UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, LOS ANGELES

HAVE YOU EATEN YET?
STORIES

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BY

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To Po Po and Gung Gung,

for filling my stomach with steamed chicken

and my heart with stories.

ABSTRACT

HAVE YOU EATEN YET?
STORIES

Have You Eaten Yet? Stories is a fictional short story collection about Chinese food. Before I anger Chinese cuisine experts, I acknowledge that my featured dishes are not "authentic." I write about transplants, fusion, and junk food. My characters are similarly Chinese-adjacent. They are westernized, conflicted, longing to return to China, or declare independence from it. Their stories expand upon the canon of immigrant kitchens and frugal home-cooking. I needed these stories, ones that reflect Chinese identity as global and varied and human. With President Trump's references to coronavirus as "the Chinese virus" and discrimination against Chinese restaurants, this representation felt more important than ever.

"Dim Sum Days" is a traditional short story for a classic Cantonese brunch, featuring mother-daughter relationships and nods to *Joy Luck Club.* "DTF" mimics a text conversation and touches on millennial absurdism and hookup culture at Din Tai Fung. "Be Water" explores the violence of the Hong Kong Protests, the intersections of political and private life, and the comfort of cha chaan tengs. "White Rabbit, Sour Plum" covers an immigrant's first 25 years in America with vignettes and multiple perspectives.

My po po begins our phone calls with "Have you eaten yet?" Chinese grandmothers say this interchangeably with "Hello." Food is a language of love for our people. When we talk about food, we talk about so much more: love and craving, identity and history, family and sacrifice. I chased these themes in my stories. As with most recipes, I followed my gut and tongue.

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Dim Sum Days

In the free fall of retirement, Ming An Fen looked forward to Sundays. Usually, she slept in and only woke when the ache in her back could no longer be ignored. On Sundays, however, An Fen set a five o'clock alarm. She needed enough time to boil coffee, wake her husband, read the Chinese newspaper, pick out her Sunday best, put in pearl earrings, and gossip over WeChat before her daughter arrived. She did this all while refusing to eat. An Fen didn't allow her lo gung to eat either, which made him grumpy, but it meant they'd eat their money's worth without rushing the meal. Days like these required such care. After all, Sundays were dim sum days and dim sum days meant family.

Their daughter, Lei Li, lived by schedules and arrived at eleven o'clock sharp. At 10:55 a.m., An Fen wrestled the lint out of her vest and readjusted the clip in her short, gray hair. On their way out of the apartment, she reminded her lo gung to grab his wallet a second time. They argued their way downstairs to the apartment parking lot where Lei Li waited in a white SUV. Lei Li flashed an impatient smile.

An Fen greeted Lei Li as her lo gung took the other passenger seat. The car was missing its usual giggles and hugs. Lei Li explained that her daughters were with James at a basketball game, they'd meet at the restaurant later. As they navigated San Gabriel's wide streets, An Fen talked about her potted chilis on the patio. Her daughter could convince her lemon tree to fruit if—suddenly Lei Li blared the horn. An Fen fell silent as her daughter cursed in English.

Perhaps she should let Lei Li drive in silence. An Fen swatted at her lo gung to stop dictating a text message on WeChat. She felt bad about placing the burden of chauffeur on her only child, especially when it kept Lei Li from attending basketball games. The discussion

always led to argument though. With An Fen's growing forgetfulness and her lo gung's back surgery last year, Lei Li said they had reached the age where driving was no longer an option. Lo gung proposed something called "Oobah" or "Leef" but Lei Li dismissed the idea of riding with strangers, especially when they couldn't speak English. Until now, An Fen and her lo gung had navigated San Gabriel fine. Strip malls passed, graceful names of restaurants and Chinese groceries next to sharp English letters. An Fen's granddaughters had tried to teach her English, but An Fen never remembered which letter made which sound. She was too old to learn. When An Fen's words failed her and her daughter, sometimes it was easier to talk about house plants.

When Lei Li stopped shaking her head, An Fen continued in Cantonese, "Oh, I finally got those pictures from First Aunt. She's so forgetful. I think she's getting worse with age."

"WeChat is hard to use, Ma."

"Tiu! My eldest sister is old but not dumb. She knows WeChat well enough to send me all those videos of dancing dogs. Does she not remember how to send photos of family?"

"People get busy."

"Too busy to remember loved ones?" An Fen said. Her daughter always took the wrong side. "She couldn't have. I've been asking for those photos for days now. No, this is because she's still angry with me. Her grandson got into UC Davis and I wasn't quick enough to congratulate him. Of course, how was I supposed to know? She only told Second Aunt."

"What are these photos of?" Lei Li said, tapping her fingers on the steering wheel.

"Her birthday dinner! You forgot?" An Fen said. Again, Lei Li had forgotten something An Fen mentioned so often during their calls. Sometimes it seemed she was somewhere else

when they talked. Worrying, always worrying. It struck An Fen that First Aunt might be angry with her forgetful daughter. “You remembered to wish First Aunt a happy birthday, yes?”

“Of course, we greeted her as soon as the kids woke up.”

An Fen nodded and watched her lo gung scroll through WeChat. Three days had passed but the family group chat still hummed with First Aunt’s 80th birthday dinner. An Fen pieced the meal together through pictures, audio recordings, and stickers. All three of her sisters and their families had gathered around a table full of long noodles, roasted quail, and lobster to celebrate First Aunt’s achievements.

“Our message was nice,” Lei Li said, “I’ll show you later. The girls sang her a song.”

An Fen nodded. First Aunt must be pleased; she loved attention growing up. An Fen had sent her own recording, praising First Aunt for living so long—their parents only lived to their seventies—and for having smart grandchildren. She spent an hour rehearsing. How could An Fen possibly express her relief at her sister’s health, her sorrow at the last twenty birthdays missed, and her fears of their fading connection? An Fen settled on a thirty second recording and a happy dog sticker.

Though An Fen no longer saw herself living in Guangzhou, her spirit ached to return. She wanted authentic dim sum, the silky rice noodles that made the tongue weep and the deep teas that welcomed the new day. She wanted to cross through open air markets, their overflowing produce crowding the sidewalk, on the way to First Aunt’s apartment. She wanted big dinner tables and drunken laughter and the ache of too much food. This yearning was unrealistic, of course. A plane ticket was far too much to ask of her daughter. Perhaps An Fen could save up for First Aunt’s 90th. After all, love was meant to be shared in person.

"Third Aunt posted photos," Lei Li said, "She's traveling now, no?"

"Her family took her to Shanghai, yes," An Fen said, meeting Lei Li's eyes in the rearview mirror. Lei Li had her father's long face and auspicious nose, but An Fen's eyes. They were dark and round, transparent in their annoyance or joy. An Fen caught a tinge of the former, was Lei Li still bothered by their tardiness? An Fen mirrored back a smile.

An Fen was being foolish. Her family was here, about to enjoy dim sum. When Lei Li looked away, An Fen told her lo gung that they'd treat. He nodded and continued to scroll.

Red Bao Dim Sum House sat on the third floor of a strip mall above a 99 Ranch Market and three herbal medicine stores. The only parking spot sat across the lot. An Fen navigated the maze of Toyotas and BMWs in her black loafers, sturdy ones she found for only three dollars, while Lei Li supported lo gung close behind. Inside the strip mall, they took a right turn—newcomers missed the elevator tucked away to the right—and rode two-floors to Red Bao's lobby. Sunday morning patrons packed every square foot. Hungry elders, quiet parents, and impatient college students crowded a hostess with their tickets. Her voice carried numbers in Cantonese and English over a loudspeaker. An Fen snickered and left her family for the restaurant floor. Only newcomers grabbed a number.

An Fen pushed past people on their phones and stepped into the left-side of the restaurant. A hundred clothed tables shone with tin baskets. Families laughed with chopsticks and argued between stuffed cheeks. Servers wheeled shopping-cart-sized steel carts in the valleys between chairs. They called out various dishes, desserts, and snacks through spit guards and ribbons of steam. The chorus shook the fake chandeliers overhead and drowned out ESPN highlights on flat-screen TVs. A little girl ran past An Fen with a toy car.

Standing on her tiptoes at five-foot-four, An Fen waved over the new manager, Cheng. He was a tall balding man with a wiry goatee. Unlike the old manager, who had left with their decade-long rapport six months ago, Cheng did not cross the room to greet her. An Fen chased him down, slipping a $5 red envelope into his palm. The gift and smiles summoned an empty table, settings, and a pot of Oolong. An Fen used to get everything with a smile.

An Fen sat at the table by the time her lo gung and Lei Li squeezed into the restaurant.

"Aiya, so fast?" Lei Li said.

"Lo po, which old lady did you fight off this time?" Lo gung said, chuckling. He set his canvas hat and coat over his seat.

"Tiu! Sit," An Fen said, wiping her chopsticks with her napkin, "I got Oolong. Tell James we're here and ask him what the kids want. Anything they want! Gung Gung is paying."

Her lo gung gave a thumbs-up as he took his seat.

"Ma, you paid last week," Lei Li said. She poured tea, filling everyone's cup before filling her own. "You know it's our turn."

"No!" An Fen said in English. Lei Li loved throwing a fit about paying. Today An Fen would take care of her daughter for once. "We pay on Sundays. That is how it is."

"We only eat together on Sundays!" Lei Li said.

"Then you should make the drive and eat with us more!" An Fen said.

Lei Li's smile fell. An Fen hated the sudden tightness in the air. It was a joke!

An Fen knew eating together was more complicated than a thirty minute drive. Two cities separated them, but the kids' basketball practices and Lei Li's real-estate meetings kept them apart. An Fen knew she was lucky to see her daughter each week, but there was also a selfish

bitterness at how life had left An Fen with Sunday mornings. Daily conversations over the phone weren't enough. Love needed to be shared in person.

"Aiya, no more talking. I want to spoil my granddaughters today," An Fen said. She waved over a cart lady. "There's siu mai. How many can they eat?"

"Grab two," Lei Li said.

A server placed two metal baskets on the lazy Susan. Each basket had three carefully wrapped siu mai with their signature crinkly egg wash wrappers and a pinch of orange roe. An Fen smiled at the thought of her granddaughters stuffing their cheeks. Lei Li wrapped her fingers around her teacup. Gung Gung watched his videos. Their hunger could wait.

Ma started a one-sided conversation that Lily nodded along to. Their daily calls taught Lily the tone indicating Ma wanted to be heard rather than engaged with. So far, the former. "Your father's back is better. Oh, and that other medication made his rash go away..."

