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White Anemone

Zhe Chen

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White Anemone

By

Zhe Chen

A Thesis
Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies
through the Department of English Language, Literature, and Creative Writing
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Master of Arts at the
UNIVERSITY OF WINDSOR

Windsor, Ontario, Canada

2014

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White Anemone

by

Zhe Chen

APPROVED BY:

J. Ku
Department of Sociology, Anthropology,
and Criminology

R. Douglass-Chin
Department of English Language, Literature,
and Creative Writing

K. Jirgens, Advisor
Department of English Language, Literature,
and Creative Writing

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Abstract

The novella *White Anemone* presents a modern Chinese American story grounded in personal recollections, historical accounts, and cultural mythologies. It is a fragmented narrative that demonstrates the correlation between memory and desire, tracing a young woman's journey to adulthood and self-realization through trials of love, friendship, and family. The story is set in the early 2000's New York City Chinatown and depicts the diversity and socio-economic struggles of working-class Chinese immigrants in 21st-century America.

Dedication

To Grandma, for your tireless devotion to our family

and life-long passion for knowledge.

谢谢您，奶奶

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My heartfelt gratitude to Dr. Karl Jirgens, my advisor and teacher, for his optimism, guidance, and astute criticisms. He saw merit in my work when I was in doubt, and could always be relied on for a good pun.

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Table of Contents

DECLARATION OF PREVIOUS PUBLICATION	iii
ABSTRACT	iv
DEDICATION	v
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	vi
PROLOGUE	1
CHAPTER 1	5
CHAPTER 2	13
CHAPTER 3	29
CHAPTER 4	48
CHAPTER 5	60
CHAPTER 6	83
CHAPTER 7	87
CHAPTER 8	102
CHAPTER 9	115
EPILOGUE	123
ESSAY: Unveiling The Embedded Asian American Identity In <i>White Anemone</i>	127
WORKS CITED	139
BIBLIOGRAPHY	141
APPENDIX A	143
VITA AUCTORIS	144

White Anemone

Prologue

The winter I turned seven, Dad requested cleaning duty on top of his regular delivery job at the Hong Kong seafood restaurant on Elizabeth Street. He was paid seven dollars for an extra hour of work after closing, and the owner didn't care if he gobbled up customers' leftovers, as long as he didn't take any home.

Some nights he got to eat lobster claws for free.

Dad told me he was able to work more because I was a big kid now, and he trusted me to be obedient for Tai-gong, my retired great-grandfather and in-house babysitter.

I didn't fight him for the most part, heeded bedtime and Tai-gong's teeth brushing mandate. Dad was always there in the morning to wake me up and make us breakfast.

Tuesdays, were the slowest nights when the restaurant closed an hour early. Tuesday was the one night Dad could rush home just in time to tuck me in.

On these new Tuesdays, I'd fake sleep until Tai-gong retreated to his bedroom, then I'd put on a sweater and Tai-gong's big winter jacket and venture out to the halls to sit on the top step of our fourth-floor landing waiting for Dad to come home.

Our building's wooden floorboards heated up quickly enough if I folded my knees to my chest and zipped the whole jacket up around my legs. Like a little legless Bodhi-dharma doll, I'd listen for Dad's footsteps while leaning against the wall, with its chipped mahogany topcoat.

Sometimes Christina, a schoolyard buddy and downstairs neighbor, would sneak out of her apartment and sit with me, hip to hip, the combined length of our padded shoulders blockading three-quarters of the stairway. Christina's ears were already alert to most of the gossip flying around Chinatown, how Mrs. Lam's younger son got busted for selling moonshine, or how Stinky Lee's daughter-in-law had a secret boyfriend in Greenwich. It was hard trying to pick out Dad's light footsteps over Christina's stream of whispers, but I never asked her to stop.

It didn't take me long to fall asleep like that, whether it was due to the dimness of that windowless hallway, the blanketing comfort of Christina's voice, or the hypnotic drone of yellow fluorescent lights overhead. On Wednesday mornings, I'd wake up in my own bed. Once in a while, I had dreams of being carried into the warmth of our home, head heavy on Dad's shoulder.

For three months, Dad and Tai-gong let me pretend I was getting away with my little stunt. Finally, on a snowy night in February with our radiator fighting for its life, Tai-gong followed out behind me just minutes after I'd taken up my post.

"What are you waiting for? A rabbit or a willing fish?"

It was his Mandarin that took me by surprise. I almost didn't understand him. Tai-gong's English was usually more than enough for conversations between us.

Great-grandfather sat down beside me and held up an index finger. Switching to English, he said, "Rabbit, or fish. Choose only one."

"Rabbit." I hated the stink of fish that clung to Dad at all times.

Tai-gong cleared his throat, a call for attention. I scooted closer to hear. This was our regular routine.

“Long, long ago, there was a farmer in old China. One day, when farming and working hard, farmer saw a rabbit. Rabbit was running, running, running all the way into a tree, head first. Boom! The rabbit died.” As he spoke, Tai-gong mimed a running motion with his arms, tapped his forehead against the banister, lolled his head back and dangled out his tongue. The next second, he was alive again. “Farmer brought rabbit home for dinner, and his family was very happy. Next day, farmer does no farming, no hard working. He waited by tree all day for another rabbit to run and die. But no rabbit came.” He feigned confusion. “Next day, farmer does same thing, but, hey, no rabbit came. Same thing next day, and next day. Soon, it was winter, and farmer has no second rabbit, and also, no food from his farm.”

Tai-gong clasped his palms together and stared into me. I crinkled my nose.

“Dad’s not a rabbit,” I said.

“Yes, true, he runs into tree only sometimes.” When that couldn’t elicit a laugh out of me, Tai-gong patted my head and said softly, “Today, you get 72 on addition quiz.”

I flinched away. Math was my first class on Wednesday mornings. “It was a stupid quiz. I know how to do ‘em on my homework!”

“I know you know. But all fourteen mistakes, you forget extra ‘1’. Quiz is not stupid. Mistake is stupid.”

“Okay, okay, sorry.”

Tai-gong sighed. For a few minutes, we had no words for each other. The floor felt icier than usual that night and I couldn't stop shivering, not even with Tai-gong's hot palm shielding my bowed head. We waited together until I could no longer stand it.

Tai-gong tucked me into bed for the second time in two hours. His fingers, calloused at the tips from decades of calligraphy, brushed aside my uneven bangs. Tai-gong told me in a murmur: "Daddy is not a rabbit, it is true. Daddy is more like farm. Remember, *Xiao Ren*, if you are good, and work hard, farm will grow everyday, like Daddy will come home everyday. So? *What are you waiting for?*"

"Dunno," I mumbled, eyes shut by their own volition. I went to sleep accompanied by the dins of a tenacious radiator, but didn't dream until I heard the faint turning of a lock.

Chapter 1

Winters in Long Island more or less resembled the storybook stereotype, where occasional gusts of snow purified the earth and for a few hours, everything assumed a gentle, meditated confidence. There was a predatory ghastliness behind it all, too. Grassy lawns became perpetually frost-bitten, the trees skeletal, and as Fall semester ended, the areas around the university lapsed into a ghost town.

Nonetheless, I was determined to stay near campus the winter of my Junior year. My fully furnished studio apartment ran on a twelve-month lease, no subletting allowed. While home was only a little over an hour away, going back meant an entire month of sleeping on my old single, in the curtained off half of the living room. At school, I had a queen bed to myself, I had a door, and I had Ramon for a few days more.

Dad merely grunted when I called the day after my last final to tell him I wasn't going home. He always worked on Christmas anyway, the restaurant business in Chinatown peaked without fail during the Holiday season.

"I'll be studying ahead, Dad. It's a full-year course, same professor for Spring and everything," I explained in a whisper, sitting on the lid of my toilet with the door closed, bundled in a cotton bathrobe. Sound carried easily throughout the apartment, and Ramon was still dozing on my bed.

Dad sighed over the crackle of our old landline. I pictured him leaning against the kitchen's outer wall, fiddling with the mounted telephone's entangled cord, its once

ivory-white now nearly yellow from age and accumulated grease. Dad was probably going to scrub it again after the call, but the grime was never going to come off.

“Are the cafeterias open for Winter?” Dad asked, his accent noticeably strong. It got like that when no one practiced English with him at home. Without me, Dad and Tai-gong spoke to each other in a mix of Mandarin and Shanghainese. I, on the other hand, was inadequate at the former and useless at the latter.

“For a while,” I replied, adding, “and I’ll cook at home when they close.”

“Three times a day?”

“What? You don’t think I can do it?”

Dad didn’t bite. “Do you need money? You pay December rent yet? Go ahead. I put enough into your account for December.” I hemmed. Dad gave me a run-down of upcoming bills, some of which he’d taken care for me back in the city, others he let me handle as “lessons in growing up,” as if signing a check was the only requirement for adulthood.

In the middle of reminding me to stay warm, Dad halted. “Hold on, Tai-gong wants to talk to you.”

I waited for great-grandfather to make his way to the phone, listening for the dull thumps of his cane against our creaky floor, the chrome exoskeleton of my cellphone hot in my right palm. I had to bite my lip to refrain from asking Tai-gong to once again buy a cellphone already, or replace his relic with a cordless model, something he could use anywhere, preferably while sitting down. The last time I brought it up, Tai-gong had laughingly responded with “You are nag. Nagging. Don’t nag your old Tai-gong.” That

was how you'd know when Tai-gong's learned a new word. When I was twelve, he'd picked up "whatever" from my vocabulary. It was a painful two weeks.

Once given the mouthpiece, Tai-gong was far more vocal than Dad. He insisted I go home for a week at the very least, and he had a present for me all wrapped up. "A surprise. Bought it myself." We wound up settling on a compromise: I promised to return for the Lunar New Year weekend in early February, and Tai-gong promised not to donate my present to a more filial, more unfortunate child.

"Don't go outside too much. It's too cold in Long Island. Too cold, and ice. You always say there is too many ice. Stay home," Tai-gong counseled.

I said good-bye just as the heating system came back to life, filling the apartment with a loud buzz. I kept the temperature high in winter, a habit formed from growing up living with Tai-gong, who always insisted that his old bones couldn't stand the cold. My apartment was too warm for Ramon, though, so the two of us developed a new habit of lying exposed above the comforter after making love, usually with him curled up in my arms, demanding a story from my childhood that seemed so foreign to him.

That afternoon, we had had no time to spare for conversation. Ramon's train was leaving in the evening. The traditional Sichuan cuisine I'd prepared for him was left untouched in the skillets on the stove, even though the meal was originally Ramon's idea, and he had hounded me until I called Dad to send his recipes along with a bag of dried orange peels and Sichuan peppercorn, ingredients impossible to find in the suburbs.

Ramon was awake when I came out the bathroom. "Think it'll stick?" he said, his voice clear as if he'd never fallen asleep in the first place. It was snowing again.

I answered that I hoped it would stay. When the snow melted right away, it tended to collect into puddles and freeze all across campus, and the school was too cheap to properly salt the grounds.

I went and lay down beside him, my bathrobe came loose at the waist. “It’s so quiet,” I said. It was going to be quieter with Ramon gone.

“Yeah. Creepy, isn’t it?”

Ramon understood, because Ramon was a city kid, too. Of course, San Francisco was not the same as New York, but for city kids, winter just meant a different sort of bustle. Growing up in Downtown Manhattan, winter was Wall Street skyscrapers illuminating a darkened sky at 5 o’clock, Red Cross volunteers ringing in Christmas charity, blue jeans whitened by rock salt. It was blackened piles of snow on street curbs. It was coffee-and-bagel carts steaming up busy intersections. It was never, ever, simply still.

I’d asked Ramon before about Christmas in California, and his reply was a detailed list of relatives he had to visit, food they ate, the usual presents they exchanged. I huffed, but clarified that I wanted to hear him describe the “atmosphere” of his hometown in full Holiday swing. Ramon searched my eyes for a proper answer, finally replying, “Like, cloudy and mid-50’s?”

That was at the beginning of our relationship when I was still comfortable laughing at him, head back and open mouthed. He’d shook his head and said, “Go ahead, mock away. You’re the romantic, not me.”

I'd never thought of myself as such. If anything, Ramon was the one who brought out the romantic in me, what with his appetite for stories, like a big kid yet growing, never fully satisfied.

His hunger was intimidating at first. A fifth-generation Chinese American, Ramon was named after his father's Spanish best friend from medical school, but couldn't write his Chinese name without first calling home to confirm. His entire family conversed in fluent English, but somewhere in time, they stopped passing down stories, histories, memories.

In their absence, Ramon memorized AC/DC lyrics and Giants stats. When we first met, he told me stories too, about summers spent fishing for perch at the pier, getting yelled at after driving his mom's convertible without a license at 15, fighting with his little sister over the corner bedroom, countless little anecdotes that sounded familiar yet out of reach. I'd always imagined Ramon's family home like a carbon copy of the TV set of *Full House*, filled with pastel colored furniture and neatly hung photographs. Perhaps his childhood was filled with similar adventures.

While I daydreamed about his apple pie, American life, Ramon was ravenous for the novelty of mine, though all I had were the folk tales my great-grandfather told and retold in his effort to keep his "wee monkey" grounded.

There was a story about an overconfident man from the Kingdom of Chu who'd lost a drawing competition after adding legs to a snake. Another, of a fool who'd forgotten his shoe size while trying to buy new slippers, and returned home empty-handed because he didn't think of trying on any of the footwear in the shop.

That one made Ramon chuckle. “But what’s the moral? Don’t be an idiot?”

I couldn’t answer. Most of Tai-gong’s stories contained kernels of wisdom, fables or centuries-old myths intended to guide the young. Then, once in a while, he told them just for the sake of making me laugh.

But more than the folk tales, Ramon preferred to excavate my most intimate memories, the more embarrassing the better. It started with the revelation that I was only half Chinese, and ended with my telling of the time in 6th grade, when I’d saved half a year’s worth of allowances to buy skin-lightening cream from a hole-in-the-wall beauty parlor in Chinatown. Dad’s rage had been volcanic, but Ramon’s reaction, three parts horror and seven parts disbelieving glee, had me laughing at my own foolishness. After that, remembering no longer hurt as much.

Curled up by Ramon’s side, I combed my brain for another story to weave, but his train was leaving in thirty and Scheherazade herself wouldn’t have been able to stop him from going.

“Did you book your return flight yet?” I asked instead.

Ramon looked away. A small knot of wrinkles formed above the bridge of his aquiline nose, a few shades lighter than my own. He dressed in silence. Ramon looked taller than 5’6” standing in the middle of my apartment searching for a runaway sock. His frazzled black hair was overdue for a clipping. I shifted toward the edge of the bed, my robe came further undone.

Shortly, sock and voice were found; he looked everywhere, but not at me.

“Actually, you know, flying during the holidays is a huge pain.”

“Ah. So, you’re staying in New York this year.”

I made sure my tone was lighthearted, and I made double sure not to mention Jenna by name. Ramon didn’t like it when I did, which I always thought was quite silly, and insulting to the both of us. After all, Jenna was the high school sweetheart who’d followed him to the East Coast, whose picture was on his MySpace homepage, smiling at a banquet table amongst Ramon’s family. She could serenade Ramon on her violin, treat him to breakfast with a view in her family’s Midtown condo. Jenna was a proper Chinese girl with a pedigree almost as long and pure as Ramon’s own. If anything, my name should have been the one left out of polite conversation.

I pretended to turn my focus onto a P-Chem textbook I’d abandoned earlier. Lying on my belly, I slowly swung my feet up and down. My right hand played with an old bookmark, as I read the same line ten times.

A smooth palm flitted up my calf, then down the ridges of my spine. “I’ll send you something nice, Ren, something expensive.” After two years, he still pronounced my name the English way. I’d long ceased trying to correct him.

“Nothing expensive. It’s the thought and all that.” He wouldn’t have liked an outright rejection.

“Got it! How ‘bout something sentimental?”

I went along. “Sounds good.” Ramon’s gifts were always practical. He wasn’t one for romance and sentiments. He never remembered special occasions or brought me flowers. No roses, no snapdragons, not even cowslips or humble daisies.

“Maybe something like your bookmark? It’s nice. Looks handmade.”

He tapped the laminated bookmark between my fingers, a pressed and preserved white anemone. The flower's eight petals were laid out on textured golden rice paper. The stamens appeared orange under the direct light of my desk lamp.

I began to remember, a new story Ramon hadn't heard before.

"Did you make it yourself?"

My imagination was spinning, puzzling together pieces of a jagged memory. Ramon's taxi was waiting downstairs; there wasn't time to begin the telling, no way to ensure he would come back to me for the ending.

I rose from the bed, my robe slipped from my bare shoulders. "When you come back," I said, "I'll tell you the story of how my great-grandmother turned into a flower."

Chapter 2

Ramon left on the 10th of December, and I didn't hear from him for the rest of the year. We shared an agreement about not calling each other in case Jenna was nearby.

I didn't let myself miss him too much. Instead I occupied the parts of me that wanted to pick up the phone and dial his number with the story I'd promised to tell. I mulled it over between grocery runs to Walmart and laundry trips to the basement, and too frequently, while staring at nonsensical equations on my laptop. Great-grandfather's white anemone lay languid on a corner of my writing desk, stirring up memories whenever it crossed my vision. I couldn't bring myself to put it back between the pages of a textbook.

The story had to be complete and perfect, and to make it so, the telling required practice. It had been eight years since I heard it myself, the details were fuzzy and the order of events half-forgotten. I had to rehearse it in my head first, patch up missing pieces with appropriate embellishments, nothing too outlandish to avoid making it ridiculous, but some background information was necessary for Ramon's sake. I picked pleasing words and set the right tone and pace, with the aim of drawing out that half smile of his.

The script went through too many metamorphoses to count, and a few times when I had a perfect narration planned out, I'd forgotten it the next day. I thought about writing it down, but putting the story on paper somehow felt like cheating, like it would have betrayed the intimacy of its orality.

It never once occurred to me to call Tai-gong for clarification on the original story, because at some point, it was no longer about Tai-gong and his wife, the great-grandmother I never knew. The story skipped decades and continents to dwell inside of me. It left its roots in 1940's Shanghai and took up residence in my studio apartment in Long Island, New York.

The beginning started with me, on a maddening Sunday before my eighth grade formal when I'd spent two hours in front of the bathroom mirror applying and re-applying makeup secretly borrowed from a classmate's older sister. I had an unconquered mess huddled in the sink: eye-shadow palettes in pink, blue, purple and black, two types of primer, five brushes of varying sizes, an eyelash curler, mascara, eyeliner, lip gloss, lip stick, concealer, foundation, blush, a box of tissues and a half-empty bottle of makeup remover, and a copy of *Seventeen* magazine propped up against the wall by the sink faucet, opened to a page with step-by-step directions written in some indecipherable code of femininity.

It was supposed to be a practice run, see what color eye-shadow best matched my skin tone or how much foundation was too much, because even I knew it was a terrible idea to wait until the day of the formal to try on makeup for the very first time. It was a ritual foray into womanhood, one I had to trek alone.

In just two short hours, my face was covered with reddened patches, a reaction to the abuse it'd suffered. I'd stabbed myself in the eyes, smeared mascara over my hands, and repeatedly wound up resembling a rabid raccoon.

I started crying after the eighth attempt, bawling, really. Frustrated tears blended together with layers upon layers of cosmetics. I'd used up more of the borrowed makeup than intended, but the result was still no closer to the image I had in mind.

Through my sobs I heard a knock on the door. I'd thought I have more time alone with Dad at his weekend day shift delivering *China Daily* and Tai-gong spending most of his Sundays at the senior citizen center.

"*Xiao Ren*, are you hurting?" Tai-gong asked in his unmistakable accent, more British than American. Hearing his nickname for me generated more tears—Little Ren, a pun on "Little Person", a child who knew nothing, as opposed to a "Big Person," an adult with all the answers.

Tai-gong's concerned query was another reminder that I'd spent too long accomplishing nothing. I opened the door, smudged makeup and slumped shoulders, to answer Tai-gong, whose pressed slacks and pristine dress shirt made my cheeks flush with heat.

The grandfather of my father, Tai-gong was truly a gentleman from another era. He still practiced calligraphy for hours every day and smoked tobacco through a long, hand-crafted pipe. Single at seventy-seven, he liked to spend his free hours ironing his laundry, and went ballroom dancing every Friday night, with an easy smile for everyone. I saw him scan the disaster in the sink behind me, the waste basket overflowed with used tissues, saw him sway ever so slightly.

He took me by the wrist and led me into the dining room like I was an unsteady infant just learning to walk. He boiled water on the stove, steeped a pot of tea using his personal stash of imported Yunnan Pu'er, a little luxury he indulged himself with.

"*Xiao Ren*," he began anew when I calmed a bit, but couldn't quite find the right question to ask. My knee-jerk response, entirely unpremeditated, surprised the both of us.

"It's not fair Mom didn't want me," I cried. "It's not fair there's only you, me, and Dad. And you can't help me because *she's* supposed to teach me this stuff, but I don't even know what she looks like. Dad doesn't have a Mom either. And where's your wife? Don't I have an aunt, or a cousin? Anyone?" I panted, nearly unable to breathe. I'd rarely asked about my mother, found it difficult to miss her even as a child. Family had always been me, a dad, and a great-granddad squeezed into a one-bedroom apartment. As soon as I stopped talking, I wished that I never mentioned her at all, wished I hadn't cried for her, because Tai-gong was going to get the wrong idea that I needed a mother.

Tai-gong just nodded. His lips curved up into his usual, placating smile, shielded by his silver mustache. His brows were tight and wrinkled.

"Ren," he said, dropping the endearment, "I am sorry. You are right. I do not know how to paint face. I do not know where your mother went. Your grandmother divorced your grandfather in China, and I do not know where she is now. Your father is only child, like you, your grandfather is also only child, but I do not know where he is at the moment, my own son. So you are right again; there are no aunts and no cousins, no uncles and no sisters and no brothers. We do not know many things. Sometimes, this is the case because we are immigrants."

I wanted to explain myself, but Tai-gong wasn't done.

“There is a curse on our family's men. Your mother left your father, and your grandmother left your grandfather. And it is my fault. There are many questions, but never answers in our family. There is only one question you ask, I can answer. I will not say lies, but I hope you will not blame me too much after you hear it.”

It was strange to hear Tai-gong talk of curses. He usually despised mentions of superstitions. As soon as he said it, I knew this was one story I couldn't deny myself. “I won't,” I replied, voice hoarse and limbs aching. “I just don't know anything. No one ever tells me anything.”

