

THE MYRIAD THINGS: A NOVEL

IN PROGRESS

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David Z. N. Latham, B.A.

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THE MYRIAD THINGS: A NOVEL  
IN PROGRESS

Committee Members Approved:

---

Tom Grimes, Chair

---

Nelly Rosario

---

Edgar S. Laird

Approved:

---

J. Michael Willoughby  
Dean of the Graduate College

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## PROLOGUE

2010

*My mom stands in front of me with her fists clenched. Her shoulders are drawn high on her neck. Streaks of mascara, like rivers of black ink, run down her cheeks. Drool hangs from her lips. It hurts to see her in so much pain, but I know there's nothing I can do to change the fact. Change is difficult; the pain of being an individual and feeling alienated has always been there.*

*I know she grew up in a difficult household. I have nothing but sympathy for her pursuits and the independence she's sought and struggled so hard for, but I have to conscientiously refuse to engage in the situation. The wounded look in her brown eyes as she screams "I'm not angry!" is enough to make me want to turn, flee the house, and never come back. Or do the opposite: tell her, once and for all, what I really think about moments like these and the way she acts out. That she is destroying herself.*

*"You can't treat me like your father," she screams. She rattles her fists at me. "You don't know anything about my life. You don't anything about who I am. You're ridiculous! You're absurd!"*

*I lower my head. All men are pigs and liars. The doctoral candidate in literature at Berkeley who encouraged her to go to school and helped pay for her tuition was a*

*pig and a liar. The doctoral candidate in nuclear physics that gave up finishing his degree to help raise me, buy a home, and then settle down was a pig and a liar. The alcoholic with a soft heart that was on his own third divorce and hoping for redemption was a pig and a liar.*

*I stare back at her coldly, disgusted with the situation and how it's gotten so out of hand. I know that she feels helpless, but what am I supposed to do as her son?*

*I fold my arms, look her in the eye, and say what I have to say. "Get help, Mom. But not from me. Never again."*

My name is Thomas Mooreland. As I stand at the foot of my mother's gravel driveway, the fight with her plays over and over again in my head. I feel crowded and unsure of myself. I'm unable to breath. My face aches. Like a dog searching for a particularly difficult itch to scratch, I rake the sides of my face with my fingertips, telling myself not to worry and that everything will go fine with the coming visit. It's the first time we've seen or talked to each other in four months.

The distance between where I stand and the front door is a little over fifty feet. It's the psychological distance and letting go that's tough, though. Walking past the browning lawn, past the plastic cat ornaments that peak out from the bushes, past the front window where she sits inside waiting and reading a magazine, it feels like I'm walking across a mine field. Selfishness. Emotional debts. The past. They're all there waiting for me, like traps.

Twenty years ago, I left the United States to live in China with my father after



my mother's third divorce. The way I departed was sudden. There was never any kind of closure for either of us. All the same anxieties and tensions of childhood that remained open when I left now reopen now. My mother's three divorces, as well our mutual estrangement and heartbreak, loom large over our meeting. And now, after nearly twenty years spent living in a different society, all I want is to be able to come home. To that feeling of home again. And family.

While living in China, my life ended up becoming an expatriate's. It's the life of a person who calls a foreign country home and visits the real home on vacations. I have to shake my head at that fact as I come up to the door. A familiar heartsickness washes over me. A lot has happened since my mother and I last lived in the same city, or even the same country.

**BOOK I:**

**1990**

**CHAPTER I:**  
**I SAY GOODBYE TO THE LIBERTY STATUE ON ALKAI BEACH**

When June of 1990 came, my mother, Sherry Mooreland, began singing in the kitchen again. Her voice, smooth and reedy like a clarinet's, filled the two floors and four rooms of our house. The spring months in Seattle, full of melancholic skies and unceasing rain, had put a damper on her spirits. For weeks all she could speak about was her father who'd passed away the year before. She struggled to complete papers for an important class she was taking. When the weather became fairer, friends visited to cheer her up. Their talk was contagious and full of laughter. My mother revived and spoke animatedly about politics, science, and other subjects she loved. Later in the evening before dusk, she and Adam, my stepfather, sat on the front porch of our house and drank soda pops together as they looked out onto the glassy, sunlit waters of the Puget Sound. Adam was working full-time at the port authority and hadn't touched a drop of alcohol in over three years.

The garden in the backyard opened up shortly after the summer sun came. Cucumbers, long and prickly, like penises, shot up from the ground. Tomatoes as big as softballs, heavy and luscious red, drooped from the vines. Peas, that looked crisp, virginal and slim, hung like socks on their green tethers. The carrots the three of us

pulled from the earth were dirty, bright orange-red, and wet.

My mother owned an old tugboat she kept dry-docked on the side of the house. The bricks, which the boat rested upon, had been gradually sinking into the soil for years. The neighbors thought the old boat was an eyesore and complained that it lowered property values. It had originally belonged to my grandfather who ran a fishing business. Growing up, my mother spent many of her summer days on the boat, behind the captain's wheel with her father, trawling the Sound.

In its day the boat had been well known among fisherman for its mechanical problems. My grandfather had spent years standing over the engine with a wrench, beating it like he was beating a disobedient dog. When he'd go trawling on the water, he cursed up and down the Sound about he'd been shafted when he bought the boat. Years later, after retiring it on the side of the house, raccoons broke through the wheelhouse windows. After that squirrels, mice, rats, and finally our own cats got inside, leaving my mother with a derelict boat she was unable to fix. Sitting around the dinner table one evening, a decision was made by my mother. She'd get rid of it.

"How are you going to do that?" asked Adam.

"I guess we'll have to dismantle it," said my mother. Her voice fell as she spoke. I could tell she didn't really want to get rid of it. Some of the best moments of her life with her father had been lived on the boat. She and Adam had also talked in the past about putting money into fixing it and one day all of three of us sailing down the coast to San Diego together.

"Who's going to do that?" asked Adam. My mother crossed her arms and

looked back and forth between Adam and I.

“Well, who else can do it? We don’t have money to have someone haul it out of the mud. It could have sailed if you’d gotten to work on it when you said would.”

Adam shook his head, got up, and then brought his plate to the sink, where he began washing the dishes.

“There’s nothing wrong with the boat itself,” continued my mother. “It’s sea worthy.”

“Since when did I become responsible for fixing your boat?”

“Why isn’t it our boat? That’s what I’d like to know.”

“Forget it. I’ll take a look at it after dinner and see what I can do.”

Later, as Adam and I stepped out the front door, my mother shouted after him, “If you can fix the engine, then let’s save it. If you can’t, then stop complaining. This is *our* boat, remember?”

Moments later, I stood in the wheelhouse doorway with my hand over my mouth. Adam, covering his nose and mouth with a wet cloth, moved around the wheelhouse opening the windows. A cool breeze swept through, and, able to breathe again, we lowered our hands. At my foot sat a pile of blackened raccoon turds.

I kicked it with the tip of my shoe. “Big mess.”

“Yup,” said Adam. Using a crowbar he’d brought with him, Adam tapped the walls and cupboards. I walked over to the captain’s wheel, and, putting my weight into it, spun the wheel around. It moved easily on its axis and looked to be in good working order.

“Can’t you just...I don’t know...take it out in big pieces?”

“Not if we’re going to be hauling the pieces to the dump in my truck. The truck bed is too small.”

I looked around and explored the room. On the walls were maps and charts, as well as a framed picture of my grandfather and grandmother standing on a pier with the tugboat in the background of the shot. I touched the frame’s glass; a powdery residue came off onto my fingertips. I wiped the dust off on my jeans.

“Grandpa was crazy,” I said, “wasn’t he? You met him, right?”

“I don’t think he was crazy. Just a little wishful,” said Adam, laughing to himself. “Your grandfather was a grand old schemer. I think that’s why your mother loved him so much.”

Adam walked around the room, continuing to bang the walls and floors with the crowbar. Using the nose of the crowbar, he pulled open one of the cupboards. Inside was a stink that nearly knocked the two of us over.

“Jesus. It smells like something died in there,” I said.

“Yup. Critters getting in can do that,” said Adam, closing the cupboard. “I hate wasting all the good stuff, though.”

Stepping over to the starboard wall, he pointed to a piece of boarding that had woodwork. The board depicted a pair of mermaids swimming around an island castle. Sticking the end of the crowbar between the boards and leaning back, Adam began prying the board out. A second later, with a wailing screech, the nails came loose, and the board fell to the floor.

“Careful,” I said.

“Shit.” Picking up the piece of board, he held it before his eyes and I saw his

body grow stiff and uncomfortable.

“What?”

“I hate doing it,” he said. “Whoever built this boat put a lot of effort into planing the wood just right. It’s good wood, too. Heavy, see? You don’t take apart something like without thinking twice about it.”

I stepped around to where Adam was kneeled down, and we both looked at the decorated board for a moment, quiet, reverential.

“That’s what mom said she wanted. How are we going to do it?”

“Dunno,” said Adam, standing up. “I haven’t done this kind of thing before.”

When we went back to the house, Adam showed the piece of carving to my mother, and then asked again if she really wanted us to go through with it. She nodded sadly and went upstairs to her books and schoolwork.

Then the work of dismantling began.

At about that time, my school year ended. The moment the bell rang in my final class, I rushed out of the building toward the bike rack with my best friends, Greg and Sarah. It was a cool sixty-five degrees outside. Greg, Sarah, and I had been talking about the summer since the start of the school year. It was the best time of the year, the time of year when the whole city stripped off its heavy raincoats and reveled in the warmth of the sun.

The three of us descended on the beach like a pack of wild seal pups. Once again, I was free. As we lay on our beach towels and talked about the school year, the present came into perspective. Next year we’d all be in tenth grade together, and more and more in our daily conversations over the past year the word ‘future’ had

kept coming up. Greg and Sarah had their sights set on college, but Greg, who'd done poorly over the last year—not quiet sure he even liked school, but who tried hard anyway—kept his head low while Sarah massaged the tension out of his neck. Sarah, we both knew, was going to college. She got straight A's and took part in school clubs. Her mother was a doctor and her father was a lawyer. I'd never set the bar very high before. I had what my mother called 'native intelligence' and that had always been enough to get me by.

Getting up, I stripped down to my shorts and tipped toed down the path of rocks and shells leading to the water. In that moment, that rare moment of sunshine and warmth in Seattle, I didn't care how cold the water was. I dove into the ocean with abandon, letting go of everything. The moment I hit the cold blue surface, the air in my lungs shrunk to the size of a tennis ball. I came up to the surface a moment later, gasping for breath, feeling utterly alive. The cold of the ocean didn't matter.

On the way home that day, as the three of us went to my house on our bicycles, about a quarter of mile from my driveway, three police cars sat parked on the side of the road. A telephone pole lay in the street. Just to the right of it, I could see a pair of skid marks leading off the road and down into a ditch. As I observed the backend of a white Ford pickup poking up from the bottom of the ditch, my stomach began to knot up.

We all got off our bikes. Greg was the first to break the silence. "Isn't that your step-father's truck?"

As we walked forward, I got the eerie sense that the world was about to be pulled out from underneath me. My ears grew hot; my hands began to go numb.



When we got to within ten feet of the police barrier, I recognized the license plate as my stepfather's. I stepped past the barrier and walked down the slope toward the truck. A moment later, I heard a voice shouting from behind to stop, but I didn't listen.

As I made my way down the slope, I felt myself suddenly rolling forward. Rocks and grass rose up in my face. I slid down on my palms and stomach, a murky wallow welcoming me at the bottom. A moment later, a firefighter was standing over me. He had a pair of bolt cutters in his hand. Just behind him I could hear the whirring, high-pitched scream of an electric buzz saw. I stood up. A second later, the firefighter put his arms around me. I struggled, kicked, and screamed. "Let me go! That's my stepfather! Let me go!" I shouted, but the arms only hugged me all the tighter as I fought against them.

The truck's windshield had a crack in it that spread out like the icy veins of a snowflake. Inside the truck, I could make out Adam. His head rested against the steering wheel, which he clung to like he was hanging off the edge of a tall building. After I stopped yelling and kicking, the firefighter set me down, and I collapsed in the grass. My head was dizzy and my vision was blurry. *This can't be happening*, I thought. *Everything's been going well. He's been sober for three years. Why?*

A stream of blood ran down my stepfather's arms and hands. As the firefighter pushed Adam back in his seat, he kept mumbling, "What happened?" All I wanted to do was scream, start tearing my hair out in fistfuls right there so everyone—the police, the neighbors watching, my friends—could know how mad I was at him.

When Adam got home from the hospital two days later, contrary to what I believed would happen, my mother didn't kill him. She cooked him soup and made him sandwiches. Up until that point, Adam had been the one to cook. Each night as my mother confusedly searched for ingredients in the cupboards and she struggled with herself. It was her third marriage, as well as Adam's.

A week later, things returned to normal, or as much could under the circumstances. Adam got on his feet again and went back to work at the port. But I could tell by the way the two of them didn't fight anymore that something had changed.

As I lay in bed one night thinking about what had happened, I came to understand the events as a measure of our family life. 'Which weights more, a pound of lead or a pound of feathers?' a teacher had once asked me. It's a riddle that's easy enough to understand the logic of after a while. They weight the same. It doesn't matter what the substance is. The pound is a measure of *things*. Our family was broken.

After that, life stopped at home. As if walking on the bottom of the ocean floor each day, my parents puckered their lips as tight as they could, until, inevitably, all the pent up anger and frustration had to be let loose. My mom throttled her fists, charged up and ready for a fight, pointing and shouting and accusing, remembering and hurting and dying, over and over again, while Adam presented his own list of grievances.

Unwashed dishes began to accumulate in the kitchen sink. Laundry collected on the bedroom floors. Garbage overflowed in the trashcans. Resigned, I gave up

looking to either of them to take care of me, realizing that to surviving the disorder, I was going to have to learn how to take care of myself.

I collected my laundry and washed it, dried it, and folded it. Night after night they spent their wills on trying to strangle the other's shadows. I stayed as far from both of them as I could knowing by the looks in each of their faces that they were bound to hurt like hell. In the meantime, I kept telling myself, 'Be small. We'll survive. Things will be okay.'

About a month into the summer vacation, one evening, my mother came into my room and sat down on the edge of my bed. She folded her hands in her lap. The veins in her hands were like rivers that had dried up. Her eyes, like old windows, were sagging and glossy. I could tell something was up. She told me to listen.

"Adam and I have been talking, and we both think now isn't a good time for you to be around the house. What do you think about going to live with your father for a while? Just a while. Until things settle down here."

"In China?"

"Yes."

"I don't want to live in China."

"Your father lives there. It's a chance to get to know your father. Don't you want that?"

"What about relatives? Or Greg. I could live with Greg and his parents."

"There isn't anybody else, Thomas. I need to do what's right. Think about it, please?" she said. My mother caressed my hair, then turned away.

The following morning we ate breakfast together. Adam scooped up the last

of his oatmeal from the sides of his bowl. The sound of a spoon clinking was one my mother's long-standing pet peeves. I looked at my mother, and as if that spoon were a symbol of everything she'd ever hated about Adam—his roughness, his inability to figure her out, however or whatever it was—she calmly stood up, went to the kitchen drawer, yanked it open, and pulled out a plastic baby spoon.

"Here. Eat using this," she said. Her voice was cold, quiet. She pointed to the bowl where the last soggy flakes of oatmeal clung.

"I'm not eating with a plastic baby spoon just because you don't like the sound of my spoon clinking against the side of the bowl."

"I've told you in the past, I don't like it when you eat loudly. Eat with the spoon."

My mother thrust the spoon in his face. Standing up, Adam left the room. An hour later, his duffel bag and a pair of plastic bags filled with clothes were packed and by the door. I pleaded with him to stay, but he just shook his head, smiling sadly, strangely, almost as if he might begin to laugh. It was then, looking at his eyes, that I knew we were saying goodbye.

I ran out of the house, slamming the front door behind me. Outside, the kickstand of my bike jammed, and no matter how hard I tried to kick it up, it wouldn't budge. I threw the bike down on the lawn and ran. As I ran, I heard the sound of the traffic passing on the streets. I closed my eyes and kept running with them that way for as long as I could, trying to fight off the upset inside me, not knowing when there would be a turn, or a car, or a cross walk, or a person in front of me who might suddenly shout, 'Hey kid, what are you doing?'

When I opened my eyes, I stopped and turned around. I saw my house not far away, the old derelict tugboat there sinking into the mud and the wood blackening and rotting with age. I turned back toward the beach and walked the rest of the way there, not knowing where exactly I was going, but finding myself drawn down the boulevard toward the replica Statue of Liberty. There was something about its sphinx-like stillness that felt like it contained an important secret.

The statue's eyes stared out onto the Pacific as if looking upon a far away place on the horizon. The men in my mother's life came and went. Some were good. Others less so. What kind of man would I be?, I wanted to know.

The beach was deserted, and after a while it began to drizzle. I sat at the foot of the statue, pulled my legs up to my chest, and looked out onto the ocean. I knew tomorrow would come. I knew the sun would rise. And yet I could not understand what lay ahead. The future. And now I was being asked if I wanted to live in China? *Communist* China? And yet there it was before me, the question, and another, 'Do you want to live with your father for a while?'

I looked up at the statue. Sitting underneath, the statue's lips almost seemed to smile. I got up, took a couple steps back and looked at the statue again. Now it seemed to be somber and serious again.

"What do I know about anything?" I shouted at the statue. As far as I could tell, that was the only thing I had going for me. That I knew I didn't know much. For better or worse, my adulthood began here.

When I got home, I told my mother I'd go. That evening before going to bed, she took me upstairs and tucked me in. Then, the next day she bought me a plane

ticket, and before I knew it, it was the morning of my flight.

By the time my mother and I got to the airport, neither of us could hold still. After a confusion at the check-in counter regarding my visa, we sped through security. By the time we got to the gate, my mother and I were both balling. I didn't want to leave holding something against her, but it was hard to push away the past. There had been too many tears, too many fights, too much 'I'm right and everyone else is wrong' and not enough 'family and love.' She shoved a fifty-dollar bill in my pocket and said in a sad voice, 'Take care of yourself, I love you,' and that was it. I got on the plane, found my seat, and fell asleep.

I woke up three hours later startled to find myself on a plane. Panic rose up in my throat. The next several hours of the flight went by painfully slow. I looked down at the wings-pin I'd been given at the ticketing counter that indicated I was a child flying alone. *No shit*, I thought. *This is how it always feels. Like I'm alone.* Who was my father? I didn't know. Who was my mother? I desperately tried to hold on to some image of her, but found none. The world around me seemed to have shrunk to the size of a dime. Outside my window, the Arctic stretched as far as the eye could see. Far in the distance, I could make out what looked like an oiling operation. It made me think of Adam. That was the kind of place he was going. The thought of living somewhere so far away and isolated terrified me. Where I was headed was not quiet as isolated as the Arctic, but close enough. And the only thing I had to really tell me anything about my father were the letters he'd sent me over the years.

I took out the stack of letters and postcards from my backpack. The

handwriting on the letters was scratchy, barely legible. My mother called it chicken scratch. I stared at the bundle apprehensively, listening to the plane drone. I'd read them hundreds, if not thousands, of times, and had often wondered before why my father had decided to live in China for so long—nearly 25 years—but for whatever reason had never thought of asking. At the end of one letter there was the following note:

“It's fun to travel and see the world, but there is no place like one's own home and one's own bed. As you go about in your own life, discovering the world, remember, people are what's most important. I wish I could be there to see you grow up. Please let me know how you are doing in school and sports. Be good, study hard, and remember to think, plan, and then do what is right.”

When I finished, I looked out the window again. I felt like I was traveling through a black hole. The sight of the eerie, blue, glowing ice and the darker, fractured surface I was crossing outside made me breathless. After a while, I put the letters away. One of the Poles of the world was out there somewhere. Everything that had happened was a dose of the real world I wasn't quite ready for. My mother's desperation and anger suddenly revealing itself. Adam's disappearance from both my mother's and my life. More and more, the hairline fractures of the ice pulled apart, and I set sail for China, without knowing when I would return.

## CHAPTER II:

### NEITHER FORKS, NOR KNIVES, NOR SPOONS

*In my first couple weeks in China, I was home sick much of the time. I wasn't stripped of independence—that's not the right phrase. But as I got to know the city of Beijing, I had to learn to rely on knowledge and ideas that weren't my own in the sense of society, as well as a different set of understandings and values concerning every day objects, people, and places. And each moment of the rest of my time there, I pondered the mystery of all those values and relationships.*

*Imagine the patterns of a carpet within your own mind changing before your eyes each day. That was what the process of adjusting to life there was like. So it was that with each new day, each new thing I saw added to my understanding of the sum. A cow with worn skin, mangy hair covered in flies, slobbering and groaning, added something to the grayness of the sky and the Chinese man who sat upon the cart, thrashing the reins. The pigeons that the flew circles around my apartment building each morning became like the crows and the ravens back home for me, the ones that would stalk in the evergreen branches, loudly cawing. The streets of Beijing and their quiet, crumbling stones, bricks, potholes and ruptures became like the unbroken flesh of my own neighborhood back home.*



After the ten-hour flight, all I could think about was escaping the cramped confines of the plane. As I walked down the exit ramp, my heart began to beat as if being drubbed by a professional boxer. Cradling my backpack to my chest, I looked around. Standing near the exit gate was a Chinese soldier dressed in army fatigues counting passengers as they walked off the plane. When he turned his head in my direction, his eyebrows, thick and bushy, like a pair of black caterpillars, inched up his forehead. He glared at me for several seconds before turning his attention back to the exit gate. Just behind him was a crowd of Chinese people dressed in sober-looking black and blue coats shouting as they greeted someone who'd just come off the flight. I looked around again. No father.

From behind me I heard a voice calling my name. I turned to see my father walking toward me with two Chinese police officers. My father pointed at me, and I could hear him say 'That's him.' By the looks on the police officers' faces, I wondered if the two of us were about to be put in prison.

My father was dressed in a silk Chinese jacket, blue jeans, and a pair of black hemp slippers. It was the first time in over a year since I'd seen him. The clothing he wore made him seem unfamiliar, but I recognized his red cheeks, high forehead, and wistful eyes. A warm, goofy smile came onto his face as he walked toward me.

As the police officers and my father came to where I stood, my father took out his passport and handed it to them. "*Wo de er zi*," he said. *My son*.

The two police officers then asked in English to see my passport. After comparing the documents—my father's passport and my own—and looking back and forth between the two of us, they passed the documents back and said,

“Welcome to Beijing and the People Republic of China.”

Later, as my father and I walked to the baggage claim, he laughed at the expression on my face. I tried to say something, but I was in too much shock.

“Sorry about being late,” said my father. “When I got here, I had to argue with the airport security to let me meet you at the gate. It’s not usually allowed. Are you tired? I’ll bet you’re tired. Did you get anything to eat on the plane?” Question after question my father asked, but each time I tried to respond, my voice came out only as a peep, a small ‘Yes, I am,’ or ‘No, I’m not.’ I couldn’t believe where I was and who I was with: my father.

As we walked together, I felt something that I had never felt before—that I was seeing who my father really was for the first time.

