A PAPER SON

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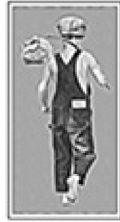

Dedicated to Rose Lee, Alyce Hanly, and Harry Hong.

ONE

First I saw him in a teacup.

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It was the day before the storm hit, the storm we'd been watching on newscast Doppler as it approached from Alaska, devouring the coast like a carnivorous planet made of teeth and ice and smoke. The weatherpersons pointed to it, their expressions mixes of glee and trepidation, their predictions heavy with superlatives, italics, underlining. The storm had formed in the Arctic over Siberia and had lurched eastward, devastating docks, leveling marinas, sending grapefruit-sized hailstones through windshields. Bering Sea waves had knocked some of the lesser islands in the Aleutian archipelago from their moorings and sent them tumbling southeast through sea foam, piling their igneous ruins on the British Columbian coast along with uprooted trees, demolished fishing boats, polar bear carcasses. This same fury would soon be upon us—blotting out the sun, stealing whole chunks of the peninsula out from under us—but not yet. That day, the first day back in school after the winter break, it was still clear. An unbroken blue stretch of sky filled my classroom window; the only indications of the coming maelstrom were the taut, horizontal flags over the skyscrapers downtown.

My third graders were hard at work, their pencils scratching unevenly across their papers. They were writing about all the things they hadn't done during their vacations. I'd introduced the assignment the previous year, after nine years of reading the same excruciating paragraphs about Santa preparations and skiing in Tahoe and trips to Disneyland. Today I had received the usual panel of puzzled stares when I'd written the topic on the whiteboard.

"Can you provide an example?" Eliza Low asked, looking bemused.

"Did you get eaten by a lion over the break?" I asked her.

Eliza was destined for a station in life where she would have people twice as smart as I am working so far under her she'd never even know their names, and from the look she gave me then I could tell she was a little impatient for that day to arrive. "Actually I did," she said. "We kids heal up fast."

"Well, then you'll have to write about something else," I said.

Kevin Hammerschmidt raised his hand. "*I* didn't get eaten by a lion, Mr. Long," he said, and flashed me a grin short on teeth.

"You could have written about that, then," I said, "but now you have to come up with something else, because that was my idea. Fifteen minutes. Go."

This was not the first time I'd augmented the common core curriculum. I teach my kids cooking and bicycle repair. In P.E. they like to play dodge ball, but every now and then I make them do *tai chi*. I tell them it will make them better ball dodgers. In my English lessons I charge them with the guardianship of the language. I have them identify and revise poor writing from the adult world.

Despite the school’s ban on handing out refined sugars, I distribute Hershey’s Kisses to anybody who ~~brings in a newspaper or magazine article with grammatical errors. I teach them words they’ll~~ appreciate, like “brachiate.” They love the monkey bars, after all. “To brachiate,” I tell my class each year, “means to propel oneself by swinging from arm to arm, like a monkey.” Shortly after this year’s lesson I heard Amanda Martin say, “Nice brachiating!” to her friend Savannah Steward as Savannah dismounted, and I was again reminded why I love my job. I also teach them to be better storytellers. Problems are the main ingredient, I tell them. At the beginning of each term I tell them to create a character, and then give him five problems in one page.

Just before the first recess bell rang I collected their papers and encouraged them to go outside and play at triple their normal intensity. “When this storm hits,” I told them, “it’s going to be the end of everything we know and love.” This was a game we played. I’d make a dubious proclamation and their job was to show some skepticism. To investigate. To question adults, especially their teachers. We all glanced out the window, as if the sky might tell us how much time we had left. Several gulls wheeled over the playground, anticipating the spillage of raisins and graham crackers.

“My birthday party?” someone asked, after a time, without turning from the window. “Will it be the end of my birthday party?”

“Where is it?” I asked.

“Golden Gate Park.”

“Ask for waterproof presents,” I said.

“Barney?” Kevin asked. “Will it be the end of Barney?”

Kevin’s mythical dog Barney was a frequent topic. He was an ingenious creation, standing in for actual beings when our classroom conversations had to touch upon the personal, the uncomfortable. He also garnered Kevin the laughs he felt he needed each day. But this time there wasn’t much laughter, and I knew some of them were worried about actual pets. “Barney will be fine,” I said, “but you may want to keep him inside.”

Beyond the playground lay the broad grassy field, and at its far edge stood the sports shed and the tall chain-link fence that kept balls, flying backpacks, and wayward children from tumbling over the top of the high retaining wall and down the cliff. In the distance stood the skyline of downtown San Francisco, quiet and still but for the trembling of its flags. I figured by then the storm must have crossed through Vancouver and made its way into the lower forty-eight. It wouldn’t be long now. And here we all sat, energetic and innocent and helpless like teenagers in a horror movie forest cabin. The bell rang and my kids scrambled for the door. “Get out there and make it count,” I said.

I kept to my room through the recess break, and through lunch and the second recess as well, declining the first-day-back-after-break faculty reunion in the lounge. I tended to avoid the place on days like this—it was always too busy, too full of energy, too noisy with accounts of exotic vacations. For a bunch of public servants, my fellow teachers managed to do a lot of island hopping and helicopter skiing. Four of them—three women and Mr. Benson, who taught first grade—were married to investment bankers. I did have quite a bit of work to do in my room as well—lesson plans, and organization for the Chinese New Year/Valentine’s Day phase of the teaching calendar. But my

primary goal was the avoidance of all that collegial exuberance. It wears me out.

Henry made his teacup appearance just before the final bell. A single cloud had breached the fram of my windows—small and compact, with a faint dark core. *A warning shot*, I thought. I had poured myself a half-cup from my teapot and I was working at my desk when I *felt* something along the edg of my vision. When I looked up, the steam from my tea had ceased rising; it stood motionless, three o four inches of linked spirals, loops, whorls, all as still as if photographed. Without thinking (what would there be to think?), I reached for it. I was barely able to stifle a gasp when it collapsed back in the mug, sucked in with a force that made me think something huge at the bottom of the mug had taken a great sharp inhalation. I leaned over and looked inside, and there they were, the four of them, standing at a railing. I suppose I would have blinked, or rubbed my eyes, or looked around the room i a weak attempt to make sense of it. I don't remember. Somehow the room vanished from around me, the chair from beneath me. Even the sense of strangeness I should have been feeling did not quite materialize in the presence of this image, which now filled the copper disk of my tea's surface. It wa actually Henry's mother that struck me most, at the time. She stood over her children, her arms arou their shoulders like the eaves of a home, sheltering them from whatever loomed before them. Henry peered out from just below the top railing; his sister peered just over it. They were all looking off to the side. Only after I'd taken the three of them in did I see their father, standing just behind his wife, his hands planted on his hips and his chest out, a smile on his face. They were Chinese, like me. Like half of me, anyway. From the way they were dressed and the way their hair and clothing shifted in th wind, I thought they must have been on the deck of a steamship. I pulled the mug toward me and the vision dissipated. The tea settled but the family did not return; instead the reflection of my classroom's fluorescents made their more conventional appearance. Steam spun back out. I dipped m head, sniffed. It smelled like rain.

