And then we got a bunch of shit here for finishing. Irons, Presses, all that shit.”

Ping nodded.

“Okay, house tour is over. You know what you want?”

“Boss,” Rock said. “You didn’t show him the conveyor belts.”

“Oh, yeah,” Mario said. “We got these conveyor belts. If you want to have a really big operation, I mean a huge operation, you can get these conveyor belts to carry the sorted laundry around your facilities.”

“I don’t need,” Ping said.

“See, guys?” Mario said. “I knew he wasn’t interested in no conveyor belts, I didn’t forget.”

The men shrugged.

“Alright, so what do you want?” Mario asked as he rested a hand on his hip.

“I take two washing machine and one mangler.”

—

The laundry equipment would be shipped by the DuMont Shipping Company to St. John’s sometime in the next five weeks. Ping went back to his hotel and decided to wait in his room until supper time that night. Gao had picked up a job as a chef at some place called The Jook Sing Room. Ping kicked his shoes off, sat on the edge of his bed and watched the sun pass through the sky in his gated window. Walking around never did much good anyways in his experience.

At 6 p.m., he got ready for dinner, put his shoes back on and hailed another cab.

“Where ya headed to?” the cabbie asked.

“The Jook Sing Room,” Ping responded. The cabbie’s eyes flashed up into the rearview mirror with a squint.

“Say,” he said, turning around to get a look at Ping. “You must be some kind of celebrity or something?”

“Heh,” Ping laughed. “No.”

“Well then, good luck trying to get in,” the cabbie said, facing the road again and beginning to drive off.

The Jook Sing Room was on the corner of Second Ave and East Thirteenth Street and Ping was surprised to see that there's a line outside the door, stretching down the block. The line was full of white men and women, fancy looking people. Bow ties and pearl necklaces, fashionable fedoras and slinky svelte dresses. Ping paid the cab driver and walked towards the back of the line. The outside of the restaurant was completely plain, not even a sign over the door. If Ping hadn't known the addresses from all of Gao's letters, he would've never even known that this was the place. Ping stood in the line. After ten minutes, the line didn't even budge. A door on the pavement opened up and a Chinese man in a chef's outfit emerged from the underground. He walked around, looking at the lineup, then saw Ping and waved him over.

"Gao," Ping said in Taishanese. "Is that you?"

"Yes, yes," Gao replied. "I'm so glad to see you."

The men gave each other a hearty handshake and a man in the line up scowled.

"Hey," he said. "No skipping!"

"He's not skipping," Gao said. "He works here."

Gao led Ping down the underground stairs from which he just emerged.

"Sorry," Gao said. "You won't be working, don't worry. Sam told me he'd save you a seat at the bar, just that I couldn't let people see you skipping the line."

Gao led Ping through the bustling kitchen of the restaurant. Dozens of Asian men were cooking dishes all around them, fire flying into the air from a stove, plates being slung across metal tables, a radio playing some big brass tunes.

"Okay," Ping said. "Who is Sam?"

“Smuggler Sam,” Gao said. “He’s the owner of the place. He’s probably out front somewhere. You’ll meet him, I’m sure. He’s a bit of a... well, I’m not sure how to describe him. He reminds me of that circus we went to that time.”

Gao stopped by a pair of doors.

“I’m not allowed to go out there, but if you walk through that door, you should see an empty seat at the bar. That’s for you.”

“Who’s that?” asked a Filipino man behind Gao, as he poured a shot of rum into a glass.

“This is Ping, he’s a friend I met on my travels. He’s in town on business.”

“Ouuuuu,” the Filipino man said. “I like the look of you.”

“He’s a bartender,” Gao explained to Ping. “Go take your seat before they give it away.”

Ping opened the kitchen doors and walked into the restaurant. He felt as if he had been transported to a different world. The lighting was dark, but Ping could see giant totems with carved grimacing faces. Flotsam and jetsam hung from the walls, along with a garish collection of cultural souvenirs: old nets, tribal masks, shipping crates, a samurai sword, empty barrels, giant clamshells, pieces of bamboo coated in resin, lobster traps, a surfboard, a spear, an anchor, a ship’s wheel, a lion dance suit. Plants of all kinds were draped all over the place, giant blooming flowers and overgrown greenery. A ukulele strummed relaxing notes somewhere in the distance and there was a sound of running water as if there was a waterfall nearby. Men and women were seated in little dark booths around the perimeter of the room with torches on the sides of their tables providing illumination, all of them with drinks served in elaborate bowls and vases topped with flowers and souvenir swizzle sticks and colourful little umbrellas. A bird cawed as Ping noticed the rattan and jade-tiled doors of the establishment.

A white man wearing a panama hat, a blue and white striped shirt, an ascot and a lei hobbled towards the awe-struck Ping.

“Argh,” the man said, in a gruff nautical tone. “Are ye lost or simply wanderin’?”

“I...” Ping began.

“Oh,” the man said, dropping the gruff voice he had been using just a second prior.

“You’re Gao’s friend? There’s a seat at the bar for you. I’ll show you the way.”

The man hobbled in front of Ping, leading him over to a semi-circular bar where a white man in a white tuxedo stands, polishing glasses.

Ping’s seat was sandwiched between another Chinese man by himself and a drunk white couple.

“Whoa, oh oh,” the drunk white man slurs. “Is that *the* Smuggler Sam?”

“Argh,” the man’s gruff voice returned. “It is I! Are ye enjoying me rum rhapsodies?”

“Smuggler Sam, if I may say so,” the man struggled to pronounce his words, “this... this, is the very finest! ... establishment in New York.”

“Argh, but we aren’t in New York,” Smuggler Sam said as he pointed Ping towards the empty stool. “We’re in an atoll on the Pacific, as far from New York as ye can strive to imagine.”

Ping stared at the man, wondering about his strange vocal changes.

“Go on, ask him, Max,” the drunk man’s girlfriend whispered loudly.

“I’m getting to it, Anita,” the man said. “Smuggler Sam... we heard a ru—ru—mour that you have—“

“I know what it is ye seek to learn,” Smuggler Sam interrupted him as he brandished a large knife from his boot. Sam raised the knife in the air, high above his head and, with a dramatic flourish, stabbed the knife into his own shin.

Ping and the drunk lady gasped.

“Heh,” the drunk man laughed. “I love it when you-you do that, Sssam.”

“Yer lady can touch the wood if she desires,” Sam said as he lifts the leg of his pants. A peg leg, the wood looking worn and splintery with plenty of stab marks.

“’Twas a whale that did that to me,” Sam explained as Anita grazed the peg leg with her fingertips. “A beluga off the coast of China.”

“Oh my,” Anita said.

“Ye’ll do well to remember,” Sam said before he hobbled off, “even the simple life has its excitements.”

Ping shook his head and rubbed his eyes as the bartender handed him a menu. DR. FONG FOO’S FANTASTIC FRESH FLAVOUR FOUNTAINS. Ping read over the menu of strange names. Vampire’s Fang, Villager’s Punch, Tarantula, Wasp’s Nest. Ping settles on one that has an advisory of “limit of two to a customer” next to it: the Zombie. The white bartender writes his order a piece of paper then opens a vent and slides it through to the kitchen area.

“This your first time here?” asked the Chinese man seated next to Ping.

“Uh, yeah,” Ping said.

“Hmmm,” the man said, then adds in Taishanese, “let’s speak in our language. More freedom.”

“Heh,” Ping fake laughed. “Okay.”

“So, what brings you to Smuggler Sam’s Jook Sing Room?”

“My friend, he’s one of the chefs here,” Ping said.

“Ahhh, and you live in New York?”

“No, um, Newfoundland? You may not have heard of it.”

“A lot of fish there, right?”

“Yeah,” Ping said.

“Yeah, I’ve heard of it.”

A moment of silence passed.

“Um, what...” Ping struggled to come up with something to say. “What brings you to New York?”

“I live here,” the man said. “I guess you mean to ask me what brings me to sitting here alone at this restaurant tonight.”

“Yeah,” Ping said.

“I’m a cinematographer,” the man said. “Do you know what that is?”

“Something to do with the picture shows?”

“That’s right,” he said. “I work with the camera. I frame the shots.”

Ping was impressed. A Chinaman in the picture shows? Amazing. Or, well, at least behind the camera. Still impressive.

“Would I have seen anything you’ve done?” Ping asked.

“Did you see The Thin Man?”

“That’s a Bogart picture, right?”

“No, no, William Powell.”

“Oh,” Ping said. “I don’t think so.”

“I’m doing a picture with Disney right now,” the man said.

“The cartoon guy?”

“Yeah, yeah,” the man said. “He’s doing a new one. It’ll be a mix of cartoons and live-actors.”

“Interesting,” Ping said.

“I’m not going to be credited,” the man said. “But it’s a good experience all the same. Anyways, to answer your question, I’m here tonight to scope out the stars. A place as popular as this, I figure we’ll be doing pictures about it soon and I wanted to see it for myself. See how people sit here, how they move, try to think of some angles.”

“Stars?”

“Yeah,” the man said. “You didn’t notice?”

“No?” Ping said.

“Look, over there in that booth,” the man said, discreetly pointing towards the wall. “It’s Charles Laughton.”

“Who?” Ping asked, squinting his eyes to see.

“That’s Lillian Gish sitting next to him,” the man said. “Why I’d love to shoot a picture with the two of them.”

A small silver door opened up on the other end of the bar and the Filipino man that Ping met earlier pushed a drink out through the hole before promptly closing the tiny door again. The white bartender picked up the drink and put it in front of Ping.

“Your Zombie, sir” he said.

Ping looked at the drink. The cup was long and tall and its base was shaped to resemble a skull. An orchid lay floating on top of the drink as well as a couple pineapple fronds and an orange peel lay over the side of the drink. The peel had been cut to resemble a snake, big diamond shaped head, two little poked out eyes, and a couple jagged pith edges cut to look like fangs.

Ping took a sip. Tastes like... spicy juice. He liked it.

“They call them, ‘The Four Boys,’” the cinematographer said.

“Excuse me?” Ping said as he lay down his drink.

“Those Filipinos back there. They call them ‘Sam’s Four Boys.’ They make the drinks.”

“Then what’s this guy for?” Ping said, gesturing towards the white bartender who once again resumed his polishing of a glass.

“Nothing,” the cinematographer said. “Appearances. That’s all this place is, you know.”

Ping took another sip of his drink.

“Like Sam’s wooden leg. There’s no belugas off the coast of China. You know how he lost that? Tuberculosis. It plagued him as a child. And all this shit on the walls. You know he doesn’t know where it came from. He’s supposed to have travelled the whole world and collected all this shit. I heard he’s never even left New York.”

“Huh,” Ping said as he once again surveyed the mishmash of objects on the wall.

A door on the other side of the bar opened and a small plate got pushed out. The bartender picked up the plate and put it in front of Ping.

“Your appetizer, sir,” the white man said.

“I sorry,” Ping said in English. “I not order anything.”

“Your friend said he’d know what you’d like,” the bartender said as he walked away.

Ping looked at the plate. A small piece of deep-fried something next to a small bowl of little white balls with some liquid running off them, pooling in the bottom of the bowl. Ping ate the deep-fried thing first. Some pieces of crab and cream cheese, wrapped in batter and deep-fried. Not bad. Then he tasted the little white balls and he got transported. Maybe it was the alcohol, maybe it was being tired from all the travelling, but when he bit into the ball, he was taken back to his childhood. Helping out on his Uncle and Aunt's farm, collecting wet turnips in a small basket. That fresh, off-putting scent of wet turnip, as the bottom of the basket gives out and the turnips tumble onto the soft topsoil. That scent of wet turnip here now in Smuggler Sam's in the bite into that little white ball. A pickled turnip. A crunch, acid, a flavour of remembrance. Delicious.

"You ok?" the cinematographer asked. Ping was holding his fork in midair, staring at the wall, thinking about turnips on a hot Hoiping day.

"Hmm?" Ping said, coming back to the present.

"Hey," the bartender noticed Ping's dazed state. "That drink you're sipping on has eight ounces of rum in it so you better go easy there, big fella."

"Yes, I okay, just thinking of my childhood."

The bartender raised an eyebrow and shook his head up and down. Back to polishing glasses.

The small silver bar door opened again.

"Hey," the Filipino said. "Delroy."

"What?" The white bartender replied.

"You gotta hear the radio," the Filipino said. "Big problem in New Jersey."

“Yeah,” Delroy said. “What is it?”

“Some sort of cylinder fell from the sky and now there’s a big tentacled, monster coming out of it.”

“There’s a what?”

“A monster! That’s what they said on the radio.”

Another Filipino poked his head in through the window.

“I think they’re Martians. A little while ago, they said they saw explosions on Mars.”

“Close that door,” Delroy said. “I don’t wanna hear no more of that, and if the boss sees you with the door left open, it’ll be my ass.”

The Filipinos shut the door.

Not long after that, the bartender placed a bigger plate in front of Ping.

“Sweet and sour pork,” he said.

Pork and peppers and some rice and a really thick, sugary sauce served inside a hollowed-out pineapple. Ping ordered another Zombie. Things got fuzzy. He was feeling good. At some point, the cinematographer left. Ping remembered him patting his back. At another point, Smuggler Sam was yelling about New York being under attack.

“Folks,” the gruff voice was dropped once again. “I hate ruining your dining experience. But we’re getting reports on the radio that there are five big machines wading through the Hudson and the reporters on the radio seem to think they have heat guns.”

Gasps — and chuckles — throughout the room.

“I don’t mean to panic anyone,” Sam said. “But this isn’t part of the Jook Sing experience. There’s people diving into the East River like rats.”

Then, Ping was in the kitchen with Gao.

“No,” he remembered saying. “We all wear suits now. It’s different. You should come back.”

Then the conversation goes on and he doesn’t remember it. Then they’re outside the restaurant, late at night, smoking on the street, the glow of the Empire State building making mist luminescent.

“I nearly lost my mind,” Gao said, tucking a rag into his apron.

“Woah,” Ping said.

“The city life’s too fast for me,” Gao explained. “Nobody has any time. Cement and steel and flashing lights.”

“Yes,” Ping said. “Yes. Yes. Yes.”

“It’s all I can see,” Gao added, scratching his forehead. “It might be good for New York state but it’s no damn good for me.”

“Of course,” Ping said. “Of course.”

—

Ping woke up in his hotel room, lying face down on his bed, suit and shoes still on. He looked out the window. No big machines, no martians, the spire still attached to that building from the movie. Must’ve been a bad dream. There was an awful pain in his head, right behind his eyes, right in there. And his stomach. Before he knew it, he was on his knees in front of the toilet, dark brown liquid with pineapple chunks ejected from his insides. He spent the rest of the day in the hotel room, either nervously waiting for another round of vomiting or dry heaving until it was all expelled from him.