Once we got out of the airport, my father hailed a taxi. The night’s air was heavy with fog, and the streets were dark and empty. As the cab drove toward the city along a narrow, two-lane road, I looked out the window. Except for only one or two lights on in the buildings, the city seemed almost uninhabited.

“Why isn’t anybody out?” I asked. “Why are the lights all off?”

“The city’s rationing electricity right now,” my father said. “They do that here with food, as well.”

Looking down at my hands, I suddenly noticed I was clinging to the edge of the car window. For a moment, I wanted to tell my father to turn the cab around and head back to the airport, but as I looked at him, I saw that he was smiling that same smile I recognized from home. He patted me on the leg and put his arm around my shoulders.

“Don’t worry. I’m not that low down on the bureaucratic chain of things,” he said. “Our building has electricity and we have plenty of food to eat. Although it’s pretty much all Chinese food. Speaking of food, are you hungry?”

I nodded. Suddenly I found myself starving. After the meal on the plane, my belly felt as if it had been filled with rocks, barely satisfied, only half full.

“Alright,” he said. “I know a good restaurant. We’ll be home soon.”

The word ‘home’ suddenly hit me. Like a bucket of ice water had been dumped down my back. This place was to be my new home. Fifteen minutes later, we were standing on a street corner outside a restaurant. I dragged my two bags out of the trunk of the taxi along with the help of the driver. Inside, the restaurant was empty except for a woman in a pink uniform who stood in the center, moving about the tables and sweeping up the floor. On the floor was a mess of cigarette ashes and butts, along with row after row of empty, green beer bottles. When the waitress saw us come in, she came over.

*“Dui bu qi, women guan men le....Ei, shi ni. Zeme you lai le? Bu zuo fan zai jia ma? Zhe shi shei?”* she said. *Sorry, we’re closed...Oh, it’s you. Don’t you ever cook at home? Who’s this with you?*

*“This is my son. We’ve just come from the airport. He’s going to stay a while with me, learn some Chinese culture. Sorry to have troubled you, but is the restaurant still open?”* said my father.

The woman looked back and forth between us. *“The cooks are all sleeping,”* she said.

*“Asleep? Oh....”*

I didn't know what was being said, but the woman, who appeared to be only a couple years older than me, suddenly looked back and forth between us nervously. Turning, she went to a door on the far side of the room that was covered with a bead curtain and called into the back. A groan came from the room, and a moment later, a sleepy eyed cook with disheveled hair poked his head out. He looked up at the waitress.

*"You look,"* she said to the cook, pointing at my father and I.

The cook suddenly shrugged and went back into the kitchen. *"We have guests!"*

A moment later, the waitress cleaned off one of the tables for us and we sat down.

*"Sincere thanks,"* said my father to the waitress.

"What did you just say?"

"'Thank you.' The literal translation is 'moved thanks.'"

I nodded my head, both intrigued by the situation and the fact my father had just had a complete conversation with a Chinese person. "Is that what you do at the university, translate?"

"Yes. I teach, as well. Every once in a while there's a meeting I have to go to, but otherwise the school leaves me alone. After they've approved what I teach, of course. Thus the meetings."

A moment later the waitress returned and presented us with two glasses of hot water.

"You live a weird life," I said.

“What do you mean ‘weird’?”

“You live in China. You read and translate Chinese.”

“How is that weird?” my father asked. When he looked back at me, I could tell he was thinking about something. His expression changed ever so slightly, not exactly pleased or displeased, but somewhere in between. I could tell he wanted me to be happy, but I didn’t feel ready for any of it. His life. There were a thousand questions I wanted to ask him. Why have you been in China for so long? Why happened between you and mom? As question after question went through my mind, a painful realization struck me like a bolt of lightning crashing down on my head. My father was a stranger, and I was a stranger to him, too.

“Alright, but—”

“The Chinese have a saying about patience,” said my father. “‘One moment of patience may ward off great disaster; one moment of impatience may ruin a whole life.’ We’ll figure everything out. Everything in its good time.”

A moment later, a plate of dumplings arrived. Clouds of steam turning in great coils wafted up from the plate. The smell was thick, dense, doughy and oniony. The waitress then brought us three small jars, one with soy, one with vinegar, and another with red pepper oil, as well as chopsticks. As the vapors from the plate filled my nose and lungs, I felt suddenly as if I could breath a little more easily. What my father said made sense—it was my first night after all. I decided to put aside my thoughts for a moment, and focus on eating.

Taking a pair of chopsticks out of their paper sleeve, I grabbed the two top ends and pulled the chopsticks apart. They came apart with a brittle snap, and

looking down, I found one half of the chopstick still attached to the other half. A bad break. Across the table was a mason jar full of chopsticks, so I reached over and grabbed another pair, trying a second time with the same result. Seeing the pile of chopsticks piling up before me, when I reached for another pair, my father told me to stop. He took a pair out and held it with both his hands.

“When you break them, hold them closer to the bottom. That way the force is distributed more evenly,” my father said, pulling the two apart. The chopsticks came away evenly, a proper pair. “And then, do this.”

Holding the chopsticks in his palms like a pair of incense sticks, he began rubbing his hands together rapidly. I couldn’t help but smile, even laugh a bit at what he was doing. He was trying to make a joke, and trying hard for me. I watched carefully as my father’s eyes filled with a glee. Following his instructions, I did as he said, and the chopsticks came easily apart. My father stared back at me, the crease of a smile on the corner of his lips.

“Not so hard, right?” said my father. “If I could give you easy answers about why things are the way they are, I would. There aren’t any easy answers though.”

“Alright,” I said, getting angry. “What was my GPA last year? What’s my favorite sport?”

“You got A’s and B’s. Your favorite sport is soccer.”

“C’s and D’s more like it. I don’t play soccer any longer.”

“Alright, so I’ve got things to learn. By the looks of it, so do you. Patience. Study it like you’re studying for a test. Now go ahead and eat. It’s getting late and we’ll want to get back soon.”

Questions or none, ready or not, I wanted to make a better impression on him than I had moments before. Holding one chopstick in each hand, I looked back and forth between them. They were neither forks, nor spoons, nor knives. Before me sat the plate of steaming dumplings. They looked soft, gooey, like little breaded envelopes. My mouth began to water.

I looked at my father; my father looked at me.

"You don't know how to use chopsticks?" he asked.

I lowered my head. "No."

"Hey. You don't have to do that."

"What?"

"It's okay. You'll learn. Look around here," he said, pointing around the room.

"Do you see any skeletons?"

I raised my head and looked around. "No."

"That's because no one has ever died in China because they couldn't learn how to use chopsticks."

My father then grabbed one of the chopsticks and set it in the dip between my thumb and ring finger, telling me to pinch down. Then he set the other chopstick on the top part of my thumb and told me to pinch down with my forefinger.

Awkwardly, I reached over the table for one of the dumplings with my chopsticks. The first slipped out onto table. The second I was able to get hold of, lift up, and bring within inches of my mouth before it fell into my lap. I thrust my chopsticks into the bowl of rice in frustration.

My father suddenly began waving his hands. "That's bad luck in China!" he

said. I took the chopsticks out and leaned them against the side of the bowl. My father patted my shoulder and stared at my food with me. "You'll get there. Let me ask the waitress for a spoon."

Afterwards, as we went home, we walked the street in silence. When we got to the foot of my new apartment building, my father pointed to the top floor. "That's us, up there. The top floor. After midnight, the elevators are turned off, so we'll have to hike the stairs."

Eight flights of stairs later, we got to the apartment door. My father pressed a button on the wall, and a light came on. Pulling a ring of keys out of his pocket, he selected a long, diamond-headed one and slipped it into the door. As he turned the key, I could hear bolts and levers inside the door moving.

Inside, the apartment was dark. My father flipped on a switch, and then dragged my bag into the living room.

"Home sweet home," he said. I looked around the room. Stacked along the walls were piles of books. On the far right side of the room were two bookshelves with more books and a number of old Chinese vases and jars. There was a couch and a living room table, and a couple potted plants that were shriveled and that was about it. It looked like a bachelor's pad, which I had kind of expected. My father explained that the building was built in the 1960's and used to be a diplomatic residence. The building was called *Donghuashi*, and the apartment was just under 1,300 square feet, with two bedrooms, a small workroom, a kitchen, and a single bathroom. I walked around, checking the place out. The rooms had vaulted ceilings, stained wood trim, and Victorian-looking floral wallpaper.



My father showed me to my room. There was a bed and a nightstand and a chest of drawers. Apart from that it was empty.

"Sorry there's not much in the way of furniture or decorations," my father said. "I haven't had a chance to go furniture shopping yet. We'll get to that."

The room was quiet. My father hesitated at the door, and his face fell to the floor. "We'll figure everything out. I'll let you settle in."

Unable to sleep, I spent the early hours of the morning reading magazines in bed. After an hour, I had a terrible headache. The heartbreak of the present stood over me like a vast and terrible cloud. After a while, I gave up trying to read. Several hours later, when a faint red disk appeared on the horizon outside my balcony window, I finally was able to quiet my mind and sleep.

In the morning, my father met me in the living room. On the table was something that looked like a pancake, but not, and a pair of oily breadsticks in a plastic bag. "Breakfast is served. No chopsticks needed."

I sat down and examined the pancake. It had an egg in it. That was enough for me. I began eating. It was salty, slimy, crunchy, and spicy. My father looked at me expectantly.

"It's good," I said, although I wasn't being completely honest. It was true enough, though. It had an egg in it.

"So, first things first. In terms of living here, you'll need to learn Chinese."

"Probably."

"Definitely. There are a lot of things you need to learn before you can even leave the apartment compound. You'll need to carry a photocopy of your passport

with you at all times. That's in case the police ever need to confirm your identity. You'll also need the phone number of the embassy in case a revolution breaks out, and I'm not around at the time."

"A revolution?"

"Like Tiananmen. Things are reasonably safe here, but the political climate can change rapidly. That's about it for now. In terms of learning Mandarin, the wife of a Chinese colleague of mine has offered to help. She used to teach English in middle school in Beijing. They also have a young son about your age, if you're interested in making a friend."

Later that day, my father introduced me to the Wangs. They lived on the first floor of the apartment building next to ours. A Chinese man in his forties dressed in white pants and a checkered shirt met us at the door. Smiling, he shook my father's hand and then introduced himself to me as Wang Xiaogang. "Call me Richie, if you like. That's my English name."

Inside, the apartment contained none of the decorations or wood my father's apartment had. It was all solid concrete walls that were painted white and a few pieces of simple furniture, including a large couch in the center of the room that stood in front of a TV. Apart from that, the place looked fairly empty, but it was clean.

After we came in, I was introduced to Zhou Qi, Richie's wife. As my father and the Wang's spoke, going back and forth between Chinese and English, Zhou Qi told me I could have my first Chinese lesson the day after if I thought I was ready. She smiled as she spoke. "I am very glad to meet you Thomas. I will be your auntie while

in Beijing, how's about that?"

My father explained that she wouldn't be my real auntie, but something like one. I nodded, trying to take everything in. Standing just behind her, was the boy my father had mentioned. He had spiky hair and wore a pair of glasses. Trying to push her son out from behind her, Zhou Qi took his hand and led him in front of us. He looked back and forth between his parents as they spoke, as if hanging on every word. When they asked him to introduce himself, he shook his head and stomped away.

"Don't mind Xiaoling," said Richie. "He's shy of new people. You are also the first American his age he has ever met. Maybe you can meet him next time."

Just as I thought we were about to leave, then, from the backroom came a voice. A moment later, an old man stepped out, still dressed in his morning clothes. He wore a bathrobe that dragged on the floor behind him, a pair of boxer shorts and a sleeveless undershirt with holes in it. His eyes moved carefully as he crossed the room towards us. Walking right up to me, he stared at me for a long couple seconds.

*"Don't scare the boy, Lao Ba,"* said Zhou Qi.

The old man stood up. *"Me? Scarry? Ha. I'm not scary. You in a bad temper, that's scary."* Looking back and forth between my father and Zhou Qi, he pointed a long, gnarled finger at me.

Zhou Qi smiled and then put her hand around my shoulder. "This is my father. His name is Zhou Wenliu. You can call him Grandfather Zhou, if you like."

The old man continued to look straight at me, his eyes bright and dull looking all at once.

*"Do you mind if I touch his hair?"* he said, looking at my father.

My father looked at Zhou Qi, then back at Grandfather Zhou. *"I don't know. You can ask him if you like."*

The old man turned back to me. *"Do you mind if I touch your hair? Just for a second. I've never touched yellow hair before."*

I took a step back, trying not to show my fear to my father or anyone else. He seemed alright. Just an old person. Old. Ancient.

"You must excuse my father. He's old and doesn't understand modern ways," said Zhou Qi, glaring at her father. The old man shrugged his shoulders and smiled, appearing all too happy with himself.

"He is asking if he can touch your hair," explained my father. "They don't have any people with blonde hair in China. He's curious about what it feels like. To him it's very different. Your choice."

I looked at the old man staring back at me. He nodded his head up and down a couple times. The situation was discomfiting, but I wanted to be polite. "Alright," I said, nodding to him twice to make sure he knew I meant 'okay.'

The old man grinned all the more brightly. Standing up straight, he pulled back the sleeve of his bathrobe and raised his outstretched fingers above my head, holding his hand there for a moment. And then he firmly placed his hand on my skull.

As the old man began moving his fingers through my hair, massaging my skull with his fingertips, I felt that I might burst out laughing. The old man stared out into the open space of the room, his eyes searching there as if searching for

something in his mind. Then just before I thought I couldn't stand it anymore, he pulled his hand away and clasped it behind his back.

*"Soft. I didn't expect it would be so soft,"* said Grandfather Zhou. Taking a step back, he gave me a thumbs up. *"W'ery goo-da. Did I say it right? Very good? Nice firm skull. Firmer than Xiaoling's. Maybe this American kid can be his friend."*

The following day when I came over for my first Chinese lesson, Xiaoling sat at the dining room table doing homework. Following me with his eyes as I crossed the living room, his mouth hung agape, and he looked back and forth between Richie and I. The night before when I'd met him, he hadn't spoken a word, and now, Zhou Qi, who began preparing the lesson for the day, asked Xiaoling to move down to the other side of the table. Reluctantly, he got up and shifted his notebooks and papers to the other side. Pulling out a chair, he slapped the seat a couple times.

As I sat down across from him, I took out the lesson books my father had given me at home. After a moment, Zhou Qi came back with a plate of biscuits, as well as three glasses of tea, and set them on the table. Just as I reached across the table for a biscuit, I thanked Zhou Qi, and when I turned back, I found Xiaoling staring at me again, his own hand outstretched about as far as my own over the biscuit plate.

He froze.

Zhou Qi looked at him. "What's the matter with you? You're always hungry; go ahead and eat," she said in English to Xiaoling. Xiaoling, who had before been looking at his mother, turned to look back at me.

*"Xiaoling, ni bie zhe yang. Shi bu shi ni shangge xiangqi shuo le yao zhao xin*

*pengyou, duanlian duanlian ni de yingyu? Gen ta liao ba. Shi shi,” said Richie. Xiaoling, don’t be that way. Wasn’t it you who said last week you wanted to practice English? So, here’s your chance. Jump in.*

Taking up one of the biscuits, Xiaoling stuck the wafer in his mouth and thoughtfully chewed. Then, taking a deep breath, he suddenly shouted:

“HELLO. MY NAME IS WANG XIAOLING. HOW ARE YOU?”

I looked at Zhou Qi, who looked at Xiaoling and then back at me, nodding her head as if giving me permission to speak.

“Hi,” I said, not sure what to make of what was going on. Did he have something wrong with him? Why was he speaking so loud? “I’m fine. My name is Thomas. Thomas Mooreland.”

“MY NAME IS WANG XIAOLING AND...” said Xiaoling, this time gulping as he spoke, as if he were having difficulty breathing. Reaching across the table, he picked up one of the glasses of tea and tossed it back, guzzling the whole thing in one go. As Xiaoling set down the glass, he sighed comfortably.

“My name is Wang Xiaoling, and I am from the People’s Republic of China. I go to Number 55 Middle School in Chaoyang District. I am my school’s top English student. I am very glad to meet you.”

I looked at Richie and Zhou Qi. I’d never heard anyone introduce themselves in quiet that way before, but now that he was talking, I was curious. After a moment of silence, Xiaoling then took out his schoolbooks and began working on his homework, scribbling furiously on a piece of paper and drawing big X’s across it. Then he got up from the table, and stomping across the dining room to the living

room, turned on the television. I looked at Richie, who looked at me and then Zhou Qi. After a moment, Richie, with his hand held to his head, went into the backroom.

From the kitchen, Zhou Qi asked if I would come talk to her a moment.

“Mm,” she began. “Xiaoling would like to make new friends. He is not popular at school. He’s very friendly once you get him to open up a little bit.”

It took me a moment to register what was going on. I could see it in her eyes that she was serious, and that, perhaps, as part of the bargain for Chinese lessons, my father and the Wangs hoped the two of us would become friends. I turned and looked back into the living room where Xiaoling sat. Sitting on the couch with his legs hanging over the edge of the chair, he kicked his feet. I turned back to Zhou Qi.

“Is he always this way?” I asked.

“No. He is very nice,” she said. I could tell she was lying, but the truth was I didn’t know anyone else, and he didn’t seem that bad, just awkward. I told Zhou Qi that I would try.

Walking into the living room, I sat down next to Xiaoling. There was a kung fu melodrama on the television. After another a few moments of silence, I caught him looking at me out of the corner of his eye. I didn’t understand a word of what was being said on the television, but all the characters spoke to each other with a kind of urgency, nodding grimly at one another, as if the sky were about to fall, and then suddenly, when an important decision was made, all the actors looked skyward, clutching weapons to their chests as the wind blew through their hair.

“So,” I said, looking at Xiaoling out of the corner of my eye. “There’s no English TV here?”

“No,” he said, not looking at me and continuing to kick his feet. I waited a moment. But he didn’t say anything more. Just as I was about to get up and leave, though, he spoke.

“But sometimes I watch movies in English. I am the only student in my class that watches English movies. That’s because my father, Wang Xiaogang—you have met him before, he is in the back room right now—he collects English movies. Do you watch English movies?”

“Yes,” I said, nodding. Of course, I watch English movies. I’m American. What other kinds of movies would I watch? “What do you do for fun around here?”

Xiaoling paused for a moment, then his feet stopped kicking, and he leaned in more closely to me, looking at my face. “Could you speak more slowly?”

Ah, so that was it. I was talking too fast. “WHAT. DO. YOU. DO. FOR. FUN. AROUND. HERE?”

“Many things. I go to the park and play badminton after school. Would you like to play badminton later?”

I nodded, and everything seemed settled. At least he was talking now.



**CHAPTER III:**  
**WE GO TO THE SUNDAY MARKET AT PANJIAYUAN**

*At the start of spring, ivy begins to grow at the base of the fences that surround Donghuashi, and within weeks transform the normally menacing, white iron bars into comforting walls of foliage. Emerald creepers and white, pink, and purple flowers sprout out of the soil. The smell of thunderstorms becomes trapped in the air. Magpies begin to appear in large numbers and picturesquely hop between the milky grey branches of the poplars lining the street. In the summer, the hours pass slowly. The cicadas bark in the trees, and in the oppressiveness of the desert heat of the city everyone hides in the shade, using fans and drinking iced beer to keep cool. In the evening, when the temperature falls, couples old and young dance in a small public square to classical music. Around the edges of the square, people sit and talk with one another, sharing stories, the daily news, and gossip of their daughters and sons, and their children's' children. In the fall, winds from the plains in the north bare down upon the city, kicking up dust off the streets. The days are mellow, and the nights are cool. In the winter, the sun disappears behind a grey curtain of clouds for weeks at time, and the sky only opens when the winds from the north again sweep through the city. The air smells of sulfur and the streets become filled with black slush. And then spring*

*returns and with it comes Spring Festival. It begins with a few isolated cracks and pops. Night after night, the sound of fireworks grows louder. And on the final night of the festival, the sky fills with colored light, until the air itself appears to be burning with rainbows and lightening.*

For many years, I'd wondered why my father had chosen to stay in China for so long. I'd never asked in a letter, and when he visited the United States, questions such as those always took a backseat to catching up or having fun in the brief time we had together. So, later that day, on the way home from the Wangs and my first Chinese lesson, I asked my father if he would show me his office. If we were strangers, that place seemed as good a starting point as any for changing that.

The office, it turned out, was barely larger than a broom closet. Tucked in the corner was a small desk next to a window that looked onto the back of the apartment compound. On the desk was a Chinese scroll that had been partly unfurled. When I asked what it was, my father held it up and rolled the scroll out. The paper stretched from one side of the room to the other. It was a poem he was working on translating, he explained.

"How long will it take to translate?" I asked.

My father rolled the scroll up and shrugged. "I've been working on it for over a year now," he said, adding as he waved his arm around the room, "welcome to jungle." Several piles of books, papers, and notes were stacked on the opposite end of the room. Next to them lay a bookshelf made of stained oak that had been built into the wall and contained hundreds of volumes of books in both Chinese and

English. Some of the titles were pulled half way out to flag them. Next to his desk was a wooden box that had compartments like a wine rack and which held more scrolls. I went over to the bookshelf and tried reading a couple of titles that were in English. They contained technical, obscure sounding words and phrases like 'dendrology' and 'arboriculture' and 'The Journal of Chinese Translation Studies, collected articles, 1970-80.'

Bringing in a chair from the living room, my father offered me a seat. The chair looked like an antique, the polished wood of the armrests smooth from age and use. As I sat down, the back piece of the chair pressed awkwardly into my back. I adjusted my position every couple seconds trying to find a comfortable position. My father then asked me about school, friends, and other subjects. Just as each question came up, a small answer on my part came out. I could not help but look around the room, wonder at the things there, but also feel the very absence of what I understood as familiar and home-like.

From that point forward, the conversation was stop-and-go and after about ten minutes, I got up from my chair and went over to the window. Outside, a haze blanketed the sky and obscured all but the shapes of the buildings in the distance. It lent the landscape a haunting mysteriousness. As I looked out, I began to think of it, the city of Beijing, like a kind of silent 'third' between my father and I. To understand him would mean understanding what he saw in China, or what he liked about the place. The silences that permeated our conversation seemed to point to one place and one place alone: estrangement and avoidance of coming to terms with that. If things weren't like home here, there was no point in fighting against it.

Picking up one of the plants from the windowsill, I examined it. It was a dried up cactus.

"How did you manage to under-nourish a cactus?" I asked. We both laughed at the same time, and looking back and forth between the cactus and each other, we laughed even harder, until it seemed the both of us were about to cry, not out of joy exactly, but in pain. After a while, my father quieted himself and settling into his chair, folded his hands. For a moment, he looked around the room as if in search of something, then gave up, bowing his head.

"I know I haven't been around much, and I know you're feeling overwhelmed. I'm...I'm not good at this. Parenting." Looking at him sitting there, his neck arched out over the floor, strangely awkward looking and sad, I pitied him. And as I looked around the room, I felt a sudden, almost shameful sense of relief. Nothing in the room reminded me of home or the trouble there. After a while, though, the subject came up.

"If there's one thing I can tell you, one piece of advice I want to give you, it's this: the only person's decisions you're responsible for are you own. It's that way for everybody."