Tai-gong nodded and poured himself a cup of tea. He leaned in with his elbows on the dining table, palms together and fingers criss-crossed, like he was preparing to let me in on a secret.

“You ask if I have a wife,” he began. “I did. Before you were born and before your father was born, when I was young, maybe twenty years old, I lived in Shanghai with my wife—your Tai-po—and your grandfather, and he was only a baby. We had a big house, not little apartment like this. We had two living rooms, three bathrooms, six bedrooms, one dining room with crystal chandelier, and kitchen with two cooks, and two house servants to help your Tai-po's comfort. We even had a little garden, and that was rare in a big city like Shanghai.

“Shanghai was like New York now. It was a port city, you know. Many, many Europeans and Americans lived in Shanghai. Students, reporters, ambassadors, business people. When I was in school, I learned Russian and English, my teacher was English,

and there were three Jewish-Russian boys in my class, one Italian, one French, and one Portuguese child. Few of us, Chinese and not Chinese, liked leaving school in middle of a day and ride our bikes to the Bund. Do you know the Bund?”

I shook my head.

Tai-gong leaned back and grinned. “You know Zhou Run Fa? Chow Yun Fat?” he repeated the name in its better known Cantonese and I nodded. Tai-gong chuckled to himself. “Yes, you must. Oh, there is no Chow Yun Fat without *The Bund*. A little joke, little joke.”

“Tai-gong, c’mon.” I did not have enough patience that day to wait out another one of his private jests.

“Okay, okay. I am sorry. The Bund is foreign land, no, sorry, *was* foreign land, land occupied by foreigners, but beautiful land. Many beautiful buildings facing Pudong River. Banks, consulates, hotels, restaurants. Myself and friends, we often left school, sat outside the fancy foreign banks, which were big buildings in European styles, and we made one another to talk with walking-by white ladies. We were only your age. Thirteen or fourteen. This was before the war.

“My school friends, foreign ones, all left when war started, one after another. I finished schooling at sixteen, just when the Japanese came. Your Tai-po and I married that year. She was eighteen. We grew up together in same neighborhood, her family knew my family. Her father was a rich man. He owned three cotton mills, two in suburb of Shanghai, and one near Wuxi. Soon after I married his daughter, he offered me a job in

his business. I was young and learned very fast, and I worked very hard. I attracted foreign investors because I speak very good English.”

Tai-gong paused to urge my agreement with a cheeky grin, and I could only reward his utter lack of humility with a nod. My great-grandfather would be a life-long student of the English language, and for a while in my youth I was his teacher. When Tai-gong would finally pass, my dad and I would pack away two cardboard boxes full of his study notebooks, some tracing back to the 60’s, every one filled from beginning to end by his thin, slanted cursive.

The tea had cooled enough to drink. Tai-gong took a sip from his cup, and filled it to the brim again.

“I was maybe nineteen when my father-in-law died and I became big boss. For few years, we made good money, a lot of money. We lived in your Tai-po’s family home and rented my home to tenants, and that brought a lot of money, too. I had friends in Guomindang, the Nationalist government of China, and they knew how to buy smuggled goods when war got serious. Everything became more and more expensive, but we were very safe. After the Japanese took Shanghai, we still had money to give to the Japanese and lived comfortable lives.”

Tai-gong explained, “It was important to give the Japanese money. No one wanted to, but if you don’t, they bothered your cotton mills, hurt your workers, steal your products. It was a lot of trouble and money made it easy, just little bit. But you also must keep quiet. Give money to the Japanese means you were a *hanjian*, a traitor, and other *hanjian* had to spit on you too if anyone finds out, so they didn’t look bad. But what can

you do? You could be a hero and fight them, then who will feed your family? So, we gave the Japanese money, as much as they wanted, and we survived.”

He paused to sip more tea.

“But after, Americans started war with Japan... you know Pearl Harbor?” Pearl Harbor I knew; we’d covered it in seventh-grade American History. “After Americans start, the Japanese wanted more and more and more money. Our cotton mill in Wuxi closed down in ’41, and one in Shanghai was destroyed in ’44. The Japanese left in 1945, but we ran out of money, so, I fired cooks and servants. Then I had to sell furniture, little by little. Do you understand, Ren?”

I would have liked to admit my ignorance, but I nodded instead. We had not studied a chapter like this in World History, even though I’d gotten a 98 on the World War II unit exam and could recite the first minute of President Roosevelt’s Pearl Harbor address. Tai-gong’s story sounded like a lesson I had somehow skipped. I would spend several days that summer in the Chinatown branch library to redeem my truancy through a silent, private study.

“In 1945,” he said a little louder than before, “the World War finished. America was happy, England was happy, Russia was maybe happy, everyone who won was happy. In China, after the World War ended, Communists and Guomindang—the Nationalists—began to fight.

“Communists and the Nationalists are both Chinese, you see, but they hated each other. They fought each other before the World War, and stopped for a long time to fight

the Japanese. But, they are like cats and mice, and when the Japanese lost, they were enemies again.

“When they fought, Communists had the minds of regular people, farmers and poor people, and Guomintang had businessmen, like me. Guomintang also had Americans to help, but we were losing. You see, we forget—there are always more hungry farmers than rich businessmen. Many of my friends closed down their factories or business and left for Macau, Hong Kong, or Taiwan. Smart ones left in ’47, a little more ran in ’48. I was stupid. I thought we might win.”

Tai-gong slapped his forehead a couple of times, adding physical effects to this story like he would with the folklores he still told at times. My head rang with an echoing buzz. I couldn’t comprehend the idea that once upon a time, Tai-gong lived in a war zone and feared for his life. The glory and majesty of Manhattan had always granted our home, paltry as it was, a sense of an inviolable permanence, that Tai-gong had once been denied that security was unthinkable.

“But you got away.” I was scared for Tai-gong, even though his presence before me was proof enough of his safety.

“Yes, I did,” he said. “In January of 1949, Guomintang lost a big battle. The news was Communists were moving closer to Shanghai. The Americans gave up, tired, and foreign bankers gave up. I knew we will lose.

“Even so, I wanted to stay. It is a terrible guilt to leave your country. You can take money and family to new world, but you cannot take your home soil, and you cannot take your ancestors’ graves. My friends and I were very worried. A, we were Guomintang

party, and B, we all give money to the Japanese at some point, we are all *hanjian*, and Communists hated Guomindang and *hanjian*, because we were comfortable when everyone else suffered. In every city they went to, thousands of citizens were killed for taking the wrong side. But, that is war.”

Tai-gong was messing up his tenses. After a certain age, I could no longer bear to point out his recurrent grammatical mistakes, no matter how receptive he always was to correction.

“So, finally, your Tai-po and I talked, and we decided to leave. I had friends already in Taiwan. I hoped to find them after we go over. For our boat tickets, I sold everything I could from my one last cotton mill. But that was not enough. I begged your Tai-po to let me pawn her silver dining set, her china set, and her jewelries. Oh, her collection! She had so many pearl necklaces and gold rings and ruby earrings, all her dowery!

“I pawned everything. But it took so long because everyone in Shanghai wanted to sell, no one wanted to buy. Remember, you can’t sell when no one buys. When I finally had enough money, I went to buy tickets but ticket-seller said I only had enough for two people, not enough for my whole family. The price went up, see, everyone wanted to leave. Then I go home and pawned your Tai-po’s silk *qi-pao*, twenty altogether, and I try again a week later, and now I only have enough money for one.”

“And you took it for yourself.” When I spoke out, I hadn’t meant for it to come out like an accusation.

Tai-gong nodded, grim but not at all abashed.

“Your grandfather was only six,” he explained. “Your Tai-po did not want to leave his side. She told me to go, borrow more money in Taiwan to send for them. I listened to my wife. I bought my ticket to Taiwan, and handed rest of the money to her, and the empty house also.

“I left in April, 1949. A friend picked me up and drove me to the port. I told her to stay home.” Tai-gong closed his eyes. “She locked our son in his room. He cried all night. I have one brown suitcase with some clothes and papers. It is beginning of April, yes, at five in the morning. We have a plum tree in front of the house, its flowers are wilted. She is wearing a cotton *qi-pao*, dark blue, holding a pink handkerchief. She doesn’t cry.

“She is a very brave woman. When the car starts to go, I wave back, and I see her look after me from rearview mirror. She has not smiled for many weeks, but I see little smile when she waves back.”

Tai-gong’s eyes re-opened, setting a brief but heavy scrutiny upon me. Then quick as it disappeared, his good humor was restored and he smiled like the playful young man I knew he once was.

“And then, I blinked, and my wife disappeared, like a fairy. This is not a lie. She just vanished. Poof!” He jumped in his seat. “I rolled down the window and looked back, but she was not there anymore. There was only little white flower on the sidewalk.”

It was difficult suppressing my desire to point out that I was thirteen, not three, especially when Tai-gong excitedly got up, went into his bedroom, and came back out with the laminated anemone.

“Like this flower.” He waved it too closely to my face, the bookmark’s sharp edges nearly sliced my skin. “Your Tai-po turned into a flower just like this. I found this in Taiwan, it reminded me of her and I had it pressed. I am sorry I do not have her picture, but I promise, your Tai-po was a beautiful lady, like this flower. Just like you.”

Tai-gong gave the bookmark to me to keep. I never contemplated calling him out on his tall-tale. That afternoon, he told me a little more about how Shanghai was taken by the Communists that May, how he started a new life in Taiwan studying and then practicing traditional herbal medicine, how those skills earned him a visa to the United States in ’64. When communications with the mainland reopened, Tai-gong said it took him another three years to track down his son and help him emigrate.

“So, you see, it is my fault. I left my wife, and now, no woman will stay in our family, and you are alone in the bathroom trying to become a clown.” Tai-gong took a kitchen napkin to dab at my face hopelessly; the cake-like mixture that once was makeup had dried a while ago. I laughed, at him and at myself.

I ended up going to the formal, my face *au natural*. I didn’t have another go at makeup until 10th grade. And by the time I got to university, I had abandoned make-up as something superfluous. I was never really good at it anyway. The white anemone disappeared into a book somewhere but resurfaced years later. Tai-gong and I never talked about great-grandmother again. After all, there was no use dwelling on the fate of a flower.

Two days after Christmas, I received a care package from home, a heavy cardboard box of a good size that must have cost at least fifty dollars in delivery fees. The addresses were in Dad's handwriting, but the contents were without a doubt Tai-gong's doing.

They'd sent me two packs of White Rabbit milk candy, a can of pickled dried plums, a bag of salted sunflower seeds, two packs of dried mango, a bag of lychee jelly pudding, and in the very center of it all, a shoebox wrapped in reindeer gift paper tagged with a flattened green bow, the present Tai-gong said he was going to hold ransom until I went home for Chinese New Year. Tai-gong had scribbled on it in permanent red marker, *Merry Christmas, Ren. Study hard.*

He'd gotten me a pair of men's steel-toed boots, dark brown monstrosities with anti-slip treads, perfect for the suburb's unsalted ice traps. The boots' thick leather exterior and fur-lined insides added a couple of inches around my size-9 feet. I felt as if I was standing in two canoes. I put them back into the shoebox, then buried the shoebox deep in my closet.

A much smaller package arrived the next day. It was addressed to me but had no return address. The handwriting was Ramon's. For a terrible moment, I wondered what he'd gotten Jenna, whether hers was bigger or more expensive than mine. Thoughts like that made my skin burn. In an unwrapped Tiffany box too big for its size was a rectangular paperweight carved from clear crystal with a miniature image of Manhattan's midtown skyline laser-etched into it, creating a mirage of floating skyscrapers. The gift

came without a note. The paperweight went on my desk, Tai-gong's anemone rested above it. I wished I could call Ramon to thank him, but I was terrified of stirring up trouble between Jenna and him. Besides, speaking felt awkward after stretches of days spent in isolation. The very idea of talking seemed painful and daunting.

What use was a storyteller without a voice, without an audience? Without Ramon, I had no one to go to for a friendly ear. The few friends I'd made in high school had all moved to different states in search of liberation from home. In university, I had no confidants. Acquaintances, yes, but I dared not share my relationship with Ramon, especially not with other girls to whom I would have been labeled the "other woman," a *hanjian* to my own sex.

Around New Year's day, in between successions of shrieking winds and fitful silence, I broke down and began speaking to the anemone. But instead of a 3-inch flower, the ghost of a grown woman would sometimes appear on my writing desk.

Great-grandmother came only at night, after I'd dimmed the lights. There was only the yellow glow of my bedside lamp, usually after I'd spent hours stuck on a practice problem. She never spoke, just sat on the edge of my desk, her skin, translucent, glowing as white as the anemone petals, a bright halo against the dark blue cotton *qi-pao* that sheathed her small frame. I had conjured her to be the opposite of me, short in stature, with a demure oval face and straight waist-length hair half pinned up into a clean bun. Her feet, naturally tiny, were definitely not like canoes. She always had a small smile on her face, calming and unassuming like Tai-gong's constant grin.

One night after picturing her smile for far too long, I croaked in Mandarin, “*Are you scared?*” Great-grandmother would not have known how to speak English.

“*My name is Ren.*” My tongue felt thick speaking even the simplest phrases. Eight years of Saturdays spent in Chinese school was ultimately useless when neither Dad nor Tai-gong bothered to practice with me.

In the margins of an open textbook, I scribbled the ideogram for my name over and over—four simple strokes, the elongated particle for “human” placed beside two parallel horizontal lines—one of the very few Chinese words I knew how to write.

I scribbled faster and faster, until the overall structure of the word no longer looked stable. Tai-gong said Chinese, when written, should always retain a box-like state, balanced and equal at every angle. Too wide above will make a word topple over, while a big bottom half was obtrusive, like dead weight. There was an old idiom, *zi ru qi ren* —“one’s writing reflects one’s self”, and for the Chinese, the aestheticism of a person’s calligraphy was just as important as its meanings and applications. This was one lesson I never got down.

Dad had named me “Ren” after long consultations with Tai-gong and a dictionary, had insisted on naming me himself though he only had six years of bare-bones education before moving to the States at thirteen. Dad chose a perfectly Chinese name with a smooth second rising tone, easy to pronounce for non-Mandarin speakers, its ethnic origin obscure, its gender designation androgynous. The word itself was one of the three tenets of Confucianism meaning “Humaneness,” “Benevolence,” a “perfect, innate Virtue.” Tai-gong said Confucius himself defined “Ren” as “Love.”

Great-grandmother probably would have known all of the little wordplays Chinese parents think of when naming a child. She also would have known that when spoken in a different inflection, “Ren” had the potential to transmute itself. Dad had named me with all of its homonyms in mind. He’d told me once, and only once, to “Ren” was to Recognize, to Know, and Submit. It was the Edge of a Blade; it was to be Tough yet Flexible. It was Man as well as the child-rearing Woman. Ren was Responsibility. Ren was Tolerance. Ren was Human. He’d told me that for the sake of my survival, he chose this name because when uttered in the third falling-rising tone, Ren was to Endure.

But I didn’t know great-grandmother’s name; Tai-gong never told me. The only tether between us was blood, and even that had become diluted by the other half of my heritage. She was a wife and a mother, beautiful and virtuous, and I, a self-exiled woman of questionable repute who could scarcely speak the language of my ancestors.

I hadn’t eaten for over eight hours, hadn’t slept for twenty. I sighed and my exhalation tipped over the anemone, its sharp laminated border nicked Ramon’s paperweight as it fell.

Great-grandmother began to fade; her smile seared me with its kindness. I watched her leave for the night, wondering how much of her my imagination got right.

Did she know Tai-gong wasn’t going to be able to get her out of China? Did she say good-bye to him comforted by the knowledge that at least her husband would live on without fear? Did her hope ever waver, after her property was divided, her family uprooted, her good name smeared through the refuse of war?

How long did she wait, before her smile was taken away?

Chapter 3

I did not like Ramon the first time we met, and I would one day tell him so while his lips skimmed over my bare hip.

It was the second month of my Freshman year, I had just developed a headache after finishing an exhaustive midterm, he was a maniac with a loudspeaker hounding whomever would listen to register and vote in the upcoming Midterm Elections. The student body was collectively more intent on getting ready for Halloween. Ramon had attracted only a handful, and I'd made the mistake of stopping to glare.

He saw me right away, hopped down from the bench he was standing on and shoved a voter registration form in my face. I wanted to retaliate by making fun of the fact he was shorter than me by an inch, or that his well-groomed eyebrows didn't fit the manly image his muscles were trying to present, or how his goatee failed in being either sophisticated or ironic. I must have been scowling, but Ramon looked like he was trying hard to hold back laughter. He would forever smile like a man assured in his victories.

A week later, still friendless and baited by the promise of free food, I would end up sitting by Ramon's side while the Congressman he interned for was re-elected to office. The celebration at a town hall forty minutes away from campus went late into the night. After local camera crews came and went, Ramon handed me a glass of champagne and said, "Drink up. No one will ask for ID."

He'd worn a dark blue suit that evening complete with a red tie and polished black shoes, a scarlet campaign button fastened over his left breast pocket. A couple of

Ramon's fraternity brothers had gone along for the party, boys who'd transformed into men simply by exchanging beer for champagne and sweatshirts for blazers. Ramon had told me jeans were perfectly acceptable for the occasion, and I never really forgave him for that.

There was free food, however. He hadn't lied about that. But instead of a proper dinner as I'd expected, mini spinach quiches and cocktail shrimps made their short lived rounds, along with deep fried rice-and-cheese balls. Ramon called them *Arancini di Riso*. His accent sounded authentic enough, but I couldn't really tell. They were already cold when brought out. I hadn't eaten dinner on purpose, and with too much champagne and not enough food in my stomach, I spent the evening swaying in frivolity.

The Congressman came by and shook our hands at one point, thanked us for our support, not enough young people were interested in politics and he was not going to disappoint us, he said. His gelled graying locks and the flag-pin on his lapel were so quintessentially American that mixed with the champagne in my belly, nearly inspired me to put right palm over heart and recite the Pledge of Allegiance.

He thanked Ramon for his help over the last year with a three-pump handshake. Ramon introduced me, "This is Ren Sheh, sir. Freshman. She's a future Chemical Engineer and just voted for you in her very first election."

The Congressman enveloped my right hand with both of his. "Excellent!" he exclaimed. "A young, minority woman aiming for a STEM field? You, young lady, are the future of this country." He seemed over the moon at meeting me, even called over his personal photographer to take a picture of us shaking hands.

At that moment, surrounded by red, white and blue balloons, I would have believed anything the Congressman promised, would have donated however much he needed for his future campaigns. A month later, I would not be able to recall his name. Flattened between some random pages of my old class notes, is a newspaper clipping of that picture. It had wound up in a national gazette.

Lightheaded from the Congressman's attention and the champagne, I was relaxed and giddy during the ride back to my dorm.

"Everyone looked so nice and official," I mumbled, half asleep against the passenger side window. Ramon and I were alone in his blue BMW S3, his 16th birthday present from his parents. Ramon laughed. "For the thirteenth time, you didn't look out of place in jeans." Not that I could have done anything differently. I didn't own formal wear back then. I'd thought about calling Dad to ask for extra cash to buy a business suit, something a young lady like myself could use heading into a professional world. If I could find a set for under fifty bucks, Dad would probably acquiesce and even offer to pay for an extra pair of heels. Although, he could use a two-piece suit himself. I spoke aloud without thinking. "But then again, where would he wear it to?"

"What's that?"

The car was heated to a perfect temperature, its leather seat sank just the right amount. "Nothing," I said quickly. "Thinking about my Dad. He doesn't have any dressy clothes."

"Really? What did he wear to your high school graduation?"

“Nothing. No, wait, I mean, he didn’t go. He was working, that’s all. My dad works. A lot.”

“Yeah? My dad’s the same. He actually scheduled two surgeries the day of my graduation, then, went straight to a poker game at the club. Stress relief. Whatever.”

Ramon briefly looked away from the road. I could see his eyes reflected in my window, cueing in my contribution to the exchange. He probably could have sympathized with how in 4th grade, I had spent three hours in the nurse’s office waiting for Dad to pick me up after I’d twisted my ankle during recess, or how every holiday season, I wouldn’t see my father for weeks on end because he’d only be home for a few hours’ rest before heading back to the restaurant, or to the *China Daily* wholesaler, or that building on Mott where he’d worked as a nighttime janitor for two years. I imagined no matter how much time Ramon’s father devoted to his surgeries or country club activities, he surely always had a neatly pressed suit to wear, with a tie to match.

I asked about Ramon’s internship with the Congressman instead, who was going into his third term and whose name was something Irish, or maybe Italian.

Ramon didn’t seem to mind the subject change. From the very beginning, he knew just which buttons to push and what topics to avoid. Once he began talking about his involvement in politics, something his father had introduced him to in high school, Ramon was in salesman mode.

Eyes ahead on a nearly deserted highway, Ramon talked about the two-party system, about lobbyists and judiciary oversight, about the importance of public appeal to sentiment and candidate “relatability.” Ramon would repeat this speech to me from time

to time, when he ran for Junior Student Rep, for instance, or on the evening Bush kept the White House, each recitation brimming with pride. Even in his criticisms, Ramon spoke like one who wholeheartedly believed in the potential for success within the American system for anyone willing to work for it.

“Take me for example. I’m short, I’m Asian, and okay, I’ll be the first to admit, not your typical candidate choice for any party. But hey, you watch, if I play it right in the next thirty years, you’ll be voting *me* for President in 2032.”

“Sure, and I’ll be the next Miss America. Let me out.” I pretended to look for an escape, chuckling at what I thought was a dumb joke. “I’m trapped in a car with a delusional maniac! Stranger danger!”

“What? It could happen. *You* would vote for me, I bet.”

“Why? Because we’re both Chinese?”

Ramon smiled. “Sure, there’s that. I’m also a pretty ideal candidate if you break it down. Look, I’m a fifth-generation immigrant. I’ve got the pedigree—Purebred, by the way.” He gestured up and down his body. I rolled my eyes. “And... and, baptized Christian, and I’ll start going to church again once I settle in a city. Um, I can throw a mean curve ball. Oh, getting my MBA after graduation, so I’ll be a good choice to handle the economy, which, c’mon, is always the voters’ first concern. It’s simple. You need campaign funds and you need to be what the voters want. You can get the first, if you have the second.”

I couldn’t help it. I laughed. Cackled, more like. There was just enough sincerity behind his flippant mannerism to make the idea seem even more absurd.

I pushed. “You’re Chinese! You’re tiny! What are you, 5’5”? You really think America is going to pick a five-foot-five Chinese guy for Commander-in-Chief?”

He pulled. “Sure! Not now, obviously. But in thirty years, who knows? I’m 5’6”, by the way. Guess who else was 5’6”?”

