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A JONG AND MARVEY ADVENTURE

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GENERAL
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SHANGHAI NOBODY

*A young programmer's adventure to find love and purpose
in the 21st century mega-metropolis.*

VANN CHOW

Shanghai Nobody

A Novel

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"In the country the darkness of night is friendly and familiar, but in a city, with its blaze of lights, it is unnatural, hostile and menacing. It is like a monstrous vulture that hovers, biding its time." --- W. Somerset Maugham

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Prologue: The Problem

The problem is, there are simply way too many Chinese men on this side of the world.

After years of killing off --- I am not going to spare your sensitivity because it is what it is --- baby girls and let live the baby boys in Mainland China by the ignorant bunch, there are officially way too many Chinese males in the country for each of us to have a fair chance of being in a heterosexual marriage. This means, I am stat out of a girlfriend, wife and a lifelong companion.

The good news is that not having married at the age of thirty, which is way above the average marriage age for Chinese men for the past five thousand years, has nothing to do with you, or me, per se. It is just all circumstances.

This artificial, unnatural selection created a situation where women are in high demand. It has turned Chinese women into thinking of themselves as princesses, if not queens, of any heterosexual relationships, and Chinese men, into a desperate female-attention seeking animal with less self-esteem than newspaper fetching dogs and more showoff-ish than courting peacock when they get the chance.

Any typical Chinese girl would say, if we were to do an interview on the streets of Shanghai, Beijing, or even the rather westernized Hong Kong, an ideal husband would be someone rich with house and car, preferably in plural forms, acquired via a nice, awe-inspiring job with high salary. In absence of any of the above, they should be born

rich, or have a dying relative that would inherit them a large sum of money or rights to a profit making company. Shall neither of these apply, it would still be acceptable to simply have an above average height and above average build, in combination with dashing looks and a head of reasonably dense hair.

What this means is, I am pretty much screwed.

I do not need your pity. I realized that the more compassion I get, the more competition it meant for me in the marital market.

Chapter 1: Queens

At thirty-three, I had just broken up with a long-term girlfriend of four years. I thought I would be with her forever, not only because I loved her, which I did of course, but also for the fact that I would never let her go for if I ever did, I would never get a second chance again at having a girlfriend.

The relationship was going well for a very long time.

Like many couples that had been together for a few years, we talked about getting married and talked about buying a house. Then we talked about signing the papers at the municipality because a full Chinese feast of a wedding would come at too hefty a price and we also talked about renting a small place together which could only fit the size of one human being and a dog, that role regrettably filled by me, so that we could live together immediately after marrying. After about another three months I proposed that in order to further reduce our expense, I could continue to rely on my mom's excellent housekeeping and cooking skills, my ex-girlfriend and then-future wife could move into my parent's house which I was already living in. She agreed somewhat reluctantly. And one day when she was showing me wedding dresses options from a Chinese online shopping website which offered wedding gowns the price of a piece of carrot, or something like that, I gave her the unfortunate remark that these dresses were way too low quality to be used in a proper wedding.

That apparently was the wrong thing to say, for she exploded. There was no word for the level of rage she attained on hearing my casual remark which was meant to be said and ignored.

Everything went downhill from there.

Understandably she had a lot of suitors, just like any other girls in China with two arms and legs. However, she was my fiance as soon as she said yes to my marriage proposal, which was in completely virtual reality settings in front of the Eifel tower where I gave her a virtual diamond ring the size of an egg. She made a commitment and to her credit she stuck to it pretty much all the way while waiting for me to save up enough money to buy her a real ring, which would have to start at a much lower karat than the one she got in virtual reality, until that moment.

That moment, she fired up one of the many apps that was password-locked which I never bothered to hack into on her phone because I respected her privacy and now greatly regretted it, to show me the list of notifications from strange men much more qualified in her eyes than me to offer her a comfortable family life.

I argued that they would never love her more than I did and no one would make her happier than I did. She retorted the famous line that was floating around the internet like wildfire a couple of years ago --- I would rather cry in a BMW than laugh on the back of a bicycle. This totally shut me down, because until then I thought what we have was true love. I absolutely did not expect that my girlfriend, someone of reasonable upbringing and good education would feel equally disgusted, as all the other women in our time and age, by laughing on the back of a bicycle in the imagery scenario, that she would tarnish our love by prescribing this line to me! What a denigration to our relationship!

For years I had been watching Jay Chou's music videos and most of them consisted of him carrying a girl on the back of his bicycle on a country road having a good time. It was all very romantic and affectionate. Apparently everything was just a poor man's illusion. If my girlfriend, the

nicest, sweetest woman in the world thought this was laughable, then no other girl would think any better of it.

Creeps flew up my spine. I frowned, and left the premise.

We broke up and I could not bring myself to speak to her ever again for she represented very well the other side that I was up against. It was not a single woman that I was facing. It was the whole Chinese female population.

My friend whom I had told this to, Kelvin, said I was wrong. We were, in fact, up against the whole of female population which was becoming more and more self-centered, selfish, greedy and money-focused. For he had friends who had friends who live in other parts of the world. He said all women were the same.

In some countries like Japan or Korean the men had it worse because most of the women did not work, unlike most Chinese women, so they had even more incentive to make the husband-picking threshold ever higher and the process ever more excruciating to ensure their future lives were completely foolproof. Meanwhile in South East Asian countries like the Philippines, Indonesia and Thailand, most women made more money than men because of the abundance of opportunity to work in foreign countries as household helpers who, by virtue of relative health of the foreign economies, could afford them to be ever more critical of their male suitors.

Unfortunately for me, he added, as if he was doing much better than me, I drew the short stick. Being an engineer, I was quintessentially boring and unromantic already because of my profession and natural disposition that led me to this career path. This was wrong, of course, because I considered my virtual reality proposal trick a romantic feat, but I didn't bother correcting him.

At thirty-three, I was broke, without a girlfriend and without a prospect of having one, up against the whole of female population.

This was the problem.

A very big problem.

Chapter 2: The Problem is Not The Problem

If only there was a solution to every problem in this world, there would be no need for engineers.

The one at hand, the biggest problem I had ever encounter, was so challenging that I decided to dedicate my whole life into solving it, so I would never be out of work in a sense.

There was a Chinese saying that went like this: If you are resolute, you could sand down a steel rod into a thin needle. And hence day and night I thought about the girlfriend problem. I caught myself smiling to myself a couple times, and smiled even more at myself for having smiled at myself because I have finally found a problem so worthwhile I could not stop thinking about it.

And eventually I figured it out. The problem I thought was a problem was not a problem at all. There were more men at marriage age than women in China was not a problem. Most men could not afford to live up to the standards of living most women in China desired was not a problem. Women were in high demand in the marital market while men were not was not a problem. Couples broke up because of financial squabbles was not a problem. My girlfriend left me was not a problem. I had a hard time looking for a new girlfriend without improving my financial status was not a problem. None of the above were problems. They were phenomenon .

The real problem was, I live in such circumstances and I believe that my individual life would be subjected to the generalization

these phenomenon highlighted. So the problem was really in my head. I did not need to accept all these phenomenon to be the governing rule of my life, even if it was for the society as a whole. I could be the exception. I could be the fish that swims upstream. I could break out.

There was a million thing I could do. I could work harder and make more money. I could save on frivolous things and focus on saving up for the big things that women care about, like brand named handbags and foreign breed puppies. I could borrow money to invest in stocks or start a business and get my foot into the door to the better world. I could maybe even send my resume for the thirteen time to Google to get a position there, which was like the golden ticket to a life of reasonable comfort which many could only dream of. This sounded actually like a good plan.

I conveyed my newfound confidence to Kelvin. He said nonchalantly that he was once like me. And in fact, there were a lot of me's out there. All the me's were thinking we could break out and be different. We could walk in the opposite direction from the shoving herd of sheep. We would eventually be trampled all over by the rest of the pushing herd.

He explained that there was no way one could jump from one social class to another via traditional means, not even working a white collar job. Working for oneself by starting a business was in his eyes an even worse gamble, because that meant giving up a stable income over the unknown mystical future where only one in a billion succeeded in building something that one could live off with. Saving up money was in his eyes a must but he had an excellent point that with the low interest rate any interest accrued from the saved sum would be negligible. Any money would be better off invested. He asked if I had some good investment ideas already in mind that could be started with the amount of money I had in my

bank account. Given that I had a negative balance, that was where the conversation stopped.

In the end we settled on improving my looks. A charming look could go a long way. I was quite satisfied with my own look but he told me to count the number of women who passed by us on the streets and smiled at me. I went out of the cafe and stood by its window. I smiled for five minutes like a creep at all female creatures that walked by and none of them returned my smile, not even the chihuahua in the hands of an old lady.

Admittedly, that experience made me feel like an idiot. My friend had made his point.

I thought improving my looks would mean making me more attractive looking, like shaving regularly, putting gel in my hair and style it like I was a Vogue model, or even going to the gym to improve my muscle weight. Turned out, "Dress up like you're rich." was his advice.

Even in China, we knew this to be "pulling a Don Quixote".

Chapter 3: The Don Quixote Solution

The Don Quixote solution was not a very robust one. I was, however, an empiricist. I decided to still give it a go.

While I was not a rich man nor was I born into a rich family, I did have a relatively financially stable and sheltered life. I lived with my parents who rented an apartment in a high-rise in the middle of the city. I was the only child. This meant that I was being treated as a little God since the day I was born. They were used to growing up the same way, being also the lone child and only offspring on whom their parents could cast all their dreams and hopes.

Having a boy was an absolute honor to the Chinese family, notwithstanding the fact that as a boy you get a lot of perks which were part of the patrilineal system that had long been seen as the only way to deal with inheritance in China. A boy had the right to inherit old lands from his father who received it from his father, who in turn received it from his own father and so on. The tradition had it also that a family line was tracked only from the male side, which meant if you had, based on the one-child policy, produced a girl, your family line would come, quite sadly really, to an end at your generation. This was not only financially inconvenience, it was a shame to your family.

Some people did not have land to inherit to begin with, and some people did not mind conventions. Some others respected nature's chance of game where there was always a 50% chance of conceiving a girl and 50% chance of conceiving a boy. Then there were some people who

thought they could profit from raising a child, regardless of gender to increase household income, especially when the girl reached marriage age. Custom had it that a dowry must be paid by the groom's family to the bride's family as a show of goodwill before marriage.

The dowry could go anywhere from a pair of coconuts to a million dollar mansion with seaview at the Shanghai Bund and beyond. In these days and age, those that made the decision to keep a girl (thank God they did) were blessed. For there was an abundance of men who overwhelm the market with labourers, engineers, doctors, architects, and other stereotypical male profession seekers, and there were not enough women in workplaces where you would expect more of them.

The society was certainly turning upside down by this imbalance of genders. Personally, as I was saying, I had lived relatively well taken care of. I had a job at an ecommerce startup in the middle of the city as a software engineer. It did not pay much, and in fact way below international average for software engineer of my calibre that mastered the same skillset but it paid the bills. Due to the fact that I had started out much earlier in the field of smartphone application development than a lot of people who came in waves after app development became a hype, I could sit in my position rather comfortably as a senior figure in the team, delegating work to the young engineers and doling out criticism or compliments, when needed, to them to further secure my position of indispensability in the office when the bosses would eventually come around.

Without the going-out expense from when I was in relationship such as movie tickets, dinner bills and presents, I could cut down my spending dramatically. I did not need to pay for food (lunch at work and dinner at home), nor did I have any fixed expense such as phone, internet or

TV bills because the company paid for my smartphone contract which entitled me to unlimited high speed internet which I could use to stream any TV program online I wanted to watch for free.

In a few months when my debt would be settled, I would be officially out of the "long term salary end" league which had, according to my unofficial calculation, at least three hundred million unwilling members.

With the promising prospect, I ignored the fact that I had yet to settle my debt and went ahead to buy me two pairs of new trousers, two pairs of new leather shoes, a pair of brand name sunglasses and three featured outfits (I was too lazy to mix and match myself) on display in the windows of a department store on Nanjing Road.

I felt my face and my ears reddening when I was trying to pay the forty thousand worth of clothing at the counter with my credit card. I knew it would go through, but I still felt like a thief. Never in my life have I spent such a large sum of money in one go in such a short time, on frivolous, aesthetic items. The money I was spending did not feel real. It was as if I have simply taken it from someone else and played it off as my own (which was kind of true for any kind of borrowed money, especially one with 17% interest). My heart pounded as the cashier checked my signature on the bill against the one on the card.

The pretty girl at the cashier did not pay any extra attention to me that I was expecting when my card did go through for my large purchase. I supposed women who worked in stores like that were used to seeing big purchases. I made a point to never date a shopkeeper from a reasonably flourishing business.

The next day I went to the office with my new outfit. Nobody paid me any attention.

I told my friend about it and he said that it was useless to be fashionable in a software company. There were very few women to begin with and they were likely all taken. I should expose myself to environment more conducive to me finding a girlfriend, such as a bar or a party.

Partying and dancing have never been my thing, but drinking I could do with reasonable familiarity and skills. I decided to begin there.

Chapter 4: The Correct Way To Showing Off

On Friday evening, my friend asked me to wait for him at the bar of the Hilton Tower's Snake Lounge on the 60th floor. In my new outfit, I was instructed to order a whiskey on rocks next to any group of boring looking males I could find. After about five minutes, I could locate such a group. I stood next to them and waited in line to order my drinks.

During my wait, I should turn around to look at the audience in the club and pose inconspicuously with the bar top supporting my back to show off the details of my expensive suits in various carelessly-waiting-for-a-delayed-friend stance. Two times and not more, should I be looking into my latest imitation Rolex watch that my friend had lent me for the evening and sighed.

A group of girls walked by. The trick I was doing did not get me any attention. So I activated the next level of attraction tactics. I dialed a fake number on my phone and spoke loudly to nobody at the end of the line about a piece of code that I had to write for a client whose name I was supposed to fill in with whatever the top performing A stock company of the day was, and pushed through the middle of the group of girls to deliberately spill drinks on them. The splash range was suppose to be as wide as possible to capture as many of them as I could. And it seemed like I succeeded with a score of three.

At that point I was supposed to hang up my fictitious phone call, apologize and flirtatiously invite them for a drink for their inconvenience. One of the girl however slipped and fell flat on her face. Her

friends scrambled to lift her up and they wasted no time to give me a grudging I-never-want-to-see-you-here-again look and brought her to a lounge chair to examine her injury. At that moment I was so flustered and embarrassed I had forgotten to remain in my role. I sprinted out of the bar and down the elevator with still the whiskey glass in my hand. When my friend saw me at the lobby he frowned and reprimanded me for not taking advantage of the situation further after my ice-breaking event with the group of girls.

What else could I have done but to bolt? I asked him. He said I could go forward and show my gallantry by participating in some saving-the-girl-who-slipped activities. It was easier said than done, when you obviously sensed that you were not welcomed.

My friend said that we needed to fix my social inaptitude, because a rich look alone was probably not going to get me anywhere.

I proposed to get me started off in a lower-level environment. Not the 60th floor of the Hilton Tower but somewhere near the ground, so I could practice my way up. I expressed that I just wanted a girlfriend, not a rich girlfriend who would make me feel uncomfortable and would look down on me. This remark made my friend laugh, for he thought I was stupid for not realizing that a lot of women in fancy places like that were on the lookout for men themselves, ever more so than more down-to-earth places, like the library or neighborhood hotpot spots.

He had a point. It would make sense to be in places where there was a high concentration of women looking for a long-term male companion actively. Was there somewhere else where there would be lots of women hunting for husbands?

Unceremoniously, my friend pulled out his cellphone and pulled up a chatting app. The same one that my ex-girlfriend had shown me

her long list of male suitors. I almost dropped the whiskey glass on the marble floor but luckily the bellboy spotted me and cupped it before it did with a smile. I gave him a small tip and returned my mind on the damnable app my friend was showing me.