"I'm sixteen. I don't know what to do."

"You're a kid. You'll go to school. You'll study. You'll explore Beijing. Are you glad to be here?"

"Yes," I said, surprised by my own answer. As I said the words, I suddenly felt at peace with the fact. For better or worse, I was here now and China would be the thing that negotiated, changed, and sculpted our relationship. After talking, my

father suggested I keep a journal while in Beijing. “It’ll be good for you. Write about the things you see here. They’ll make a good token of your time here years from now, and you may later enjoy looking at them.”

“What should I write about?”

My father grinned as if privately musing upon something, and then getting up, he went to the bookshelf and took down a large, oversized title with a blue dust jacket. He flicked through the pages one at a time. The book itself looked well used, full of notes and highlights in the margins.

“Here it is. The Myriad Things of Creation,” he said, pointing to a row of characters. “It’s a philosophical concept.”

My father showed me the book, and I shrugged my shoulders. After a moment, he continued. “The Myriad Things. We all attribute meaning to *things*—events, people, places, objects. And if you collected up all those thoughts, yours and everyone else’s, and put them in a jar, letting them mix around and swirl together, like different colors of paint, eventually the mixture would take on a new consistency—or, in this case, a new pattern would emerge. That pattern is what the Myriad Things are.”

Thinking about it for a moment, I told him I thought I understood. Sort of. “So it has to do with how people perceiving things, you mean?”

“Basically. The Myriad Things, at least as the concept goes in Chinese philosophy, isn’t just about what one person sees or thinks about things, though. It stands apart from people...Think of it as something similar to the word ‘social fabric,’ but more profound than that. We have relationships with things. We value

things. We seek to understand things. Things and us, we're quiet inseparable. And between people and things and other people, there's the stuff that binds it all together—the relationship itself is like an object. And what's that? That's the Myriad Things of Creation, the thing from which all representations come."

"You've lost me."

My father huffed a little and then closed the book. "Perhaps a more concrete example is in order. Tomorrow, I'll take you to a place called Panjiayuan. It's a bazaar. If there's any place in Beijing that can help explain the idea of the Myriad Things—and what Beijing's like—it's that place. Incidentally, it's also kind of fun, and we can take a brief tour of the neighborhood."

Later on that day, I continued unpacking my things and spent the evening writing letters to my mother and friends. As I wrote at my desk, watching a train passing over a bridge with a Chinese temple in the background, I struggled to convey and describe the scene in my letter. As I reflected upon the fact and what my father had said, I felt as if I were getting closer to understanding how I might convey certain differences between China and the United States in the journal my father had proposed I write. 'Things' were certainly different here—but conveying the differences was like translating what was extraordinary in one context—my own vision of it—and what was ordinary in another context, life as it stood in China, as a Chinese person might understand it.

The following day as we set out for Panjiayuan, next to the entrance of the apartment compound, my father stopped at a bicycle rack. The bicycles appeared to all be of the same make, and my father scanned the license plates attached to the

back seats until he found the one that belonged to him. Unlocking the bike and pulling it out, he held it before me and pointed to the wooden bench attached just above the back wheel.

“Hop on,” he said, grinning. “It’s called a Pigeon.”

“A Pigeon?” I said. The bike reminded me of something out of a World War II movie. The frame was made of thick, heavy-looking bars of iron painted black. The leather seat and plastic handlebars were worn. “Are you sure? How are we going to do this? I’ve never done this before.”

“Neither have I to be honest. We’ll figure out the technicalities on the way. Just take a seat and swing your feet over the edge. Also, don’t drag your feet. The bike has only one gear.”

My father got the bike going, and as I ran alongside him and the bicycle, I jumped on the backseat.

Not more than twenty feet out of the main gate, I quickly learned that in order to keep myself from falling off, I had to carefully balance my body, like the two sides of a scale, over the seat. The streets were wet and cool from a rain the night before. Vapors rose from puddles and off walls and rooftops. Outside the compound, hundreds of bicyclists rode up and down the street in opposite directions. The crowds moved with a kind of subdued energy.

My father turned his head back and grinned. “Are you having fun yet?”

“Loads,” I replied, checking back and forth between my feet and the road. Try as I might, I couldn’t manage to get the right balance and after a moment, my father, trying to compensate for my movements, leaned the bike outwardly, bumping into

the bicyclist next to us. As I looked up, a wizened old man with a face that reminded me of a wrinkled shirt grabbed hold of the bicycle's handle bars with one hand, and steadied the bike until my father managed to right it.

My father thanked the old man in Chinese, and the old man dipped his head soundlessly, then waved goodbye as he turned down a street corner.

Looking upon the city in the daylight for the first time, I was surprised by how close everything was. The buildings, mostly four or five stories tall, were packed together. Construction cranes rose up on both sides of the road, their long steel arms ferrying materials between work sites. Each of the buildings that was under construction was wrapped in the same green fabric as the last, and when I asked why my father explained it was meant to keep debris off the streets. Elsewhere, there were smaller buildings going up, and workers dressed in muddy clothing worked with pick axes and shovels to clear mounds of dirt and rock. Smudged in between everything were a large number of small shops, restaurants, hair salons, and other small businesses. Each block we turned down had the same blocky, square-ish quality to it. Blocks within blocks. Blocks overlapping blocks. Blocks bisecting other blocks. The city seemed bursting with energy, but not quite able to release it either.

As we biked further down the road, I wondered what it was my father wanted me to see at the market, and what its connection was to the idea he'd introduced to me the night before. Left, then right, then left and right again, we turned our way down the various roads, the Pigeon slowly advancing.

"What am I going to do about school?" I asked, shouting over the sounds of



the traffic.

“Well, there is Xiaoling’s school. It’s a Chinese school, but it also has some foreign students. There’s also an international school as well, run out of the American embassy.”

“How could I go to a Chinese school?” I asked, thinking of Xiaoling. “I don’t even speak Chinese.”

“The school prepares students for that. Zhou Qi can help too. You never know, it might be interesting going to a Chinese school. Not a lot of kids back home will ever get to say they went to a Chinese school.”

I nodded. “Let me think about it.”

As we continued biking, I watched the people along the street get ready for the day. An elderly woman sat on the curb in a sleeping gown while trimming her fingernails. As we passed, she looked up, her eyes strangely vacant. Not far away, an elderly man wearing a sleeveless undershirt and pants stood by a water spigot, brushing his teeth. When he looked up, the same vaguely unsettling and unlikely look came onto his face.

“Why did you come to China?” I asked. “I mean, why China?”

“For work. Why do you ask?”

“I’m just asking. We haven’t really spent much time with each other before. That’s all.”

My father took a deep breath, exhaled slowly. “I know. Well, the long and the short of it is that I grew up in a town with only a couple hundred people. I don’t know if I’ve ever told you that. And I wanted to travel, see some of the world when I

was young. In college, I learned about China and decided I wanted to visit here one day. So, I'm here."

"What about home though?"

"Home? Here is home."

"Yeah, but before here. With Mom."

"I didn't leave by choice."

"Why did Mom ask you to leave?"

"Why?" My father paused for a moment. "I don't know. That's the truth. At least from my side of things."

Coming to a red light, my father brought the bike to a halt. One by one other bicyclists cued up next to us. Smiling and whispering to one another, the Chinese stared at us. It was strange, having a private conversation in public, even if others couldn't understand it. I smiled and waved hello, and, as if all were of the same single mind, they waved back. The effect was eerie. The word I'd used the other night came back to me: strangers. Strangers in a strange land surrounded by yet other strangers. How was living here going to work?

A few minutes later, we arrived at the market. Outside the main gate, several carts were parked along the sides of the roads. The carts were piled high with boxes of various different shapes and sizes. A flow of bodies moved in through the main gate.

Inside, the market was filled with thousands of people. Clouds of blue cigarette smoke hung in the air. On the floors, vendors had laid out blankets to display goods. Horsehair camel whips. Raw copper and iron ores. Porcelain pots and

old shoes. Belts, bullets, hard hats, and emptied grenades. Leather document bags and rotary telephones. Crystals. Rare coins from China, Russia and elsewhere. Pearl and jade necklaces. Violins and guitars. Oil and ink paintings. Old magazines and newspapers. As I moved about in the crowd, stepping around people, I suddenly felt downcast, right when I should have felt excited. Everything in the hall spoke of things, a Myriad Things, which I didn't understand.

After walking around the main bazaar area, my father took me into a shop. The room was dark and it took my eyes a moment to adjust. A fine powder of glowing dust sat suspended in the air around the doorway. The room smelled like an archeological dig site, full of various earthly, bland, dusty and dirty smells. The room was crowded with old furniture. Cupboards, tables, and shelves lined both walls, all made of various differently stained woods, some lighter and finer in the grain, others darker and almost completely black.

Sitting toward the back of the shop on a pair of stools was an old Chinese couple. They sat with their elbows on their knees, an iron cistern full of rice and vegetables between them. Looking up from the meal, the man offered us some of his food, which my father and I both declined politely. Nodding, the shopkeeper went back to eating, telling us we could look around as we liked.

On the far wall, above where the old couple sat, were several paintings done on silk screens. The paintings depicted different families from different times in Chinese history. At the center of each painting, while the number of people depicted varied, sat a patriarch. On the shelves lining the left and right walls were collections of vases that were still caked in the earth out of which they'd been dug. On one shelf,

there was a collection of dinosaur eggs. Everything was ancient. Slowly, I took everything in, and looking more carefully, I found that there was a complex matrix of symbols in the decorations. Bats, cranes, dragons, phoenixes, lotuses, and other animals or plants. Without knowing what the symbols meant, it was hard to guess at a specific meaning, and yet in the artistry alone I could sense some basic underlying pattern. The symbols fit together, and I began thinking again about the Myriad Things my father had mentioned the night before.

As my father walked around the room, he examined various antiques. Picking up a vase, he inspected the lines and characters painted on the face. Then he stuck his hand inside the vase and turned his hand around inside it, feeling out the contours within. A second later, my father then held the bottom of the vase up to his nose and inhaled deeply.

“What are you doing?”

“Detective work,” said my father. “I’m trying to tell if it’s authentic or not.”

My father continued examining the vase, bobbling it in his hands to test the weight. “What do you think?”

“If it’s real?” I asked. He handed me the vase and I turned it around in my fingertips. The porcelain was cool to the touch and heavy. I handed the vase back to him. “I don’t know. Maybe.”

My father smiled. “That seems about right enough of an answer.” My father then set the vase back on the shelf and picked up another.

“You can tell the difference between originals and fakes by the indelible markings of their makers. Vases in particular, the best and even the worst of them,

have certain hallmarks. Uneven surfaces where pressure has been applied too lightly or too forcefully by the hands. Qualities of the furnace leave their mark as well. An older furnace leaves traces of the all the other wares that have gone into the furnace before it, so that sometimes hints of other metals, metals that aren't meant to go in, end up in the piece of pottery. Also, originals bare the imprint, simply, of time. Antiques come from a lot of different places. Cellars. Graves. Shelves of peoples' homes. They accumulate markings and scratches, become cracked, receive repairs, become dirty, the dirt itself becoming a part of the object, and so forth. Machines can't duplicate such accidents and events. And even a clever forger of antiques has to work especially hard to produce believable results, often times failing."

My father kept looking around, and I scanned the other shelves. It appeared the couple had a thing for clocks. Three shelves were dedicated to various different kinds. Wooden ones, metal ones, ones with stainless steel bells, and wrist watches from various countries, all with their hands stopped at different times.

Coming to the final shelf in the row, I found a collection of small figurines. There was a dragon, a bear, a turtle, and a ram. The first three were all colorfully and elaborately painted, but it was plainness and simplicity of the ram statue that caught my attention most. Picking it up, I turned the statue over in my fingertips. The ram was depicted in a sitting position with its legs tucked underneath its belly and its mouth was wide open. One of the horns was broken. There was something to its proportions, I thought, that gave the statue a lifelike quality. I wanted that. Proportions. And stillness. Because it always felt like everything was moving,

everything always changing.... Was it that things were changing or I was changing?  
Was it both?

*"Ah, that. That's my wandering sheep statue. It's nice, isn't it?"* said the shopkeeper, coming over to me. Leaning down, he pointed to the statue while my father helped translate. *"It was made by the Tu people of Hubei Province. 'Tu' means 'soil.' It's over seven hundred years old. There's an unusual story behind the statue, if you'd like to hear it."*

My father and I both nodded.

### **THE STORY OF THE WANDERING SHEEP STATUE**

*"The story of how I got this statue is a strange one. As mentioned before, the statue is over seven hundred years old. A lot can happen to people as well as a thing as fragile as a statue in that span of time. In the seventy-five years it's been in my family, it has been lost and found again three times. My great grandfather, Li Yuan, who also collected antiques, was the first to find it far south in Guangdong in 1892 while on a business trip. Coming back to Beijing, along the way, his caravan was held up by a gang of robbers. My great grandfather had paid handsomely for the statue, but fight as he might against the robbers he was unable to keep them from stealing his bags and along with them, the statue. Several years later, my grandfather, Li Bai, found the very same statue in another market just outside of Beijing. He knew the statue to be the one his father had bought, because one of its horns was broken in just the same way my great grandfather had once described to him. He had to pay double the price for the*

*statue, unfortunately, to get it back. Later when my great grandfather, Li Yuan, saw the statue being brought home by his son—after examining it carefully—he knew it was the one. Because his son was the one to find it again, though, my great grandfather gave it to him. The statue then stayed in our family for over a decade, and all would have seemed fine if it had not been for a famine. Needing food for his family, my grandfather sold the statue to his landlord, a man of ill repute who taxed his people heavily even when the crops were dying. At this point, you might ask then, how did the statue get back to my family? My father, Li Quan, was in the military, and he'd heard about the statue before from his father. When the Second World War came, the night before the landlord's house was sacked, my father snuck in and retrieved the statue, knowing the following day the house would be destroyed. When he got home from the war, he then gave the statue to his wife, my mother, as a gift, and when I began to show an interest in antiques when I got older, she then gave it to me. So now you understand why I call it the wandering sheep statue. Because it travels from hand to hand, but somehow always manages to find its way back to someone in my family."*

When my father finished translating the story, I was in awe that such a small statue could have traveled to so many different places and had so many things happen all around it, and yet still, so to speak, find its way home.

"Are you interested in the statue?" asked my father. "As a welcoming gift?"

## CHAPTER IV

### AN ADVENTURE AT THE GREAT WALL OF CHINA

*The term for a foreigner living in China is laowai. Lao, old. Wai, outer. Old Outsider. The 'lao' part is an affectionate term in Chinese, although there are other names for foreigners, as well. One term that was commonly used during the early 1900's is 'blue-eyed devil.' Uncommon, but still occasionally used in the Chinese countryside and in smaller Chinese cities, is the term 'yangren,' or 'unwanted' or 'unwelcome person.'*

*In an effort to describe my own relationship with Donghuashi, I've coined a term of my own. Bendi laowai. It means 'of-that-place foreigner, or 'local foreigner.' The effect is oxymoronic, of course, and when I've used it among Chinese, I usually get a startled laugh. New words mean new ideas. New ideas mean change.*

On the way out to the Great Wall, I listened to the adults making conversation on the bus, while Xiaoling, who sat behind me, kicked the back of my seat. Turning around to tell Xiaoling to stop, I found him lying asleep in Zhou Qi's arms. His head flopped from side to side as the bus drove over the potholes in the road, and, reaching up, Zhou Qi cupped his head with her hand and pulled it into her chest. For a moment, looking at them, I found myself wishing I were in Xiaoling's place. The



thought was ungrateful, but I couldn't help but compare Zhou Qi with my mother. Zhou Qi's face was still, like water at the bottom of a bowl, her expression calm as she looked out the window. I turned back around in my seat and decided to suck it up.

The American and Chinese families that had come on the trip were animated in a way I'd never quite seen before. They spoke about China and the change that was coming in a manner of quiet anticipation. And there was openness to discussing political events I hadn't expected, as well.

Two years after '1989,' as they referred to protests that had taken place at Tiananmen Square, the largest McDonald's in the world was going to open less than a mile away from where the tanks had rolled down the streets and students had died. Richie, who sat listening to the Americans talk about this looked quiet, but otherwise patiently listened, his legs in the aisle with his elbows resting on his knees and his hands folded.

I got out a pack of shrimp flavored chips from my backpack. Earlier in the morning I'd bought them as an experiment. At the time of purchase, I had assumed they'd taste like shrimp, which in the end turned out to be true, and both interesting and gross. Interesting, because it was new, gross because it tasted like a seafood flavored cheeto. But, it was food, so I kept eating the chips until the whole bag was gone, afterwards drinking a can of Coca-cola to wash it all down.

As we got further out of the city, I had a difficult time seeing where the change was taking place. The office buildings alongside the road sat vacant. Rust stains from the iron bars covering the windows dripped down the sides of the

building giving them and the place a particularly forlorn and desolate feeling. The sidewalks of the streets were crumbling, and all the shops' steel shutters were drawn down and secured with chains and locks, even though it was a Saturday afternoon. Outside one building laid a group of construction workers sleeping on the street. Of the few that were awake, they sat on their haunches, unmoving and staring listlessly into the sky, as if they had no place to go or nothing in particular to do.

As I looked over at my father talking with the Richie about China and change, I sensed a part of my childhood giving way. A quiet despair seemed to touch everything outside the bus's window. Solemn, and yet curious, I pointed at different things along the road and asked questions, receiving various explanations for why things were the way they were in China. Richie, as he sat there, listening to my father talk, seemed particularly conflicted about the change that was coming.

"Chinese do like change even when it is a good change," he explained, shaking his head. "Change means uncertainty. But you can see how poor these places are. Our country must change."

After we got out of the suburbs, I could see the clay colored mountains surrounding Beijing drawing nearer, and I began to get excited. Every once in a while we passed a small village. Fields of corn, cabbage, and other produce stretched out beyond them. Hanging over the road were red banners painted in gold lettering displaying various different government slogans.

*"Remember, there can be no new China without the Communist Party!"*

*"To build a new community, embrace technology!"*

*"Welcome tourists and foreign visitors to our wonderful suburb!"*

As we came to an intersection and stopped, a man in a cart drawn by a donkey pulled up alongside our bus. Squinting as if focused on a flea on the donkey's back, he mercilessly whipped the donkey. A couple of Chinese kids my own age playing in the street, their faces covered in dirt and tanned, came up to the bus. One of them pointed a plastic AK-47 at our bus and riddled off some imaginary bullets. *Bah-bah-bah-bah!* Then, as a group, the kids and ran away, wildly laughing. Uncertain of what to make of the 'assault,' I waved hello back, trying to be friendly. As we drove away, the kids chased the bus out onto the road and waved, as well.

From behind me, I could hear Xiaoling saying that he was hungry. "I want to eat a cake."

"Don't think about eating now. If you eat on the bus, you will throw up all over me," said Zhou Qi.

"I won't throw up. I promise."

"No."

"But I'm hungry."

Richie turned to his son. "Xiaoling, don't be a pest. See all the people here. If you throw up, they will have to sit and smell your stomach acids for the next hour." Richie then handed Xiaoling a stick of Wrigley's double mint from his pocket. As Xiaoling began chewing the gum, his face cinched up and a moment later he spit the gum out into the palm of his hand.

"It tastes like tree sap," said Xiaoling. It appeared taste buds were not always universal. When Richie offered me one, I gladly accepted it, rubbing my tummy as I

began chewing and saying 'Mm, good.' Xiaoling kicked the back of my seat in reply.

After we got off the suburb thoroughfare, the bus turned on to a mountain road. Looking over the sides of the bus as we climbed into the mountain range, below, a drop of several hundred feet greeted my eyes. The driver, each time he approached a blind corner, blasted the bus's horn three or four times, and then quickly pulled the bus around the corner. I held my breath each time, and after a moment, I began to feel the contents of my stomach churning.

I turned to look at Zhou Qi. "I think I'm going to throw up."

Immediately, Zhou Qi's eyes grew wide and she began shouting in Chinese. My father and Gang both turned, and before the bus driver could find a place to pull over, my father threw open my window.

"Lean out. Throw up outside!" my father cried.

I leaned out the window and for the briefest of moments, with my father holding me by my legs, I felt like I was flying. Then, all at once, the shrimp chips and coke rose in my throat.

Moments later, I leaned back in my seat and wiped my chin with the back of my arm. "Yeah, I'm going on an adventure."

"Too much excitement is bad for the spirit," said Richie, pushing up the glasses on his nose and grinning. Everyone on the bus nodded and laughed. A couple of people opened their windows as well, just in case. Despite the trauma of vomiting, ten minutes later, I perked up and began to feel better than ever.

When we got to the opposite side of the pass, doing the same winding journey downwards, we found ourselves in the countryside proper. After a while,

we came to a village nestled in the valley. Farmhouses ran up the escarpments on both sides, and above the farmhouses were terraced ledges with neatly ordered rows of trees. At the entrance to the village was a sign made of worn slabs of wood. The name of the village was *Pingguocun*, 'Little Apple Village,' and next to the right of the name was painted a picture of green and red apples in a barrel. The village looked like a couple hundred people lived there. Toward the top of the ravine and overlooking the rest of the village, I could make out a building larger than all the rest that looked like a hotel.

The car shook as it climbed the cobbled roads. Outside on the main thoroughfare, farmers were selling fruit from woven baskets laid out on tables. Others sat outside of what appeared to be their homes, the character for luck, *fu*, hanging upside down on the doors.

When we got to the top of the hill, the bus stopped at the hotel's front gate. The hotel was surrounded by walls made of yellow clay with shards of glass cemented to the top. After we parked in a shallow spot of grass, the driver got out of the bus and went to the steel entrance gate and began rapping on it. When no one came, the driver took a step back from the gate, cupped his hands over his mouth, and tried to shout over it. A moment later, a small window in the gate opened, and a face peered out. The driver and the man inside conferred something at the window. After speaking for a moment, the man inside reached out through the window and pointed toward a spot of grass not far from our bus. The driver shook his head and the two argued for a moment, according to Richie, about the parking.

"Good old fashioned bureaucracy," said my father, sighing.

A second later, Richie and my father got out of the car and the three of them argued with the gateman through the hole in the door. Eventually, the hand reached out again and restlessly flicked 'back up, back up.' A moment after that, I heard a chain being undone and the grinding sound of a metal deadbolt being slid open.

Inside there was a two-story building that looked like an old mansion. Richie explained that hundreds of years earlier it had belong to a powerful landlord. During the Cultural Revolution, the mansion had been ransacked and set on fire by the People's Liberation Army, and, years later, it had been restored and turned into a hotel.

The main entrance was painted in multitudinous colors and symbols. White clouds with blue lining were painted on the pillars that held up the roof. Between the two center-most pillars was a simple black slab of wood upon which the name of the hotel was painted in gold. The doors were bright red and had copper knockers. Set to the left and right of the doors were a pair of stone tiger statues guarding the entrance. Standing before the entrance, I was both surprised by the degree of artistry put into the building, as well as shocked by the notion that someone, the Chinese government namely, would set about trying to destroy it.

The hotel watchman, a man with a wrinkled face and patches of white skin on his arms, stood next to the bus still arguing with our driver. After a while, the driver handed the watchman a 20 RMB note and that seemed to settle things. The watchman then escorted us through the main entrance into the hotel.