"Mr. Long, is there something in your cup?" whispered Eliza Low, from her seat in the front row.

"Yes," I whispered back, trying to recover. "Tea."

She wrinkled her brow and studied me before returning her attention to her math sheet. I glanced back into the cup, but the family hadn't returned. I told myself it had to have been a trick of light, a shifting projection, the reflection of a photograph I knew did not exist.

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I scrambled down the hill for the refuge of my apartment, trying to figure out how I was going to explain my afternoon tea to myself. Just beyond my conscious thoughts a headful of difficult theorie lurked, like party crashers waiting for the right moment to leap in through a window. I wouldn't be able to keep them out, I knew, but my hope was that I could get home—and into the bottle of Scotch kept around for emergencies—before I had to confront them. To recalibrate my senses I focused on the immediate as I walked: leafless sidewalk trees trembling in their square patches of dirt; the hum mid-afternoon traffic; exhaust; the solidity of the concrete beneath my feet. A fist-sized knot in my stomach. I reached my street and trotted across it. As always, there was a puddle in the gutter in fron of Ike's corner store, the remnant of his afternoon sidewalk hosing. I stepped over it and onto the cur and again there was that sense on the edge of my vision that colors and shapes were not in their right places. I turned and leaned over the puddle. My reflection looked up at me. It was wearing a hat. My hands shot up and felt my bare head. I whirled and checked my reflection in the store's windows. No hat. I held my breath and looked into the puddle again. It was unmistakable: a short-brimmed, dark

blue hat, pulled down to just above my ears. Everything else on the puddle’s surface looked normal—the ~~bare branches of a nearby tree and the tops of buildings reached down to an underlying sky.~~ A woman in a long coat approached. She slowed, looked down into the puddle, looked at me, continued on her way. A gust of wind blew a paper cup into the water and the image splashed apart.

I took the stairs two at a time, threw my bag onto my couch, pulled down the Scotch, and poured two fingers. I took a bracing slug and headed to my desk, where sometimes I could think. Figure this out, I told myself. In a college psychology class I’d learned that schizophrenia usually started with auditory hallucinations and showed up during the teen years, which I’d been clear of for fifteen years It was reassuring, I supposed, that my new visitors hadn’t called me Jesus. But I couldn’t rule that theory out. I moved on to my genetic heritage. My mom was above suspicion. The example she set fo us—utterly practical, unfailingly even-keeled—was so strong that I still had trouble accepting the relative flightiness of the rest of humanity. My father, however, had been a bona fide eccentric, of th reclusive software genius variety. He might have been completely insane, for all we knew. He never interacted with anything organic long enough for anyone to get a good read on him. My sister Lucy was three years older than I was. She lacked what some people might call direction, but I understood her in a different way. She did what she wanted from year to year, and things seemed to work out for her. From what I could tell she didn’t give a shit what anybody thought. She orbited in and out of California every so often. Right now she was out—in New York City. She was brash, but probably more sane than the rest of us.

I swallowed another slug and continued to further theories as the Scotch emanated its heat and calm. There had been no blunt force traumas to the head, no volunteering for any weird government experiments. I had only dropped acid twice, and not since I was an undergrad. No inexplicable memory losses, no alien abductions. I finished the glass, stood and made for the kitchen for more, an then I remembered the doves. I had been seven, one of twenty-some second-grade students assigned t the young but embittered Ms. Ferguson, whose failing vision had cut short her bid at a career in ornithology. At least once a week she made it clear to us that she would have much preferred to be ou bird watching than stuck inside with us. Even my name—Peregrine—earned me no favor. Sometimes it even seemed to work against me, as if it disgusted her that something as graceless and earthbound a seven-year-old boy would dare share a name with one of her beloved.

The disdain was mutual. Though we were early in our school careers we all knew the difference between adults who liked kids and adults who were forced, for one reason or another, to tolerate them At recess we often discussed the many careers we felt Ms. Ferguson was better suited for—dog-catcher, garbage collector, bridge toll-taker. The two-way antagonism abated for a few minutes each day, however, when she talked to us about birds. In the final minutes before lunchtime she would introduce us to the Bird of the Day (the “Daily Aves,” she called them), and for that short time we struck an unofficial truce—she forgot she was our teacher, and we forgot we were Plan B. Her voice would soften as she described the traits and range of a cedar waxwing, a condor, an emu. Her gesture would become graceful and her eyes would shine behind her thick glasses. She would almost become pretty.

Once the Bird of the Day had been the mourning dove. My upper-middle-class classmates lived lives of blithe contentment, and even I was still a few years from learning what it meant to mourn, so we all assumed that this dove had been so named because of its preference for conducting business before lunchtime. In the way of playground rumors this one captured our attention and grew until it

was widely held that all mourning doves had to vanish at noon—where they went, or what would happen to them if they stayed around, were the subjects of wide speculation. They slept in trees because they awoke early, and grew tired; they hid in underground burrows because the sun got too h for them. A couple of days later I was sitting alone in my backyard after school, watching the trees move in the breeze, when a mourning dove landed on the fence. I recognized it immediately from the whistle its wings made as it landed, which Ms. Ferguson had imitated perfectly for us. It looked right at me for several seconds before it took flight, accompanied again by those staccato whistles. For a long time I wondered whether I'd seen something I wasn't supposed to see, or if I'd been singled out by the birds to receive the message of their true and secretive nature. Either way, I didn't know what to do. I didn't tell anybody.

Back in the kitchen I capped the bottle of Scotch and brewed a cup of tea. I set it on my desk, angling myself so that I could see the reflection of my overhead light fixture in its surface, and I stared into it. Shades of meaning flipped back and forth in my head—what separated a hallucination from a vision? A schizophrenic from a seer? My tea revealed nothing. No steamship appeared. The steam rose and spread.

That night as I lay in bed I thought about the woman at the railing, her husband and children, the looks on their faces. I tried to see into their futures. I tried to see where the ship was going, but there was only mist.