No way. I told him.

No f-ing way. I would rather live alone forever than meeting someone online.

nothing else show up

Chapter 5: Hierarchy of Needs

I would live on dignity if I could. Apparently no one ever survived with just their egos alone.

Food, shelter, clothes, safety, sanitation, education, health care. I had all of the basic needs of a human fulfilled. There was a newer model published recently that even more accurately depict what a human being needed in the 21st century, which included battery power, wifi and smart gadgets. All these I had, because of my employment, satisfied to a T. Kelvin ridiculed me for being so complacent with my life. There should be, according to him, entertainment, physical and emotional fulfillment and self-actualization. I did not really get what self-actualization meant and neither did my friend I suspect. He probably rattled them off from the Maslow Hierarchy of Needs he found on the internet so I decided there was no need to discuss with him the topic.

I did agree with the pyramids of Maslow. The man seemed to be the authority in the topic because if you google basic human needs, nothing else shows up. Five thousand years of Chinese musing and we did not produce any popular theory on the topic? I could hardly believe it.

Most of the time I was quite entertained. I entertained myself with watching American TV series, playing games on Playstation with my friend, going to concerts, listening to pirated version of music online for free, playing pranks on others...the list went on. I was not in want of entertainment.

When it comes to physical fulfillment, I played soccer every Monday, Tuesday and Saturday, while I coached a team of eleven-year-olds

soccer on Sunday I would watch my friends play on the same field in our neighborhood. There was not want of physical exertion. However, I felt energized every single time whether I was playing or when I was watching.

In terms of emotional life, I had wonderful parents, good group of friends from soccer, bosses that do not give me a hard time and reasonably obedient underlings at work that did not dare to challenge me as of yet. Emotionally I had a rather sophisticated fabric of interactions with people from diverse backgrounds, genders and ages interweaving through my life giving it color.

Counting up to here, I could see myself being fairly well off compared to a lot of people who would have trouble counting their blessings up the pyramid to this level. While I still did not know what self-actualization that sat on the top level of the pyramid meant, I could believe that if I knew I would be able to say something positive about it as well in my life.

My good friend, as good friend would do, torn that impression to shreds one day by showing up to our midday chat every Friday afternoon at the neighborhood coffee place with his new, insanely hot girlfriend. She wore a tight light blue dress that accentuated her figure so much no pair of eyes wanders anywhere else but her body between the coffee drinkers.

With his right arm, my friend hugged his goddess of a girlfriend on the waist tugging accidentally her skirt an inch higher than it should, exposing her white pearly thigh as they sat down on the couch opposite to mine.

Immediately I felt that something was missing from my life.

A woman.

A hot woman.

Chapter 6: Hot

As much as I loved my ex-girlfriend, I would not call her hot.

Hot women do not make good wives, that was common knowledge, but hot women definitely make good girlfriends. They burnt your insides with just small movements of their bodice and if you were to be in close quarters of them, you would find yourself drowning in sweats and sound of your own heartbeats.

Never in my life had I felt that towards my own girlfriend for she had made it very clear we were to behave properly until we would be married. For whatever reasons I found that acceptable, given that a woman was like a flower which should be cherished and handled delicately. There were no thoughts of transgression of the physical boundaries between us nor was there real motivation until we get married, because we were supposed to. I did not mind the wait.

Now however being confronted by this visual display of hotness brought on to me unprepared and unjustly by my most trusted friend, I felt an onset of jealousy. Of having missed out. Of being betrayed. I wanted to avenge him for my humiliation. A hot girlfriend would serve him right.

So I made up my mind to use the chatting app and only meet the hottest women I could find in my vicinity. Turned out they were easier to find than I thought. Their photos brandishing their beautiful face and occasionally their décolletés and further on their profile pages, open to public browsing by anyone within 100 mile radius. Their adopted Western names conjured up imagery of angels descending from heavens.

Gingerly I sent out my first chat to a stranger, which received no reply after two days. After that, having understood the high chance of being ignored even on the internet, I became more emboldened and I started sending out more and more messages to these beautiful strangers.

And that was when things started to look up for me.

There were online interactions which were way beyond what I had ever made with my ex-girlfriend. I felt like I have discovered the secret of the world. No man would ever be left emotionally and physically destitute again with such an app which granted one direct access to thousands and thousands of beautiful women.

After spending the 2nd hour of chat with someone whose handle I forgot, since there were so many, but had a beautiful face, I agreed to meet her.

The girl whose name and face were both *Angelique* .

Angelique quickly seduced me to bed. We ended up naked in a love hotel off the main road a hundred meters from the cafe we met. Her bosoms were as huge as they appeared on the photographs she posted online. I squeezed them over and over again, and started to lick them as if I was a dog licking a tasty bit of bone, forgetting any kind of decency.

Just when I was about to come, having a beautiful woman riding on top of me for over a minute, with her clothes on --- it was really difficult to control myself in face of an actual woman and not the ones that I saw behind a computer screen --- the door to our hotel room got busted open. Two men rushed in and started to yell at me. Angelique quickly got up, unfazed and wrapped herself with the blanket which was half covering my legs. I was now completely exposed to the eyes of those intruding strangers.

They wanted money from me, for the damaged that I had done to one of the man's honey.

Apparently Angelique was one of the man's girlfriend. This man though was completely focused on extorting money out of me. He did not stop snapping photographs of me with his cell phone until some hotel staff came over to look at what was happening. They scurried away as quickly as they could as soon as they saw the obscenity and smelt the dangers of imminent violence.

I cried out weakly to them for help to no avail and could do nothing but to cover my private part and face with each of my hand to defend against the assault of the man's camera.

Just when I thought I would never get out of this alive, the other man found my wallet and two thousand yuan in it. I had taken two thousand yuan out to pay my part of my cousin's wedding gift. The man grabbed the money and stuff it in his pocket. He beckoned the others to leave. I felt my wallet smashed against my rib cage as they slammed the door shut and disappeared, leaving me behind in a messed up hotel room and an emptied wallet to commiserate my first time with a real woman.

I could not tell whether the hotel staffs were in on the scams. They must have, assuming that they had stayed in pretty much the same type of premises throughout their careers, seen enough dramas playing out in their workplaces to know what to do. Turned out they did not call the police nor did they attempt to acknowledge the atrocity that just happened to me. The bill still needed to be paid, and it included a hefty surcharge for replacing broken furniture.

Chapter 7: Scammers

There were not many things I kept to myself, but being scammed to my last piece of clothing was something that I would never share with anyone, not even my best friend.

Ever since that experience with Angelique, I grew ever more suspicious of the internet thing. What I experience was a classical scam. Millions of times I had seen it on television dramas and movies. More than anger, I felt shame. Being an engineer, I did not make good observations and sufficiently analyze the situation before surrendering my trust to a complete stranger. There was of course the silver lining that I did make my first sexual encounter with a real attractive woman, regardless of the reason why she would accept the abuse by her alleged lover to make money off of gullible men with her body and share the profit with them. (I certainly hope she gets the bigger share.)

Admittedly this was somewhat like a transaction, though as I had no prior knowledge of what was to come, I found that the two thousand yuan well worth it. Even when I closed my eyes for the next few evenings, I could still see Angelique angelical faces and her plumb seductive body as her imaginary presence straddled over me on the soft bed of the hotel room.

It might sound strange to you, but my grown suspicion did not stop me from making more connections with beautiful women on the chatting app, nor did I become weary of face-to-face rendezvous. I more than tripled the amount of time I spent on this whole activity every day since the unfortunate event perhaps, because I was curious. And now that I had been scammed once, I felt like it could not happen to me again. And if it did, since the first time wasn't so bad, as money usually could solve most

problems in China, I just need to make sure I was alert and explored the most while controlling the damage to the minimum.

So that was how my contact list grew. It had been stabled for as long as I remembered since I got a smartphone. Occasionally I would make new entry for practical contact numbers like the numbers for my girlfriend's favorite hotpot restaurant, the hair salon which I was mandated by her to visit every two and a half months, the computer repair shop whose owner promised to contact me whenever he had some new imported PC games I could make a copy of for a fraction of the selling prices and so on. Recently I have been adding numbers of beautiful women with eye-sucking (a popular Chinese term on the internet) quality to my contact list which made me feel like I was finally growing up to be the man I was supposed to be. This was how an adult male should live, with at least a handful of beautiful women waiting at home for my booty call. The last part is of course imaginary. I did not think any of them actually wait for my call as anxiously as I wanted them to be. Still I got the numbers and as long as I got the means, I could get to an end.

Let me introduce you then to my repertoire of ladies. ---- There was Kiki, who was a twenty one year old studying in the Science Institute to be a chemist. She had one year to graduation but her hobby was to meet men online and scam them into buying expensive goods for her so she could show off in front of her classmates. Her tactics were fairly simple. All she needed to do was to suggest possible advancement in the relationship when certain desire for expensive objects of hers was fulfilled.

Janice was a lovely girl, and she was a bit absent-minded. She forgot her wallet every single time she went out. Regardless of what it was, she would suggest to split the bill or even shoulder it herself, and then

found herself without any money. Men were supposed to be the breadwinner, yes, still in the 21st century China, so whether they were simply an acquaintance, a friend or a boyfriend, as men they were bounded by traditions to feel ashamed that their female friend even suggested the notion of paying, and to save face, they would seize the opportunity presented to them when Janice was in need of help to show that they can take good care of her. Willingly they would open your wallet for her.

Occasionally, the beauty of a woman can mask her treachery side. Lucy loved fixing up machines. She knew how cars work and with a group of friends she joined racing rallies every week. All suitors need to do to win her favors was to win a rally, which was of course fixed because the car they were assigned were always under-performing because of some mechanic's tricks. They would end up losing regardless of how hard they tried and were generally humiliated so much they forget about the bet money they were losing to their opponents which could be well in the thousands.

Then there was Mariam who looked like the singer Miriam Yeung but since she did not graduate from middle school, she could not spell her namesake properly. Her specialty was, coincidentally, singing. She loved to take men to karaoke. In these dark little private rooms filled with booming noises from the karaoke box of the room and the neighboring ones, she would get real up close to the men who were already engrossed in her good voice and genuine performance, and slip her naughty fingers into their pockets to fish out their wallets.

And let us not forget little Nancy. She had taken one too many men to her parents' house for dowry discussion. Of course before such a discussion could be made, there had to be a marriage proposal. Eliciting

marriage proposal is Nancy's specialty. Being the heir of a prospering business (at least that is the story she always tell) and a woman of above average looks, it takes no more than three months for marriage proposals to come on average. She usually ran a couple of scams in parallel so she had a fish belly (a term to describe her naive targets) coming in less than every three months. Despite that this scam required considerable effort, having to feign the role of a girlfriend so perfectly she could be considered by men to be their future wives, the return of investment for her scheme was much higher than all the other ones I had mentioned.

A marriage proposal these days involved at least a diamond ring on silver or gold, a bouquet of flowers and a nice romantic dinner at a fairy tale location. After she had accepted the gift, she would then bring her fiance of the moment to her parents' house, which was customary in Chinese tradition to properly ask for her hand from her father, at which point her father would without a doubt gets emotionally fired up and chase the man out of her house, asking him to never see her daughter again because he was no match for his precious daughter. The parents were of course no blood relations of hers. They were actors in her grand scheme.

I thought my social ineptitude would hinder the development of relationship between me and these beautiful women, but turned out none of the ladies got put off by it, since they were not planning on a life long relationship with me, except when I could guarantee a lifetime of satisfaction to their extravagance and greed. They had multiple targets every time, and I was only one of them. When you had a collection of something they were more or less going to stick to the Gaussian distribution in terms of personality.

Chapter 8: Fun and Games

It sounded counter intuitive, but it was not an exaggeration to say that it was not too bad to be cheated by these beautiful women. Everything in this world was give and take. Scammers do not simply take something from you without giving something up. Online fraudster-dating had gained me a lot more hours of facetime with real women. And having being so much more alert than I would had been had Angelique did not completely annihilate my self-confidence about how observant and world-smart I was, I felt like if I remain attentive, I could maximize my gain while minimizing my loss. I could feign dumb and play along until the last moment. If these women were set out to deceive me, there was really no reason why I could not do the same to waste their time for some female companionship.

I did understand that I was sampling a subset of Chinese women who were amazing in looks between the age of 18 to 32, spent an awful lot of time on their phones and playing in particular only dating apps interacting with more than one man at a time and were interested more about monetary gain than having a good time. There was very little direct contribution these encounters would make towards my long term goal of finding a life partner. However, after navigating inside scammerville for about six months, I felt like I have become a different person. I had grown. I started to see the world in different light, the same light that my parents see the world, that reality was not all fun and games. I realized that men's natural attraction to women made us such easy targets for bamboozlement, whilst women's natural attraction to men that could provide and protect, mostly manifested in terms of wealth, made them such easy targets to be exploited.

I never thought I would have these thoughts crossing my mind. I was the epitome of all Confucius virtue --- loyal, honest, hard-working (up to a certain point), meek individual. To think of human relationship as some kind of transactions or even con games was completely foreign to fine Chinese specimen of mankind like me. Yet here I was, crunching the numbers on the balance sheet of love (I am not even sure you can call it love) --- 62 thousand yuan spent, 193 drinks consumed, 45 dinners, 41 times hand-holding, 32 kisses, 18 condoms consumed. If I were to compete against myself in the parallel universe where I try to meet girls the traditional way, I would win by a couple of trips to the moon and back.

Thinking back to the day when my best friend showed up to our weekly coffee with his hot girlfriend, I smirked. It was about time to show him my ladies as well.

I did not have to wait until our weekly coffee for an opportunity. His girlfriend posted on Happy Net (Chinese Facebook) that he had been ran over by a truck while he was motorcycling on the highway, something that he was not supposed to do but did regularly anyway. He was apparently lucky enough not to suffer any major injury but a concussion to his head. On the Happy Net post his girlfriend posted, he was able to sit up on the hospital bed, smiling weakly, and made a triumphant V sign with his right hand. His head was wrapped in a ball of bandages. I scrambled to the hospital while trying to call one of my many girlfriends, hoping one would be available and bring an empty soup container so I could pour some market-bought nourishing soup, a standard gift to someone recovering, in it to bring it to my friend at the hospital.

Time and time again I was disappointed. Nobody cared. Not even when I already offered the most convenient solution of just showing up and skipping the soup. What if I pick you up? I asked Kiki, Mandy,

Sarah and FeiFei. They said they were occupied and would make it up to me next time. MeiLing, YaoYao and Clarisa told me to stop calling them about nonsense and Cindy said she wanted to break up with me and hung up. Queeny seemed to have blocked my phone number all together.

When I arrived, my best friend's parents were also in the room. They were happy to see me. After a short chat about the conditions of my friend, who needed to stay in the hospital for a few more days under doctor's observation, they asked me the inevitable --- Where is your girlfriend? Is she not coming?

The community we lived in was huge but it can feel so small sometimes. If someone you know sees you with a girl, everyone would know about it. They might not know who the girls were, since these girls I met do not come from the same residential area by my clever design, but people would take notice of these little foreigners presence in their neighborhood, with one of their own. Their faces, their outfits, their demeanor, everything is recorded by a collective of individuals who may appear to have nothing to do with each other but turned out all be member of an unspoken society of gossipers and contributed to the gossip file with my name on it regularly. This file was passed by word of mouth from one nosy non-blood related auntie to another bored uncle (we call every one senior than us auntie and uncle even when we are not related), and eventually they would get to the people whom I really know, someone who could subject me to a level of embarrassment I disliked.

At that point, my best friend started laughing. He could only be stopped when he felt his jaw hurt since his mouth was practically wrapped shut by the layers of bandages designed to protect him from any further unnecessary damage to his head. I eyed him suspiciously as his behavior seemed to imply that he knew more than he should. To that, he simply

winked back at me and chuckled to himself, as he could not really open his mouth wide.