Inside was a *siheyuan*, or 'four-sided courtyard.' Apartments lay on each of the sides. The courtyard was about one hundred feet by one hundred feet; toward

the left and back corner was a peach tree and beneath its branches sat a soap stone table with four stone stools. My father and I were given one of the rooms on the east side of the courtyard that had, according to Richie, a view of one of the towers of the Great Wall.

Richie announced to the group that we had an hour before dinner. Having lost my breakfast on the way in, I wanted to rest and settle my stomach before eating dinner. My father, looking at me and trying to suppress a smile as I laid back on my cot, took out a book of poems from his backpack, as well as a pen, and began reading and scribbling notes on a yellow legal pad.

After a while, my father set down his paper and pen. "How is your stomach feeling?"

"I think I've figured out I don't like shrimp chips," I said, recalling the somewhat the gritty texture in my mouth.

"Wait until you try green pea flavored ice-cream. That'll really get your stomach going."

I got up from my bed and went over to the window to check out the tower Richie had talked about. Opening the window, I found the evening air was warm. Although it was not completely dark yet outside, the hills glowed mysteriously in the moonlight. To the right, I could just make out what looked like the tower, nearly two thousand feet above, on the peak of the mountain. From my vantage point, it looked like an unattainable summit. I also had to wonder: What had compelled the Chinese people to build a wall like that, all the way out from the edge of the sea in East China, over thousands of miles of mountainous terrain, through forests and across deserts,

to where the Himalayas began in the West? The moon, pale and milky, hung wedged between two hills like an egg in a bird's nest.

"I miss Mom," I said to my father.

My father looked up from his book. "I know."

"I miss America."

My father sat up and closed his book. "I've spent my whole life trying to understand this place. It's never been easy. Sometimes I get frustrated, you know, because even simple things like having a conversation become difficult, let alone trying to discuss something like poetry or history. If Richie didn't know English, I don't know how we'd get through half the conversations we get through. But you learn something everyday. That's part of the excitement of the place. Give it a chance. Who knows, it might even grow on you."

"Yeah, but—"

My father lowered his head. "Chinese poetry is different than American poetry, but there are some things they share in common."

"Poetry. Bah. What do I know about poetry? That's your subject."

"Poetry is one of many ways of understanding the world. The Chinese, they like nature, they like family. Those are things Americans like. There's also a saying here that goes something like 'In the heart of every American is a farmer.' There's a lot of respect in a statement like that coming from an agricultural people. And yet they hold very different values than us. They admire unity, rather than individuality, for example. They believe emptiness, for example, isn't a bad thing, but just as much a part of life as fullness. I still have trouble wrapping my head around an idea like



that. And they love stillness. Despite those differences, they're just people in the end. Just try and get used to it, okay?"

I looked at my father. He wanted things to work. He was also asking me to do something. To try and understand the place. I told him I'd do my best. He smiled softly, and then patted me on the shoulder. "Good. Now let's go get some food."

We left the *siheyuan* and went outside to where the hotel restaurant was. The restaurant, it turned out, was in a detached concrete building. Inside the restaurant, the main eating room looked almost completely empty, except for three round tables at the far side of the room and a large, framed poster on the wall.

"Why aren't there more tables?" I asked.

"Supply and demand," said my father. "They probably don't get that large of groups coming out here."

"But then why is the room so big?"

"It makes the building look more impressive from the outside is my guess."

I grunted in agreement. Everything was backwards in China. We sat down at the table and waited for the others to arrive. After a moment, a pair of waitresses and a waiter came into the room, each of them wearing black outfits. The two waitresses went and stood on the far side of the room next to the poster hanging on the wall. After a moment, the waiter came over to us with a pair of menus.

I picked up my chopsticks. At the moment I broke the two chopsticks apart, suddenly I realized that my own interpretation of the Myriad Things here—those things being filtered through my own understandings of the Myriad as I knew it back home—could not be my guide in understanding. Rather, I needed to approach

the details differently. My inner eye was going to have to change. I needed something flexible. I needed a never-ending perspective, one that could accommodate the fact that the process of learning was a constant work of deconstructing and constructing at the same time. I had to allow my perspective to openly evolve and change at the very same time as I tried to construct sense and meaning of the details that were before me.

The feeling was odd, but looking at my father as he flipped through the menu—all Chinese words—I decided I might as well give it a try. Because everything about the cracks running through the concrete walls, the frayed table clothes covered in old stains, and the seats with tears in the cushions, told me one thing—desolation, despair, grueling poverty, Communism—but acceptance of it, implicit acceptance of difference, contained a different meaning. This was life here. And I suddenly found myself wanting, or feeling like I might be able to one day come to understand it more completely if I tried.

After a few minutes, the rest of the people from our bus came into to the room, and began settling in. A crate of beer was brought to the table and individual bottles taken out and placed on the table's turnstile. When the Wangs came in, I said hello to Xiaoling. And for a moment, it was the oddest sensation. He looked different to me because I understood things differently.

Once Richie placed the order for all the tables, I turned my attention to the poster on the wall, wanting to take another look at it. I looked more carefully this time around, and discovered that the picture was grainy, like it had been enlarged from an original, or perhaps someone had taken a picture of a picture from a book,

then cropped, cut, and blown up the proportions of the image. I asked my father if he knew where it, the image, was from.

“It’s probably something that was originally European. It’s a simulacrum,” said my father.

I looked at the poster again, examining the facial features of the two people in the picture. One man was dressed in a white suit with a white jacket and white pants and a white hat, and the woman, sitting on the opposite side of the boat, was wearing a white dress and carrying a parasol. It seemed familiar to me on one level, like a scene from one of the Victorian literature books I’d read once, but on another level strange, out of place, surrounded as it was by so many things that seemed not just to contrast with it, but the with idea of it.

“What’s a simulacrum?” I asked my father.

“A kind of pretense of reality. A copy of an original that never existed.”

A pretense of reality? A copy of an original that never existed? I had to think about that for a moment. “Why would anybody want to hang a ‘pretense of reality’ on their wall?”

“Good question. Richie, do you want to try and answer that, about the poster?”

Richie nodded. “It has to do with the Cultural Revolution. It’s hard to explain, but it goes something like this. Our government wanted to build a new country, and the only way they knew how to do that was to tear down the past, literally and figuratively. It was a very difficult time in Chinese history. Academics and doctors and other intellectuals were imprisoned, executed, or taken to the countryside to do

labor on farms and be reformed. Such was the time. Even something as small as teaching a child how to write a few words in English was seen as dangerous and counter-revolutionary.”

I looked back at the poster. “What does that have to do with the picture on the wall, though?”

Richie leaned back in his chair, and turned to look at Zhou Qi.

“The new world and the old world. It’s like the difference between the two,” she said.

Richie then went silent and cupped his hands in his lap. “Someday, people will see it for the madness it was. Already, many people do, even people in the Chinese government, but change is slow. There is nothing we can do but hope for a better future, try to do things differently now, even though we have thrown the past into turmoil.”

I nodded, without completely understanding what was being said. In basic, to build the new, the past was destroyed, and somehow that poster, grainy and photocopied, ended up on the wall in the restaurant we were sitting in.

My reaction to this simulacrum was strange. Nothing could be sadder looking upon it, because I knew that it represented something false—like the shell of a nut, rather than the fruit that lay within—and yet thinking back to what my father had told me about antiques, I knew false copies could be differentiated from originals.

Dinner started. The waiter brought out a pile of fresh *mao dou*, or chilled beans boiled in soya sauce along with red peppers. There was a plate of tomatoes and eggs that had been scrambled together, as well as General Kung Pao’s Chicken, a

beef dish with mushrooms, and a fish that had been breaded, fried, and covered in a sweet tangy sauce. I got frustrated as I work with the chopsticks, especially trying to eat the fish, which still had all the bones.

Richie waved over the waiter and said something to him. The waiter left and a moment later came back with a small plate of peanuts.

“Practice picking up two salty peanuts,” said Richie. “When you can pick up two without dropping them, then you will have mastered chopsticks. Pick up three, and you will have transcended chopsticks.”

“Transcendence,” said my father, nodding his head and pointing at the plate of peanuts. “It takes practice and effort.”

I tried picking up one peanut and it slipped out of its thin, papery skin, onto the turnstile, rolling around there loudly. I tried picking up another with the same result. Xiaoling, a chopstick full of egg and tomato inches from his mouth, looked over, his eyes wide. Again, I felt annoyed. Why can’t I just use a fork to eat?

“Don’t hold on so tight,” said Xiaoling, simply and humorlessly. I loosened my grip and Xiaoling grabbed my hand, confidently rearranging my fingers into a different position until, as awkward as it seemed, the position of the sticks seemed to fit. I tried again and this time succeeded. Ten minutes and a mouthful of peanuts later, I began to wonder if there wasn’t something to these chopsticks. And I began to wonder, what’s the record for most salty peanuts picked up?

Later on that night, as I fell asleep under the heavy cotton comforter, a deep warmth flooded the very marrow of my bones, as if a kind of transfusion came from the wooden rafters of the hotel, the tea cups that lay half open on the bedside table,

and the moonlight that shone through the window onto the mountains that lay in the distance. Here was something I had never known before in my short life—real peace, a sense that the world was not changing, in truth, but rather fixed upon some axis that ran through the world, and that ultimately my problems were small, insignificant.

I did not resist this feeling, eerie though it was, but allowed myself to slip further and further, so gentle was the force of it, the force of time, somehow returning to me, becoming oxygenated. And I allowed it to keep flowing until it felt as though I did not see the world as it is, but as it was, hundreds of years ago, thousands of years ago. My heart was bound to a course. Understanding. And I wanted the moment to last forever.

And yet somehow I sensed that it had always been there. That feeling. Like with the boxes in which I copied my Chinese characters, the boxes supported the proportions of the characters—the conduit of meaning was the form. That never ending perspective I wanted was not just the relationship of content to form. The relationship was like an object itself, but one within the mind. At that moment, I began to realize what the Myriad Things of Creation were.

In the morning, I woke up feeling groggy. I tried drinking hot water from the tall plastic thermos that lay next to my bed to settle my stomach before we headed out to the Great Wall. Outside, the moon was still in the sky, daylight just beginning. My father, who saw me clutching my stomach, pulled a bottle of pepto bismol out from his suitcase.

“Boy, your stomach’s not taking this easy at all,” he said, handing me the

bottle.

I groaned in assent.

"It takes a while. In a couple weeks your stomach should be fine."

He sat down next to me and patted me on the back. "The Great Wall of China. Are you ready for it?"

My father's face was enthusiastic, much like it had been when he went hunting for antiques at Panjiayuan. I decided it was time to give enthusiasm a try myself. I nodded, began packing up my backpack. Two thousand meters. Piece of *yuebing*, or 'moon cake.'

We set out just as the sun was beginning to rise in the sky. A thin mist clung to the hills. We met the other families outside where the bus had parked, and Richie, wearing a red hat and vest, and carrying a flag waved everyone over into a circle.

"For those who have not been to *Huanghua* Great Wall before," Richie began, "this is the Wild Wall. It has not been repaired like the other parts of the Great Wall near Beijing. The path we will be taking is a little dangerous, so you must be careful how you step and make sure to help each other."

"Dangerous?" asked someone in the group next to ours. "How dangerous?"

"Dangerous only if you don't pay attention. Last year, a British man hiking alone fell to his death because he wasn't careful. And also because he was alone. If he'd been with a partner or a friend, who knows, he might have lived. So, make sure to stay together, and be careful about where you put your feet. At parts we will need to climb together and help each other, so again, stay close."

Although there were some groans—"Why are we doing this again?" I heard

someone ask—everyone picked up their bags, and began readying themselves.

The footpath behind the hotel leading to the Great Wall crossed through an apple orchard. We walked in a single file line through the rows of apple trees, Xiaoling just in front of me and my father just behind. At the front of the line, Richie led with his flag, turning back every once in a while to make sure we were all together. The morning air was cool and dry. I'd seen post cards of the Great Wall before, but already was getting a taste of something entirely different.

As we continued up through the orchard, the path thinned and then zigzagged through a crack canyon. After getting to the other side, the path opened onto a grass plain. In the distance was a flock of sheep. We followed the path for twenty minutes as it arched across the field.

Once across, a forest began, and looking up I could see the Wall, a great brown and white stone worm laying upon the ridges of the hills. Once inside the forest, the path became broken. The path itself looked like a horse trail. Parts were covered with hoof prints and mounds of dung lay upon the dirt path. Where the incline became steeper, there were stones that had been laid into the ground that looked years old and worn down to smooth surfaces by rain. Looking through the thick brush to the valley on the opposite side, I could see mountains covered in scrub and brush, the layers of bare rock pushing out of the earth as if they'd grown out of the earth at angles.

It took an hour to make it up through the tree line to where the Great Wall began.

The Wall followed up the hills on the right and the left sides, east and west. In



the center was a turret with a crumbled archway in the center. Wild grasses and small saplings grew out of the rock on the sides of the Wall. The stone was weathered, and the plaster in between the rocks was flaking and dry. The thing looked wonderfully crumbling and ancient.

In order to get onto the Wall, we had to climb up a portion of the rubble. Going up one at a time, we slung our backpacks on top of the Wall, then carefully climbed the rocks. I slipped on a couple loose rocks as I drew myself up and over the Wall's ledge. Once on top of the Wall, I looked up and saw the danger Richie had talked about. Rising more than two hundred feet at an almost seventy degree angle were the steps that led to the next turret of the Wall.

I turned to my father. "We're climbing two thousand meters of that?"

He smiled and shook his head. "You might. I don't know if I want to. That looks awfully steep."

As we kept going, I became more careful, grabbing on to plants that had grown out of the rock to stay my balance. Each step I took, I tested out the bricks, shaking them a little bit to make sure they weren't loose. Sweat began to drip down my face and arms and legs, and by the time I reached the top of the first turret, I was breathing with some difficulty, but happily so. Turning back to look down, the distance to the bottom where we'd started looked even more pronounced than when I'd looked at it from below. I decided it probably wasn't a good idea to look down anymore, but, in the back of my mind, I realized that at some point, we'd also have to come back down.

The turret had an archway leading inside to the interior and just above it, a

square sign of smooth plaster with characters carved onto its surface, now only faintly visible.

The room inside was dark and cool and smelled of crumbling rock and dust. To the right and left were corridors and windows, as well as small holes near the foot of the floor, like little vents. I asked my father what the vents were for, and he said they were for shooting arrows. I went further inside to the center of the turret and on both sides were stairs leading up to the roof, as well as a small courtyard. Just in the corner was a tree with white flowers reaching up into the sky. It was hard to describe what I felt at that moment, looking at all these various different things. A part of me wondered, quiet frankly, why the kind of excitement I felt now was not more present in my life back home, and why, in some sense, this aspect of history, nature, and adventure seemed altogether vanquished from daily life.

We continued climbing for another hour and a half, some sections of the Wall level, others rising upon the hillside to tremendous heights like the first section. About half way up, the wind began to blow hard upon the hill. Breathing, I could tell the air was a little thinner. A light rain began to fall, wetting all the steps and making them slippery. A group meeting was held and almost all agreed that it was not safe to climb and that we should turn back. I huffed at the decision. I wanted to keep going. My father, who was in agreement about turning back, stood at the edge of the wall, looking down into the valley.

“Let’s keep going,” I said. “There’s only a couple hundred more meters and it isn’t *that* slippery.”

“Yes, but it might start raining harder, and if that happens, we could be

stranded up here for the night. If you do not sufficiently prepare for an adventure, then you cannot have one.”

He had a point. I was dressed in shorts and a t-shirt. Bad idea.

I turned and went over to Xiaoling. Asking how old the section of the Wall was, he said he thought it was at least eight hundred years old, adding that he’d been to three other sections of the Wall before, all much more pretty than this one. He seemed to think that because it was falling apart, unlike the sections he described that had been repaired, that it was the lesser of the Great Walls. “No good. I don’t like. It’s too old. See how it sits here, the trees and grass growing up out of the rock? The stone is rotting. I like new.”

I walked over to the edge of the Wall and picked up a rock and lobbed it out into the valley. As it flew through the air, the little grey speck spun, shrank, and then fell into the forest, making a pleasant clinking noise against the rocks below. Xiaoling grinned toothily as he stepped over to me and picked up a rock of his own. “Throwing rocks,” he said. “I do not get to throw rocks often. In the city, no rocks.”

“Why don’t you like it out here then?” I asked. He considered the question for a moment. “Nature. ‘Too much is as bad as too little.’ That is what my father says. It is that way here. Too much nature and it eats away at even the strongest stone; too little and the seasons of life don’t change. Here, everything is nature, and so the Great Wall crumbles. We must preserve it.”

After he finished speaking, I turned away and began searching for a bigger rock, something heavier and eventually settled on a good ten-pound brick from the Wall. *Nature, ha, a difficult question, I thought. I know about nature. It’s supposed to*

*be a little rough around the edges. Isn't that half of the fun of it? That it's a thing that hasn't been touched or sculpted by mankind?*

I hefted the rock up into my arms, cradled its rough, cold surface to my chest, and carried it to the ledge. I lifted the stone above my head. After a while my arms begin to ache with the weight of the rock. I looked up at the rock and my quaking arms, and began to fear I might drop the rock right on top of my head and fall over the edge of the Wall into the valley. Still I kept it there. From behind me I could hear Xiaoling ask, "What are you doing?"

I didn't know. I wanted to be rid of the years of bullshit. My own and others. I wanted a better life *for myself*, could feel it in my bones, not far away, there, distantly. The other side of problems and whatever lay beyond them. *Living*. I lobbed the rock out onto the valley. The brick took off, lighted on the thin, cool mountain air of morning, and fell crashing through the trees below, the sounds of branches shattering rising up after it. Blackbirds and sparrows shot out of the trees, cawing and clacking and screeching.

"What are you doing?" I turned around to see Xiaoling with a bitter grimace on his face. "What is the matter?"

Hot tears ran down my cheeks. My nose was dripping with snot. I wiped the back of my arm against my face, and then collapsed onto stone floor.

"I don't know what I'm doing," I said to him. "I don't know where I belong. I've got no home to return to, and this place isn't my home either."

Xiaoling stared at me pensively. Finding a branch of wood, he suddenly began pacing up and down the Wall, agitatedly swatting the stick. I looked up at him

surprised.

“Who cares,” he said. “Everything changes. It cannot be avoided. You can either go with the flow, or fight against it and in the process waste all your energy. Do not worry so much. I will teach you Chinese wisdom and one day you will return to your home country victorious.”

“Ha.”

“You doubt your ability to learn?”

“That’s not what I said.”

“Then what do you have to fear?”

I had to laugh at that. What *did* I have to fear? To him, how to live was unambiguous. He believed in romantic ideals, albeit Chinese ones. Bravery. Persistence. Family. Where I came from, everything about ideals seemed ambiguous, in the middle of changing, neither here nor there, really.

“What scares me is what’s on the other side,” I said. “The other side...of everything not working. What if things end up working? I wouldn’t know what to do with myself. That’s what scares me.”

Xiaoling stared at me hard. He looked angry, and yet the look seemed to become him, the way his brows became knitted and sharp, and the corners of his mouth pulled down like a half crescent moon. He looked mad, but not in such a way that was frightening or confusing. He was angry at my self-pity.

“That kind of reasoning is obtuse. Seriously. What kind of logic is that,” he said.

I was proving to a real wimp I realized. Screw the suffering. I got up from my

feet and felt my heart lighten a bit. Xiaoling lifted his head and gave me a thumbs up. He was angry for me where I did not feel strong enough to be angry myself. Looking at him, all I could think was that for the first time since arriving in China, I didn't feel alone.

"To hell with it!" I cried.

"If people shares in your joys, rejoice with them. If they do not, then go in peace knowing what is right." Throwing down his stick, Xiaoling went over to the edge of the Wall and picked up a large stone, a big one. As he hefted it up into his chest, he wobbled on his tiny legs over to the edge, utterly persistence, utterly determined. "Come. We will throw rocks together."

**CHAPTER V:**  
**THE MYSTERY OF ANOTHER FAMILY'S FAMILY LIFE**

*In the early morning hours, you can find an old Chinese man with a wooden tool box strapped to the back of his bicycle, walking the streets and ringing a cow bell. He dresses in a pair of blue bathroom shorts and a sleeveless, white cotton shirt. He yodels 'Fixes and repairs!' over and over again. He searches the apartment windows with his eyes as he rings the bell. Then he kicks up his bike stand, sets down a stool on the sidewalk, sits and waits.*

*A moment later, a young Chinese woman dressed in pajamas and with her hair in a hairnet comes out of the first floor of the apartment with a tin kettle tucked underneath one arm. She hands it to the old man. They begin chatting. In a few minutes, with the help of a ball-tipped hammer, he pounds the tin back into its proper shape and then reattaches it to the kettle with a shiny new bolt and washer. She hands him a crumpled bill—wu mao qian, or half a Chinese dollar—leaves, and the old man sits down again.*

*After a minute, he takes out a cigarette and a box of matches from his shirt pocket. Cradling the match in his hand, he strikes the match at a sharp angle, lights his fragrant cigarette, and then sits for a few minutes smoking. After a while, he stands and moves on to the next street, yodeling his cry for labor.*

I was relieved to hear my mother's voice when she called. The time difference between my mother's home and my father's home was just over thirteen hours, and yet the distance that separated us, or my awareness of it, seemed to stretch things out in a way I couldn't understand. I felt separated from the sounds that came over the receiver. The sound of the ocean waves in the background and the breeze that passed over the mouthpiece every once in a while, made me nostalgic, but I was determined to make the best of things. Get on, as it were.

"It sounds like you're having a lot of fun without me," she said.

Although I'd heard my mom say a lot of things like this before—did she feel alienated?—the comment caught me by surprise. "Should I not be having fun?" I asked. When no reply came, I decided to change the subject. Unfortunately, I asked about the house.

"About the same as when you left," she said.

"Why don't you just get rid of the house and sell it like you an Adam talked about?"

"Please don't mention his name," she said. "I don't want to hear his name right now. I—"

Her voice was edgy. I didn't know what to say, so I stayed quiet for a moment. When the conversation continued and my mother asked how my father was doing, I kept things simple, knowing from experience that the subject brought up a host of bad memories for her. Like a laundry list, my mother had a collection of grievances against my father. She frequently described him as an 'asshole.' I couldn't see any of that description in him. That said, I knew as well, that when I talked about my



mother to my father, he had his own feelings—to disagree produced a kind of pain for him, and that their divorce had ended with an ugly splitting of goods—myself, the son of each parent, included—I thought pretty understandably hurt him.

“How’s your father?”

“He’s fine.” I got up and went outside on my balcony, dragging the telephone cord with me so I could look out onto the city as we talked. Just beneath the window was the apartment security guard. He dragged a broom around in circles on the street, sweeping up dust into piles. A moment later, a gust of wind came and blew the pile away. He continued at the work, though, and after about ten minutes, he stopped and went and stood on his guard’s podium. After looking up and down the street to check if anyone was on the sidewalks, he began picking his nose. I told my mom about what was happening, but she didn’t seem to find the fact funny.