The chatter gave Lily time to process. Ma loved playing the guilt card. In middle school Ma said, *Baba cooks for you and you'd rather go to a movie?* In college, *How will you support your family with an English degree?* Couldn't Ma appreciate the moment? Eat with us more! They were sitting at the table!

Lily caught herself. She knew Ma didn't mean half the things she said, though her words often sparked a fire. When Lily was a teenager, her anger and embarrassment fizzled out hours after their arguments. Now, some twenty-five years later, the heat stayed in her soul for days or

weeks, mixing with oily guilt until it burned her inside out. Lily still called every day, sent gifts, and drove them around. Like a grease fire, smothering usually did the trick.

Lily swallowed the heat and refilled her cup last. Rice wrapped ha gao and pei dan congee filled the table. Baba blasted his volume close to his ear, even though Lily had bought him earbuds last month. To his right, Ma waved over nearby cart ladies as she described their last doctor's visit. Lily nodded and fed Ma a question. Their order sheet filled with red stamps as though more food would bring the girls faster. Lily might as well think up ways to get to the bill first. Maybe she'd run to the bathroom...

After the siu mai lost its steam, Lily texted James for his ETA. She imagined the Subaru that cut them off on the way here. Her breath caught. Of course, the kids were fine. James must've offered Mia or Sophie's teammates a ride home.

Ma paused and met Lily's eyes. She finally wanted a conversation instead of nods. Lily swiped Do Not Disturb. She needed her full attention to keep conversations with Ma pleasant. Any topic could start innocent until it riled Ma up or tore Lily down. The most important part about Sundays was ensuring they returned the next week.

"Small world! Li Ying Wei sent me a WeChat request! She had a boy in your grade."

"He doesn't sound familiar..." Lily said. Of course, she remembered Francis Li, they went to Junior prom together. After Arcadia High, Francis went to Stanford and then UPenn for his MBA. Considering her Bachelor's in Business Economics at UCLA, this was a guaranteed nosedive. "Speaking of middle school, did I tell you Mia is running for Treasurer in her leadership class? We've been working on her campaign—"

"Didn't you like Francis?" Ma said. "I remember you would hog up the phone line talking into the night. Late too! Lap-lap-sang all day. It was very cute."

"We were talking about homework," Lily said, shooing a cart lady that came too close. The girls didn't like taro puffs anyway. "Sophie's done well with schoolwork lately. All A's!"

"You sure sounded happy for homework! No wonder you got that C in geometry."

For a woman who called about lost glasses every other week, she sure had a good memory. "That reminds me. For summer, James proposed a basketball camp, but I think we should start preparing the girls for high school. Mia will be a freshman soon and that's when colleges start looking at transcripts. You said there was a college prep place near your apartment? Harvard-something? Maybe the girls could spend time with you and—"

"Let them enjoy basketball with friends. They're very smart," Ma said, adjusting her glasses. "You worry too much. Be careful. Worrying adds more wrinkles."

Lily considered sharing what her therapist thought the real source of her stress was. Eight dishes, bowls, and baskets filled the lazy Susan—already too much food for the six of them. A bowl of pei dan jook, its thousand-year-old egg chunks like black pearls in rice porridge, shadowed plates and baskets. Shrimp ha chun glistened in a pool of soy sauce, the translucent rice noodles hinting at the fat prawns underneath. Sesame-studded, lotus paste balls sat pretty in a basket. Dangling strips of braised tripe for Baba streaked burnt orange on the bowl. Jellyfish noodles for Mia, Lily's eldest, jiggled with every turn. Did Ma want everything to be cold by the time they arrived? Where was James anyway? Was there an accident on the freeway?

"Who knows? Maybe Mia or Sophie will meet a very nice boy at basketball camp," Ma said. "Did I ever tell you Ying Wei and I tried to get you and Francis together? You would've been very comfortable! Ying Wei says he makes good money at Goldman Sachs—"

"Ma!" Lily said, flames licking her throat. How could Ma say that? They were perfectly comfortable! James taught Chemistry at Temple City High, Lily was a top producer for her real estate group. Without James' freedom to take care of the kids, Lily would've never had her career. Ma should know James was off-limits. "Let's stop talking about this. It's in the past."

"Yes, yes. You'll see when your daughters are older. Mothers only want the best."

"James is the best. You know that! You can't just—"

A server in a vested uniform cut Lily short. "Durian pastry, dan tat, red bean bao..."

Lily waved the man off before Ma could answer. "We have enough food."

"But Mia loves dan tat. Let's grab some. Those were fresh."

"The man will come back," Lily said. She refilled Baba's cup, then Ma's, then her own. She breathed heat from her lungs as she remembered Ma's good intentions. Sensitivity wasn't inherent to motherhood, her therapist said. Ma learned from her Ma and so forth. Lily swore to break the chain. Her daughters would learn the power of their words.

"Lei Li, I meant it when I said Baba and I are treating."

"It's our turn," Lily said, taking her seat. Why couldn't her mother listen for once?

"Fine, fine. You don't have to be stingy though. Don't worry about the money—"

"It's not about the money!" Lily shouted.

A server fell silent. A few nosy mothers arched their necks. Baba broke from his screen.

"This!" Lily said, meeting Ma's eyes as the words boiled over. "This is why I'm afraid to bring my family here. I knew one day you'd compare them, you'd make them feel they're not good enough when you're the only one not happy. You always do this, Ma. You never appreciate what you have. Can't you see how lucky we are to meet up like this? Can't you see I'm happy? James is a wonderful husband and father. You're lucky to have him as a son-in-law."

Ma was silent. Baba hid behind his phone. Dread anchored Lily to her seat. She hadn't shouted at her mother in years. Lily felt herself regressing to her teens: voices bouncing against kitchen tile, insults and I-hate-yous, a slammed bedroom door. Shouting never solved anything when their words rang hollow. Lily would keep visiting her parents. Her kids needed them.

Ma's eyes glistened as she spoke. "I do appreciate our family. Very much."

Was Ma... crying? The thought made her shift in her seat. "I know you do, Ma."

"We appreciate James. I hope you know that too. We see him as our son."

"Thank you," Lily said. Her words hung too high to swallow back down. Ma wiped the corner of her eye with a napkin. Lily hated the heat bubbling under her skin, the way it gnawed her raw. She didn't want to be angry at her mother anymore.

Suddenly, Sophie's voice sounded from behind. "Po Po! Gung Gung!"

Sophie, her youngest, ran across the room in her red community league jersey. Ma melted into a wide smile as soon as Sophie hugged her. James followed close behind with Mia, their twelve-year-old. Mia kissed Baba's cheek and put her flat cap on his head. The heat in her chest could wait. Family came first.

"Waa. Ho lang-ah," Mia said, exaggerating 'so pretty' as she'd seen in movies.

"Lang-AHH," Sophie said.

"Sorry we're late," James said in English before kissing Lily on the cheek. His freckles danced above his smile. He ran a hand through the curls in his auburn hair and passed over Sophie's pink sweatshirt. "We stopped at home. Girls, don't forget to say hi to Mommy."

"Hi, Mommy!" Sophie and Mia shouted, their voices hitting the sugar octave.

"You stopped at home, huh?" Lily said, catching the chocolate stain on Sophie's jersey. She glared at James' crooked smile. Did he seriously take the kids to Wendy's? "The kids have a lot of energy after that game—Girls! Be gentle with Gung Gung please."

"Endorphins, wow!" James said, retreating to kiss Ma's forehead. He used the Cantonese Lily had taught him, "Neiho, Ma. Dee ma, Ba?" He turned to Lily, "How has Dad's back been? Any better?"

Baba flashed a thumbs-up and gestured for the five of them to squeeze in for a picture. The phone exchanged hands as everyone joined the frame. James helped Baba share the pictures with aunts and uncles in Guangzhou as the kids took their seats.

"Good! Now, eat!" Ma said in Cantonese. She filled the girls' plates with desserts first. "If the food is cold, we'll re-order it! Look for carts! Gung Gung is paying!"

James leaned over as Lily translated. When he gave her a look, Lily told him they were treating, of course. She slipped her credit card into her pocket.

Lily forgot about the card in the blur of re-filled teacups and moving baskets. James ordered calamari. Ma caught Lily's eye and ate a piece of fried squid for him. Ma never ate much during dim sim, always too busy piling food on the girls' plates. Their little hands split open crumbling custard buns and flaky egg tarts. They fumbled with their chopsticks, the siu mai dropping and rolling on the table cloth. Ma wiped sauce off cheeks bulging with shrimp ha chun

and jellyfish noodles. Halfway through the meal, the sugar rush crashed and Sophie cried when Mia took her hair tie. Ma soothed them with mango pudding and Baba told them to smile for photos. Now and then, James tapped Lily's arm to check if she was alright. She was fine. She refused to be angry with her daughters present.

Full stomachs and squeaking chair backings signaled the end of the meal. The card cut into Lily's thigh, reminding her of the tab. Lily set her stained cloth napkin on her plate and announced a trip to the bathroom. Ma didn't seem to notice, preoccupied with one of Sophie's basketball stories.

As Lily excused herself, Mia tugged her sleeve. "Ngo oi neih means 'I love you,' right?"

"Yes, very good!" Lily said. "Did you learn that off Duolingo, honey?"

"No, Po Po and Gung Gung said it," Mia said, straightening out her cap. "They've said it before, I wanted to make sure I knew. You can go pee, that's all I needed."

Ma had said I love you? Ma sat across the table, eyes closed as Sophie played with her hair. She looked so much older and softer. The hardness of her jaw had soft wrinkles. Hints of a smile pulled at the corner of her lips. Ma looked at peace.

Yet, Lily's heat returned with a new roar.

An Fen smiled as her youngest granddaughter played with her face. Sophie jumped with new energy, her tummy bulging under her jersey. Her palms rubbed circles into An Fen's cheeks, stretching her mouth into a smile or frown. An Fen scrunched her face against the pull and reached for Sophie's nose. Sophie giggled and pulled away.

James looked up from his phone to tell Sophie to stop. Sophie slumped and crossed her arms. An Fen sighed. Little girls should be silly, before the world demanded they be smart, pretty, or firm. She put her thumb to her nose and made a funny face. Sophie giggled and played with the wrinkles between An Fen's finger bones.

Mia had already outgrown her silly phase. Acne studded her forehead and her legs looked too long for her basketball shorts. An Fen tried to remember Lei Li at that age of growing pains. What year did Lei Li leave her silly girlhood behind? When had they first started to argue? Mia was already smart, analyzing her leftover egg custard flakes with a scholar's eye. Soon Mia and her mother would find things to disagree about.

Lei Li had left for the restroom. An Fen knew she should not parent her granddaughters, that was Lei Li's job. Like the thin lemon tree in Lei Li's yard, the girls would grow under loving care until they outgrew their pot and soil. At best, An Fen could provide a stick to guide them.