“I don’t... Napoleon?”

“Bruce Lee! Bruce Lee never let his height stop him. As he would say, ‘Running water never grows stale. So you just have to keep on flowing.’ And everybody loves Bruce Lee!”

Ramon directed his toothy grin at me, daring me to disagree. The more agitated I got, the more amused he became. It felt like I was losing at a game I didn’t know I was playing. I bit down on my dissent. Who was I to contradict Ramon if he saw triumph in Lee where I could only see struggle?

A truck passed us on the other side of the road, its headlights blinding. My alcoholic haze was fading fast. I wished I hadn’t mocked him. It felt as though I’d made fun of someone who embarrassed himself in public but had long ago learned to laugh about it. I could hear the echoes of my unwarranted disparagement like a recording, and shame rushed through me, but it turned out the embarrassment was mostly mine.

Still, the lightness in his tone weighed on me. I felt dense next to Ramon, as if I was sinking fast into freezing waters, and yet was more afraid to take his outreaching hand. However ridiculous his notions, his baseless optimism blazed into a bonfire, its warmth teased my skin, its glow opened my eyes to the numbing cold.

Ramon adjusted the heat dial on his dashboard. A major turnpike sign flew overhead. We were three exits away from campus. The teeth were gone from his grin. To my further distress, he apologized to me.

“Sorry, Ren. I’ve been rambling. It’s a bad habit. Not everyone’s into politics.”

I assured him my disinterest was entirely due to personal ignorance.

That got him going again. “It’s never too late to get involved! We’re all citizens. Didn’t it feel good to vote? To participate?”

Earlier that day I’d cast my ballot for Ramon’s Congressman with zero knowledge of his campaign platform. Ramon had given me a pamphlet the week before, one which prominently displayed the cut of the Congressman’s jawline next to a list of his accomplishments. I didn’t read it. My vote was no skin off my back, an easy favor for my first friend in university. In the Congressman’s victory speech he emphasized the need for stronger military presence in Afghanistan, tax cuts, and welfare reform, to which I found myself nodding along, even though I didn’t quite understand everything.

Still, I had trouble embracing Ramon’s enthusiasm. In the grand scheme of things, I was sure my one little vote made no difference to the fate of a Congressman from Long Island, and I held no delusions as to his negligible effect on my future. Politics was a game for those who could afford the gamble, like Ramon’s surgeon father and philanthropist mother. The best someone like me could do was to cheer on the ambitions of a friend.

“I’ll vote for you,” I said. “If you run for president, I’ll vote for you.”

It was like a promise had been engraved onto time, and within that promise I could see all of Ramon's potentials, in which his earnest charm and annoying persistence, coupled with a good suit would take him wherever he wished to go. I saw the ways he could fail as well, slip up like countless men who'd come and gone. The thought of such disappointment saddened me, made me want to prevent it the only way I knew how.

"Can I tell you a story? It's something my great-grandfather used to do when I was small."

"Sure! Sure! Hey, I've been hogging the conversation all night. Let's hear it!"

I'd never shared any of great-grandfather's stories before, to anyone, and he had told me so many that the majority of them had long faded from memory. For the ones I could recall, I tried to remember the occasional tremor in his voice, the slow but arresting pace of his narrative, even the British undertones in his accent. I could never get it exactly right.

The storyteller's role was vastly different and required experience which I did not possess. My words felt awkward and wrong, and I would have extinguished the story before it started if it were not for Ramon's excitement.

I began as Tai-gong would, feeling slightly silly. A clearing of the throat, then, "Long, long ago in the Middle Kingdom, there lived a virtuous man who was learned and generous. He—"

"What's his name?"

"I, I don't know. It's not important."

"How am I supposed to keep track of the characters if I don't know their names?"

“Um, okay. His name was um, Yang. Stop laughing! I’m trying to tell a serious story.”

“Why ‘Yang’?”

“I don’t know! That’s a legitimate Chinese name.”

Ramon chortled but apologized. “Please, go on.”

“Anyway, Yang was virtuous and generous. He went through the civil examinations at a young age and quickly rose within the emperor’s ranks. Throughout the twenty years he served in office, Yang was beloved by his people and trusted by his superiors. Many ambitious young men from all around the country went to him for advice.”

“Sounds like a smart guy. Bet he could be President.”

“You’re horrible at this listening thing.” I omitted that as a child I was infinitely worse. “Anyway, one day, in the middle of the night, a young man with some reputation as an aspiring politician went to visit Yang and begged for a private audience. Yang complied and shooed all of his servants away. And before you ask, we’ll call this guy, Liu. Okay? Liu. With only one candle burning in the locked room, Liu brought out a pouch from his robe and presented it to Yang. When Yang opened it, he saw that it was full of gold nuggets.”

Ramon clucked his tongue and shook his head but didn’t say anything.

I continued, “Liu asked Yang to remember his visit, in case a favorable position opened up in the near future, somewhere that collected a lot of taxes and wasn’t too hot or too cold. Yang told Liu that opportunities went to those with true merit, and no gold

could sway him. Liu urged Yang to keep the bribe anyway, as a gift, something that no one had to know.”

Ramon pulled up to the front door of my dorm. The car’s clock read “3:27.” He shifted into park, released his seatbelt so he could turn and give me his full attention. There was the tiniest hint of a smile on his lips.

I held onto the visions of the man Ramon could become and concluded my story. “And Yang replied, ‘How can no one know? You know, and I know. The Heavens know, and the Earth knows.’ Liu heard this and was so ashamed that he left with his gold and never again showed his face.”

Tai-gong’s story never finished with “The End.” He usually let silence guide me to some inner contemplation. I’d failed to learn his wordless authority, but Ramon was cooperative. The only thing he said in response was, “Thank you in advance for keeping me honest.”

In the elevator, he made me promise another story for another time. At 3:34, Ramon opened my door and escorted me into my room.

Three weeks after Election Day Ramon found me at a computer station in the library. It was 2 in the morning and I was wading through a 5-page essay for a Freshman writing class. The thesis statement was weak and my ideas had lost focus after just three

paragraphs. When Ramon tapped me on the shoulder and flashed me a smile, I saw it as a sign that it was okay to give up the struggle and just drift for a while.

He walked me to my dorm and even held my books. I let it slip that I was working at the library because I didn't have a computer of my own.

Ramon was appalled, then suddenly gleeful. "Hey, you can have mine! I've been wanting to get the new PowerBook. I'll just tell my parents my desktop died on me or something. You'll be doing me a favor taking it off my hands."

The sheer extravagance of his abrupt offer felt like a personal affront to everything I was raised to honor. Dad would have been offended. I had never been so tempted. When I protested, Ramon started on a list of grievances he had with "that clunky piece of junk" and how he couldn't "even bring it to class—what is this, the 19th century?" By the end, Ramon had me convinced I was the charitable one for letting him unload such a burden on me.

I tried to give him some money for it the day he came over to set everything up, but Ramon wouldn't have it. There were other ways to repay him, he said, like joining the mailing list of his Chinese-American Student Social Awareness club, or helping him organize a protest against upcoming tuition hikes.

The computer was the first of many things Ramon would give me. They were mostly small favors like dinner and ice-cream for every oral quiz I helped him pass in his beginner's Mandarin class. But sometimes Ramon was exorbitant without realizing it, like when an iPod arrived in the mail for his birthday and he simply let me have his

portable CD player. To make myself feel better, I spent three hours hanging up his Student Counsel campaign posters around campus.

I can never figure out exactly how much Ramon's generosity affected my feelings for him. I would like to say the material items didn't matter at all, but that would be blatant self-deceit. My good fortune also came with an appropriate dose of guilt and shame. I felt like a spoiled beggar eager to devour anything Ramon could spare, whether it was his attention or his presents. Every time he invited me to a club meeting, or volunteered to instruct me in the art of rhetoric, or gave me a camera he no longer needed, I was flooded by a voracious want for more.

Back then, I had trouble naming my want, and without knowing its name I could not ask for it. But I think Ramon always knew.

The Sunday after Valentine's Day of my first year, Ramon took me to Montauk Point at the Easternmost end of Long Island. We meandered the lighthouse tower until closing time, then stayed in his car to watch the full moon cast its shimmering reflection upon the Atlantic. I was in the middle of explaining how the Chinese calendar followed shifting moon phases when Ramon murmured, "Did you know your face is shaped like the moon?"

His half-smile was deliberate and provocative. I could sense heat emanating from the hand he'd casually placed on my headrest, inches away from my cheek. I kissed Ramon while listening to the roar of furious waves breaking against shore. I'd kept my fingers imprisoned between my shaking knees. When it was over, Ramon praised me. "Thank God you made the first move," he said, then leaned in again.

My toes danced little jigs inside my boots for the rest of the evening. I was soaring and could hardly find enough breath to feed the rush of thoughts in my head. I wanted to comment on everything in sight, wanted to tell Ramon about the screeching hawk flying overhead and that my twitchy fingers were dying to discover the texture of his hair.

He, on the other hand, turned increasingly withdrawn during the ride back. The car radio and I managed to fill the silence, but nothing felt right when Ramon wasn't firing back questions or playing Devil's Advocate to my burgeoning political views.

That night Ramon didn't walk me to my door. In his car he told me about Jenna for the first time, whose mother was best friends with his and he couldn't possibly break his mother's heart by leaving Jenna. Ramon thought I was "different from all the other girls and genuinely cool," but he knew someone as "awesome" as me would never agree to be a hidden sidepiece. He was sure we could have been perfect together, but he liked me too much to string me along. Unless, of course, I was open-minded and didn't mind a purely physical relationship.

I could recall everything Ramon said to me along with a singular, searing determination to prove myself. My sense of pride at eighteen had a different priority. Surely it would be unconventional, but an acquiescence to his rules meant I could continue to pursue my own happiness with him. Anything else was inconsequential, I thought. Secrecy was a small sacrifice.

Still, it was anger and not excitement that greeted me in my dark, overheated dorm room. I picked up the first thing I could get my hands on and threw it blindly at a

wall. Ramon's hand-me-down CD player broke into two pieces. It was just a cheap little thing.

There was a story my great-grandfather liked to tell, on one of those languid weekend afternoons I spent by his side.

“A beautiful lady live-s on the moon,” he recited that first time. Tai-gong liked to show off his knowledge of subject-verb agreement by giving the “s” its own syllable. It's how you'd tell a real English-speaker from the fake, he used to say.

I was seven at the original telling. Maybe five. Eight at the very most. We were sitting at our dining table, which Tai-gong sometimes used as his calligraphy stand, and I'd later commandeered for a study desk.

I asked, “Is she a princess?”

Tai-gong thought about it. “Ah, yes, she is wife of a prince.”

I was pleased.

“Does she live in a big castle, like Cinderella and Sleeping Beauty?”

Tai-gong listened with his good ear tilted toward me, mulling over the question. At that age, my interruptions rushed out like summer thunder, indiscriminate, with one word rolled into another without consideration for pauses or tonal stresses. Until I learned to slow down for Tai-gong's sake, we had many repetitive conversations.

“No” was his quick answer, once he understood. But then, Tai-gong inhaled through clenched teeth, an inverted hiss, a standard diplomatic deliberation before he

capitulated to whatever I asked of him. “Maybe. Moon part is not important. Going to moon is the importance.” Tai-gong drummed his ringed index finger upon the leaves of an old red leather bound tome. A third of it was water-damaged, and colors ran amok in clouds of pastel. The ruffled skin on Tai-gong’s hand matched the ripples of the pages.

I sat straighter in my chair to better look over the table’s edge. A blurred drawing of a lady extended across the opened pages. Dressed in a yellow robe tied tight around her impossibly tiny waist by a red sash, she craned her neck upwards toward a full silver moon, her pale cheeks dotted by two feverish spots of rouge. The lady’s long, translucent sleeves trailed down to her slippers, half hidden by the whirling mist that carried her above blue-grey mountain ridges and flowing rivers. In the white spaces of the pages, a story I could not read hung like branches of a willow tree in the traditional style—up to down, right to left. Tai-gong’s finger followed the columns of ideograms as he read the story to me, every sentence first in Mandarin, then, his own translation in English. His study notebook and electronic dictionary were laid out on his other side for reference whenever he was stuck on a particular turn of phrase.

“Long, long ago,” he began, smoothly at first, giving each sentence its due, “there were ten suns in sky, and Earth was very hot, always. Nothing grew and rivers went dry. People’s livings were very difficult. The good King asked everyone for help. In the kingdom lived a hunter, his name was Houyi, a filial and—” Tai-gong checked his dictionary, “—right-e-ous young man. He was very good with bow and shooting arrow. He told the king he will help. One day, after ten suns came up to the sky, Houyi used his bow on them. Houyi killed nine of the suns, one by one, but—”

“You can’t kill suns!” I interrupted. Tai-gong held his pose mimicking a heroic archer and chuckled.

“Yes, but Houyi’s bow was magic.”

“Oh, well, you gotta tell that part first, Tai-gong.”

He cleared his throat. “Okay, I am sorry. After Houyi killed nine suns with a magic bow, tenth sun was very afraid and hid behind a mountain—”

“Hid,” I corrected. “H-I-D.” We must have gone over past tense in school by then, so I had to be at least eight. Tai-gong scribbled down my correction in his notebook.

“—*hid*... behind a mountain. Thank you. Now Earth was very dark, nothing grew and rivers flooded houses and farms. King asked Houyi to put down his magic bow. Houyi also promised tenth sun he will not kill it after all. Tenth sun stopped hide, no, hiding. Okay. Tenth sun stopped hiding, plants grew and everything was beautiful. This is why we have only one sun.”

“Uh-huh. But where’s the princess?”

“*Bie ji*,” Tai-gong chided my impatience. “The good King was very happy with Houyi, he made Houyi prince. Houyi had a wife, a beautiful young lady. She was named Chang-e. See? Princess.”

Tai-gong grinned at me, triumphant. I pouted and kicked my bare feet under the table. Sometimes I used to kick high and hard enough to knock over Tai-gong’s little bamboo plant and spill the water in its vase all over the dining table. The one time Dad caught me at it he threatened to bind my shins to the chair, and I learned not to kick in

Dad's presence. Dad was rarely home before midnight anyway, and Tai-gong never scolded me for any reason.

“So she wasn't even a real princess,” I whined, and kicked. “They just made her one.”

“Is it better to not be a princess at all?”

“No, I guess not. Did she have a castle though? Did she get gowns and servants? Oh! Did her prince kiss her?”

“Always kissing.” Tai-gong sighed and rolled his eyes with a little dramatic flair. “There is no kissing in Chinese stories.”

He pinched my nose shut and used his hold on it to wiggle my head side to side. I opened my mouth to breathe and broke into hiccups from laughing too hard.

“You are a bad audience. Too many questions.”

I promised to stay quiet. My legs continued their uncoordinated jig.

“After Houyi saved Earth, Queen Mother of Western Heaven gave him awards. Hm? Rewards. She gave him two rewards, two medicines of immortality, one for him and one for Chang-e. Queen Mother of Western Heaven told Houyi to eat the medicine when he and Chang-e were ready to be immortals. Houyi was very happy. He took the medicine to Chang-e and told her to put them away. Houyi had to go away. He told Chang-e to wait until he went home to eat the medicines together.”

“Uh-oh. Did he die while he was away?”

“Die? No, no. He was away, just away, for a long time.”

“Where'd he go? Did he go to work?”

“I don’t know.”

“How long is a long time then? Like, a week? a month?”

Tai-gong handed me a clementine. He wouldn’t start up the story again until the first slice was in my mouth, glaring at me all the while as I took my time peeling away the rind and picking apart the sticky pith.

When it was finally safe, Tai-gong continued, “Houyi was away. Chang-e waited and waited, but she was impatient, like you. One night, she brought medicines out and she thought, why should I wait for husband? He can eat his when he is home. She did not want to wait anymore. Chang-e ate her medicine right away, but, nothing happened. She did not feel immortal. She didn’t feel different anyhow. And, so, she ate Houyi’s medicine, too.”

I wanted to say something, but only drops of clementine juice spurted from my open mouth, some landed on Chang-e’s robe, darkening the fading yellow. Tai-gong handed me a napkin.

“After she ate Houyi’s medicine, too, Chang-e began floating. She floated through ceiling, roof, and trees. Chang-e floated for Heaven. In the air, Chang-e heard her husband’s voice. Houyi was home, but too late. Houyi saw Chang-e float for Heaven, he took out magic bow and yes, aimed, but he stopped, because he did not want to kill his wife. Chang-e was ashamed she did not wait for Houyi, so, instead of Heaven, she turned and went to moon.”

Tai-gong looked at me expectantly in silence.

“Was that it?” I said.

“Yes.”

“No castle?”

“Of course not. The moon is cold, has nothing. That is why it is a punishment.”

Time must have passed between the end of Tai-gong’s story and my unsatisfied reaction, but I could only remember breaking out into a full-body thrash in protest of Chang-e’s treatment. There was more kicking of that poor table, pain in my toes and a high pitched squealing, words fought each other to be heard but perished together in my throat. It was a tantrum that barely lasted half a minute. I calmed after tearing out a page of Tai-gong’s storybook with my citrus stained hands. Maybe I wasn’t yet six years old.

All the same, it somehow became one of my favorite stories, and Tai-gong told it every year on the night of the Mid-Autumn Festival, the two of us out on the fire escape tracking an ever elusive full moon through rainclouds and cityscape. He changed the details often, since according to him, no Chinese story stayed constant. One rendition had the ten suns as the Jade Emperor’s sons; another said Houyi and Chang-e were immortals from the start. Chang-e still flew to the moon at the end of every version, but one year Tai-gong allowed her a rabbit for a companion, another year a woodcutter friend. One time when I was much older, Tai-gong had a little too much sorghum wine and told me Chang-e met Buzz Aldrin and danced for him in exchange for English lessons.

Chapter 4

There were six stops from Penn Station to Canal Street, two if I took the express. When everyone else dashed across the platform to squeeze into the Q, I opted for a seat on the suddenly spacious N-local, my mid-size suitcase safely nestled between my knees. In one of the busiest stations of the city, 2 p.m. foot traffic was only marginally better than during rush hour. After spending months in Long Island, I grew weary of facing ceaseless torrents of Manhattan pedestrians.

The plastic yellow and orange seats arranged in rows of back-to-back L's were a small comfort. The MTA was slowly fading out old fashioned trains that screeched on the tracks for sleeker models with icy blue benches, digital displays and automated announcements. I'd ridden the new trains a few times during my last trip home, but they were too bright, too open, and lacked terse graffiti keyed onto windows grown opaque with age.

I closed my eyes and let the sway of the train rock me. I could have slept if the ride was longer. I could always sleep on a New York City subway train. For four years of high school, my daily hour-long commute to the Bronx involved a 20-pound backpack at my feet, a flimsy grip on a grimy metal pole, and a dense crowd to prop me up so I could doze.

I'd slept a little on the LIRR into the city, but my all-nighter was making itself known throughout my aching body. It took fifteen hours of uninterrupted work, but I'd completely cleared my weekend, made time for the following two days, time to hang up

decorations, sieve through grocery stores for the best deals, time to prepare a long hot-pot dinner at home on Saturday, watch rental tapes of Hong Kong mafia movies, dim sum on Sunday, and for the first time since high school, go to bingo with Tai-gong at the senior citizen center.

As much as I wanted to try and be a good child that weekend, dread was inevitable when the train stopped at Canal. The station platform was jam-packed with commuters, most of whom didn't bother waiting for me to step off before pushing their way in. I was a nuisance with my suitcase in tow, too spoiled by the suburbs to remember that in New York, you had to take what you wanted, even if it was something as mundane as a way out of a subway train.

It was a straight dash from the station to Mulberry Street, head down, chin tucked, shoulders stiff. I only briefly took in the February chill, milder than a Long Island winter. Chinatown was an ever shifting obstacle course, more so with the Lunar New Year merely days away, but my muscles remembered what my brain could not, knew how to twist and turn and shuffle to avoid puddles and cars and pedestrians with their shopping bags and baby strollers and tourist maps spread wide in the air. In front of a bakery at the corner of Mulberry, my feet rose a little higher to avoid an uneven crack that should have been there. I'd walked that crack since eighth grade but it must have been repaired some time during the six months since I'd been away. The unmarred concrete almost halted me mid-step, had I knew better than to stop in the midst of a raging stream.

The deluge ended once I was within my old apartment building, a red bricked, five-story relic from the 1890's. The front entrance was a metal door made purposely

narrow to allow for more storefront space along the building's ground floor. The hallways inside were cramped and barely lit, with no windows to let in natural light. Every floor packed in four apartments, accessible by a sole wooden flight of stairs, each step worn shallow in the middle with deep, smooth grooves. The dark brown banisters were shiny like varnished silver, polished by nothing but decades of palms coming and going.

We lived on the fourth floor—Tai-gong, Dad, and I squeezed into a one-bedroom apartment for eighteen years. Tai-gong had first moved in sometime in the 60's, and the building, while shoddy and roach infested and probably not fit for living, was rent-controlled and more than anything Dad could have asked for when he was left alone with a baby two weeks before he turned eighteen. As the years went on, the building's lack of an elevator was beginning to give us cause for worry.

A slow and heavy set of footsteps echoed down from above. I stood still and hoped it was a new neighbor, someone who wouldn't stop to extend fortuitous blessings or ask after my love life and force me to tap into my shallow reserve of broken Mandarin.

“Oh, look at that,” a voice came from above. “Ren-Ren's home.”

Big brown eyes smirked at me from the landing between floors. Christina still wore her hair in a messy bun, her nose perpetually scrunched up in a manner that conveyed both disgust and playfulness. Aside from her protruding belly, obvious beneath her overcoat, she didn't seem to have changed much since she had moved in to live with her mother in Queens, halfway through high school.

“Hi,” I said, and couldn't think of anything more to say.

“Oh, c'mon. No? Really, nothing?”

I stammered. My neck hurt from looking up to her.

“Twenty-nine weeks!”

“Uh. Congratulations!” I said with more exuberance than probably necessary. I couldn’t look away from her midsection.

Christina laughed, and made her way down with both hands on the banister. A thin yellow band encircled her left ring finger.

“Yeah, whatever, I can see it on your face. Happy New Year. How long you here for?”

“Just the weekend. And no, really, Christy, congratulations. How, how long have you been married?”

“Oh, five months?” She smirked wider. “Got another two-year-old sleeping upstairs, by the way. Figured we’d get hitched once I knew we were getting another one. Good guy, S’ing. Vietnamese though. My grandma wouldn’t let us come for New Year’s until he put a ring on it, then she got all mad ‘cause he’s not Chinese.” She rolled her eyes.