“And?” she asked.

“And nothing. He’s fine.”

She paused. “Why won’t you tell me more about what he’s doing?”

“Why do you care so much about how Dad’s doing? You’re divorced.”

I could hear my mother audibly breathing on the other end of the line.

“Why do you like your father so much? Why do you respect him, but not me?” she asked, her voice sharp.

“What am I supposed to say to that?” I asked. I was over four thousand miles away, trying to go about living, while her life was falling apart. And there was nothing I could do except talk things out. “It’s beyond my control, Mom. Everything. You asked me if I wanted to come live here with Dad, and I said I’d go. So, I’m living

here now.”

“God, you sound just like your father.”

“You’re making too much out of things,” I said. “I get that you feel like it’s important for me to understand how oppressive men are. But if you asked me why I don’t respect you a lot, it’s because you act out and lose control of your own emotions all the time.”

On the other end of the line, I could hear my mother gasping. “I am not angry. And I think that’s really unfair of you to say,” she said. “And it’s incredibly rude and insulting.”

I sighed. “Can’t we just move on? Things. Move on. Forward. Gung ho, into the future, we go?”

As if relenting a little, she changed the subject. “I’m glad you’re learning a new language.”

“Thanks.”

“Don’t get too close to the Wangs.”

“Why not?”

“Because they’re Communists.”

“They’re people mom. The Wang’s happen to be really nice people, as well.”

“And that’s because they live in a Communist dictatorship, and they’re afraid to say what they really think.”

I shook my head. Alright, maybe she had a point. Maybe I didn’t know the first thing about what the Wangs, really. At that point, I gave up on the conversation. I looked around the room. Talking over the phone, none of the things before me

could be conveyed, and even if I could convey them, I doubted my mother would really want to know or be interested. When we hung up, she said she'd call again soon and for me to remember not to become a Communist.

Two weeks passed and I settled into a new routine. My father had given me the room on the east side of the apartment with a balcony overlooking the street. As my father had suggested, I began keeping a diary of observations about things going on outside my window, exploring as it was, *The Myriad Things*.

Each morning as the sun rose from behind the watchtower at dawn, an old man with a cowbell came down through the streets, yodeling up into the windows our apartment. There were also a host of other characters I saw with some regularity. There was the security guard who picked his nose. A middle aged Chinese man that ran a fruit stand on the side of the road. A pair of old ladies who sat on the curb all day, wore red armbands, and looked like identical twin sisters.

The pace of life, just like my dad's Pigeon bicycle, was slow, almost exceedingly slow at times. But I found the place nice, quiet, and easy to live in despite some of the obvious hardships. No Western food. No English television. No America, in other words. The city was dry and smelled of baked sand, engine oil, and the coal burning plants whose smoke stacks could be seen belching out smoke each day from nine am until five pm. In the early afternoons, there would be thunderstorms sometimes, and I began to look forward to them knowing that with the rain would come a day of clear skies, a comfortably humidity, and fresh air.

Each day my father left for work at the university at around eleven. Collecting up his books and notes, he stuffed them all in heavy looking green canvas bag he

slung over his shoulder, then hopped on his Pigeon and began biking towards the University District on the northeastern part of the city. Even though he could have taken a taxi, he insisted on saving money and riding his bike. Besides, it was good exercise, he pointed out.

Shortly after he left, I headed over to the Wang's apartment for lunch and my Chinese lessons. My stomach, still adjusting to flavors of Chinese food and the local water supply, grumbled frequently. Cupping my bulging belly, as if there was a chilled brick of ice stuck inside, I made frequent trips to the bathroom each day. Eventually, I found that drinking a cup of green tea after eating helped cut through some of the oiliness of the food.

On the second day of my Chinese lessons, Zhou Qi brought out a new Chinese lesson book, and, tied up in a red ribbon, a stack of blue books in which she said I was to practice copying characters. The books were made of rice paper, thin and easily crumpled or torn. I felt like I was right back in school, even though it was the summer, but unlike the teachers back home there was something about Zhou Qi's tenor that was different. I couldn't say what it was at first, but eventually figured it out. She was concrete, always, and she liked teaching. Laying out my lesson book in front of me, she opened to the first page and went through the table of contents, pressing down her index finger down by each of the numbered lesson titles. Then we began the first lesson in the book and went over basic pronunciation. The book had different diagrams of mouth and tongue positions. When I laughed at one of them, Zhou Qi did not understand what was funny. I soon learned that we had very different senses of humor.

One by one, she went through the diagrams, pointing out the different parts of the larynx, mouth, and tongue that were needed to produce different sounds in Chinese. I learned quickly that she was a tireless teacher with an abundance of patience for me, but who would not accept it when I said 'I can't.' "You need a good attitude to learn," she said. When I tried and failed to pronounce the difficult "zh" and "q" and "oo" sounds, she would grab my face in her hands and then pinch my lips into the right position. I looked at her like she was crazy when she did that, and then I tried again, this time getting the sound right.

Halfway through the lesson, Zhou Qi went and made tea and brought out some cookies on a plate. She said almost nothing apart from this, but I got the impression she was trying to piece together me as much I was trying to piece together her. She was quiet and still in a way I couldn't articulate. The very odd effect of it, how sure she seemed to be about the steps of everything she did, was that I felt calmer and stiller myself.

Sitting at the table, one at a time, I drew characters in the small boxes of my practice workbooks. I looked back and forth between the lesson plan and my book, copying the character for 'I.' *Wo*. After a while, my hand began to get sore from pressing down on the paper. Holding up the lesson book and my own side by side, my characters looked uneven, disproportionate, like they'd gone through a dryer before coming out onto the page.

"You must square your words with the boxes," she said. "Practice starting in the right place in the box—remember the rules: left to right, top to bottom, inside to outside. Some characters finish in different places, but always toward the bottom

and the outside. Practice the proper stroke order, too. If you can do that, your characters will be more shapely.”

I tried. The task of writing out the characters in stroke order seemed counter-intuitive to me at first. Why not come up with my own method, or just do whatever was most comfortable? I practiced another couple lines of characters, and, again, they looked uneven. As I continued to work, though, I discovered the repetition itself was an oddly self-sustaining activity. Repeated, the characters took on a kind of force and power in my mind, and quickly I found my own patience repaid with a certain measure of skill.

Asked if she could write in English, Zhou Qi replied, “Of course! I was a high school English teacher once!” Taking out a piece of paper, she picked up a pen and wrote the words, ‘Nothing ventured, nothing gained.’

“That is an English idiom I have always liked very much,” she said, smiling. A moment later, Zhou Qi got up from her seat, went to the back room, and returned with a book under her arm.

“This is a very rare book,” she said, handing it to me. “It’s on English penmanship. A teacher I knew in high school wrote it. When he was a young man, he went abroad to England and studied there, then came back and wrote this book. There are probably only ten of them left in China.”

I opened the book. Unlike some of the other Chinese books I’d seen, this one had the characters going up and down the page, instead of left to right. On each page were examples of English scripts. Signatures. Sentences. Poems. All handwritten. The paper was golden colored and worn around the edges. I’d never quite seen

anything like it before.

“Here is my favorite script,” she said, flipping to a page toward the back. I could not read the Chinese subheading under the script, but she told me it was by an author named Wordsworth. The cursive looked nearly illegible to me so fine was the script. She took the book back when I was done and tucked it underneath her hands. By the look in her eyes and the smile on her face, at once mellow and set, I could tell she was very proud of the book, just like my father was very proud of his collection of antiques. When there was nothing more to show, she grew quiet again. And then, for a moment, I thought I saw something flicker in her eye as she looked at me.

Later, as I ate lunch, she watched me out of the corner of her eye from the kitchen. My chopstick skills had improved a bit, but always around the edges of my plate could be found the remnants of sauces and pieces of food. Zhou Qi seemed to find the fact funny. A moment later, she came back with a rag and wiped the mess up. The very fact she was cleaning up my mess—and smiling, not so much at the mess, but at me—struck me as a kind of motherly gesture of kindness I wasn’t really familiar with. I felt awkward, and even to a degree ashamed of myself, for having needed a mother.

“My mom doesn’t really like to do housecleaning,” I said, when Zhou Qi sat back down.

“Neither do I, most of the time. But there’s some satisfaction in it,” she said. “Your mother sounds like a very interesting woman. Someday, I hope I can meet her.”

“Ooh, probably not.”

“Why is that?”

“She hates China.”

I could tell that this last comment caught Zhou Qi by surprise, and that perhaps I’d have been better off censoring myself a little bit. But the words were out. She raised her eyebrow and leaned back in her chair. “Why does she hate China?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “She seems to dislike a lot of things.”

Zhou Qi looked at me again, her face very concentrated. With a different person, I might have qualified the look as fierce, but with her it was clear that she was listening very carefully. Somehow that made all the difference in the world. After, she nodded, and went back to the kitchen and began preparing tea.



**CHAPTER VI:**  
**GHOSTS OF CHINA'S PAST**

*I get up in the middle of the night to go to the bathroom. I turn on the light next to my bed and sit for a moment. My bladder gets heavier the longer I sit, but I don't feel like moving. Outside, I hear the sound of the trains heading south, a deep metal rumbling, and the traffic underneath the overpass.*

*I stand up, walk to my bedroom door, open it, and trace the hallway wall with my fingers as I move in the darkness. The light is on in the bathroom, and a ghostly lights falls on the hallway floor. I hear what sounds like choking.*

*I open the bathroom door. My fathers sits on the edge of the bathtub, his hands covering his face, sobbing. His whole body shakes, as if an earthquake has begun inside him and landmasses are breaking apart.*

*I stand in the doorway uncertain of what to do. I have never seen my father in pain before, suffering.*

*He looks up at me. His eyes are red. The lids of his eyes look like they have been pulled down and back, exposing the eyeballs. The comb-over of his hair hangs over the side of his face. The small creases near the edges of his eyes stand out in relief, like they have always been there, waiting for them to be seen by me.*

*"Dad?" I say.*

*"What are you doing up?" he asks, his voice a raw, painful growl. He wipes his face with the back of his hand.*

*"I need to take a piss."*

*He turns his face away, sets his arm on top of the sink while gripping the basin with one hand.*

*"I'm sorry," he says. His sobbing begins anew. A drop of saliva runs down his chin, hangs there on the corner of his mouth.*

*"For what Dad?" I say, now scared of what's happening.*

*"I don't know."*

*I get angry with him, for sitting there, for feeling sorry for himself and for being a single father that doesn't know what to do. Like I know what I'm doing. Neither of us does. "It doesn't matter."*

*"What doesn't matter?"*

*"Whatever it is. Everything. Things. Fuck it. You know?"*

*My father nods, then turns his face away again. As if he's taking a break, he looks around the bathroom at the tiles, the mirror, the toothbrushes, everything, and suddenly comes back to himself.*

*"Don't curse like that," he says. "It's bad form."*

*I nod, say nothing more, close the door, and go get an empty water bottle from the kitchen.*

When the fall arrived, a cold wind from the north blew upon the city, like lips upon the edge of a bowl, stirring up the contents inside. Dust and leaves glided along the channels of the tightly woven streets and alleys, then fell and settled until the next bowling ball of wind came. Slowly but surely, people shed their summer clothes and on the streets appeared a tapestry of different colored sweaters—red, orange, green, blue, and other colors—that had never been there before. Xiaoling, always hungry, began to talk with big glowing eyes about the Autumn Festival in October. “I will eat hundreds of moon cakes this year,” he said, enthusiastically. I kept at my Chinese studies, as well as my diary of the Myriad Things.

Following the arrival of the winds, the perpetual haze that blanketed the city lifted. The iron and concrete buildings of the city stood out starkly in the bright autumn sunshine. Each morning I watched from my balcony window as hundreds of Chinese people—construction workers, day laborers, office people, government workers, and others—flowed toward the center of the city that lay beyond the watchtower. On one afternoon, a dust storm swept across the city. Within minutes, the whole watchtower became a faint, dark outline in the sandy air. When the storm cleared, I watched as the commuters who’d taken shelter in the tower came out. One by one they strapped on cotton face masks, and got back on their bicycles. The sight was a sorry one to see—construction and change was taking its toll on the environment—and I missed the summer rain storms. As things grew cooler, the foliage of the trees fell and the city grew more and more desolate.

Although I still had difficulty with the stroke order sometimes, my characters, as Zhou Qi had promised, began to take on better proportions. I couldn’t have been

more pleased with my progress, and after graduating from the first book of lessons, I moved on to more complicated phrases. Xiaoling and I could now have basic conversations in Chinese.

One afternoon, Xiaoling and I went down to the small public space between our buildings and kicked a soccer ball around. When I got the chance to ask Xiaoling what other kids at the Chinese school were like, Xiaoling shrugged his shoulders, and bent his head down. From the moment his mother had told me he had difficulties with friendships at school, I'd wanted to ask him why. When I asked, he replied stoically, "My mother and father are both teachers. So they think I have an unfair advantage. They call me a teacher's pet."

"That's bullshit," I said. I had to give him credit. Contrary to what his grandfather believed, Xiaoling didn't seem to have a soft head. He just seemed a little sheltered. I patted him on the shoulder and after a moment he nodded.

"What is 'bullshit'?" asked Xiaoling.

I could tell by the curious expression on his face he had no idea what the word meant. I laughed to myself for a moment, and as if awaiting a moment I didn't even know I'd been looking forward to all summer, I explained, with relish, what bullshit was, both literally and figuratively. When I was done, Xiaoling nodded thoughtfully and stared off into the sky, his face serious and contemplative.

"In China we say *goushi*. Dog's shit. But 'bullshit' is good too."

"*Goushi*," I said, repeating the word a couple times to make sure I got the pronunciation right. I leaned over the table. "Tell me some more words. For school."

"They are bad words; you should not use them."

"It's not like I'm going to use them during class. It's so people don't think I'm a nerd."

"What is a nerd?" asked Xiaoling. Again, the expression on his face was completely earnest. I wanted to whack him on the head. If he wanted to make friends at school, he'd have to learn how to play his hands better.

"A nerd is someone who is too thinking. A nerd likes to study too much," I said.

"You enjoy studying Chinese."

I shook my head. Okay. I was a bit of a nerd, too. "If you want to be more popular, don't talk about books so much. And swear. Swear all the time. Try this one. 'Who gives a crap.'"

Xiaoling stood up and repeated the phrase. It rolled off his tongue poorly. I told him to try again, and he added a small improvisation of his own, whipping his head away in disgust.

"That's it," I said, nodding in approval. We then spent the next ten minutes exchanging swear words in English and Chinese, and practiced them on the fruit stand guy who was named Meng Pu. Xiaoling explained that Meng Pu always cheated customers. The metal weights Meng used on his scales had been hollowed out to increase prices.

"This is bullshit, yes?" asked Xiaoling.

I nodded.

Sneaking up behind Meng Pu's truck, we nabbed a handful of peas from the truck bed, and while shelling them, practiced our curses on Meng Pu.

"*Ben dan.*" Dumb Egg.

"*Sha gua.*" Stupid melon.

"I do not like your bullshit," said Xiaoling.

"You could call him an 'asshole,' too."

I explained to him the meaning, again, literal and figurative. Wide eyed and nodding, Xiaoling took everything in. We then returned our attention to Meng Pu. He had a particularly cruel looking expression to his face, even in his sleep. His forehead was wrinkled with creases and the tarred end of an old cigarette butt hung out of the corner of his mouth. Xiaoling aimed a pea at him, and flicking it with his thumb, the pea bounced off the side of Meng Pu's head. Meng Pu flicked his hand at the air and then shifted in his seat so that he had his back to us. When I sent the second pea sailing, he swatted again, this time turning back in our direction. A single, lazy eye stared back at us. As Meng Pu rubbed his second eye, it opened, and a moment later we burst out laughing and ran away down the street. When we got around the corner of Xiaoling's building, we both laughed raucously at Meng Pu's annoyance.

Getting on our bikes, we then headed to the *hutongs*, or alleys, behind *Donghuashi*, racing through the alleys and shouting our curses. As we went, fireworks boomed in the street in celebration of the coming autumn festival. When I asked why, Xiaoling explained that fireworks were for scaring off ghosts and welcoming the new autumn moon. We kept biking and looking back on my bicycle at Xiaoling, I could tell he was finally having some fun, and I was glad for him.

After a while, I realized we'd gone further from the compound than I'd ever

gone before. Enjoying the first real moment of independence I'd had since arriving in China, I kept pressing forward.

Eventually we came to the end of the road. On our right was a small stone bridge crossing over a river and which led into another part of the city. People selling goods had set up shop on the bridge, laying out all sorts of household goods—socks, buttons, underwear, plastic washtubs, woks and pans, chopsticks, and other things. On the other side of the river, there was a group of about twenty or so small, single story buildings all made of the same, bare red bricks. Out of the center of the buildings, a smoke stack rose up high in the air and belched out smoke. The faces of the sellers were all sun burnt and their hands were full of cracks. When we got halfway over the bridge, Xiaoling said he wanted to go back to *Donghuashi*.

"Come on," I said, looking over the bridge. I was curious about what lay beyond, still reveling in my freedom. Twisting his fists on the handlebars of his bike, Xiaoling pulled his bike over to the side of the road. Following, I walked over to stand beside him.

"What's wrong?" I asked. He pulled his bike wheels around and pointed them in the direction of *Donghuashi*. "My mother says not to go over the bridge. It's not a good place."

"It's just a market," I said. "Let's give it a quick look."

"*Luo huo le*," he said. *Backwards*. I had to ask what the word meant and Xiaoling translated. His voice was fierce, and there was a kind of passion there that I'd never seen before in him. He was adamant about not going, and all the enjoyment of moments before was gone from him. I suddenly turned my bike around, not sure

what I should say in the situation. 'Should.' The word rang out in my ears.

Appropriateness. Respectfulness.

"That place is no good. We go home now, okay?" said Xiaoling.

"It's not a big deal. It's just a village."

A contemptuous look came across Xiaoling's face. "If we go, you will look down on China."

By the look in his face, I knew it would be a bad idea to argue with him. I could tell that the sight of the village rankled him as much as the boat docked on the side of my mother's house rankled neighbors.

I made a mental note to come back at some point on my own, and we road home. For the rest of the ride back to *Donghuashi*, we biked in an awkward silence. Looking at Xiaoling out of the corner of my eye, he peddled with his legs bowed out, weaving in the bike lane, his head slung low. I couldn't understand what the big deal was.

When we got back to the apartment, we sat around in the livingroom watching Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles on television. Grandfather Zhou joined us on the couch. He held a glass jar of tea in his hand. The golden brown mixture sloshed around as he sat down. Tipping the jar back, he took a drink and then smacked his lips in satisfaction.

Xiaoling and I still weren't talking, the moment at the bridge standing between us, still grinding at me. I didn't care, I wanted to say. Grandfather Zhou noticing something was up looked back and forth between us, then back at the TV.

"Teenage mutant ninja turtles," said Grandfather Zhou. "Who would ever have



*thought of such a thing? Since when has a turtle been able to do anything but chase it's butt and hide in its own shell?"*

*"It's a cartoon,"* said Xiaoling, shoving his fist into his cheek. *"From America."*

Xiaoling leaned forward toward the TV as he focused all the more carefully on the show.

*"Why don't we go take a walk. I need to take a walk."*

*"We just got back from bike riding."*

*"So? I'm 83. You're fourteen and you're telling me you're too tired? You should be playing around in the dirt, chasing sheep and horses, things like that."*

Xiaoling rolled his eyes. *"We live in Beijing. There are no sheep or horses."*

Grandfather Zhou then looked at me. *"Do you like pigeons? Pigeons, the little birds,"* he said, flapping his arms to make sure I understood. I had no idea what he was doing. *"We can go visit my old friend Zhang. He owns some. If you want, you two can feed his pigeons together."*

Xiaoling translated for me. The pigeons. I'd seen them flying around the neighborhood before in the mornings and the evenings; they were one of things I'd recorded in my journal of the Myriad Things.

*"Alright. Let's go together,"* I said, in Chinese.

Xiaoling then got up and turned off the TV. *"Fine. Let's go. But not for too long."*

*"This'll be fun,"* said Grandfather Zhou, ribbing me and then Xiaoling with his elbow.

When we got outside, we walked south along *Chongwenmen* South Street in

the direction of Beijing Train Station. The road we took passed through Beijing's old diplomatic quarter. European-style houses roses on both sides of the streets. Grandfather Zhou told us a little about the history of the place, all with a certain measure of pride. Surrounding the diplomatic quarter was an area called *Qianwai*. It was the 'old neighborhood' as Grandfather Zhou called it, nodding a little as he spoke.

Grandfather Zhou's limbs seemed to limber up as he caught his step. Every once in a while he stared over at me, like a hawk bearing down on a mouse. I didn't know how to describe it. His curiosity was naked; like with the hair thing, he didn't even try to hide or mask it. When I finally decided to challenge him and stare back, he clasped his hands behind his back and turned his face away.

The Chinese houses in the area, Grandfather Zhou explained, were over five hundred years old, nearly as old as the city itself. The alleys were narrow. Ash trees rose up out of the concrete, pushing out of the concrete covered soil. Crumbling mortars and old gates made of chipped wood, with dragon's piers or tigers at the foot of some of the houses. Every once in a while as we walked, someone would step outside of their door with a bucket of morning water and threw it down with a splash on the concrete. As we walked, Grandfather Zhou greeted people on the streets, every once in a while stopping to chat for a moment. Xiaoling and I stood to the side, introducing ourselves whenever we were asked. The people in the *hutongs* seemed very friendly. When I asked Xiaoling what his grandfather was saying, he said he couldn't understand the dialect being spoken. It was *Beijing hua*, the local dialect.

Overhearing Xiaoling and I speaking, Grandfather Zhou filled us in on various pieces of gossip about the people in the neighborhood. *“That one, he fixes shoes, but he uses cheap glue, so people always have to come back a week later to get their shoes fixed again.... That one, that one there, is the director of the local housing authority at the Public Security Bureau. Everyone dislikes him because he can be petty about forms.... That one, that guy, oh, that’s old Chuan. Sometimes I go fishing with him. He fought in the Korean War—yes, that war with you Americans,”* he said, looking at me and grinning again—*“and thinks his dick is as big and shiny as his aluminum fishing pole.”*

After walking a bit further, we came to a house and Grandfather Zhou stopped. Zhang, or ‘Old Zhang’ as Grandfather Zhou called him, greeted us at the door. He was a little younger than Grandpa Zhou it seemed. He stood the doorway in a pair of boxer shorts with his shirt hiked up over his belly.

Inside was a twenty foot by twenty foot courtyard. A black Chinese oak shot up from the far left corner of the courtyard, its branches hanging over the whole courtyard, like a canopy. On the east and west sides of the courtyard were bedrooms. Along the windowsills were a variety of empty pots and jars, as well as some plants. On the north side was a small kitchen area.

After talking with Grandfather Zhou, Old Zhang went inside the kitchen and came back a moment later with two bowls of ground corn millet. He gave them to Xiaoling and I, and then all four of us climbed up a ladder laying against the wall that led to the roof. Looking at the courtyard and the others adjoining it in all directions from above, the area looked like a maze of small compartments, each courtyard it’s

own little world nestled together, side by side, with many others, just like it.