He left New York early the next morning, by which time he felt fine. Back on the boat, headed to Port Aux Basques, then back on the train to St. John's. By the time he was back home, it was about 3 p.m. in the afternoon the next day. He got off at the train station on Water Street. He stood on the platform and stretched his legs. Then he saw her, moving through the crowd, partially obscured by a passing cart, her hair a frizzy mess.

Ethel.

It had been years since he saw her.

"Ethel," Ping called out, waving. "Ethel!"

"What kinda Jesus Chinaman," she said, squinting. "Oh! William! It's you! It's been so long."

She started to go for a hug then stopped herself.

"What are you doing all the time?" she said as she looked him up and down.

"I just come back New York," he said. "I buy many laundry equipment. I make new laundry on Aldershot Street."

"Yes, now, look at you. Fancy New York guy. I was wondering what would happen to you now that the Walwyn's are gone back across the pond."

"You no see Humphrey Junior anymore?"

"My duckie, that ended a long time ago. Sure Jesus b'y, how many times did you see me at the house after I got you the job there?"

Ping thought about it for a second.

"Uh, maybe two, three times," he said, with a nervous laugh.

“Well, you know the way Richards is, couldn’t leave me alone long enough for the Walwyn boy to marry me. Now, where’s Richards? Gone once again. The man just about drives me to drink.”

Ping nervously laughed again.

“What about you?” she said. “Still married?”

Ping paused. It had been a number of years since he had seen his wife, but they were technically still married. In the time since he arrived in Newfoundland, they had exchanged only a couple letters, the ability to send mail having only gotten more difficult with the onset of war.

“Yes,” Ping said. “Very dangerous in China right now. I need family come here for safety.”

Ethel frowned.

“I hope one day law change,” Ping said. “I think maybe one day, I not sure. I wait.”

Other people on the platform were whispering and pointing at the white woman and the Chinaman talking in such friendly ways.

“Hey,” Ethel said, noticing the attitude on the train platform. “Why don’t we go somewhere and talk? Go see a movie or something?”

“I just arrive,” Ping said.

“Who cares?” She said. “So, did I! I don’t want to go talk to my sisters yet.”

“Where you?”

“Out around the bay,” She said. “Seeing my parents. My mom, she’s real sick, she’s shrivelling away to nothing.”

“I sorry to hear that,” Ping said, thinking of the last time he saw his mom, as he rode away on that horse.

“She just lays in the bed and moans and moans and so bony and...” Ethel stopped herself and took a deep breath. “Let’s go to the movies.”

They walked to the Nickel Theatre. A big technicolour poster of a cartoon woman surrounded by seven little people and animals and plants.

“Let’s see that,” Ethel said. “Vile saw it and said it was bad. But, I still want to see it anyways.”

Ping approached the ticket window.

“Two ticket to Snow White, please,” Ping said.

“I’ll buy my own ticket,” Ethel said.

“No, no,” Ping said. “I never get to thank you. You get me job at Governor house and you teach me English. I buy ticket, repay you.”

“I never got you that job. Sure, Walwyn Junior was sweet on me at the time, but Jesus, b’y, your laundry had burnt down, it was the least anyone could do was give you a job.”

“So?” the teenager in the ticket booth asked. “Is the chink buying the tickets or are you, lady?”

“I buy tickets,” Ping said.

They sat near the back of the theatre and waited for the movie to begin, waited for the news segments and the travelogues to end. It was a colourful, pretty film and the animation was impressive. How could they make it look so realistic and whimsical? And the movie was scary too. They got to the scene where Snow White runs into the forest, trying to evade being mur-

dered, and everywhere she goes, there's these eyes watching her and jagged branches and it's dark and she falls in a swamp and alligators try to bite her and there's all these pairs of menacing eyes staring at her from amongst the trees and she's panicking and she's running this way and that way until she freezes and drops to the ground, succumbing to the fear. Ethel grabbed Ping's hand when that happened. Just a reaction to the suspense, Ping thought, nothing more.

Ping looked at Ethel's hand on his. The whiteness of her skin on his. Yellow they called him, but his hand looked brown next to her. His skin looked dirty. In that moment, he felt disgusted with himself, he felt like vomiting again. Her skin on his. He felt dirty. He hated it.

Ethel let go. The menacing eyes turned out to be a coterie of friendly animals, sniffing bunny rabbits and curious deers and a menagerie of everything that seemed scary now seeming welcoming. Ethel's eyes remained glued to the screen the entire time. Ping's heart was beating in his chest and he felt hung over again.

"Tell me a story," Snow White said. "A true story. A love story."

—

After the movie, Ping walked Ethel home.

"What did you think of it?" she asked.

"I don't like the songs," Ping said. "Hard to understand."

"I loved it," Ethel said. "And those dwarves? God love their cotton socks."

"The dwarves remind me of old friends," Ping said.

When they reached her apartment, they stopped outside the door.

"This was fun," Ethel said. "We should see movies together more often. Helps you learn how to speak our language, I think."

“Yes,” Ping said.

“‘Spose you’ll be too busy with your new laundry though,” she said.

“You want a job?” Ping asked.

“You want me working with a bunch of Chinamen? Who am I, Snow White?”

Ping thought for a moment.

“Heh,” Ping laughed, as he walked away. “You want job, you find me. I live Aldershot Street now.”

“Wait,” Ethel called out. “Where are you going?”

“Oh,” Ping said, a blush rising in his cheeks. “Just home. Go sleep. Wake early tomorrow.”

“Didja want to come in?” Ethel said as she opened her door. “I’ll put a pot of Tetley on.”

“No,” Ping said. “Is okay. I go home.”

“No” Ethel said. “Come in. Have a drink. I’ll make you something stronger if tea’s not to your liking.”

“No, no,” Ping said. “I go. I tired from travelling.”

“Jesus, b’y,” Ethel said, exasperated. “Just get in the friggin’ house before the neighbours sees ya.”

—

Ethel had a small one-bedroom apartment inside the house. A casual clutter had invaded her space and took up nearly every inch of her apartment. Toppled bottles lay on top of scattered pictures, every inch of wall space adorned with either a photograph or a painting or some sort of

decorative planter. The bed was unmade and the only thing in the entire space that looked tidy was the bar cart. Ping stood awkwardly inside the doorway.

“You wait here, while I get changed,” Ethel said, as she stepped behind a body length folding screen, various scarves and boas and costume jewelry hanging off its corners.

“Heh, ok,” Ping said, feeling heat radiating from his blushing cheeks.

“Y’know,” Ethel’s provocative shadow called out from behind the screen, various garments falling to the floor, “my mother always told me to never let a man see me in my pyjamas.”

“Oh, yeah,” Ping said, trying to not look at the screen, instead anxiously staring at a rather intricate cobweb forming in a corner near the ceiling.

“Yeah,” Ethel said. “Luckily I’m not wearing any pyjamas right now.”

“That good,” Ping said, nodding his head, beading the sweat off his brow with a hanky. “I always listen to Mom advice.”

“As a matter of fact,” Ethel said as she stepped out from behind the curtain, “I’m not wearing anything at all.”

1941

Unhappy Road

"I can't believe it's been ten years," Gao said as he stepped off the train platform.

"Has it been that long?" Ping said. "Last time I saw you was only two or three years ago."

"No," Gao said, stretching his arms. "I mean ten years since we first arrived here. Since we first met."

"Oh," Ping said. "Yeah, I'm not sure how much has changed really since last time you were here. I have a car now."

"Yeah, you told me in your letters."

"Oh," Ping said. "Yeah."

"Well, I'm just glad to be away from the city life," Gao said.

"I don't know," Ping said. "America, it seemed nice to me."

"America, Newfoundland, it's all the same. It's the people there, their attitude, their... speed, I couldn't take to it."

"Well," Ping said, unsure of what to say next. "I'll bring you to the place where I'll have you working."

Ping and Gao walked out of the train station in downtown St. John's. It was mostly the same, a couple more paved roads, a few less farm animals. A lot less men. Most of the businesses that Gao could remember had since closed down. Hans' Shoe Shoppe looked as if the place had been firebombed. But, many things remained the same. There was still children running around and pointing and staring. Some of them running towards Ping and Gao, hands on their faces,

pulling their own pallid skin back to look like they had slanted eyes and yelling a bunch of non-sense words between giggles.

“Ching chang bing bang,” one child yelled, imitating a Chinese accent.

“Clang clang,” another yelled.

“Chinese, Japanese, dirty knees, look-at-these,” the first child yelled again.

Ping and Gao stopped being bothered by this type of behaviour long ago. The comparison to the Japanese, well, they didn’t care for that very much. But they kept walking all the same until they reached Ping’s car.

A 1940 Chevrolet Panel truck, all black and big round curves. The sides of the truck were emblazoned with the painted on words: SNOW WHITE LAUNDRY LTD.

“It’s for work,” Ping said. “Makes it easier bringing the laundry.”

“Wow,” Gao said, stopping outside the passenger door to size up the car. “I don’t even remember seeing cars like this back when we first came here.”

“There was a couple around,” Ping said, as he hopped in the driver’s seat. “None like this though.”

Gao kicked a tire and extinguished his cigarette before getting in the car.

“So business must be going well?” Gao asked.

“Yeah,” Ping said. “Those laundry machines, they really changed things. We have dry cleaning now too.”

“Who would’ve thought you could clean things dry?” Gao said as Ping took the car out of park and began the short drive to Harvey Road.

“I got a good deal on the car,” Ping explained. “Some furniture company here ordered a half-ton version of this Chevy and when it showed up, it was a one-ton. They didn’t want and it wasn’t about to be sent back, so I was able to get it at a good price.”

“This city,” Gao said, staring out the window as Ping drove. “It’s just as I remember it.”

“Okay, this is the place,” Ping said as he parked the car outside a nondescript building just a couple doors down from the local movie theatre.

Inside, the floor was lined with an extravagant patterned carpet, and tables and chairs upholstered with the finest linens. The walls were covered with a red velvet fabric and electric candles and lanterns hung from the ceiling. Along the back was a small stage with a mic and a stool and an organ built into the wall. So too was there an elaborate bar, slightly raised above the rest of the restaurant, fully stocked with liquors of every type. And there were three women, two of them on ladders and one on the floor directing the other two, hanging up a large painting. The painting depicted three men with long beards, one in a green robe holding a baby, one in red carrying a curved green sceptre, and an older one in yellow holding onto a peach.

“The Sanxing?” Gao asked.

“Yeah,” Ping said. “We’ve got these too.” He walked towards a wooden crate and pushed aside its cover. Inside the box were dozens of circular wood carvings of the symbols for double happiness, prosperity, longevity and status.

“We’re going to arrange them into an archway,” Ping explained. “Right here by the door.”

“This must’ve cost quite a bit,” Gao said. “The whole place, I mean.”

“It’s always the way,” Ping said.

They looked at each other.

“I didn’t mean...” Ping began.

“It’s fine,” Gao said. “Who are those women over there?”

“Oh,” Ping said. “Do you remember Ethel? She used to teach me English?”

“Yeah,” Gao said. “At the church.”

“Yeah,” Ping said. “Her and her sisters are going to work here too. They’re helping me put the place together.”

“Did I meet them before?” Gao said. “They look familiar.”

Ping scratched his head. “You might’ve,” he said. “I don’t remember.”

“William Seto Ping,” Ethel called out. “C’mere me love and tell me if this painting looks level to you.”

Ping and Gao walked over.

“Talk in English around her,” Ping said to Gao. “She gets suspicious when we don’t.”

Marge and Vile were on either side of the painting, pushing it back and forth little by little.

“Whaddya think?” Vile called out. “Can I get off this Jesus thing yet?”

The painting looked as level as one could expect it to be.

“It look good,” Ping said, with a chuckle. “Yeah, you come down. Get off there before you hurt you self.”

“This must be the great Upton Gao,” Ethel said. “It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

“You may have met before,” Ping said. “He learn English at church too.”

“Yes,” Gao said. “I remember you.”

Ethel paused, scrunching her face looking at Gao.

“No, my son, I don’t remember ever seeing the likes of you before. I remembers the other ones, the ones that died, I don’t remember you.”

A silence fell between them as Marge and Vile got off the ladders.

“I like that,” Marge said, gesturing towards the painting.

“This will bring good fortune,” Ping said. “I glad to have you all here as team.”

“No,” Marge said. “Thank you, Mr. Ping.”

“I’m only here because I’m getting paid,” Vile said.

“It’s still good team,” Ping said. “This is Gao. He a great chef. He, uh, cook the food for us.”

“I ‘spose that’ll be the only thing we won’t have to do around here,” Vile said under her breath.

“Vile,” Ethel said with contempt.

“Hello,” Gao said with a big smile.

“He was the one that gave me cookbook,” Ping said. “Remember?”

“Jesus, yes, I remembers that,” Ethel said. “You were learning English from that friggin’ book and everything you said sounded like a recipe. ‘I was walking at fast speeds for thirty seconds to a minute.’ ‘Just a pinch of happy.’”

“I still have book,” Ping said to Gao.

“Really?” Gao said.

“Yes,” Ping said. “Is here in kitchen.”

“Can I see?” Gao asked.

“Yes,” Ping said to Gao before redirecting his attention to his staff of Squibb sisters.

“Okay, I show Gao the kitchen. You girls organize the wooden symbols.”

“But we don’t know what they mean,” Ethel said.

“No matter,” Ping said. “Just organize by shape. No one have to know what they mean.”

Ping and Gao walked into the kitchen and resumed speaking in their dialect.

“This is where you’ll be working,” Ping said.

A nice kitchen, but small. A big fridge, a couple gas ranges and a big hood. There was even a special compartment for a wok.

“So what do you think?” Ping asked as he passed Charlie’s old cookbook to Gao.

“It’s good, it’s good,” Gao said. “You have a menu worked out yet?”

“No,” Ping said. “You can do it. Just cook whatever you liked cooking in New York.”

“I thought you’d want more authentic stuff,” Gao said.

“I want whatever sells,” Ping said. “You can cook some fish stuff too. Fish and chips. Stuff from that book.”

Gao stood there, thumbing through the old, stained pages of Charlie’s cookbook.

“The Globe, huh,” Ping raised one hand to his temple, massaging it. “Do you have ideas for a restaurant name?”

“You don’t have one yet?”

“No, I was thinking of something like Seven-A or Five-A or something like that.”

“Why?” Gao asked, as he closed the book.

“Seems easy for white people. Not too Chinese, nothing hard to understand.”

“Like the Globe?”

“Exactly.”

“Call it ‘the Globe Two.’”

“Heh, no,” Ping shook his head. “Bad omen. Seven-A is more like good luck.”