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The next morning it was still not raining. After a night of sound, Scotch-assisted sleep, a square breakfast, and two cups of coffee which remained only coffee, I nearly managed to convince myself that nothing amiss had happened the day before. Ike's daily puddle had yet to collect, but when I reached the corner I felt my head anyway. No hat. In my classroom I inspected my tea-making paraphernalia—electric kettle, pot, mug, tin of leaves—as though seeing them for the first time. I turned on the faucet and filled my kettle. Yesterday it had been water but now it was a confluence of molecules, the simultaneous arrival of billions of atoms, each of which had traced its own pathways around and over the planet, through rivers and rains, glaciers and clouds, down throats and through cell walls, each through countless years. When I thought of it this way, all those long journeys collecting in my teacup, it seemed strange that there would only be one ship in there. I poured the water over a tea bag and sat down at my desk, feeling a little trepidation. The water settled, and there it was. Now I could see beyond the ship's prow. I could see what the family was seeing. It was a vast, dark city, with columns of smoke rising into a late afternoon sky.

"My mom says some people can tell fortunes from tea leaves," a voice said. It was Eliza Low, her toes parked exactly at my door's threshold, in accordance with my pre-bell rules. "Are you one of those people?"

"Not that I know of," I said. I looked back at the family and the dark city before them. "Do you want to see them?" I asked. Eliza nodded and I beckoned her in. She approached my desk and stood just opposite me. The ship remained where it was, bearing toward the city's port. I didn't know if I wanted her to see it or not. Eliza leaned over and peered into the cup. The steam rose as if from the ship itself and parted around the contours of her forehead.

"She says fortune-tellers look at the way the leaves land on the bottom of the cup, and the pattern

tells the future. But I think that's ridiculous."

"People certainly have a wide variety of beliefs," I said.

She didn't bother to suppress a flash of annoyance. "Yes," she said. She stared back into the water. "I only see little wet leaves," she said.

I lifted my cup, shaking the image free, wondering how I was going to get through my teaching da with phantoms floating through my beverages. I took a sip and imagined the smells of cooking fires, of fish and oceans, hiding within the layers of my jasmine green. "There are people who tell us the future, actually," I said to her, working to keep my voice steady. "The weathermen. And they say thi is your last chance to play tetherball." I pointed at the clock. "So I'll see you back here in seven minutes."

Throughout the morning the sky continued to darken and the rattling of the tree branches grew mo feverish, but by lunchtime the rain still had not arrived. I headed for the faculty lounge and found it t be as quiet as I'd hoped. With the specter of the long-ago travelers steaming through my thoughts, I was even less prepared to make small talk than usual. Among the few gathered in the lounge was Franklin Nash, our principal, a massive black man with a gray beard and a gray suit, who made the furniture in his vicinity look as though it had been collected from dollhouses. He noticed me and approached, navigating with effort through the maze of tables and chairs. Whenever I saw him like this, moving in tight quarters, I had the impression that he would have preferred to simply kick thing out of his way. Despite the imposing bulk, the kids loved him for his smiles and warmth and for his t collection. Today's selection featured ice-cream cones.

"Peregrine!" he said, enveloping my hand in one of his. He handed me a yellow sheet. "I found thi and thought of you."

It was a flier announcing the launch of a new literary journal, to be called *The Barbary Quarterly*. Now accepting submissions of fiction, non-fiction, and poetry, it said. A Grant Street address was listed. I had all but abandoned my attempt to assemble a collection of short stories. A few years earlier, I'd managed to finish and send out what I thought were two decent stories: one about a vengeful architect and the other about a deaf poker player. The latter had been picked up by the in-flight magazine of a regional airline based in Indiana, which had since gone out of business. In the heady days following my receipt of the acceptance letter, I'd formulated a plan to put together a batc of fifteen stories or so and submit them for wider publication. If they were good enough for Midwestern puddle jumpers, I figured, they'd be good enough for anyone. I wrote one more, about a vagabond minister, and then I ran out of ideas. I forced myself to finish a story about a haunted mobi home but it was as terrible as it sounds. Since then I hadn't written much beyond grocery lists and lesson plans.

"Thanks, I'll check it out," I said, forming no plans to check it out.

He drifted toward another of the seated groups. "Let me know how that goes," he said, as he went. "I'm still hoping to read something of yours someday."

I slid a bowl of leftover lasagna into the ancient microwave and punched in several minutes, whic usually wasn't enough. I had watched it make a half-dozen revolutions on the carousel when a voice

asked, “Interesting show?”

Annabel Nightingale appeared at my side. Her straight black hair fell down on either side of her face and curled in slightly just beneath her chin. Her eyes were wide and as dark as her hair. Her skin was pearlescent; a small jade circle hung from her neck on a silver chain. Faint crescents of pink on her cheek were the only indications of an interior made of blood and tissue, and not snow or cream. She held a red plate, upon which a pair of shish kebabs flanked a mound of yellow rice.

I tapped the microwave door. “Lasagna,” I said. “It’s a rerun.” Actually, it was to be the fourth consecutive meal (not counting breakfasts) that I would have mined from the pan I’d made a couple o nights earlier. Not wanting to sound like too hopeless of a bachelor, I kept this information to myself

Annabel had just joined us the previous fall, and as her “buddy” teacher I’d been unofficially taske with welcoming her to Russian Hill Elementary School. Every year, each third-grade class was paire with a kindergarten class, and each third grader was assigned a kindergarten buddy. A few times a month we’d get our classes together and give the partners a project to complete. In the process my third graders shared their wisdom and experience with the kindergarteners, earning in return their little partners’ admiration and a sense of maturity that lasted until the moment our classes parted ways. Our first semester had produced among other things some amusing art projects, a treasure hunt and an afternoon of comical skits, but hadn’t revealed much about the newest addition to our faculty.

Annabel pulled a fork from a drawer, yanked a skewer from its queue of steak and vegetables, and flipped it toward the trash can. A burst of light caught it in midair; the murmuring groups behind us fell silent. There was a lone gasp, and then the scraping of a chair against the floor. We waited, breat held, the microwave’s fan the only sound in the room, and then the crack of thunder slammed into th building. The tables emptied immediately, leaving me alone with Annabel. The microwave beeped, and I retrieved my lunch.

“You’re not worried about your kids becoming lightning rods?” Annabel asked, yanking the secon skewer from its contents.