Xiaoling and I walked over to the pigeon cage. Looking inside there were fifteen or so pigeons. The birds 'whooted' and as they climbed or leapt over one another in small confines of the cage.

Xiaoling poked his finger inside the cage. "I do not like pigeons very much. They are stupid."

Old Zhang came over to us. *"It's that time of the day. Let's let the pigeon's out. Which of you wants to do it?"*

"Do you want to do it, Xiaoling?" I asked. Xiaoling looked pensively at the latched gate of the cage, then stepped forward and threw it open. Rising up in a great flock of beating wings, the pigeons scattered. For a few minutes we stood and watched as birds did circles around the neighborhood. Although they were just pigeons, they no less soared on the air. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see Xiaoling looking up, no less transfixed by their flight than I was.

When we came back downstairs, I thought, that was pretty cool. And looking around the house, I saw that Old Zhang owned other birds. One that looked like a crow, but had a yellow eye and could speak just like a cockatoo, but in Chinese. Along the wall were a pair cages with blue clothes draped over them, as well.

"What are these ones?" I asked Old Zhang, pointing to the cages.

Lifting up one of the cloths so I could take a peak, inside were a pair of small birds, each not much larger than the size of a golf ball. The bird had yellow and pink bodies. Small black bands ran around the eyes. The faces and beaks that looked as sharp as arrow heads.

*"Songbirds," said Old Zhang. "I keep the covers over the cages during the day so they can rest."*

I liked the look of the birds. There was a part of, as well, looking at the birds, though, that wanted to release them like the pigeons. I told Old Zhang what I was thinking through Xiaoling.

*"Do you think the song bird sits around all day, bemoaning its own fate?" said Old Zhang. "No, it sings! It sings because it feels joy and it feels joy because it has a voice."*

Grandfather Zhou nodded. *"You two are like a pair of young birds. But which birds are you? The pigeons or the songbirds? You two will make very good friends. Brothers."*

Later on that evening as I lay in bed, I thought about that word, 'brothers.' It had been clear from the start the Wangs had hoped I'd become Xiaoling's friend, but brothers? Maybe I was being too literal, but the word hung there, and for the rest of the night I thought about it.

In the morning, when I awoke, the sun hung in the morning's blue sky like an egg yolk. Later on, I headed over to the Wangs, where Xiaoling sat in the living room, hunched over a homework book.

"Let's go do something," I said.

"We could play badminton. *Yao ge bi sai ma?*" *Do you want a competition?*

"Why not?"

We grabbed a net set and rackets from his hallway closet and lugged them to the elevator. Outside, the streets were nearly empty, the only noise the car traffic on

the Second Ring Road. The guard at the entrance to the building was, as usual, standing there on his podium, his eyes shifty, his posture slouched and awkward, his one lazy eye looking up and down the street.

Xiaoling brought out a box of chalk from his pocket and drew out the lines on the court while I set up the net.

Once we started playing, I learned that Xiaoling's service was always precise and right at the front of the net where it was hardest to return. I swatted at the birdie like I was playing tennis, flat, as if trying to put on topspin. Ineffectual. Xiaoling looked at me disappointed, and then came over onto my side of the net and gave me a three-minute lecture on how to hit the birdie properly. I nodded, taking it all in, then disregard everything he said out of sheer annoyance. I'll figure this out on my own, I said to myself. I'm American! The racket made a gross popping sound as I slapped the birdie across the net, like the strings might break from swatting the birdie so hard. Plastic feathers flew. After a few minutes, I'd mangled the birdie, and Xiaoling told me to not hit the birdie so hard.

A Chinese guy wearing a papery shirt and sunhat stopped to watch us play. Drawing up his knees to his chest and wrapping his arms around his shins, he sat down on the curb. A goofy smile spread across his face. A few points later, two others joined him, handing out newspapers for seat covers. People were clearly settling in for the match.

No matter where I tried to place the birdie, Xiaoling always seemed to be one step ahead of me. He moved around the court with ease, lunging across the concrete and plucking the birdie out of the air wherever I put it. I got a couple good shots in,

made him work for points. I began to pick up the game a little better and warm up. Xiaoling was as dry as bone; I was sweating from head to toe. I got into the match more. Xiaoling stared back at me from his side of the court, his face serious. His shorts were hiked up to his belly button; his socks were hiked up to his knees. He's far more invested in the match than I am, I said to myself. Or am I just kidding myself? When Xiaoling made a good spike, the people watching clapped. Fine, time to get involved.

I went back to the service line, and lining up the serve the way Xiaoling had taught me, I aimed the birdie into the front right corner. Xiaoling scurried forward, lunged and popped the birdie up. I set myself up underneath the birdie as it came over my side of the net, saw it come down slowly, the white tip growing bigger as it fell to the earth. I leaned my weight back, leapt up in the air, and came down on the birdie like I was throwing a tomahawk. The birdie whistled in the air as it sailed over the net. Nimbly, Xiaoling twisted his torso away and to the side and the birdie sailed past him and landed on the line.

Xiaoling turned back to face me. "It's out."

"What do you mean 'out'? That was right on the line."

"No. It was outside. I saw it. My point."

"Bullshit," I said, walking up to the net. "That was in by a mile. Are you blind?"

"Blind?"

"Can't see. Eyes closed."

"It's very rude to call a person blind in China. I am not a blind person. Blind

person has very different meaning in China. You cannot call me blind person.”

“What does it mean?”

“It is a very ugly word. It means cannot see anything. Stupid. Ugly stupid.

*Shazi.*”

“Yeah, well, you’re acting stupid,” I said, crossing my arms. “The birdie was in.”

“*Wo cai er, ni cai er,*” he said. *I’m acting stupid?, you’re acting stupid!* “You cannot call me names.”

“Oh, whatever. You’re way too sensitive.”

“Sensitive?”

“Soft headed,” I said, pointing at my skull to make sure he understood what I was saying. At that, Xiaoling began to fume. Maybe it was unfair of me to poke at him that way—through his grandfather—but I knew the birdie was in. Or, at least, I was 90% sure.

Picking up the birdie, Xiaoling slapped it over the net at me. It hit me on the nose. The adults around us starting laughing, thinking it was quiet funny that both of us had lost our tempers.

“Whatever. It was in.”

“If I am a blind person, then you are a barbarian monkey! Badminton is not about swinging the racket as hard as you can. You cannot play.”

I folded my arms and glared at him. The way the final words came out of his mouth...I found myself stung. ‘You cannot play.’ It stunk of a broader generalization. You cannot play. You do not have skills. I got pissed.



“Well, I might not be able to play that well, but it was in.”

Xiaoling then crossed his arms over his chest and began breathing through his nose. Turning to the crowd, he walked over to one of the first person to have sat down for the match. As I walked over to join Xiaoling, another goofy grin came onto the man’s face, and he turned to look at those sitting with him. The others were smiling, too.

*“Old Grandfather, was that last shot in?”* asked Xiaoling. The old man, who wore a pair of thick bifocals, push his glasses up the bridge of his nose. *“I don’t know. I didn’t see it very clearly.”*

*“It went wide. I saw it,”* the person sitting next to him said.

*“It might have been in. It looked like it was in from here,”* said the other.

After a moment, the crowd began arguing about the point and insulting each other. “Liu Du, look at your shirt and all the undone buttons,” said one, adding, “you’re can’t see a foot in front of you.”

After a while, it seemed the crowd was even more passionate about the dispute that Xiaoling and I were. I stood there dumbfounded, unsure of what to do next. By the end of the battle of insults, the crowd came to its conclusion, though. The birdie was out.

Xiaoling turned to me with a toothy grin on his face, immensely pleased with the public opinion on the court. And one last time, in my best Chinese, I asked each of the people watching if they were sure it was out. Each shrugged their shoulders and the debate renewed. Xiaoling began to peel with laughter, clearly getting a kick out of everything.

“My point,” said Xiaoling.

I went back to my line. I chafed. I frothed. I fumed. Our audience found it incredibly amusing I’d lost my temper. In the end, I settled down and took my position.

When we finished the game, the final score was 21-17, Xiaoling. Walking back to the apartment, I dragged the racket on the ground behind me. I was pissed. Had the call gone the other way, there was a chance I could have one the match.

When Xiaoling and I got back to the apartment, Richie, Zhou Qi, Grandfather Zhou, as well as my father, were all sitting in the living room. When they asked what had happened, Xiaoling and I recounted the match and the controversial point.

*“The young brothers are fighting with each other, eh?”* said Grandfather Zhou.

*“You should apologize to me!”* shouted Xiaoling. *“You cannot call me names.”*

I looked up at Zhou Qi. Her lips were pursed. After a moment, her eyes softened, and there was a look there I always dreaded. From almost everyone. My father. Zhou Qi. Grandfather Wang. Even Xiaoling. Disappointment. How was it that I always managed to do that? Disappoint people? My own mother wouldn’t have given a damn—who needs approval?—but here, one look from Zhou Qi and I suddenly became vulnerable, a kid. I was getting the childhood I’d always wanted to have, and a mother of sorts, I just didn’t know how to deal with it.

Grandfather Zhou went over to the kitchen and a moment later came back with a glass of tea. Tilting his head back, he lifted the steaming glass of hot water to his lips, and poured a generous serving down his throat.

He then looked at all of us. *“Trouble between the brothers? I guess there is*

*nothing to do except take them fishing."*

*"Ba, please," said Zhou Qi. "This is no time for a joke."*

*"I'm being serious," he said. "Give them to me for the afternoon, and I will straighten them out. Besides, young boys need to learn a skill; fishing is a good skill to have. I will teach them."*

*"Mr. Ye," said my father, "that's not necessary—"*

*"—Nonsense. I'm the one that told them they were brothers, did I not? I should be the one to solve the problem. My solution is fishing."*

Zhou Qi turned her face away from her father. I could tell she felt hurt. She'd always been hurt by the things her father said. Damnit all to hell, why did everything always have to be so different here?

Grandfather Zhou came over to me and clapped his hand on both my and Xiaoling's shoulders.

*"Listen you two. I need exercise. Let's go fishing, how about it?"*

*"I don't want to go fishing," said Xiaoling. "I do not like fishing! I do not like nature!"*

*"I guess it's going to be a long day for all of us then. Go put on your shoes."*

Grandfather Zhou then took us to the local butcher's market, Xiaoling complaining and dragging his feet the whole way. The butch, it turned out, was an old friend of Grandfather Zhou's.

*"I need some chicken guts," said Grandfather Zhou.*

*"Alright. I have some from this morning for cheap if you want."*

*"If they're cheap, they're not fresh. Give me a fresh chicken."*

The butcher nodded, and grabbing a chicken by the throat from one of the cages near to her, she set it on a chopping block. The chicken on the block and the others in the cages began cackling madly knowing that death was near.

*"Watch this,"* said Grandfather Zhou. *"This is how you kill a chicken."*

The butcher raised the chicken above her head, and without hesitation, or anything else apart from the sense of practiced stroke, brought the chicken down, severing the chicken's head from the body. Bloody ooze oozed onto the chopping block. She then de-feathered the bird and hung it on a hook to let the blood drain. After a moment of waiting, she took a paring knife, and ran it up the chicken's belly, and then with a single pull of her hand, tore out all the entrails. When she was finished, she placed the guts in a plastic bag and weighted them on a scale.

*"Three yuan,"* she said, and Grandfather Zhou paid the price.

As we left the meat market, my stomach felt queasy. The life of a chicken was worthless in China, its guts worth about only ten cents in American money. I had a feeling I was in for a doozy of an afternoon.

Walking for a while, Xiaoling and I again rehashed the debate about the controversial point. Grandfather Zhou, who walked a couple steps ahead of us, said nothing. Eventually we came to *Houhai* Park. Sitting down at a bench next to the park's lake, Grandfather Zhou began taking out his fishing equipment. Xiaoling and I both stood with our fists shoved into our pants pockets, not looking at one another.

*"You too don't ever shut up, do you?"* said Grandfather Zhou. *"Always talking, talking, talking. You want to know why you argue? Because you talk. You want to know why you talk so much? Because inside you are not quiet. If you learn to be*

*quiet inside, then fewer arguments. If you learn to be quiet inside, and can figure out when you should talk, then there is never any need to argue. Go sit over there on the bench and help me bait my hooks. Do not speak. Learn to be quiet."*

*"I thought you said we were going to fish," I said.*

*"No, you can watch me fish. Once you've learned to be quiet, then maybe I'll give you a chance."*

Xiaoling and I stepped over to the bench and began baiting the hooks. As I worked the bait on one hook, I looked over at Xiaoling as he stared into the bag of chicken guts. He stood there frozen. Then he turned to look at me, a sour expression on his face. This was justice. I was having a great time; Xiaoling looked like he was about to faint.

When we finished baiting the hooks, Xiaoling and I came back over to Grandfather Zhou, who sat with his pole ready. He examined the hooks, nodding to himself, then looked back up at the two of us.

*"Sit down for a second and let me tell you a story about brother's arguing. I don't care about who said what or when, or even if the bird died was in or out. But I want to tell you a story, then you two decided what to do, decide what the story means. Xiaoling, translate the story for me, word for word, okay?"*

### **GRANDFATHER ZHOU'S STORY: THE PIG AND THE HANDWRITING BOOK**

*"I used to have a brother once. His name was Guang. He has been dead for many years now. You see this scar on my face and my missing teeth?—my own brother*

*did that to me. That's the story I want to tell you about.*

*My brother and I grew up in Henan. My mother and father were very poor, and they were farmers. Every day, my parents, my brother, and I would get up early to till the land. Each morning there was dew on the corn leaves, and the smell of the soil filled my lungs. We had a good plot of land, as well as a pig that my father kept in a pen on the side of the house.*

*That pig was my favorite creature in the whole world. It had a mean looking nose and face, fat and ugly like a misshapen potato, but it was the friendliest creature on earth. And it was smart, too, like a dog. When people came by the house the pig didn't recognize, it would squeal loudly and warn us. In the morning, when I needed to get up for work, the pig would come over to the wooden slats of the house, just next to where I slept inside, and bang its head against the wall until it heard me say, 'Okay, okay, I'm getting up.'*

*When I got older, I married. Because my parents were very poor and I had no money, we all had to live together. We worked the land together, as well. My wife then had a daughter—Zhou Qi. At first, I did not like Zhou Qi because she was a girl. Our lives were very hard, you must understand, and I wanted a son to carry on my family line. But Zhou Qi was a special child. She was smart, and could learn to do anything, and soon, she became the apple of my eye. She could work a hoe pretty well, too. Zhou Qi could do whatever she set her mind to doing, and she always did so with kindness in her heart.*

*My brother, on the other hand, could not find a wife when he got older. He was always in rough shape it seemed like. He spent time in the town trying to do business*

*with my father, but never seemed very good at it, and when it came to picking up a hoe and tilling the fields, he was simply lazy. He said that he wished he were a student, and my father, wanting to give his son a chance to make something of himself, spent our families' life savings to send him to college.*

*Then the Revolution came. By that time, Zhou Qi was in middle school and making all of us very proud, my father included, which is no small thing to say. My father had had two boys, who'd by turns made him proud and deeply frustrated. But here was a daughter who was smart and could learn things that even he could not do. In a very funny way, as well, Zhou Qi even made my father think better of me. 'How did you do that, make such a wonderful daughter?' I remember him asking me one day as we worked in the fields together.*

*I couldn't say how, but I was very proud of my daughter.*

*When the Revolution started, my brother ended up joining a group of soldiers called the Red Guard. They called themselves soldiers, but in reality they were an awful group of people. If there were people who sought to change China for the better, there were others that could just as much set her back. The Red Guards were an unforgiving and uncontrolled group of ruffians who caused all sorts of trouble.*

*A year later, when my brother returned to our village from graduating college, he came back a new member of the Communist Party. Dressed in a fine new suit, he bragged about his exploits in college and his new found prestige as a member of the party to my father and I. Despite the change in clothes and the college degree, I could tell that he was still just the same old Guang. Just now a 'promoted' Guang. A higher up and one that wanted to show us he was powerful.*

*When Guang saw how well Zhou Qi was doing in school and how much she made my father proud, he grew angry and resentful. He couldn't stand the sight of her, for she was becoming everything he could not be. We could not afford to buy Zhou Qi books, so she had to travel every day by foot to the big town twenty kilometers away to read in the library. There, she met a teacher who helped her to study English and even gave her a book on English writing—the very book you've seen her hold so close to her heart.*

*When she came home that day with the book, she was elated and spent the night carefully flipping through the pages by candle light. I had never seen her so fascinated with something before. Even I found it a bit odd, the writing book I mean—full of curves and circles and all sorts of smoothly flowing lines and then Chinese characters, hundreds, that I could not read. I had never seen such a book, but I knew it was a precious thing. And it was in that moment I realized Zhou Qi had a chance to really do something with her life, more than I ever would, or for that matter, her mother, who had spent all her days and hours cooking and tilling the fields with me. Later, my wife and I talked, and decided to begin saving money to send her to high school, and someday, perhaps, college.*

*All seemed well until a couple days later my brother stopped by the house. He said he was coming by just to say hi again, but really, I knew better. He was coming by to show himself off again, give my father and me a lecture. And he did. But in the back of my mind, with all his talk about Revolution and 'capitalist roaders' and 'counter-revolutionaries that must be destroyed' and 'the vile, evil influence of Western society,' I became very afraid.*



*It was at just that moment as my brother concluded his speech that Zhou Qi came in to the room wanting to show my father the book she'd been given. When Zhou Qi handed the book to my father, my brother immediately snatched it out of my father's hands.*

*"I'll take that," he said. My brother then began flipping through the book, looking at Zhou Qi out of the corner of his eye, as if while looking at it, he was looking at the solution to all his problems. He couldn't even read the book, let alone understand anything in it. But he understood that Zhou Qi loved that book, and that he had the power to take it away.*

*"I'm going to confiscate this as counter-revolutionary material," he said. "You should be glad that we're able to keep this awful secret in our family, just between us."*

*Zhou Qi became very upset, and did my father and I. I said, "It's just a book about handwriting, what does it matter to you?"*

*"Handwriting?" my brother said. "Handwriting? Dear brother, you are confused. This is not a book about handwriting—this is a book about the subjugation and humiliation of the Chinese people. That is what this book is. A symbol of everything that is wrong about China. It's weakness and the past."*

*I didn't know what to say about all of that 'subjugation and humiliation' business. It did not seem to subjugate or humiliate anyone—it was just that my brother had been a no-good turtle's butt all his life. "A teacher from the city gave that book to her—it's a completely legal book," I said.*

*My brother stood up. "A teacher, huh? What's the teacher's name? Tell me. Or else."*

*I told him to go screw himself and snatched the book back from him.*

*Standing up from the table, my brother's face grew red and he became incensed. He began ranting on and on about the Revolution, pacing up and down the room like a lion being eaten by ants. When he stopped, he flew at Zhou Qi. Afraid he was going crazy, I jumped between the two of them.*

*After that, there was no going back. My brother wrestled me down to the floor and began to pummel my face. The Red Guards that had come with him held back my father and Zhou Qi, smiling and laughing as my brother beat the hell out of me. I was surprised by his strength—he'd grow stronger since going to the capital—and no matter how much I punched back, I could not get the upper hand on him. A moment later, I don't know from where, he found a club. And that's when it happened. Luckily, my father had taken Zhou Qi out of the room, because I remember the look in my brother's eyes. He was completely mad. He took the club and bashed it into my face again and again until all my teeth had been knocked out and lay in a pool of my own blood on the floor.*

*"You can keep your damn book, then," my brother said, when he was finished. And then he left.*

*My brother and I never spoke again after that day, although I saw him from time to time in the neighboring town, walking the streets, wearing protest banners and shouting and screaming, raising his Red Book high in the air.*

*Years later, toward the tail end of the Cultural Revolution, news came one day to our house that my brother had been killed. I was deeply saddened by this news, and when I went into town trying to learn more, I learned that he'd been killed by another*

*Red Guard—murdered by one of his own in cold blood over a gambling dispute!*

*From that day forward, I swore off all politics. I love my country and my people, but most of all, I love my family. So, my lesson to you is this: if you call yourself brothers, act like brothers. I feel great sadness now when I think of how my brother's life came to an end. He died a dog's death."*

When Grandfather Zhou finished the story, he sat back in his seat, and cast out his line.

"That's really screwed up," I said to Xiaoling. Xiaoling didn't translate for Grandfather Zhou. I looked at Xiaoling, who sat by the edge of the water, untying a string of tangled fishing line as he continued to struggle to bait his hook. I stood up. Coming over, I sat down beside him.

*"I'm sorry I called you blind, okay?" I said. "I don't care about the point. We'll follow the honor system next time. The birdie was on your side of the court, so it should be your call."*

Xiaoling nodded. *"Yes. And next time we'll draw better lines on the court, so it's clearer if the birdie falls in or out."*

Grandfather Zhou then handed us two fishing poles and Xiaoling and I baited our hooks.

"What happened to the pig?" I asked Grandfather Zhou.

*"Well, that's another story, I guess. We ate it, and I've never been able to eat pork since."*

## CHAPTER VII:

### MEMOIR & STORIES

***Author's Note:*** The following chapter is presented in three parts. The first is a memoir. In terms of its relationship to the preceding chapters of *The Myriad Things*, it represents a different facet of a larger story I am trying to tell within a fictional context in the novel, and so I have included it here as complimenting piece. The later two parts are pieces of short fiction that stand independently of the novel, but touch on related themes and issues.