“I don’t like it,” Gao said. “It should be more mysterious, enticing.”

“Globe Two is mysterious?”

“That was just a joke. What about something like.... the Magic Wok?”

“Ugh no, people here don’t know what that is.”

“Magic?”

“No, woks.”

“What about Song-Hee?”

“It’s too... oriental, too foreign.”

“What about... Fabulous Foods?”

“That one is too local.”

“What about...” Gao’s eyes lit up. “Hollow Bamboo?”

“That’s what your restaurant in New York was called,” Ping said. “We can’t use that again.”

“No, no,” Gao said. “In New York, we just called it Jook Sing, we didn’t translate. Here, you can call it Hollow Bamboo.”

“That seems like in bad taste,” Ping said. “It might give the wrong impression of me.”

“The white people won’t know what it means. The Chinese people will find it funny.”

“I don’t know,” Ping said. “I don’t want my creation to be hollow bamboo.”

“Look at where you are,” Gao said. “That might be out of your control.”

“I’ll think about it.”

“Who’s cooking with me?” Gao asked, as he thumbed through Charlie’s book again.

“You?”

“No, no,” Ping said, waving the notion away. “I know a guy. He’s not here though, we’ll have to drive out to him.”

—

“We should’ve left earlier,” Ping muttered under his breath as he began to drive out of town.

“Why?” Gao asked, in the passenger seat, looking at a crudely drawn map. “How long does it take?”

“About an hour,” Ping said. “Maybe an hour and a half.”

“Lots of time,” Gao said, checking his watch. “It’s almost three now, we’ll be back by seven, just in time for supper.”

“Yeah,” Ping said.

The roads were only intermittently paved throughout the city and once they left the city limits, the roads were nothing but dirt and trees.

“Reminds me of the trains,” Gao said as he stares out the window at the landscape blurring by.

“Yeah,” Ping said. “I was just thinking that.”

“So,” Gao said. “We need to catch up on everything.”

“Yes,” Ping said. “You first. Tell me everything about New York.”

“New York,” Gao said. “Eh, you don’t want to hear about that. The people are loud and they move fast. Everyone’s in a rush. You were there. You saw it. I want to know about you. I want to know how you afford all this, I want to know about you and Ethel.”

“Ethel?” Ping said, eyes squinting as he tries to distinguish which dirt road to turn down. “She’s just a friend. She’s an employee now.”

“C’mon, man,” Gao said. “You’ve been around this girl for ten years and nothing has happened?”

“She’s a nice woman,” Ping said. “But just a friend. I am married, you might remember that. I have a family.”

“So, what you’re saying is, you don’t care if I make a move on Ethel?”

“I don’t care what you do,” Ping said. Then added, “But, no, I can’t have two employees involved romantically. It’s a very bad idea.”

Gao narrowed his eyes and looked at him. “Alright,” Gao said. “Who says it would be romantic? Not everything has to be romantic.”

“You have the map for one reason and one reason only, to guide me. I’m not being guided right now.”

“Fine,” Gao said, analyzing the map. “I think you just keep going straight.”

“I thought I took a turn somewhere around here,” Ping said.

“Well,” Gao said, “if you know the roads so well, why do you need me to look at the map?”

“Well,” Ping said, “usually Little Joe tells me which roads to turn on. I think I’m supposed to turn here. I’m taking this turn.”

“You and Little Joe, driving a car round this place, I never would’ve thought I would see the day.”

“He’s a nice guy,” Ping said. “It’s not like it used to be. He just makes sandwiches for kids now.”

“Old grey mare,” Gao crooned. “She ain’t what she used to be.”

Ping paused for a moment, wondering whether or not Gao was done singing.

“But, yeah,” Ping said. “Me and Little Joe drive around the island, make sure that all the Chinese people are connected through the association. The more people that arrive in St. John’s, the more that end up somewhere out here. It’s important to keep the community together.”

“Is it really a community if it’s spread out across an island?”

“It’s a community spread across the world,” Ping said. “It gets lonely here. Even when I’m surrounded by my own people, it gets lonely. I can’t imagine how some of the people out here feel, alone in places where nobody’s ever seen anything like them before.”

“Alright,” Gao said. “I get it. You’re the big shot community leader now.”

“No,” Ping said. “It’s not like that.”

A silence fell between them and they both listened to the car’s radio, cycling back and forth between heavy bouts of static and faraway whispers of some Christian radio show, the gospel of Christ sandwiched between white noise.

Ping relied mostly on painted wooden road signs in figuring out where he was going. He had been out here with Little Joe once, a couple months ago at the beginning of summer. There was a guy out near Placentia, he had opened up a restaurant in a shed. Nothing more than a wood

stove, a wok, a counter to take orders from and, out of sight, a bed under the counter. Just a shed on the side of the road. A nice view of the ocean and nothing around him.

Ping and Gao arrived at the shed pretty quickly, only taking about an hour or so since they left the city. They parked the Snow White truck underneath a hand painted sign that read RENNY'S CONFECTIONARY. There was barely enough room inside the restaurant for Ping and Gao to stand together. A thin, young Chinese man sat behind the counter smoking a cigarette and reading a book, with his glasses precariously balanced on the tip of his nose. He's wearing a long sleeve sweater that's a couple sizes too big for him, with small ropes tied around the cuffs so that his baggy sleeves don't impede him.

"Hey Renny," Ping said.

"Oh," Renny looked surprised, quickly putting down his book. "Hello, Mr. Ping. What brings you out here?"

"Did I mention to you last time that I was opening a restaurant? I want you to meet someone, this is Upton Gao, he's going to be my chef."

"Oh," Renny said. "Very nice to meet you, Mr. Gao."

"Hi," Gao said. "Your name is?"

"Oh, uh, Reginald So, but every one calls me Renny."

Gao smiled and nodded.

"Renny," Ping said, "I didn't drive out here just so you two could meet each other. I want you to work for me."

"Oh no, Mr. Ping," Renny said, shaking his head. "I can't. I have to run this place."

“I know life out here can’t be easy,” Ping said. “Come to town. We’ve got a really nice restaurant built on Harvey Road. I’ll pay you good money. Probably more than what you make here.”

The men stood around arguing and debating the logistics of such a move. Renny could sell the shed or hold on to the land he bought, etcetera. Eventually, they reached an agreement that Renny would have to decide whether or not he was going to work at Ping’s restaurant within the next three days. Ping and Gao left the roadside shed and stared out at the ocean before getting back in the truck. A series of ships were out on the water, big and small. Two huge Naval cruisers, one British, one American, surrounded by a bunch of tiny warships. Big blue waves crashed into light brown rocks and the air tasted salty. The sun was beginning to set so the men started the drive home.

It wasn’t long before darkness began to set in and Ping found it harder to see the road signs, scattered as they were. Gao found it difficult to navigate the map and Ping started to wonder if the man even knew how to read a map. Ping pulled over a couple times, when he’d see a sign on the road, and then he tried to line that up with the map. This worked to variable degrees. He thought that maybe if he kept driving straight, he would make it back to St. John’s. And so he drove.

It was night now and he was driving through a dark forest. Sometimes he’d see a flash of light or he’d be compelled to take a turn or even just stop but he kept going. They clung to a road by the coast, hoping that it would eventually lead them back to St. John’s. So dark, no lights other than his own headlights and an occasional beam of passing light from a light house. Gao dozed off in the passenger seat. Ping judged him for this but found himself dozing too. Strug-

gling to keep his eyes open, his eyes trained on the beam of his headlights, nothing but dirt road and patches of grass and then something ran in front of him.

Several somethings.

Ping slammed on the brakes, stopping the car so hard that its rear wheels left the ground. The weight of the truck pulled it back down to Earth, albeit sideways, as the truck toppled onto the driver's side with a loud dry thud, the windows remaining intact.

"What the hell?" Gao said, roused from his nap.

"I..." Ping started and trailed off. "I thought I was about to hit something."

"Well, did you?"

"I'm not sure," Ping said, his eyes struggling to focus.

Just outside the windshield, trapped in the beam of the headlights, dozens of little birds. Their bodies were half black and half white, with big multicoloured beaks, orange with yellow lines and black spots. Their eyes were black and rimmed orange and it almost looked as though they were smiling. The longer Ping stared at them, the more of them seemed to arrive, until he could swear there was hundreds of them out there, gathered around the headlights. More and more little birds gathered in the light until counted amongst their ranks was a pair of green rubber boots.

"Jumpin' dyin' ta night," the rubber boots yelled. "Are you fellas okay in there?"

"Is he talking to us?" Gao said.

"Mudder!" the voice called out. "Mudder! Dem Jesus birds did it again!"

Ping struggled to understand where the voice was coming from.

“Oh, it’s you lot,” the voice said quietly. “Jesus, should’ve known the way they drive. C’mon fellas, get out of there, let’s get you set back up.”

It took a few minutes to establish what happened. Once Ping and Gao were out of the truck and it seemed that they weren’t injured, only dazed by the accident, the man in the rubber boots helped Ping and Gao push the one-ton truck back right side up. The rubber boots belonged to Cory Cox, a teenage boy who lived with his mother just off the main road. These car accidents were semi-frequent, Cory explained.

“Dem birds, right, dere called puffins,” he said. “Dey live on dat island over dere. It’s called Puffin Island.”

Ping and Gao stared blankly at the boy while he told them this.

“Basically, da puffins, dey likes to eat during da night and dey lets da moonlight guide dem where ta go. But sometimes, cars and trucks and all dat drives by, right, and da birds gets confused and thinks dem lights on the front of the car are da moon, right, and dey comes over. Gives da drivers an awful fright, all dese little birds coming out of nowhere, right.”

“Yeah,” Ping said, anxious to leave.

“Every morning, I collects all the birds over here and puts ‘em in me boat and brings em back to dere little island. I ‘spose I could leave em here, but there’s nothing worse than waking up to a yard full of dead birds.”

“Right,” Ping said.

“Although, I ‘spose if it was turrs, that’d be alright.”

Cory looked at the men with an expression that meant that what he just said was supposed to be funny.

“Heh,” Ping said. “It’s always the way.”

“Yes, dat’s the truth, ain’t it? What are ye fellas doing out here at night anyways? Could’ve hit a moose or anything.”

“I recruit a cook for my restaurant in St. John.”

“Oh, yes now, a cook! Where to?”

“My restaurant,” Ping said.

“Yeah,” Cory said, “where to?”

“On Harvey Road,” Ping said.

“Unhappy Road?” Cory said, puzzled.

“No, no,” Ping said with a smile. “Har. Vey. Road.”

“Oh,” the boy said. “Harvey Road. Never heard of it. Now Water Street, I heard of dat before.”

“Cory, b’y,” Cory’s Mom’s voice echoed through the air, “come in out of it, you’re liable to catch a chill out there talking to those Chinamen all night.”

“Alright mudder,” Cory yelled back. “Listen fellas, you’re more than welcome to spend the night here. Just park your truck up by da house. It’ll be easier for you to figure out your way back to town tomorrow, in the daylight.”

And so the men parked their laundry truck by Cory Cox’s house, just off the main road by Puffin Island. They slept in the back of the truck, not quite comfortable enough to sleep in the young man’s house. The boy brought out some of his Nan’s quilts for the men to sleep with.

“You’re liable to freeze ta det out here,” Cory said as he hands the men the quilts. “Is really no trouble for you to sleep inside the house, we don’t mind. Are you sure you don’t want to come in?”

Ping and Gao slept in the truck.

And just under all of this, just over the edge of that there cliff, on a beach down below, two men walked on the rocky shore, under the cover of darkness. They paced back and forth, up and down the beach, discussing the future of the world. What a funny pair, these two men on the beach, one short and stout, a cigar hanging out of his mouth, his bald head gleaming in the moonlight, attracting more than a few puffins. The other man was tall and thin, with glasses that reflected the gleaming light off the other’s bald head. This man had a wheelchair with him but found it too hard to navigate on the uneven rocks. Instead, he stood and walked very slowly, swinging his hips back and forth in such a way so that the iron braces on his legs could move just so, balancing his weight on a cane. And these two men talked and talked and came up with a document that would change the shape of things. And although the document would never truly exist, its contents never written down, its signatures never signed, it was something agreed upon and heard the world over. And the strangest thing of all is that even though this document had nothing at all to do with the Chinese, no mention of them at all, its creation meant that one day, several years down the road, the walls would come down and Chinese women and children would be allowed in to Newfoundland.

All because of two men walking on the beach.

1942

The Hunting Trip

“Service,” Ping yelled. “Service!”

Marge arrived to grab another hot plate out of the kitchen.

“You can’t let people wait like that,” Ping said to her. “If food get cold, they hate us. We have reputation.”

Marge silently took the plate and headed back out to the main floor of the restaurant.

It was a busy night, as always. Every table in the room was filled and there was a waitlist for others to get in. Ping checked himself in the mirror by the service hall, made sure his tie wasn’t askew, made sure his hair was perfectly coiffed. Appearance was important. It always was, but especially here, especially now. His restaurant had been praised as the best in the city and he had to make sure that he looked like he owned the best restaurant in the city. His clientele, most of them were the finest of St. John’s, the bourgeois elite, politicians and men rich enough to be able to afford to miss the war. The rest of the clientele was made up of American service men and allied members of the Navy due to a hostel for soldiers having been set up just a couple doors down the road. Some called them heroes, Ping called them customers.

A banjo was being played tremendously fast out in the main dining room. Ping took a deep breath, fiddled with his tie once more and walked out. It was a glamorous place, all rich white people in their best dining attire. Bow ties and top hats, elegant dresses, ornamental canes, the whole gamut. Ping lived to circulate the dining room on nights like this, to see and be seen. It was a strange turn of events, it was no longer frowned upon to be at a Chinaman’s establishment, now it was exotic, a badge of honour, something these patrons could go home and brag to their

friends about. 'Ernest took me to the 7-A last night and it was amazing. The food was served in a pineapple, like the pineapple was a plate.'

Ping surveyed the room. A local banjo act was on the stage right now, strumming his four string while simultaneously humming a tune into a harmonica, playing while Addie was on her break, probably out back having a smoke. There didn't seem to be any problems Ping needed to tend to, the room looked happy. It sounded happy. As long as he heard laughter out here, he knew it couldn't be too bad.

Ethel was tending to some booth in the back, a rich guy waving some bills at her, her blushing and batting her eyelashes, knowing how to work the room. Marge was over in the service hall, staring at some plate. Vile was taking drink orders.