“We’re doing the old key-on-the-kite-string experiment this afternoon,” I said. “It’s good practice for them.” I usually managed to be slightly more witty than normal when I was around Annabel—or maybe she just felt she had to humor me until she got settled in. “What about you?” I said.

“I teach kindergarten, remember?” she said. “My kids are sitting on their mommies’ laps with cocoa and cookies right now.” She took my place in front of the microwave and slid her food into the hot lasagna-scented interior. “When yours get out of the burn ward later this week, you should come over,” she said. “We’ll have a New Year’s thing.”

“Sounds good,” I said. “Friday?”

“It’s a date,” she said. She looked over my head toward the window and the blackening sky beyon “I should put my schefflera outside,” she said. “It loves rainwater.”

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It didn’t rain, though, not yet. Lightning continued to fracture the sky and thunder buffeted the hill

but the ground was still dry by the time I closed up my room. As I walked back home, the air was as heavy as a pendulum. I stopped at the edge of Ike’s puddle and looked down. The phantom hat was back on my head, but I only had a second to consider my reflection before a great fat drop of water crashed into the surface and scattered the image. Another fell, and then another. Within seconds, the puddle was roiling. I continued home without hurrying.

My one-bedroom apartment was on the top floor of a five-story building near the bottom of the hill. I’d lucked into it nearly ten years ago, and I had never wanted to live anywhere else. It was a beautiful building—a lobby with forest green walls, dark wood and brass trim, double-decker rows of bronze mailboxes. The elevator smelled like wood polish. Even the stairwell was carpeted. The color of my walls were cream at midday, and took on the color of sand on sunny late afternoons, so I didn’t mess them up by hanging art. The floor plan was simple: a living room ran through the middle to a sliding glass door and a small balcony. On one side of the room a wide arched doorway led to the kitchen, which was full of windows that looked back up the hill. On the other side a short hallway led to the bedroom, bathroom, and a big closet I would never fill. I had a bed and a pair of nightstands (one of which I used and the other of which I didn’t), and a dresser with a small TV on it. In the living room was a couch and a bookcase that held a slightly larger TV, novels and biographies, a few old college textbooks, and some framed pictures: my sister and me in the snow; my mom and the two of us in the wooded mountains near her place; an old one of all four of us when Lucy and I were still kids. By the balcony door sat a small round table with wooden grinders for pepper and rock salt. My desk was in the corner.

My last girlfriend, a student at the San Francisco Art Institute, told me that my apartment reminded her of a fancy hotel suite. “Like for a banker,” she had said. Her name was Joy, which even she found ironic.

“That doesn’t sound so bad,” I said.

“It’s the worst thing possible,” she said.

“This is how I like it,” I said.

“No,” she said.

A few days later she brought me a half-dozen paintings and prints, of various sizes and subjects.

“I’ll put them up for you,” she said.

“I’ll do it later,” I said. After a week or two I hung them all above my headboard, so I wouldn’t have to see them while I was lying there. Joy saw them, looked around at all the other empty walls, and put her hand over her mouth. She dumped me a few days later. We had the big talk at her loft, after a tense lunch of pho and spring rolls. Collage was her medium—she built reproductions of corporate logos out of combat photographs. A Chevron logo made of mass gravesites loomed on the wall above us as we sat on her couch; across the room, the golden arches comprised assault rifles. It was the standard break-up conversation until she told me that she really liked the concept of me, but she had misgivings about the execution. At that point I knew it wouldn’t be too hard to get over her. She collected the paintings and prints and I puttied and painted over the holes they’d left in my wall, and went back to being content.

Now in my banker's suite I tossed Franklin's flier onto my desk beside my laptop, and prepared a cup of tea. Outside the storm attacked with the frantic energy of a novice fighter in the first round. I felt strangely calm now, and ready for the family at the railing. I had an idea now of why they were there, and what I was going to do with them. The water settled and there they were again, with the twilit city spread out in front of them. The woman's name was Li-Yu, I decided. Her children would be Rose and Henry. Her husband would be called Bing. The city wasn't San Francisco—it was too dark, too far away. I decided on Canton, the origin of uncertain journeys somewhere in my own family's distant past. The year would be 1925. I opened my laptop. *From the deck of the steamer,* I wrote, *they can see what must be nearly all of Canton.*

From the deck of the steamer they can see what must be nearly all of Canton. In the day’s last ligh the city’s buildings look secretive and dangerous as they crouch inside a smoky haze, their haunches illuminated by diffuse, flame-colored lights from unseen sources. The wharf uncoils and reaches toward the ship like a dirty claw. The air is cold, and smells of fish and garbage. So this is it, Li-Yu thinks. The fabled heart of China.

It has been hours since they steamed past that outer armada of islands, past Hong Kong, and were swallowed by the hills and plains of Guangdong. The Pearl River, Bing said, looking inland, northward, his excitement clear. Li-Yu had spent weeks at sea, and weeks before that, trying to absor some of this excitement, but none of it had settled in her. Even now, with the end of their journey so close, and the oppression of the ship’s steerage compartments nearly behind them, she couldn’t shak the feeling that she was offering herself and her children to the throat of a hungry dragon. She watche the hills and rice paddies glide past, wondering what sort of river could so easily consume a ship like this.

She knew well a version of this country, one she had pieced together from thousands of miles away from her parents’ stories and from clues like the smell and feel of the clothes and the few things that had survived their trip across the Pacific, the year before Li-Yu was born. In her mind the countrysid was dotted with mist-shrouded mountains and temples with roofs curling like phoenix wings, its halves divided by that stupendous wall. The government consisted of soldiers, their columns bristlin with rifles, marching through the grainy landscapes of news clips and magazine photographs, and of the boy Puyi in his embroidered silk robes, with his hat and his haughty stare, an emperor without an empire, and now nothing more than a commoner. Before seeing this view of Canton she felt she migh have known something about its cities, having been raised in the Chinatowns of Stockton and Oaklan and San Francisco, where her sisters now live, far behind her. She knows the sound of twenty men speaking Cantonese all to each other at once, and she knows the smells of roasted duck and dumpling and the steam of rice. She knows the shops and their wares, and the textures of jade and ivory and bamboo and silk. But there is nothing familiar about this city that now reaches for them with its claw of a wharf and pulls them into its shroud of twilight and smoke. The quays teem with cargo and equipment, and the sounds of hundreds of shouting voices rise up over the growl of the ship’s engine The mouths of streets appear, revealing narrow corridors that twist from the docks into the city’s interior.