I apologized for not sending my well wishes. Christina punched me on the arm. “You didn’t know. It wasn’t like Grandma was gonna go around the neighborhood bragging about her bastard grandkid. Great-grandkid? Anyway, where you been, Ren?”

“Out on Long Island. Um, SUNY, one more year until I get my B.S.”

“Oh yeah? I know lots of people spouting BS but no one had to go to college for it. SUNY? What the fuck happened? We all thought you were heading for an Ivy!”

Christina was as loud as I remembered. Even in kindergarten, she was constantly cursing and arguing with teachers at school, and if she got into trouble at home with her mother, Christina made sure the whole building knew when she was undergoing the feather duster treatment. Naturally, she had a flock of girls orbiting around her tarnished glow, and I was no exception. But we were children no longer. No part of me wanted to be in that dark and cold hallway admitting to anyone who might have been listening behind thin walls, that I was too dumb for a free ride to Columbia, and too poor to gamble hundred-dollar application fees on private schools that I couldn't afford in the first place.

I gave her my best non-committal response. She had to go out and grab some green onions, but made me promise to drop by later to see her two-year-old. I agreed readily. If nothing else, Christina's grandmother made the best dumplings money could not buy.

I wobbled up the stairs hauling my suitcase with about as much finesse as Christina and her belly. The second floor was decked out in red and gold streamers, a paper lantern origamied from red envelopes hung from an old nail in the ceiling. Widow Cheung's door was ajar on the third floor. She hollered something at me in Hokkien; I pretended not to hear, following instead a pungent wave of ginseng and bitter licorice up to the fourth floor, where the apartments were purposefully labeled 5A to 5D. Superstition born of a verbal pun on "four" and "death" ensured most Chinatown buildings had a vanished floor, its residents exiled to an alternate dimension unafraid of taunting bad luck.

I fished out my set of keys. There wouldn't be anyone home to open the door for me. Dad was probably doing his maitre'd shift at the restaurant and Tai-gong had ballroom dancing class on Friday afternoons. I'd arrived a few hours earlier than I planned.

The old doorway itself was welcome enough with its dents and scratches, two reinforced locks, and caked-on layers of vermilion paint. I could still see remnants of a row of Hello Kitty stickers I'd stuck onto the doorframe. Pasted on an angle above the peephole was a square sheet of scarlet displaying Tai-gong's elegant black calligraphy. The character for "fortune" was intentionally hung upside-down, another pun—so I'd been taught—to chase away evil and beckon luck and wealth.

Our exterior decoration was still missing the traditional poetic element—two vertical scrolls sandwiching the doorway and one horizontally overhead. Tai-gong tried explaining to me once, that the vertical scrolls should be a rhyming couplet containing equal numbers of syllables, and the horizontal one must be succinct, four syllables long, conveying some sentiment spreading good cheer.

Instead of buying them for five bucks at the local Chinatown gift shops, Tai-gong preferred composing and writing out his own New Year *dui lian*. He'd read his finished drafts to me, archaic Chinese that sounded like drumbeats before a battle, somehow majestic despite my incomprehension. When it came time to write, I served as ink-stone grinder, and was allowed to stay and watch only if I said nothing and kept absolutely still.

I was almost done unlocking the second bolt when Dad pulled the door open from the inside. He stood there, dressed in brown slacks and a green sweater instead of his black-and-white work uniform.

“What are you doing here?” I fumbled.

Dad shook his head. “Well, I still live here, unlike you.” He reached out to hug me. Dad was an infrequent but enthusiastic hugger who aimed to suffocate. I couldn’t apologize until I burrowed out of his chest for air.

“Sorry, Dad,” I said. “I didn’t think you’d get off work so early. The sun’s still up.”

Dad flashed me a cryptic smile. He took my suitcase away, making room at the entrance for me to finally notice the presence of a familiar stranger, my grandfather.

Rising from his seat at the dining table, Grandfather made an awkward attempt at a simultaneous wave and head-nod. “Hello,” he tried, then switched to Mandarin, “*Do you remember me?*”

Even if I didn’t, the familial resemblance was undeniable. He was lanky like both Tai-gong and Dad, the few age-spots visible on his forearms failed to disguise the strength yet alive in those sinews. He must have been in his mid-60’s, but like Tai-gong, still had a full head of hair that made him seem young for his age. He had Tai-gong’s forehead and jaw, and Dad definitely got his long, pointy ears from him. The dipped arch of his nose was unique. Unlike Dad, who was a tireless workaholic, Grandfather carried around a weariness visible in the hunch of his spine.

I looked to Dad for answers, but he was bent low next to the garbage bin, cleaning off salt and residual slush from the bottom of my suitcase with a paper towel, his stiff back presented to both of us.

“*Ninhao*,” I greeted, using the politer form of “*ni*” just like Dad had taught me. Etiquette demanded that I call him by his title next, an acknowledgement of his generational superiority, but I couldn’t remember the Mandarin for “Grandfather,” and I knew it wasn’t anything like “Tai-gong,” which actually meant something like “Grand Master”.

My Mandarin refused to be called. That part of me had long been overwhelmed, pressed and repressed by the constant flow of chemistry jargon in classrooms, and guilty promises whispered to Ramon beneath bed-sheets. When I still lived at home, the two languages used to slide together like the dimpled edges of puzzle pieces. They had made sense to me once upon a time. Now, listening was easy, but the words themselves refused to be called.

“*He’ll stay with us for a week*,” Dad finally cut into the silence, using Mandarin for Grandfather’s sake, but still not looking at either of us. “He’s sleeping on my bed in the bedroom with Tai-gong, and I’ll take the couch. Sorry if I snore at night. Everything in your room is still the same. I laundered the sheets and pillowcases yesterday.”

My “room” was a third of the living room sectioned off by tall cabinets and shuttered by a floor-length drape, just big enough for a single bed and a dresser. There was no door, no lock, and anyone could enter without permission. Dad was always good about not going in there unless he needed to sweep, but I knew he slept in my bed when I

went away to school. For too long, Dad and Tai-gong split the top and bottom halves of a dissembled adult bunk bed. Add a nightstand and a dresser big enough for two, their bedroom barely had space for a humidifier. It didn't help that Tai-gong's snoring seemed to get worse with age.

The apartment was cramped enough when it was just the three of us. Our dining table had to be placed in the middle of the living room, which had just enough space left to fit a bookshelf, an apothecary table, an old analog TV, and a black pleather loveseat not nearly large enough for Dad to spend the night. Tai-gong had said that once upon a time, the building was mainly used to house "married bachelors," Chinese-American workers separated from their wives in the old country. Naturally, individual apartments were divvied up and reconstructed to squeeze in as many renters as possible. We had it good in comparison. At one point in junior high, Christina's family managed to house four adults and two teenagers in their apartment.

It was clear that there was no space for him, but Grandfather smiled at us anyway, like he knew exactly where he wasn't supposed to be, but figured he could push his luck.

I shrugged off my jacket and untied my boots. My indoor slippers were waiting atop the sparse shoe rack. Grandfather pulled out a chair for me by his side. There was nowhere else to sit. The loveseat in the living room was occupied by a brown briefcase and a small pile of clothing.

"How old are you now?" he asked.

The appropriate answer came like drizzling rain, soft and slow. “*Twenty-three in the new year.*”

Grandfather nodded happily, like he was proud I’d remembered the rules of *xusui*—that according to our traditions, we were born as one-year-olds and should add another year to our age at the turn of the Lunar calendar. His right hand twitched above the dining table. I drew my hands to a safer spot beneath my thighs.

If only our apartment was bigger, if only I had a room of my own, I could have run from three generations of silence. While he was happy to study me, perhaps attempting to find traces of himself in my half-blood features, all I could see were his tobacco stained fingertips, and a dress shirt in need of an iron. It was unnerving to sit beside him, a relative stranger in whom I could see hints of my only family members.

Dad would have wanted me to ignore him, and I felt familial loyalty demanding that I comply. But I couldn’t unsee the laugh lines at the corners of Grandfather’s eyes, the wrinkled dimples on his cheeks as he looked upon me, head nodding some silent approval at the mere sight of me.

He must have realized that he wasn’t wanted here, that he was only going to antagonize Tai-gong, be ignored by Dad, and get in the way of shopping, cleaning, food preparation, and candid conversation of which he’d given up the day he walked out when Dad refused to put me up for adoption.

Grandfather’s mouth opened and shut a few times without producing any sound. Dad jumped in before Grandfather could find the words he wanted. “Ren, put your coat and shoes back on. We are going shopping.”

“You and me? Us two? Tai-gong usually goes with me.” Dad never had the time.

He jabbed his thumb twice toward the bedroom. “Tai-gong is sleeping from his medicine. He won’t be up for a while.”

“Medicine for what exactly?” I asked. Dad glared back, unimpressed at my tone. Dad didn’t usually hide things from me.

“Ren, Tai-gong is sick. It’s not serious, but he’s sick. Don’ gimme tha’ voice.” Dad’s accent slipped whenever he got agitated. “He didn’ want me to mention it to you. Old people get sick. We should be lucky it’s just a cold.”

I wanted to protest that Tai-gong wasn’t an “old” person. He did tai-chi every weekday morning and had plenty of energy left for calligraphy, English lessons, ballroom dancing, and flirting with women of all ages around Chinatown. He climbed up and down four flights of stairs multiple times a day. Even his cane, which he’d had for decades, was mainly for decorative purposes.

But once I slowed down to think about it, I remembered Tai-gong was eighty-four that year, would be eighty-six soon by way of how the Chinese counted age.

Grandfather looked back and forth between Dad and me, smile dimming at the atmosphere though he couldn’t comprehend the content. One of his teeth was missing from the bottom row. His presence made me feel like Dad and I were butting heads in public, that our conversation was unseemly for an innocent third party.

Father looked at grandfather, “*We’re going shopping. You can browse the bookshelf.*”

Grandfather was still smiling when we left him there in our little home, Dad's right arm wound like iron around my shoulders. We headed down the hallway.

“What's he doing here, Dad?”

Dad followed the change in topic without a glitch, neither of us looked back. “I don't know. For New Year's?”

“Are you okay with that?”

He shrugged. “Let's go to the store. Maybe if we leave for long enough, he'll be gone by the time we come back.”

Chapter 5

On Saturday, Tai-gong woke up coughing and hungry at 5 in the morning. I heated up a bowl of sugared congee and chatted at him by his bedside until he drifted back to sleep two hours later. Deliriously low on rest myself, I was more talkative than usual.

My long, mostly nonsensical monologue consisted primarily of exaggerated complaints about eccentric professors and megalomaniacal TA's, the usual go-to topics whenever Tai-gong called to check up on me. Tai-gong wouldn't have cared about convective and diffusive gas transport in human lungs, but he did congratulate me when I told him about the summer job interview my adviser recommended me for at a start-up biomedical company in Hoboken.

Under the bright streetlamp lights that seeped through our dollar-store curtains, Tai-gong looked lost without his reading glasses, his eyes foggy and defeated. His sighs were more frustration than surrender, like he was angry at his untouched to-do list with only five days left before the New Year. There was the *dui lian* he had yet to write, wonton skins to be stuffed, red envelopes to be passed out to the neighbors' kids. I had wanted to ask about great-grandmother during this trip, if only to get her name and complete the character list for my recitation, but Tai-gong had questions and requests and I was too busy agreeing to everything.

Tai-gong wasn't my only audience. A few feet away, Grandfather lay prone on Dad's bed, and occasionally, I'd look over and catch him staring up at our low-hanging

ceiling, eyes wide, face blank and not yet overburdened by wrinkles. He listened, and didn't move a muscle. Since he was awake already, I didn't bother to keep up my whisper. I wondered how much he'd understood.

Dad fired up the stove sometime after 6:30, his usual waking hour. For as long as I could remember, Dad would sleep no more than five hours a night, what with his restaurant jobs finishing in the late evenings and his delivery route starting around sunrise. That Saturday, he was able to stay home for the first time, no more kitchens to scrub or shifts to cover. He'd notified his workplaces that he was quitting, was only going in to help out until the end of the holiday rush.

It was all news to me. Dad had confessed while we browsed the aisles of Golden Gate Supermarket that he'd wanted it to be a surprise. He was quivering with excitement in front of the water-cresses, when he finally couldn't hold it in anymore.

"I'm starting my own business!"

I thought it was a joke at first. Dad had always worked menial jobs around Chinatown where his more than proficient English was in high demand and no one cared that he didn't finish high school. He'd never expressed a desire to do more, to be more than a pair of hands that brought home checks and bundles of oily cash week after week.

And now, along with two co-workers, Dad was planning on starting a shuttle van business between all the satellite Chinatowns in New York, from Canal to Flushing with the intention of expanding service to Elmhurst and Bensonhurst, cheaper than a yellow cab and twice as fast as the subway.

"Are you sure it's feasible, and profitable?" I asked.

“Think about it, Ren. If we charge five dollars per person for twenty minute ride to Flushing, we can fill the van with seven people one way, that’s a great deal for customers and not too much gas money for us. And you can’t forget the tips.”

I’d grunted. It was not the reaction Dad wanted. He quickly added that they already had a CPA and a lawyer on hand, they’d gotten the necessary permits and were just looking for vehicles now.

I was especially shocked when he showed me his driver’s license. I hadn’t known he was learning in the first place.

Dad had never been so animated.

“If you need help with anything, Dad, looking over documents or something, I…”

“No, no, no.” Dad stood a little straighter. “Your job is school. I told you, we have a CPA and a lawyer, ABCs like you, but speak better Mandarin. How are your grades?”

I’d managed to stay above the fray, however slightly. My B-average wasn’t terrible by any means, but to Dad I answered, “Passable,” because I knew I could do better.

Dad asked the man behind a row of tanks for their liveliest carp, and didn’t react to my reply. He’d only ever inquire, but not demand anything from me, hadn’t asked to see a report card since 5th grade. To repay his trust, I never hid my failures.

It was more difficult sharing certain successes with Dad. We were almost at the cashiers when I found enough courage to tell him about the possible summer opportunity in Hoboken.

“Why?” Dad growled. “Do you need money? I put money away for you in Tai-gong’s safety deposit box. Don’t worry, my shuttle business is other money.”

I had to look away from the grey in my father’s hairline, which had gone from creeping to full-on assault since I last saw him. He was not yet forty. We’d had an agreement years ago, that I’d go to a state school to save on tuition, and he’d make sure I wouldn’t want for money while studying. I’d wanted to take out a student loan like everybody else, but the suggestion only drove Dad into an overtime frenzy. He’d been pinching pennies ever since I was born, and I knew Tai-gong put aside a certain amount of his Social Security checks for my sake, after twenty years, I’d figured it was time.

Dad wasn’t having it. “Come home this summer. Take care of Tai-gong when I’m not home. He is growing old and can’t go out everyday anymore. Come home and keep him company. Let him read stories to you like you were small. He misses reading to you.” He showed me his back, and that was the end of that.

For breakfast Dad, Grandfather and I ate steamed pork buns with pickled radish on the side, as well as small servings of microwaved pancakes which Grandfather didn’t touch. The syrup was too sweet, he said. Soon the sun rose and colored our apartment bright crimson, a lucky omen for the day.

We spent the morning cleaning, Dad and me. He wiped down the furniture with a wet rag cut from a shirt he’d owned since the late 80’s. I swept the floors after sprinkling them lightly with water, so the dust would gather in obedient clumps instead of rising into our noses and hair. End-of-the-year cleaning all had to be done before the last day of the old year, lest the New Year become tainted by last year’s griefs and sins.

It was a sunny day in spite of the cold. Grandfather took off early to play *xiang qi* in the park. Dad hadn't asked him for help with anything, only could he please not turn on the TV while Tai-gong was still sleeping. I'd stayed quiet watching their terse exchange. After he left, Dad said to me, almost like an afterthought: "He's shameless."

I had no attachments to Grandfather, but Dad's condemnation felt outrageous. I had been taught by Dad himself, that it was disrespectful to murmur such things about those belonging to an older generation.

"Maybe he'll leave soon," I offered.

Dad scoffed. "He'll leave right now if we give him money."

"Maybe he's in a tough spot."

"Shameless. A 60-year-old man looking for money on New Year's. He should be giving *you* a red envelope."

Dad knew I never cared for that. With no extended family, it had always been impossible for me to amass a fortune over the holiday like other Chinese kids. Usually Tai-gong gave me a hundred, and Dad, two. If I followed Dad to work I'd get a ten or, if business had been flowing, a twenty from his bosses and married co-workers. Everything I collected unfailingly went back to Dad, who'd put the money into my college fund. While tradition dictates that we were supposed to receive red envelopes on New Year's until marriage, after high school, it had started to feel like charity.

I signaled Dad over to help move Tai-gong's apothecary table. We usually kept the surface clean except for a bowl of fruit, but it was now clustered with Grandfather's

toiletries and Chinese travel magazines. One was bookmarked to a page on the Tarim Basin in the Xin Jiang Region.

“Do you know where he’s been since the last time he came around?” I asked.

Dad eyed the travel guide. “I don’t ask.”

“Do you think he’s been traveling around China?”

“If he has money for that, he wouldn’t come here looking for help.”

“Did he actually say he wants money? Maybe he missed you, Dad, and Tai-gong.”

I wasn’t presumptuous enough to suggest Grandfather missed me as well, not when my birth coincided with him leaving in the first place.

Dad dropped his rag into the mixing bowl he’d filled with soapy water, a smattering of dirt floated to the surface.

“It’s why he came back last time,” he said.

I’d stopped sweeping. Last time I saw Grandfather was also the first time. I was six, it was the summer before I was to start elementary school, and Grandfather had appeared without warning. I remembered Tai-gong hitting Grandfather’s ankles with his cane, and Grandfather took it without complaint. He was much younger then.

He’d brought me presents last time, a brown lacquered lunch box that I eventually used to store jewelry, and a pair of black leather shoes half a size too small. When I cried from the pain of squeezing into those shoes, Grandfather joked that my feet were too big for a proper Chinese lady, that maybe I should endure the pain so I could grow up to be beautiful. It was the first time I learned about the practice of foot-binding, a horror story from a long disconnected past used to scare little girls who wouldn’t sit still. When Dad

learned that Grandfather's teasing had made me cry, for the first time he got angry enough to shout. I remembered being both relieved and devastated upon giving away my pretty new shoes to Dad's coworker's kid, but I couldn't remember seeing Grandfather leave.

Dad took a seat on the floor and got really quiet. The veins on his forearms jumped as he roughly mussed up his overgrown hair. I would need to bring out the whetstone soon for the scissors. To save money, I'd been cutting Dad's hair since I was twelve.

He was hesitant to look me in the eyes, a rare evasive maneuver for him. Perhaps because he was still a child himself when he moved to the States, or because he'd wanted to make sure I wouldn't lack emotional attention growing up in a home without feminine influence, Dad had always been more open with his daughter than most immigrant fathers I knew around Chinatown. Aside from the subject of my part-time jobs, Dad used to calmly discuss every little thing with me. When the other kids at school would exchange brave tales of enduring corporal punishment with rolling pins or coat hangers, I would never have anything to share. Dad preferred the method of "talking it out."

I knew I shouldn't have expected him to share everything with me. I was not his peer. When the silence stretched out for too long, Dad, sitting on the floor like a child who'd broken a window with his ball, told me that Grandfather had stopped for a very brief visit the summer before I left for university. Only then, Grandfather had brought along two bookies from some basement horse racing den in East Broadway, and left with

nearly fifteen thousand dollars in cash that Dad had been saving in a cookie jar over the years.

“Old news,” Dad said, though he carried its weight like it was new.

Fifteen thousand dollars would have afforded me two years’ worth of rent. I couldn’t bring myself to say that out loud. Instead I asked, “Does Tai-gong know?”

Dad nodded. “He was so mad I thought someone was going to die that day in this apartment.”

My cheeks grew hot. I took a seat next to him, broomstick still in hand.

Dad apologized. “That was going to be your money,” he said. “A couple of grown-ups screwed up and you lost it all. He paid, I think, an eighth of it back. We don’t expect the rest.”

Grandfather’s frayed toothbrush sat on the apothecary table looking worn and yellow. I thought about how Dad had worked at least three simultaneous jobs throughout my teenage years, had missed weekends and birthdays and parent-teacher meetings. I considered scrubbing the floor with that brush. When I whispered aloud the petty revenge plan, Dad laughed, and I started to cry.

“Oh. Stop crying. Stop crying now.” Dad could handle most things with aplomb, tears were the exception.

“You were right,” I said, “he is pretty shameless.”

“Yeah.”

“But you taught me, we don’t turn him away.”

“Unless he decides to leave on his own.”

Still, Dad suggested throwing Grandfather's belongings down the fire escape, then changed the topic to school with his next sentence. In our family, once a money subject was dropped, we aimed to never return to it again. Tai-gong knew a saying that money was like warm breath in winter, there was no endeavor more useless than trying to hold it within our hands.

When Dad got a little silly and asked if I had a boyfriend hidden away on Long Island, I laughed off the question and prompted him to talk about his newfound entrepreneurship, which he was more than happy to go on and on.

It was now February, but Ramon hadn't stopped by my apartment or even called since Christmas break. A week after the new semester began, I'd snuck into the dormitory where Ramon stayed as a Resident Adviser, something I once promised him I would never do. It was where Jenna stayed whenever she visited.

The dormitory hallways had been obscenely cheerful, baby blue walls decorated by poster announcements in all colors of the rainbow. There seemed to be a whiteboard hanging on every door, some displaying inspirational quotes, others scribbled with saucy messages that bordered on pornographic.

I scurried onward as fast as I could, feeling like a thief roaming through Ramon's territory. Finding his room took longer than I'd anticipated, and I was set to turn tail every time someone came my way, afraid they would discover that I did not belong.

The "AWAY" notice on Ramon's door was a little like absolution. I might have giggled from a rush of relief. But, the next few weeks of waiting weren't any easier. I

slept at odd hours and missed three classes. Meals didn't sit right and I lost interest in tending to the cleanliness of my apartment. It was the waiting that I hated.

Coming back for New Year's provided a propitious distraction. I'd looked forward to the consistency of home, with its routines and cycles, an asylum cemented in memories and protected from solitude.

Grandfather came back to the apartment for lunch. I ate next to Tai-gong's bed to avoiding sitting through yet another stilted family meal. I heard Grandfather's umpteen attempts at conversation in the living room, all were shot down with a grunt or two.