Ping peeked into the kitchen. Gao and Renny were cooking as fast as they could. Ping walked back out and took a seat at the bar. This had been his routine as of late. Work at the laundry all day, managing the orders, doing the paperwork, writing up receipts. Then after he was done his clerical duties, he'd pop down to the restaurant, just to check in, make sure everything was going smoothly, have a drink at the bar and be there to shake the hands of whosoever wanted to meet the owner. He had a good view of the stage from here and tonight's a special night. When service slows down later, Gao and his band are going to do a couple songs. Ping hadn't seen them perform yet and although he was trepidatious about letting Gao leave the kitchen, he was excited to see his friend do what he loved.

Ping lit a cigarette and ordered an Old Fashioned and waited. After the banjo player left the stage, Addie takes her seat behind the organ again and started playing some dinner music. In

the beginning, she played nothing but hymns and it was driving business down. But over time, she learned some secular music and things were good.

It was about 11:10 p.m. when service had slowed enough that Ping could reasonably declare that it was okay for Gao to get ready to take the stage. Gao went out back to change into his stage clothes. Ethel took the mic from the main stage to introduce the band.

“Alright, b’y’s,” she said, not quite loud enough to quiet the rowdy crowd. “There’s a band taking the stage now, so let’s give a warm welcome to ‘The Chinese Singing Cowboy and the Barrelmen.’

Gao walked on to the stage in an ivory-white suit with a shiny red tie and a big cowboy hat. His band formed behind him, the banjo player, a drummer, a guitar player. All white.

“Hello,” Gao said in stilted English into the mic. “For our first song, we will perform Dean Martin song from new movie.”

The banjo player blew a tune into his harmonica, a soft, strange tune. The bass player hummed along to the tune of the harmonica, giving it an ethereal feel. Ping took a sip of his drink. He hadn’t heard this tune before so it must be from a movie he didn’t see yet. He’s too busy for the picture shows nowadays, trying to keep two businesses afloat.

“The sun is sinking in the west,” Gao sang in his deep, baritone voice, the last word wavering in his delivery just so. It sounded like an error but it was perfect. It gave the line some emotion.

"The cattle go down to the stream.

The redwing settles in the nest.

It's time for a cowboy to dream.” Gao sang these lines slowly with a nostalgic sadness and Ping could remember all those days on all those boats and all those trains, listening to Gao singing the same folk song over and over again. And Ping had always felt that Gao’s voice didn’t quite fit that song about San Francisco and gold and Moms and whatever, but his voice felt right here. Ping shook his head as he stubs out his cigarette.

“Purple light in the canyons.

That’s where I long to be.

With my three good companions.

Just my rifle, pony and me.”

Ping turned his attention to Ethel, over at that rich guy’s booth again. Ping could’ve sworn that he saw the rich guy pointing towards him, but now that he was looking at the table, the rich guy was shrugging and raising his eyebrows and throwing his shoulders back, looking at Ethel. Ethel was shaking her head and shrugging and then she looked over in Ping’s direction. Ping gave her a nod and she gestured at the rich guy then towards Ping and the rich guy stopped moving and looked at Ping and nodded. Ping nodded again.

“Gonna hang,” Gao sang as the drummer harmonized with him, “my sombrero on the limb of a tree.

Coming home sweetheart darling.

Just my rifle, pony and me.”

The rich guy stood up to walk over towards Ping but Ethel shushed him and pointed towards the stage. The rich guy took his seat again as Ping finished his drink. Ping stopped listening to the music after the sombrero line. Gao and his band were good, but this type of music

wasn't for him. Strangely, he felt a little stomach sick now. He got off the stool and walked into the bathroom, its brilliant light bulbs a stark contrast to the dark velvet lighting of the dining room.

"Mr. Ping," the young bathroom attendant said. "You don't look so well."

"It nothing," Ping said, looking at an unusually pale reflection in the mirror. "I think I just drink too fast."

"Do you need anything?" the attendant said. "A cigar? A razor?"

"No, no," Ping splashed water on his face and grabbed a towel from the attendant. "Is okay."

When Ping reemerged from the bathroom and took his seat on the stool, Gao had retreated from the mic and the banjo player had stepped forward. The audience was roaring with laughter. It was the first time Ping took a good look at the banjo player. He was bald at an unusually young age and he had thick-rimmed glasses. The banjo player wasn't singing so much as he was just talking into the mic, doing some kind of comedy routine set to music. The bass player was playing a jaunty tune on an accordion and the drummer kept a steady beat. And although the audience was laughing, the story the banjo player told seemed to be a darker one, a rhyme about someone being refused entry to heaven.

"Through the keyhole Paddy cried,

'I'm keeping all your keys,

I'll give you the key, St Peter,

if you'll set old Ireland free!'

Now when I awoke,

me head was jammed
between the bed and wall,
Me feet were tangled in the quilt -
'Twas those lobsters done it all."

The laughter from the audience was deafening. Ping lit another cigarette and watched as Gao took the mic again. He sang a song about a 'big iron on his hip' and while Ping knew this was probably a reference to a gun, he couldn't help but remember the irons they used to use at Fong-Li and imagined having a big one strapped on his hip like a weapon. Ping sighed.

The band performed a couple more songs, nothing too extravagant, more country songs and more funny spoken word pieces. After they were done, it was time for Last Call. Gao and the banjo player came over to where Ping was seated.

"Hey," Gao said in English. "My bandmate want to meet you. He say he know you."

"Oh?" Ping said, squinting at the banjo player.

"Hi," the banjo player stuck out his hand. "We met years and years ago. Do you remember me?"

"I'm sorry," Ping said. "I not sure."

"I used to own a bar downtown and you came in one night with Fong Choy."

"Oh," Ping said, the memories of that night coming back to him. "Yes, yes, I remember."

"Eh, it was only a chance meeting," the banjo player said, shaking Ping's hand. "We may as well be strangers. I just remember your name is all."

"Heh," Ping said. "Mr. Ping"

"Well, I'll introduce myself again," the banjo player said. "The name's Joey Smallwood."

“Nice to meet you,” Ping said. “Again. You like 7-A?”

“It is truly one of the finest establishments in the city. And you’ve got a wonderful singer cooking for you here.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Ping said. “His voice very good at this type of music, very nice.”

“Ain’t that the truth,” Joey said. “Well, I’ll leave you to it. I only stay up late once a week cause I got a pig farm to be tending to.”

“Oh,” Ping said. “Okay. Have good night.”

“Just let me talk to him, just — excuse me, excuse me — let me talk to him,” a man’s voice rang out from behind Joey. It was the rich guy Ethel had been serving and even now, she stood between the man and Ping, trying to keep him from going over.

“Just take me word for it,” Ethel said.

“Mr. Ping,” the man yelled out. “Just a moment of your time, please. I am merely an admirer of your establishment, that is all.”

“Yes, yes,” Ping stood up and sauntered towards the man, gripping his hand in a shake.

“Ethel, anyone want speak me, you let them speak me. Is fine.”

“Fine,” she said as she walked away.

“Oh, Mr. Ping, you are the gentleman of repute,” the man said. “I simply wished to extend my thanks. My thanks for this absolutely wonderful establishment you have here, I mean, it’s just miraculous. I feel like I’ve been transported to the Orient the moment I walk in though the doors.”

“Thank you,” Ping said with a nod. “Your name?”

“My name is Richards DuMont. Look, I love everything about 7-A, just everything, from the drinks to the waitresses. I come here pretty often as well, I’m sure you’ve noticed me. Look, I just wanted to invite you to a hunting trip with me. Nothing too extravagant, I have an estate just outside the city. It’d be an honour and a privilege to have you out there, just for a couple days and we can talk. I am positively fascinated by your people’s... perseverance. I’d love to discuss some business with you.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Ping said. “That sound good. Fun, yes.”

“So, you’ll do it?” Richards said.

“Yes,” Ping said. “This what Ethel try to stop you from doing? She crazy. I never even hunting but I want try.”

“This weekend,” Richards said. “I’ll send a car for you.”

—

Richards DuMont’s estate was on a beautiful piece of land just outside the city, in a valley between two mountains. There must’ve been a farm somewhere nearby as there was such an overwhelming scent of shit in the air that you would gag for the first couple minutes you breathed in the air outside his house. But then it wears off and you get used to it. The air starts to smell just fine to you and it only bothers newcomers.

A nice black car had picked up Ping on Saturday morning and drove him out to this estate. A one-story building, significantly wider than it was tall, with sharp and dramatic angles. It was at the end of a long dirt road, although it seemed to Ping that most things outside the city were at the ends of long dirt roads. A series of nice cars were parked around a fountain outside the front door.

After arriving, the butler of the house directed Ping toward a room where he was to change into a garish bright orange sweater to prepare himself for hunting with Richards.

“Moose,” Richards explains. “There’s a lot of ‘em here now and we’re gonna find one. You can even bring back some of the meat to that wonderful chef of yours and see what he can do with it.”

“Oh yes,” Ping said. “Very good idea.”

“Me and Gao go way back,” Richards said with a big smile. “Or, well, I know him at least. He may not know me. My Dad helped him ship some precious goods to New York, if you catch my drift.”

Ping and Richards wandered around the woods behind Richards’ house for a couple hours. Ping had never shot a gun before but he liked the weight of the rifle in his hands and he could imitate the poses one should take with a rifle from all the movies he had seen over the years. Something about holding the gun reminded him of his childhood, playing with sticks, imitating the men in the dialous. Ping and Richards wandered for hours, never saying much. On occasion, Richards would stop to have a snack and offer Ping some carrots he had brought along. Then Richards would put his hands up to his mouth and make some sort of weird calling sound that was wet and loud and Ping thought it would probably scare off an animal before it would attract one. Ping remembered the noises that the moose were making on the *S.S. Caribou* and they sounded nothing like this. They didn’t encounter any moose.

They wandered into a bog and saw a pair of long, spiny legs from a distance.

“Oh my,” Richards said, raising the rifle to look down the sight. “Lookey there.”

Far down at the end of the bog stood a peculiar sight. Two pink flamingos, one pecking at its legs, the other just standing there looking around. Ping stared at the long pink birds.

BANG.

Richards shot one of the tall birds and it fell to the earth as easy as a rock through a window. The other flamingo flew off in a hurry, zooming through the woods until it was no longer visible.

“That type of bird,” Richards said. “Why, I never in my day.”

Ping and Richards dragged their boots through the moss until they got to the bird.

“I’m glad we got this one,” Richards said. “Otherwise, no one would believe me.”

They dragged the bird back to Richards’ house and gave up hunting for the day.

Richards had a modern home, with a glass fireplace and big luxurious leather chairs and small mirrored tables. After changing back into their normal clothes, the two men sat on either end of the fireplace and the butler brought out two snifters filled with some peaty scotch. Ping found the first sip abrasive, like breathing in pure smoke, but the second sip was more palatable and by the third sip he had grown to like it.

“You hold the glass like this,” Richards explained, half of his face illuminated by the fire. “Around the little round bit. The heat of your hand warms up the Scotch ever so nicely.”

Ping nodded.

“Yes,” Ping said. “The heat, you can taste.”

“The heat you can taste,” Richards repeated with a shake of his head. “You people have a way of being so wise with your words. It’s... remarkable. Just remarkable.”

The only thing Ping could think to say in response was ‘it’s always the way,’ but he thought this might be the rare occasion where the phrase might actually hit the wrong notes.

“Do you like hunting?” Richards said. “Did you have fun?”

“Is nice,” Ping said “Being outside. Easy to work too much, stay inside too much. Outside nice.”

“Yes,” Richards said with a nod. “Now look, as I’m sure you’ve already surmised, my motives in bringing you all the way out here were not limited to just the cultural experience of a Newfoundland hunting trip. No, I brought you here to discuss business.”

“Okay,” Ping said with a sip of his scotch.

“Or, rather, one particular aspect of your business. Now, you see, Mr. Ping, I love the 7-A. I love everything about it. It’s tremendous, really, really tremendous. And the thing about it is, when it comes to you people, you come here with not a dime in your pockets, not a cent to your name and you come all the way over here, to do what? To live. And you have a hell of a time doing it. Why, I can’t even imagine what it must be like.”

Richards stopped as if he expected Ping to talk about what it’s like, but Ping didn’t say anything.

“And the 7-A,” Richards continued. “You and the 7-A. Why, what a remarkable success story, for you to rise from nothing and now you own a place people want to go to. It’s just fantastic. And I’m sure it is due in part to your diligence, your absolute cunning, as a businessman. But I think even you yourself have to admit, your success also rests upon your team. And what a wonderful team you have. I mean you take, Gao, for example. Multi-talented. Multi-lingual. Why no wonder half of these folks want your people to leave. You’re just too talented. You’re

like moss on a rock that grows into a mushroom. You people thrive, on survival. It makes you stronger.”

Richards raised his glass as if to toast and Ping mirrored this action while simultaneously wondering why he did that.

“Other members of your team, too like Ethel. You talk about a ravishing young lady—“ Richards made a fist and bit it with an eager glee “—never in my days, I swear to you, Mr. Ping, I swear to you. Which brings me to the matter of which I wish to speak to you. Now, you see, I’m a wealthy man, Mr. Ping. I deal in imports and exports and, much like yourself, I am not from around here. I too am an immigrant, even though my skin may be white. It’s a funny situation we have ourselves in here, all these immigrants and descendants of immigrants, and descendants of descendants of immigrants.”

Richards stood up from his chair and walked over to a nearby window that framed the vast forest behind his estate.

“The first person to live on Newfoundland, year round that is, was breaking the law. Now, I’m not talking about those Indians. Their histories aren’t written the same as ours. No, I’m talking about Europeans. You see, when England first colonized this little island in the middle of the frigid Atlantic, the King himself decreed that no one was to live here. That’s right, the royalty didn’t think the conditions here were livable. So they made it a rule, it was against the law to stay on this island. Then some knuckle brain got it in his head and thought ‘Well, what are they gonna do about it?’ and he stayed here and survived a winter, somehow, and the monarchy didn’t do anything. So then another man moved here and survived and another man. And soon enough you have on this very island a whole community of yahoos from throughout Europe, gathered here to

fish and break laws, as it were. And the King did nothing. What are you going to do, sentence a hundred people to death? Easier to just leave ‘em here and forget about ‘em. So, that’s how it began. The original celestials were people whose skin looked like mine.”

Only half of Richards’ body was illuminated by the light and for some reason Ping thought of Shaowei.

“Now, you may be thinking to yourself, ‘Why am I hearing this?’ Why, it is to establish something, a precedent, if you will, for the type of community you and I have found ourselves in, that we dragged ourselves to from our own disparate parts of the world to end up here together at this very moment. Now, listen to the sounds of my home, Mr. Ping.”

Richards stopped talking for a moment. All Ping could hear was the crackle of the fire. Maybe the footsteps of the butler on carpet far off somewhere.

“Do you hear any screaming children Mr. Ping? Do you hear any nagging wives? You hear nothing, right?”