Li-Yu tightens her grip on Rose and Henry. Bing turns from the railing, where he has been smiling and breathing in great draughts of the smelly air. He squats down next to the children. “This is China our home,” he says, steadying himself with a loose hug around their legs. “What do you think?” Neither of them speaks. He looks back and forth at their blank faces. “You’ll love it,” he says. “Ask your mother.” He looks up at Li-Yu. “Tell them,” he says.

Neither of her children looks to her, and Li-Yu offers nothing. Bing stands and leans toward her ea “I thought we were supposed to be together,” he says.

“We are,” she says.

“I thought you were going to talk to them,” he says.

“What can I tell them?” she says, looking out across the dark city. “What do I know?”

But Bing has already stopped listening; he’s gazing down at the wharf, which is now just beneath them, and crawling with people. The ship docks with a bump and a heightened groan as the engines work to check the rest of its momentum. The deck rings with footfalls as the passengers clamor for th stairs. Li-Yu gives each of her children a small canvas bag to carry, tells them to hang on to the back of her coat, and hoists her bags. Bing takes his own suitcases and plunges into the crowd. Li-Yu chas after him, and though she can feel the tug of both children’s hands, she imagines how easy it would b for them to be pulled away into the crowd, like fruit plucked from a tree. They make it onto the dock without getting separated, but Henry is fighting tears, and Rose’s jaw is hard and set. The wharf is nothing like Li-Yu imagined. The signs are in Chinese, but the faces are from all over the world. She hears a dozen different languages before they have gone a hundred steps. Bing is jubilant. He is congratulating strangers, laughing, turning and calling things out to Li-Yu and the kids, his words garbled like he’s been drinking. At one point she loses sight of him completely. She stops, gathers he children against her sides, and searches the crowd before her. Just when she is about to panic he com bounding in from the side.

“Over here,” he says, smiling, pulling them toward the edge of the crowd. There is an open-air restaurant, little more than a cart with a few upturned wooden crates around it. Bing gestures at them to squat and after a quick exchange with the cook he returns with bowls of rice porridge, slices of grilled pork, boiled peanuts, a dish of lotus root and tree fungus in a rich brown sauce.

“Eat, eat,” he says, spreading the dishes on the crates, beaming as if he has just cooked them himself. He tousles Henry’s hair. “Real food!” he says. “Eat up, we only have half an hour.”

“Until what?” Li-Yu says, picking up her chopsticks.

“Until the boat to Xinhui!” he says. “We’ll be there before the sun sets tomorrow!”

Li-Yu shakes her head.

He points somewhere, vaguely inland. “Nearly there now!” he says.

“Not tonight,” she says. “The children need to rest. I need to rest. Even you need to rest.”

“We’ll rest! What could be more relaxing than a quiet boat ride? We’ll look at the stars, and the river will rock the children to sleep.”

“I’ve been on a quiet boat ride for weeks,” she says. “We’re staying here.”

He jabs at the crowd streaming past them with his chopsticks, sauce dribbling from the corner of h mouth. “This is rest?” he says. “Nobody sleeps here. You’ll see.”

“Henry is nearly asleep in his *jook*,” she says. “We stay.”

Bing curses through a mouthful of mushrooms, drops his chopsticks on the crate, and storms away One of the chopsticks clatters to the ground. Henry picks it up, places it neatly alongside its mate, an attempts a smile at her.

"Where is Dad going?" he says.

"He'll be back," she says.

He returns minutes later and points up one of the narrow serpentine roads that fan out from the wharf. "Let's go," he says.

Once in their bed the children fall asleep instantly. Bing seems to forget about the delay. He holds Li-Yu and talks on and on about all the things she and the children will love in Xinhui. His voice grows quiet, his words soft and far apart as he tires and fades. Li-Yu stays awake until very late, listening to the breathing of her children and her husband, and to the sounds of voices outside, and wooden wheels rolling on stone.

***

While I'd been writing, the storm had continued its siege on the city. A wind had risen and now my windows hummed and rattled. My teacup sat where I'd left it, untouched, its heat gone and its mysteries inert. My computer's desktop was littered with a dozen open browser windows: maps and images of China, articles on its history and geography, articles on steamships and Pacific crossings. I closed them all and centered my document on the screen again. I checked the clock. I knew I was supposed to be hungry by now, but when I thought about looking in the refrigerator or in the cupboar all I could see was Li-Yu, lying awake in that room, listening.

***

The next morning Bing awakens them early. After a breakfast of steamed pork buns from a street vendor they return to the waterfront, where they wait in a thick dark fog for the water taxi. By the tim it is fully light they are underway. The city seems as though it will never end but finally it shrinks an clears, and soon the little boat is plying up a wide avenue of water that runs through an endless patchwork of fallow rice paddies, which are empty but for puddles of rainwater and small piles of rotting stalks left from the fall harvest.

Rose and Henry say almost nothing, except when they lean in to whisper to Li-Yu that they have to use the bathroom. The other children on board stare at the scenery for a time, but then they scatter to find other diversions. Hills emerge from the fog, ghostlike, and then disappear back into it. The air grows colder. A breeze pushes against them. Li-Yu gathers her children and squeezes them against he sides.

"We're almost there," Bing says, smiling broadly. "Just one more night." He drops to a knee in front of his children and points to the empty rice paddies all around them. "You wouldn't know it thi time of year, but the fields of Guangdong are where the best rice in China grows. And since the best rice in the world grows in China, what do you think we'll find growing here next summer?"

The children nod but do not answer. Li-Yu looks upriver, peering through the fog for the land Bing has described, for the memories of her parents. She sees nothing but endless paddies, and looks to Bing for an explanation. This doesn't look like the place you described, she wants to say. Where are the valleys, the mountains, the blossoms? There is only this river, the endless mud of these rice field and the occasional village. But Bing is staring off into the distance, perhaps seeing things in the mist

that she cannot. In the months leading up to the move he had been expansive, holding on to her at night and telling her over and over again how things were going to be. He'd indulged all the kids' wishes—all they'd had to say was that they were going to miss something: cinnamon buns, ginger al chewing gum—and he'd be on his way to the grocery store. But then they departed and San Francisc diminished behind them. At sea he had spent more and more time, it seemed, lost in thoughts of something else. She had to ask him questions two and three times before she knew he'd heard her.

The boat drifts past a little riverside village. There are women washing clothes along the riverbank but they do not look up or wave. Li-Yu wonders again how she let Bing talk her into this. Her parents had been stunned when she'd first told them she was considering it. She had been in their living room They had stared at her in silence for what seemed like several minutes. Finally her mother turned slightly, almost imperceptibly, toward her father.