Tai-gong drifted in and out of sleep until Dad fed him something that knocked him out. When Dad went into work to help with a temporary afternoon shift, Grandfather turned his attention onto me. Frazzled, I remembered Christina's invite to stop by and see her kid, and left him in the apartment to the company of Tai-gong's thunderous snores.

I knocked on Christina's door shortly before 2, but still managed to intrude on the Tsai family's lunch time. It was a work in progress, like most holiday meals, with everyone squeezed into the dining-room-slash-kitchen and the food was made fresh and cooked in batches. Eating during the Lunar holiday was often a day-long marathon event, and lunch was merely a precursor.

Christina's mom waved me in, greeted at me in Cantonese and shoved a red envelope into my hands. In return, I gave one to Christina for her child—eighteen dollars,

and another to her teenage brother—just eight. The envelopes were purchased bulk from a shop downstairs, cinnabar red with a golden design of a primping rooster, that year’s zodiac animal; the bills were crispy new ones Tai-gong had gotten out of the bank weeks before.

Mama Tsai had a good fifteen years on my dad, but one wouldn’t know it with her dyed and permed black tresses and newly tattooed eye-lines. She looked like she’d shed twenty pounds since the last time I saw her, and was dressed more stylishly, too. She never smiled much, but I knew she liked me enough when she pinched my left cheek and said, “Ooh, Ren, you fat now.”

Mama Tsai went back to tending a pot of dumplings while chopping up more ginger for the dipping sauce, taking bites from her bowl whenever she could. Christina’s brother, Kevin, took over a floor corner with a laptop across his feet, playing “Counter-Strike” and ignoring everyone present. Grandma Tsai sat at their square dining table, her tiny, flour-stained fingers flew from chopsticks to dough to filling, crafting identical, bulging dumplings that stood in neat little rows like soldiers awaiting inspection. A 13-inch TV/VCR set played a muted Korean soap opera. Grandma Tsai looked away from the subtitles to call out *Wishing Many Fortunes* to me, one of the few Cantonese phrases I knew, which I then butchered in return.

“You’ve eaten lunch yet?” Christina asked as I took a seat next to Grandma Tsai. “Mom’s cooking the beef-vermicelli ones. There’s also coriander-pork frozen in the fridge if you want that instead.”

I declined, having had a substantial lunch at home. Yet, fifteen minutes later, I was wolfing down my seventh beef-vermicelli dumpling.

The Tsai's dining table was draped in a beige cloth and set upon by a sheet of glass a quarter-inch thick. Dozens of family pictures were pinned underneath the glass top in no particular pattern, some black-and-white, mostly colored. Christina and I used to giggle over a sepia rendition of her father in bell-bottom pants, but that picture was evicted from the collage after the divorce. Decades of New York City summer humidity had melted most of the pictures to the glass. Attempts at removal almost certainly guaranteed destruction.

Christina introduced her husband, a tall beam of a man who had been so tanned that even in February, I could still see the line where his watch should have been. S'ing sat on a stool behind Christina with their son on his lap, whom everyone insisted on calling "Little Pup" until his 3rd birthday thanks to an antiquated superstition that animal nicknames would trick child-snatching demons. Christina somehow coerced me into holding Little Pup, but he struggled like a bull would against a matador and bawled his way back to his father within seconds.

S'ing used to be a Nguyen, apparently, but like Christina's father and grandfather, had changed his last name to Tsai when he married into their family. He spoke to me in quiet mumbles, seemingly content to be ignored by the Tsai women. I couldn't tell what S'ing's specialty was, but I knew he had to have one because all the Tsai women were artisans, and the men they married practiced traditional trades as well, or Grandma Tsai would have overthrown Hell itself before she let him into the family.

Out of the whole family, only Christina's mother was still putting her art to practical use, her needlework had gotten her a job at a sweatshop when she first arrived in New York, and she'd stayed in the business ever since. In the living room, there hung a framed piece of yellow silk embroidered with exactly 60 hydrangeas and 60 chrysanthemums, a birthday gift to Grandma Tsai and a testament to Mama Tsai's skills. Once, when we were in elementary school, Mama Tsai took Christina and me to her job at a nondescript warehouse on the border of Queens and Brooklyn. Mama Tsai had made sure that I understood she was the lead sample-maker, not a grunt like the other women. It was a random day during summer vacation, and Christina and I spent it playing with discarded rags or chasing around other tag-along kids until the foreman yelled at us to shut up.

For Christina's sixteenth birthday, Mama Tsai spent a month making her a *qi-pao* by hand. On its back, she'd embroidered a body-length phoenix, its nine tails stitched in no less than a hundred shades and colors. Christina had told me back then that she wanted to wear it for her wedding. I wondered if she did. I never asked. My sixteen-year-old self had wished that Christina would get too fat to fit into the *qi-pao*. At sixteen, it wasn't easy being around Christina and her family.

But when we were little and when I still believed I didn't lack anything, I was practically a third child of the Tsais.

When Grandpa Tsai was still alive, I'd spent hours watching him work, wetting and drying and cutting and tying and folding strands of bamboo as thin as hair into dolls and animal figurines that fit into our dirty, quaking palms.

Grandpa Tsai sold his dolls along Canal Street for a while in the early 90's, before tourism really bloomed in Chinatown. When we moved on to Middle School, he'd given up and decided to collect cans and bottles for recycling money, even after he got sick. He'd still made bamboo dolls in his spare time, and tried to teach the art to Kevin, who had always been too engrossed in his Gameboy to pay attention.

The Tsai family home was a veritable shrine dedicated to their crafts. From their steamy kitchen, I only had to look up to see Grandpa Tsai's figurines pinned to random spots on the walls, or placed on a soap dish, or hung by a hook in the ceiling. A monkey, an ox, and a pig within view rested in the exact spots they had been since Christina and I were in high school. The apartment was like a stage-set, stuck in time. I knew if I checked their bathroom, there would be a straw tiger prowling on the second shelf of their medicine cabinet.

Before the divorce, Christina's dad was a sugar painter, but he had even more trouble finding a way to sell his trade than Grandpa Tsai. After a few weeks of being chased by NYPD for not having the proper food vending permits, Papa Tsai put away his wok and spatula and got a job waiting tables.

On certain holidays, if Papa Tsai was in a good mood, he'd unpack his tools and make sugar art for the neighborhood kids from his own kitchen. Their whole apartment would be crammed with children shouting orders in English, Cantonese, Mandarin, or Hakka, while Papa Tsai heated up barley sugar on the stove. The boys usually wanted the snarling dragon, and Papa Tsai would nod with an unlit cigarette dangling from his mouth, spoon a precise amount of molten sugar with his ladle, and draw dragon after

dragon on a perfectly smooth, cold metal sheet. He'd adhere a wooden skewer onto the finished product, then chip it off the metal with his spatula. We girls were more unrestrained with our requests, and would ask for flowers, birds, kittens, or pandas. Papa Tsai even learned to make Hello Kitty for us, but balked at the idea of a sugar Barbie. No matter what we got, no one wanted to be the first to eat theirs, and often times, dragons and sparrows would bump into each other in the great jostle of bodies and shatter into pieces on the Tsai's apartment floor. On those evenings, one could hear Mama Tsai cursing well into the night about their ant problem.

As for Christina, she studied paper cutting under her grandmother. Even as I sat by, stuffing my face, Christina was wordlessly working on a sheet of red stained paper with a pair of sewing scissors. Christina was a talker, except when she was cutting. When she caught me peeking, she slid over a sheet and commanded her husband to fetch another pair of scissors.

Christina tried teaching me when we were kids, but I had neither the dexterity nor patience for the art, and wound up cutting myself more than once. She was doing easy stuff back then too, formulaic symmetrical ideograms, but somewhere along the years had moved on to forming full images in her mind then rendering them with slight snips of the hand.

In under twenty minutes, Christina had cut a palm-sized picture of two children in traditional garbs playing amongst a field of flowers. I tried to crumble up my four-cornered snowflake, which Grandma Tsai snatched up, took one good look at, and just laughed and laughed.

“I can’t believe you kept up with it,” I said to Christina. Grandma Tsai was still giggling over my snowflake.

Christina looked pointedly at her brother. “It’s our cultural tradition. I know *I* would regret it, if I let it die out.”

Kevin didn’t look up from his screen. “It’s not gonna die out, stupid. Thousands of people in China know how to do that shit.”

Little Pup mimicked, “Sit! Sit!”

Mama Tsai waved a wet ladle at me. “Wan’ mo’?”

I shook my head extra fast. “No, thank you. I am really full.”

“Okay,” she said, then switched to Cantonese.

“Mom said she’ll pack you some for your dad.”

Arguing would have been just a waste of breath. Conversation continued to fly around me between the women, of which I was only able to pick up bits and pieces. Chinatown was still very much a center for Cantonese speakers, and growing up I had always been the odd one out. S’ing and I shared a smile. He was probably even more clueless than I was.

There was talk of *mahjong* after dinner, something concerning green onions, and Grandma Tsai was gesturing wildly at the living room about a bad thing Christina had forgotten.

“Ugh! Ren, help me up.” Christina was on her feet before I could react. She put her paper cutting and a roll of cellophane tape into my hands and bumped me with her belly, giggling, until I went toward the direction she desired.

She ordered me to paste the cut image facing outward onto a windowpane, even though the only thing outside that particular window was just another brick wall.

“Grandma forgot to light granddaddy’s incense today and it’s somehow my fault. Ol’ batty.” Christina grumbled as she dug through a desk drawer for incense and a lighter.

Grandpa Tsai’s shrine hung just above head level facing away from the family kitchen. A black and white framed photo of him was propped up at a slight angle by a three-legged incense holder already filled to the brim with old ashes. Two red electric candles standing on either side of the photo flickered to life with the flip of a switch.

Christina took out three thin incense sticks from the pack, lit them and put out the flame by fanning it with her hand until only an ember was left burning away. “You can’t just blow it out with your breath. It’s impolite to the dead,” she explained, forgetting she’d already taught me that, when we were kids. To be fair, I didn’t have a shrine in my home to pray to everyday.

I stepped in when she couldn’t quite reach the incense holder in her pregnant state. After I jumped out of the way, Christina bowed three times and said aloud, “Hang in there, old man. We’ll burn you some money before the New Year. Got a new great-grandbaby in here, hey? Please protect my babies, and Kevin even though he’s an ass, and S’ing, and Mom, and Dad, wherever he is, and Aunty and Uncle, and Lisa and George and Benny. And I know you’ll always watch over Grandma. Oh, and Ren’s here. Haven’t seen her in a while, I’ll bet. Well, I haven’t, either. Help her find a boyfriend, please, and maybe guide her home more often. Okay, thank you, that is all!”

I paid my respects as well, copying the exact way Christina had pressed her palms together, her eyes shut and waist bent at a slight angle. I was followed by S'ing with Little Pup, and eventually Kevin obliged after rising from his nesting spot, all the while cursing about pins and needles in his legs.

Grandma Tsai wobbled in and handed Christina a stack of letters to read. From underneath their coffee table, she pulled out a large tin container, the same one she'd been using to store goodies since Christina and I were in diapers. Grandma Tsai tempted me with honey glazed hickory nuts, herb roasted sunflower seeds, haw flakes, dried bean curds, and prune candies, one after the other. It seemed like every week, Chinatown supermarkets were importing new-fangled junk food, but Grandma Tsai remained a traditionalist. Some of the stuff in there was arguably several years old. Each offer had to be refused three times before she would give up. She finally grumbled something to Christina and heaved a disappointed sigh.

“Grandma says you're too skinny,” Christina explained. She fingered an opened letter in her hands, “Christ, fifty-dollar rent increase for a new boiler? Bullshit. Hey, Grandma!”

The two of them got into a heated discussion, hands and spittle flying. I withdrew next to S'ing and Little Pup on their seaweed green couch, a tweed treasure Papa Tsai had picked up one morning from a sidewalk in Little Italy.

“So you're in college?” S'ing asked while bouncing Little Pup on his knee. Little Pup stared at me, unblinking. He had S'ing's eyes, long and tapered, wide near the nose.

“Yeah, uh, Chem-E, Chemical Engineering. Sorry, Christina hasn’t told me what you do.”

“Oh, she’s terrible at introductions, isn’t she? I’m a meter maid. Traffic cop, bottom tier. The benefits are good.”

“The benefits are great! I should have married him way sooner.” Letter clutched in hand, Christina shuffled over. S’ing relinquished his seat and put Little Pup in Christina’s arms. She cradled him with ease, swatted him on his bottom when he started to fuss again, kissed him on his forehead when he calmed for her.

“Ren,” she said, rocking Little Pup. “Your Tai-gong’s probably gotten this letter already, but just so you know, the landlord needs his permission to raise his rent. Don’t sign. It says here a new boiler was put in January 5th, but Grandma says she doesn’t feel any warmer at night, at all. They probably got some second-hand garbage and now he wants to squeeze money out of us.”

Grandma Tsai waved a magazine at me and shouted at Christina. She was presumably trying to tidy up by moving stacks of magazines from one shelf to another. The apartment was clean enough however, and, clutter was inevitable. All three of Grandma Tsai’s children had stayed in this apartment at some time, along with their families, and each wave of new occupants left behind pieces of themselves too precious to throw away.

“Okay, okay! Grandma also says don’t let your dad move out of the apartment. He can inherit it from your Tai-gong, and it’ll still be rent-controlled, but only if he’s living there, minimum two years. I swear, Ren, now that Grandma’s here by herself, landlord

comes over every other month to see if she's dead yet." Her scowl donned a conspiratorial gleam. "You remember Mr. Wong on the second floor? Yeah, the one with that weird eye? He croaked last September, and his kids are all out West, right? His apartment now has two white kids from Minnesota living in it! I heard landlord is charging them thirteen-fifty a month! Like, seriously, thirteen-fifty for this shithole?"

Scoffing along felt like the correct response. I was unequivocally outmatched in handling household affairs, and voicing any personal opinions would have immediately exposed my embarrassment. As early as sixth grade, Christina had been going to HPD info meetings with her grandmother, or translating mail for the whole family, or calling insurance companies to argue her grandfather's hospital bills. She was washing dishes by fifteen, waitressing at sixteen, worked two summer jobs throughout high school.

She used to call me lucky because both my father and Tai-gong spoke English and didn't need me. At sixteen, it was difficult arguing with that logic.

At twenty-one, I opted for commiseration, which was water to Christina's thirst for babble. "But you know what," she leaned close, "Grandma's been here for long enough. Mom says we're kicking Kevin out soon as he turns eighteen, then Grandma can move in with us to Woodhaven. She won't have to deal with the stairs every day, and she can watch Jason and the new baby for us. Oh, don't make that face, of course we call him Jason when Grandma can't hear."

Little Pup Jason wriggled out of his mother's hold and staggered back into the kitchen to find his father.

He was barely on the floor before she launched her list of complaints. A pipe leaked for a week on the top floor, and water seeped into Grandma Tsai's bedroom wall, mold grew behind the wallpaper, and they had to pay out of pocket to get it removed, in the last two years the building had been fumigated on two separate occasions for bedbugs, the security bars on their living room window were rusted and loose, but after a whole year of complaints, the landlord had yet to fix it.

Christina monopolized the conversation as usual. Her facial tics and hand gestures revived a dizzying wistfulness for our high school days when we'd find time during the busiest weeks to chat about the boys she was seeing or the bosses who harassed her. I was sure our little talks heartened Christina during her more trying times, but the truth was, after hours buried in SAT and AP study guides, I was the one who hungered for the adventures of her days.

Christina went on to fill me in on the years I missed. She said she and S'ing met while he was writing a parking ticket for her uncle in Flushing. She flirted in hopes of saving her uncle some money, and S'ing put up an admirable resistance.

"Turned out he thought I was underage." Christina giggled. The gold band on her ring finger twinkled. "I mean, yeah, I was just eighteen, but soon as he saw my ID, he was all up on this trying to get my number!"

Kevin shouted from the kitchen, "Gross! We can hear you in here!" S'ing chuckled.

"Shut up, Kev, no one's talking to you. Anyway, what about you? Seeing anyone?"

It was the second time in an hour Christina brought up my love life. She couldn't possibly know about Ramon, but her hand in the rumor jar was deep and far reaching. I cautiously denied being involved in a relationship. She looked at me askance but didn't push.

Before I went home I asked to use the computer in Grandma Tsai's bedroom. I hadn't been able to check my email because both Dad and Tai-gong insisted they had no use for a computer, much less internet access. Dinosaurs, the two of them. Meanwhile, Grandma Tsai had been reconnecting with her old neighbors and friends in China since her kids bought her a webcam, and they'd even upgraded to Broadband service and set up a wireless modem.

Two emails stood out from countless club announcements and student health adverts. One was my Fluid Mechanics professor asking if I was still interested in the Hoboken internship, and if so to send him a copy of my CV. I marked the message as important but did not reply.

The other came from Ramon. My pulse sped even as I read the impersonal subject line. It started with "Hi All," meaning it was an email blast to everyone in Ramon's address book. This was meant to reach hundreds, maybe even thousands. Ramon was a natural at networking.

It was an announcement for a blog Ramon started on behalf of his mother's new charity, a fundraising initiative to buy new textbooks for inner city schools in California. Ramon was diplomatic, sincere, and lauded his mother's qualifications and credibility as if on par with those of a Saint. I bet only a very few who received this email knew Ramon

was almost solely raised by his mother while his father was away more often than not.

Even fewer could claim to have heard Ramon proudly declare himself a “mama’s boy.”

For Ramon’s mother, I went on the website and pledged twenty dollars. I tried not to think about drowning in a crowd of thousands.

Chapter 6

My mother was Dominican. The evening before I left for college, Dad talked about her. His story went something like so.

“We met in high school, when your grandfather and I lived in Queens. It was a high school in a Dominican neighborhood. Everyone spoke Spanish. We dated, and um, you were born, and her parents were upset, so she got sent back to Dominican Republic. And, well, here we are.”

Dad’s account was succinct and factual, as if he was updating me on the minutes of a corporate meeting I’d missed. There was no meat to any of it; he had not inherited Tai-gong’s penchant for storytelling, that was certain.

I imagined it was intended to be a gift of a sort, a show of respect for my blossoming maturity, a confession he’d finally had the courage to disclose. But I’d heard too many of Tai-gong’s spirited tales to be impressed by Dad’s style of narration. And after years of secrecy, the mystery had lost most of its allure.

At the time, I chose to file the knowledge away, because it would be too easy to get mired in the past or be tortured by circumstances I could not change. I only thought of it again after Ramon came into my life and did everything in his power to knock down the barriers of my memories. After Ramon, Dad’s brusque account was no longer enough.

I wanted to love how my parents loved, and Dad hadn’t divulged enough information for me to even paint a mental picture of my mother. This was a story I had to uncover myself.

Dad was lanky back then and didn't have as much muscle tone. I'd seen pictures of him drowning in hand-me-downs. If he was in high school, then this would have been shortly after he and Grandfather emigrated. I could see Grandfather, too proud to accept Tai-gong's offers of a lodging, choosing instead to move to a cheap neighborhood in Queens. They would have had to rent out a strange family's extra bedroom, or a dank basement as less fortunate New Yorkers often had to do. To make ends meet, Grandfather found work in a restaurant, some cheap Chinese take-out place with neon signs in the storefront. I imagine Grandfather made Dad pick up a part-time job that interfered with his grades, which could explain why Dad was always so adamant about my full dedication to schoolwork.

Mom would have sported long, curly locks that give mine their waviness. She was an immigrant, too, and still had close relatives in the Dominican Republic. Unlike Dad, she surely came from a big family and lived in close proximity with her aunts and uncles and cousins and three, no, maybe five brothers and sisters. They fought often because family meant confronting each other's truths, but when Thanksgiving or Christmas rolled around, they took turns squabbling over stuffed turkeys or ribboned presents, and hugs and kisses were free-flowing.

My parents might have been neighbors, classmates. Maybe she noticed him when he first moved in.

Dad didn't speak English at first, and was too shy to try because other kids laughed at his accent when he did. He kept quiet in class to avoid drawing attention to

himself, found a hidden niche to do homework during lunch. He didn't speak, but he listened and learned.

He would have gone home to an empty basement, possibly damp and moldy, definitely dark and cold. Grandfather paid rent in cash and kept all of their savings in a ziplock bag hidden in a rice bucket. Maybe this was when Grandfather started gambling, every small win became a lure for escape from poverty.

They'd get scolded by the landlady for using too much hot water to shower, but they never complained about the stomps of footsteps on their low ceiling. A home was a home. Sometimes Tai-gong would call to touch base, and Grandfather would lie and say everything was hunky-dory. At night they ate leftovers Grandfather brought home from work, greasy, terrible imitations of Chinese food.

Dad got a little chubby around fifteen. Perhaps he was bullied for it, perhaps he got pushed around for being Chinese. I always thought Mom would have jumped to his defense, hair flying, sharp nails glinting, a perfect first encounter. She would have cursed, a lady's mouth that spewed vile insults in both Spanish and English. My mother would have done all the things I had been afraid to do as an adolescent.

They started dating soon after. Mom snuck out of her house to see Dad, failed tests and neglected homework because she constantly had him on her mind. Her parents wouldn't have agreed to it, of course. After all, it was supposed to be a love story, and if I had a say in how it went, Mom would have rebelled against any opposition.

To be worthy of her devotions, Dad took up more shifts at work, probably something in the restaurant business since he knew it so well, and used his earnings to buy her flowers, plastic jewelry from street stands, the new Cyndi Lauper album.

Who else was popular in the 80's? Michael Jackson? Then, Dad would surely have bought her a Michael Jackson album, too.

They would have loved each other in a way that only teenagers were capable—careless, rushed, wrought with iron faith on both sides.

This was where I always stopped. The ending had already been written, no matter how I altered the intermediate parts. Mom's parents were furious when she got pregnant, not "a little upset". Dad, being a minor at the time, would have needed Tai-gong's financial support to be granted custody of me. Mom had to have signed over her rights. Whether or not she was torn by that decision bore no significance in the long run. This was when Grandfather ran. This was when our family became three.

There were irrefutable facts, and a story cemented in facts had little appeal to a storyteller. As Ramon would say, it lacked the necessary romance.

Chapter 7

I got back from Christina's at 4, but it was 10 before we could eat. Dad intended to refuse the evening shift but the restaurant needed all available help. He finally bowed out at around 9:30 and came home with two-hundred dollars in tips.

Dad brought back a container of drunken chicken, chilled and salty with a sweet undertone. It was Tai-gong's favorite. And in case Tai-gong wasn't up for the long process of eating hot pot, Dad also bought green onion pancakes and crab meat steamed buns from a Shanghainese restaurant on Bayard.