“No, is very quiet house,” Ping said. “Peaceful.”

“Well, Mr. Ping, the time has come for the peace to end. You see, I live comfortably here and in fact, I no longer require the inheritance to which I am entitled. But you see, Mr. Ping, and I’m sure you can relate to this sentiment, money begets more money, don’t it? There’s never enough of it, right?”

Ping shrugged.

“You might be familiar with my father, Old Member Higgs, and if you are familiar with him, then I’m sorry to be the bearer of terrible, no good, bad news, but he’s on his deathbed, I’m sorry to say.”

“I sorry to hear that,” Ping said. He had never heard of Old Member Higgs.

“Well,” Richards continued, “you’ll be relieved to know that the old coot is remaining stubborn as always and now he’s demanding that I marry before he dies. He said I got a beautiful nest made here, now all I have to do is trap my bird, and that once I trap my bird, I’ll inherit a bigger nest. And I’m not talking about that flamingo, although I will most assuredly get it taxidermied. No, Mr. Ping, I am referring to a wife of course.”

“Oh,” Ping said. “Okay.”

“Now you see Mr. Ping, this is where my interests and yours collide. You see, I’ve ran my fingers through my little address book, time and time again and I just can’t settle on any girl. And these are wonderful girls, Mr. Ping, wonderful. I mean beautiful, smart, wealthy in some cases. But none of them intrigue me. None that is, except for your darling waitress Ethel.”

Ping slightly choked on a sip of scotch, the flavour of peat welling through his sinuses.

“I’ve known darling Ethel for years, and she’s always been the one that got away, as the platitude goes.”

“Oh,” Ping said, remembering his language lessons with Ethel. “Yes, yes, she speak of you many times. When she teach me English, she talk about you all the time. I remember, I not even know English and she just keep saying ‘Richard, Richard, Richard.’”

“Uh, the name is Richards, and yes, that does sound like her. Now, here’s the funny thing about that. Young Ms. Squibb, well, she is not interested me in the slightest. Never has been. I hadn’t the faintest idea why. I mean, usually the money is enough but I can be quite charming too, y’know. But then I start asking around. And I start hearing some things. And then I start looking for myself. And I start piecing things together. Piece. By. Piece.”

Ping shook his head in confusion.

“It’s to my understanding that you moved here, ‘round ten years ago now? A decade, if you will. And in that time, most curiously, you and Ms. Squibb have been frequently seen together. As you yourself just said, she taught you English and I hear that she got you a nice job at the Lieutenant Governor’s house and then you got her a job. People say that the two of you go to movies together and you’ve been seen sitting next to each other on the train. Now, others might fear miscegenation, especially seeing as that sister of hers, Marge, is it? Well that sister of hers has been seen cavorting around with one of them negro American soldiers. So, it must run in the family, a taste for exotica. And again, Mr. Ping, I do not judge. I do not. I have been to Polynesia and let me tell you, the pull of the exotic is entirely understandable to me. No, Mr. Ping, I do not judge miscegenation in the slightest. What I would judge is an adulterer.”

Richards stopped for a moment, leaning in and letting his last word hang in the air.

“It’s to my understanding you’re married, Mr. Ping?”

“Yes,” Ping said. “I have wife in China.”

“And it’s to my understanding that it’s illegal for you to bring women and children of your kind here, right?”

“Yes,” Ping said.

“And it’s also to my understanding that all men, the world over no matter their race or creed, that all men have the same appetites and desires. I’m speaking carnally of course and I don’t expect you to answer that one, Mr. Ping as I do know the answer and no amount of protesting will cause me to think otherwise.”

Ping said nothing.

“It’s like Old Member Higgs always says ‘a stiff cock knows no conscience.’ Vulgar I know, but you know Dad. He had a non-discriminatory way with his words. And correct too. Men, we are driven by one desire. To put a bird in our nest, to put it politely, and we might mask that desire behind other things, like accumulation of wealth or some other silly pursuit, but it’s always true that there’s really just one motivation. Now, Mr. Ping, it’s to my understanding that you haven’t seen your wife in ten years, a decade as it were?”

“Right,” Ping said.

“Right,” Richards continued. “Then how curious it is, that a man such as yourself could spend ten years away from his wife and not find another outlet for his desires. I’m not looking for an admission of guilt, Mr. Ping. I am merely presenting the facts. A man away from his wife for ten years, spending ample time around another woman. It just makes sense, Mr. Ping. But a wife is a wife, and even if that coupling was arranged for you, I’m sure there exists in you a desire to bring your wife and child here, to this very town, laws be damned. Right?”

“Well,” Ping stumbled on his words. “Yes.”

“Then what a terrible situation you would have on your hands there, hypothetically of course, if you were to have a wife and a mistress in the same town, in the same room as each other. What a nightmare.”

Ping nodded. “Yes, but—“

“Oh, Mr. Ping, just wait, let me speculate a little further. As you and I both know, there is no way of bringing your wife and child here. But if the option was presented to you, I’m sure you would accept. Especially seeing as there is a tiny bit of conflict known as war going on the world over right now and war’s filthy fangs have certainly sunken into your neck of the woods

too. What I mean to say is, surely you wouldn't abandon your family in a war zone, even if you were in love with another woman."

Ping nodded.

"Right, well, let me get to my point. Ethel doesn't have the time of day for me and I am supposing that that is because she is in love with you. What a predicament. Being in love with a married man and the whole 'married' aspect of said man is far, far, away on a plot of land that may as well be in outer space. What I am proposing is this. I want you to fire Ethel, or, in other terms, break up with her. Tell her you don't want her at the restaurant, you don't want her in your life. Bequeath her to me, in essential terms. There might seem to be no benefit in that to you, but let me suggest this to you, Mr. Ping. I am a wealthy and powerful man and I have friends in many high places, friends that I have met at your very establishment as a matter of fact. And I think we can spin a narrative around you, as being a noble man, who owns several businesses and stepped up to the community plate during this time of war. You are a leader, sir. And you know what a leader deserves? His family."

Ping leaned in, eyebrows scrunched.

"Now you may recall those first Newfoundlanders breaking the law and getting away with it. My point being is that laws are malleable. What I am proposing to you is that I can use my influence in conjunction with your image to strike a deal and get your wife and child admitted to this country. All you have to do is give up your other woman. How does that sound?"

Ping sat back in his chair, his hands shaking. He rested the scotch on a round mirrored table.

"It's a reasonable deal, Mr. Ping. Let's have dinner and you can think about it."

They moved into Richards' elegant dining room with a long dining table, at least twelve feet in length. The butler had prepared the place settings, with Richards sat at one head of the table and Ping sat at the opposite side. A large gold candelabra sat in the centre of the table, one of its candle holes empty, the wax having fully burned off.

"I must apologize for the seating arrangements," Richards called out across the table. "I'm accustomed to hosting large, glamorous crowds."

The meal passed by mostly in silence. The first course was a strange salad consisting of one big lettuce leaf, one slice of tomato and one slice of mozzarella. Ping stared at the plate, wondering if it was served wrong. The main course was a moose heart, served with some pureed parsnips and roasted shallots. Some sort of sauce made out of the moose's blood was balanced delicately in an onion petal, looking like a small fragile bowl.

"This is a very special part of the moose," Richards called out. "I usually save it for New Year's but today is a special day after all."

Lemon meringue pie for dessert, the meringue whipped to wispy points, some of which had been crisped brown, others remained pure white.

Ping wasn't very hungry, but he ate the meal dutifully. It would've been rude not to. With the last bite of his slice of pie, Ping was relieved to know there would be nothing else he'd have to eat after this.

"Why, Mr. Ping," Richards yelled out. "You finished that slice awfully quick. Have another."

“No,” Ping said, unable to yell back, fearing that he might vomit. He felt unusually warm now too and wished for nothing more than being able to loosen his tie and an opportunity to walk through fresh air.

Richards rang a little bell within arm’s reach of him and the butler walked into the dining room carrying another slice of pie on a plate.

“No, not for me,” Richards said to the butler as he lay the plate in front of him. “For him, for him.”

The butler brought the plate to Ping. He weakly picked up his fork and stabbed the tip of the slice, bringing it to his mouth, biting into it. The saccharine sweet meringue, the bitter tart lemon, the fatty crust. He struggled to swallow and knew he had made a mistake.

“Toilet?” Ping called out. He thought of Ethel when he said this, back when they first met. He’s not sure why.

“Just behind you on your right,” Richards yelled back.

Ping ran to the toilet, swinging open the door, but he wasn’t quite fast enough. He vomited before he reached the toilet, spraying a strange, multicoloured spew all over Richards’ expensive-looking green floral wallpaper. It came out of Ping so fast and so strong that it knocks over a flower vase balanced on top of the toilet. It was empty anyways.

Richards, hearing the glass shatter, rushed down to see what’s the matter.

“Oh, Mr. Ping,” he said. “Was it my boy’s cooking?”

“I do it,” Ping said, panting on the floor, yellow and red liquids on either side of his mouth.

“Well, that much is apparent to me, Mr. Ping,” Richards said. “I can see what exactly you have done.”

“No, no,” Ping said, mopping the corners of his mouth with his cuff-linked wrist. “Ethel. I fire her. I do it.”

“Oh goody,” exclaimed Richards. “I’ll get to work on our agreement immediately.”

“I sorry,” Ping said, gesturing towards the oozing mess on the walls.

“Oh, don’t worry your little heart about that,” Richards said. “The wallpaper was due to be freshened up anyways.”

—

And so on the following day of work, Ping fired Ethel in front of the entire staff at the 7-A. He found himself unable to eat that day.

“Yeah, you know,” Ping said before service was to begin that night. “Is not enough business for three of you, so I think Ethel should leave.”

“Yes now,” she said, with a laugh, as she wrapped utensils in fine cloth napkins. “Come off it, b’y.

“No,” Ping said. “I serious. We no need you. We fine.”

“I’m sure,” she said, continuing to stack the wrapped utensils in an old milk crate.

“I not kidding. You go.”

Ethel stopped wrapping the utensils, resting an unfinished one in the cart, the napkin folded to fit utensils inside but no utensils, just empty space.

“Are you fuckin’ serious?” she said.

“Yeah, yeah,” Ping said, walking towards the bar, unable to make eye contact with her.

“You no work here anymore.”

“So, what? This is my two-week notice.”

“No, no,” Ping said as he stepped behind the bar, grabbing a rocks glass and a sugar cube.

“No notice. You go. You gone.”

“Why the fuck are you doing this?” she said, stomping towards the bar.

Ping grabbed a bottle of bitters, soaking the sugar cube with them and then uses a brass muddler to mash the cube inside the rocks glass.

“Is business,” he said. “We no need you. I sorry. Is business.”

“Business? You greedy fuck, you’re letting me go because of what? Money?”

The rest of the staff stood throughout the dining room quietly.

“Yes,” Ping said, his voice wavering, his hands slightly shaking as he poured a couple of fingers of bourbon into the glass.

“You, you, you...” Ethel was so mad, she was shaking, tears welling in her eyes, unable to finish her sentiment, each iteration of ‘you’ sounding madder and madder. “You... you... you.”

She stomped over to the crate of utensils and pushed it over.

“You think my sisters will keep working here after you fire me, you fuckin’ Jew?”

Ping, puzzled by her remark, shrugged.

“Look at me,” she screamed. “Look at me.”

Ping stared at the lone ice cube he had dropped into his drink, watching it float around.

“Look me in the friggin’ eyes,” she screamed. “What is it? Why?”

Ping merely shook his head, unable to look at her.

"I hate you," she said as she walked out the door, slamming it behind her as she goes.

Marge and Vile just stood there. Ping looked at them.

"You two," he said. "Wrap utensil with napkin."

He sipped his drink as the two sisters gather the mess Ethel made on the floor.

"You're just pulling her leg, right, Mr. Ping?" Marge said.

"No, I sorry, no," he said, before turning his attention to Gao and Renny. "Go! Do prep. Don't stare at me. Stare at me won't make cooking easier later. Go."

Service was a bit bumpy that night, as Marge and Vile had to fill an Ethel-sized hole in the team. And although Ping feared that the two sisters would leave, they found the tips better without Ethel there and only grew to like their jobs more. Sure, behind the scenes they would commiserate with their sister.

"What a prick," Vile would say.

"I couldn't believe," Marge would say, breathy. "I just couldn't believe it."

But they still counted their tips every night and showed up bright and early on pay day.

—

Richards held true to his word. He successfully arranged passes and permits and documents allowing Ping's wife and child to come to Newfoundland. He was even able to arrange an array of communications through the British military to get the message to them faster. They responded back with confirmation that they would be coming. And so Ping waited. Although ten years had passed, it hadn't become any easier to get from one side of the world to the other. If

anything, travelling such a long distance was more difficult now and infinitely more dangerous. So Ping waited. And he waited.

He waited through September, hearing nothing about any arrival. He waited through October, patiently reading the newspapers in the mornings, hoping to not see a headline about a passenger ship being sunk in the pacific. One morning he awoke to a headline announcing the sinking of the *S.S. Caribou*, struck by a torpedo off the coast of Port Aux Basques. His heart was racing. He read the article over and over again. Could they have been on it?

“Approximately 37 km south of Port aux Basques at 3:51 a.m. Newfoundland Daylight Time on October 14, 1942, the Caribou was hit by a torpedo. She took five minutes to sink.” Ping read those words over and over again, an adrenaline racing through his body making him feel like the tips of his fingers were electric.

“A great many of the *Caribou*’s life rafts were lost when the torpedo hit. Those that remained could not be released because the ship was sinking too fast; they could not wait.” Did they know how to swim? Ping never knew how to swim. But anything could’ve happened in the last ten years. They could’ve learned.

It was all that was in the paper for days. A couple days later, survivor accounts begin to be published.

One man who balanced an oil drum onto a wooden plank to escape, Thomas Percy, described the event as follows:

“...all the lights went out. Couldn't see. But I knew where I was to, I knew what way to go. Second steward called into him that we were torpedoed and he came out of his room and he went down on the port side and I went out on the starboard side. He was lost and I was one of the

survivors. When she got hit she listed over, took water aboard. Well, the people that were down in steerage, they never had a chance. They couldn't get up because she was all flooded with water. They were drowned like rats down there. But you're not supposed to close a door. Anything happens aboard ship you can't get the door open, it jams, see. And all them doors was closed downstairs. They were all warned that night. The captain warned them. Be ready for the lifeboats and keep their clothes on, don't take off their clothes."

Ping felt dazed after reading that, like he might pass out. Words from the paper stuck in his mind. The people that were down in steerage, drowned like rats.

"It was dark." Thomas said in the paper. "But you could hear people screeching. All over. And then the cattle drowning."