"Mia, Sophie. Listen close," An Fen said. She spoke mostly to Mia, who could speak Cantonese best. "You must learn from your mother. She is very smart, pretty, and strong. When she was little, she used to read every book in the library. She focused on her studies, always did her homework, and got good grades in most of her classes. All the boys liked her, not because she wore lots of makeup, but because she had a beautiful smile and sharp tongue. She was also hardworking. When we first came here, we had no money. Your mother learned English and cleaned bathrooms to pay for our clothes."

An Fen's chest swelled with pride. She searched her granddaughter's eyes, hoping some of this had translated. The world was tough on girls. Their hearts needed a stake to brace strength. "Be more like your mother. She loves you very much."

Lily heard her mother in the silent bathroom hallway. These days, her inner monologue resembled Ma's nagging. So why couldn't Lily picture Ma saying I love you?

Lily held the restroom door open for a young mother and her daughter, a finger leading a tiny hand. The mother cooed in Cantonese, though the care was in the context, not the words. 'I love you' in Cantonese sounded awkward, too quick to carry such deep sentiment.

The credit card dug into Lily's thigh as she washed her hands. Flicked soap bubbles crusted the mirror, similar to their mirrors back home. The girls probably had another bubble fight earlier when they left to wash hands. What if they did that at one of Lily's open houses? Lily would talk to them later. Another item for her to-dos.

You worry too much, Ma had said. Looking past the soap specks, Lily caught a few grays in her hair and bags under her eyes. Her eyelids were mismatched, one mono-lidded and the other creased. They were uniquely uneven, though Ma always said they had the same eyes. Lily traced a laugh line with her finger, wondering if Ma was right about wrinkles and worries too.

"Ngo oi neih," Lily tested under her breath. Even their voices sounded similar. Would Lily look and sound like her mother when she got older? She considered this for a moment, surprised that becoming her mother didn't fill her with more dread. Then again, they were already so different, deliberately so. Lily swore to never compare her daughters and to express

gratitude. At Lily's college graduation and wedding reception, Ma never said "I love you" once. Of course, she struggled to imagine an "I love you" from her mother.

Guilt flared with anger. "I love you" felt like a hollow measure of love. Ma loved differently. When Lily had Sophie and Mia, Ma took care of them so Lily and James could return to work. Whenever they visited, Ma sent Lily home with leftovers so they wouldn't have to cook. Every day, Ma called first and hung up last. Lily could do without the daily criticism, but that came out of love too. How could Lily possibly name the last "I love you," resent Ma for it, when Ma had taught Lily the meaning of love?

A tear slid down her cheek. Suddenly, the bathroom stall opened and Lily scrambled to blot her face with a paper towel. The young mother led her daughter to the sink and hand dryer. Stumbling with wet hands, the girl sniffed and the mother wiped her nose. A smile crossed Lily's face. Ma probably still saw her as a little girl with sniffles. No wonder she nagged.

Lily joined the restaurant floor, avoiding busy carts and noodle dishes on elevated wrists. Their table was across the room, her family preoccupied. Ma stood by Sophie and Mia with a teapot. She was teaching them how to pour, eldest first. The girls laughed and nodded, and though Ma probably spoke too fast for them to understand, they followed her lead. Small hands and wrinkled hands carried heavy porcelain. They filled Baba's cup, then Ma's, completing a circle. James clapped as Gung Gung recorded.

The fire in Lily's chest lapsed for a moment. Ma said "I love you" all the time.

Lily found their server and produced the credit card in her pocket. She followed him to the register and signed a 20% tip that would make Ma scowl. They exchanged thank you's and receipts. By the time Lily returned, Ma and the girls had finished refilling Lily's cup.

"I got the tab," Lily said in Cantonese, "Let's go. The girls have homework to do."

"Aiya!" Ma said, at the sight of the receipt. She let go of the teapot suddenly, the girls fumbling to pick up the slack. Hot tea slipped out the neck. Lily saw Ma jump back and cry out before she registered the spill on the tablecloth. Ma stood by her seat, cradling her right fist.

The family scrambled to Ma's aid. Lily rushed to Ma's side with questions, more out of concern than for answers. James stumbled over his words as he got ice water from a server. Gung Gung recovered the teapot from the girls. Mia soothed her sister's sudden tears. The water had been hot but not boiling, Ma would be fine, but the shock threw the table into disarray. Everyone spoke or cried or cooed. Ma stood silent.

James passed a ball of wet napkin to Lily, but Ma pulled away before Lily could apply it. Anger and pain wrinkled Ma's face. Her burnt hand shook, the other pointed at the receipt on the lazy Susan. "Lei Li, I said your Ba was treating. Are you deaf? Don't you respect your parents?"

"What does it matter? You're hurt!" Lily said, "Take the napkin!"

"Of course, it matters! Of course, I'm hurting!" Ma said, "You never listen!"

Lily held her retort between tight lips. Ma let the words hang, she said the rest with her pained glare. This was their language: empty words and weighted actions. A language of distance, projection, and disappointment. Perhaps their love was too sharp to get much closer.

Ma broke away first. She wiped Sophie's sniffles and made a funny face.

DTF

Friday 12:36 PM

Yikes I don't think I'll make it:(

oh

everything ok?

wait call me

i already got us a table lol so no need to rush

u can still come tho ya?

hello?

kevin?

where are u now? do u wanna meet somewhere else?

hello?

hellooo???

At work. Can't talk. Hella busy.

wait so are u coming or not

haha i thought u said u could take off lunch for our joke valentimes day date?

valentines*

are u off soon?

i don't mind waiting

im already at din tai fung

Tbh forgot to put this date on my calendar. Thought I'd see you on Tues as usual. 👀💦🍑Double booked with a meeting that's about to start.

wtf u mean u forgot?

this date was ur idea???

the fuck

i lied to the hostess and said u were parking to get this table

omg now the waiter is asking if im ready to order

so are we not doing anything??

hello?

venmo me for my uber at least

jesus i cant believe u

Friday 1:13 PM

I'm omw Mari 😜

wtf???

did u even have a meeting?

O fuck wrong number

who tf is mari 

Yikess

did u fucking lie to me? 

Um didn't wanna do it like this but

I don't have time for anything serious. We should focus on ourselves, maybe you should go to therapy. Your ass was great tho 👐

u copy pasted that!

call me

are u fucking ghosting me

kevin

oh my fucking god

ur seriously breaking up with me over text?

on valentimes day?

valentines*

ur such a fuckboi omg

u couldn't uber 15 minutes to talk to me in person?? i ubered 45 to get here!

i spent an hour on my makeup. i wore my good falsies for this date. i even bought a new crop top bc u said my stomach was hot. i can't believe u used me like this. fuck u for wasting my time.

u think ur busy? i have an internship at a marketing agency, 30 hrs at sharetea, and 20 units of classes. i moved my work hours for this date. u think ur better than everyone bc u work at facebook. u write code. everyone writes code u pretentious fuck.

also wtf made u think i wanted something serious? this date was ur idea! i only went bc my friend said i could get free soup dumplings.

Friday 1:31

the waiter just came by. u know what? im gonna have a good fucking time. i'll fucking eat three more baskets by myself. fuck my stomach. fuck u.

ur not even that cute. the waiter is way hotter than u. hes tall and has a beard and hes from barcelona and hes wearing a black dress shirt and he actually has abs. totally hitting on me too. god he kept biting his lip. his eyes were on my chest the whole time. maybe ill invite him to eat with me. tell him about how my date stood me up cause hes a fucking loser.

u cant break up w me over text. fuck u. im a hot af abg. everyone wants to fuck me. i dont get broken up with! i fuck people up.

god and im esp not getting dumped from a hookup who couldn't even make me cum!! my orgasms were fake! half the time i laid there waiting for u to finish. ur so boring. the only reason i agreed to suck ur toes was to avoid ur baby dick.

Friday 1:58

i look like a loser bc of u. im sitting alone. the hostess definitely knows i lied. u make me feel like shit. why the fuck am i crying. people are staring.

u weren't even worth my time! everything about u was boring af. when we werent fucking our conversations put me to sleep. all u did was talk about ur job or the gym. working at facebook isnt a personality trait, its the money machine that got us trump! benching at the gym isnt a hobby, its proof that u dont have self esteem! u dont have a life and its fucking sad.

when my dumplings arrived the waiter offered me a napkin to wipe my face. hes so fucking cute. i barely know him and hes 10x nicer than u. u never asked how i was. i dont think u cared. was i just a body? is that how u treat all ur hookups?

i just dont get why u would play me like that. why did u ask me to lunch on valentimes day? what kind of game is that? did u want to make me hope for something more? do u like ghosting people?

i should have listened to my friends. they said this date was sus. they said u were just a fuckboi. i cant believe i tried to defend u. i kept telling them u were nice and smart and vulnerable. that u opened doors and had a nice car and that u would open up about ur absentee parents while we cuddled. they told me i might be in love w u.

u know maybe i did catch feelings. maybe i did think u would be more than an unnamed contact on my phone. that we could share more than just fucking. that we could talk about our problems over food and get to know each other and have it mean something when we touched. i mean is that stupid and greedy of me? was that asking for too much?

”maybe u should go to therapy?” seriously? who tf says that?

one day ur bullshit will catch up to u and ur gonna wake up all alone. dont fucking text me. i wont respond.

Read 2/25/20, 4:55 PM

Tuesday 10:05 PM

hey. went to din tai fung today and thought of u. was wondering if u wanted to meet up sometime. i think it'd be good to get closure.

Today, 12:08 AM

fuck u kevin

Delivered

Be Water

> "Two people are in critical condition after another day of violent demonstrations in Hong Kong. A protester was injured on Monday morning when he was shot at close range by a police officer. He was the third person shot by police since the protests began 24 weeks ago. Later on Monday a pro-Beijing supporter was doused in flammable liquid and set alight after arguing with protesters..."
>
> —BBC News, November 11, 2019

The sun had touched the dirty high-rises by the time Carson left his parent's flat. Faded awnings and traditional restaurant signs cast long shadows. Double-decker ding-dings made their twentieth trip around the block. Carson's backpack weighed his shoulders. It threatened pedestrians with every turn. Carson passed a man with large gums who wheeled boxes of produce into Lee's Grocery. A hunched woman boarded up her jewellery store window. A little boy ran down the street with a toy gun. Hong Kong's Kowloon district stirred awake.

Carson could walk these three next blocks blindfolded. Shooting Star Cafe was his favourite cha chaan teng since secondary school, thanks to its consistent milk tea and low prices. 16:16 was too early for dinner, but Carson had trained his stomach to crave doll noodles and congee at any hour. Food was energy and he needed plenty for tonight.