To his parents, I could only apologize on behalf of my non-existence girlfriend for not showing up. His dad nodded and tapped my back lightly to give me a non-verbal encouragement that seemed to say relationship was hard, or something like that. His mom, an extremely hospitable lady who loved me as if I was her own since I became best friend with my best friend and always hang out at their home, invited us, me and my imaginary girlfriend, to visit again some time soon. I was glad they did not ask for her name, because I could hardly make a choice between all of my girlfriends who were, really, not my girlfriends.

Chapter 9: On The Way Back

On the way back home, I decided to go see the Huangpu River. I found an empty bench that was not occupied by resting tourists and couples in love, dropped my backpack on the ground and sat there for a good hour, just looking out.

So many skyscrapers. New ones already popped up whose names I only vaguely remembered. I used to care about these stuff, urban news, city development, interesting architecture, latest achievement of the city that I could boost on rival territories on forums. At that point, I did not even remember having checked the weather recently. So focused was I on meeting girls I was completely beside myself. Fumbling for the bottle of water in my backpack, I realized that I was still that boy who carried water bottle around from home to save money, so that, back then when I still had a saving goal, I could give my ex-girlfriend the life she wanted. I dived deeper into the backpack for my handkerchief to blow my nose.

My life goal used to be to make my ex-girlfriend, then future-wife, and her parents happy, because seeing them happy would make me happy, and that in turn would make my parents happy. There was no greater joy in Chinese parents' eyes than to see their grown son forms a family and builds a career. The career part was a prerequisite to formation of a family because without a good career, a regular guy like me would never have enough money for all the expenses that was required to get up to the point of forming a family, hence really happiness in a family revolves around the amount of money I had in my disposal.

After thirty-three years, I lost my girlfriend and I was even more broke than I was when I had just broken up with her. I wasted a lot of

time on women that had no interest in me and lied to myself about how I would be gaining some socializing experience from paying them for their inconvenience. I was such a loser, I was better off dead --- I thought to myself matter of factly.

I walked up to the metal fence that barred me from the river and I thought of Qu Yuan, the patriotic poet slash court adviser that jumped into the river to his death for failing to save his master from harm. He was remembered till this day every Duan Wu festival with dragon boat races. No one would remember me. They would probably considered me a nuisance to the city, ruining the peace of beautiful Huang Pu.

“Can you take a picture of me?”

An American girl holding her iPhone reached out to me. I said, “Sorry...what?” I really was not paying attention.

“Would you hold the camera for me? I would like to have a picture in front of this beautiful skyline.”

Skyline, oh yes. Shanghai famous skyline. There were so many tourists these days along the river. I should have known what she was talking to me about without asking.

Crazy as it may sound, handling an iPhone was a difficult task for someone who had been using Android for as long as he remembered. Occasionally I would slip into the Apple Store to play Angry Bird when I had some time to kill, but operating the iPhone camera on panorama mode did not come natural to me.

“Xie xie nin.” She said to me in Mandarin. A lot of tourists can say thank you, but to say thank you in the polite form, this was the first time.

“Do you speak Chinese?” I asked, in Mandarin. And she replied in fluent, though heavily accented Mandarin that she did and she

was an exchange student from Harvard at the Fudan University.

I could not help but praised her on her proficiency. She was not particularly flattered by it. She said that if I were to go to an exchange program in her home country America, I would have to speak English too. That was nothing special about her being able to speak my language. I argued that Chinese was a difficult language to learn, with lots more characters. Smiling, she retorted that I should not treat every non-Chinese as if they were idiots who could not learn the same set of characters that every children in China had to learn to make basic conversations. Embarrassed, I apologized to her for giving her compliments about her Chinese. Intrigued by her intelligence, I invited her to chat over a cup of coffee and a slice of cake, also because I was dying to get back indoors since night was falling and the temperature dropped significantly that my hands were frozen. Now that I had something else on my mind and did not want to die, I felt like I should feed my body properly to keep it alive.

Some clients from my freelance work were non-Chinese. I had my fair share of interaction with foreigners and that was why my English was passably fluent. All the conversations I had with foreigners were however so far all business and nothing personal. This was the first time I met a foreigner whom I thought could become my friend. I was intrigued by the possibility. And to my surprised, after having been trained on numerous occasion to talk to girls by meeting them online, I was able to behave rather calmly in the presence of the female gender and not make a fool of myself. I even did the gentlemanly thing to pull out her chair and offered to buy her coffee and cake, which she refused.

“No, don't do that.” She said. “I can get my own,” and she gave me a smile. So we took turns buying our merchandise.

When we finally both settled down on the opposite end of the coffee table at Starbucks I had learnt, from the shouting barista that her name was Marvey.

I asked her why she decided to come to China, out of all of the places in the world.

“China is fascinating. Everything is so different from where I came from, and so much history. And I love the sound of your language. It made me a more elegant person I think. I felt like my manners are adjusting to the sound of my voice when I speak in Mandarin. Every time I speak, it is like I am reciting poetry. I wish I could stay here longer.” I told her that I never felt that way about my own language.

The disappointment came in quickly after her promising opening introduction. She also had a boyfriend who came to China to join the same exchange program with her. It was a no-brainer for her to join him.

As to the whereabouts of her boyfriend, she said she had no idea. He had not been picking up his phone the whole day today, but that was not unusual she said. Sometimes he needed his privacy and she respected it. Especially in China, she said, where he had lots of friends from his childhood and could easily make new ones, he became harder and harder to reach every day because he had so many engagement apart from school. The more she tried to justify his ignorance, the sadder I felt her voice became. If it was melodic like poetry at the start, now it turned into a recital of an obituary.

Three months into the exchange and she still did not have a proper panorama of herself and her boyfriend in front of the Bund. She thought today was the day but then she said apparently not, with a feeble smile.

I asked her about her boyfriend. He was a Chinese American who looked nothing Chinese to me and more American than an average American I envisioned in my head, consulting knowledge of how they look after watching years of American TV series. From the picture of him she had as a wallpaper of her smartphone, he was a tall and beefy guy. His built was reminiscent of the blue genie from Aladdin, huge head, even huger body. The width of his upper arm muscles seemed to tell stories of men whose neck he wrung in combat. I felt my neck hurt just looking at them.

For whatever reason, I told Marvey that I could be their photographer next time when they come out to the Bund for their panoramas. To boast my photography skills, I showed her the photo albums I had uploaded three years ago onto Flickr which had now twenty thousand or so views.

“Yes, that would be wonderful!” she said to me, smiling brightly while being fascinated by my stills of autumn scenery around Shanghai.

“I want to have a selfie with you,” she said, and before I could answer, she snapped the photograph with the front camera of her iPhone. The sudden flash dazed me but this was the first time I took a photo with a foreign person. Also the first time that a girl posted a photo with me on social media without hesitation. “Sorry! I can't wait to show off my new Chinese friend,” she smiled apologetically.

To get a copy of the photograph, I “climbed” over the firewall that blocked Facebook and signed up for an account. Marvey became my first Facebook friend.

Chapter 10: Foreign

Marvey had seen through me. Perhaps it was the ogling that I inadvertently did whenever we hang out together with her female friends. She knew I want nothing more but to get to know them so she would bring me along whenever there were some exchange students gathering. She said it would do the group good to hang out with local Chinese during their times in China, instead of simply sticking to each other and learnt everything about the rest of the world but the Central Kingdom. I could not agree more with her determination to integrate. I could use some practice for my English as well. I was not planning to stay in China forever, although this was nothing more than just a thought.

Her friends were not all from North America. Majority of them were from Europe, one from Africa, two from South America, and three from Japan. I was most attracted to Marvey's best friend in the group. Her name was Erika, and she was from Switzerland. Her unmistakably French accent was extremely intriguing. Most of us, not just me, had to pay extra attention to what she said before we could really understand every word, despite her best effort to speak English, or sometimes Chinese. Perhaps it was because of the extra effort that I paid to discern her words that also made me pay her a lot more heed than the others. She was tiny by European standards, her head coming only up to the start of my neck. Her looking up at me with her big round light brown eyes could completely soften my heart, even when she was saying something that no Chinese girl would say, such as telling me straight on that the grandma who tried to squeeze herself on to the crowded bus was a bitch, or that the professor who gave them two

assignments to complete by the deadline of Saturday midnight was a slave driver.

I was exhilarated that she chose to confide in me these profane thoughts. Maybe because she knew I would not reprimand her for her lack of manners, as my level of English would not allow me to do that just yet even if I wanted to. And many nice minutes passed by as we, together with the group traveled to various parts of Shanghai on weekends, exploring the city that I grew up in with a fresh pair of eyes.

Marvey's boyfriend Zhi seldom showed up. The usual excuse was that he knew the city like the back of his hand already since he had lived here till he was six year old and did not require to be showed around again by me, an amateur guide. As a fellow man I knew what he was up to. He was otherwise occupied and he also valued spending time doing something else than spending it with Marvey or their classmates, so much that after six months of Marvey's exchange program, they barely got any photo together anywhere, let alone the Bund.

Erika called me one time, and the only time since we exchanged phone numbers so we could be in a chat group together in WeChat for sightseeing plans, that she thought Zhi wanted to break up with Marvey and asked me to think of a way to cheer her up the evening before the Saturday when we were supposed to go to the zoo.

Zoo was one of those places where you either go with your friends when you were single, or you go with your boyfriend or girlfriend when you were not. Marvey must have asked the forever elusive Zhi who declined to join and felt rather upset, which prompted Erika to reach out to me about tomorrow's planning. Marvey was my first foreign friend. She was kind and gentle. She actively seek to learn more about my city and love its culture as if it was her home. She and her friends always treated me like

an equal, something that I found it hard to believe given how many years I had been told by the media and everyone who believed the media that foreigners viewed us as an inferior species, and although I knew I do not need to feel grateful, for all men were equal and I deserved just as much respect as the next person, I still felt in debt to her for being my friend. If she was upset, I was upset. Tomorrow, I decided, would be the most wonderful day she had in Shanghai since she arrived under my supervision.

Just wait and see.

Chapter 11: Happiest Day

The last time I had to plan a Happiest Day for someone was for me and my girlfriend's third year anniversary. That was when I proposed to her and it was as far as I remember, counted as one of the happiest moments of our relationship. Her mother was smiling from ear to ear when I sent her home that evening and my mom, when I told her about it, shed tears that turned her azure handkerchief dark blue. That was a decorative handkerchief she tucked in front of her chest which she never intended to use. Dad and I knew what that meant.

I thought of that day as blueprint for Marvey's Happiest Day in Shanghai and as I was thinking back to these happy moments, I saw more of that day that I did not realize before. My ex-girlfriend had a slight frown on her forehead when she saw me kneel in front of her at the Tianai Road after we visited the Lu Xun Museum that day. She was reluctant to put on the Virtual Reality goggles when I offered it to her instead of what she thought might be a box with a ring from my backpack. Little did I notice that her hands were balled into fists when my marriage proposal animation played out virtually on the screen of her glasses in which she would receive a bouquet of a hundred red roses the size of my palm and a diamond ring the size of an egg, bigger than anything you could ever find in real life without breaking your bank. When she took off her glasses a group had gathered around us making photographs.

It baffled me to see those signs of negative emotions now I was replaying the scenes in my head. Had I been really too blind to see that she was already disappointed when I proposed to her. If she was really unsatisfied with my proposal, why had she accepted it. Was it because she

thought I could not have done any better? On one hand I was glad she spared me the humiliation in public, on the other hand, would it not have been better for us if she had not let me lived under the illusion that I was making her happy and led me to total destruction only long after I had committed a foul, when I thought nothing could go wrong anymore?

Randomly I stumbled on to her Weibo profile. I had turned off notifications from her and had not read her profile since we broke up lest I would see something that make me sad. Turned out that was a good decision, for I did not like what I saw. Twelves days ago it was her birthday and her new boyfriend had booked a table at Flair Rooftop restaurant and presented her with a three layer pink birthday cake. She perched on the tabletop with her eyes closed and was making a wish on the photograph she posted on Weibo which was now her profile picture. On the side there was a red suede box that said the dreaded letters, Cartier.

How I wish I could afford tearing this computer to shreds for showing me such a post.

To put the record straight, I did buy her a ring. It was a diamond ring and I got it on offer for eleven yuan and fifty cents from the shop down the streets. Big brand sold these Zirconia rings as if they were real, there was no way I would buy the same thing but pay thousands of yuan. My ex-girlfriend, then future-wife even gave me a compliment for being so smart with my money. Obviously her new boyfriend was not as smart as I was, but that was where logic lost out. Women do not think rationally. They say one thing and want another. They praise you but secretly wish you would disappear. Perhaps only after a fair share of these experience with women online that I finally figured out I should not trust what women told me a hundred percent, especially when it comes to compliments.

Chapter 12: Recreating the Happiest Day

You cannot be a hero if you do not have any superhuman abilities nor the wallet for it, my best friend said.

I had asked him to come join me to the zoo not only because I needed some extra help, but also the fact that we had hung out less and less since I started going out with girls. Now that he had recovered from head injury, it was time for him to get out of the house and do something fun, while trying to help me pull this thing together. He was as usual bringing along his pessimistic attitude, which showed me he was really committed.

The next morning, the two of us went early to the supermarket and bought a bunch of classical picnic utilities and food. We even bought three bottles of French wine from the supermarket whose brands nor tastes we did not know but decided that if the prices were above average, they should have above average taste as well. Then we headed to the zoo just when they were starting and poured over the map to plan our traveling route. Here Marvey should be offered a chance to sit on baby elephants. And there Marvey could hold the parrot during the show. Over there Marvey could stroke the tiger and take photographs with it, and here we could do laser game and let us make sure Marvey would be on the stronger team. At 3:30 there would be the dolphin performance and 5:45 pm there would be a special tour inside the butterfly conservatorium. We talked to the security guard and gave them a thousand yuan each so that we would get the best seat and have our spot kept until the time. At 9 pm there would be fireworks and the best view would be by the fountain. We need to have a

spot ready so at 7 pm Kelvin would leave the group and try to grab one for the group so that Marvey and her friends could have the best view for snapping selfies. While we would be waiting for the fireworks, the ice-cream truck would appear and it would be handing out free ice-cream to Marvey and her friends. Kelvin also enlisted a professional quality single lens reflect camera to record all of the above mentioned special moments so that Marvey could go home and enjoy them again via videos. The day was perfectly planned and we were satisfied with ourselves.

They day went ahead as planned. I had laughed as much or even more than I had planned. While I could easily mapped out the route and events at each attraction of the zoo, I could not mapped out the group's reaction to them. Marvey sat on the elephant, petted the parrot, got splashed by the dolphin that came to shook our hands and had butterflies flying around her making her looked like a fairy in the conservatorium just as planned. Her laughters were heartfelt and the happiest oozing out of her was contagious. Erika came over to me at one point and tried to wrap her arm around my shoulder as a sign of good will. She could not easily do that due to our height difference so I ended up switching with her and wrapped my arm around hers instead as we walked to the next attraction. I taught her how to say I love you in Shanghainese and she kept repeating it in public, to the surprise of the locals. We were like best pals.

Just when I thought everything was going well, Zhi arrived. I did not understand this boy. If you did not come in peace, stay away, I wanted to say to say to him. But that would obviously be poking into Marvey's private business. Marvey's eyes lit up when she saw her boyfriend and rushed over to give him a hug. They embraced for more than I wanted to see and then he torn her away, telling her that people in China were not

used to this display of emotions and that she needed to keep it down, which she obliged.

I asked Erika what happened, and she shrugged. Probably they got back together yesterday late evening over the phone? Who knew. Erika was obviously enjoying herself and found no flaw in the situation. Kelvin though came tumbling towards me from the fried chicken counter with two cups of fried chicken strips that he had been dispatched by two of the South American girls to fetch, and whispered in my ear a news I so very much anticipated.