"Do you know how hard it was for us to get here?" her father said, quietly. He took off his glasses and rubbed his eyes, as if this foolhardy daughter before him could be cleared away like a trick of light.

"Yes," she said.

He put his glasses back on and folded his arms across his chest. "Our grandchildren were born in America," he said.

Li-Yu shrugged.

Her mom said, "Here are a few things you wouldn't have in China: those shoes you're wearing, an those clothes. That purse, or that chair you're sitting in."

"I'm sure they have chairs in China," Li-Yu said. "They even have thrones."

"Used to."

"Don't you think it would be good for me and for the kids to see China?"

"No," her dad said.

"This room and pretty much everything in it," her mom said, looking around, "except the dirt."

"They have never met their other grandparents," Li-Yu said.

"Bing chose to come here," her father said.

"Let's go look in the kitchen," her mom said.

"I don't want to go look in the kitchen," Li-Yu said. "Bing says it's a nice big house, the largest in the village."

Her parents exchanged looks. "It's a terrible plan," her father said, "and that's that."

"If Bing wants to take you and the children to China," her mother began to say, but her father cut

the sentence off with a stamp of his foot.

"Resist," he said.

The stamp echoed through the house. Her parents stared at her, their unblinking eyes steely.

"We didn't raise you to be a Chinese wife," her mother said.

"It's not like it is here," her father said.

"I'm Chinese, and I'm a wife," Li-Yu said. "Not much is going to change those things."

"You have no idea what you're saying," her father said.

"Maybe that's why I need to go," she said. "If it doesn't work out, I'll come back."

Her mother emitted a short mean laugh. Her father took his glasses off again and rubbed his eyes. "Do you know how hard it was for us to get here?" he said again.

"Yes," she said.

"No, you don't," he said.

The boat sails through the morning, navigating a complex network of rivers and tributaries. Li-Yu quickly loses track of their turns. The paddies around her might as well be endless. Around midday they begin to shrink; the ground buckles and rises, transforming into hills and ridges. They sail past the mouths of river valleys, whose curving interiors open and reveal themselves and then close. Floo plains appear and recede, each of them dotted with villages. That night she helps the children make beds on the deck with their clothes and bags. She and Bing watch the stars, and then she falls asleep, sitting up, leaning against him.

In the middle of the next morning the ship enters what looks like just another wide floodplain, but when Bing studies the surrounding hills he jumps as though pricked by a thorn. "This is it!" he cries, pointing upriver. Li-Yu and the children lean over the railing but see nothing. He addresses the children. "Are you ready to meet your *yeh* and *mah*?" he says. Rose and Henry nod, all the while scanning the landscape.

At the far end of the floodplain the boat follows a final curve in the river and a small wharf appear The boat jostles into position along the pier and once it moors the family disembarks, along with a handful of other passengers. There are men to help them with their luggage. Together the little group heads up the road, Bing talking happily with the porters. He recognizes one of the other passengers, and the men embrace. Bing fires off a string of rapid questions, but is almost too excited to listen to the answers. Now Li-Yu has to smile. For years, the image she has held in her mind of her husband h had him behind the counter of his little shop on Channel Street in Stockton, talking noisily with his customers. But far more of his life has transpired here at the base of these hills, alongside this river. She reminds herself that even though they have been married ten years and have had two children together, there are parts of him—whole countries—she doesn't know. Henry and Rose are watching him, too, and for the first time in weeks she sees an end to their fatigue and boredom.

The road runs along the hills’ feet, a dirt line that divides the slopes from the rice paddies. Buildings soon arise, made of bricks the same color as the earth, and crossroads appear and branch through the growing village, carrying men in dark clothing who walk with purpose, their farming too swinging and catching the sunlight on their blades. There is an old woman in dark robes near the side of the road. She lifts a wrinkled hand and lets out a happy cry. Bing all but leaps. He drops his bags and runs to her, and the two of them embrace. A smile illuminates her face—Bing’s smile. Bing turn and beckons Henry to come to him.

“This is your *mah*,” he says. “Her name is Jiao. Say hello!”

“*Nihau*,” says Jiao, squatting down and wrapping her arms around Henry. Henry stiffens but brings his arms up and returns the woman’s hug. She holds him with a look of such joy on her face that Li-Y feels herself warming all over, her misgivings breaking apart. Finally Jiao releases Henry and stands. Rose steps forward, a smile on her face, her arms outstretched. But Jiao does not reach for her—instead she tilts her head and looks her over, as if uncertain what she’s seeing. Li-Yu looks to Bing bu he has already gone; she sees him hurrying up a pathway among some houses, pointing to things and talking again to the porters, who are scrambling to keep up with him. Li-Yu cannot hear what he is saying. The women stand for a moment longer, considering one another, and then Jiao takes Henry’s arm and darts after Bing. Li-Yu and Rose join the pursuit.

The caravan weaves quickly through the village, up and down through a sloping network of serpentine dirt paths. As Li-Yu follows she searches for explanations. Jiao had not heard, or she had misunderstood. Perhaps she had mistaken them for someone else? Who? She sees Henry struggling t keep pace with Jiao, who still has him by the arm, and who moves with surprising ease for her age. H glances over his shoulder and gives Li-Yu a look that stabs at her heart. You don’t have to pull him like that, she wants to cry out. Now she can hear Jiao calling something out to Bing, but he will not slow down or turn around. They reach the far edge of the village where there is a clearing, and then a doorway, and without having registered a single impression of the house’s exterior, Li-Yu finds herself standing inside, along with the rest of the heavily breathing procession. The floor of the front room is made of wooden planks, and there is a faded carpet covering much of it. Vertical wooden posts support heavy roof beams. Across from them, on an ornate wooden couch covered with blanket there sits a woman with an imperious look on her face. Her hair is drawn up into a tight bun, her body hidden beneath layers of robes. She does not rise or speak or smile. Bing takes Henry by the hand and pushes him into the center of the room, as though he is some sort of offering. She looks him up and down, not smiling, and then her eyes flash across the rest of the faces in the room. When they reach Li-Yu’s, they narrow, and drill into her.

Jiao appears at Li-Yu’s side. She looks her in the face, and then gestures toward the woman on the couch. “Wife number one,” she says, a tiny smile touching the corners of her mouth. She places a han on Li-Yu’s shoulder. “Wife number two,” she says.

The room goes gray, along with everything in it. Li-Yu gropes for her children, to pull them in to her, but Henry is too far away, and she does not find Rose.