His phone buzzed. Joseph and Stacy had sent their orders over Telegram. Duck noodles, red bean milk, French toast with extra syrup. Thank you! Of course. Stacy sent a sobbing rabbit sticker. She forgot to bring her goggles and asked if Carson could grab a pair from home. Carson had one pair, the Oakley snowboarding goggles in his bag. Actually, Baba had a pair of carpenter's glasses by the washer. They wouldn't stay on if she ran, but at least it was something. Did she want those?

As Carson typed, something crunched under his Vans. Orange glass, pieces of the

Yoshinoya rice bowl logo. Exposed bulbs blinked where the sign had been. A tarp flapped over the restaurant window's gap. Dripping red spray paint covered the walls: 叛徒! FREE HK!

Carson held his breath. His high school football team got karaage here after games. He'd sit by the window, on those seats now open to the sidewalk, and watch faces walk past. He missed that cheap breaded chicken. Carson hadn't eaten there in a month, not since Yoshinoya announced their support for Beijing. Their blue-ribbon signaled an enemy of the protest.

The owner emerged from the tarp causing Carson to jump. He was a short, older man who offered student discounts with a smile and high-five. He looked exhausted, his gloved hands holding a broom and dustpan. Carson thought to say sorry, share his relief that this particular Yoshinoya had been spared for so long. He caught himself though. The protests demanded ruthlessness to enemies. Carson gave a curt nod and stepped over the glass.

Carson had three new messages. Stacy told him not to worry about it. She and Joseph would buy goggles while picking up supplies. They'd clock out of 7-Eleven, see him in twenty, and head to the protest in Tsim Sha Tsui by seven. Carson sent a thumbs up.

He had lost his appetite.

To his relief, a yellow ribbon hung from Shooting Star's handle. Warmth and roasted butter pulled him inside. Six wooden booths crowded the narrow restaurant. The tables never housed everyone's orders, though thighs could hold drinks if necessary. The middle aisle required a held-in breath or, in Carson's case, someone to sit for him to pass by. At the end, Mrs. Liu's prep station sat near the kitchen door. His parents said Shooting Star was old Hong Kong. The proof was on the walls. A cork board collage captured the last forty years: Mrs. Liu's late

husband and their daughters, students that no longer lived here, celebrities like Robert Downey Jr. and Old Man Lee from Lee's Grocery.

The cha chaan teng was almost empty. An affectionate couple and a sleepy-looking businessman sat near the door. It was still early, but the dinner rush had lost its energy these past few months. The stillness of the recession unsettled him. The protest's efforts to save Hong Kong had hurt folks like Mrs. Liu. Carson and his friends did their best to help. They went to Shooting Star before every protest, filling their stomachs with whatever their student salaries could afford.

Mrs. Liu was in the kitchen. Carson squeezed into the table near the prep station. He liked that spot, he could ask Mrs. Liu about her day while she worked. They had talked on Wednesday. Which was… yesterday?

Last night felt like a dream. At the front line, protesters guarded themselves with umbrellas and street sign shields. They threw Molotov cocktails, slingshotted bricks. Carson worried they'd hit an officer, though there was never time to think. Rubber bullets whizzed by their ears. Tear gas canisters fell inches from their heads.

Carson and Joseph extinguished canisters as they hit the ground. They followed swirling smoke, traced their impact, and chased clanging metal on concrete. A traffic cone covered spitting canisters. Water bottles poured down the top to extinguish. When there were too many, they chucked the smoking canisters back into no-man's-land.

At one point last night, a protester fell and clutched her arm. A rubber bullet had struck her shoulder. The girl wailed in pain, her voice muffled by more shots. Lucky that wasn't a real bullet, someone said among calls for first aid.

Everything will be okay, Carson said to her through a squeezed hand. Her grip hurt his fingers. Her bangs reminded Carson of his sister. The crowd called to fall back. The police were charging. *Don't leave*, her eyes begged.

The kitchen door swung open. Carson flinched.

Mrs. Liu carried a plate of Hong Kong-style French toast and condensed milk buns. She was a heavier-set lady in her sixties with a soft spot for coloured eyeshadow. Today she wore pink to match her pink nails and pink shirt. Carson greeted her with the colloquial ah yi, auntie.

"Another protest, Fat Boy?" Mrs. Liu said in Cantonese, "You've been out almost every day of the week! Aren't you exhausted?"

"I'm fine," Carson said. He was always exhausted.

"You talk to your boss yet?" Mrs. Liu said. She set the plate in front of the couple.

"Not yet," Carson said. He had complained about Café de Coral a week ago. Something about oversleeping and getting yelled at. Now Mrs. Liu wouldn't let it go, lending advice and insults. Carson didn't have the heart to say the conversation would never happen. "I'm waiting for my paycheck to come in first. It'll happen, ah-yi."

"Tiu," Mrs. Liu said. She carried dirty plates to the prep station, "I'll pay you the difference! Tell that woman to go to hell!"

"There's really no need," Carson said with a smile, "Thank you though."

Carson needed more than one paycheck. He was still in debt for gear: heat-resistant gloves, elbow and knee pads, goggles, construction helmet, gas mask... It weighed his backpack and emptied his wallet. The price for safety and his parents' silence.

"I can't stand people like that," Mrs. Liu said. She grabbed her notebook from her apron,

“You’re risking your life for our city! Only a college student, fighting against China! She should have some respect.”

Carson nodded. He thought of the girl’s cries last night. Losing her in the crowd. That could happen to him tonight. Did he think he could make a difference against fucking China?

“You better eat up, Fat Boy. You’ll need the strength. Same thing today?” Mrs. Liu said.

Mrs. Liu stirred condensed milk into black tea at the prep station. Carson’s thoughts rattled with the ice and spoon. He was a coward! How could he think of leaving the protests? Only a few blocks from here, an 18-year-old boy had been shot with a live round. A volunteer medic lost her right eye to a rubber bullet. He’d seen teenage protesters beaten in the street. Of course, they had no choice. Hong Kong was their home.

Mrs. Liu set his milk tea on the table. “On the house,” she said. Free milk tea was her way of thanking protesters. Would Mrs. Liu still thank him if she knew how afraid he was?

The ice bobbed in the caramel liquid. A drop slid down the side, staining the napkin orange. Through the glass, hot and cold spots tickled his palm. The first sip was strong, a flood of sharp earthiness and sweet cream. The caffeine and sugar jolted the brain. The rush felt like going down a roller coaster at Ocean Park, heart stopped and stomach lifted by gravity. The aftertaste coated the tongue in a creamy sigh. Carson sipped until the drink lost its kick.

His cousins from Mainland China couldn’t stand milk tea’s sweetness. They preferred the bland teas at yum cha. This difference across a river used to confuse him. His parents told him milk tea was from British occupation, a period before he was born. Putting cream in tea was British custom. Drinking black tea was Chinese. Condensed milk and black tea was a Hong

Kongese blend, like their government and cricket grounds and telephone booths on the sidewalk. 150 years of British rule changed Hong Kong until the island was unique, unrecognizable.

With the handover in 1997, Hong Kong became both part of China and no longer Chinese. Hong Kongers had their democratic rights guaranteed for the next fifty years. Fighting for these rights in the Mainland drew tens of thousands of students to Tiananmen Square in 1989. His parents had probably joined the students from Kowloon, a couple still in university, filling the streets with their signs and conviction. They must've watched as those students at Tiananmen crumpled from China's gunfire. No wonder Ma and Ba refused to look at him at dinner.

Thirty years later, China wanted to cut Hong Kong's freedom's short. Submitting to China's violence meant forfeiting their freedoms. Carson and his friends had to take to the streets. They had to defend their democracy and demand police accountability. Anything less would be cowardice.

So did that make Carson a coward then, to know they didn't stand a chance? Hong Kong was an island, China the world's largest superpower. His friends fought guns with slingshots and glass. The protest destroyed government and pro-Beijing buildings to send a message. The people of Hong Kong gathered every day to keep the world's attention. The movement was never supposed to be violent—the police had struck first and protesters responded out of self-defense—but already global news outlets portrayed them as rioters. Would Carson really put his life on the line for this cause? The protest was not perfect, but was it good?

Carson heard Stacy's laughter and Joseph's voice from outside. Through the window, Carson saw Stacy flash a toothy grin. Joseph groaned and carried armfuls of plastic bags. A smile crossed Carson's face as he remembered his reason. Carson went out for Stacy and Joseph.

Carson needed to make sure his best friends came home. That was good enough.

"Hey, Carson!" Stacy said, skipping down the middle aisle. She was the most athletic of the three of them with lean arms and a confident stride. Her ponytail draped over her 7-Eleven work polo and scratched Carson as they hugged.

"Hey man, sorry we're late," Joseph said. His thin arms strained under several plastic bags. He put them on the table. "We're all set for tonight. Got water, Red Bull, plastic wrap, lighters, Stacy got swimming goggles…"

"Let's hope I don't get hit in the eye," Stacy said, "It'll hurt like a bitch."

"You sure you don't want mine?" Carson said. He could leave the protest. He could run.

"You're a front linesman," Stacy said, "You need it more than I do."

"The girl who lost the eye was a medic like you," Joseph said.

Stacy laughed. "Maybe I should take yours then. Joseph's been insufferable like this all day. Going on about how cereal is a soup or some shit. Can you tell him to shut up? He doesn't seem to hear me when I say it."

Carson watched them bicker and laugh. Stacy and Joseph hadn't changed a day since they all met at HK Polytechnic in August. Stacy was as brilliant, Joseph as brave. They were fast best friends, but extreme conditions had elevated their friendship to a level Carson couldn't describe. They had laughed and fought and mourned together. Carson could hardly imagine life without them. So what was this urge to leave and run home? Would they still call Carson their friend if they saw his cowardice?

"Chopstick! Stacy!" Mrs. Liu said to them, walking out of the kitchen with their orders.

The three of them moved the supplies to the floor. Fish congee, duck burger, and noodles took their place. Stacy slurped noodles and asked Mrs. Liu about her baby grandson. Joseph dripped duck fat as he gave Carson a very broad definition of 'soup.' Carson sipped his milk tea, waiting for his fish congee to cool.

Joseph stopped halfway through his sentence, remembering something. He said, "Oh shit, did you guys see the live stream on Telegram today? Someone was shot with a live round in Sai Wan Ho."

Carson's stomach dropped.

"Fuck, again?" Stacy said.

"Yeah, this was really bad," Joseph said. He wiped the sauce off his fingers on a bunch of napkins. He opened Telegram with his pinkies. "I can find it. But know it's pretty graphic."