It was the first time the four of us ever sat down together for a meal: Tai-gong at the head of the table, I to his right, Dad and Grandfather opposite of me to his left. For a hot pot dinner, everything was to be cooked at the table, and ours consisted of fifteen dishes of raw ingredients laid out in concentric circles around a portable butane stove, with five types of sauces distributed into individual portions, and chopsticks and ladles set beside empty rice bowls. There would be no excuses for Dad to escape into the kitchen under the pretext of preparing more food.

Our protests that Tai-gong should stay in bed were instantly dismissed. With Grandfather's help, it had taken Tai-gong two minutes to shuffle out of bed.

“Oh, *Xiao Ren*, this is, as you say, ‘nice spread’.”

I didn't do much to deserve Tai-gong's compliment. Hot pot was a deceptively elaborate meal that required little culinary talent. It took me less than half an hour to wash the vegetables—bean sprouts, enoki mushrooms, spinach, bokchoy, cauliflower,

green beans; the meat—pork, beef, lamb and prawns—were store bought and pre-sliced; the fried tofu, skewered seaweed strips, vermicelli, wontons and egg dumplings came frozen in festively decorated plastic and styrofoam. My only job was to make everything look presentable.

It was Grandfather who did the real work. He was tending the kitchen stove when I came home from Christina's, making soup stock in a deep pot by boiling beef shoulder bones, which hadn't been on our grocery list so he must have paid for them with his own money.

In a separate pan he stir-fried a host of ingredients in order to prepare *Ma-La* seasoning for the spicy broth. The apartment smelled like he'd thrown every herb in our possession into the mix. Fennel, cinnamon, and garlic were just a few that I was able to distinguish underneath an overwhelming assault of stinging red chili peppers.

He grimaced sheepishly when I sneezed four times in a row. It was pungent inside the apartment even though he'd opened the kitchen and living room windows, and now it was cold as well. The standing fan he'd set up in front of Tai-gong's closed bedroom door to redirect airflow didn't help matters. I had to put on my outdoor jacket. Grandfather, however, was cooking up a sweat in short sleeves.

Bewildered at such an unnecessary thing, I pulled out two plastic packets from a cabinet and said numbly, "*Dad got pre-made soup mix. It's simple this way. Just add water.*"

“Oh, no, no, no!” He tacked on an exaggerated accent for effect. *“This is how it is done in Sichuan. Real hot pot, real spices. No powder. Authentic. Also, beef shoulders are good for you. Your Dad likes to suck out the marrow. Also, back burners don’t work.”*

“*We know.*” They hadn’t worked for years.

It was Grandfather’s turn to sneeze, five times in quick succession.

Despite the freezing temperature and nasal assault, I was salivating. He enticed me closer in order to point out the spices in his sizzling arsenal. *“Sichuan hot pot is led by Ma-La. Ma comes from the Sichuan peppercorns that numb your mouth, La is the chili pepper that burns. But just Ma-La is dull, like a singer who can only perform one song. You need everything else for support. Cinnamon stick, crushed garlic, ginger, cardamom, star anise, bay leaf, fennel, chili bean paste, licorice. You can’t forget them. Taste of soup depends on unity of its components.”*

When he spoke at length like that, Grandfather’s fingers and arms twisted and moved in conjunction with his words. It reminded me of Tai-gong and his bodily antics during story time. A light dawned on the ridge of his brows. His shoulders didn’t droop as much.

Unlike Dad or Tai-gong, Grandfather didn’t slow down when he spoke Mandarin to me. I had to listen hard in order to catch everything, and some of the spices he named were simply outside the scope of my vocabulary. If I showed confusion, Grandfather merely used the ladle in his hand to scoop up the item in question and repeated its name.

That afternoon I learned my grandfather used to be a cafeteria cook for a paper mill near Chongqing.

“Spicy food is good for factory workers,” he said, “helps sweat out bad thoughts and motivate the lazy. Spicy food cools in summer and warms in winter. When everybody sit together and make shi-lew shi-lew sounds, everybody will make funny faces and can laugh at each other.”

He tended to his soup every half hour until Dad came home, adding salt and parsley or skimming away grey scum and oil from the top film. By the end, what little meat left on the beef shoulders was tender and eager to fall off. For the final touch, Grandfather poured the soup into both halves of a yin-yang wok bisected by a welded sheet of stainless steel. In one half, he stirred in his *Ma-La* mix, which stained the broth crimson with just a few swirls. The wok was then placed atop the butane stove to be kept simmering throughout the duration of dinner.

I always thought of a hot pot gathering as a subtle display of individuality in motion. Since everything was raw, you cooked only what you wished to eat in the soup flavor you preferred to be dipped into whatever sauce you deemed tasty. It was an occasion for unabashed self-indulgence.

Having spent a significant portion of their lives deep in the Sichuan basin, Dad and Grandfather almost exclusively opted for the painfully spicy *Ma-La* broth, while Tai-gong, a Shanghainese through and through, could only handle the plain side. I liked the peanut-sesame dipping sauce myself, but Dad claimed he couldn't stand the texture and depleted his citrus-vinegar instead. As for meat selection, the inlanders couldn't get enough of the lamb, which left the prawns for Tai-gong and me.

Dad offered help when Tai-gong's shaky fingers took too long peeling the prawn shells, but Tai-gong batted Dad's hands away and said, "It's okay. I have enough," and he didn't touch another for the remainder of the meal.

The initial frenzy for personal satisfaction eventually waned. Lacking appetite, Tai-gong gave up on eating, and took to loading up my plate with fried tofu and bokchoy, things he knew I liked. Grandfather followed suit by fishing out a bunch of spinach from the spicy broth and giving it to Dad.

"Here, eat," he said, his face open and solicitous, *"it's high in iron."*

Dad kept his eyes stubbornly fixed upon the stove and nodded dismissively. He had the same reaction when my twelve-year-old self first asked him to pick up tampons from the pharmacy. He didn't touch the spinach.

Grandfather looked around the table. The bags under his eyes were bloated and dark blue. He must not have slept well recently thanks to Tai-gong's snoring. He wasn't used to it like Dad and me.

At the risk of offending Dad, I handed my bowl to Grandfather and said, *"I'll have a bit, too."*

"Sure, sure!" He stood up to serve me, careful to only take from the non-spicy broth and even added a fried tofu chunk that had been floating around. I realized he had been watching all along, filing away bits of his granddaughter to fill a page long left blank.

The anger I tried to hold on to on Dad's behalf crumbled. I pitied Grandfather, pitied his bent back and hopeful smile, pitied his frayed and discolored maroon sweater,

his one missing tooth, the unshaven fuzz above his upper lip. I pitied him because there should have been a detailed book of him in my life, and I could see he feared it was too late to start assembling the words.

I'd never been a rebellious daughter, but under Dad's betrayed glare that night, I picked up a slice of beef with my chopsticks and dipped it into the bubbling *Ma-La* broth, swished it until it fully browned and pieces of chopped chili pepper hung to it. I ate it as was, then immediately scrambled to chug a glass of water.

Grandfather laughed. He offered a napkin for my runny nose.

"Tastes great!" I said through burning lips.

He preened from the simple praise. *"You can tell it's a real Sichuan recipe. Do you feel the Ma?"*

While the word implied numbness, the actual sensation was more of a tingly burst of flavor in my mouth, like I had eaten a handful of minuscule pop rocks. Sichuan peppercorns appeared often in our family meals, but Dad never made anything this spicy.

I urged Tai-gong to try it.

Tai-gong had been quietly watching us, his hands folded atop one another on his lap. It wasn't like him to be silent for so long. When he breathed in, I could see his chest tremble in labor. He was getting tired.

As opposed to Dad's open hostility, Tai-gong had been treating Grandfather with a neutral coolness. They spoke on occasion about innocuous topics, weather, or the neighbors, and during such rare exchanges both parties stayed equally apathetic. Grandfather also didn't try hard with Tai-gong. He'd made no offerings of filial gratitude

aside from the most basic show of politeness. Any reasonable person would mistake them for strangers.

Whether out of civility or his affections for me, Tai-gong complied. He picked up his chopsticks and chose an egg dumpling that had been floating around. The spiciness didn't seem to bother him as much as it did me, which visibly surprised Dad; he knew better than anyone how picky Tai-gong was with food.

The verdict: "Good. *Tastes good.*"

Grandfather didn't so much preen this time as he merely nodded away Tai-gong's approval as a matter of fact. "*Egg dumplings are a Shanghai tradition,*" he said, "*but Sichuan Ma-La tastes good with every style of Chinese cuisine.*"

"*Did you move to Sichuan to study cooking?*" I asked. I knew it was where Dad was born and spent his childhood, but Tai-gong had said he left his family a thousand miles away in Shanghai.

My banal question was met with a scowl from Dad and his old complaint: "*See? American schools don't teach other countries' histories if they're not directly involved.*" Indignant, Dad looked around for an ally and shook his head toward Grandfather, who returned the gesture with a shrug of his own.

Their brief camaraderie came at my expense, but I was glad for it nonetheless.

Grandfather seemed equally tickled by my assumption as well as Dad's ire. "*No, it's no problem. The world has a long history, and this is just a little, unimportant history. I didn't move to Sichuan. The Communist government moved me to Sichuan when I was fifteen and I didn't know anything, didn't know anyone, so I was told to raise pigs for a*

while and then trained to become a cook. Cooks could sneak bites when supervisors weren't watching. Cooks didn't go hungry. But this is not interesting for Americans. There is probably no word for this movement in English: Xia Fang."

The translation was actually rather simple—"Downward distribution," like some economic terminology Ramon would espouse. Grandfather's unperturbed answer belied any sinister implication behind the idea of a government forcefully relocating its population. He'd summarized years of his life into one sentence, left it impossible for me to gauge the magnitude of unspoken realities from his airy smile.

I was still confused. *"Doesn't Mainland have a lot of people? How did they move everyone?"*

"Ah, no, not everyone. Only young people from big cities. Some went willingly. I was moved due to... bad family history."

At the head of the table, Tai-gong shuddered. His whole-body shiver led to a coughing fit. Dad and I huddled over him, alternately rubbing his back and crooning our concerns.

Tai-gong stood up on his own. "I am full," he said. "I want to sleep." No matter how we insisted, he refused our help, demanded his cane and made his own way back to the bedroom. The door was shut softly in our faces.

"Let him be. We eat," Grandfather beckoned. This was no suggestion. He'd spoken with such startling gravity that even Dad obeyed.

But obedience didn't sit well with him. He hadn't been a child since before I was born. Dad slouched in his chair, trawled through the hotpot until he found a sizable chunk of shoulder bone, and began a meticulous process of digging and eating its marrow.

Grandfather beamed behind a steaming wonton.

After dinner, Dad retrieved Tai-gong's radio from underneath the sink and hauled himself onto the loveseat to listen to NBA updates. He'd gotten caught up in the Chinatown Yao Ming craze a few years back and ended up a diehard Knicks fan. Home team pride, he called it.

Grandfather volunteered to handle the cleanup. Not wanting to sit still, I gave him a hand. The yin-yang wok was covered and bound up in a plastic grocery bag and placed outside on the fire escape to keep the broth cool overnight. We still had plenty of ingredients for another meal the next day. The meats were once more saran-wrapped and returned to the freezer. To conserve space in the fridge, leftover vegetables and sauces were consolidated into as few plates as possible. I wiped the table, Grandfather washed the dishes.

It was already midnight when we finished. The standing lamp in the living room had been dimmed to a gentle luster. Dad was asleep on the sofa, arms crossed atop his chest, head propped up on one end and feet hung out over the other. Two sports commentators mumbled on in the background about the upcoming All-Star Game, for which Yao had apparently received the most amount of votes.

Dad would never let on, but I knew he'd voted.

He'd shoved his blanket aside and it was now partially draped across the messy apothecary table, mostly crumpled up on the floor. Careful of the creaking floorboards, Grandfather slunk over, gathered up the blanket and covered Dad with it, taking extra pain to ensure the inside edge was properly tucked in between Dad and the sofa. He fussed with it inch by inch. He looked like he was holding his breath, afraid to let out even the slightest puff of air.

"Do you want tea?" My bed was calling but I did not want to go just yet. Grandfather haltingly looked away from Dad. His back was slouched again, his answering nods obsequious. What little confidence he won from making dinner had been stripped away while I wasn't looking.

He was quiet as we drank our tea—green for its low caffeine content—and I didn't like it. I was just starting to grasp him without Dad's animosity. Though it had only been a day, Grandfather's presence already felt familiar and nostalgic. This is blood, I thought.

But blood was not absolute. Grandfather was not Tai-gong despite the similarities in their mannerisms, and he would not always be the instigator of intimate conversations like Tai-gong. If I wanted to know certain truths from Grandfather, I, for once, had to take the initiative.

Gesturing to his travel guide, I leapt. *"Have you been there? To Xin Jiang?"*

Grandfather shook his head.

"I-I looked through your magazine. It looks like a beautiful place."

"I agree. I want to go one day, but, no money right now."

We fell into silence again, but the effort of my intention must have gotten through to him, because after a short lull, he freely offered, *“Did your American school teach you about the Silk Road?”*

“Yes!”

He perked up along with me. *“That’s good! You know, Silk Road used to run through Xin Jiang to the Middle East. Many distinct tribes lived there, nomads like the Mongols, and left their histories there. If we go now, you would not think the people there are Chinese at all. Some are dark, some are light skinned, some even have blond hair and blue eyes.”* He seemed embarrassed all of a sudden. *“But this is normal for you. America doesn’t have one face either.”*

I didn’t contradict him.

He retrieved the guide stealthily and flipped to two pages full of different colored maps of the same region drawn with various borders. I recognized the eastern coast. It was China through the ages, shrinking or expanding with every turn of a new dynasty.

“See, history of Xin Jiang.” Grandfather pointed to the maps one by one. *“Parts of the region used to belong to China, then, it wasn’t for a long time. China did not even belong to itself for a long time. But now, it is back. People come and go, and lands do too. It is all fine, if they return with new things to teach to those who have not gone.”*

I didn’t think Dad would agree with such logic. He was still of the belief that Grandfather was here to take, not to give. Although to my knowledge, Grandfather hadn’t asked for money at all.

“I quit gambling,” he said. I thought he’d read my mind.

The abashed countenance of a sixty-year-old man was a strange sight. “Good,” I said lamely, trying to look busy studying the blue stenciling on the porcelain teacup in my grasp.

Over the chatter of Dad’s radio, Grandfather mused, “*You have your grandmother’s hands.*”

Grandmother must not have had very ladylike hands. Tai-gong once commented that my hands were made for manual labor, the combination of a large palm and long, thick fingers meant I was born to hold onto things. He’d also said they were proof I was a monkey in a past life, and that my oversized hands must have made swinging on tree branches extra easy.

I had a habit of sitting on them to hide my grotesque appendages from the world. For a few weeks after I learned of Jenna’s existence, I was neurotic about keeping them out of Ramon’s field of vision. The thought of her dainty, violinist fingers made me feel like an ogress.

But Grandfather didn’t seem to share my abhorrence. His eyes were fond when he spoke of Grandmother. “*She had strong hands like you. She delivered piglets and calves, and harvested wheat, and plowed the land with her hands.*”

“*She was a farmer?*”

“*Everyone was a farmer then. But not many were good at it. Your grandmother was born a real farm girl, a Sichuan gal. La! Spicy! Her hands and face were always dark from working under the sun. And she had such a voice! She was always singing in the fields.*”

Grandfather's grin stretched across the width of his jaw. The timing felt right, so I dared to ask, "*Why didn't she come to America with you?*"

"She made a mistake marrying me. They didn't forget you were the son of a Guomindang just because they moved you across the country. Bad times. Bad era."

Grandfather downed his tea as though he was trying to swallow history itself. "*In the end, she had enough of the harassment, the parades, the dunce caps. She wanted to be 'reformed'. She wanted to join a troupe and sing songs for the Red Guard. Back then, not many people would have given up a chance to come to the Beautiful Country. We forget the same opportunity can mean different things to different people. She decided to stay, because she could not leave China behind, and she let us go, because she wanted your dad to have an easier life.*"

Dad's life, easy? I wished Grandmother could see the fallout from her good intentions. Strangely, there was no bitterness in Grandfather's tone at her betrayal. Perhaps his capacity for resentment had existed once upon a time, but he would be a hypocrite to judge her, wouldn't he? Or perhaps Grandfather embraced Dad's brand of stubborn pragmatism—move forward or perish—a trait I was starting to notice in our family's men.

Similar as they might be in their causal nonchalance toward the past, Grandfather was just a touch different from Tai-gong. Asking Tai-gong about his past had always been a delicate task; I often felt my curiosity was too nosy, or insensitive. Grandfather, however, was elated at my simple interest. His candor made me wonder in the years he'd been gone, if anyone was there for him to talk to.

Grandfather turned out to be quite an ideal conversation partner. His anecdotes were not as long-winded as Tai-gong's grand efforts, but encompassed more amusing details than Dad's bland reports. He told me a story about his pig-farming days, when his equally clueless supervisor commanded him to give penicillin to sick pigs that ended up killing them. He told me about Dad catching a case of the mumps at eight, and to treat it Grandfather hunted down toads for their skins to be used in a traditional medicinal patch, but he fell into a mud swamp and went home with leeches still stuck to his back.

I muffled my laughter so as not to wake Dad. Self-deprecation was key in Grandfather's stories, as though he was much more comfortable laughing at his own incompetence. He talked until the radio started playing nighttime mood music. I was fascinated. Tai-gong always tried to normalize his stories, explain them in a Western context so I could follow along. Perhaps it was the nature of languages, because Grandfather could only use Mandarin to get his points across, and his descriptions of settings and events were decidedly more "foreign," at times more challenging to understand. But that wasn't necessarily a bad thing.

A couple of times I interrupted Grandfather to ask questions. The longer I listened to him, the faster my own replies and rejoinders were able to take form. Tough syllables became more malleable, vacillating tones more intuitive, the words I had forgotten—no, abandoned—were gradually finding their way back to me.

He was content to be the audience, too. He asked if I'd gone on any travels, if I butted heads with Dad on anything, if I preferred hotdogs to *you tiao*, if I liked what I studied at school. Intentional or not, Grandfather chose to ask inoffensive, uncomplicated

questions, and I was thankful. He also wanted to hear stories about Dad, but I didn't have much to tell. Dad's days weren't exactly packed with adventures. There was the one time he was robbed in the Lower East Side while out on a delivery, but even I wasn't supposed to know about that.

In hindsight, I should have noticed that in spite of his chattiness, Grandfather was pointedly avoiding anything that involved Tai-gong. If I had been a little older, a little more worldly, I might have waited to ask Tai-gong himself in the transparency of daylight, "*Can you tell me great-grandmother's name? Tai-gong never said.*"

It wasn't supposed to be a controversial topic, but Grandfather's smile faded into a stunned half-frown. He responded with a question of his own.

"Which one?"

Chapter 8

In the second grade, Christina and I had a Social Studies teacher named Miss Kleid. She was a young but awkward woman who loved decorating her classroom and clothing with ribboned flowers and was a bit too eager to please. Eight-year-olds had a knack for identifying pushovers, and to be honest, we didn't give her an easy time.

Miss Kleid told us she spent a gap year in Taiwan and had requested a position in a school in Chinatown. She liked to practice her Mandarin on us, but most of my classmates came from Cantonese speaking families, so her attempts were often ridiculed or ignored. For the sake of solidarity, I too feigned obliviousness even though I'd managed to pick up some of her heavy accents.

Miss Kleid felt it was important to incorporate our ethnic culture into the broader curriculum. She kept track of the important Chinese holidays to teach us about, Lunar New Year, Mid-Autumn Festival, *Duan Wu* the Dragon Boat Festival, and even *Qing Ming*—Tomb Sweeping Day—which was an odd holiday to celebrate in a second-grade class.

That May was the first official Asian-Pacific American Heritage Month; none of us would have known about it if not for Miss Kleid's extremely vocal delight. To commemorate, Miss Kleid assigned each of us a show-and-tell presentation on a major contribution Chinese people had made to the world. Christina got an easy one, gunpowder, and I was given the topic of silk.

In the picture books Miss Kleid kept in the back of the classroom, I found a story about Yellow Emperor's wife, who while having afternoon tea underneath a mulberry tree, saw that a silkworm cocoon had fallen into her teacup and unraveled into a long, shimmering strand of silk. A "Fun Fact!" appendix at the end of the story said a single cocoon could produce a strand of silk up to a mile in length.

Four illustrations accompanied the texts. The mulberry tree didn't have individually drawn leaves, but its brilliant dark green dominated the pages. The Empress and her ladies-in-waiting wore drably dyed clothes, a contrast to the luster of silk being discovered at that very moment. In a close-up panel of a porcelain teacup, a white cocoon glistened like a pearl.

For the "show" aspect of my presentation, Christina's mom lent me her silk handkerchief, a keepsake from her girlhood. I promised not to let my classmates' grubby hands sully it. Her gesture left Christina pouting because she couldn't bring firecrackers to school and had to settle on pictures of fireworks in a book. Mrs. Tsai said her kerchief was handmade from real silk. It was soft and its white seemed to sparkle with different colors in the light. I took it home in a clean sandwich bag to keep it pristine.

I showed the handkerchief to Tai-gong that night while rehearsing my speech about the Empress' discovery almost four thousand years ago. Tai-gong was a big fan of Miss Kleid's initiatives, and he often had plenty of supplementary materials to teach me after her lessons.

Tai-gong's feedback this time was more personal than usual. "Oh! I used to grow silkworms!"

I probably responded with, “‘Raise’, Tai-gong. You don’t ‘grow’ animals. Sounds weird.”

Tai-gong went on to tell me how when he was my age, they could buy silkworm caterpillars and mulberry leaves from morning markets on the streets of Shanghai. Tai-gong used to buy a few and keep them in a straw hat. The caterpillars were tiny at first, he said, smaller and slimmer than an aspirin capsule. But for weeks on end they would just crawl round inside the straw hat on a bed of mulberry leaves, eating as they went. Every year, Tai-gong would inevitably lose a couple of caterpillars to an early demise, but the rest of them grew fatter and longer before his very eyes, molting every so often, until they got to be the size of his middle finger, maybe even fatter.

“And then they turned into butterflies and gave you silk?” I asked.

Tai-gong might have rolled his eyes. “No. Silkworm turns to moth, not butterfly. And no. They cannot turn to moth *and* give us silk.”

It was my own fault for not making the connection during the reading of the Empress’ tale.

By the end of a month, Tai-gong said he would just wake up one morning and find a caterpillar had been replaced by the beginnings of a cocoon, which grew in size with each passing hour.