***

I looked up from my laptop, and the wooden room in long-ago China became my living room. Its couch morphed into mine; its occupants became my bookshelves and television. It was nearly ten

o’clock. I had been at my computer for five hours straight, and my eyes felt as though I hadn’t blinke once~~. I clamped them shut. Orange lights wheeled across the interiors of my eyelids. I read over~~ my last few sentences, saved my document, and shut my laptop. It had been years since I’d managed a session like that. I rose and headed for the shower, shaking the feeling back into my arms. I climbed and turned my face into the stream. Over the water I could hear strains of music rising from somewhere in the building, a strange and lilting melody that must have been turned up loud to reach me through the walls and the sounds of the shower. It died when I stepped out. I went to bed, fell asleep without effort, and dreamed I was lost, adrift on a white sea on a raft made of pages torn from giant book.

TWO

I awoke before dawn. Great raindrops burst apart on the black windows and smeared the light from th street lamps in rolling patterns. I rose, turned on my teakettle, and sat down at my desk. The flier fro *The Barbary Quarterly* still lay there, beside the computer, an e-mail address on its corner. I read through the pages I'd written the night before, looking for something I cared to rewrite, and because seemed strange that nothing should present itself, I changed a couple of words and then changed then back. I opened a new e-mail, typed in the address, tapped out a few lines of introduction, attached my story, and sent it off.

I drank my morning coffee, ate a grapefruit and a boiled egg, and when it was time I gathered my things and headed outside.

The world was made of wind and water; my umbrella's efforts were laughable. Once in my classroom I dumped my things, spooled out several feet of scratchy, semi-absorbent paper towels, an mopped the water from my hair and clothes. I brewed a pot of tea and found the family absent from my mug. Perhaps with my story and my submission they were satisfied that they had my attention. I' check back later. Only then did I realize I'd failed to plan anything for the day. I hoped it might be Wednesday, which would mean back-to-back trips to the music room and the computer lab that morning; that would buy me the time to pull something together. I consulted my calendar and confirmed my hope.

"Everything okay in here, Peregrine?" a deep voice called from my doorway. It was Franklin Nash A cheerful red and blue robot on his tie squinted at me through the sights of a gigantic laser cannon.

"Everything's fine," I said. "Had you heard otherwise?"

"No, no," he said. "I was just making my rounds. But now you're making me wonder." He grinned

"What's with your robot?" I said. "Is he a sadist or something?"

He laughed. "I tell the kids it's a telescope."

"And they buy that?"

"Not for a second." He pointed across my room, toward the windows. "This rain," he said. "I don't think you're going to get much in the way of recess today. If you need a reprieve, give me a call and I'll come spell you for a few minutes."

"Thanks," I said.

"Remember, I can only be in five places at once." He knocked twice on the doorframe, the signal h would be moving on. "Don't be the sixth to call." Annabel Nightingale immediately filled his space, as though pulled into the vacuum he'd left. She wore a raincoat that reached from her ankles to her throat. It was blood red, and covered with concentric circles and spirals in reds, yellows, and oranges She looked like a Klimt painting.

“Did you see the kindergarten playground yet?” she asked.

I shook my head.

“Follow me,” she said.

She led me through the slick hallways, which were filling with dripping children and the smell of mildew. She pushed through the doors that led to the scaled-down playground at the back of the school. The drain had clogged and now perhaps two inches of water covered the ground. The surface was a chaos of droplets, falling and leaping and diving again.

“And this is after just one night,” she said.

***

The rain continued over the next few days, its assault on the city relentless. Sewers clogged and streets flooded. The power blinked on and off across the city; traffic crept and knotted in darkened intersections. The weathermen advised us all to spend the weekend inside and I was content to comply, reading and watching movies and making loose plans for the family I’d stranded in rural China. On Monday my classroom windows were buffeted by alternating waves of rain and wind and the sounds of sirens rising from the city below. My cooped-up kids did their best to contain their energy and anxiety. My tea revealed nothing.

Sometime later that week, my story appeared in *The Barbary Quarterly*. The editors hadn’t contacted me at all—no acceptance letter, no corrections or suggestions, no galleys—so I was surprised to arrive home, after another long wet day at school, to open the manila envelope and find a copy of the journal, along with a handwritten note on yellowed paper that said, “Thank you. Send mo please.” A twenty-dollar bill fell out of the package and onto my desk. The envelope’s contents were all damp, and smelled of seawater. The journal’s paper felt cheap; the printing was off-center and slanted slightly. My story had top billing. At its conclusion, they’d added, “To be continued.” Next was an excerpt from someone’s memoir that had to do with memories of a ballet class and someone having typhoid. Also included were a pair of short stories and a handful of poems. The cover bore a striking image—a sepia-tone photograph of a Chinese girl about the age of my students, her hands clasped behind her back, looking directly into the camera with an empty expression. She was standin in the middle of a Chinatown sidewalk. She looked a lot like Rose, I thought.

My phone rang and I dropped the journal onto my desk. It was my sister Lucy. “How are you doing you sweet soggy apple-cheeked son of a bitch?” she said. I do not have apple cheeks. My face is on th narrow side, and my complexion is a touch paler than average. “Peregrine, I have some tales for you that will make your hairs stand on end. This city is a strange and twisted place and if it sounds like I’m okay with it right now, it’s only because I’ve been drinking Irish coffees for the last two hours. Shit. Hang on a minute.” She was muffling the phone, and then barraging somebody with profanity. I waited a minute, and then another, and then she was back. “Sorry about that. My car was about to get towed. I told the fucker I’d pepper spray him if he hooked it.” She loved to pepper spray people—I had stopped keeping track of her victims somewhere around her junior year in college. “But listen, th reason I’m calling is to tell you to get ready for a houseguest.” She let out a yelp. “Holy crap, Perry!” she yelled. “I gotta go. This guy is coming back from his truck with a gas mask and a crowbar and—”

And she was gone.

***

Two nights later I was stir-frying chicken when Eva Wong came through my door, with her rain-smeared mascara and her wet luggage and her bewildering accusations. She was about sixty. She wor a clear vinyl raincoat that reached her knees and a matching rain hat, and something black underneatl I expected to hear an accent, but when she spoke she sounded as American as my mom.

“You’re Peregrine Long?” she asked.

“Yes.”

“Do you recognize me?” she asked, without smiling.

I shook my head. “Should I?” Only then did I remember Lucy’s mention of a houseguest—it had been lost somewhere between her cursing and her gas mask report.