Survivors were brought to Sydney because Port Aux Basques didn't have a good hospital. Maybe they were there. Maybe they got out.

In the days after that, a list of all the passengers' names was released, both alive and dead. The list didn't name Hualing and Zhaohui. Although Gao and Renny said Ping should be happy that they weren't on the list, this absence only made Ping feel worse. It was months and they still hadn't showed up. So he waited some more.

The onset of winter was cold that year. The wind seemed harsher, louder. And although Ping never cared much for Christmas anyways, he had Marge and Vile decorate the restaurant, with some metallic tinsel and fragile lights.

It was the night of December 12th, when Ping noticed a strange black smoke billowing under the doors of the 7-A. It was a busy night, more seatings than usual as would be expected for Christmas. And it wasn't unusual to see smoke roll in under the door, but usually of the cig-

arette variety, not thick, black smoke like this. Ping put on his coat and hat to go outside and see what was the matter.

Just up the road, the Knights of Columbus hostel for the soldiers was ablaze. He ran back inside and evacuated the restaurant. In the coming days they would learn that nearly a hundred people were killed in the blaze and another hundred had been seriously injured. The press speculated that it was another attack by the Germans, although Ping could easily imagine a navalman drunk off too many cocktails at the 7-A stumbling back and accidentally dropping a cigarette on a stockpile of toilet paper. He wasn't sure how to feel about this notion and although the restaurant had to be closed for the rest of the Christmas season due to severe smoke damage, Ping never dwelled on either of these issues too much. Instead, he was holed up in his laundry on Alder-shot Street, waiting and waiting.

In February, he received a tattered, soggy postcard in the mail. The image on the front depicted Vancouver's harbour. On the back was a small paragraph, Hualing's calligraphy. "They wouldn't let us in," it read. "They said that they didn't believe Zhaohui was your son. So, they sent him back to China. I'm going with him. Will send another letter when we are home."

1949

The Night The Roads Changed

Ping rested a soggy hat on a hook as he entered in through the door of the apartment he lived in above his laundromat. He sighed as he flicked on a desk lamp and slumped into a creaky rotating chair, the cold March rain pitter-pattering on a nearby window. Clinging to his tongue was a memory of scallions from an afternoon scone. He looked at the clock. 7 p.m.. He was waiting for midnight. It was a nice lunch, he thought. Good to see her again.

He had ran into her on the upper west side of Water Street, sauntering into a movie theatre on the arm of some handsome beau as Ping was walking out. They stopped and chatted for a moment. Ping had just seen *White Heat*, Ethel was dragging this guy in to see *Jolson Sings Again*. It was the first time they had seen each other in years. Sure, sometimes he'd see her hanging out with Marge and Vile, back before the restaurant closed down. But that was years ago. At the time, there was nothing but tense silence and sullen glares. The world had changed since then. A lot of things had changed.

Later that same night, when Ping was back in his loft above the laundromat, his phone rang.

"Hello?" he said, half-expecting it to be some bozo looking for a rush on his laundry.

"Hey," Ethel's voice echoed through the tinny receiver. "Want to go get a lunch some time?"

Ping agreed and they made plans to meet for a cozy bite-to-eat, at the lobby restaurant of a newly opened hotel. What had interested Ping most of all when they ran into each other at the theatre was that the man on Ethel's arm wasn't Richards DuMont. He still looked like a man of

wealth, but it wasn't Richards, that's for sure. Ping had tried hard to not follow up on what happened between Richards and Ethel. He had forbid Marge and Vile from talking about it in front of him. It wasn't long after that the restaurant had closed anyways. No Ethel DuMont, No Hualing, No Zhaohui. It seemed to him that everything thing he had done years ago was for nothing.

Lunch was to be tomorrow, the final day in March. The Newfoundland Hotel was nice, having been newly built in the hopes of a big influx of tourism, with confederation and all. Ethel was already seated there waiting for him. She had on a big puffy jacket and even though it was pretty warm inside the hotel, she refused to take it off. The hotel was a classy place, big slabs of green rock and marble pillars, and a couple of glass sculptures behind the bar. The menu was fairly light. Deviled eggs, cheese and scallion scones, lemon squares. Two scones were ordered.

"I surprised you want talk me," Ping said to her.

"Well, Jesus, b'y," she said as she lit a cigarette. "Why wouldn't I want to talk to you?"

Ping stopped, unsure of how to even describe why.

"Because when I fire you job," he said.

"Oh," Ethel said. "Is that all you did? Just fired me, nothing more to it than that?"

Ping frowned. Maybe he should've stayed home.

"I'll tell you why I wants to talk to you, I wants to talk to you because I always wanted to know why. What it was you and Richards were up to. I'm in a new phase of my life now and neither of ye are of any interest to me anymore. But Richards always denied that it was him who made you... fire me."

Ping felt sick again.

"You not with Richards?" Ping asked.

“Jesus, b’y, that’s old news. Sure, do you know the war’s over?”

“Heh,” Ping laughed.

“So?” she said. “If you’re not going to tell me either, then I’ll leave.”

“Okay,” Ping said with a sigh. “I tell you. You remember when Richards take me hunting?”

“Yes, I remembers that. I remembers trying to stop it too.”

“Yes,” Ping said. “He send nice car for me, drive me to fancy house. We go hunting for a little bit, not find nothing. Then we go back his house. He say me ‘you break up with Ethel, right away, and I get paper allow your family come here.’”

“What?” Ethel said, surprised.

“Yes,” Ping said. “Richards say, ‘Oh, it very easy. I rich guy, I change rule for you if I want. You a good businessman, easy.’ But he want me fire you, he want marry you.”

“Oh my god,” Ethel said. “It all makes sense now.”

“Yes, yes,” Ping said. “He make me decide that night. I get so nervous, I get sick all over his bathroom. But I do it. I want family safe.”

“Safe?” she said. “Sure you people have never felt safe here have you?”

Ping stopped and couldn’t think of anything to say.

“I remembers Marge and Vile telling me about that,” Ethel said. “‘Bout your wife coming here. And I figured that was why you fired me. Cause of your wife coming here and all. But then I remember Marge saying that they never showed up.”

“Is true,” Ping said with a slow nod. “Never show up. I wait and wait. They never come.”

“So whaddaya think? Richards never gave them the right documents.”

“I not sure,” Ping said. “I think maybe he give right document but, my son, I am not the father. I not sure the word in English. I not the father and my wife not the mother?”

“Jesus, b’y, what is this, a riddle?”

“Heh,” Ping laughed. “No, I just not sure the word. You never taught me. You bad teacher.”

“Oh wow,” Ethel laughed. “Now it takes one to know one, you know that right?”

Ping paused for a moment. Both of their attitudes had been playful but something felt off to him.

“Anyways,” he said. “I not sure the word, but my wife, she not give birth to our son.”

“That’s called ‘adoption,’ me duckie. You adopted him.”

“Yeah,” Ping said. “He adoption son, so someone say he not my son, they send him back.”

“So they’re still in China,” Ethel said. “This makes so much sense. You must be looking forward to tomorrow?”

“Tomorrow?” Ping said, puzzled. “When roads change?”

“Well, that too,” she said. “But aren’t the laws around you people changing tomorrow too?”

“Oh,” Ping said. The significance of the day had been almost lost on him and now having been reminded of it, he remembered the days, weeks, he had spent waiting, wondering where they were. “No, I not excite.”

“Sure you went through all that trouble to get them here,” Ethel said. “Now he should be able to enter right.”

“I... I not sure,” Ping said with a wave. “What happen you and Richards?”

“Just wait now,” Ethel said. “You aren’t planning on bringing your family here, now?”

“I not want to talk about it,” he said.

“You’re going back to China, aren’t you? You’re leaving us here, aren’t ya?”

“No,” Ping said sternly. “I not go back China. I have business here, I can’t leave.”

“Sure can’t you get someone else to run it?”

“No, no,” he said. “Then I lose money. Richards and you, what happen?”

“So you’re not bringing your family here and you’re also not going back?”

Ping exhaled heavily through his nostrils.

“They dead,” he said. “They dead. They die in war. They not come here, I not go there.

They dead.”

“Your scones,” the waiter said, placing one plate with two scones on the table.

—

After receiving a postcard back in February of 1943, Ping waited for another letter for months. Months and months, until a bitter and sour disposition took hold on him. He no longer felt sick, he felt ravenous. He became a voracious consumer of food and gained forty pounds in six months. And still he waited. Sometimes he would even go sit at the train station and peer through the crowds of people disembarking the cars and look for them. Maybe they had tried again, maybe they would show up.

Never did they show up.

News from the European war fronts was quite easy to obtain, covered in the papers and on the radio and in newsreels shown before the picture shows. And although all the Chinamen

knew that a war was being waged back home, it wasn't too easy to get any information about it. It had come as quite a surprise to Ping when he was at the theatre and the "Week's New War Reel" was depicting the "Chino-Japanese War: Authentic Pictures of CHINESE TROOPS in action."

"Hundreds of days of war in the Far East," the British-accented narrator reported, "hundreds of days of bucking shots and whining shells and on nearly every one of those days, hundreds killed and maimed." The reel showed footage of grand naval ships in harbour, dozens of soldiers carrying supplies around.

"As the opposing armies advance and retreat, dragging each other to-and-fro across the central plain like wrestler's locked in a death grip, they turn China's fertile countryside into a scarred and scorched wilderness." Footage of water cannon's firing, of sea planes taking off, of trenches and raised bayonet rifles.

"The Orient contains much that is beautiful and now, war! Must it go on?" Soldiers aimed guns at planes flying over. Shattered windows, pulverized buildings, troops dragging carts down dirt roads. Dramatic music played over the footage of soldiers rushing onto a battlefield, accompanied by a chorus of loud brass instruments and incessantly rolling snares.

"As China's tragic struggle drags into its sixth year, we present these dramatic pictures from the Chinese side of an actual battle, far into the wild and mountainous interior. China's army is ill-manned, ill-trained, and ill-equipped but still it struggles on." The footage almost looked familiar to Ping, the rocky mountains terrain, the overgrown greenery. Had he walked through there? Impossible to say for sure, but now it was war torn, with cannons hidden inside bushes and explosions destroying the countryside.

“In filming these amazing pictures, our cameraman takes just as much risk as the soldiers, moving forward in twos and threes in the deadly job known as contact with the enemy.” An idea crept into Ping’s mind as he sat in the theatre, illuminated by the black-and-white glow of the screen, showing men that looked just like him, fleeing their towns, running as fast as they could to escape bombs and cannon blasts and explosive shells. An idea crept into his mind, one that he would never be able to shake. Zhaohui and Hualing were dead. They had to be. There was no other way to account for what happened.

“Such is the indomitable spirit of the Chinese people,” the narrator proclaimed before the newsreel cut out on footage of a diaolou exploding. Ping froze in his chair. Maybe they weren’t dead, maybe they were hiding. But then Ping thought about it some more, and he wondered how could they even safely cross the Pacific, a woman and a child, in steerage, in those hellish conditions. He felt sick again and slumped lower in his chair in the theatre. How could he possibly have expected them to make it here? He tried to block out the thought out of his mind, he tried to focus on the picture, some Cary Grant vehicle. He couldn’t. He left the theatre and walked home and couldn’t stop thinking: they’re dead.

Of course, that was years ago now. That was before the war was over even. And when the war did end, Ping felt hopeful for a few weeks, as he thought maybe now, he would hear from them, maybe now, they would reach out and say “Hi, we’re alive.” But no such letter came, and this idea in his mind grew bigger and stronger and all the more encompassing. They were dead.

He focused on the laundry. The restaurant was too social, too many couples, too many white people to smile at, too many government officials, too much disappointment. He avoided it all together until one day Gao suggested that they should probably close down.

“No business,” he had said. Ping was happy to get rid of the place.

—

After the waiter placed the scones on the table, Ethel was quiet for a moment.

“I.. I’m sorry, b’y, I never even thought... how rude of me.”

“Is okay,” Ping said. “I not want to talk about it anymore.”

“Okay,” Ethel said.

“You and Richard?”

“Oh,” she said. “He was some friggin’ weird b’y, like he thought just cause he had money he could act right strange. I went out with him for a couple months but I just couldn’t stand him, not even for a million dollars.”

“I thought you marry him,” Ping said.

“No, b’y, I would’ve never married that. Jesus no.”

“So you single now?”

“I’ve been seeing a new guy now, Frank, and its going good. Sure you seen us at the movie theatre?”

“Oh,” Ping said.

The two of them sat in the lobby restaurant for three hours that afternoon, nibbling on scones and kicking around old times. Learning how to say ‘toilet’ in a church gymnasium. Christmas at the Walwyn’s house, the fire roaring and a Cuban cigar in everyone’s stocking. Seeing those marvellous Disney animations, the way those lines could dance. Late nights at the 7-A, back when Joey Smallwood was just a face in the crowd. That time Marge just stared at a plate and everyone thought maybe she’d had some sort of aneurysm. Good memories.

“You ready for tomorrow?” Ethel said, once all the tea was drank, and the scones were nothing but remnant crumbs on a fragile plate.

“Tomorrow,” Ping said. “Nothing change. One day, I am Chinese in Newfoundland. Next day, I am Chinese in Canada. Except I not go anywhere. Buildings not change. Car still drive. Nothing change.” Family still dead, he thought.

“Hey now,” she said, “that’s not true. You gotta drive the car on the other side of the road starting at midnight.”

Ping was so sick of hearing this about the roads. Everyone had always driven on the left side of the road. It just made sense, it wasn’t logical to drive on the right side of the road like those on the mainland or those idiot Yankees. But this was part of the compromise of joining Canada, you had to drive on the right side of the road like a damn fool. This was a rare time where Ping agreed with the locals, it was stupid to change this, but at the same time, he didn’t really care. There had been protests in the streets by people who never knew the likes of the lives his people had lived.

“Oh,” Ping said. “Yes. Right. But still, nothing change. You wake up tomorrow, nothing change.”

“Don’t be so dour,” Ethel said. “At least one of your friends must be happy. Gao, or somebody, must be able to bring his family here now.”

Of course, another curious thing was to result from Confederation: the Head Tax would be revoked and Chinese women and children would be allowed to immigrate to Newfoundland. After World War Two was over, the Canadian government decided that their anti-Chinese laws were a little hypocritical in the face of the defeat of Nazism. The Newfoundland government

didn't feel it was hypocritical at all and left their laws in place: pay big money at the front door, and no women and children. But joining Canada would change that.

"I not sure," Ping said. "Lot of things change."

"See," she said as she put on her hat, getting ready to leave. "You said nothing changes but you just admitted it. Things change."

"Things change in world and society because war. Things change here because money."

They walk out the front door of the hotel, and keep dry under the extended burgundy-and-gold awing of the hotel.