“He is sleeping with my cousin Jin Na! I saw him yesterday when I visited her to grab the selfie stick.” I think I heard angels singing when the news arrived in my ear. This was exactly the kind of evidence we need to have to get rid of this man permanently from Marvey's life. The veracity of the news was further confirmed when Zhi spotted Kelvin. The guilt on his face was unmistakable. He managed a hi, nice to meet you in English with Kelvin, who nodded with a smirk on his face. I wonder what was going through Zhi's head. Was he more embarrassed to be found cheating Jin Na with Marvey, or to be found cheating Marvey with Jin Na? Either way, he was screwed.

Emboldened by the knowledge of his adulterating nature, I walked up to Marvey then asked Kelvin to tell her what he saw yesterday night. Zhi seemed to have turned into an angry hulk momentarily as soon as he saw Kelvin's mouth open. His arms seemed pumped up twice their sizes and were ready to attack. I prodded Kelvin in the ribs to wake him up from fear of the Chinese giant and he stuttered for a second before he got to the essence of what he witnessed.

Almost all of the girls gasped, except Marvey, who was shaking instead in silence with her head down.

“I hate you!” She screamed at me, and pulled Zhi off towards the exit of the park. Erika rushed forward to ask if she really wanted to leave the group and Marvey even barked her away. Zhi was dragged behind her heels like a deflated balloon, lost in thought.

So much for giving Marvey the happiest day of her life.

Chapter 13: Elusiveness of Happiness

If happiness was elusive to sweet and nice people like Marvey, than what chance did I have?

I admit that I did not have her best interest in mind when I asked Kelvin to expose her boyfriend in front of everyone. My own happiness had gotten priority over her happiness. I did not act on her best interest and humiliated both she and Zhi in public because of some secrete desires to get Zhi out of the picture since the day we met, my best friend told me when he tried to analyze the situation for me. You are in love with Marvey, he concluded.

“No, of course not!” I said.

“Not even a little bit?” Kelvin poked further.

“Not a bit.” I said.

“You have to admit that western girls are lot more attractive than Chinese girls.” He said. I do think there are a lot of very attractive western girls, but not all of them attractive and Chinese girls have its own way of being attractive that could not be explained in words. “They are a lot easier to please. They could find fun in everything and they do not require anything more than some some sweets and snacks to please,” Kelvin was recalling his popularity with the chicken strips.

Indeed if I think back to today, there was not a dull moment nor was there any request that require attention of my wallet. Same as my ex-girlfriend, I would be lucky if the Chinese girls I had been hanging out with did not mention some extravagant merchandise that neither of us could

afford the whole day. We could just be kids and play along, instead of being the manly men that were supposed to shoulder all the expense as well as do all the chores, except when we wanted to.

Kelvin thanked me with a cold beer when we sat around the side of the fountain watching fireworks for bringing him along. He found that part where Zhi was embarrassed the most amusing of all while I continued to sulk from Marvey's angry last words to me.

At that point Erika came over and asked what we were discussing so secretly in Mandarin. She asked us not to forget that they were all students of the language and we laughed, for they would need to study much harder to even catch what the topic was about based on the level of command of the language I observed from them. Erika clanged her can of beer which appeared from nowhere with mine and Kelvin's and downed it with a wink.

At least someone was having a good time.

Chapter 14: Regret

“I am sorry.” I texted Marvey. She did not reply. In fact she seemed to no longer check her WeChat messages anymore.

When Erika invited me to her farewell party, Marvey was nowhere to be found. After asking around, it seemed that Marvey took a flight two weeks ago back to America, to Alexandria in Minnesota, if I remembered it correctly. Her friends told me there was nothing there. If I should ever visit the US, I should go to New York, Washington D.C., Los Angeles or Miami, not anywhere in Minnesota.

Holding a sparkler, we sang Katy Perry's Firework swaying our bodies to the tunes under the night sky at the beach. Behind the little sparks of fire, I vaguely saw Erika grabbed her glass of champagne and took a big gulp from it. Our eyes locked as she wiped her mouth with the back of her right hand. She rose and walked, as if in slow motion like in a movie, towards me swaying her hips still to the tunes of the song that I could no longer hear but my very own heartbeats.

Then she kissed me on the lips. Hard.

She bit and she sucked. As she was ruffling my hair with both hands I could hear the others cheered and snickered beside us. Over the suckling noises of our kisses, Kelvin's “Ta ma de!” (His way of expressing amazement) resonated. I reached out to grab Erika's sparkler and planted it upside down into the sand before it could burn our hair and at that moment, Erika pushed me backwards on the sand. It took me by surprised but I was relishing it. We laid on the sand, kissed and made out for god knows how long.

The others could not stop giggling on the way back. Luckily I had to carry a lot of stuff in my hand, all the leftovers that I did not want to waste, so I was not confronted with the awkwardness of should I or should I not hold Erika's hand like a couple. Erika did not mind, she was so high from alcohol she was leaning on anyone she could find. In the end the two girls from South America shouldered her to the bus back to the university campus.

“Good night everyone!” Kelvin and I waved as the door of the bus was about to shut. Kelvin poked me in the ribs and I knew what he meant. “Good night Erika,” I added. Everyone laughed, except Erika, who already passed out on her friend's lap.

“Wow! You're my hero!” Kelvin screamed at me as soon as the bus left the stop. “You're the first one I knew who had a foreign girlfriend.”

It seemed like everyone was more excited about it than I did. There was no way Marvey was really in love with me. She was beautiful beyond my league. Even a fool like me could see her rejecting suitors left and right back in Switzerland in my mind's head. This was her farewell party, she probably thought she should do something that she would regret, the traditional unwritten goal of almost all farewell parties.

The regret, these two words were etched into my forehead, I was sure.

I knew it sounded strange, but I could not stop thinking about Marvey, despite everything that happened today.

That evening, I went home and looped the only Mandarin music video with a foreign actress I knew, Jay Chou's *Couldn't Say*, until I felt so miserable I had to shut my laptop and go for a cold shower.

The imagery of Jay riding a spacecraft through the meteoroid fields to look for his alien lover kept looping in my dream. “Through the

clouds I came, trying to run towards you. Delivering my love to you, but you're already in another man's embrace. It's just because I couldn't say it.”

Chapter 15: Brain Damage

“Did you fry your brain?” Paula said sarcastically as she nudged my forehead with her pointy index finger after she heard me talk about Marvey. She took a drag of her cigarette as she sat down on the couch, crossing her legs. The whiff of smoke stung my eyes. I blinked reflexively.

Paula did not stop her verbal abuse. She continued on as if what I needed the most was to hear her insult me. “You are not good-looking, you barely speak English, you are a decade older than that white girl and worse still you haven't got a penny in your pocket. How on earth are you getting to America? Even if you get there their immigration office will kick you out. I mean, look at you! Even I can't bare to look at you for more than two seconds. If I do not need you to watch my kid, I would not let you even stay here. You're a nobody. Don't dream of eating swan's meat!” Eating swan's meat was part of a Chinese expression to mean that something so desirable it was out of my league.

I eyed the innocent kid, her son, who had to be subjected to the nonsense of adults and listen to such discussion between us, my chest swelled with pity.

“I have to go. Don't let him fall asleep before he finishes his homework!” Paula cried over the sound of the rattling metal gate as she pulled it open. As a karaoke escort, she would be singing and drinking until way past the boy's bedtime to know if I shall not fulfill her request.

As usual, I went out on a date with a beautiful woman I met online some time ago and found myself in the arms of someone who wanted more from me. Interestingly, Paula was not looking for material or financial support, she was looking for a male au pair to take care of her son. I wonder

which part of my profile implied that I ran a day, I meant night, care center but I took a liking to her son after the first time meeting him. With a slut of a mother, he could use a fatherly figure. I had coached eleven- year-old soccer, but that was a long way from providing fatherly love. For the last four months I had been coming over to Paula's place at least once a week long after Paula and I no longer wanted anything to do with each other to hang out with the little guy.

His western name was Jessie, I decided, like the younger brother of Nick from the Back Street Boys. He was to grow up tough, cool and with lots of female friends, not the malnourished quiet boy who did not know what fun was and was currently sitting dully next to me doing his homework as if his life depended on it. (Although being literate and educated could take him out of this dump that his lavish mother was putting them both through.)

One night I brought the old flat screen TV I had in my room for Jessie. Paula almost killed me. “Did you suffer from brain damage?” She yelled so loud I suspect the neighbors would call the police. “How dare you bring this to my house? My boy is not going to grow up like you, wasting away his life watching silly cartoons on television.”

I retorted that he was getting out of touch with the world without a television, since there was also no radio nor computers at their home. Obviously, Paula had a smartphone but that was for herself and not her son. It was completely justifiable to give Jessie a means to learn about the outside world.

“You're brain dead.” Her abuse got worse. She accepted the gift nonetheless after I finally managed to install the flat screen satellite TV, an old model already from five years ago, in her living room. “How the hell

are you getting the signals? I didn't pay, and mind you, I won't pay for any of it!”

After explaining for less than 30 seconds that this was a satellite TV and that we could get signals even from foreign channels and that little Jessie could learn English from CNN, Paula asked me to shut up and the three of us watched four hours of television till midnight without speaking another to each other. I did not remind Paula that Jessie had not let me check his homework yet.

Chapter 16: CNN

The teacher from my English class at the vocational college gave me the second compliment of the lesson. A guy from the back row hissed.

“What are you studying so hard for?” He shut my book so suddenly I gave a start. Leaning on the teacher's desk with his arms crossed, he questioned my motive. “I am going to get the highest score in this class, not you, old man.”

His comment seemed nonsensical, because our performances in class should have nothing to do with each other's grades. I wish to confirm it but this was not the case in a Chinese classroom, even when you were learning English. There were quotas for the best, and when there was a limit of resources, people started fighting for it with zeal. Some ancient scholars might have figured it out that limiting the number of people who can obtain the best grade was the best way to motivate students to learn, and so it went that whether you were in a class preparing for national university entrance exams or a pop quiz at the evening vocational college, students compete with each other as if being ranked top of class was the only point of learning.

“It was all talent,” I retorted. Just then the teacher entered the room again. Break was over.

For the last ten months I had been attending English class, as I mentioned, at the vocational college. I had begged my Human Resource lady San San to come up with ways how I could take the class in company expense. The things I learnt from spending way too much time with women who wanted to benefit from me turned out to be extremely instructional. I flirted ostentatiously and I did not save on compliments. After a dinner at a

restaurant which was offering buy-two-get-one menus with Rib eye steaks because there was a refrigeration failure the evening before, I managed to get San San to talk to my boss about my mandatory improvement training for employee who had served the company more than five years and held senior position.

She laughed when she heard that I wanted to take English lessons. “How on earth are you going to justify it? You don't need to speak English at work.”

“We have a high chance of being bought by Alibaba, don't we? Their top guys are all Chinese Americans, or American Chinese. Whatever. Someone in the development team who can speak fluent English could come in handy.”

San San must have a moment of weakness imagining me engaged in a conversations over the details of our products with people from Alibaba Group who was rumored to buy us. Being bought by Alibaba was like a dream come true for a lot of people working for Chinese tech companies because then we would have a near-American corporate structure, less hierarchy, less micro-management, more freedom, less hours, more holidays and maybe some soaring stocks as year-end bonus. I gave her the practiced wink as we parted that evening. It apparently did its magic because I got my class approved the next day.

Chapter 17: Grandson

I could have taken a holiday to the U.S.A. during Chinese New Year, but I did not do it for the sake of Jessie.

There were a lot of celebrational banquets and events in the city. Paula said she hope she could split in two so she could manage to make all the money that the rich was handing out during the festive season. I asked her why not split into four or eight, if that was just her wishful thinking anyway. Aim higher, I told her. Jessie chuckled next to me.

Because Paula was so busy escorting men from one party to another, it was decided that Jessie would be placed in my custody without my consent. One day I came back from work and my mom was busying spoon-feeding rice congee to Jessie as he was watching a poor copycat version of Chinese Doraemon the robot cat from future. His lap and the table top was covered in dots of thick, spilled rice paste.

My dad came rushing out of the kitchen, his apron still on and he smelt like steamed black bean fish, my favorite dish.

“Where did you find this woman?” My dad sounded furious. He was trying to make sure I get the impression that he was furious as well while at the same time trying to keep his voice down lest Jessie could hear him talk, although from what I could see, the child was absolutely engrossed by Doraemon. “How did you get into such a mess?”

I liked how my dad and I were like twins sometimes because his questions were the exact questions I had in my mind. Of course I had some inkling what happened. Patching up what my mom told me, and what my dad told me, what I could gather was that Paula needed to rush, as

always and luckily she still thought of putting Jessie into someone's care first instead of leaving him alone at home without adult company and food, and I came up top of her list. Unfortunately my cell phone ran out of battery since I was playing Clash of Titans and that game drained battery like no other. I missed all four of her calls and she took it to her hands to deliver Jessie to the playground in my neighborhood and gave her son an old iPod which contained a photo of me and herself. Very responsible.

A local city guard caught Jessie playing on his own still when it was turning dark and talked to him. Jessie told him about how his mother had to go to work and he was supposed to stay with his mother's boyfriend's tonight. He said he was not playing there but keeping an eye on the passersby for me. The city guard took him to my parents without making a fuss.

I checked my cell phone and I had more than just four missed call, but three more from my parents and one voice mail. I erased it before it would play to save myself the double yelling, recorded and in face to face.

“She's just a friend.” My mom frowned as if she thought I was lying. Jessie had told her I go to her house regularly right before she put him to sleep. He was now away from earshot and we could discuss the matter properly.

“What kind of idiot are you to take care of someone's child when are not involved with her? Besides bringing up a kid takes money.”

“I am not raising her kid for her. We are just acquaintance. I took a liking to the little guy so we hang out from time to time. I teach him English and Maths. That's it.”

“That's someone's kid, my son. Don't invest real emotion in it. This Paula, she could not have been a good woman from how she left her son alone in the playground. He could have been kidnapped! Stay away

from such a woman,” my mom pleaded, as if I just told her I wanted to marry Paula, something that I would never do.

“I am trying to, but you see, the kid...”

“He's not a bad boy, just didn't get the right attention,” my dad said.

“You better send him back tomorrow first thing in the morning,” my mom said. “You're already not earning much, how could you take care of someone's family?”

“What someone's family?” I said.

“You have to find a girlfriend still. What if other girls saw you with this woman and her kid? No one would come near you!”

“It's just a friend's kid. It's not a plague. Besides, when Chinese New Year finishes, his mom would pick him up again as if nothing happened!”

“Nothing happened! Son, we have to now carry him around with us throughout the holidays! All of your relatives will see him and ask me, who is this kid? Is that your grandson? When did your son get married? Why didn't you tell us? And worse still, they might find out he is not one of us, that you have been so dumb to date a woman with a child.”

I grunted. Indeed, I did not think of the consequences as thoroughly as my mother. On the other hand, I could not care less about what other people say about me. She did though, very much, I could tell.

“Just think for yourself. You're not young. You're thirty-three already. It's time to find a girl and settle down. Don't waste your time on woman who looks pretty on the outside and has no virtue on the inside. What kind of impression people are going to have on you when they heard this nonsense? Your reputation will be ruined.”

“My reputation was already ruined when we canceled the wedding...” I had to say.

My dad sighed, which stopped her short and said, “If you were married we might have a grandson already to continue our bloodline. I wouldn't have to look at someone else's son and felt envious.”

“Dad. Mom! Stop! This year's New Year will be difficult for you, but don't worry, next year you will have a lovely daughter-in-law who comes from a good family and she will bear the grandson you have always wanted to bring face and luck to the family, okay? That settles it I suppose. I'm going to bed.”