Eva reached down, lifted a canvas suitcase, and walked past me, limping slightly, heading for the couch. She sat down with a heavy exhalation and looked around the room, taking in the empty walls, the small bookshelf, perhaps her own warped reflection in the black television screen. “My feet hurt, she said, “and I could use some tea.” She dropped her bag on the floor, removed her raincoat and hat, and tossed them alongside her bag before sinking into the couch. She looked over at me. “You’re letting in a draft.”

I shut the door. “Sorry, I didn’t quite get all the details,” I said. “You’re who, exactly?”

She reached down, unbuckled and removed her shoes, and sat back up, looking pained. She was ou of breath. “Eva Wong,” she said. It sounded like a proclamation rather than an introduction. I hoped she’d continue, but apparently I’d have to wait until her panting subsided.

“Well, welcome, Eva,” I said, rounding the corner for the kitchen. I started water for tea and returned my attention to my dinner, which, I noted, would not be enough for two. I could make a big pot of rice and stretch it, though. “Are you hungry?” I called to my guest.

“Why, how kind of you,” she said, her voice cheerless, perhaps even borderline sarcastic. “But the tea will be just fine.”

I know you’re wet and tired and out of breath, I wanted to say, but make a little effort here. I gave the wok a flick and started silently rehearsing a bit of the grief I’d have to give Lucy, not that she would care. It wasn’t the first time she’d sent a vagabond my way. She’d always had an appreciation for the full spectrum of the human character, and was capable of striking up a friendship—or a rivalr —with anybody. She’d introduced me to felons, to middle-aged circus performers, to people with words tattooed on their faces. In her travels she liked to tell people this was her place, and if they wer ever in San Francisco they should just come over for a night or two, no need to even bother calling ahead. I never really minded—it’s not as if I had a lot of uninterruptible extracurriculars. It even mac me feel a little closer to her. I’d learned a lot of things about my sister from people I’d only just met. Eva seemed like an unlikely friend of hers, but Lucy had built a life out of unlikelihoods. I turned the

burner down, put a smile on my face, and headed back into the living room.

“Funny,” Eva said, her expression humorless. “What kind of name is Peregrine, anyway?”

“Long story,” I said. I wasn’t about to go into deep familial history before she’d even told me who she was. I didn’t feel comfortable taking a seat by her on my own couch, so I opted for the desk chair instead. “So how do you know my sister?”

I thought I saw her wince. “‘Sister?’” she said, shaking her head. “That’s a little bizarre, don’t you think?”

Ah. One of those. Lucy hadn’t always been forthright about our siblinghood when she was commissioning guests for my apartment. It was a little joke she liked to play on me. They’d show up thinking I was her fiancé, her college roommate, even, once, her lawyer. Maybe some of Eva’s surliness could be attributed to one of these fictions. “I’m not sure what she told you,” I said, “but she’s my sister. Same last names, DNA, the whole bit.”

“What are you talking about?” she asked. I couldn’t tell if she was angry or merely exasperated. Either way, it wasn’t the reaction I usually got at that point. Eva reached into her suitcase and produced a copy of *The Barbary Quarterly*. She smacked it flat on the coffee table and looked at me. Now I could read her expression: It was contempt. “Here’s the thing,” she said. “I imagine a publication like this doesn’t pay much more than about fifty bucks, tops. And I imagine it doesn’t get you more than about that same number of readers. So what’s the point?”

I was starting to feel disoriented, as in those childhood anxiety dreams when you’re suddenly faced with an exam you haven’t studied for. I’d missed episodes; I’d driven off the edge of the map. “You’re asking me why I write?”

“I’m asking you why you steal,” she said.

Heat flashed across my chest. In my anxiety dream I was now not only unprepared but naked as well. I stared at her face closely now, searching for an explanation, maybe even a punch line. Webs of wrinkles fanned across her temples. Her mouth was thin and drawn. If Lucy had put her up to this, she’d found a good actress.

“How much *did* you get paid?” she asked.

“Twenty whole dollars,” I said. “Earned, not stolen. Not that it’s any of your business. Who are you exactly?”

She turned the journal around so the photo was facing me and she tapped the girl’s face. “I’m her daughter,” she said. “Eva Wong.”

“I don’t know anything about that photograph,” I said. “The editors put it on there. I’ve never seen it before in my life.”

“I don’t believe that for a second, but that’s not even what I’m talking about, and you know it.” She sat forward and planted her elbows on her knees. “You stole my story. It isn’t yours. Maybe you thought you could publish it in this fourth-rate journal and get a line on your resume, but

unfortunately for you I read a lot. So cut the bullshit.” Flushed, she let out a breath and glared at me. ~~“You made me swear,” she said. “Really, I hardly ever swear.”~~

“That’s crazy,” I said, and as I said it I realized there was probably more truth to it than I’d meant. This was unprecedented. Lucy had never sent me a lunatic before. I wasn’t sure how I was expected t proceed.

“I didn’t steal anything,” I said. “I made it all up. Last week, sitting right here.”

“You didn’t bother to change a single detail,” she continued. She stood and clasped her hands behind her back, and seemed to be scanning the room for something. “What are you, a historian or something?”

“I’m a teacher.”

“Of history?” She crossed the room and began studying the photos and the books on my bookshelf.

“Of third grade,” I said. The kettle whistled and I hurried into the kitchen to find my chicken nearl done. Before making Eva’s tea I pulled out my phone and shot Lucy a quick text: *What the hell is wit this lady?*

“Can we back up?” I called. “Where exactly did you publish this?”

“I didn’t publish it anywhere,” she said. She appeared in the doorway, her fists half-clenched. “It’s not a story. It’s a life. My mom’s life.”

I set her mug of tea on the counter and rotated it so the handle faced her.

“Where do you live, exactly?” I asked her.

“What does that matter?” she said, reaching for the tea with a nod of her head. “I’ve never even seen that picture before,” she said.

“That makes two of us.”

I followed her back into the living room, where she sank into the couch again. “How could you hav known about Channel Street? And *Xinhui*?”

“I picked them off maps,” I said. “Is there somebody looking after you?” I asked her. “Do you hav a husband, or a neighbor or something?”

She went very still, and looked at me for a little too long before answering. “My husband is dead, and who in the city doesn’t have neighbors?”

“I thought maybe we could give someone a call. I think you might be a little bit confused.”

Her face twisted and then slowly cleared, as if it were a pond into which I’d just heaved a chunk of broken concrete. “You are correct,” she said. “I am confused.” She sat forward and leveled a finger at my forehead. “I am confused about who you are, and how you came to know my family’s history, and

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