They watched breathlessly and on mute. A live stream from this morning began. An officer in a neon vest pulled out a pistol. He grabbed a protester in white into a headlock, pressing the gun into his chest. Another protester in black tried to grab the gun and… Carson could hear the gunshot in his head. Point blank at the boy's abdomen. The boy fell. The policeman pinned him to the ground like an animal.

The anger knocked the wind out of him. This was the third time a protester had been shot with a live round. The police were trying to kill them.

"Fuck!" Stacy said. She set her chopsticks down and crossed her arms. "Fuck the police! Oh my god, is the kid alive?"

"Critical condition, I think," Joseph said, staring at his burger.

"This makes me so fucking mad," Stacy said, "The government calls us violent when

they're pulling this shit! They treat us like animals! They're trying to kill us!"

Joseph and Stacy kept talking, but Carson couldn't hear them. He wanted to throw up. That kid could have been him. It could have been any of them. The protests were getting more violent. There was only a matter of time before—

Stop. Carson needed to focus on something else. He stared at the white chunks of fish in his congee. The circles of green onion. The comfort of home…

Remember when Ma used to buy fish at Lee's Grocery to make congee? He'd sit on stacked rice bags while his mother picked a fish from the tanks. Fish was always for congee since Carson refused to eat the whole body steamed. He never told his mother why. That the eyes bothered him. They stared behind the plastic tanks, all terrified and sad and helpless. Carson could see their unblinking fear as the worker dipped in the net. The school dispersed while the worker snagged an unlucky one. Carson looked away as the worker threw the fish on the ground. He covered his ears to the awful flopping and gasping. He wanted to cry out, tell them to stop, that it couldn't breathe, but Ma told him to keep quiet. Its suffocation was temporary. The worker grabbed a wooden paddle hanging nearby. He beat the fish as it flailed and gasped until it lay still. The worker handed its body over in a bloody bag.

Carson couldn't breathe. The edges of his vision tightened. He had to get out of there.

Stacy laughed. She and Joseph had already moved on. Carson tried to focus on their words, but his racing heart blocked all meaning. His hands shook. He wanted to scream.

"Hey, you okay?" Joseph said, nudging him. Stacy looked concerned, too.

If Carson went into how scared he was, their concern would turn into disgust. He should be angry like Stacy. Calm and steady like Joseph. Even if the protest seemed doomed. He was a

coward. He wanted to ditch his friends and save himself.

"Yeah, I'm fine. I guess I'm tired," Carson said.

Their phones buzzed. A new announcement on Telegram. Carson's stomach clenched. He knew these announcements only meant action. Stacy got to her phone first. "There's a protest going on in Mong Kok. A big one. Police are due in twenty."

"You wanna go?" Joseph said, "We'll be a little late, but we could make it."

Carson's heart raced out of his chest. He focused on slowing his breaths.

"Bigger crowd means more injuries. They'll need more medics on the ground. Let's go, yeah," Stacy said, pulling her backpack from under the table. "We can change at the station. Maps says we can catch the 17:19 train. I'll give Mrs. Liu the tab."

"You sure you're okay?" Joseph said to him, "It's okay if you need to rest."

Joseph pulled apart a napkin in his hands. He probably didn't even realize. When Joseph felt scared, he tore apart whatever was in his hands. That's how Carson and Joseph met at Polytechnic. Joseph had ripped apart his itinerary and tapped Carson's shoulder to share.

Joseph was scared shitless like him. Carson could breathe again. Joseph needed him.

"Of course, I'll be there," Carson said, "We do this together."

Carson watched his reflection in the train car window. He sat next to Joseph, Stacy, and dozens of other protesters in matching gear. Hospital masks and professional-grade filters covered noses and mouths. Black clothes protected exposed skin from tear gas. Thick gloves, yellow hard hats, and Oakley snowboard goggles added coloured accents.

Carson searched for eyes. Stacy was asleep. Joseph and a few protesters stared out of the

windows. The girl next to him looked up to the metal ceiling. Carson heard her praying under her breath. The silence put Carson in a strange calm.

Carson had no new messages. His contacts were phone numbers, Carson had removed names in case his phone was confiscated. The last message was from his mother, the one number he knew. "小心, be careful." What if his last words to her were "I'm off to work?"

Carson typed "I love you" and hovered over send. He felt the heavy silence of their last family dinner. The sting of his father's tears and mother's begging. Carson hadn't eaten dinner with them in months. What would a text do? He owed them apologies, goodbyes, explanations. Maybe the boy shot in Sai Wan Ho had stopped eating dinner with his family too. Was his empty seat tonight anything new? The thought sparked his anxiety, so Carson pushed it aside. Carson would see his family again, tell them in person. He deleted his message and turned off cellular to protect his identity from police scrapers.

The train car screeched. A protester told everyone to fix on their masks. Carson's goggles made the world darker. His mask amplified every short breath. His gloves collected his sweat.

You good? Joseph's thumbs-up asked.

Ready, Stacy smiled in her Speedo goggles.

Please be safe. I love you both, Carson said with a nod.

Carson lost Joseph and Stacy in the stream of black figures flooding the station. Carson's heart raced with the thunder of feet. They reconnected at the escalator and rode up together. Protesters crowded every step. At the top, Stacy waved goodbye to join the first-aid responders in neon vests. Carson saw the turnstiles and neon signs of the street. Voices thundered together in Cantonese, "Reclaim Hong Kong! Revolution of our times!"

Two paths stretched out. Carson could still turn, grab the next train, and return home.

Joseph tapped Carson's shoulder as if to say, *I'm here behind you, keep going.*

Mong Kok Station opened up to neon signs and designer displays. Thousands of protesters filled Nathan Road's four lanes, a river split by the median strip of cement planter boxes. To the left, a supply tent. Makeshift stations organized everything from helmets to beer bottles. They were a few blocks behind the front line. Still in civilian territory, if there was one. Civilians wore street clothes and hospital masks. Frontlinesman carried full body armor and street sign shields. Several hands held up a blackened Hong Kong flower or American flag. A teenage girl held up a sign with Bruce Lee's quote, "Be Water."

Be Water was the mantra of flexibility that kept the movement going for the last hundred days. Like water, they had no leaders. Like water, they fought and retreated. Like water, they flooded different locations all at once. This was one of dozens of protests, one day of a hundred. This was the strength of the Movement. Their Movement.

Everyone had a role to play. Volunteers tore up bricks from the sidewalk to fill slingshots. A human chain passed supplies to the front line. An older woman handed out McDonald's from the sidewalk, thanking hungry protesters. A pro-Beijing man shouted curses from his balcony, calling the protesters useless. Carson belonged at the front line. Its pull woke up a familiar terror in his chest.

Joseph pointed to his backpack. *I've got water. You ready?*

Carson nodded. *Lead the way.*

They squeezed through gaps between the crowd, picking up to a jog as they got closer. It

didn't take long to hear the fight ahead. Glass breaking. Cries for ammo. Canisters exploding. Carson's heart beat faster than his falling shoes. They drummed, *You're alive, you're alive.*

A fog of tear-gas blurred the neon designer store lights. The armoured front linesmen appeared all at once. They crowded behind a barricade of the broken fences. Everyone moved with one pulse. Bricks moved across hands so others could load slingshots and fire. Molotov cocktails danced over lighters and flew into the wasteland. Water relieved the eyes of bystanders. Hand signals called for more ammo, first aid, or another round of teargas. The front linesmen were a creature with a thousand hands, roaring against the enemy.

A tear gas canister slid up to Joseph's feet. He vaulted the smoking canister into no-man's-land. Carson watched the canister fly and land among the half-block of broken bricks and shattered glass. Carson's quick breaths thickened the air as he saw them. The police looked monolithic. Flashes of red and blue outlined their silhouettes. They were a wall, individuals marked by riot shields, striped helmets, and bulletproof vests. Laser pointers danced where their eyes should be. Bursts of smoke revealed the next flurry of tear gas and rubber bullets.

Joseph brought him back with a hand on his shoulder. He extended an arm and finger towards a nearby traffic cone. *We have a job to do.*

Carson nodded and ran to grab it. He kept his eyes up, tracing the other smoking canisters falling from the sky.

Either two hours had passed, or twenty minutes. The air changed sometime in the night. Carson looked up from Joseph and the smoking traffic cone between them. Hands hung in the air, waving the group towards Mong Kok station. Everyone who saw the signal turned away

from the enemy lines and repeated the message. The signal caught like wildfire, the scouts quickly noticed and sprinted to inform the civilian crowd. Carson knew before he processed the crowd's shouting.

Retreat!

A jolt to the brain. Carson's exhaustion and soreness melted away, every muscle tightening as he gave into cowardice. Carson grabbed Joseph's sleeve and pulled him into the river of protesters rushing down Nathan Road. They jumped over fallen planter boxes and scattered bottles, focusing on the shoes in front and behind them. The wave thundered down the street, crashing into particles as protesters slipped into side alleys and one-way streets. Joseph's last water bottle bounced in his bag. Carson held his facemask in place and pinched the stitches in his side. They beelined it to the train station as shots sounded close behind.

Carson made the mistake of looking back. The front line had disappeared into a fog of teargas. Police appeared out of the gas and shadows like monsters, grabbing slower protesters or chasing them into alleys. Carson caught an officer pinning a woman to the ground under a Dior store. Carson took another burning breath, his lungs aching for a break. He had to keep running. He had to see his family one more time.

Panic struck. Joseph had disappeared.

Carson stopped and someone slammed into him. A blur of protesters in black raced past. Carson cursed, his shoulder throbbing and every breath drawing fire to his lungs. His mask must've slipped. He turned, fumbling to readjust with a held breath. He looked for a yellow hardhat in the sea of black clothes and goggles. No one resembled Joseph's thin frame and tall stature. His worries and search made him dizzy. Where the fuck did he go? He couldn't have

gone far.

Carson saw Joseph a few hundred feet behind, waving Carson towards a side street. *Hurry! It's a shortcut,* Joseph seemed to point before disappearing inside.

Carson cursed and took after him. Every step and breath burned, but Carson refused to cough for fear of drawing attention. The protesters thinned. Black police uniforms glowed pink and blue under neon lights. Carson ducked behind a tipped trash can to avoid passing officers. When he finally made it to the street's mouth, he froze.

The street was a one-way between apartment buildings, wired together with telephone lines and fire escapes. Piles of garbage, coathangers from nearby stores and broken bottles from protest cleanup crews, soaked in puddles of sewage. A hundred feet away, an officer crouched over a body and lowered his baton. An awful thudding noise echoed off the walls. Cries followed. The sound was unlike anything Carson had heard, an animal-like yelp followed by sobbing. Between strikes, Carson could make out a voice begging for the officer to stop.