I went into my room to find Jessie fast asleep on the far end of my double bed, blanket on the floor. I locked the doors and said Goodnight to myself.

Chapter 18: Pretension

Jessie got along with the sons and daughters of my cousins, who were about my age but already married and had kids of their own. My parents decided to take turn to own their relationships with Jessie. They have decided that Jessie was the son of Paula who was their distant relative's daughter from their hometowns and that I should not be involved in any part in the story of why we were bringing along an extra kid this year to family gatherings. Since my mother and my father's hometowns were seventy kilometers apart and most people from these towns didn't mix with each other, the chance that anyone shall find out the trick we pulled here was minimal. Jessie and I went along with it. My mom allowed us extra turnip cakes at our relative's houses for keeping our mouths shut lest we exposed her and make her lose face.

Unlike the previous year, no one asked me when am I going to get married, since for years I had been telling them the plans of me and my ex-girlfriend's wedding plan, which was now nothing but sad memory. Instead they resorted to the question they asked ten years ago, do I have a girlfriend because they were ready to set me up with some distant relations again who was at marriage age.

While I made it sound like it was really hard to meet girls, it was only theoretically true. Theoretically there were a lot more men than women, actually about 50 millions more men than women at marriage age. You would expect that due to low supply and high demand, all women at marriage age would be taken. That was certainly not the case. Practically, not all women were equally desirable and some were more desirable than others, causing the cost of acquisition, all expenses involved in giving her a

good time such as dinner, flowers, gifts for her and her parents, dowry and so on, to shoot up in marital market, while for those that were less desirable to have a reasonably affordable cost of acquisition. I did not mean to diminish women by applying economic theories to their flow in and out of relationships, however in a society that men were expected to shoulder most cost, if not all involved, it was hard not to be a bit more frugal and calculating, since money in my command was never infinite. There was limited resource that could be attributed to this activity of wife-finding and I had to optimize my gain. It was imperative to be economically minded.

So, there were still girls who would love to meet such a loser like me and perhaps even marry me, despite my average looks. average career prospect, and below average savings, especially those that aspired to get out of the small villages and move in with me to Shanghai. The rent was so high it was still a dream to most people and a dream closed to the hearts especially for those who lived in village the closes to it who was constantly reminded of the beautiful, glamorous city life that was so close but felt so far away.

Throughout the week of commencing from the New Year's day, I was introduced to ladies of all sizes and shapes. None were so pretty and attractive like the women I met online, since they were all village girls who either did not bother with their looks because they had hard jobs in the village where jobs were scarce, or they over did it.

Hundreds of thousands of people flooded Shanghai every year from outside the city, hoping to get in on the action of the high life. They had a pretentious taste, wear expensive clothes feigning good taste, kissing up and looking down. You could tell from five meters away they stank of ignorance.

I told Kelvin about my observations when we chatted over the phone since we would miss our weekly coffee during the holidays. He said that I was too harsh. In his opinion, the daughters of new rich he had to spend time with during family visits in Shanghai were a lot more obnoxious.

New rich, of course. Kelvin's parents were amongst them, although they did not pick up any bad habit from his social class, and so Kelvin had a good upbringing. He still hangout with his old pal from back in the days as if there was not a huge class division between us. Every time his chauffeur offered to drive me back to my office after our weekly coffee, he still insisted that I pay for it as if it was a taxi ride. Certainly the chauffeur was obliged to turn down my money since he knew that was just a joke between two kids.

He was right, in fact there was no girl in or around Shanghai who didn't have a pretentious taste, who smeared herself with branded makeup day in day out as if they were Korean movie stars, who did not feign class in even the simplest of all situation and wanted to distinguish herself from the crowd through their abilities to acquire pricey items, or men, and was obsessed with showing their so-called luxurious lives online. It was disgusting, we concluded.

What was more disgusting, however, was that we, men, were the exacerbaters of the phenomenon, footing the bills to boost their confidence in hope of getting their favors.

The daughter of my cousin gave Jessie a kiss. He was so shocked he felt face down on the couch seat. Everyone laughed and it was so noisy we decided to cut our conversation short.

Chapter 19: The Perfect Girl

Then one day, I met the perfect girl. She was the replacement English teacher for the professor at the vocational college who got injured in a hiking accident.

We had been asked by the headmaster to call her Miss Li. She was in her 3rd year in Harvard's School of Arts and Science, major in American Studies, with focus on immigration cultures within the Americas. All these information I found on her teacher's page that same evening in my moments of insomnia.

Not only did she look lovely, she was also elegant, graceful and well-educated. She was the perfect model specimen for girlfriend. I had followed her a few times home after class. No, I was not stalking her per my definition, since she happened to walk in front of me every time and lived near the thirteen tram stops along my usual route home from the vocational school. Of course she did not take the tram with me, otherwise we would have had the opportunity to speak outside of class already. For such a lovely girl, it was almost expectant that there would be a lucky man in an expensive European car waiting to drive her home every school evening so she could keep this sinful, degenerate part of the city from polluting her soul. Because of the frequent traffic light along the route, my tram could catch up to the white BMW every so often. These were the opportunity where I would peer into the car and imagine how it would feel like it if was me who was sitting next to her in the comfort of my own car, driving my beloved home.

One evening after class, Miss Li asked me to stay behind.

My heart pounding, I sat motionless on my seat unable to move. She loomed over me eventually and I felt my mouth watering. I swallowed hard and shifted on my seat.

“Do you know Marvey Green?”

On the sound of Marvey's name, my heart skipped a beat. How did she know her?

Miss Zhao explained that she knew Marvey through some Chinese student society events.

“So it was you! In her photos. She posted a lot of photos from her exchange semesters in Shanghai some months ago. And when I saw you in this class the first time, I thought you looked very familiar but I didn't know where I knew you from. The other day my brother came to pick me up from school and he said he saw a student from my class who looked like the guy in Marvey's photographs. Of course that was you, now I know! Such a small world!”

I smiled weakly, reminiscing the fun times when Marvey was here, and wondering on the back of my mind why I could not see any of the photographs she posted on Facebook. There was no way I would miss them because I had all the notifications turned on for everything from Marvey. It appeared that she was hiding our own photographs from my eyes.

“Would you like to have midnight snacks with my brother and I?” Miss Zhao asked. I obliged.

Shirley, she told me I could call her that, and her brother Simon. They both studied in Harvard. It was a relief to hear that the man who picked her up every school evening was her younger brother, not lover, who was also taking their spring break back home in China. However, I found myself sulking throughout the midnight snacks, despite the excellent street snacks and wonderful company.

Sipping my cup of lukewarm tea that was brewed for way too long that it was now dark brown, I tried to control my face so that my foul mood would not be too obvious to the others. On the background, a group was singing old fashion Chinese opera songs to entertain the customers.

“Marvey had it really rough lately after she broke up with Zhi. Most of her close friends were Zhi's friends, and she felt alienated when they broke up. The dance crew was her only solace, she told me once.” Shirley said. The two girls apparently belonged to the same Chinese dance group in Harvard that performed every year at the year-end student show. “Lately, she had become really really skinny I could see her shoulder bones. We all think she is anorexic but she wouldn't go to the health center. Some of us were wondering what might help her get better. And I recalled that she had very fond memories of her times in China. When I saw you, I thought maybe you could help bring back some of those happy memories somehow, cheer her up and make her eat again. You were in almost every photo she posted.”

“Was I?” I was surprised.

“You two were really good friends, right?”

“Emm...you could say that I was the first real Shanghainese she knew outside of school. But we have gotten out of touch since she left for America.”

“That's wonderful! You know what, let's Facetime her together!”

“Now?”

“Yes, now! It's still just late afternoon over there. She should pick up.”

“Where is she now?”

“She's back home with her parents for the break, in Minnesota.”

Before I could protest, Shirley's brother already took out his latest iPhone and started Facetimeing Marvey. Shirley dropped her chopsticks, took out her compact mirror to take a look at herself to make sure she still looked as fabulous as she remembered it. Quickly, I took a big glum of the tea to wash my mouth before moving myself behind Simon.

“Hey, Marv!”

“Hey, Shirley. Wasup? Isn't it really late already in Shanghai?”

“Look who's in my English class!” With that, Shirley swiped the camera to my direction. I poked my head out from behind Simon, who was grinning from ear to ear.

“Hi, Marvey my dear.” I said to the fussy image of the girl whom I had missed in the last ten months.

There was a delay on the line. I looked into Marvey's eyes trying to search for some recognition in vein for what felt like eternity,

“Oh, my God! Shirley!!” Marvey screamed to the speaker as she scrambled out of her chair and jumped hysterically behind her desk like a three year old girl who got a bucket of chocolate for Christmas. “Jong, what are you doing there! How did you two know each other?”

“English class, missy! I just told you.” Shirley laughed at her forgetfulness.

“Jong, you have to come visit us! You have to come visit us!”

The two girls giggled through the rest of the conversation. I did not remember much of it, but I remember distinctively that I was invited to Harvard by Marvey and Shirley.

Chapter 20: Ashtray

“No, you're not going to Boston.” Paula said when I broke the news to her that I was invited to visit Harvard the upcoming summer during dinner. “Who's going to take care of Jessie when you're gone?”

“Take her to my mother if you want.”

Little Jessie almost fell off the couch in excitement. Going to my mother means going to the rest of the family to the countryside where all the rest of the relatives lived. He could meet his little girlfriend again, whom he had been keeping in contact with through DouBan.

“Are you going to see that white girl and ask her to marry you?” Paula asked sarcastically. I felt assaulted by the jets of jealousy oozing out of her nostrils as she spoke.

“I am not going to ask her to marry me but I am going to visit her all right. Who knows what would happen.”

“You're so childish you are unbelievable. Romance like that does not exist.”

“It doesn't matter. You know how long I have been looking forward to that.” I stated matter of factly.

“No one would want to be with you except me. You're just going to fall flat on your face in shame over there when you realized that.”

“I wasn't expecting anything. I am just going to visit a friend.”

“Friends. They are all friends. All these sluts who text and call you in the middle of the night.”

“Well, look who's calling other women sluts now?” I said jokingly.

“Don't come back if you insist on leaving!”

“What leaving? I'm coming back.”

“Don't!”

Paula put on her earring, grabbed her handbag, walked out and slammed the front door behind her, just like every time when we could not agree on something. She had the habit of running away in the middle of a conversation as if the world depends on her arriving on time on her next escort appointment.

“Ma thought you've forgotten about the Western girl.” Jessie said me while I was lost in thoughts. “I told her she was wrong.” He grinned as if he won a price for being right.

“What else did your mom say?”

“She thought you would make a good husband. She is sad that you have another girlfriend.”

I grimaced. I always got the feeling that if I was not doing such a good job at looking after her kid, she would like to bash my head into pulp for just breathing the same air with her, occupying space in her vicinity. Was she really that into me?

“No, your mom doesn't like me.”

Little Jessie smirked. “Of course she does. You don't know?”

I tripped over the coffee table as I was walking towards the front door to shut the still opened metal gate. A tray of cigarette ashes spill to the ground in an hazy, ash cloud. It made me choke.

“Smoking is a disgusting habit.” I said to Jessie in between coughs. “I don't like women who smoke.”

Chapter 21: The Shirley Show

Shirley was alone again that evening. Her good brother Simon had gone to a trip to the nearby Hangzhou with his friends. No one else in the family drives but Shirley. That evening, Shirley asked me if I would like to ride with her. I had no reason to say no.

On the way home, we stopped by a noodle shop to get some spicy dumpling soups. Over the steams of the hot soup, I sucked in air through my running nose. Shirley handed me a paper towel and when I did not response since my mind was elsewhere, she took it upon herself to wipe my nose.

“Hey, I can do it myself.” I said in a muffled voice. The paper towel was covering my nose and mouth. I grabbed it from her hand and sneezed.

“I'm so glad we are going to Boston together.” She grabbed my other hand and smiled. “You can stay at Simon and my rental house. There is enough space for the three of us.”

I pulled my hand out from under hand palm, gave hers a squeeze and released it so that I could hold up the bowl of soup to my mouth to drink it up.

That evening, Shirley drove me home. She was surprised I did not proactively ask her to come in for a drink.

“Sorry, my mom and pop are up there. It would be weird for them to see you with me, while we are not...”

“Well, let's be a couple then.” She smiled and pulled the car key of the ignition.

As expected, my parents overreact to Shirley's visit like I thought they would. They were all over her as soon as she stepped through the threshold of our door.”

My mom became instantly ashamed of our cozy apartment and she kept apologizing how small the place was and how everything was old and probably not up to the standards of what Shirley was used to back in her luxurious home.

My dad, on the other hand, took the art of silence to an extreme. He glanced at her for a good five minutes without speaking and responding to her greetings, until he finally decided that based on his face reading theories, she was going to have a fruitful and prosperous married life.

Then they started feeding her snacks. No the preserved dried fruit that had been in the can for at least five years that my parents served when the neighbor aunt came over for mahjong or the stall biscuits that my dad serve the neighbor uncles whenever they came to watch soccer and drink cheap beers with us. Those were real exquisite imported snacks like chocolate pralines and Belgian mini waffles they kept in their stashes they did not dare to open and share unless there would be important guests.

“You should really have told us if you are bringing a friend to visit.” My mom said as she fussed over the, in her opinion, sub-par conditions of the house and her appearance.

“What does your honorable father do?” My dad asked, using pronouns in polite form, as he received a box of Hawaiian nuts and a bottle of whiskey in return from Shirley.

“He is the owner of the Sun of China group.” Shirley answered monotonously, likely a question she got often since it would be crazy not to notice she must come from a family with impressive pedigree.

Her answer was one that would make any regular Chinese flinch. The Sun of China group was in the middle of IPO discussion to get on the board of the Shanghai Stock Exchange. The group was evaluated, I could still remember freshly in my mind because it was such an exorbitant amount, at 6 billions. It was the owner of hundreds of luxury real estates and premium shopping locations in and around the area. My dad, who was a feverish news reader, would no doubt had read about Shirley's father.

Shirley grabbed my hand and gave it a squeeze in front of my parents, and she said, "I am taking him to Boston with me, so he could see how I live over there."

"That's wonderful." My dad said, glad to hear that such an opportunity was bestowed to me as if fallen from heaven. Going abroad, even in these days and age of supersonic commercial planes, budget airlines and massive intercontinental flight networks, was still a luxury for most folks. I had the honor to fly a couple of times for business to Xiamen, a two hour flight, where one of our service providers was located to do a face-to-face meet and greet, but that was nothing like the glory you would earn in your social circle if you were to say you have traveled to Boston, to America. "Behave yourself over there in America," my dad said, not realizing that he was embarrassing me with his cautious words in front of Shirley.

"A long distance relationship is usually very difficult, but I am sure if he come once in a while to me, and me to him, we would have no problem maintaining it until we get married and settle down." I was salivating on the thought of traversing the Russian airspace on First class once a year to see my beautiful, smart and rich new girlfriend and had not notice she mentioned something about getting married. My parents of course had a bit more foresight than I did. They welcomed the idea of us getting married with big smiles on their faces.

“He could move in with us, at the mansion at Puming Road near the riviera.” She said, then she corrected herself, “no, actually all of you should move in with us! I am sorry I didn't think of that in the first place. We have two floors in the highest residential building in Shanghai, we didn't know what to do with all that space anyway. I am sure my parents would be very happy about it.”

My dad was nodding along, then he stopped and said, all of a sudden remembering our place in the society hierarchy relative to Shirley's family, “we loved your suggestion to live together, but we were planning to retire in our ancestral home at the village.” A factory worker all his life, he felt ashamed of himself and his family. “Thank you for your hospitality, I think we would not fit in the nice mansion. A quiet life at our hometown would be what we need. The two of you could stay in the city.”