#### Letters Home from Zhalong, People's Republic of China

*In the basement office of my father's West Seattle home, a two-story redbrick surrounded by a prizewinning collection of rhododendron bushes, more than thirty varieties in all, is a portrait of him hanging on the wall. He is perhaps forty-eight or forty-nine in the painting. He looks healthy, his eyes are gentle and blue, and he wears what I like to think of as a military man's smile. It's not quite a smile, but more of a purse-lipped grin. And there is a sad, contemplative look to his eyes in the painting. I*

*don't know much about my father's early life except for a handful of details. He was born in Worland, Wyoming on December 10, 1944. His parents were Catholics. Because they didn't have running hot water in their house, they used rocks taken from a nearby riverbed heated in the kitchen oven to warm bathwater. Once, my father recalled to me a story of his father carrying him on his shoulders through waste high water to dry land and safety after their house flooded.*

*When I was 24, I was at the retirement ceremony where the painting was presented. It took place in Beijing, China, where he, my stepmother, my adopted sister, and I all lived and called home between the years of 1992 and 2005. When the painting was unveiled—a white curtain draw back by a colleague of my father—I think everyone at the ceremony was shocked by its beauty. I know I was. My father is one of those Americans who have come up in life: a PhD. A twenty-three year military career in which he attained the rank of colonel, at one point almost becoming a one-star general. He was CEO of a Fortune 50 company for over a decade. He's sat at tables with two Presidents, former U.S. President Bill Clinton and former Chinese President Jiang Zimin.*

*My parents divorced when I was young and for the first ten years of my life I lived alone with mother in a North Seattle apartment complex located next to a housing project. My closest friend from that time was the son of the family living next door to my mother's apartment, a half-white, half-black kid named Brian Roberts. By the time he was twenty-five, he had four children, all girls, been to jail twice, and his wife was in jail. He now lives somewhere in North Dakota raising his children with his mother. By way of saying this, I mean to say that when I came into my father's life*

*when I was thirteen to live with him for the first time, I didn't know much about him. And as a son, I think for most of my teenage years he was unsure what to make of me. Some stories are as much about forgetting as they are about remembering.*

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*In the early summer of 2009, I spent my final twenty minutes in Beijing International Airport in the smoker's lounge. Not the old airport, the one that was first in use in 1992 when I arrived in China with my parents, and not the new one built the year before for the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games. The airport that was in between. I remembered standing by the same window two years earlier, looking out at the long, steel arms of twelve construction cranes in the distance, winter fog blanketing the site of the new airport that had been designed by the same architect that designed Paris' De Gaulle Airport.*

*I sent off text messages to friends, saying final goodbyes, as well as to my ex-girlfriend, a Chinese woman name Zan Xiao who'd I spent three years with and nearly married. I'd met her parents. We'd researched immigration policy and jobs options in the US. I have a copy of the marriageability certificate I had notarized at the American Embassy declaring I intended to marry her, and that I was not married to anyone in the United States. Despite everything we hoped for and wanted to believe was possible in our relationship, it broken down under the strain of my imminent departure six months before I left. She discovered she could not commit to my life as a writer or a life in the United States, probably more the former than the later, and I could not commit to her life in China, because it would have meant spending the rest of my life there.*

*As I stood there at the window, all the while, a little voice in my head, privately disbelieving, said "I'm leaving China. I'm finally leaving China." I left the smoker's lounge, waited to board my flight, and when the plane finally took off, instantaneously, I was faced with the shock that I was in fact leaving China forever. I'd spent the last four months preparing to leave the country. In hindsight, I know now that the further I entrenched myself in the idea of creating a life there, the more I began to lose touch with my own culture and myself to some extent. Expatriatism, apart from its allure, is also a lifestyle of transience. People come and go, and of those that stay, more often than not, many are doomed to live lives of great difficulty. It's the problem of living between worlds.*

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*I awoke to the sight of fir trees and fence posts strung together with barbed wire passing outside my train window. The cabin was cold, the heating, all centrally controlled, not yet turned on because it was early spring. The cotton comforter I'd slept in during the night after departing from Beijing Train Station was stale with sweat. The train shifted on its tracks, rattling the cars, all the passengers tipping back and forth like bowling pins, as we pulled into the train station in Qiqiha'er. Qiqiha'er is a small outpost city in Heilongjiang province that shares a border with far-eastern Russia and Siberia. All throughout the night, as I stood between the train cars smoking and talking with the Chinese businessmen and travelers who shared a car with me, a single phrase kept coming to mind. Head North.*

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*My sister was adopted in Hong Kong when she was two. As a Chinese-born, Chinese-American, she struggles with her identity sometimes. She feels frustrated by the fact she doesn't speak Mandarin very well anymore, and won't speak to either my father or me in Chinese, even if the situation seems like a good opportunity for "China-bonding," like when we go to a Chinese restaurant in Seattle and my father and I, like a pair of goofballs, place our orders in Chinese, knowing exactly what will happen next: the waiter or waitress, usually someone who looks hurried, will turn up their head from the order pad momentarily shocked. As they stare at us, our table, our family, the language center in their brain is cuing them to speak in Chinese, but there's a visual confusion. We are, after all, with the exception of Kimberly, Caucasians. For Kimberly it is different. She is both Chinese and Asian American. And as for my father and I, there are parts of China so familiar to us, it's difficult to say we don't have some kind of ownership in the culture. But we're not Chinese, not like Kimberly, and China, in the end, is just a place.*

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*Zhalong Nature Reserve, a wetland located sixty kilometers outside of the Qiqiha'er, is best known for its cranes, which in Chinese culture are symbolic of longevity, health and happiness. Members of six of the world's fifteen cranes species come through the reserve every spring to forage for food, fight for territory, mate, and raise young. Among those species are the Red-crowned crane, the White-naped crane, the Demoiselle Crane, the Hooded Crane, the Common Crane, and the Siberian Crane. Less known is the fact that Zhalong is also the seasonal home to many other migrant*



*and resident birds—approximately 300 others—stilts, grebes, seagulls, quails, ducks, storks, herons, falcons, tits, warblers, owls, and many other species.*

*As I drove to the reserve, I spotted a Eurasian Curlew from the window of my taxi in a section of farm field filled with the burnt husks of last season's corn crop. The Eurasian Curlew stands just over a foot and a half high, has a long, scythe like beak over twelve inches long. Its body is golden brown with black spots painted across its back and primary and secondary wing feathers. The neck stands out about eight inches from its chest and it has long legs good for moving around in shallow water. The beak is good for picking at and stabbing things buried in the mud: frogs and toads, crayfish, burrowing land crabs, tiny fish, and the delicious tubers so many of Zhalong's migrants come specifically to the area each spring to eat.*

*About twenty meters away from the bird, I took a couple steps forward, coming right up against the edge of the field. It spotted me just as I began to spot it in the focal points of my camera lens. The cab driver stood behind me in the background, leaning up against the car and smoking, curious, perhaps, as to the origins of my hobby, or why exactly I'd told him to tingche so suddenly, or 'stop the car,' so I could take pictures of a bird he'd probably preferably eat. Or at least get at the eggs of. To explain this last part, a Chinese saying is needed: 'Apart from tables and planes, Chinese will eat anything with four legs or that can fly.'*

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*To go native in a place like China means you learn to accept a place within a society as an outsider. And I knew enough about what it might mean for the rest of my*

*life if I chose to do so. I'd marry a Chinese woman, have Chinese parents-in-law, probably have to start my own business in order to survive—a bar, a café, a bookstore, things expats do when they're settling in for the long haul in a place. And perhaps you become something of a curiosity as a person as well, if only because the locals you meet must have their own thoughts about your own country and they must wonder, they must: why is this person willing to give up a life in America to live here? Do they love my country so much? Do they not love their own country? At one time in my life, I used to joke with Chinese that I was a bendi laowai, or 'native foreigner,' a phrase I'd proudly come up with on my own to describe myself to Chinese during small talk.*

*That was what was always at stake, living there as long as I did, thirteen years in total, six with my parents and seven as an adult: would I settle for a life in China? Would I stay behind and become one of those expats that lives twenty, thirty, forty, fifty years of their life in China? Needless to say, to become such a person, China must become your life.*

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*At Christmas time when the rest of my step-mother's extended family comes over to the house to celebrate my step-grandmother's birthday and the three other generations of their family are around us—babies, husbands and wives, grandfathers and grandmothers, and one great grandmother, Louis Wheelers, who this year turned 95—my father sits in a corner chair in the living room, watching the rest of the family quietly. He never joins in the card games most everyone after the birthday dinner. He goes to his office and works on his family history book, which he published an edition*

*of in 1980 that was around 200 pages. The new version he hopes to complete before the end of his life is currently around 3000 pages. He never seems at Christmas to be so overwhelmingly happy that he's smiling most or even much of the time.*

*When he was sixty-two, through his research in family history, he discovered through an aging cousin that his father was not his biological father and that he was born an illegitimate child.*

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*When I got back to the US, I made jokes with people about being 'fresh off the boat,' as if I'd come back to the United States in a shipping container, a poor Chinese immigrant forced to emigrate to the United States, leaving behind homeland and family for freedom and opportunity. I don't think any of them understood that joke. For that matter, how could they? I'm inconspicuously Anglo, just under six feet tall, dress in jeans and t-shirts, have blue eyes and blonde hair.*

*My father called me last week to talk about a book I'd given to him by Chinese-born American writer Ha Jin. Earlier in the week he wrote an email about the book: "I have finished Ha Jin's, *Waiting*. What an emotional, gut wrenching read. It brought back so many sights, sounds, smells, tastes, experiences, pains, recollections of small happinesses and life's fundamental problem of we human's being all fouled up much of the time. It was a painful read, artfully done." Later, we talked further about the book and he told me about a passage in which Ha Jin describes a Chinese farmer going to market that has sewn shut the assholes of his pigs. My father said he barely even noticed the detail as he read. I myself knew why the farmer had done so before he'd*

*even told me. To increase the weight of the pigs, of course. He's trying to get better price when they're put on the scales.*

*That is how closely linked our relationship as father and son is to China.*

*Without even thinking about it, we both know why a Chinese farmer would sew a pig's butt shut.*

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*My books are probably the most precious thing I own. It's a collection of around four hundred titles, all brought back from the US to China during Christmas vacations over the years. When I packed my books before coming back to the United State, I reflected on the distance they'd traveled, each book well over 6000 miles. The last box of books I'd brought back with me to China, a collection of nature writers mainly—Wallace Stegner, Mary Austin, Rachel Carson, Edward Abbey, Peter Matthiessen, and others—I'd brought back the winter before, knowing well that if things worked out, I'd be returning to the US in another year for graduate school. I reflected on the fact that I hadn't got to many of the titles yet, and what essentially a waste it was to bring them across the ocean. Not a waste maybe, but they point to the very true nature of having to plan for two different lives at once, one lived in China, the other in the US. Planning for different lives.*

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*What can I say about loneliness? What's the difference between solitude and loneliness, those items not being mutually exclusive? And what about their relationship*

*to distance, the miles a person puts between one place and another? What about lonesomeness and the downright egotism of avoiding company?*

*In the spring, a steady, uninterrupted wind flows across Zhalong's vast, nascent plane. The predominant colors are of the reed bed's winter stalks, brown and black. I stared down into the water, my galoshes sunk a couple inches into the mud, watching a cloud of grey clay silage kicked up by my boot. My sense of being alone there was acute, even painful to think about. Thin blades of grass reflected in the water, one half green, the other half a darkened reflection set against the glassy surface of the water in which the clouds and sun above were reflected on the surface. The wind scoured the soft, pink innermost parts of my ear drum. You look out onto that landscape and can only feel at once its immense emptiness and beauty. Five or six miles in the distance is a single tree, and beyond that, nothing else.*

*I remember the first moment that I saw a crane flying, really flying. Five hundred meters above me. The clouds in the sky like white paint strokes set against a blue backdrop, the body of the crane dark, yet discernibly crane-like. A pair of long legs stretching out from behind the body, the long, thin, toothpick-like neck stretching out in front. It flew in circles. What I remember most was its beak, how every once in a while as it turned on the wind, it opened soundlessly, then closed.*

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*I won't claim to have been the best son growing up. I was a trouble maker and for the most part I'm able to laugh about the fact in hindsight, because I don't think I did anything ever that was ever unforgivably wrong. I was a 'social floater,' as well,*

*and along with the trouble makers, I also hung out with intellectuals and nerds. We played scrabble, cooked dinners at friends' houses, thought about life, things that all kids do. We smoked pot, drank beer, and smoked cigarettes. The only time in my life I have ever heard my father speak in an openly confused manner was during a phone conversation in which we were arguing about some of the wounding words he said to me while I was growing up, not recounted here because the don't need to be told to be understood. When I told him how much it hurt to hear him say those things, quietly sobbing, he said, "But my father treated me like any other son."*

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*While I was dredging through the water, I happened across a purple heron. It was about one hundred yards ahead of me, its head and beak only a slightly different shape and color than the reed bed surrounding it. Nearly invisible unless you have some experience stalking birds. It's not that the dynamics of flight allude me, but somehow a bird resists a sense of place—flight is the very life of Zhalong. Without it, there would not be anything else to the place except the endless landscape. A bird and its flight has everything to do with word "departure" and what it implies by product, arrival, or in this case, return.*

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*This is what my father gave me: China. And antiques. Some small taste of a different culture and its artifacts and artifice. This is what we shared together as father and son. Why is it so hard for me to separate my thoughts of him from that place? To remove China and all its many things, the joy each of us felt looking at them*

*and all they came to mean to me, would be like saying that we never lived there at all, that my father and I had never met and remained strangers to each other for all our lives.*

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*I look at my Dad in pictures taken from when I was a teenager. In some of them, he looks like he doesn't even want to know me, he's that disappointed as a father. He holds his head to the side, avoids eye contact. He has the posture and appearance of one who is deeply frustrated. He sits apart from the group of people in the foreground of the picture on a stone with me standing in front of him. He looks unhappy, miserable. He wanted a different son, not this one his ex-wife has passed off onto him at the height of his career, when everything is supposed to be going right. He had a plan. She ruined it. His family is supposed to be perfect. His wife was supposed to listen to him.*

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*Years later after I have returned to the United States, I reread the letters my father sent me when I was a child. I am surprised by many things. In the course of three four-page letters, there are only two spelling errors, both appearing at the end of the same letter. I'm surprised by how detailed the letters are, and how adventurous my father was when he was in his late thirties.*

*In one letter, he writes: "I returned from South American today. I called you but you were not home...The last country I visited was Chile. It's capital is Santiago. Chile must be the longest and narrowest country in the world. In some places the country is*

*only sixty miles wide. On average, the country is one hundred miles wide. Most of the country is composed of mountains. The capital of Santiago is in a valley between two mountain ranges. The high Andes Mountains rise directly from the valley on the east side. I took a bus trip to Valparaiso, which is on the coast. It is Chile's major port. The bus had to go over a small mountain range to get to the coast. The same day we were in Valpiraso (the new home of the Chilean congress), a former director of the Intelligence Unit of the Carabineros (national police) was assassinated (killed) just 1-2 blocks from my hotel."*

*I keep reading. I am surprised by how good natured my father is, and how his voice in the letters sometimes appears to fluctuate between excitement and a desire to write and the sorrow of a parent who lives far away, who can only be a parent through letters. However exactly I ever did not know or understand my father seems almost strange to me. Had I become, by the age of 16, so totally alienated to the world that I could not see my father's own character and how much he loved me? It would seem like that.*

*I can also see that he feels a loss of control. In one letter I wrote to him about quitting my soccer team and being bored in school. In his reply, more than anything, he seems to feel some pain hearing about my life and a direction he cannot understand. Even here in the letter, our separation and estrangement begins to shows its face, a forking in the road.*

*At other times, he tells stories about his own childhood and writes with such feeling, after reading, I feel as if I might have been there with him. "One time my father, mother, and I were all trying to do something to the cow. It took all three of us to tie*



*the cow to a post in the field near the house. My father was by the cow when she reared up on her hind legs. One of her front hoofs hit my father's head. It cut his eye rather badly. I nearly passed out when we went in the house and his eye fell out. This was the first time I knew that my father only had one good eye. The other was a false eye. When he was about sixteen a bottle of glue exploded. He turned toward the bottle as it exploded. A piece of glass damaged his eye. It could not be saved. Thus he had a glass eye....The cow had cracked the eye. He had to get a new one. As you might guess, you just don't walk into the Bon Marche and ask to see the selection of eyes. He had to write a special company."*

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*When I look at my understanding of mother now, I think I don't understand her that much. I see a person who tried exceptionally hard to keep things together, but who failed at doing so and probably feels terrible about it. Terrible about her own anger, how angry she's been. I see a woman who has struggled her whole life to live up to her own expectations of herself. She's never forgiven herself for her own weaknesses. I don't think I've ever forgiven her for her weaknesses either. Because growing up, she always presented herself as very strong on the outside. But she had a lot of pain to deal with. And that was always at odds with everything.*

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*The thing that has always frightened me about my mother is how she acts like a child sometimes. She'll speak in a childish voice, sit in the living room watching*

*cartoons. She becomes lost. To me and my sister. Escapes into a fantasy world where neither of us can see or touch her anymore.*

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*For a few brief moments, we are like any other family. Ariel, my sister, leaps over the barricades on her horse, and I record her on my mother's camera, crouching down low for an interesting angle. Mom is smiling, cheering. Ari is getting what she needs from my mom and me both. Recognition. Attention. Praise.*

*My sister is a recovering heroine addict that teaches horse riding. My mother is a fifty-eight year old woman going on her third divorce. I am a thirty two year old writer without any money and without a real direction in life. We're a family. All the parts work if we let them work.*

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*My mom once said to me: "The greatest power you will ever have in your life is the power to say 'No.'" Like then and now, the comment was puzzling to me. I also consider those words something like 'part of the legacy of the 1960's,' where protest and denial of power were essential tools of social change. At the same time, I've watched my mom struggle over the years to achieve goals and build a solid marriage. For her, the power to say 'No' could also be used to escape making choices. She's always loved psychology, always wanted to write a book, for a long time wanted to get a PhD, always wanted to show up my Dad.*

*She's got demons which she's been chasing down and fighting since her own childhood.*

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*My father never expected anything out of life growing up. I don't think I ever understood that idea when I was young. Even now I struggle with the idea, but I understand it better now why he felt that way. I know also, in some respect, that everything he's ever done or given to me as a son must be perceived through the lens of that knowledge. When he gave or did, his hope was I would accept the same responsibilities that came along with the gifts he was giving. To deny him that and the love he was trying to express as a father would be to deny one half of the better part of myself.*

*My father also says things about women that I simply don't like hearing. When he says them, I can see his own bitterness about the outcome of his marriage with my mother and how robbed, I think, he feels as a father for me having lived in her home for the first thirteen years of my life. Maybe he's right to feel that way. But it's not for me to decide. This may be the only instance I can think of where he feels like he really deserves something, where he has expectations.*

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*All the expats I've known—the people who've settled in, made lives in China—have had to adapt psychologically in order to survive. The choice, for most, is probably parts voluntary, parts involuntary. Codes—that textural pattern of understandings implicitly a part of another culture—get switched, turned on and off, become a part of the complications and compromises one must make in order to live in that culture.*

*I once met a German in his fifties who'd been living in China for over twenty-five years. He owned an arts and entertainment company, as well as a taxi company. The later was probably the more lucrative of his businesses, but the cultural promotion company was fairly successful too. I worked with him on a producing a show at the art gallery I was managing at the time. We went back and forth about figures and money. We wrote up contracts. The negotiations dragged on and on and it seemed that my Chinese boss and the German could ever come to agreement. They remained polite, smiled in public, but over time a bitterness began to develop and the deal fell through and the business partnership dissolved.*

*"He's too clever. He's like a snake," my boss told me, agitated, fuming about the show that had fallen through. "He's too crafty."*

*What I began to understand, at that moment, was that the German had taken on Chinese qualities—like my boss, he was always trying to find some way to place the burden of responsibility for the success of the event elsewhere and that he was trying to save money, find ways to get my boss to pay more.*

*It was all very Chinese.*

*People change. People adapt. They take on the qualities of the local environment in order to survive.*

### **Suan Tian Ku La**

Sammy Zhu bulldozed her vacuum across the carpet of the hotel lobby. The Pudong Grand Hyatt, located in the Jin Mao Building, was the highest hotel in the world. Travelers from all over the world came to Shanghai and from anywhere in the city they could see the pagoda-shaped, eighty-eight-story building towering over the skyline. This is the first step, thought Sammy Zhu, even though she wore hose that strangled the circulation of her already swollen legs. The carpet was rose colored with patterned streaks of orange running through it.

She loved how her friends called her Sammy Zhu instead of her Chinese name, Zhu Jing. Ten months ago, before the fire in her apartment, she would have been too busy dancing on Mao Ming Road with the crazy foreign students from the Language Institute to worry about work. She would have been shopping at the Huai Hai fashion market for dangly bellbottoms and sleek sneakers. She would sleep at night during the week, instead of working a graveyard shift from eight in the evening until four o'clock in the morning each day.

Sammy took a moment to breath. The vacuum procured second hand by the hotel was heavy. She was grateful that the assistant manager of the hotel, her uncle, Zhu Shiji, had given her the maid's position at the hotel. Each evening when she started her shift he pointed out the lobby's atrium to her, the outcrops of balconies spiraling up like wavy arms to the ceiling of bursting white bulbs. 'It looks like an

angel,' he told her, and that with his connections the Jin Mao Building would treat her well; a secretarial position was opening in the management offices that would get her off her feet soon.

Sammy returned to the maintenance floor just below the forty-fourth-story, and tried her best to avoid the other maids. The older ones had become suspicious of her once they saw how quickly she memorized the German, Japanese and English greetings all employees were required to learn. She tried to assuage their fears by telling them she'd already learnt the words before from her foreign friends, but that made them only more anxious.

Sammy Zhu began unloading a cart of dirty sheets into a washing machine, but one of the laundry boys, Ding Yu, came up behind her.

"Look," Yu said. He held up a dirty bed sheet, laughing to himself, and there were specks of blood on it. Even the highest hotel in the world couldn't help having its share of prostitutes. Sammy Zhu gave him her most fierce look of disgust and immediately he began helping her load more sheets into the washer.

"It's alright," said Sammy. At age nineteen, Ding Yu was two years younger than her, and like most boys his age he was very immature. But he was also sweet to her sometimes and even a little attractive; he was tall and had long arms with stringy muscles that moved elegantly in the oversized black jackets the male workers wore. And Ding Yu was one of the few men whom outside of the Jin Mao didn't stare in pity as she limped past them towards the bus stop for home.

"She can do her own work, you know," said a maid, who was standing a ways from them by the dry cleaning press. It was one of the old women, Fei Daoli, who'd worked at the hotel for over two years. "Why are you always pampering her?"

"Ignore her," said Ding Yu, turning his back on Fei.

"Pretty, isn't she?" said Fei, pulling down hard on the handle of the dry press so a jet of hissing steam shot into the air. "Except for the leg."

Sammy knew before then that Ding Yu had a crush on her. This was the first time it had been acknowledged openly, and by Fei of all people. Yu squatted down on his knees and stared into his reflection in the washing machine's steel panels. Maybe he'd been planning to tell her today.

"If Ding Yu likes me, that's his business, not yours," said Sammy Zhu.

Yu got up and kicked the steel-paneled side of the washing machine and it made a hollow thudding sound. He probably couldn't stand the idea of her having defended him.

"But you don't even like him, do you?" said Fei Daoli, to Sammy, but Fei was looking at Ding Yu when she said it. He turned and hustled out of the room.

"Just because you speak good English, doesn't mean you're a genius, you know," said Fei.

Sammy took one of pressed sheets and began folding it into eighths. "You think I think I'm better than you. I don't."

"My nephew, he speaks good English," said Fei. "If only he had connections like your uncle."

If Yu was here he would say Fei Daoli was just old and bitter, but he wasn't. Did he even really want her? If he was afraid to approach her because of her legs, then he might be even less mature than she'd thought.

"What are you doing with that?" said Fei, tearing the sheet out of Sammy's hands. "Who wants to promote a cripple!"

Sammy hadn't always had a pair of legs that looked like burnt pieces of tofu. An accident had left her this way. A beam had fallen from her apartment's ceiling, tortured as the heart of a burning coal, and pinned her legs to the floor while it seared her flesh and crushed her ankles until they withered and snapped like blades of dry grass.

"What do you understand about anything?" cried Sammy Zhu. Four other maids who were stocking carts by the supply shelves stopped what they were doing to watch.

"Do you think this is a government job?" said Sammy. "Do you think you get paid as well as you do because you work hard? Things have changed. You're just too much of an old cow to understand that."

The four older maids came over to them to stand behind Fei.

"You little whore," said Fei. "In a couple of months you'll be selling yourself to all the foreigners like the rest of the girls your age."

"Cripple," said one of the maids.