Joseph.

A heartbeat, a thud, a cry. Carson couldn't shout or rip the baton from the officer's hands. A live pistol hung from his belt, not some rubber bullet rifle. Before he knew it, Carson would be the same as the kid in this morning's live stream. The protester shot wasn't the one who'd been caught. The boy had tried to help, he had tried to intervene.

A heartbeat, a thud, a beg for mercy. Carson didn't want to die. He couldn't listen to the voices screaming for him to run either. In the faint light from nearby department stores, Joseph's face glistened with sweat and blood. His eyes were bruised shut and blood dripped from a busted lip. His hands folded awkwardly behind him, zip-tied. The officer wanted to kill his best friend.

The officer would kill Joseph and Carson would have to look Joseph's parents in the eye and Stacy in the eye and Mrs. Liu in the eye and reporters in the eye and himself in the eye and try to explain. There were no words, no time.

A heartbeat. Carson snatched the neck of a stray beer bottle, an abandoned Molotov cocktail, from the trash. The beer-drenched his sleeve and glove.

A thud. Carson shattered the butt against the floor. Something warm flowed over his palm, but he kept his grip around the bottle's neck. Jagged glass reflected the neon lights.

A sob. Carson charged the officer bottle first and slammed into his side. The glass dug into the officer's arm. Carson caught his balance as the officer fell. His heart hammered, a hollow sound to Carson's numbness. Slowly, Carson felt the wetness and biting on his hand. Glass had cut through his glove, Carson could feel the long cut in his palm.

On the ground, the officer held his head. Crimson stained his white sleeve. Parts of the bottle had stuck into his arm, a shard the length of Carson's hand. Carson stared through goggles, his lungs ached from the gas, but Carson didn't draw another breath. He stabbed a police officer. The protest was nonviolent. He would never do something like this...

Joseph's moans brought Carson back. Carson lifted Joseph off the ground, carefully working his arm around the cries of a broken rib. At the very least, Joseph was lighter than him and easy to carry. Carson half-ran Joseph back onto Nathan Road as the officer came to. Carson heard the man cursing as they ran. He could only pray the officer wouldn't recognize them.

The four-lane street was deserted. The wind had carried the tear gas and police closer to Mong Kok station. Carson held onto Joseph and ripped off his mask. He filled his lungs for the first time in hours, gasping for breath and choking on spit. His sweaty hair felt icy in the evening

wind. A small patch of warm liquid on his face crusted.

He had blood on his face! His gloves were soaked and dripping, they left red smears on his mask and goggles. Carson hadn't realized how much his hands were bleeding. He could feel it throb, the heart in his palm racing to remind him that they had survived. Carson could take Joseph to the hospital. He could go home and tell his parents he loved him. Tell Mrs. Liu about his bravery before tomorrow's protest.

There would be another protest tomorrow. The realization filled Carson with a familiar dread. He adjusted Joseph's weight on his shoulder as they passed graffitied security cameras, missing chunks of brick, and zip-tied fences. China destroyed their city from the inside out. Every part of Hong Kong had a part to play in this war. Everything became a weapon, one way or another. Carson covered his mouth with his glove to keep from crying. He took his first deep breath in hours and focused on the next step.

White Rabbit, Sour Plum

Uncle Zheng, 1989

When Uncle Zheng saw Wai Git at the baggage carousel at Oakland Airport, he knew America would crush him. His nephew struggled to lift a lady's suitcase off the belt. Wai Git's gangly arms wrestled with pink handles and flower-print corners. His off-white dress shirt ran short on his narrow frame, revealing stark white skin and bone. Wai Git had grown into a man, much taller than the feverish toddler Uncle Zheng remembered, but Uncle Zheng saw the same weakness in his eye. Wai Git wheeled the bag to a young woman in a winter coat. She thanked him, laughing as Wai Git doubled back for his own bag as it slipped away.

In the car, Uncle Zheng learned that the woman was a stranger. She had sat next to Wai Git on the flight. She and Wai Git had talked for several hours about their families in Taishan and their hopes for the Bay Area. They promised to stay in touch, but Wai Git forgot to ask for her address! Uncle Zheng held his tongue. Nothing he could say would prepare Wai Git for the upcoming heartbreak. America would teach him everything soon enough. Uncle Zheng shook his head as Wai Git stared at eucalyptus trees and Victorian houses like a boy in love.

Wong Wai Git, 1989

Wong Wai Git's first job in America was restocking Uncle Zheng's corner store at 9th and Harrison in Oakland Chinatown. He spent most of his time in the back storage room. Under flickering bulbs, he counted varieties of Lays chips, Pocky sticks, and chocolate bars. Their bright labels and airy packaging amazed Wai Git. Americans spent so much money on yeet hay junk that barely filled the stomach. This was what Ma meant when she said "land of abundance."

Taking inventory was boring. Wai Git usually finished early and used the empty hours to study English. In the storage room, he could study free of embarrassment or lost customers. Wai Git dreamed of emerging from the storage room completely fluent. He could already see the look on Uncle Zheng's face, he'd be so impressed! Wai Git sounded out "Doritos Cool Ranch" and "Sierra Mist." He traced his new name, Wyatt, on inventory sheets. He listened to the walls and echoed Uncle Zheng's harsh English. Whenever he drifted on 7-Up and Coke boxes, remembering his luck jolted him awake. Other Chinese workers were burning themselves in laundries and kitchens down the street! As long as he counted correctly and did as Uncle Zheng said, he could afford a couch in Uncle's apartment upstairs and save the rest for his future.

Uncle Zheng manned the register outside. Marlboro packs and lottery tickets decorated the walls behind Uncle Zheng's head. Packs of gum and mints covered the counter. The cash register faced the door, offering the perfect angle to glare at regulars and shoplifters. The store was wider than it was deep with six aisles for candies, snacks, canned goods, toiletries, party favors, and drinks to the right. Barred windows and humming bulbs illuminated the shelves. Wai Git set out Bin Bin rice crackers, Pringles, and saltines so the labels looked crisp and straight. He could feel Uncle Zheng watching.

Wai Git met Uncle Zheng for the first time last Tuesday, though talks of sponsorship began long before Wai Git was born. Wai Git knew Uncle Zheng by his deep voice on the building telephone. Ma kept Uncle Zheng's passport photo in her wallet. Uncle Zheng had a large forehead, something Ma said made her brother a shrewd businessman. In person, Wai Git learned Uncle Zheng's success was mainly due to temper. Uncle Zheng yelled at suspicion of missing candy bars or nickels in the register. He spit at teenage shoplifters and short-handed

delivery men with the same fervor. Sometimes after too many drinks, he yelled at his wife's ghost, who had left him for their dentist and moved to Michigan. Wai Git feared and admired Uncle's gnoc, his fierceness. He had kept his store open through the '82 recession and owned three shops. "Learn" was the last thing Ma said to Wai Git. Uncle Zheng could teach him to find the golden peak of Gam Saan.

Over time, Uncle Zheng gave Wai Git bits of wisdom:

1. Smile and nod. Wai Git only saw Uncle Zheng smile when the front door jingled and when cash entered the register. He'd talk with customers like old friends. When Wai Git asked, Uncle Zheng said it kept them returning. Wai Git introduced himself as Wyatt and learned to ask "How are you?" He smiled and nodded, partly because Americans spoke too fast and partly because they thought you were only listening if you agreed with them.

2. Know the inventory. Chips made the most money. Wai Git memorized their shapes: tongue, wavy tongue, worm, and triangle. Uncle Zheng knew exactly how many bags sat in the third aisle. When they ran out, he told customers, 'No more, tomorrow please.' Wyatt never understood why. New deliveries only arrived on Tuesday at 8 a.m.

3. Trust no one. The sunflower seeds and Bin Bin rice crackers sat on the shelf closest to the register. Uncle Zheng checked them as though they might disappear. Shoplifters loved to steal them. Uncle Zheng taught Wai Git the word "fucker" and to use it as soon as he saw someone slip a bag in a pocket. When Wai Git offered to chase them down, Uncle Zheng yelled at him, "Never fight them, idiot! Some fuckers carry guns!"

Those were the easy lessons. Wai Git had left his winter clothes in Guangzhou in his excitement for the Sunshine State. He studied English for hours but only had a burning face to

show for it. He weathered Uncle Zheng's daily fits, saving his tears for the closed storage room door. Most importantly, Wai Git learned to survive the ache of homesickness. His brothers' laughter and Ma's cooking called him home to Taishan, rooted him to stay in America. Wai Git messed up the first few envelopes, but he finally wrote his first check. He sent it home with his American name and address on the return label.

Wyatt Wong, 1989

When Wyatt's family called, he heard how life had moved past his absence. His mother could afford new clothes and his youngest brothers could afford their education. His eldest brother had gotten married to his longtime fiancéefiancee and the reception had the best squab and dancing. Ma would say this all in eight minutes—international calls on collect were expensive—and then Wyatt would have two minutes to talk. Things were good, Ma. They were always good.

Of course, Wyatt wouldn't mention the robberies over the last three months. Uncle Zheng never did and for good reason. There was no use worrying her.

Before Wyatt saw a gun for the first time, Uncle Zheng warned that the neighborhood was dangerous. Every two hours, he gave Wyatt big bills to hide in boxes of dried squid. At night, Uncle cursed shoplifters' quick fingers and shirt bulges. Wyatt sometimes caught Uncle Zheng rehearsing English words under his breath. They sounded steady and slow.

Wyatt began to wonder if Uncle was paranoid in the same way he was angry. Their customers were almost all tong yen. The occasional Black or White man was friendly, full of laughter and thumbs-up. Wyatt had overheard stories of robberies at nearby restaurants and knew

better than to flash his wallet or walk around at night. He couldn't see why someone would rob their little store though, especially with the bank down the street.

The first gun appeared four weeks after Wyatt arrived.

Around sundown, Wyatt heard shouting from outside the storage room door. A man repeated something in English and for a second, Wyatt thought the two drunk men had started a fight by the coolers again. Wyatt had his hand on the knob when a fist pounded twice on the door. Uncle Zheng's Taishanese shook as he spoke, "He has a gun! Stay inside! Gun!"

"English… Speak English, motherfucker!" A man said. Something metallic clicked into place by the register. The man shouted some more, angrier and louder.

Wyatt froze. The storage room wrapped around his lungs. A bullet could slip through the walls and strike his arm or chest. Wyatt dropped to his knees and armed himself with the nearest heaviest object, a can of grass jelly drink. Thoughts drowned out sound and sense. Wyatt had to defend Uncle. Uncle said not to fight though, Wyatt could die. They both could die. If he waited, they could still die. Wyatt wanted to see his family again. Family was all he had.