“That's ludicrous. We are a family, aren't we?” Shirley squeezed my hand again. It helped me focus back on the conversations at hand from my daydreams about America. “We should live together even after we get married and we must renovate it nicely!” Shirley said enthusiastically, “let me talk to my father's architects. They could design something for us. I am sure my dad would be happy to give me the resources.”

At that point, we looked like a picture-perfect family. Everyone was happy, the filial son had a filial wife-to-be, and the parents' big city hopes and dreams, what they couldn't realize in their youth when they arrived in Shanghai, would soon to be fulfilled through their beloved son.

When Shirley was gone, my parents could still not sit still from excitement of having met their perfect future daughter-in-law.

“Now this is more like it, son! I like her very much. Good job.” My mom complimented me. “I need to say a prayer to the ancestors and

give thanks for looking after you boy.” Then she walked into the kitchen.

My dad yelled out to her, “what did I always say, huh, both of you? Inside a book you will find girls with complexions like jade; Inside a book, you will find houses made of gold. ” He recited a Chinese proverb, proud that a theory he held so dear was finally proved true. “Educate yourself and you will find everything you need from it.” He was referring to my long-dued decision to go back to school.

“Yes, old man. You're right again!” Mom yelled back from the kitchen as she warmed up my dinner for me.

“Will you take care of Jessie for me when I go to Boston?”

“Forget about Paula and Jessie. Don't even bring them up in front of Shirley. You don't want to let this girl has any reason to break up with you.”

“Mom!” I was shocked by her directness. “What's wrong with Paula and Jessie?” I certainly knew what was wrong with Paula and Jessie, but they were after all our family acquaintance now after all these times they have spent with Jessie in the country side during Chinese New Year. By extension they should be nice to Paula as well, she being my friend, mother of Jessie and all.

“Okay, I will take care of Jessie. But remember what I told you. No woman likes to share a boyfriend with someone else.”

The next day when I met Kelvin, he was jut as excited as my parents about Shirley. “That was a good call from you to go to night school.” Kelvin said. “Are there other beautiful misses? From Chinese class? History class?”

“Piss off.”

“True. There can't be anymore like Shirley. Beautiful and smart. The most important quality of all is that she is rich. She doesn't need

your money. Even a penniless fool like you can make her fall in love with you. That's just miracle.”

“Everything about her is perfect. Yet I didn't get the same feeling towards her as I have with Marvey.”

“Feeling? You're still so stubborn about relationships. You're looking at a goldmine.”

“Not everything has to be about money.”

“Let me analyze it for you. Marvey is an American girl and she lives a thousand miles if not more away. She would never become anyone more than a female friend who lives in an exotic foreign place to you. In the process of obtaining even a chance to take a shot at having a relationship with her, you have saved all your salary for the trip, sacrificed your social life and wasted hours of your time studying English. Now Shirley is different. She's native Shanghainese. She could communicate with your family. Her family business is going to be yours or at least partly yours if you marry her and you, being the son-in-law of such a big tycoon, could live like a king. Your life is all set, only from making such a tiny, tiny life decision. Many others would kill for such an opportunity. Didn't you say she upgraded your flight to first class so the two of you could travel together in comfort and style? If I were you I would proposed to her on the flight, marry her in the next opportunity and visit Boston together like it is our honeymoon. I would just skip the whole Marvey thing if I were you.”

“How are we different from the gold-diggers that we always made fun of. How are we then different from the women who want to marry rich?”

“The difference is you don't have a role in that scenario because you can't afford to give your woman the life she wants. This city is expensive. The person who gets the most money gets the girl. This is a

scenario you are familiar with because you are constantly being rejected in the auditions for the role of future husband. Now there is a different show coming on stage and you have already passed the audition. That's the Shirley show. Go for it man!”

In order not to be called the disgrace for men, Shirley and I officially started a relationship two weeks before we were due for Boston. That evening I gave her an upgraded version of my virtual reality proposal animation in the car. The roses were not red but pink, with golden ribbons and the diamond ring was replaced with a diamond necklace.

“I couldn't afford a lot. I hope you like this.” I added the subtitle in the background as she watched the animation through the VR goggle.

“This is the best gift ever. Thank you!” Shirley hugged me so tight I almost could not breath.

“I am glad you liked it.” And I was more surprised at how similar products could elicit such different responses from two different persons.

Chapter 22: Soccer Field

One of the kids kicked the ball towards the direction of the goal. It narrowly missed the frame and hit me on the face instead. The corner of my right eye started bleeding without me noticing, until Shirley ran into the field and told everyone to stop. I sat down the field and tried to wipe my face with the corner of my soccer shirt.

“The shirt is brand new!” She said, as she was pulled out a paper towel from a fresh package of Tempo she had on her and started dabbing the corner of my eyes with it. I cringed as the menthol on the towel stung my eyes and my nose.

“It's okay.” Just when I was reaching out to grab the towel from her hand, it was her turn to cringed backwards. My hands were muddy, she did not want me to touch her. She waved her servant over from the side of the field who was holding up the water bottles and a box of what I gathered to be travel size first-aid kit. The middle-age man rushed over and knelt by my side despite his suit. He started treating me with stuff from his magic box while I scanned what was happening around us. All the kids have gathered around us and some of them were snickering.

“You are so weak, coach!” One of them said, and the others giggled.

Shirley hushed them quite, and she said, “You boys are so not careful. That's why it is necessary that a woman is presence to make things alright again.”

One of the latecomer leaned on her shoulder, wanting to get a better look at my injured face. Shirley stood up as if she had just been touched by a molester. “Go away! Dirty brat!”

The kid fell to the ground and started sobbing. Needless to say, his mom came over and started to quarrel with Shirley. “Be careful with my kid!” I heard her yell. I was too tired to care. The sun was shining directly above my head and sitting still on the same spot after running around the field with the kids exhausted me. I closed my eyes and fainted.

When I woke up, I was in the guest room of Shirley's parents' city apartment. The room was massive for guest-use and all around there were mirrors and white marble decorative panels and white leather furniture. I felt myself and realized that someone had helped me change out of my own soiled soccer outfit. Good, otherwise Shirley would be really upset about it.

I looked around for my own clothes. They were neatly folded and placed into a small stacks on the white-washed bedside cabinet next to the small lamp. Still feeling dizzy, I slowly wobbled to the door behind the fake wall behind the bed frame headboard and opened it. As I thought it was a private bathroom within the guest room. In most apartments in this part of the world, only the master bedroom would have its own bathroom. I could only imagine how grand the rest of the apartment looked like as I washed my face with cold water coming out of the exquisite, highly polished French faucet. I didn't know if I was imagining it but the water, I licked the side of my lips it just to see how it would be, seem to even taste sweet, compared to the bland water at home, coming out from the rusty spout that we called faucet.

When I turned off the faucet, I could hear muffled noise coming from the other side of the wall. Instinctively I leaned my head on the cold tiles to hear better. This was Shanghai after all. Despite its outward appearance, the walls were still paper thin, probably stuffed with mixture of

concrete, sand and newspapers by greedy hands of dishonest construction contractors.

“Just bear with it. It's only for the time being.” Shirley said. Yes, it was distinctively her voice.

“I couldn't bear the thought of you being with another man.” A male voice said. Then there were a period of nothing but muffled rustling noises of different kind fabrics.

“Mmm...don't do that. He's in the next room!”

I felt my heartbeat racing. Shirley was hiding a man from me. On second thought, I had only known Shirley recently. From the familiar tone she used to talk to the other man, they might have known each other before I got together with her. So we were the affair, not the other way around. Now the question was, why? Why deceived me?

The man on the other side had the exact same question. “What do you like about that idiot? You could have picked a better rival. I feel insulted.”

“He's a man also is he not? And if he's an idiot like you said then that's all the better. He would never notice. It is perfect.”

I understood that at some point, Shirley would realize that I was an idiot, she being a student at Harvard and all, but to hear her say that in such a context, I felt extremely crossed. I pressed my ear closer to the ice-cold tile and listened ever more intently.

Under the circumstances, I needed to be as quiet as possible until I had gathered as many facts as possible in stealth, but I felt an intolerable itch in my throat. Involuntarily I coughed to get rid of the itch. I clasped my hand immediately over my mouth. It was too late. The discussion on the other side of the room stopped. What felt like two seconds later, Shirley busted into the guest room and rushed to my side. Luckily I

had already slipped under the thick layers of duvet and I coughed again to keep up the appearance of being sick. She gave me a kiss on the forehead and asked me in soft gentle tone that was completely different from the tone she used to describe me when she spoke to the other man. She spoon-fed me some medicine and I fell asleep again. In my dreamy state, I remembered saying to myself in my head that it seemed like I could apply the same sentence to Shirley as well, “She would never notice the glitch. It is perfect.”

Chapter 23: Parental Guidance

When I woke up from my summer stupor, an anxiety washed over me. Through the uncurtained window I could see the beautiful skyline of the Bund. There were very few obstacle that blocked my million yen view. Despite the view, I dressed myself up as quickly as possible in the moonlight that shone through the glass window panes, and walked out the front door.

I thought I could catch a glimpse of who Shirley was speaking to. Instead I saw Shirley, Simon and their mom and dad enjoying dinner. On the side, two servants were waiting on them. One rushed forward to give me a pair of slippers. It did make me feel a little bit more secure, for the marble flooring was really cold. Gingerly I walked a few steps towards them and apologized for my intrusion.

Shirley's dad did not look up at me. Her mom turned her head to give me a glance and then her head was turned back to the soft, steamy bowl of pearlescent white rice she had in her hand. There were six or seven dishes on the table. One of them were garlic baked razor clams. I felt my mouth watering. My stomach growled.

“Hey, come join us for dinner!” Simon said enthusiastically. Shirley walked to my side and grabbed my arm before I could protest, for I felt already the unwelcome by the manner of her parents. “We are having grilled pork belly in red wine tonight. You will like it!”

“Mom, dad. This is my boyfriend.” She introduced me as such when I sat down between Simon and Shirley, keeping my distance from the tigers on prowl, bracing in my head for attack.

It was difficult to endure the silence during dinner. Fortunately everyone was a fast eater, including myself. When my energy was replenished, I was sat on the massive couch on the other side of the living room that sat on top of an expensive looking red and gold rug, directly opposite to Shirley's mom and dad, who were sipping after dinner Dragon Well tea. The smell of it was so good I could not resist the temptation when one of the servant offered one to me.

I knew I had to be the one to break the silence and get the discussion over with. So I did. Conventionally, when you meet your girlfriend's parents for the first time, you are supposed to bring some symbolic gifts and introduce yourself extensively to impress them. In my case, I was taken in because I fainted, I gathered. There was no opportunity to purchase anything impressive, nor was I dressed appropriately. Shirley did not seem to mind in this instance as much as I thought she would. She chimed in to sing my praises when I started my monologue about who I was, where I worked, where my parents came from and all the other facts about me that could impress, or in the least provide confidence to her parents that I was a capable man worthy of being their beloved daughter's boyfriend. I still did not find out what the earlier discussion about me between Shirley and the mysterious man was about but in front of bigger enemy I had momentarily forgotten about it. Swimming against the stream of hostility, I managed to say something that Shirley's dad was interested enough to say something about. It was the fact that I was going to Boston together with his daughter.

“Where are you staying?” Her dad squinted.

Shirley quickly eyed Simon, who rescued us from coming under the line of fire by saying that he had arranged for me to stay with his

American friend's dormitory. It was a cultural taboo for a Chinese woman to stay in one room with a man before they were married.

“Why can't you afford your own place for just a few weeks?”

I was about to answer that I could afford anything I want in the world but saving money was a virtue, something that a lot of rich folks did not understand. Simon seemed to read the preposterous answer in my mind and he decided it was best that he answer for me instead.

“My friend is going away for the summer. He could use someone to look after his cat. This is best arrangement for all of us.” I did not bother to tell Simon that I hate cats.

It was subtle but I thought I saw her dad rolled his eyes.

Then it was her mom's turn. “Are you the one with the kid?”

“Mom...shhh!” Shirley hushed her.

“What?! Your dad ought to know if he has a kid!”

“What are you talking about?” Her dad rumbled.

“I have lots of kids.” I smiled. “I coach them soccer every week. That was what I was doing as well today.”

“Not those, I meant your own.” Shirley mother's corrected me.

“Oh, shoot! I completely forgot about Jessie.” Jessie was waiting for me at home that evening because as usual, Paula left him alone in the house again.

Shirley chimed in before the misunderstanding worsen. “Jessie is his Godson. They are not related. He has a very big heart. He coaches these kids from poor families and underprivileged conditions school works. You taught Jessie English, too right? Last time you told me you watched BBC with him?” She said, looking me, searching for confirmation of her lies. “He's such a nice person I wish I could be more like him.”

“Excuse me. I need to give him a call...” I excused myself as Shirley was still singing my praises and back traced my way through the enormous apartment to the guestroom to look for my cell phone. In the corner of my eyes I could feel her parents' disgruntlement.

“Hey, little man. What are you doing?” I said to Jessie. My mind was split into two. I was trying to process the parallel conversation happening between Jessie and I, and the one that still continued in the living room between Shirley and her parents. They seemed to have immediately started a fight over my unwelcome presence in their lives as soon as, they thought, I was out of earshot. The apartment was great, but as I have mentioned before, the acoustics of this place was terrible. You could hear everything from everyone anywhere in the apartment. I could hear clearly that her dad described me as “good for nothing, stingy, not fit for business” and her mom, “lack of manners, impolite, poorly dressed.” All in all, I got the impression that if I were to become Shirley's husband, I would be the disgrace of their family.

In my ear, I could hear Jessie's eager voice longing for me to come home so we could play Superman action figures together. I was just happy he did not starve to death or got into some sort of freak home-alone accident.

“Thank you for your hospitality. I have to go, to look after Jessie.” I smiled as politely and as gracefully as I could after being insulted behind my back to Shirley's parents.

It was then that her dad said the longest sentence to me the whole evening. “Take this kid of yours, Jessie, with you to America. I will pay for his flight and any expense incurred.”

Shirley looked distraught by the offer, no, actually the command of her dad. I could understand how senseless it was to her to

think that we were going to spend time just the two of us together but instead we would be taking care of a kid that did not belong to neither of us on his first trip on the plane to a foreign country. It would be a full time job instead of a full time summer vacation. I, of course, could see where this was coming from. Obviously Shirley's dad wanted to make sure we would not be doing anything we were not supposed to do when we were out of his reach, so he would like to plant a kid in the mix. With a kid close to us, we would not be sleeping with each other any time soon, he thought. In those instance, even the cleverest parents were wrong. It would be a great inconvenient, but it had never stopped Paula and I. So I could not see how this would stop Shirley and I.

I tried to look taken aback to keep Shirley's dad into thinking that he had ruined my plan. In the back of my mind I was exhilarated. Jessie would be so excited about the free trip. He had been begging me to bring back some American comic strips since the day I told him about Boston.

“No, Boston is famous for Irish gangs and good beer, not comic strips,” I corrected Jessie with information I presumed correct which I had learnt from years of watching American TV series and movies. “Do you know the Departed? The Chinese movie that got a remake in Hollywood? It was filmed in Boston.”

“Andy Lau!” Jessie shouted on the top of his lungs. He loved Andy Lau.

Chapter 24: Airplane

If I were a braver man I would have confronted Shirley about what I heard the other day. Being the wuss that I was, I told myself that whatever that was could wait until after I arrived in America. So what if she was in love with another man, and condescend to make me her boyfriend-for-public? It was not like I entered into this relationship with a pristine open heart. To be honest, I did not think love is something for me anyway. It cost too much money. When the money ran out, the woman was gone. I had the taste of this bitterness one too many times. If this constant bitter disappointment was love, then I was perfectly fine not to have anything to do with it.