When a cocoon got round enough and stopped changing, Tai-gong’s nanny would drop it into a pot of boiling water, and just like in Miss Kleid’s picture book, the cocoon would give way to a splendid filament that we called “silk.”

I still didn’t want to catch on. “Wh-what happens to the caterpillar?”

“It died, of course!” Tai-gong laughed briefly at my obtuseness. “Like crabs die in hot water, why not caterpillars? If I put you in hot water, I make *Xiao Ren* soup!”

When it was my turn to present, I kept my revelation to myself. Miss Kleid loved that I brought in a real silk handkerchief, and the class applauded the Empress’ story. The picture book was passed around so everyone could see the illustrations up close. They were still beautiful and vibrant with color, and Mrs. Tsai’s handkerchief was still soft and shimmery when I returned it to its owner. None of the other second graders found out the side of the story I chose not to tell.

A commotion woke me at dawn on Sunday. Three hours of sleep left me feeling barely rested at all. Dad was piggybacking Tai-gong out the front door. Tai-gong had a fever, and Dad was taking him to the emergency room.

“I can go with you! I just need to brush my teeth.”

“No.” With Grandfather’s help, Dad gently jostled Tai-gong higher up on his back. “Stay and sleep. It’s only a fever. Be good and wait.”

Tai-gong’s head was limp on Dad’s left shoulder, his eyes shut tight in agony. Our living room was not spacious, I could see Tai-gong’s ragged and shallow breath by the rapid movement of his ribcage.

Dad was gone before I could protest. Grandfather escorted them downstairs just in case Dad lost his grip along the way. Tai-gong wasn't overweight but he was fit for his age and had been wrapped up in layers of sweaters and his heavy-duty overcoat.

The weekend was effectively done. There was to be no bingo or dim sum. With nothing left to do, I hid in my room feigning sleep to avoid talking to Grandfather once he came back. Our conversation before bed left me at a loss for words.

I wasn't angry at Grandfather, in fact I was grateful that he did not attempt to hide the truth. It seemed like the only person absent in my childhood was also the only one willing to treat me like an adult.

Before our night ended, Grandfather had told me the story of Tai-gong and his two wives. I always knew Chinese men in the dynastic ages had concubines, but I never thought my Tai-gong was old enough to have participated in this practice.

"I called his first wife 'Da Ma'," Grandfather had explained—"Big mom". "I do not know her name. My own mother was the second wife, and her name was Lin Xiang Xin, a peasant name."

Xiang Xin. Fragrant Heart. It was an unimaginative name by Chinese standards, only thirteen brush strokes between two characters. Great-grandmother's illiterate parents named all five of their daughters "Fragrant so-and-so" to keep things simple. Back then, daughters were extra hands for labor, until they could be bartered off for marriage. Grandfather said Fragrant Heart was the luckiest of her sisters because by pure coincidence, "Xiang Xin" pronounced in a slightly different tone sounded like "Trust."

The unintended play on words lent Fragrant Heart a hint of sophistication, and so they believed she was meant for more than the plebeian life designated by her birth.

Tai-gong married her because his first wife, the one whose father owned the cotton mills, couldn't give him children. Fragrant Heart did not have dowries for Tai-gong. She could not bring to the family silvers and jewelries and silk *qi pao* to be pawned for food or bribes during the war.

But, for everything she did not own, Fragrant Heart bore a son, and that was worth all the material possessions in a man's life. She also knew how to sew and cook and perform household chores, but it was improper for a rich man's wife to be seen washing diapers by servants.

She still tended to her needlework and tailored Grandfather new winter jackets every Lunar New Year. Sometimes she would sneak into the kitchen to make her signature bean curd with seaweed dish. Grandfather said he could recall no significant quarrel in their home. Tai-gong treated his wives with appropriate amounts of deference, Fragrant Heart shared her son with Da Ma, and Da Ma was gracious to the woman who could bear sons.

But when the end came, you couldn't trade a son for boat tickets.

"It was a sensible solution," Grandfather reflected. "The money all came from Da Ma's family, so one of the boat tickets naturally had to go to her. And your Tai-gong would have been killed if he stayed in China, whereas my mother and I only anticipated rough times. Poverty, definitely, and short imprisonment along with some public humiliation, but they generally spared women and children. I was very young, but I

remember Da Ma tell your Tai-gong that she was willing to divorce him in Taiwan, and he can then marry another woman and have another son.”

After months of tactful insistence, we would eventually pry from Tai-gong that they did indeed divorce in Taiwan, but it was because Da Ma did not want to say goodbye to yet another China.

Tai-gong also told us Da Ma’s name after some pleading: Jia Xi, Auspicious Dawn, a modern yet erudite name with thirty-four brush strokes in total. She’d died in Taiwan in the 80’s.

Grandfather was collected and honest while he imparted his side of the story. He didn’t linger on Tai-gong’s part for long, preferring to use this chance to pass down his mother’s legacy to me.

Love was abundant in Grandfather’s verbal memorial. According to him, great-grandmother bore the jeers of being a *hanjian*’s unwanted mistress, underwent days-long interrogation and imprisonment, yet still made sure he had someone to care for him in her absence, that he was fed and warm and was able to go to school.

When Grandfather was sent to Sichuan at fifteen, she could not go with him. She was alone in Shanghai during the famines of the 60’s, alone when the Cultural Revolution revived anti-gentry sentiments and harassment returned to her life in full force.

He spoke so fast I did not fully absorb everything. He was afraid, I thought, that I would cease to hear him before he could finish his message. A few historical terms he mentioned were initially meaningless even in context, like “Great Leap Forward” or “verbal struggle,” but looking those up on an internet search engine was easy enough.

The white anemone bookmark was in my suitcase and my thoughts kept returning to it throughout Grandfather's monologue. I wondered if the great-grandmother I'd imagined during those lonely nights in any way resembled the real Fragrant Heart. How wonderful if it did, that my blood would know her even if I never saw her face.

I asked to see a picture. He did not have any.

"But I can tell you she was a beautiful person. Believe it or not, your dad has her nose. When I was younger, she had very long and thick black hair that she braided every morning. Oh, and she was short, maybe a-hundred-fifty-six centimeters, but that didn't matter, because she was strong."

Grandfather used "zhuang" for "strong," which specifically denoted a physical sturdiness.

"She was a peasant!" Grandfather had been amused at my confusion. *"She was strong from washing all eleven family members' dirty clothes down at the river, or carrying her young siblings. She didn't always live in Shanghai. When my mother was younger, she had to haul buckets of water from the village well, then go out to the fields and help with the plowing."*

The visions of a matriarch I thought I knew disappeared and I could not summon another. Over the years Grandfather would slowly help me assemble a new image, one forged through sweat and callouses shrouded in a two-piece commoner's work uniform. Great-grandmother remained elegant in my imagination, her beauty stark despite her beaten back or permanent wrinkles. One truth Grandfather shared that night would always remain with me:

“My mother's feet had been unbound. She took large strides in life and stood firmly upon the earth. Nobody could push her down.”

Grandfather left the silent apartment around 10 that morning. I kept quiet for a while longer in case he was only gone temporarily. I made my bed, re-packed my small suitcase, and killed a wandering cockroach with my slipper. It was a sizable one, too.

Dad called my cell-phone an hour later. They'd just gotten to see a doctor and Tai-gong was thought to have caught pneumonia. He was given antibiotics, but the hospital wanted to keep him for observation. “It's his age,” Dad said. “No, no need to come. I'll stay here a little longer. If you leave before I come home, have a safe trip, Ren.”

To stave off the tears, I kept busy and made Tai-gong's bed, Grandfather's cot, and folded the blanket Dad used on the loveseat. The dishes Grandfather washed the night before were dry on the dish rack. After I put those away, there was little left to do in the hollow apartment. It felt unnecessarily spacious.

At noon I put on my outdoor coat and sought out a sufficiently comfortable groove on the top step of our fourth-floor landing. The paint on the walls was a different color from when I was a child, but chipped nonetheless, and the hallway was still freezing cold.

I thought if I could wait for Dad to come home, then at least that would be a sign that Tai-gong was doing well enough to be left alone at the hospital.

My hand groped my pocket for my cellphone. I hesitated. Then, flipped it open and dialed Ramon's number.

Beep.

Even a disconnected Chinese like Ramon honored the Lunar New Year. He'd told me once he did. Maybe he was in the city, too, celebrating early with Jenna. Maybe he wasn't picking up because he recognized my caller ID and she was right there.

Beep.

Or maybe he was on campus, and this was just another Sunday to him. Maybe he was at a church service and his phone was on silent. I was the rude one then.

Beep.

It had been a while since Ramon was home in San Francisco for the New Year. Perhaps his parents flew in to see him this time around. They could be having dim sum in Chinatown right now.

Beep.

Ramon's phone went to voicemail after four rings. If I couldn't talk to him, I didn't plan on leaving a message. I could take a hint.

"Hi! Sorry I can't—"

I hung up.

For three minutes I stared at the digital clock display on my phone. There were a dozen possible things Ramon could have been busy doing at that moment. I just wanted him to spare a tiny moment for me.

My thumbs floundered on the keypad. I was never one for texting.

<Ramon, call me. Tai-gong sick, Dad stressed, and a Grandfather showed up. I need you.>

Half an hour later, Christina found me there, staring off into nothing, waiting for a response from Ramon that would never come. She looked like she was dressed to go out, hair combed into a bun neater than usual, face complete with a light smattering of makeup, a thick down jacket zipped up over her belly. I was still in pajamas underneath my overcoat, hair tangled from restless sleep.

“Hey, what are you doing sitting out here?” she asked.

I felt like crying again.

Christina hobbled up the stairs in a rush. I’d forgotten how perceptive she could be .

“Oh, hey, hey, Ren, what’s wrong?”

She couldn’t sit down beside me. The cold floor wouldn’t have been good for her condition. I stood up instead, and spent a few seconds swimming in darkness waiting for blood to return to my head.

For the first time since we’d known each other, I rambled and Christina gave me all of her attention. I told her about Tai-gong and the illness that could easily end a man his age, about Grandfather and his attempts to mend fences, about Dad’s patronizing compulsion to keep me from any hint of tribulation, about the men in my family and the infuriatingly casual manner with which they dealt with grief. I told her everything except for Ramon, whose conspicuous absence since December burned with frigid neglect.

Christina had learned to listen sometime in the years we stopped looking for each other. She stroked my head as a mother would her child, even pulled out a pack of tissues from her pocket for my sniffles. She didn't ask questions, nor did she make any comments, merely let silence cast its soothing cloak over us. Any advice would have sounded trite to me anyway.

Eventually my weeping subsided and I remembered my sense of shame. An ever timely Christina plucked a twice-folded sheet of red paper from her non-tissue pocket and declared, "Take this! I made this last night. Came here to give it to you before I leave."

Unfolded, the paper showed the cuttings of eight lotus flowers complete with sprawling lotus leaves and a pair of frolicking Mandarin ducks. Some of the flowers were partially opening, others already in full bloom with their seed pods showing. The biggest took up a quarter of the sheet, while the smallest was the size of a dime.

Christina said it was cut with a special knife instead of scissors. This piece was more precise and daring than the one she made yesterday, with free white spaces between flower buds juxtaposed against the meticulous slits that marked the individual outlines of a single leaf. A half-inch untouched border kept the whole piece together. On its back at the lower right corner, Christina's mother had written four extremely complicated words in Chinese script, and neither Christina nor I could read them.

"I wanted to make you something, and my mom suggested lotus flowers. See how the flowers and leaves are floating on their own? But they're connected at the roots, we just can't see them." Her voice softened. "Why don't you come home more often, Ren. I'm here almost every weekend, so Grandma could see Jason. It's not a total shithole."

She and I both chortled. Christina was delightfully simple like that, straightforward and always expressed exactly what was on her mind. It was her artistic work that embodied the true intricacies of her visions. She would let her cuttings say in a single frame all the words she could not articulate.

I told her she should try selling her work to art galleries.

She scoffed. “It’s a neat party trick, that’s all.”

The cutting took my mind off the empty apartment behind me. I asked her to join me for lunch but Christina could not stay long. Her family was waiting to go home to Queens. She had a job answering phones for a dentist at 9 the next morning, dinner to warm up, and a son to put to bed. We were no longer seven, and she no longer had the luxury or desire to wait with me.

Grandfather came back late in the afternoon as I was getting ready to go back to Long Island. I declined his offer to walk me to the subway station but asked him to interpret Mrs. Tsai’s four words for me. He squinted at her writing for a while before exclaiming, “Ah! ‘*Ou Duan Si Lian*’!”

It was an idiom, a pithy way to get a point across and impossible to decipher without a decent grasp of the language. Chinese seemed to have thousands of them, some wouldn’t make sense unless you knew the background stories.

Grandfather broke it down to plain Mandarin after some head scratching, “*A lotus root may break, but its parts are yet joined by its silky fibers.*”

Dragged out into so many words, the phrase lost some elegance, but I got the message.

Chapter 9

Tai-gong was discharged two days later, but it would take him another three weeks to recover. The fifteen-day New Year celebration was well over before he could freely roam Chinatown again. After the bout with pneumonia, Tai-gong never fully returned to his energetic old self. He stayed indoors more and more, took smaller and slower steps to reach one point from another. His hands shook too much whenever he tried to pick up a calligraphy brush.

He still had a couple of years left in him, but since I didn't know that at the time, my days in Long Island were spent fretting, and on the weekends, I risked angering Dad and went home as often as possible. The apartment was too cramped for me to study in, he argued, and I was spending too much valuable time traveling between the city and the suburb.

But it wasn't a long ride, not anymore. I got used to lugging an overnight bag and a stack of reading materials for a twenty-minute walk to the LIRR station on Saturday mornings. The hour-long train into Manhattan as well as swarming New York City crowds soon became a tolerable routine.

Grandfather was still there the first time I went home after New Year's. He was there the second time, and the third.

But, he didn't live there. Dad said Grandfather would disappear for a few days at a time, and would show up without fail with groceries and make food for Tai-gong and Dad.

“He doesn’t say anything, just leaves one day and doesn’t come back for two or three.” Dad groaned and shook his head. “He’s helping your Tai-gong get around and is cleaning the apartment, but I want him to just leave already. Every time, it’s, what’s the phrase you say about boots?”

“Waiting for the other shoe to drop?” I supplied.

“Yes, that! Our home is not a hotel. He needs to make a decision and keep it!”

Dad was too grumpy to notice the invitation implicit in his choice of words. He had been somewhat stressed lately. Tai-gong’s insurance didn’t fully cover his hospital stay, and Dad’s shuttle business wasn’t going to be ready for launch until Spring. He had to cut short his self-given vacation time and pick up some shifts at his old restaurant to avoid tapping into the savings he put aside for me.

I never witnessed one of Grandfather’s disappearing acts. He was always there when I visited, and the apartment would double in occupancy on the weekends. It became a habit for me to spend Saturday afternoons watching Tai-gong and Grandfather dueling over a plastic *xiang qi* set. The two of them stayed away from personal conversations, and thanks to the militaristic undertone of a *xiang qi* game, they mostly spent hours taking turns telling me about famous Chinese generals and strategists.

Without fail, they would forget that I was supposed to be their primary audience and end up debating the veracity of one historical account over another. Their disagreements stretched from the Three Kingdom stories to Mao’s Long March, but they were good about letting up before either party got too upset.

I was content to watch them butt heads, and pour tea as needed. When they tried to argue for different interpretations of Sun Tzu, I had no problem tuning out both of them.

On the other hand, Dad took much longer to come around about Grandfather. He would not fully forgive him for a good five years. But even Dad saw the merit of having Grandfather around as Tai-gong got weaker by the day.

Near the end of March, Dad borrowed five hundred dollars from his future business partners and bought a fold-out couch to replace the loveseat in our living room. The mattress was thin and bumpy in the middle, but Grandfather didn't disappear as much anymore.

It was another two weeks before Dad officially asked Grandfather to move in to the apartment. He told me about it over the phone when I couldn't reach out and hug him to show how proud I was of him. Dad was annoying like that.

The following Saturday, Dad was working his last week at the restaurant and Tai-gong fell asleep reading newspapers in bed. Grandfather took me aside and asked, "*Xiao Ren, will you help me move?*"

I agreed reluctantly and prepared myself for a trip, to New Jersey, perhaps, or even Pennsylvania. If Grandfather had any furniture he wished to bring back, he was out of luck and out of space.

Instead of heading toward a taxi or a transit station, Grandfather and I threaded through Chinatown crowds on damp streets toward the Manhattan Bridge. The last spell of snow had melted and the sun once again felt warm on our faces.

We turned left onto Bowery and soon reached an old, brown-bricked building.

The whole walk hadn't taken more than ten minutes.

I was nonplussed, then a little furious.

"How long have you lived here?" He was within such close reach.

"Fifteen months," he answered, which couldn't possibly be true because Chinatown wasn't that big and Dad would have ran into him at some point.

He unlocked a narrow steel door and I followed him up an unlit set of stairs to the third floor. My eyes took some time to adjust to the dim, greenish hue, and the first things I saw were the pipes and free-hanging cords and wires overhead.

The second thing I noticed was that the entire floor was one open space, and it had been divided into little boxed rooms, no larger than four feet by six. The walls of the individual "rooms" were flimsy to the touch, and hollow when I knocked on them, as if they were made from cardboard, or at best, low-grade paneling. The walls didn't reach up to the ceiling, and a few residents were peeking at Grandfather and me from the opened tops of their "domiciles." A scraggly man greeted Grandfather, *"Hey! Old Sheh, where have you been?"*

Someone broke into a hacking cough inside the cubicle closest to us. Grandfather led me away with a hand on my back. We passed a dozen or so closed or curtained doors and saw only one old woman who sat outside a cubicle cracking sunflower seeds and tending to a smoldering pot over a propane stove. The hallway was narrow so we had to creep along the opposite wall to avoid bumping into her stove. She didn't look at us.

Grandfather's cubicle had a comparatively favorable position. It sat on one edge of the room overlooking a set of windows that directly faced Bowery Street. When I looked down I could see yellow taxi cabs dodging jaywalking pedestrians, a two-decker tour bus, colorful shop signs in English and Chinese, even a MacDonald's if I craned my head to the left. And further on, there was a side view of the arch that led onto the Manhattan Bridge.

A rat ran out from Grandfather's cubicle when he unlocked his door. I might have screamed.

Grandfather didn't have much. A wooden slab of a bed with no mattress took up more than a third of his space. Beneath the bed he kept two cardboard boxes. A laundry rod extending over his bed had a few shirts hanging from it. A mini fridge stood beside the head of the bed, and on top, Grandfather had his own propane stove as well as a small soup pot with one pair of chopsticks inside.

Next to the mini fridge was a low shelf, just two levels. It seemed to hold the rest of Grandfather's possessions: Three worn books, a wash basin, a faded blue towel, a kettle, rice cooker, a bottle each of soy sauce, vinegar, and sesame oil, a tiny pair of salt and pepper shakers, a cutting board, a lightly rusted cleaver, and a rice bowl with a chipped edge.

Aside from the bed, there was one fold-up chair to sit on, but Grandfather didn't offer me a seat. He hauled out one of the cardboard boxes and started handing me things. He had me carry a half-full photo album, a well-worn copy of *Outlaws of the Marsh* with shredded binding, three unlabeled tape cassettes, and a recipe book entirely in Chinese.

He grabbed a pair of shoes and the clothes hanging above his bed and said, *“Somebody will take everything else if I just leave it all here. Let us return home.”*

Nobody bid Grandfather farewell, not the scraggly man who knew his name, not the downstairs manager when we dropped off the keys. His load was light enough that he could have carried everything on his own. He didn’t need me. But for fifteen months he lived right underneath our noses and had gone unnoticed by us. I could not begrudge him this unveiling.

I split my time between Long Island and Chinatown for the rest of the semester. On a Tuesday in April, I ran into Ramon outside of the music building on campus. His brief moment of panic made me want to laugh, the way his eyebrows shot up to his lightly gelled hairline.

To his credit, he didn’t run the other way.

We hadn’t seen each other in nearly five months, but as soon as he acknowledged me with a nod, I could feel that same old breathlessness in my lungs and a solid weight in my stomach that made it difficult to stand straight. My feet felt as though they had iron bars strapped to them.

Out in the open, he was cordial and reserved, and he spoke with a detached friendliness worthy of a politician.

“How are you?” he initiated.

“Good. How are you?” I cooperated.

“Good.”

It was a rather hot day for April and we were standing directly in the sun. He was wearing his fraternity blazer. I saw a sheen of sweat collecting inside his collar.

The short distance between us kept me from instinctually reaching for him, but it didn't prevent me from blurting without thinking, “It's been a while.”

Ramon sucked on his upper lip. “Yeah, sorry. It's been crazy.”

“With what?”

I clearly had a problem controlling my tongue when flustered. But I was sick of waiting.

“Um, well, I got into NYU Stern.”

His MBA. I had forgotten even though it used to be all he would talk about. A quick breath of air rushed out of me. I inhaled quickly in order to fill my hungry lungs. Ramon was graduating soon, and he was going to one of the best business schools in the country, paid for by his unquestionably proud father. He might even buy Ramon a condo.

I straightened. “And what's going on with Jenna?”

Ramon did a double take. He didn't call me out on saying her name, however, and answered truthfully, albeit hesitantly, “Sh-she'll be starting med school. Also NYU.”

A sliver of cloud shaded the sun, and a few seconds later was gone again. I thought I could feel an impatient summer already clamoring for its turn. Under the bright sky, Ramon seemed to quake ever so slightly.

I didn't have to ask if they would be moving in together, maybe buy a condo with both of their names on the contract. On Sundays they'd go to church, him in a suit, her in a sundress. At night they would make dinner at home, something organic or exotic, or order takeout sushi from some reputable restaurant in SoHo. If Ramon's parents were in town, they'd all go to a fundraising event for some hot-shot Senator or endangered shellfish. Jenna would play violin in a cocktail dress, and Ramon would show her off around the room with her gentle hand on his elbow. In a matter of years, he would be making million-dollar deals in a hedge fund company, and she would be starting her Residency at a nearby hospital.

This would be their love story. I knew this as surely as I knew a silkworm could make silk. I knew it even before Ramon mumbled, "We got engaged on Christmas. I'm sorry."

I think I thanked him. Not so much for his reluctant honesty, but because with that tidbit of news, I could rest assured that even though the Stern school was only a mile away from my home in Chinatown, I would never see Ramon again.