Wyatt leveled his eye to the keyhole. Uncle Zheng had the register open, his movements slow and shaky. He spoke in leveled English, the same phrase Wyatt heard him rehearsing over and over: "Please don't shoot… I take money out… I am grabbing big bills… Here, all we have… Please don't… please don't shoot..."

Inches from Uncle Zheng's head, the short barrel of a pistol. The gunman's hand shook as it rested over the trigger.

Ming Chiu, 1993

Ming got his first job during his Junior year of high school. He helped stock that run-down corner store by Lincoln Park in Chinatown. His friends loved stopping there for guava candies and Warheads on their way to tutoring. On a dare, Ming approached the younger employee and asked for a job. To his surprise, the employee took him seriously. Ming got the job and an employee discount on any candy he wanted. His friends loved him for it.

The job was great when Ming's boss, Mr. Zheng, wasn't on his ass. Mr. Zheng had lungs, he yelled in Cantonese the same way Ming's Dad did with grades. Ming preferred the young guy, Wyatt. Wyatt was chill, always smiling and laughing. He'd pointed at Ming's clothing—wide-leg jeans, a bomber jacket, an oversized shirt—and told Ming he looked cool.

The night shift was Ming's favorite. At sundown, Uncle Zheng left Wyatt and Ming in charge of the store. They kicked their feet up on the counter and listened to Boyz II Men on the new radio. Wyatt let Ming eat Pocky sticks. For hours they struck up conversations with regulars: the Ring Pop kids on their way home from tutoring; the weed dealer who spoke Mandarin and bought an iced coffee as a courtesy; the scary White man who demanded a restroom and a lighter. As the evenings stretched near dinner time and the crowds thinned, Wyatt offered Ming the chance to go home early to see his family. Ming found some excuse to stay. Wyatt never asked questions, he just boiled water for top ramen.

On a particularly slow night, Ming disappeared into the storage room and brought out his Sony Discman. Wyatt gaped, running a hand over the smooth cover and shiny chrome buttons. There were already scratches on the side from all its use in the last week, but it looked futuristic. Ming smiled ear-to-ear.

“This is the latest Sony!” Wyatt said, “I saw this in a Black Friday ad last month. It was $300! On sale! This must’ve costcosted you a fortune.”

“Nah, not too bad,” Ming said, though he’d been saving up for months. “You remember how I was telling you about the Wu-Tangabout Wu-Tang Clan the other day? Well, I wanted you to actually hear them for yourself. I got their debut album, you won’t believe how good it is. Don’t worry, you don’t have to understand all the English to feel the beat.”

“Wah,” Wyatt said, “Is this why you’ve been working such long hours?”

Ming shrugged. He wanted to say he liked Wyatt’s company, but that wasn’t something guys said. “One of ‘em, yeah. I should be saving for a car, but my parents were working on my birthday last week and I figured I’d treat myself,” Ming said, handing him a pair of earbuds, “There’s a surprise you might recognize. Listen close. It’s pretty cool.”

...The Shaolin and the Wu-Tang could be dangerous

Do you think your Wu-Tang sword can defeat me?

En garde, I'll let you try my Wu-Tang style

Bring da motherfuckin' ruckus

Bring da motherfuckin' ruckus…

“Shaolin!” Wyatt shouted in Ming’s ear, “Why do they mention Shaolin?”

“I’m right here, Jesus,” Ming said, ripping the earbuds out, “The rappers are Black, but they got a lot of inspiration from Shaolin Kung Fu movies. Isn’t that genius?”

“This singer has good taste. Shaolin is a classic. That takes me back,” Wyatt said. “I was only fourteen when *Shaolin Temple* came out. My brothers and I wrestled for weeks!”

“Whoa, there were other Shaolin movies other than *The 36th Chamber*?”

"Of course!" Wyatt said, "I'll find the VHS tape and give it to you tomorrow. I bought it the other day. Ask your family to watch with you, I'm sure they'll remember it too."

"I mean, my Ba doesn't let me watch movies. He says it'll distract from my studies."

"Tiu!" Wyatt said, "Studying isn't everything. You can be smart in other ways. Like street smart! It all depends on what you want to do. If you want to be a doctor, go to school. Business man? Start a business. But not everyone wants to be a doctor or businessman. So what do you want to do, Ming? After all this."

Ming stared at him. An adult had never talked to Ming like that before. They usually told him what to do; no one cared what Ming wanted. Ming looked to his Discman, his voice shaky. Wyatt had put into words what Ming had been shouting into his lyrics for the last three months. He could tell Wyatt the truth. "Music. Ima be a rapper like Wu-Tang Clan."

Wyatt smiled and offered Ming the other earbud. "Good! We better start studying then!"

Wyatt Wong, 1994

Mr. Miller, the delivery man, broke his and Wyatt's routine of polite smiles in 1994. Wyatt usually avoided saying much beyond "Good morning" and "Good, thank you." He understood the outlines of English questions and stories, but the details got muddied in the flurry of jagged sounds. He froze before and while speaking, gaps lengthened by a familiar look of confusion and pity. Wyatt's inability, once a source of shyness, had transformed into deep shame. After five years in America, this could only mean failure of persistence and funds. Without either, the next best thing was to smile. After a while, Wyatt felt the delivery man understood: conversations at Lucky Corner Store only came when Uncle Zheng felt

shortchanged.

Then Mr. Miller asked about Wyatt's favorite... something. Wyatt thought he had imagined the question, Mr. Miller had touched his cap and spoken fast. The delivery man looked at him for a moment with a smile. He expected a reply.

Then Mr. Miller repeated his words slower, moving his hair-covered arms. He pointed at Wyatt. "You-r." Mr. Miller said. He folded his fingers into a heart. "Favorite."

Wyatt heard that, he was missing what Mr. Miller had said after. Wyatt hesitated and gathered his words. He said, "What you say…" Fuck, what was the word for 'after'?

"Uh-huh, *what you say*," Mr. Miller mocked. He made a face and for a brief, horrified moment, Wyatt saw how Mr. Miller saw him. Hunchbacked, front teeth jutted out, small eyed. Like a grotesque rat. This couldn't be the same Mr. Miller he'd waved and smiled to the last five years.

"Wai, gweilo!" A woman shouted from across the street.

She had stepped out of the store in a waitress uniform with an iced green tea in hand. Her red lipstick was curled into a snarl. She rallied curses at Mr. Miller in English until he shook his head and drove off in his truck.

"Did he threaten you?" The woman asked in Cantonese, "I know someone at the community center you can talk to if he did. We tong yen can't keep taking that shit."

"No," Wyatt said. Meeting her eyes, he couldn't speak. She was as terrifying as she was beautiful. "Thank you."

"Of course. I'm sorry that happened. Have a nice day," The woman said. She had barely rounded the corner when Wyatt ran after her and got her pager. Her name was Celia.

Mr. & Mrs. Wong, 1995

The year Wyatt and Celia became Mr. and Mrs. Wong, they welcomed their first son, David. At the Red Egg party, Uncle Zheng surprised their family and friends with a shocking announcement: he would leave the corner store to Wyatt. Uncle Zheng was moving to San Leandro for retirement. For the first time, Wyatt cried in front of Uncle Zheng.

The Wongs used the money they had saved for a new house in the suburbs to refurbish the corner store. They repainted the outside a rich blue with white trimmings and changed the sign to "Wong's Corner Store." Wyatt scraped the graffiti off the windows while Celia scrubbed the grime between tiles. They replaced rusty displays and leaky fridges, decorated with lucky cats and paper lanterns. Wong's Corner Store opened in May.

Celia captured new and old faces on polaroids, filling a spare wall with their little community. Over the years, they added the old men and their newspapers, kids with missing baby teeth, badminton teams and coaches, sweet-toothed policemen, and high school seniors off to big colleges. Celia offered a piece of White Rabbit candy with pieces of life advice. She proposed the machines for bubble milk tea and cheap sandwiches for the lunch rush. Celia knew the names of every high school student and restaurant worker who said hello.

The year little David ran paper airplanes through the aisles of the store, the Wongs were pregnant with their second child. The morning the results came back, Wyatt let his son eat whatever he wanted from the shelves. David sprinted to the candy section, touching each item. Watching their boy from behind the counter, Celia said to Wyatt, "You know, all those cavities might make the boy a good dentist someday."

"Or a food critic," Wyatt said, "Look how careful he is! The boy has great taste like you."

Celia smiled. "Our little ones can be anything they want. Isn't that wonderful?"

Watching his little David hold up a Juicy Fruit Pop and a box of Hello Panda, Wyatt realized how much life had changed over the last decade. For the first time, Oakland felt like more of a home than Taishan. His family in China was prosperous, ecstatic now that Wyatt had brought the family its first grandson. They could talk of plane tickets with a set date rather than wishful future. This was why his family sent him to America, this was how America worked. As long as Wyatt worked hard enough, he could make all of his dreams come true.

Mr. Wong, 1998

Eight months later, the last thing Mr. Wong wanted was flowers and Tupperware fried rice. The neighborhood meant it as a kindness, but Mr. Wong couldn't bear to keep finding them. He'd walk David to pre-school and see white lilies woven through the store's metal grates. At lunch, Ming would mention a visitor and point to a tub of food with a condolence note.

The first day of winter, Mr. Wong plucked the new flowers and cards from the grate. He gathered the notes stacked near the register and White Rabbit candy from the shelves. Everything went into a plastic Thank You bag. The bag, twinkling with glass and crushed petals, crashed into the wastebasket. It was one less reminder of her. Everything reminded him of her.

The front door opened and the cardboard displays filled the sidewalk. The first customers would arrive in thirty minutes. Mr. Wong set his watch and allowed himself to sob.

David Wong, 2004

David's favorite part of the day was after kung fu practice. Around sunset, he'd race Baba back to the store. He ran fast because the winner got a piece of candy of their choice and the loser had to eat a sour plum. They'd sprint past Chinatown signatures: old ladies and little carts, a blanket of purses, open boxes of fruit, and the tailor at the beginning of their street.

Before they reached the store, Ming would run outside and stick his arms out like a finish line ribbon. David passed under Ming's arm right before Baba hit Ming's hand. Ming announced David as winner and paraded him into the store.

David picked his favorite, a piece of White Rabbit candy, and swerved over to the sour plum jar for Baba's punishment. Baba would stick out his tongue and plop! his face would shrink and wrinkle and gag. David laughed, warming the hard milk candy into a chewy glob in his cheek, and taste sweet milk. He squished Baba's face like a wrinkly putty.