In Chinese, men who needed women's financial support were called Little White Faces. I had been verbally abused by people around me all my life with all sorts of names. But Little White Face was a title I had never earned. As I rather enjoyed being showered with gifts, and feel entitled to good things once in my life, like the other women who had all came into my life and left me destitute both mentally and financially, this time I had my eyes set on being called just that.

I would compromise on the loving feeling even if there was ulterior motive behind.

It was lonely to be so perfect in all respect. This Shirley's parents knew very well, and they tried their utmost to protect her from someone like me. Given how inhospitable her parents were towards me, who was a, in my humble opinion, reasonably polite and honest man, when I met them last, Shirley's secret boyfriend must be a hundred times worse than I was in some aspects, if not all. That would be a good reason for her

to take me in as a surrogate boyfriend to appease her difficult parents. Thinking of this, I could not help but snickered.

The man sitting across the aisle from me on the plane gave me a condemning frown. I did not know one cannot snicker to yourself in First Class, I told him. He turned away his cocked head and stared into the nothingness that was the wall panel.

I had not been on long distant flight too many times, but I could conclude that based on my current observations, there was nothing so special about First Class, apart from the amount of uncalled for, almost disturbing, attention I got from the various six-foot tall heavily made up air hostesses, that I would come back for more given the steep price tag.

No, I did not want a wine, nor did I need any slippers. I did not want to read Wall Street Journal, nor Financial Times. The Harold was absolutely irrelevant both to the origin and destination in my point of view I had to voice my opinion about her inconsideration. When the air hostess ran out of offers, she asked me if I had any request. Jessie immediately brightened up and asked for a comic strip. “We have one,” the pretty but annoying hostess came clacking down the aisle with a Chinese comic book. Jessie brushed her off, looking pissed with his arms crossed in front of his chest. Shirley only smiled and took a picture of us at that moment.

Half way through the flight, there was a commotion on the other side of the curtains, in the business slash economy class. An air hostess came through the curtains from the other side, carrying an important looking news for the captain. She conversed shortly to her colleague who gave us the Chinese comic book earlier, and went straight into the cockpit.

“What was this all about?” The man across the aisle asked, flustered that someone had broken his peace.

“Hi, ladies and gentlemen, there is a small incident in the economy class. Our crew is working hard to resolve the issue right now. Please remain seated with your seat belt fastened and I will make sure that whatever is happening will bring no discomfort to all of our First Class passengers.” The comic book lady announced to us. Then she turned to the man with the brightest smile she could muster, “would you like to put on your headphones for some excellent classic music from the Romantic Period? Perhaps a plate of complimentary cheese and wine with it?”

The man nodded and seemed pleased again. Sometimes I felt like other people have wrong priorities in life.

Just at that moment, the door of the cockpit busted open and a man in captain uniform walked out, following the air hostess that brought the news. They rushed through the curtains and I caught a glimpse of what was out there when it flung open.

“Two passengers were having a fight, over the last can of coke.”

“I told the manager to stock more! See what happens when she did not listen to the crew.”

The two air hostesses gossiped at the threshold of the class divider.

When the second one peered through the curtains, she made an opening. Through it, I saw the captain was being beat to the ground by a grouchy-looking man.

“Such low quality people on the plane.” The man next to me said.

“I agree with you!” I said, directing it to him, which he did not realize, like all self-absorbed assholes. I unbuckled my seat belt and walked through the curtains to the man throwing punches madly at the captain. The

two women, I realized later, were supposed to stop me but they were too scared by what was happening, and they let me through without any protest nor concern for my First Class discomfort.

I grabbed the attacker's shirt in his shoulder and before he could look up at me, I punched him hard in the stomach. He fell backwards. There behind him was the other passenger that got in the fight with him in the first place, sprawling on the ground with cuts on his arms and face. When he saw the opportunity, he immediately leaped over the fallen guy and clamped his arms together and behind his back. I too had by then jumped across the body of the captain, who was wringing in pain on the floor, and grabbed the spraying legs of the struggling man. The two of us managed to subdue him and kept him on the ground by sitting on him while one of the smarter air hostess came running towards us with plastic twist ties to bind his hands and feet together.

When we touched down safely in Boston, seven heavily armed police stormed the plane and arrested the two men. One walked willingly by himself, the other, still bonded by twist ties, had to be carried off the plane. His wives and children were screaming and shouting, and they too had been escorted off the plane. The head air hostess, who turned out to be the woman who gave me the twist ties, had a short conversation with one of the officer, and out I went as well into the quarantined security area.

“Stay with Shirley and Simon!” I hissed at Jessie who looked as if he wanted to follow me.

Simon gave me a thumb's up. I was too busy being carried away by men about two times my size with arms that could rival the width of the First Class armrests.

Chapter 25: Hugs

When I was finally 'released' from the interrogation room, I walked myself into another interrogation room outside of the security area. As soon as I came out through the sliding doors of the arrival area, reporters and security guards rushed forward, surrounding me with cameras and microphones. There were lots of flashes.

“You saved the captain, didn't you?” I gave the man who said that a smile for the camera.

“How did you feel about being a hero?” Another man asked. Hero, when did I become a hero?

“I am not a hero. There are just too many fools.” I replied.

“What kind of Kung Fu did you use? Was it Tai Chi?”

“No, no, no...that was nothing.” I said. “I practice nothing but soccer.”

“Are all Chinese people so grumpy?” I frowned at that one and did not want to reply.

Just then there was an opening in the crowd. A person slipped through and leaped towards me. It was Marvey. She gave me the tightest hug I had ever had in my life.

“Thank God you're alright!” She said, I felt her tears on my shirt. “I am so glad to see you.” She squeezed me harder. I felt tears welled up a little in my eyes myself.

The sliding doors behind me opened and the captain, Mr. Sha came through, his cap cocked to hide the bruise near his right eye. Mr. Sha had a big embarrassed smile on his face when he saw the media.

“Come, take a picture with the captain,” one of the reporter urged me.

“Yes, stand right there,” the cameraman behind him pointed to the space in front of the arrival sliding doors that said “Welcome to Boston!”

“Say cheese!” Marvey cheered. I saw her wiping tears from her face with the back of her hand.

Only when I arrived at Shirley's place and turned on the TV did I realize what the fuss was all about. The local media had mistakenly reported the fight on the flight to be a terrorist attack. And as far as I remembered, the newscaster said an unnamed Chinese man of average height, average looks, average clothing taste, average intelligence, average salary, average hair length and exceptionally good martial art skills had subdued the terrorists. Not only did he rescued passengers of the whole flight from their attempts to take over the plane, he had also saved the lives of thousands, if not hundred of thousands living in the city of Boston should the terrorists drive the plane into one of the skyscrapers on a suicidal mission.

Then there was a footage of me at the airport standing next to the Captain of Hainan Airline being photographed by the enthusiastic crowd.

“That was not a terrorist attack.” I told Marvey. “There were fighting because of a can of coke.”

“How'd you know the can was not part of their weaponry?”

“Good point.” I said, and we chuckled.

From the corner of my eyes, I could spot the tiny winny amount of jealousy in Shirley's eyes. She was still busy taking off the pair of leather boots that were so exquisite they needed a full five minutes to be

slowly peeled off from her feet. She must be thinking where were her servants when she needed them, I thought to myself.

Jessie ran towards me and gave me a hug. Then he turned around to look at Marvey and asked, “who's she?”

“That's Marvey. She's my friend.”

“Oooooooo!” The little bastard realized something. “She's your girlfriend isn't it! She's your white girlfriend!”

Shirley finally finished dealing with her leather boots and put on her slippers. She grabbed Jessie in the waist and hoisted him up. “No, Jessie, Shirley is your uncle's girlfriend. Marvey's just working here.”

“Working?” I frowned. “She's a friend.”

Seeing my confusion, Marvey explained, “Shirley let me live here to keep an eye on the apartment while they were back in China.”

“So you don't work here anymore.” I corrected her, now that Shirley and Simon were back.

“I also cook and clean here four days a week,” she smiled. “Shirley pays me well.”

“What kind of mess are you two making? You need someone to clean for you four days a week?”

“Drinking parties, dinner parties, everything.” Shirley replied, as she put Jessie down on the ground again after realizing that he was heavier than she thought. “We have guests here from time to time.” She walked over to the kitchen to wash her hands. “All of you, wash your hands. It's dirty outside. Change out of your clothes, too, all of you, God knows who sat on the same seat before us.”

“No, I want to go out. I want to see Boston now.” I said.

“Let me take you around!” Marvey volunteered.

“Yay! Yay! Yay! I will come with you two!” The little brat grabbed Marvey and my hand in each of his own and pulled us towards the entrance.

“Wait a minute kiddo, I need to wear my shoes.” Marvey protested.

“I don't! I don't!” He shouted. “I didn't take them off. I am the smartest person in this room!”

“What did you do?!” Shirley rushed out of the kitchen in disbelief. It looked as if she was about to faint when she realized that Jessie still had his street shoes on. “My carpet!”

“I will clean it up for you when we come back,” Marvey said.

“All of you are crazy. I am going to take my beauty nap.” Shirley stretched her arms and yawned.

“Guess I am going to take a man-nap. Wake me up when there is food.” Simon said to Marvey, as if she was one of their maids from home.

Chapter 26: Game

Shirley and Simon lived in an luxury apartment on the waterfront, over looking the Charles River. If I simply look at the apartment building that looked like it was made out of glass, I could easily thought that this was back Shanghai.

There was a little park behind it where Jessie could play so the two of us could get a moment of peace. Marvey and I sat on the edge of one of the big flower beds and watched Jessie climbed on top a plastic pirate ship together with some other kids. There was no cultural barrier when it comes to playing pirate.

Life at this point had made a ridiculous turn. I had a girlfriend, I had a kid who could be practically my own if I so choose, since Paula would not have time to object, and I had arrived in America. This was half of the Chinese dream completed, if not all of it. It made me realize that life was all about making a move. I might not have played all my moves in the best way in this chess game of life, but if I did not move, there was no game. I felt proud of myself for the second time in the same day. The first time was when I managed to check Jessie in onto our flight by answering all the grilling questions the woman at the counter bombarded me with about every personal aspects of my life to find out if I am a potential smuggler, child kidnapper or a fatherly terrorist successfully. I had been worried about it for days about all possible worse-case scenarios that could keep him from going with me on this trip, one that he looked so much forward to. He even started watching English cartoons out of his own initiative. He said that was for when he could meet Captain America. He would settle for any of the members of the Avengers though, he confessed.

“You're amazing...” Marvey broke the silence first. “You're like a completely different person from the one I met in Shanghai.”

I asked her what does she meant.

“When I first met you, you were shy, and you didn't like speaking English, except to me, because you knew you could always switch back to Mandarin with me. This morning you were standing in front of the cameras as if you can't wait to show off.”

“I took classes.”

“Yes, I know. Shirley's classes,” she said. “I can't believe the two of you are together. But I am happy for you.”

We reminisced over those months we spent together in China. Then the apology came. I thought it might, because unlike any other woman, Marvey was a kind-hearted girl. She would not let such a thing slip.

“Sorry. I shouldn't have yelled at you at the zoo. I was completely beside myself during that period. I was so sensitive about everything around Zhi I thought I would lose my mind.”

“Have you come out of it?” I asked concerningly, for she had gotten, as Shirley described, a bit too skinny to be healthy for a girl like her.

“I think so!” She said with conviction. “I have friends who care a lot about me. I have to be better.” She smiled at me, as if implying that I was included in that group.

Only after spending half a day with her did I realize what was still so wrong about Marvey that Shirley got concerned, as selfish as she was. Marvey would not eat anything that remotely resembled food.

She said, “This will make me fat!” to one thing, and “You're trying to make me gain weight!” to another constantly throughout the day as Jessie and I chowed down on local delicacies we encountered in the city

of Boston. An apple was all she had since the morning, she told me, and apparently that was enough for her, for she was on a special diet, which in my interpretation it sounded more like hunger strike, for whatever deadly cause that she deemed worthwhile.

“What was this diet all about?” I asked, annoyed that I still could not buy her something to eat after the sixth try. It was already almost dinner time.

“I just want to control my weigh.”

“Was it Shirley. Did she say you're fat?”

“Hey! I'm doing my best.”

“No, I am not calling you fat. I meant did anyone say you're fat?”

She avoid answering my question and said instead, “All these Asian girls in the dance group they are so skinny. I cannot fit into my dress anymore if I don't lose weigh.”

“You need to ignore them, because to me you're perfect. Absolutely perfect.”

Marvey blushed. I felt myself doing the same.

“I never liked Chinese dancing anyway. You need to switch dance group. Have you ever seen belly dancing? All the belly dancers are round and plumb. They are beautiful. When you stand next to them, you will feel like you should have eaten some more.”

“That's silly. I don't want to have a belly.”

“Everyone has a belly.” Jessie was at hand, so I lifted up part of his shirt to reveal his little belly. He started kicking and screaming, so I let go of him. “Look! How cute it is to have a belly!”

“Oh, please stop talking about my body shape. I feel embarrassed.”

On her prompt, I decided to get to the core of the matter that had nothing to do with her body shape.

“Zhi was an asshole. You don't have to do anything for such a man. In Chinese we say his eyes should be hollowed out to feed to the dogs.”

“I have never heard of that one.”

“See, so you have a lot to learn from this big brother.” I said. I was after all more than ten years her senior. “Boys like Zhi are so immature. They like to chase after girls, easy girls. That's in their nature. There is nothing you can do that get him back because he desired not a skinnier version of you, he wants something else, something new.”

“Someone who has beautiful long straight hair, big watery eyes and speak Chinese.”

“Is that why you are in this Chinese student association? So you could imitate them?”

“I love Chinese culture!” She retorted. “Besides, they are my friends.”

“They are Zhi's friends. I know this is harsh, but do you really think that Shirley treats you like her friend? Do you think Simon treats you like his friend?”

“Not everyone is like that. You haven't met the others. Besides, Shirley and Simon gave me an opportunity to make money to pay for my living over here. I need the part time job. They have been nice enough to offer that. That's what friends do.”

“You're way to sweet Marv.”

“And you are way to skeptical yourself. You can't make friends like that. You have to relax and not be so calculating.” She said, giving me advice instead.

“That's the world I come from. Everyone is out there to take advantage of each other. That's the world Shirley and Simon came from, Marv.”

“It wasn't that bad. I was there, in Shanghai.”

“You lived in a bubble, with all the Erasmus exchange students the likes of Erika.” At the mentioned of her name, the scene at the beach floated top of my mind. “How is Erika by the way?” I hope Marvey had not heard about the story between Erika and I. “I haven't been in touch with anyone since her farewell party.”

“I wasn't there.” Marvey said. “But I heard that she made out with you...”

I closed my eyes in disbelief. How could story from Shanghai traveled so far?

“She attacked me.” That was all I could manage to say on the subject.

“I saw you ogling at her so many times. I thought you two would end up together.”

“How did you know?” I asked. “Were you ogling at me yourself?”

“No, I wasn't!”

Jessie came by and said he spotted a comic book store down the street. He wanted to go there naturally and started dragging out towards it.

Chapter 27: Chinese Living In America

I wish I could tell you the most impressive thing I had seen in Boston was some sort of mind-blowing architectural feats like the odd Lego-like building that was the City Hall, or the wavy, uninhabitable Frank Gehry building. It could have been the bustling Faneuil market or the Fenway park full of cheers for the Red Sox at a home game. In reality it was none of them. I was most impressed, shame on me, by the rows of luxury sports cars that lined the parking lot opposite to the Harvard swimming pool on campus.

Never in my life had I seen so many of them in one place that was not the building of an auto seller.