"This was nice," Ethel said.

"Yeah," Ping said. "Is good to clear air."

"Hey," she said. "I never taught you that one."

"I have many teachers," Ping said as he lit a cigarette.

"Give me a light too," she said. "Let me bum a smoke off ya."

Ping lit her cigarette, pushing down on the back of his Zippo until that small ball of flame flew up and ignited the dry tube.

"Alright," she said. "Well, I'll be seeing you."

"You drive?" Ping said.

"No," Ethel said. "I'm gonna walk."

"In freezing rain?" Ping asked. "No way. I drive you home."

He had parked just around the corner, on the other side of Duckworth Street. They walked towards his car, and as they cross the street, Ping linked his arm in through hers to help

her walk over a puddle. A car slowed down on the other side of the road. The driver's side window rolled down.

"Why don't you find one of your kind, you fucking chink," the driver yelled as he sped off, tires screeching.

"You fucking prick," Ethel yelled back, waving her handbag in the air.

Ping acted as though nothing had happened.

"Aren't you mad?" Ethel asked as they sit in the Snow White truck.

"Is just words," Ping said. "I get used to it. It's always the way."

—

After he dropped her off at her house, Ping drove back to Aldershot Street and it occurred to him that this was probably the last time he would drive on the left side of the road. Once he was inside, he sat back in his chair and sighed. Ethel was right; Gao would be able to bring his parents here now, and a woman that they had arranged for him to marry. Lots of his friends were planning on bringing their families here.

Ping walked into the bathroom. Maybe he'll get a shower. He thought about what he had said to Ethel this afternoon. They dead. Should've said 'they might be dead.' He knew the difference. Why didn't he say something? Just didn't want to talk about it. No shame in a little misleading. They might really be dead. He looked at himself in the mirror. It had been almost twenty years since he'd seen his wife. He had spent so much time as an immigrant, he forgot that he was also a husband. Now tomorrow, he'll be an immigrant again in another nation. Strange world.

At midnight, he's planning on walking somewhere to watch the traffic. Maybe Rawlin's Cross. The papers had been predicting huge car accidents, starting at one stroke after midnight.

And the ads from Golden Arrow Coaches were everywhere: “Beginning at the stroke of midnight on March 31st, 1949, the main doors of our buses will be on the traffic side and passengers will have to embark and disembark in the street instead of at the curb. Signs are being placed at the back of buses reminding motorists of this fact.” Maybe he’ll call Gao and they can go together. He should’ve asked Ethel.

Why hadn’t he thought of that? Maybe he could still ask her. He could call her right now. Yeah, that’s what he’ll do, he’ll call right now and ask her out again. But then again, she said she’s seeing Frank now. Stupid Frank. They dead. Maybe they aren’t. Sure, it was something he had thought of often, a notion that was at first so displeasing that he spent hours, days, weeks, crying over it, wishing he had been there, wishing he had never left. But, as the years passed, the idea took on a perversely comforting notion: if they were dead, he didn’t have to wait anymore. He didn’t have to wonder. But of course, he still wondered.

They dead. Maybe he said it so that Ethel would think they were dead. He wouldn’t have to tell her the difference. He didn’t have to tell anybody anything. People would talk. They do that anyways. They could... but no. He wouldn’t put her through that. Sure, even this afternoon, boom, right off the bat. But, wouldn’t it be nice? Wonder what ever happened to Marge and that negro. Did Ethel say Marge had a kid? Should’ve asked. They dead.

Well, if they are dead, then he’s free to move on. Free to not grieve. Hell, he’d spent his life grieving. Even before they were dead, even before he had left, he started grieving that moment in his Mom’s kitchen, when they were tying up those dumplings — twelve? No, do twenty-four — even right then and there, he knew exactly how it would be, that a rooster could take his place if he left. He never should’ve left. If he had been born in the West, there’s no way he

would've listened to his Mom. He would've argued with her, he would've talked back. But, that wasn't his way.

They dead. Well, they might as well be, as terrible as it may sound. And who is this 'Frank' anyways? Fuck Frank. That's how they say it, right? Fuck him. If they were alive, they would've reached out by now. Maybe they didn't want to leave either. Plus, two months in steerage on those coffin ships, who can blame them? Why not just call her, just call her and see what she's doing? He hates the phone, so empty, so strange, so static-y. Why not just go back there? Hop in the car right now and knock on her door and ask her to go watch the cars with you. As friends. Well, you don't even need to say that part. Just ask her and see what happens, see where it goes. Hop in the car. Hop behind bars. What time is it?

11:55 p.m.? Where does the time go? They dead. She's not.

Ping threw on his hat and coat. He rushed out the door. He strapped his wrist watch to the steering wheel, just in case he needed to switch the side of the road while he's driving. He drove up Aldershot Street as fast as he could. Gower Street isn't that far. Just a couple turns away really. Would she even be awake? Of course. Of course she'll be awake. Everyone should be awake to watch their country die.

The time: midnight. Ping swerved into the opposite lane of traffic, which has now become the correct lane of traffic, just as he pulled onto Gower Street. He brought the car to a screeching halt outside of Ethel's house.

"Whoa," somebody called out from a window above. "Hey, you crazy chink, you're driving on the wrong side of the road!"

“Is the right side now,” Ping yelled into the sky, unable to place which house the voice came from. “Is right side of the road now!”

Ping ran up the steps of Ethel’s house, pounded on the door, took a step back and looked up at the windows. The lights were on. Vile answered the door.

“Hello?” she said, opening the door just a crack to peek out at who was there.

“Hello,” Ping said, out of breath. “I come to see Ethel.”

“She’s in for the night.”

“Is urgent,” he said.

Vile squinted at him.

“Hold on,” she said as she shuts the door. Muffled behind the closed door, Ping could hear Vile yelling.

“Ping is outside, Ethel. Ethel! I said Ping is outside!”

“What does he want?”

“I don’t know, he says it’s urgent. Next time you plan on having a frenzied chinaman show up on my doorstep in the middle of the night, could you let me know ahead of time?”

“I didn’t know,” Ethel said, exasperated, as she opened the door. “Ping, b’y, what’s the matter?”

Ping stared at her eyes, that chaotic truly hair, those nicotine stained fingers, that attitude, all of these things radiating off her.

“I,” he stammered. “I going to... to ask if you...”

He stopped. Ping looked her in the eyes.

“I love you,” he said.

Ethel's jaw slightly dropped.

"Didn't you notice?" she said, gesturing in the air.

He looks her up and down. She's wearing a light blue nighty and it looks almost too small because her stomach has swollen into the shape of a huge egg.

"I'm pregnant," she said.

1999

The Letter

A knock on the door jostled Ping from his afternoon nap in his favourite chair. He hobbled out of the chair, still dazed from his snooze, and opened the front door. It's that guy, that doctor that's a big deal in the association now. What's his name, Dr. Kris something? He was wearing a baggy windbreaker, with a tie-dye pattern on the shoulders and the Gucci logo on the chest.

"Hello, Mr. Ping," the middle-aged doctor said. "May I come in? An important letter come for you to the Association."

"Okay," Ping let him in with a sigh.

"If it a bad time, Mr. Ping, I can go!"

"No, no," he said. "Just my back, get tired when I sit down for too long. Come in, please. You want tea?"

Ping led Dr. Kris to the back of the house, but the doctor got distracted by the numerous pictures on shelves in the hallway.

"You have beautiful family, Mr. Ping," he said.

"Yes," Ping said, as he sat down to sit at the dining table. "Some of them turn out alright."

"How many children?" Dr. Kris asked. "It seem like they multiply in every picture."

"Five of mine," Ping said. "Plus Steve and Silas."

"Seven children! Mr. Ping, this a big house but I can't imagine seven youngsters, seven teenagers, running around in here."

Ping coughed.

“Well, it just me and Ethel now,” Ping said. “Better that way! More peace, more quiet!”

“Uh,” Dr. Kris tapped on one of the framed photos sitting next to Ping’s abacus. “Mr. Ping, is that a, uh, a monkey in this picture?”

“Yeah, yeah,” Ping said. “You say you have a letter?”

“A monkey, here in Newfoundland?”

“Yeah, back in the seventies, kids want a pet. So, we get monkey.”

“A monkey live in this house?”

“Doctor Kris, I am tired, I usually nap at this time,” Ping said.

“Yes, well,” Dr. Kris made his way over to the table. “A letter come for you in the mail. I thought it was odd, mixed in with the Association mail at the P.O. box in the Mall. Must be from someone who doesn’t have your address.”

“Yes,” Ping said. “Let me see.”

“It from China,” Dr. Kris said as he procured a tiny envelope from an inside pocket of his Gucci jacket.

Ping coughed.

The return address was messy and hard to read, the characters smeared together from months of travelling through post offices. Ping tore open the envelope. Inside was a small square of paper that had been folded several times to make it small enough to fit in the envelope. Ping unfolded the paper and began to read the letter written in Taishanese.

Dear Dad,

As I kneel before you. In a blink of an eye, time has passed. I hope this letter finds you, and finds you well. I am deeply sorry to tell you of this, but Mom is dying. I am uncertain if you have received our previous correspondences. We tried sending letters to the address of Li's laundry but have never heard a response, and sometimes have even had the letter returned to us many months later. We have caught wind of the Chinese Association of Newfoundland and are sending this letter to their address in the hopes that this reaches you before it is too late. Mom wishes to see her husband one last time before she dies. Please respond to this letter. I am once again sorry if we have ever offended you. Please forgive us.

Seto Zhaohui

Ping's hands shook as he read the letter, and he thought it was probably because he was getting old.

"Everything okay?" Dr. Kris said.

"Yes," Ping said, his voice wavering. "I.. I just, um, not expect this."

"Your hands shaking very bad," Dr. Kris said. "I can give you check up anytime. Even if you don't want to drive to my practice in C.B.S, I can come here, I—"

"No, no," Ping said. "This letter is from my son."

"Which one of the seven is it?"

"No, no," he said. "Another son."

"Oh," Dr. Kris said taken aback. "You must've been very busy when you were young man."

Ping began to sigh and it turned into a cough.

“Mr. Ping, you really must come in for checkup,” Dr. Kris said, patting Ping on the back.

“What are you doing, coughing up a frickin’ lung again?” a voice yelled from up stairs.

“Jesus, b’y, you’re gonna rile up the dogs.”

“Heh,” Dr. Kris laughed. “Mrs. Ping would probably like you to get check up too.”

Ping rested his head in the palm of his hand as the letter shook out of his hand on to the floor.

“Oh, Mr. Ping,” Dr. Kris said. “It’s just check up. Nothing to be concerned about.”

“I not concern about check up,” Ping said, batting away Dr. Kris’ hand on his back.

“Did the letter upset you?” Dr. Kris said, squinting his eyes to try to read the letter out of his peripheral.

“I have to go,” Ping said. “I have to.”

“Mr. Ping, really, no trouble for me to bring my equipment here. I know you old laundrymen have trouble getting around. It’s the time of your life now where you can sit back and let the younger generation take care of you. You earned it.”

“I not want check up,” Ping yelled. “I not care. I go back to China!”

“Jesus, Mary and Jospheh,” Ethel said as she stomps down the stairs. “Dr. Kris, what are you doing here, b’y, angering me husband?”

“Oh, Mrs. Ping,” Dr. Kris stood up to greet Ethel as she walked into the dining room. “I did not intend to cause any stress—“

Ethel cut him off.

“Go back into the Health Sciences out of it, b’y, you ol’ quack.”

“I.. I’m sorry Mrs. Ping, I—“

“I’m just joking b’y, that’s all. Now, what seems to be the matter down here?”

“He give me letter, from China,” Ping said, his shaking hands picking up the letter to show Ethel.

“Alright, and?”

“Is my son,” Ping said as he handed the letter to Ethel. “Look!”

Ethel looked at it for a second before throwing it back on the table.

“I can’t read those Jesus things, b’y,” she said.

—

The matter was settled quickly. Ping would be returning to China, but he was too old and feeble to go on his own. Someone needed to take care of him. Ethel, she was too old too, and Ping felt that the prospect of having both his wives meet each other was sickening. So it would have to be one of Ping’s children who would travel with him. Most of the kids couldn’t find time off work. Bruce was making dentures in some factory behind the mall. Michelle was managing the pet department at the new Wal-Mart. Curt had moved to the mainland and was a Mountie somewhere up north. Jim was working in a plastic factory, making playground slides and containers for disinfectant wipes. Steve was in jail, and even if he wasn’t, that was Frank’s son anyways so Ping didn’t want to take him. And Silas... well, no one really knew where Silas was, but that was his way. Silicon Valley, probably.

The only child who could travel with Ping was his firstborn with Ethel, Bill. Bill worked with the Coast Guard, two weeks on, two weeks off. So, he had some time during his off weeks to take care of his Dad. He wanted to see China anyways. He’d spent his whole life on the ships

being called a ‘Chinaman’ and a ‘Chink’ and meanwhile he had never even seen the country which came to define him. So, it was settled.

The travel agent in Churchill Square set it all up. A ten-day trip to China, flying with Air Canada to Vancouver and then flying from there to Hong Kong with Korea Air.

“Be wary of the Kung Flu,” the travel agent warned. “It’ll get ya!”

Bags were packed, times arranged, and within a month of receiving the letter, William Seto Ping and Bill Seto Ping found themselves flying over the Pacific Ocean. It was a strange relationship that the elder Ping had with all his children. He didn’t like to talk about the past. He kept a stoic and humble attitude and anytime someone asked him anything about the past, he would brush it off.

“Is long time ago, I don’t remember.”

“Is fine, is nothing.”

“I was young. It not important.”

“All I want is apology from government, I not need to think about what happened.”

The most anyone had ever heard him talk about his younger years was when some student filmmaker from the University came into the house and did a documentary about the early Chinese immigrants in Newfoundland, during which time Ping talked at great lengths about his past and struggles. *The Last Chinese Laundry*, it was called, and Ping had been the focus of the film as he was indeed the owner of the last Chinese laundry in St. John’s. Snow White had outlasted every other Chinese-owned laundromat.

It was closed now, of course. The popularity of home laundry machines having been a death knell to his industry. Ping remembered when he first saw the personal washing machine, in

a window display at Woolworth's on Water Street. As he peered through the window at the model version of a home laundry room, signs promising consumers that they would never have to go to a laundromat again, Ping couldn't shake the memory of Shaowei from his mind. Shaowei had said something about cleaning salmon in San Francisco until someone invented some machine called the Iron Chink that could clean the fish and then Shaowei and everyone he ever knew was out of a job. Maytag Washing Machine, General Electric Iron Chink, all the same.