Epilogue

The summer between my third and last year of college I bought monthly PATH passes to Hoboken for a low-paying internship where I spent three months recording dopamine levels in white mice in an on-going test for the viability of a new MAO-B inhibitor drug.

I became well acquainted with the lab researchers' individual coffee orders.

My application had been submitted in secret, and I'd gone to the interview without stopping by at home. I didn't tell Dad until after I'd already accepted the job. To my surprise, he didn't yell at all, just muttered, "Done is done" and resumed telling me about the interesting, loud, funny, rude, impatient, adorable, friendly costumers he'd shuttled around that day. It was anticlimactic, really.

That summer I'd also learned to truly appreciate spicy food thanks to Grandfather. For most nights, Dad made it home in time for dinner, and the three of us would make loud *shi-lew shi-lew* sounds together out of our burning mouths. Tai-gong stayed with his tamer Shanghainese diet. He said he had more dignity than us.

On weekends I made sure to drop by and check on Grandma Tsai. Usually Christina would be visiting with her family, and I used those opportunities to try and make nice with her son, who still ran from me at every chance. On the rare occasions Grandma Tsai was alone, I stayed and watched Korean soap operas with her. We couldn't communicate with one another. I could neither understand Korean nor Chinese subtitles,

but on-screen melodrama was a somewhat universal language. If Grandma Tsai spoke to me, I generally assumed she was making fun of me, and laughed along.

Tai-gong had good days and bad. On the good ones Grandfather or I would accompany him to the supermarket and pick out one or two video-tapes to rent. The Chinatown vendors were switching to DVDs. Soon, we were getting tapes for free. In another few months, I used one of my summer paychecks to buy Tai-gong a DVD player.

On bad days, Grandfather would sit on the bed and play *xiang qi* with him, or read him articles from *The World Journal*. Tai-gong's eyes were getting worse. He'd even admitted to feeling tired after reading for long.

On the days I was home, Grandfather and I would both sit with Tai-gong and read him stories.

It started when I found Tai-gong's red leather story book on the bottom shelf of our sole bookcase. I'd never touched it myself since I could not read the contents, but with Grandfather's help, I thought I could at least hear the words being spoken and translate them into English, as Tai-gong did for me when I was young.

The book opened to a part marked by a torn off page that had been folded in half. It was my destructive signature. And so, I asked Grandfather to read the severed story first.

It was a slow start since the style of a written tale was slightly different from everyday talk, and Grandfather had to pause often, and explain certain idioms or names of things we did not have in the Western world. Tai-gong tried to assist us, but I'd insisted that he stay quiet and listen, lest he wanted me to feed him clementines.

The story we told went something like so.

Long, long ago, there lived a respected and learned sage named Jiang Ziya. He served the King of Zhou dutifully for decades as adviser and military strategist, but as his king fell into corruption and would no longer heed his counsel, Master Jiang gave up his position and withdrew to a hermitage. Distracted and tempted by worldly pleasures, King Zhou became a terrible tyrant feared by his people.

Master Jiang stayed away from the turmoils of the earthly world for years. Every day, aside from meditation and self-study, Master Jiang went fishing.

Rain, snow, or sunshine, Master Jiang would take a straw mat and a fishing pole to the riverside. He'd sit and cast his line for hours.

But Master Jiang never caught a fish.

Passersby began to notice this old man always fishing by the river, and they all thought him wise by the Taoist robes he wore and the silver in his beard. Some went up closer to seek advice, and those who did noticed that Master Jiang's fishing line had neither hook nor bait.

"How can you catch any fish without hook or bait?" they asked.

Master Jiang would always reply: "If the fish desires to be caught, it will find a way."

It didn't take long for Master Jiang to be known as a crazy old kook. Yet, he continued this manner of fishing for many years, until his hair turned fully grey and he was nearing eighty.

Finally, one day the King of Wen passed by. The young king was ambitious and possessed a kind heart, but lacked capable underlings. The Wen King had been searching far and wide for a talented mind to help him rule.

When he came upon Master Jiang, he also asked why the old man was fishing with neither hook nor bait, and the Master answered the same as always, “If the fish desires to be caught, it will find a way.”

King Wen recognized Master Jiang’s brilliance right away and fell into a three-day long discussion with the Master about all sorts of stately and military matters. At the end of three days, King Wen invited Master Jiang to be his adviser. The Master reeled in his line and agreed.

Master Jiang helped the virtuous King Wen build his country and led his armies. With the Master’s help, King Wen’s successor eventually overthrew the tyrant King Zhou and rescued a nation of people from despair. To honor his name, Master Jiang Jiya was granted the venerable title of “Duke”, or “Grand Master”, and so, in Chinese, Master Jiang also came to be known as Jiang Tai-Gong.

If I cast my desires upon a distant shore, like my father did and his father too, I will know the path there has already been laid by benefactors who’ve come before. To take that first step and every step hereafter is up to the strength of my own will.

End

Unveiling the Embedded Asian American Identity in *White Anemone*

Lisa Lowe says in her article “Heterogeneity, Hybridity, Multiplicity: Asian American Differences” that “Culture identities come from somewhere, have histories. But, like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation” (64). The novella *White Anemone* chronicles such a transformative process from the singular perspective of a narrator-protagonist, Ren, during her reconciliation with her hybridized identity as an American of Chinese descent. Using spatial-temporal disjunctions and embedded narratives, *White Anemone* is at once a psycho-drama of Ren’s personal journey as well as a socio-economic study of the heterogenous Asian American immigrant community in the 21st century.

The novella is narrated in a first-person, adult retrospective voice, allowing for credible introspection. Its confessional aspect emulates well-established Asian American literary works like Jade Snow Wong’s *Fifth Chinese Daughter* (1950), Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior* (1975), and Amy Tan’s *The Joy Luck Club* (1989). Frequent time-shifts are employed to accurately demonstrate the fluidity of a person’s memories, and narrative disjunctions reflect the ups and downs of the narrator’s psycho-dramatic development. While the primary storyline only takes place within a few months, flashbacks are periodically interjected to give the reader insight into Ren’s childhood and teenage years. The narrative is nonlinear, and includes juxtapositions of extended flashbacks, while sudden prolepses (representations of things before they actually happen) “make connections of causality and irony between widely separated events” (Lodge 75). Such irony is evident in Ren’s first flashback of meeting Ramon: “I

did not like Ramon the first time we met, and I would one day tell him so while his lips skimmed over my bare hip” (29). This sentence depicts two separate instances in time and two widely disparate mentalities of the same narrator, demonstrating a transformation of Ren’s character over time. It makes use of Gérard Genette's *homodiegetic* analepsis, which “provides information about the same character, or sequence of events or milieu that has been the concern of the text up to [a] point” (Hawthorn 81). The novella overall also uses external and *heterodiegetic* analepsis to refer “back to some character, sequence of events, or milieu *different from* that/those that have been the concern of the preceding text,” such as Tai-gong’s recollection of wartime Shanghai (Hawthorn 12, 81). These flashbacks are embedded narratives which explain or affect the overarching narrative. Ren’s character undergoes introspective transformations after each instance of an embedded story within the larger story (i.e.; use of *heterodiegetic* analepsis), such as when she realizes the superficiality of cosmetics after learning Tai-gong’s harrowing wartime experience, or when she forms a familial bond with her disgraced grandfather after hearing about his forced relocation to rural China.

The narrator’s journey into selfhood, independence from Ramon, and reconciliation with family echo aspects of the ethnic *Bildungsroman* to “engage the individual’s process of awareness of particularity and difference, and the choice of identifying with or rejecting the models society offers” (Davis 233). The Asian American *Bildungsroman* inherited certain traits of the genre’s European origins such as its autobiographical element, but inversions of traditional characteristics are particularly common in *Bildungsroman* narratives written by women of color (Najmi 214). In *White*

Anemone, for example, the freedom of mobility that is so often emphasized in a Eurocentric *Bildungsroman* is restructured in favor of celebrating the narrator's choice to return and be bound to her family.

In many ways, this novella is typical of a feminine ethnic *Bildungsroman* as outlined by Samina Najmi:

Among the characteristics that these bildungsromane share are a greater emphasis on communal identity, defined by ethnic background, by a community of women, and by working-class concerns; use of the "talk story" as a vehicle of bildung; and the theme of art as a means of arrival at self-awareness. (214)

Najmi's reference to "talk story" is evident in Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*, in which the narrator's understanding of Chinese women is influenced and molded by her mother's stories. *White Anemone*'s embedded folklores and myths are more contextualized in that they appear as memories specific to the circumstances of the narrator along certain points of the storyline. When Ren cannot articulate her anxieties about Ramon or her longings for a more complete family, she resorts to storytelling as a method of expressing herself. She recalls a certain version of Tai-gong's "Chang-e" story shortly after accepting an unseemly arrangement with Ramon. Adult-Ren, unable to voice her desires or protest her circumstances, finds reprieve in her memory of child-Ren's audacious call for a prince's kiss and physical denouncement of Chang-e's punishment. Ren also notes that several versions of the Chang-e story exist; she evokes this version because it better suits the present flow of her psyche. As Debra Shostak remarks in "Maxine Hong Kingston's Fake Books", "Memory can serve as a kind of narrating subject, making coherent wholes out of meaningless fragments, ... the selective and

inventive functions of memory construct knowledge by reconstructing versions of the past” (52).

The use of intertextual allusions to folklore arising from cultural memories as a method of communicating narrative perspective is not uncommon in the ethnographic *Bildungsroman*. In Joy Kogawa’s *Obasan* (1981), the narrator Naomi recalls the story of Momotaro, a boy warrior, as she reflects on memories of her happier, pre-war childhood: “The little boy, golden and round as a peach, leaps onto the table from the heart of the fruit before their astonished eyes. The delight of it. And the wonder. Simply by existing a child is delight” (59). Kogawa also rewrites the fairy tale of Goldilocks and the three bears, deploying “both Western and Eastern fables to connect past and present and to contrast fantasy and reality” (Cheung 156). Though Cinderella and Sleeping Beauty make brief appearances in *White Anemone*, intertextual allusions are relatively limited to Eastern myths and family lore. However, there is a greater emphasis placed on the mutability and diversity of established myths, such as Tai-gong’s many versions of Chang-e’s ascension, Ren’s discovery of an untold great-grandmother, or the neglected dark side behind the glamor of Chinese sericulture. By revealing often untold truths, the text aims to highlight the heterogeneous and sometimes even contradictory nature behind Chinese mythologies (Yuan xii). Moreover, the discrepancies between certain embedded allusions further complements the narrative’s disjunctive form and the narrator’s yet unsettled psyche.

In the novella’s conclusion, Ren comes into self-actualized adulthood as in a traditional *Bildungsroman* when her stories are no longer fragmented memories or

passively relayed from Tai-gong's repertoire. Ren's re-telling of Master Jiang Ziya's story in the epilogue is fluid, complete, and uninterrupted. Through this re-telling, Ren achieves coherency and confidence in her own identity, and adopts the posture of a storyteller herself. Story-telling is part of Ren's cultural heritage and thus, the novella also becomes a *Künstlerroman*, a portrait of Ren emerging as an artist.

Ren's journey to self-awareness can be viewed as a feminized *Künstlerroman*, a portrait of an artist coming to her cultural inheritance. Though she sees herself as a "storyteller" (26), Ren spends a significant portion of the story acting as a passive audience or mouthpiece for the myths Tai-gong passed down to her; she starts out as a receptacle for what Annette Kolodny calls a patriarchal "literary inheritance" (10). As an adult, Ren takes Tai-gong's place as cultural ambassador and introduces the Americanized Ramon to traditional folklores, but she only does so in imitation of Tai-gong's mannerisms: "I tried to remember the occasional tremor in his voice, the slow, but arresting pace of his narrative, even the British undertones in his accent" (36). This problematic regurgitation is representative of Kolodny's criticism of a male dominated literary history, "in which certain power relations—usually those in which males wield various forms of influence over females—are inscribed in the texts (both literary and critical), that we have inherited, not merely as subject matter, but as the unquestioned, often unacknowledged *given* of the culture" (3-4). The passive stance Ren takes in a masculine literary culture mirrors her relationship with Ramon, in that he wields the power in their affair and is the sole dictator of their communications. When Ren finally grasps control and imagines, or "writes," Ramon and Jenna's love story, she is at last free

from his influence and becomes a storyteller with her own authority. This is further compounded in the epilogue when she switches roles with Tai-gong, advancing from audience to bard, even threatening to “feed him clementines” as he once did to quell her interruptions (124).

Throughout *White Anemone*, Ren is at times character and author. Whenever another character speaks in Mandarin, most often Grandfather, Ren takes over as translator. Grandfather’s translated dialogues conflate the boundary between authorial voice and character voice, a process Bakhtin refers to as “hybridization”:

It is a mixture of two social languages within the limits of a single utterance, an encounter, within the arena of an utterance, between two different linguistic consciousnesses, separated from one another by an epoch, by social differentiation or by some other factor (358).

In this instance, it is not merely two “social” languages at work, but two national languages incorporated within a single cultural system, in other words, polyglossia. The implicit amalgamation of Mandarin and English within Ren’s narration epitomizes her identity as a hybridized protagonist who is at once Chinese and American. Furthermore, the presence of extensive heteroglossia in the novella reflects the diversity and multiplicity of immigrant stories. For example, Christina’s English is much coarser than Ramon’s speech patterns, indicating a class difference between the two characters.

To depict the heterogeneity and complexities of Chinese American immigrants in detail, the novella makes liberal use of cultural foods, or vegetative and animal imageries in food form. Christine Oster notes the importance of food in Chinese culture:

Food and foodways, so often connected with family stories and gatherings, exert similar holds and incite similar rebellions. It cannot be a coincidence that food so often accompanies story, that hunger is so often a metaphor of the desire for stories about old or new ways of life, that language so often links food and story” (Oster 124).

Crucial interactions in Christina’s and Ren’s families occur around the dining table. Both Grandma Tsai and Tai-gong show affection by gifting Ren Chinese junk food. For Ren in particular, her family’s hot pot gathering marks a transformative moment in her relationship with her estranged grandfather. By voluntarily exploring beyond her preferred Shanghainese taste to try Grandfather’s spicy Sichuan food, Ren symbolically bridges familial differences, thus instigating a healing process between Grandfather and her father, until the three of them “would make loud *shi-lew shi-lew* sounds together” (123). Within Ren, the distances between Sichuan, Shanghai, and even America are subsumed under her hybridized identity. On the contrary, Ramon is solely associated with westernized food imagery, disconnected as he is from traditional Chinese culture.

The novella also contains mineral imagery in the form of electronics and urban development such as modernized subway trains. These staples of 21st-century America are set in contrast with more natural, vegetative imageries within Ren’s family home, like their hardwood floor and Tai-gong’s apothecary table. Symbolizing traditionalists, Ren’s father and Tai-gong are only seen within the apartment, and they are noted as “Dinosaurs” who shun advanced technologies (81). Ren, however, is free to move

between both worlds. Her movements from Long Island to Chinatown, assisted by the convenience of the Long Island Railroad (LIRR), increase exponentially at the conclusion of the story as she becomes more comfortable with the fluidity of her hybridity. Ren eventually attempts to broach the gap between modernity and tradition by purchasing Tai-gong a DVD player. On the other hand, technology's inherent ability to connect cultures is exemplified by a much more tech-savvy Grandma Tsai.

Electronic imagery is crucial in framing a narrative set in the 21st century. Mentions of the first iPod and internet search engines in *White Anemone* place the narrative in the early 2000's, a turning point for both technology and ethnic outreach. Around the same time, previously voiceless minority groups were just beginning to find an audience via social media including blogs or YouTube. In 2003, a trio of Chinese American students founded Wong Fu Productions to make videos featuring primarily Asian American youths. Now in 2014, as one of the most popular channels on YouTube with over 2 million subscribers, Wong Fu Productions "attribute much of their success to a largely Asian-American viewership eager to see themselves represented in the media" (Tsai n.p.). In 2001, Korean American Phil Yu launched the Angry Asian Man blog, which has now become the leading broadcaster of Asian American popular culture, news, and civil rights issues. The blog is currently featured in the *Newseum* exhibit on ethnic media. According to the exhibit's current statistics, "25% of Americans turn to ethnic media for their news" (Chen n.p.). While *White Anemone* makes no direct reference to the real-life achievements of ethnic social media—still a newborn in the

early 2000's—mentions of Ramon's mailing list and fund-raising blog hint at the internet's growing influence on minority interests within modern American society.

Apart from the novella's primary storyline of a personal psycho-dramatic journey, it also attempts to shed light on the various socio-political and economic struggles of 21st-century Asian Americans. Ren's family's financial situation is made clear at the beginning of the prologue, and Ramon's introduction shortly after sets up a stark contrast between highly disparate class differences within the same minority group. Ramon comes from an upper-middle class family, a fifth-generation Chinese American, long assimilated into mainstream American society. He is the poster image for a successful "model minority":

Asian cultural difference is held to be a source of social capital... Increasingly, the imagined Asian American family has been upheld as a model not only to blacks and Latinos but to working-class and middle-class whites as well... Recent articles in the national press on Asian Americans emphasize their persistence in overcoming language barriers, their superior disciplinary and motivational roles as parents, and their "intact" families' success at savings (Lee 185).

On the surface, the model minority label carries only positive connotations. However, critics have widely denounced it as a hegemonic paradigm used to simultaneously condemn black and Hispanic cultures and to ignore the complexities of Asian American culture and diversity. Furthermore, the term cements Asian Americans as an inscrutable "other" whose supposed advantages could only be admired from afar:

The Asian American model minority is thus a simulacrum of both an imaginary Asian tradition from which it is wishfully constructed and an American culture for which it serves as a nostalgic mirror. The model minority can operate as the paragon of conservative virtues that all Americans should emulate only if Asian Americans remain *like* “us” but utterly are *not* “us” (Lee 183).

Ramon’s status as a stereotypical model minority situates him comfortably within the dominant white culture in North America. As a result, he is as much of an inscrutable “other” to Ren as she is to him. Ren views Ramon’s “privilege” with pessimistic disparagement, at one point breaking into laughter at his political ambitions.

Ren’s skepticism towards Ramon’s rose-tinted outlook on Asian American socio-political opportunities is born out of her own economic background. Though Ren’s father works tirelessly to provide for her, her family is nevertheless emblematic of the ignored lower-class Asian American poor. A comprehensive study published in 2011 found that “Although the study of the poor has virtually become a growth industry in the United States—with various centers around the country being devoted to it—Asian-Americans are often curiously omitted from these studies” (Sakamoto 252). Empirical evidence from Sakamoto and Takei’s surveys conclude: “foreign-born Asian-Americans have higher poverty rates than native-born Asian Americans, and more recent immigrant Asian-Americans have higher poverty rates than immigrant Asian-Americans who have had more time to adjust to American society” (272-3). English language acquisition is another major factor in determining an immigrant’s economic status. Unfortunately, the term “model minority” generalizes an entire race of people, effectively dismissing critical

contributing factors behind individual circumstances. Youngsuk Chae explains how the model minority lie is fundamentally damaging and oppressive:

The media depiction of Asian immigrants as a “model minority” has concealed the racist reality and unequal power structure that have prevented minorities from improving themselves and also helped the U.S. to justify its myth as a “land of promise,” which implies that everybody can make their wish come true depending on individuals’ efforts, regardless of their race, gender, and class backgrounds (26).

In *White Anemone*, Ramon is portrayed as a believer of this ideology: “Ramon spoke like one who wholeheartedly believed in the potential for success within the American system for anyone willing to work for it” (33). On the other end of the spectrum, the narrative provides a semi-detailed look at the Tsais, a family of talented artisans who have mostly abandoned their life trades because they do not know how to navigate the American system. Lacking English, even the proud and skillful Mama Tsai could only make a living as a sample-maker in a sweatshop. Such discouragement can have a lasting effect on later generations as well, as seen when Christina dismisses her own artistic aptitude as “a neat party trick” (114).

Following the examples of Fae Myenne Ng’s *Bone* (1993) and Karen Tei Yamashita’s *Tropic of Orange* (1997), *White Anemone* aspires to be what Youngsuk Chae calls a “politically conscious Asian American multicultural work”:

Whereas politically acquiescent Asian American multicultural writings are mostly silent about labor exploitation toward racial minorities as well as the

unequal economic structure faced by Asian Americans, politically conscious Asian American multicultural writings situate their stories in specific historical, political, economical, and legal contexts and draw our attention to the circumstances that have conditioned the lives of Asian immigrants. (7)

The novella aims to be politically conscious without being blatant. To do so, it illustrates the lives of low-income Chinese American families like Ren's and Christina's within the context of Ren's personal transformation. In the last chapter, Ren runs into Ramon after visiting the flophouse where her grandfather had been living for over a year. The harsh and cramped conditions of a modern-day ghetto are immediately followed in the narrative by descriptions of high-class glam. Grandfather's cubicle partitioned by "low-grade paneling" is inspired by photographer Annie Ling's series on Chinatown tenements, specifically her "81 Bowery" collection. Both Grandfather's and Ramon's lifestyles have their basis in reality, both are accurate portrayals of Asian American lives. It is only the "model minority" label that stands out as a harmful myth.

White Anemone presents a fictional depiction of a narrator-protagonist's quest for personal acceptance and awareness. Ren's growing understanding of her desires follows in conjunction with the reader's exposure to socio-economic dilemmas facing Chinese Americans today. The text tells stories within stories, some are half-truths and some are singular visions of a limited authorial perspective. It does not claim to possess any absolutes, because as Tai-gong would say, "We do not know many things. Sometimes, this is the case because we are immigrants" (16).

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Appendix A

11 September 2014

To Whom It May Concern,

Z. Cindy Chen's prose piece titled "White Anemone: an excerpt" (approx. 8 pgs.) was published in the Spring 2014 edition of *Generation* magazine, a publication which is sponsored by the Department of English Language, Literature, and Creative Writing at the University of Windsor (ISSN# 0533-7291).

As the Chief Editor of such issue of *Generation*, I give Z. Cindy Chen permission to republish her work, "White Anemone: an excerpt," in other publications at her own discretion.

Sincerely,

Shawna Diane Partridge

VITA AUCTORIS

Born in Benbu, China in 1987, Zhe Chen emigrated to New York City with her parents at the age of 10. Known to her friends and colleagues as “Cindy”, she graduated with a BA in English Literature and Creative Writing from Cornell University in 2009. After spending three years working in Japan, Cindy moved to Canada and enrolled in the English Master’s Program at the University of Windsor. She hopes to graduate in 2014 from Windsor with a complete manuscript, after which she will celebrate by rereading her favorite book, *The Count of Monte Cristo*.