Mr. Wong, 2006

When David was eleven, Mr. Wong began to accept that his son had some questions he couldn't answer. Math problems with letters. What a teacher meant when she wrote "more analysis" on an essay. Whether Mr. Wong could skip work to make the school play.

It didn't help that David only asked in English, even when Mr. Wong replied in Taishanese. Mr. Wong had given up on reminding the boy to speak his mother tongue. He preferred English to David's rebellious silence. When David asked a question, Mr. Wong followed his son's eyes for clues. Mr. Wong became fluent in his son's silent expectation,

confusion, and doubt. Mr. Wong gave his best answer, though David sometimes rolled his eyes in response. Mr. Wong hoped everything else could make up for it: favorite candies snuck into lunch boxes, expensive Pokémon games on birthdays, and free snacks for David's friends.

One afternoon, Mr. Wong's eldest brother rang the store telephone from Taishan and asked for money. The call evolved into an argument over gambling debts, everything compacted into ten minutes. Mr. Wong's fingers were white by the time he slammed the phone back into the ringer. The nerve of his brother! Bringing up the old days, as if they had a relationship outside of lender and beggar these last twenty years. Mr. Wong hardly recognized his brother's voice!

The sound must've startled David because he opened the storage room, Gameboy still in hand. He spoke in English. "What happened to First Uncle? Is he okay?"

"He's fine. Nothing. Adult talk. Keep playing games."

"Are we going to China?" David said, eyes wide, "Oh! Are they coming here?"

"Why you think that?" Mr. Wong said, trying to recall his conversation. "No, we staying here. If First Uncle wants to visit, he can pay."

"But it's almost Winter break! We could go for Christmas," David said.

"Why for Christmas?" Mr. Wong said. David had opened his presents early, did he want an international vacation too? How was Mr. Wong supposed to explain drying finances and bloated airfare prices to a boy who had failed his last math test?

"Cause our whole family is there! Everyone spends Christmas with their family. All my friends have been to China already," David said, "Don't you miss it, Dad?"

Ming Chiu, 2008

The 2008 recession hit harder than a motherfucker. Ming could tell Wyatt was working his ass off to keep him on the payroll. Wyatt halved the inventory. Specialty chips and candy disappeared from shelves and loyal customers left disappointed. Then the store hours lengthened. Ming would clock out and clock in and wonder if Wyatt had slept in between. Finally, they wheeled out the boba machine his late wife bought. Wyatt refused to talk for days.

That's why when Wyatt snapped at him, over small things like forgetting to transfer big bills to the storage room, Ming gave Wyatt the benefit of the doubt. The poor man was tired of the grind. They all were.

Sometimes on really slow afternoons, Ming would joke about getting fired. He thought laughing might make the goodbye easier somehow. He said shit like, "If you ever can't afford to keep me on, Wyatt, gimme a sour plum and I'll be on my way. No hurt feelings or nothing."

Wyatt always shook his head. He said, "The day I fire you is the day the store dies." He said it with so much conviction, Ming almost believed him.

The conversation happened in late October. Ming grabbed his jacket from the storage closet. When he came back out, Wyatt was waiting for him with the envelope his checks came in. Payday was a week ago and this envelope was three times as thick.

"I'm sorry, Ming," Wyatt said. He looked like an old man all of a sudden. The LEDs shadowed his worry lines and crow's feet. It felt like yesterday they were chilling with Ming's Discman. Wyatt used to be so carefree.

"Hell no, man. I won't take it. I can't," Ming said, "It ain't right."

"It's what you would've earned anyway," Wyatt said. "Take it. Please."

"You're firing me because the store will tank if you don't. I get it. Put that shit away,

someone might catch you flashing it."

"We don't need this money. I took a loan from Uncle Zheng. The store will be fine."

"Oh, okay," Ming said, laughing. "So you're firing me cause you don't like me?"

"Ming, how long have you worked here? What else do you expect out of this job? Look around, you know it doesn't change! You have no future here. Any more time is wasted time."

"Wyatt, I've told you. I don't wanna a big corporate job. I'm here cause I wanna be."

"You're here because you're lazy," Wyatt said, "You're letting your dreams disappear. You told me you wanted to be like Wu-Tang! And what has happened since? You've dropped out of community college. You moved back with your parents. You've worked here. What else?"

The balls on this man! Wyatt was trying to shit on him? After all the years they'd spent together? After all the sacrifices Ming made to help out? "You don't know anything about this shit, Wyatt. It's not easy."

"It's hard! I know! It has to be harder than you sitting here all day, eating my snacks and talking about girls. Is this how you write music? By getting fat and horny?"

"You have no right to say this fucking shit," Ming said. He had a life! He fixed up cars and played poker with his friends. Wyatt made him sound like some kind of loser. "How are you any different, huh? You don't have dreams! You've never worked anywhere but here."

"I know! That's why I need you to go. One of us needs to dream," Wyatt said. "Don't come back until you have an album or record label or whatever the fuck Wu-Tang does."

"Listen to yourself! You don't even know what you're talking about! I can't believe this bullshit. Good night, Wyatt," Ming said, shaking his head. He pushed the door open and stepped out into the glow of street lamps.

Wyatt chucked the envelope onto the sidewalk and slammed the shop door in his face. He shouted through the door. “I told you to leave! Don’t come back.”

Ming cursed, took the money, and walked.

David Wong, 2010

At fifteen, David thought he knew hunger. He grew almost six inches his sophomore year. He shoveled three bowls of rice at dinner and ate Captain Crunch in the middle of the night. He wanted to try out for the basketball team, the Knicks drafting Jeremy Lin gave David hope, so he pounded milk and protein powder and after school pick-up games with the same rigor.

Hotboxing in his friend’s Chevy Cobalt woke a new hunger though. He felt a greed for bowls of hot chicken Sam Yang ramen and bags of shrimp chips, all at once. His friend proposed In N’ Out or late night wonton mein, but David had a better idea. David had the keys to Asian snack heaven. Plus, they were broke and the store was free.

They stumbled under the faded Wong’s Corner Store sign. David found the brick where his father kept the spare key. He remembered the intruder alarm but forgot to warn his friend before hitting the LED lights. When everything came into view, David and his friend couldn’t stop laughing. They had hit the lottery. David felt like a kid again, showing his primary school friends his wealth and abundance.

They tore through bags of Doritos and Shrimp Chips, sweeping them into snow angels when too many fell to the floor. They drank one, two, three bowls of ramen and saved a fourth for an experiment with microwaved Red Bull. They washed the salt down with Gatorade and grass jelly drink, two flavors that mixed surprisingly well, and contemplated starting a business

for “Gator Jelly.” For dessert, they filled their mouths with Skittles and lychee jelly and nearly choked on their laughter.

As their binge settled into aching satisfaction, his friend pointed up at the security camera in the corner ceiling. He chuckled to himself and said, “It’s weird how your Dad installed cameras but no display. Smart, actually. That’s to scare people, yeah?”

David almost threw up. “Fuck! Fuck! Fuck!”

“What? What?”

“Of course, there’s a TV display! It’s in the storage room. Oh my God, we’re fucked!”

Paranoia led to a scramble. They swept up crushed chips and shouted the short distance from the storage room to the shelves. They wiped the counters clean of sauce and Gator Jelly. They replaced every snack and turned the labels with obsession-level precision. A shattered lucky cat led to screaming, crying, and cursing. It didn’t take long for Baba to find them.

Baba drove David’s friend home. David had never experienced a longer stretch of silence. His friend left without a wave, he didn’t even make eye contact before slipping up the stairs to his house. David expected Baba to start up the car, but they sat parked outside. The car lights faded and left them in the dark. Baba’s sharp breaths cut the silence.

“Ba, please,” David finally said, his voice breaking. He could hear himself cry before he felt the tears fall, “This was my fault. I can explain.”

“Speak Taishanese!” Baba said, “God, have the fucking balls to speak to your old man how you’re supposed to! Did I not teach you anything right? Did I really raise a coward?”

David froze, searching for breath. Baba might as well have slapped him.

“What the fuck were you thinking? You stink of drugs. You rob us. You ruin my store.

Our family's store. Our livelihood! Fucking idiot! I raised an idiot! I'm ashamed of you."

David shook his head. He was glad that Ba couldn't see him crying. "I'm sorry, Ba. I'm so sorry. I fucked up."

"Sometimes I wish Ming would come back," Baba said, "Ming was a better son than you. The fucker failed out of community college and probably got a girl pregnant and sat in my store like a bum. Still he was still a better son than you! What have you done for me? How have you helped our family? Ming worked for us for years. You do nothing! You've ruined us!"

David would think about these words for the rest of his life. He'd stay up at night and shed a tear, recount them in the dark to his wife. At the time though, the words hit him like rushing water. Pounding. Relentless. Overwhelming.

When David listened past the roar, he realized his father was crying too.

Mr. Wong, 2014

The summer before David left for college, Mr. Wong reorganized the storage room with new Costco shelves and storage bins. David kept telling him to find projects to offset empty nest syndrome, as though Mr. Wong had no life outside of his grown son. Mr. Wong adjusted the white earbuds David had bought him for Christmas. The lyrics to Ming's first song popped in his ears. They made no sense, but Mr. Wong loved the beat.

David said something. Mr. Wong pulled an earbud out.

"Wai?" Mr. Wong said, "Say again?"

"We have a visitor! Guess who!" David said in Taishanese.

Mr. Wong opened the door. A wide smile stretched across his face. Uncle Zheng, graying

and weak from last year's stroke, supported himself on David's arm. "You haven't aged a day!" Mr. Wong said, "How's your health, Uncle? How's San Leandro? You should have told us you were visiting, I could've started a pot of tea upstairs."

"I won't stay for very long, I'm only here for the boy," Uncle Zheng said. He produced a red envelope from his pocket. A White Rabbit candy sat on top of it. "A gift! Before he leaves for UC Berkeley!"

David laughed. "I'm not going that far away, Uncle. You really didn't have to."

"What, do you not want it? It's free money!" Uncle Zheng shouted.

"Of course, I do! Thank you, Uncle," David said, sidestepping away, "I'm gonna help that customer now. Thank you, Uncle. Nice to see you again."

Uncle Zheng met Mr. Wong's eyes and flashed a smirk. Liver spots covered Uncle Zheng's cheeks and a film coated his teeth. Those eyes never aged though. A fierceness sharpened them. That gnoc built up, like the blood clot of his stroke, until it almost killed him. Mr. Wong could feel the same gnoc thickening in his heart. He saw his future standing in his store, he saw where the anger would take him. Mr. Wong hated the gnoc, but he finally understood its source.

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