Even so, Snow White held on long enough for them to make a movie about it. It didn't go fully bankrupt until the early '90's by which time Ping was already retired. Still, Ping was quite proud of the fact that he owned the last Chinese laundry and he would often show the VHS tape of the film to visitors.

"Look," he would say, only half-jokingly. "Look, they made a picture about me. I am star."

Ping had packed the tape in the luggage so he could show his family back in China. Easier to just show them the film than have to tell the story. Besides, he couldn't remember half of what happened anymore anyways. Then he thought better of it and took the tape out of his luggage and put it in his carry-on. Just in case his luggage got lost. Then he took it out of his carry-on and put it in the breast pocket of his suit. Couldn't be too safe.

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Altogether, it took a little over 24 hours for the two Pings to travel from St. John's to Hong Kong. The elder Ping barely even slept on the flights, simply amazed by how fast anyone could travel to China now. It wasn't his first time on a plane, he had taken Ethel and kids on a couple family trips back in the seventies to Disney World and the Montreal Olympics. He hadn't

flown since then as the task of managing seven children was too strenuous to make a vacation worth the money.

“Never again,” he had said after the Olympics. “Never.”

But this, this was different. On the overnight flight to Hong Kong, the Korean Air stewardesses had handed out blankets and slippers and bowls of congee and even alcoholic beverages. An in-flight entertainment system was playing a James Bond marathon, as a promotion of some new film that was coming out. Ping relaxed in his seat with glee, watching the old Sean Connery films and thinking of days even further in the past. Of weeks and months, travelling the Pacific Ocean and indeed the entire continent of North America, one inch at a time. Now they traveled swaths of lands that would take days in mere seconds.

Ping dozed off during the opening credits of *You Only Live Twice*, Nancy Sinatra crooning him to sleep as the plane’s TV showed the exploding lava, swirling oriental colours and the suggestive silhouettes of dancing Japanese women. Ping dreamt of the flowery years of his past. Of both his wives, of teaching classes, of holding babies in his arms, of drinking bijou and laughing with his friends, of sitting in tall grass and watching the sun go down. He remembers those vanished years, like looking through a window during a snowstorm, blurry, shapeless, seen but untouched, everything that *was* buried by everything that *is*, in perpetuity.

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“Was that a long flight or what?” Bill said, stretching his arms, as they waited for their luggage on the conveyor belt in Hong Kong International.

“Back in my day,” Ping said, “it take two, three months to travel this far.”

“And I bet you walked uphill to school both ways too, huh, Dad?”

“Matter of fact, yes. Yes I did.”

They stayed in Hong Kong for the night. The city had changed. The harbour was still clogged with boats. Women still sat on street corners, slinging oranges out of wicker baskets. Raw meat still hung on hooks in store windows. Pots of clams still boiled over as a line up formed down the block. But the people had changed. Gone were the ponytails and the robes. Now people wore everything and anything. Yellow Nike sweaters, purple suits, electric blue dresses, tattered windbreakers and dirty sneakers. And in the night times, the streets were a glow with a dazzling array of fluorescent lights and neon signs, advertising everything from TAI-WANESE BEEF NOODLE to TOMOKAZU JAPANESE RESTAURANT to MCDONALDS. So too had the buildings grown taller, driven up, up, up by all that laid underneath. The horse track was still over there, a glow emanating from it into the night sky.

The next morning, they took a ferry to leave the island. They sailed past Macau and when they reached land, there was a Jeep waiting for them to drive them to Hoiping. Soon enough, they could see the dilapidated dialous on the horizon, some slanted over like the Leaning Tower of Pisa, all riddled with bullet holes, windows shattered from shell blasts. Hoiping, too, had changed. They drove past hardware stores and coffee shops. They drove past power lines and zipping cars. They drove passed boarded up wells and collapsed bridges. They passed by Chinamen dressed in the newest Western fashions. It was a strange place. Some of the houses still looked like the old huts Ping remembered, plain little cottages built of necessity. Other houses were big and contemporary, looking like mansions from the west. Homes built of foreign money, of far-away currencies.

The Jeep eventually slowed down and stopped in front of a cottage Ping could remember. His Mother's house. The two Pings thanked the driver and got out of the car. It was a small little home, even smaller than Ping remembered and its walls were still a washed-out pink colour, the concrete cracking at several points. A man was sitting outside.

"Dad," the man called out in Taishanese as Ping stared at the old house. "Dad. It's been so long."

Ping shook his head, sternly. Who was this man? What happened to that baby boy? A strange thought crept into his head: this man could be anybody. That child he left behind could have become anybody. Ping could've ran into his son a thousand times and never known the difference. Then he thought better of it and hugged the man calling him Dad.

"Where is your washroom?" Ping asked. "It's been a long morning."

"Just around back," the man said. "Where it's always been."

Ping walked around back and found the old hole in the ground. He sighed as he undid his pants and struggled to squat down. His back felt like a rusty old rod and he moaned as he attempted to bend over. He gave up and put his pants back on.

"Dad," Bill called out from around the corner. "Do you need help?"

"What I need," Ping said with a huff, "is a toilet. We have to buy toilet for here, this no good."

Zhaohui and Bill were standing next to each other and what a strange sight it is to see. Two sons, two firstborns, two lives. The kids looked a little similar, Ping thought, even though he recognized that to be impossible.

"Dad," Zhaohui said. "Come in and see Mom. She's been waiting for sixty years."

Ping walked into the house. It was just as he remembered it. Kitchen over there, bedroom in the back. Arguing with his Mom over not wanting to leave. And hanging on the wall, an ancient yellowed photograph of a young man sitting on a stool and beaming at the camera. Ping felt lightheaded.

“Dad, we have so much to catch up on,” Zhaohui said as he noticed Ping looking at the old picture. “But go, go see Mom. She’s in the bedroom waiting for you. Go fulfill your needs, I’m sure you’ve been waiting a very long time for this.”

Ping scrunched his eyebrows for a moment, before sliding open the bedroom door. Lying on the bed was Hualing but she wasn’t as Ping remembered her. He remembered a beautiful vibrant young woman, with tiny soft curves. What lay in the bed looked like a deflated balloon, nothing but skin and bones, jowls and sags.

“Go on,” Zhaohui said. “Close the door. Do what you have to do.”

“She... she an old woman,” Ping said, in English. She lay there with her eyes open staring at the ceiling, looking like a corpse that could still blink. She didn’t talk but instead made noises and grunts. Ping was reminded of his grandmother and wanted to leave.

“I think they want you to have sex with her, Dad,” Bill said.

Ping looked back at him, eyebrows raised.

“Yeah. I know what they want. But she an old woman. She very old. This not the woman I marry. I not have sex with her.”

“Dad, you’re an old person too,” Bill said.

“What? You want me affair on your mother with this old woman? This sick, this disgusting.”

Zhaohui was smiling. He doesn't know what they're saying.

"Dad, you're all old people. Didn't you kind of have an affair on this woman with Mom?"

"You don't know what you talk about," Ping said, angry. "This very different. This... gross."

"It is her dying wish to be able to be held in your arms once more," Zhaohui said.

Hualing said nothing but made a small noise.

Ping sighed and shut the door.

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"My back is killing me," Ping said, over supper later that afternoon. "We need to go somewhere and buy a toilet."

"You couldn't find the hole in the back?" Zhaohui asked.

"No, I found it. But, it's no good for me. I can't bend down like that anymore. We'll get you a good toilet, like what they have in the West. It's way better."

The following day, they drove to the shopping district and bought a nice ceramic toilet at the hardware store. They set it up over the hole in the backyard. Ping sat on it a couple times to demonstrate its use to Zhaohui.

They had a lot of catching up to do. Zhaohui didn't have a VHS player so Ping couldn't show him the movie.

"It's a really good movie," Ping assured him. "And I'm not just saying that because it's about me. It's very educational. They show it in schools sometimes."

The days passed by so fast, it almost felt like a dream. They visited the farms he frequented as child, the old well he used to drag water out of, the old school he used to teach at. Ping visited his mother's grave several times, she lay resting out in the middle of a field. He knelt before her grave and asked for forgiveness. He did the same with his grandmother's grave and Li's grave. All the while, Hualing lay catatonic in her bed. Zhaohui had a wife and child of his own and he felt ashamed to admit that he didn't spend as much time as he should've taking care of his Mom. They lived in a different part of the city. He owned a hair salon and his family lived in the apartment above it.

And of course, they talked about what happened way back when. Ping found it hard to pay attention to what Zhaohui would say about it, the attempts to immigrate to Newfoundland. Some part of Ping just didn't want to hear about how they had to sneak out of the town under the cover of darkness, of the struggles of trying to cross the Pacific during war, of trying to evade the Japanese. Ping especially didn't want to hear about how they were turned down at the border, how they had to spend weeks at sea coming back, how Hoiping was seized by the Japanese, how the seven Seto martyrs used the dialous to protect the city, how the martyrs fell and were executed in front of the town library, beheaded. Ping didn't want to hear any of that. He couldn't — didn't want to— imagine how hopeless it must have felt, how absolutely miserable it must've been, that day in Vancouver, when they started the voyage back to China. It made him feel sick.

The final day of the trip was a strange one. The sun was shining and the air was redolent with the scent of new crops. Hualing had never budged from her bed the whole trip. As Ping and Bill were putting their bags in the back of the Jeep, Zhaohui took Ping aside.

“I... I don’t know how to ask this,” Zhaohui began. Ping already had a good idea of where this is going. “But Mom, she’s very sick. I think she could die anyway now. When she does, I don’t know how I will pay for the funeral. We... We’ll probably have to sell the salon.”

“No worries,” Ping said, patting Zhaohui on the back. “You have my address now. You will receive what you always deserved.”

“Really?”

“It’s me that should be kneeling before you,” Ping said as he walked away. “Call me. Or write me. Let me know what happens.”

“Mom always said a day would come where So Ho Puy would return and save us.”

Ping laughed as he got in the Jeep.

“I haven’t been So Ho Puy in years,” he said.

As the Jeep began to drive down the road, Ping laughed again.

“Do you want hear joke?” he said to Bill.

“Sure,” Bill said. There hadn’t been much conversation he could understand on this trip. Not many people spoke English and that was the only language he knew.

“Okay, so,” Ping said. “There is a husband and wife, and the wife, she about to go on a long trip, go far, far away. The wife say to her husband ‘Oh, husband, I know you miss me so very much while I am gone,’ then the husband say ‘Miss you? It worthwhile to send you away for fifty bucks!’”

Bill chuckled. Behind the Jeep, there was a loud smash sound and the two Pings looked back to see big, white pieces of ceramic clatter all over the ground.

“I guess they didn’t like the toilet,” Bill said.

Ping was happy when he was back at home in Newfoundland. Happy to sit in his big chair and not dwell on the past. He liked to spend his afternoons watching the soaps and the game shows. He liked Wheel of Fortune the most because it made him think of when he first met Ethel and she was helping him to spell words. And there was something so enticing about watching that wheel spin, that anything could happen to the person spinning the wheel, that one minute you might spin and land on a million dollars and the next minute you might end up bankrupt. Anything could happen.

Sometimes he would babysit his grandchildren. Their parents would just drop them off there and he'd watch TV with them, or fall asleep in his chair while the kids played in his lap or under his chair. Sometimes they'd watch the game shows together, although the kids always seemed more interested in those Flintstones gummy commercials where those cavemen used animals like appliances. He guessed there was supposed to be something funny about watching those guys use big birds to make cake batter or whatever but he didn't get it. He liked the part where the animal would say 'It ain't much but it's a living.' Now that was comedy.

And for the weeks after he returned from China, this is how he spent his days, watching TV and entertaining his white grandchildren. Cooking beef and broccoli and telling the kids that the veggies were mini-trees. Reading them story books and writing down translations alongside the English words. Someone, one of his children's wives, although he couldn't remember which one, had given him a story book, *The Story of Ping*, to read to the grandkids when they were over. The wife had thought it was cute or ironic or something.

It told the story of a duck named Ping that lived in a boat with two wise eyes on the Yangtze river. The duck never fit in with the other ducks and one day, the boat leaves him behind. And then some birds almost kill the duck and then a Chinese family captures the duck and tries to cook him and then the duck gets stuck in a barrel and so on. Eventually the duck ends up back on the boat with the two wise eyes. It was written by someone named Marjorie Flack and it bothered Ping how often the grandkids wanted to hear this story. But he read it to them all the same.

Then, only a couple weeks after he had returned from China, one night during a fretful dream, Ping died.

2020

The Monument

I woke up.

I woke up in a hotel room and I didn't recognize myself. My pants didn't fit the same way and I was pretty sure I was going bald. I mean, I still have hair, I just think there's less of it. I called out for Mo but he didn't respond. I guess the story's over. The letter was missing from my pocket and I recall that my Patagonia sweater is still missing. I leave the room. A quiet day in the hotel. No noisy children, no kitchen prep clangs. I wandered down into the lobby and found the door locked.

I unlocked it and let myself out, wandering onto Duckworth Street. The sun was high in the sky, but the city was quiet. Cars parked alongside the roads but no traffic. A couple snow-banks lingered on the sidewalks and I walked down the street thinking how strange it was, to stand places he stood, to see what he saw became all these years later. I walked down a familiar route from the Tai Mei Club to Fong-Li Laundry. All the restaurants were closed, the cafés empty. No one was around. I didn't see a person for my whole walk. How strange, there's money to be made on a day like this.

I walked that familiar footpath, their Sunday routine, until I found myself where Fong-Li was, on the corner of Holdsworth and New Gower. But there were no more Chinese laundries. Indeed there was no business here at all. Instead there was a big rock, with a big glossy picture and some engraved words, sandwiched between a strip club and a sports bar. I see my grandfather in the picture. I see a lot of faces I recognize.

I remember being here when they unveiled this a few years ago. It was a meagre reception attended by some members of the current Chinese Association and also one NDP party leader who didn't end up getting elected anyways. I remember thinking, 'All their struggles and all they get is this big rock?' But this rock is better than nothing.

The words on the rock tell a simplified narrative of their history:

"In 1906, the Government of the Dominion of Newfoundland imposed a \$300.00 (three hundred dollars) head tax on each Chinese immigrant entering the country. This discriminatory legislation remained in effect until 1949. This monument is dedicated to the memory of those Chinese immigrants who travelled from their homeland seeking a better life."

Right next to these English words is a series of Chinese characters which presumably say the same thing, although I have no way of knowing that for sure. And I suppose some local must've thought that the monument was deficient as is, so they added to it afterwards. It surely didn't have this detail when they unveiled it. And although I wished I could remove this unofficial addition to the official monument, it somehow made the whole thing feel more truthful.

Scrawled in bright yellow spray paint on top of the engraved characters on the big rock:
CHINK.

It's always the way.