"Things haven't changed as much as you think," said another. "Your blue-eyed devil friends don't belong here. They're 'nothing but paper tigers.'"



Sammy could hear the main doors to the laundry room behind her swinging open and close. She turned around and saw that her uncle Shiji was marching up behind her with Yu behind him. Fei and the other maids quieted.

“Ding Yu, go back to the concierge’s desk now. They’ll have something to do for you there,” said Zhu Shiji.

Even though Sammy was glad that Yu had gone to find her uncle she knew now he pitied her. He wouldn’t have gone to Zhu Shiji to complain that someone was just embarrassing him. Sammy was also worried that this was an embarrassing situation for Zhu Shiji, who knew nothing about her and Yu’s friendship until now. Zhu Shiji was a large, barrel-chested man and when he moved quickly or threw his meaty arms around people got out of the way.

“I have an old party saying of my own for you,” said Zhu Shiji, to Fei and the other maids. “No matter if it’s a black cat or a white cat, whichever cat catches the mouse is a good cat.”

Fei and the others seemed pacified, but they shuffled around still anxious.

Sammy was even affected by the old saying. When she’d first heard Deng Xiaoping’s words as a child the adults around her had said them with their eyes held low into the bottom of their tea cups, as if recalling an injury. And she’d never imagined how they might someday apply to herself. They seemed like words her elders were trying to forget.

“China is changing. You know that, I know that,” said Zhu Shiji. “It’s hard, I know. But if you want to keep your jobs you will work together.... Everybody got that?”

“Yes, Assistant Manager Zhu,” the maids chanted, including Sammy Zhu.

“Zhu Jing?” said her uncle. “Can I speak to you in the hallway?”

Sammy could feel the leather walls of her shoes threatening to burst open and all that supported her fragile ankles giving way. Zhu Shiji would have lost face in everyone’s eyes if he’d criticized her in front of the group.

Sammy followed him out and could hear the whispers of the old maids and Fei Daoli saying, “She may be smart, even pretty with nice round eyes, but not even her uncle can promote her. No one promotes a cripple. No one.”

Shiji’s face looked tortured when he turned to look at Sammy. His loyalties were always being cracked apart like eggshells, and she felt guilty for being the current cause of his troubles.

“What’s the matter?” said Sammy, in English. She hoped to remind him that she still needed the secretarial position.

Zhu Shiji looked at his watch. It was almost four in the morning. “Nothing. One of the suites is opening up and it needs to be cleaned. A V.I.P. will be arriving soon.”

“I’ll prepare it right away, then.”

“I can’t promote you,” said Shiji. “The secretary’s position was filled today.”

“What?” said Zhu Jing. Her uncle was too good of a man not to have a reason. The moment the word slipped from her tongue she felt ashamed, like a little empress asking for too many cakes.

“Grütenberg, my boss, hired her,” said Shiji.

Some of what the older maids had said was true. The Jin Mao Building was designed by Americans, funded by Japanese and Malays, and run by Germans. Zhu Shiji was not entirely a man of free will.

“He’s higher up than me,” said Shiji, pausing for a moment. “The girl, she was quite young. That may have had something to do with it, as well.”

“I have an accountant’s certificate and two years of college,” said Zhu Jing.

“I know.”

“I know computers and I’ve done secretarial work before.”

Jing’s uncle tried to take her hand, but she refused to be comforted. “I know English. I know foreigners.”

Jing knew there was no way Zhu Shiji could respond to what she had just said. It was absolutely true and yet meaningless at the same time.

“If China was the same old China, I could give you the job any time,” said Zhu Shiji. “The suite number is 8814. Wait until next time.”

There was a pleasant humming sound as the elevator doors closed and Zhu Jing pushed the button for the top floor of the Jin Mao, the eighty-eighth story. Then the upward momentum pulled down. It felt like there were pieces of scrap iron strapped to her ankles. When Jing got to her floor, she looked over the railing into the expanse of the atrium and the lobby forty-four flights below. The intricately textured carpet she’d noted before was blurry, simplified in shape and color. It looked more like a blotch now.

She imagined slipping over the edge of the railing, sailing past the softly lit rings of each floor, swinging her arms helplessly in the air in an attempt to turn

around. The designs of the carpet became clearer suddenly, bolder and more undeniable, until at last she hit the floor, the details crushing her completely.

"How much does it take to kill a single person?" Jing said aloud. She turned and went to the door of suite 8814. A woman stepped out of the room in front of Jing before she could open the door.

The woman had porcelain white skin and wore rouge and lipstick. Envious black curls of permed hair hung down to her shoulders. Every part of her body was sumptuously shaped. The woman scowled at Jing for staring.

"We were too different," the woman said, "so I broke up with him."

Zhu Jing didn't understand what the woman was talking about, but she was too old to be the new secretary. This woman was approaching her forties.

"Can I help you?" said Zhu Jing.

The woman strode away towards the elevators. "No."

When Zhu Jing entered the suite, she noticed how unused it looked. In the bathroom, the ends of the toilet paper were still folded into triangles. The towels and soaps were stocked. The leaves of the potted plantains in the hallway looked like they'd been wiped clean the day before. There was a depression on the left-hand side of the bed in the master bedroom, but otherwise the silver-line comforter and pillows were straight.

A man wearing a business suit stood on the far side of the room. His shoulders were wide and level and one of his palms rested chest level on the glass pane of the window. He appeared to be searching for something out on the city, but it was obscured by fog.

“Good morning,” the man said, in English, without turning around. It sounded like he was American.

Zhu Jing greeted him in English and looked down at her registry sheet. “Are you Mr. Patterson?”

He told her he wasn’t, and Jing felt annoyed at her uncle for not telling her the room was still occupied. When she apologized for intruding the man turned around, and Jing realized that he was older than she had first imagined.

“Please. Stay a while,” he said. The man strolled over to the opposite side of the room, slipping around a pair of antique wood panels, and beckoned her to join him. Jing wasn’t sure what he wanted from her. In her pinstriped uniform she looked like any other maid in the hotel. If someone’s eyes were bad, they might even mistake her at a distance for Fei Daoli. Only Jing limped when she walked.

“What do you see?”

There was a painting on the wall of a rural setting. A number of farmers worked bails of hay onto a horse-drawn cart and rosy cheeked children ran around them with paper dolls in their hands laughing gleefully. The sun was rising in the red tinted sky, and there were thatched straw huts and a dirt road painted in all the earthly shades of clay.

“It’s beautiful, isn’t it?” he said.

Zhu Jing didn’t care for it that much, although she could understand why he liked it. Foreigners tended to like these idealized scenes.

“Yes, it is quite pretty,” she said.

The man looked at her skeptically and then turned back to the painting. "And only 44,000 yuan."

Zhu Jing saw the wedding band on his hand. She wasn't attracted to him, but his curiosity about her opinion intrigued her. "I can get the gallery manager for you, if you like."

"You speak English very well," he said.

The compliment massaged a part of Zhu Jing's brain that wanted to accept any tenderness at the moment, but she knew the man was trying to be slick.

"Would your wife like it?" she asked.

"I don't think so. She doesn't care for China all that much," he said. "She's very bored here."

"What about the woman who just left?"

"You're observant, too, I see. But I'm less popular with the women than you think. She just broke up with me."

"I know. She told me."

The man smiled at her and then turned back to the painting. "I come here to be away from my wife. I've given her everything I can. I found her a job in Beijing, and bought her a car and an apartment of her own. I even let her take our children so they could live with their mother. She's staying there, but I still think she still hates me for bringing our family to China."

"I'm sorry. That's unfortunate," said Zhu Jing.

"Why were you hobbling earlier?"

Zhu Jing wondered if she should tell him, or show him, or if either choice was appropriate. After eight months the skin had healed as well as it ever would. And he was curious about her.

Jing told him to turn around for a moment and then pulled down the leg of her stocking. Scraps of molted skin fell to the floor. Her leg had healed in ridges like waves of melted rubber, and there were black scars from where the doctors had cut into her and inserted a metal rod to stabilize her bones. Just looking at it reminded her of the smell of her body the night after the fire and how she'd cried, overloaded of by trauma of her senses. She began rolling up her hose again, but the man had already turned around.

"That must have hurt."

Jing pulled her hose back up slowly, letting the man look as he chose. It didn't matter that he had a wife or that he'd cheated on her with a mistress. Jing was just happy that he pitied his own life enough to love this gruesome, broken part of hers.

Zhu Jing handed him the registry slip and told him that the early check out was at eight.

"I'll be back in Shanghai next month on business for a full week," he said. "I don't know how much time I'll have, but I want to ask you if you'd like to meet."

Zhu Jing might have to find work elsewhere that would keep her off her feet. A new position in the management offices probably wouldn't be opening soon. She'd gladly be out of Fei Daoli's way, but if she did leave she would buy a leather wallet for Ding Yu and kiss him goodbye if he wanted. Yu had probably never even kissed a

girl before. And her loyalty to her uncle would be one less thing Zhu Shiji had to split.

“I’ll be here,” she said.

*Suan tian ku la*, she thought.

\* “*Suan tian ku la*” is a colloquial phrase and literally translates as “sour, sweet, bitter, hot.” Figuratively it means “the joys and sorrows of life.”



### **An Old Pair of Glasses**

Tim Dwyer's old bedroom at his father's home in Virginia had long ago been converted into the storage space for the bric-a-brac of his stepmother and father. Those pieces of child-sized furniture, books, and sharply plastic toys, marking his early years had long since been boxed up or thrown away and were now replaced by a pair of glass-paneled mahogany cupboards. In them were the creased spines of mystery novels and kiln fired collectables—Elmore Lenard next to a scene of Joseph the Prophet, John Grisham next to a porcelain azalea, a row of Tom Clancy volumes marked off by bookends, a pair of cartoonish-looking mice.

Tim changed into a pair of jeans with a hole in one knee and pulled a sweat shirt over his head. Who would have thought his father would be doing yard work this weekend? He'd met the Shermans twice, once at a Thanksgiving dinner, the other time two years later at a New Year's Eve party, both times at his father's home. He'd never spoken to them much or known them well, but his father had been friends with them for over forty years.

As Tim perused the titles further, he came across a copy of Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Master of Ballentraie*. He'd read it six or seven times in high school and was surprised to find the title there now. He opened the cabinet's glass door, pulled the book from the shelf, and as he did so, the title fell apart in his hands, the yellow leaves fanning across the floor at his feet. He bent down, picked up what

parts of were still glued together and the loose sheets, then read a couple of lines he'd marked up nearly twenty years ago, refreshing himself with the plot as he did so—two brothers, one loyal, one lecherous, fighting over their father's estate.

Tim met his father in the backyard, who was observing something over the line of oak trees running the far edge of the yard in the sky.

'It's a red-tailed hawk,' his father said, pleased by the sight, despite the fact he'd seen it many times before. He wore a tan windbreaker jacket, old office slacks spattered with white paint, and a pair of tennis shoes that were pleasantly grime covered with mud and grass clippings. The sole of the right shoe flopped loosely like a tongue when his father walked in them.

It was Tim's first visit in over a year. It was an odd circumstance, the manner of his return: a four hour flight from San Diego to Dulles International Airport, a two hour drive to his childhood home on the border of Fairfax County, to engage in yard work as his father mourned. He didn't quite like yard work, but was glad to be engaging in a ritual they'd once shared, raking up fall leaves. Tim went to the shed on the far left of the yard to grab a pair of work gloves and rakes. They set about raking up the leaves—sycamore and white oak, each leaf about the size of a hand with the fingers outstretched—and his father, who'd been meditating on his age since he'd got there, complaining about his bladder and having to get up late in the night to go pee, continued down a morbid path of thought.

'You've worked all your life,' said his father. 'You see people ten years older and they look twenty or thirty years older than you, or so you hope. You feel the years creeping forward....You hope for a quick death—'

‘—Dad, don’t say things like that.’

‘—and if things have worked out, you feel more dignified. You’re just glad you made it. You haven’t done anything foolish, like shooting yourself in the head.’

His father had always had a morbid aspect to his person. He never accepted excuses for personal failure or shortcomings in himself, had grown up in a crumbling two-story wood house situated on a seasonal lake that flooded every summer with rain water. That two friends whose course in life ran a close parallel to his own—a rise from poverty to affluence, a sense of dignity that meant everything to him after having to heat rocks in an oven as a child to warm bathwater—had ended their lives in the way they did confounded and depressed him. Tim expected their deaths also threw into relief, in a manner as violent as the Shermans’ death, questions about choices he’d made in his own life. It was something Tim sensed in the slow movement of his father’s rake, the metal teeth dragging across the grass, clicking, like typewriter keys, with each stroke.

‘The first part sounded alright,’ said Tim.

‘It is,’ said his father, smiling as he hunched over the rake and took a couple strokes. ‘Sometimes things don’t end up like you expect.’

He waited for his father to continue in the stop and go manner of these types of conversations. His father was straight talking, but not un-intellectual, and there was a musical quality to his voice when he spoke with gravity. It was a pleasant accompaniment to the work that drowned out the scratching noises of their rakes.

But his father didn’t continue. One stroke at a time, with the persistence of a farmer, he dragged the aluminum claw of his rake over the spot of grass he was

concentrating on, bringing the leaves together into a pile, and then moved on to next area in silence. His father's favorite part of the enterprise, as he'd once explained it, was how the lawn revealed itself throughout the course of the work, patch by patch, the green carpet underneath taking shape, until finally it became "the yard."

At the end of thirty minutes, Tim had four knee high piles going. In his mind, he set the goal of clearing all the leaves in an hour, a job that normally took two, and began to work harder until finally the front of his jumper was soaked through with sweat. He took a five-minute break, went into the house, and brought out a glass of water for himself and apple juice for his father, who preferred to drink things with sweeteners now that he couldn't taste much. As Tim handed him the drink, his father said thanks and surreptitiously surveyed the yard: the spots under the western line of shrubs, the crawl space beneath the deck. He checked with Tim to make sure the line of grass just out of sight around the corner of the house had been raked. His eyes were as alive and as sharp as a bobcat's.



As they ate bologna sandwiches with canned tomato soup and saltine crackers, Tim noted small changes in the living room since he'd last visited. A pair of mahogany lamps with brass necks had been added to the table ends on both sides of the couch. A painting of a yacht at sea previously in the hallway had been moved to the mantel above the fireplace. The dining room table had a crystal vase on it, expensively looking and elaborately cut, which he'd never seen before and was filled with white gardenias.

He recalled the people that had visited there. His grandparents on his father's side, their dentures sometimes coming unglued in their mouths when they talked, both now buried in a graveyard outside Lincoln, Nebraska. A pair of wily cousins that visited summers and brought with them beers stolen from their father, Tim's uncle, which they consumed in the backyard in a tent camping nights. His mother and father arguing over a heating bill, the two of them leaning into one another. It was incredible how much the house, changed as it was after his mother had left it, and the atmosphere of those memories remained central in his mind, even as an grown adult. As he contemplated them, he realized no life could escape the unforeseen or was without its share of problems. Becoming a teacher didn't change that.

Nonetheless, he decided to mention it. His father looked up from his soup, an eyebrow raised high onto his forehead.

'Why do you want to teach?' his father asked.

'The people I work with are too high strung. I'm too high strung,' he said. 'Andrea's high strung but at least she seems to like it.' His wife was a journalist at the Seattle Times.

Cautiously, his father blew on the hot soup in his spoon before slipping it into his mouth and said nothing further.

Tim could not think of anything meaningful to say. He took a bite of his sandwich.

'I'm tired of writing emails,' he said.

'Being tired of emails isn't an excuse to quit your job,' said his father. His

glasses hung at the end of his nose, a look of scholarly skepticism.

‘I just appreciate that you and mom cared about my education. I’d like for other kids to have that.’

‘Help your own kids then. Stay at your job.’

Tim found the comment a little wheedling, but said nothing in reply. After lunch, he cleared the bowls and plates from the table, and his father went to lie down. Not feeling the conversation quiet over with, Tim followed him. Like the backyard, his father’s bedroom was a familiar setting for conversations, although the ones that had taken place in the bedroom were often in regards to Tim’s own mischief making as a child. The room was Spartan in its simplicity—a bed, a chest of drawers, a nightstand.

‘I thought you’d be more supportive of the idea. It’s not like I’m in a bad financial situation,’ said Tim. ‘Kids need teachers, don’t they?’

‘Yes, but do they need you in *particular*?’ Again, his father looked at him dubiously, but this time with a grin meant to be well-humored. Tim found the look deeply irritating, so he changed the subject.

‘Have you read any articles Andrea’s written lately?’

His father, now settled under the sheets with both hands folded across his chest, shook his head, saying, ‘I don’t bother myself with the news much anymore now that I’m retired.’

Did he have to sound so self-satisfied?

‘It would be more *satisfying*,’ said Tim.

‘What?’

‘Teaching. I’m unhappy at my job. Stop being such a jerk.’

They didn’t talk about the subject anymore and instead focused on small talk. They did this sometimes, exercised their emotions through agreement over things with which they knew they could agree. Who didn’t think that such and such baseball team was playing badly? Who didn’t admire the fall weather and think the scent of leaves was nice? Who didn’t agree that rain gutters needed to be covered in mesh wiring because they were now clogged with stinking leaves. Alright. They’d do that. Clean the gutters tomorrow.

His dad went to sleep for an hour.



The hardware store was in a shopping village off the highway, and upon seeing it from the road, Tim recalled the place as having been originally composed of wooden store fronts. They were all gone now, replaced by clean looking, stucco-style buildings. He recognized in one of the shop windows the advertisement for five dollar hair cuts as the barbershop he’d gone to as a child and mentioned it to his father, who, hunched over the wheel, merely shrugged, focusing on his driving, in a leering, dejected manner.

When they got inside the shop, his father told him in harried voice to look for a pair of staple guns, while he went looking around for the wire mesh they needed, turning away and disappearing down one of the aisles.

Sitting behind the counter on a stool was a school aged girl hunched over a life sciences book. Deep in concentration, she rhythmically twirled a pen in her

fingers every couple seconds. She was tall, bordering on lanky for a girl, had a pale, oval shaped face and plain brown hair that curled lightly at the tips. She looked up at him and smiled brightly, revealing a mouthful of braces.

‘Can I help you with anything, sir?’ she asked.

He explained that he was looking for a stapler gun, and the girl helped him find one, and after a minute or two, his father came up beside them at the counter rolling a coil of the mesh, slapping it across the floor—whack!, whack!, whack!—like a boy playing with a bike tire. A little breathless and with a quietly apologetic look, his father pointed toward the back and asked if Tim could go get the other two they needed.

Tim found the coils next to a stack of cement bags, one of which had a gash in it and was spilling a powdery white mess all over the floor. He’d tell the girl at the front and noted that he hadn’t paid any attention to the fact she was running the store and pretty much alone. If his mother had been there, she might have made some positive comment or a joke about how the times have changed. At that moment, it occurred to him that this was the just type of student he wanted to teach, and that as far as kids her age went, she was probably not all that uncommon. When they left, he told the girl about the ruptured cement bag and thanked her more kindly than was actually necessary.



The following morning, as Tim climbed to the uppermost rungs of the ladder, balancing his grip of the coil in one hand and using the other to steady himself, he



saw the red-tailed hawk his father had pointed out the other afternoon on the far edge of the roof. As quickly as his own head had appeared above the roof's edge, Tim had just enough time to spot the snarling black eye in its red crowned head and the look of the bird's grey beak as it opened, like a pair of steel thongs, before it turned and leapt away from the roof, gliding peacefully into the field opposite. Startled, he threw his hands onto the gutter's rail, clung to it like a kitten as the ladder wobbled beneath his feet. His father, trying to steady it below with both hands, received a cold shower of rain water down his back. Amidst curses, his father resumed holding the ladder, and Tim threw the coil off onto the roof, laughed self consciously as he explained what happened. His father looked up with gritted teeth, a smile beginning to form at the edges of his mouth.

'I'm just glad I'm not up there. Otherwise you'd probably be driving me to the morgue right now,' said his father.

Each of them laughed to themselves for a moment and then without another word turned to the work at hand. It was a cold black slop of hemlock needles and white oak leaves crawling in baby beetles, and Tim pulled it out in handfuls that he dropped onto the tarp laid out at the bottom of the ladder. His father stood to the side holding a shovel and every once in a while stabbed its snout into the pile of mush, hefting it with a swing into an aluminum trash can. They continued at the work for three hours mostly in silence, only occasionally breaking for some remark on the breeze or warm sunshine. After that, they washed the gutters out with a long, snaking gardening hose, then spent another two hours installing the mesh, the staples biting into the plastic with a satisfactory click-snap-pop sound each time.

When Tim left for the airport, he and his father gave each other a brief hug, patting each others' backs in the same lightly slapping fashion. His father urged him to hurry. There was look of sadness in his father's eyes, he thought, as well as his own, for their closeness briefly regained and then lost all over again. For his father, as well, this time, maybe, there was also a certain unappetizing awareness of his grown child seeking out something in the world he might not find. Satisfaction. Tim didn't hold it against him, thought him a good father for thinking so. He offered to come out again sometime soon to help with any work his father needed done, and the moment he said it, realized it was an empty promise. His dad nodded, smiled and put his head down in a grieving kind of way, and took his hand out of his pocket once more to hurriedly wave goodbye and went back into the house.

He headed for Dulles Airport. It was an overcast afternoon, and it made him sleepy to drive. He opened the window to help him stay awake and a stream of dry, cold air snaked in, whipping the flaps of his jacket and his hair around. He wished he'd brought a hat. Using his index finger, he pressed the bridge of his glasses further up his nose, so they were more securely situated on his face. In his mind's eye, he saw his wife at home, sitting on the foyer steps to the second floor of their house, wearing a yellow and green maternity dress he'd bought for her and reading a novel, waiting for him to return home.

Further in the distance about a mile ahead, he saw a column of black smoke rising from the right side of the road, extending like a bent arm over the four lanes of the highway. A moment later, he heard sirens coming from behind him, and saw a fire truck and an ambulance shoot past, heading for the approaching off ramp. The

cars on the road slowed to watch what was happening, and as he drew closer, he saw a crowd of people milling about in a shopping mall parking, watching a derelict truck burning. Even at a distance, he could see their expressions: serious, alarmed, silent, many of them with their arms crossed, or pointing at the cloud. A police cruiser was there, and a pair of officers waved the crowd back with arms outstretched, then got back into the cruiser, as if nothing unusual were happening.

What had happened? He found himself turning his head back to catch another glimpse, and after he passed well out of view, he continued to wonder. Had someone died? Was it not a derelict truck, as he had presumed? It didn't matter, he thought. Focus on the road and the other cars. He flipped his blinker to change into the outside lane and, as he did so, drove a straight course for home.

## **VITA**

David Zachary Newland Latham was born in Colorado Springs, Colorado, on June 30, 1979, the son of Mary Jane Latham and Richard John Latham. After graduating high school at The International School of Beijing in the People's Republic of China, he attended The University of Washington and completed an undergraduate degree in English. In 2009, he entered the Texas State University-San Marcos's graduate writing program.

Permanent Address: 4548 54<sup>th</sup> Avenue Southwest  
Seattle, Washington 98116

This thesis was typed by David Z. N. Latham.