Thanks to having mingled into the group of Chinese friends of Shirley and Simon in Harvard, I was invited as guest to attend this extravagant show-off. Every so often, this group of friends would go out together in their luxury rides to the city to whatever entertainment that was in store. The parking lot opposite to the swimming pool was their meeting point. Naturally, this attract a lot of attention. People who heard of the news would tell their friends, and they would stop by, men dressed in their best outfits to impress, women fully made up, and others bringing some forms of alcoholic drinks or other substances I would rather not tell, to offer to these children of wealthy families some perks in return for their acquaintances.

I found the conversations between these kids rather tiring – it was mostly about purchase of something, or complaints about the wait for

something they purchased. A group of college aged Chinese girls were standing around gossiping cheerily, all in fashionable outfits a bit too flimsy for their own good. None of them, I observed, were taking selfies or photographs unlike what one would expect when such an event occurred on the streets of Shanghai. These girls, they were not auto models like you would see in auto shows, they were owners of some of those luxury rides, or girlfriends of owners of those luxury rides. They did not have the need to record this lavish moment, for that occurred plenty in their lives. Among them, I saw Shirley, chatting away feverishly on the low quality of the latest eye-shadow palette from Urban Decay.

Curious passerby's or friends of these auto owners like myself, those of us from the peasant class, were snapping photo feverishly of the cars with them next to it. There were also a few men with professional single lens reflect cameras taking opportunity of the moment to make some Flickr-worthy photographs. God knows how they learnt about tonight.

The three girls next to Shirley, when they were not posing for photographs, were curious about her boyfriend Yours Truly. .

“I have never seen him before. Which department was he in?” One of the scantily clad girls asked her, immediately assumed that I was a PhD. D student there, because of my age.

“No, he works for my dad, back home.” Shirley lied. I was well in earshot, but I did nothing but smiled and walked away, trying to find something better to do than to hear Shirley give me unjustified compliments in front of her friends. “Managing director for the IT department.”

“Coooooool,” the girls said unanimously, admiring, I could imagine, the back of a successful, grown man that I was not.

Shirley had been telling that story since the day I arrived. I had no opinion one way or the other about my impression on these people in

Boston whom I would never meet again, so I went along with it. As long as she was happy, I thought. Indeed, she seemed to indulge herself in extensive compliments of her good taste for boyfriend from those around her when my fake title was shared. According to Kelvin's prediction, I would well be working for her dad in a few years' time when we get married, and if Shirley so wished it, me, the future son-in-law of the Founder of the company, could become a Managing Director of the IT department one day. So in some ways, this was not entirely false.

I looked up once online how much a Managing Director for the IT Department of such a big company would make in Shanghai. I got a number somewhere between twenty to two hundred times my current yearly salary, depending on the contract terms on bonus and holiday money. Kelvin was right. Shirley was my golden ticket to her grumpy, difficult father's chocolate factory. For me and my parents' good, I should hold on to this meal ticket as hard as I could, despite my growing annoyance for Shirley's haughty ways. She was a good woman underneath it all, it was simply being severely overshadowed by her disdains for everything and everyone less well-to-do. And there she went again..

“Marvey, I told you to wear that dress I gave you!” I could hear Shirley streaked as if Marvey had committed a capital offense.

“No, it was too tight,” Marvey replied as she wobbled on heels over to the group of girls.

“Did you rip it? It's a Miss Sixty.”

“Noooo, noooo, of course not. I wouldn't dare to. It's in your wardrobe. I hung it back.”

“You're showing off too much skin.” Shirley's obnoxious friend said. That was a Chinese girl's way of saying someone was fat.

“Well, this will do for now. You can buy better ones when you get paid next month.” Shirley said.

Even though I was not immediately next to her, I could tell from the distance that it appeared Marvey had to take the bus from home to here, for from the way sweats were beading on her forehead and nose, she must have walked a long way on her stilettos. “Anyway, give me a hug,” she said, expecting an American style greeting.

“Ewww, you're so sweaty. I'm not gonna hug you!” Shirley said.

“Okay, okay, fine.” Marvey rummaged in her handbag for a piece of facial tissue. One could follow the eyes of the girls from her face to her bag, and caught looks of dismissal on their faces. Obviously, Marvey was no owner of luxury handbag.

“Why did she take her along?” One of the girls whispered into Shirley's ear.

“She begged me,” Shirley said. “Zhi would be here tonight, ” Shirley whispered back.

When Marvey was busy wiping the sweats off her face, I walked over and gave her a hug. The girls were too busy gossiping about something else to notice. Marvey peeled off the last bit of tissue sticking on her forehead to see who was the hugger and she seemed pleased to see it was me.

Chapter 28: Dancing

“You have to watch out for that hag,” Shirley's girlfriend said to her.

“Ya, what's she trying so hard for?” The other friend chimed in. They were sitting on the VIP area on the side of the dance floor in the club, enveloped by pink fluffy cushions on the white chesterfield leather couch.

“Nah, you girls are idiots. She just wanted to show off in front of Zhi. Like 'Look! I could do so much better than you' kind of thing.”

“Are you sure?” The girl on the left asked, “Zhi was not really paying any attention.” They eyed the opposite of the club, where Zhi was playing drinking games with some others. Huge amount of pricey alcohol was spilton the floor in their vicinity.

“Look at her! She's no match to you in looks and class, but she has a really good figure. Men are animals. They can't think straight when there is someone flashing their arms and legs in front of them, you have to keep an eye on them,” The girl on the right said.

“Should I go and fetch them back?” Shirley asked confirmation from her friends. They both nodded, and up she went. It was at that point a boy came over to ask her to dance. Her smile widened and I was off her mind in an instance.

On that dance floor, I danced for the first time with a woman. It was less awkward than I had imagined it, perhaps because I could not care less what other people think of me. My sole attention was placed on Marvey, who was swinging her hips and banging her heads to the rhythms of the music. “Wild” was a word came into my mind. Girls in China didn't dance like that. It was nothing promiscuous, for I was very sure Marvey was not interested in me. She was simply enjoying herself, dancing as if she

was a superstar in an upbeat pop song music video. Her curls flying in the air, splashing on my chest and my face on occasion. Now she was wiggling her body only a few centimeters away from me. And felt her hot breath steaming on my face. That was no music video, that was a 4D roller-coaster ride at the Universal Studio I swore.

I found myself actually taking pleasure in dancing for once. I shuffled my steps and spun around. Impressed by, likely not my dance moves but the way how confident I appeared, Marvey leaned her body close to me and grabbed me on my waist as her hands rummage away to the rhythm of the beats. Contrary to what you would think would happen, instead of physical excitement, I felt ecstatic as if I was high. I had never been so-called 'high' before but if I did I suppose it would feel more or less like that. My shirt turned completely transparent from sweats, and so was Marvey. She put her hands around my neck, and her arms left sweaty imprints of that moment on my shirt forever. We put our heads together while our body kept swaying. I could smell the sweetness of her perfume and my head was bubbling with blood boiling at a hundred degrees.

Then the music ended. 2 am. The lights were turned on without warning and music was stopped. Someone opened the entrance door and the security guard rushed in, telling everybody time was up, we could stay if we wanted but there would be no more music nor there will be any more drinks served.

Marvey unwrapped herself from me and we stood there laughing.

“That was fun!” She said.

“Woo!” I combed my hair backwards with my two sweaty palms. I looked around for where the rest of the group were and spotted Shirley, with her dancing partner.

“Wanna come back with me?” The white boy asked.

“No, I am with friends tonight.” She smiled, pointing at our direction with her chin.

The boy didn't want to let go of her hand. He kept pressing on and resolved to the most degrading form of plead. “I will pay you two hundred dollars,” he said.

Shirley's forehead wrinkled in disgust and tried to wriggle out of his grip. “Let me go!”

Seeing that, I budded in between them and separated them two with a bit of force. The boy fell to the ground. All of our friends started circling us. Having been surrounded, the white boy crawled a few steps backwards, stood up and left in a hurry.

“Are you ooo...?” BAM! I got slapped squarely on the face. Marvey screamed.

“Where were you?!” Shirley barked. “You're my boyfriend!” tears started streaming down her face. I could hardly feel surprised by this act she put on. Her expression was so fake I felt like I was watching a baby feigning tears. As soon as you give the baby a piece of toy, it would stop screeching.

The others however did not see through that. They walked Shirley out of the premise into Simon's car, who did not care much about the situation, having used to seeing her sister throwing tantrums. He was however annoyed at the fact that he had to drive her home now instead of going to the after party at the next venue. The two girlfriends of hers had lost their appetite in partying as well. They cursed me in difficult American curse words I did not understand and slipped into the back seat of Simon's Audi A7. One of them hit her head when trying to get in. I could not help

but let out of a laugh. Marvey gave me a condemning jab in the rib for my inopportune laugh.

In less than five minutes, the venue was cleared out, leaving behind Marvey and I, and a few stray party-goers determining what to do next. None of the people we came with offered a ride to us and left without saying so much as a goodbye to us, the outsiders. Well, one did, and that was Zhi.

Zhi was drunk and he had to be carried off by one of his friends, who was even bigger than himself and taller than himself, which made me wonder if they all met each other in the gym. The drunken Zhi, slumped over the shoulder of his friend, caught a glimpse of us on the way out and blew Marvey a kiss, with his middle finger. It was obviously not the kind of kiss one would like to receive, even for such a mellow girl like Marvey who always only see the good side of people.

“Jerk,” she hissed under her breath.

“So this is how you use that word.” I said. Marvey let out a sigh.

“What are you going to do now?” She asked.

“Let me walk you home,” I said.

“You better take a taxi now and go after Shirley,” she said. She knew her very well. That would have been what she would have wanted. I however see no point in succumbing to her hissy fit.

“No, I don't want to. I want to walk you home.” I said with determination. “Jessie is at your dorm anyway.”

Chapter 29: Dormitory

The Harvard dormitory can be cozier than some apartment buildings in Shanghai. After all, it was one of the most expensive, well-worth its price of course, university in America.

The best part of it, seems to be the common room. The Victorian style room was decorated with television, pool table, gaming area and a small library of hand-me-down antique books from one generation of student to the next. A group of students were discussion El Nino here, and another group debating about GMO labeling there. Marvey asked me to keep to myself and follow her into her dorm room on the second floor. I guess even smart students gossips just like regular people.

Jessie was fast asleep when we arrived. Marvey had asked her dorm mates to keep an eye on him after she had taken care of his dinner need. Some girls had came over to play with him and he must have had a good time, judging from how deep in dreamland he was, completely exhausted that he did not wake up when we made all the noise coming into the room and settle ourselves.

“Can I stay here tonight?” I said, then realized it was not just me who needed this favor. “Can both of us stay here tonight?”

Marvey smiled, as if she would not have thought otherwise. At three am, it was probably best for me to not wander alone, nor with a young, tired kid alone on the streets, even in such a safe part of the city Boston.

Turned out Marvey had a set of silk pajama Simon had asked Marvey to dry clean it for him that I could use. I told her I would pay for the second round of dry cleaning but she would not hear it. I slipped into the cashmere soft garments and felt the silk touched this fine silk on my

skin. It was soft, but rather cold. The appeal started to wear off when I sneezed in the climatized dorm room with central air conditioning.

“Turn off the lights and crawl in.” Marvey, already changed and lying on the bed made a gap under her blanket and invited me in. Seeing my sudden onset of shyness which made me stand there motionless contemplating what to do, she said, “it will be fine. Just think of this as sleepover party.”

I climbed next to her under the blanket and felt her body warmth oozing off from her soft skin. Many a nights I had shared a bed with women, as well as men, on soccer camps or school trips in case you were wondering, and I would not feel an ounce of embarrassment. And yet here I was, nervous. My heartbeat was raising as I slowly came to terms with the reality. I was lying next to the girl I had in my mind for almost a year day and night, and worse still, she was not my girlfriend. With other girls, I would pounce on them as if they were captured preys. With Marvey, a traditional, conservative girl, I could do no such thing. I would never forgive myself for even thinking about it, for she was to be cherished, and not a tool to fulfill a man's moment of feverish sexual desire.

I sneezed again in the middle of the night.

In half sleep I felt a warm body hugging me. I hugged back, believing that it was the fluffy rabbit plush toy I had when I was a child.

“Tschukk.” I kissed the rabbit on its forehead and said, “I love you.”

Chapter 30: Land

For whatever reason it might be, Shirley chose to forgive me. Her way of forgiving suits me very well, she did not even give me so much as a care when I finally arrived the next day back at her apartment.

My growing suspicion of her unreasonable tolerance towards me was getting on my nerves. I decided to share it with Kelvin. Using Shirley's Galaxy Note, I Skyped him and told him everything I knew when Shirley and Simon were both out in classes. Marvey was bringing Jessie back in two hours so I had plenty of time to discuss the matter at hand with my best friend.

“It would make total sense for Shirley to have another boyfriend, while dating you.” Kelvin said, as if my certain deficiencies in life entitled me to an unfaithful girlfriend and nothing more. “The thing is why she picked you and not someone else, if she needs a front for boyfriend.”

“I feel like I am in a trap but I don't know what it is.”

“And you're too cheap to get up and go.”

“Hey, you talked me into it.” I retorted. “She used to be a lot more...amiable.”

“And she's pretty, and generous, and she is studying in Harvard...”

“Blah, blah, blah.” I said. “Harvard students are not that impressive.”

“What gives you the qualification to criticize them?”

“The Chinese students here were not here to study. They were here to play, to have fun, to showoff.”

“I think that's true for all of America's university students. It's called socializing, networking for the future. You should too. God knows who you might meet in there.”

“I have already met enough sons and daughters of big business moguls.” I said, “I am a bit fed up.”

“Let's switch then.” Kelvin said, to which I told him to dream on.

PING.

A whatsapp message arrived for Shirley. I never used Whatsapp before, because it was banned in China. It was however not that hard to figure out how it worked, and how it could be tricked. I opened the notification list and I could read the first part of the message from a boy called Will. “I have contacted your boyfriend's parents. They signed today.”

Her boyfriend's parents? That would mean my parents. Why was this man Will contacting them and what did they sign that would concern Shirley?

I told Kelvin about it and he he told me not to click on the message, in case Shirley would notice. My heart was burning inside my chest. What did Shirley get my parents to sign? Kelvin told me to call back in fifteen minutes. He would go to my parents to find out himself.

“Hi, son! How are you in Boston? Is it cold over there?” My mom blasted over Skype. Kelvin was holding up his phone in front of my mom so she could speak with me. My dad was reading the newspaper nonchalantly in the background. His papers were held so low I could tell he was sneaking a peek at the two from time to time, wondering what Kelvin and his wife were doing in front of the block of electronics, smiling and waving to the dead object like idiots.

“It's summer, mom,” I replied. “Did you sign some papers today?”

“Today?” My mom asked, searching her memory. “No, that was last Sunday.”

“What was it about?” I chased, while on the back of my mind wondering how could such a message been sent only after the weekend. Of course, it happened when the application of a device was not turned on to receive messages. The backlog was only flushed after a certain amount of time.

“The house in our hometown,” my mom said. “Your future wife wanted to renovate it for the two of you when you live there, didn't she tell you? Your dad signed some papers so she could bring in the architects.”

“What renovate? What architect?” I was in shock. Of course, that house was the only thing a destitute, uncharacteristic man such as I had. No, technically I did not have the house yet. It still belonged to my father. But my father was too old to be approached with the Honeytrap, so Shirley approached me. She had whisked me away from him to America so I would not be around to object.

“Kelvin, read the contract. Read the contract now!” I hissed.

My dad dropped his papers and looked towards the camera. The look of concerns and confusions matched my own. Again, we had the same question in our mind. “What on earth did we just sign away?” The heightened sense of alert was of no use after the fact. We had watched thousands of news like that and had warned each other of such scams, but yet the little people, people like us, kept falling for them.

“Call us back in a while.” Kelvin said, as he scrambled after my mom towards to safe to retrieve the papers.

When Kelvin tried to call me back, I was already offline for Shirley was back. I had locked myself in the guest room contemplating what to do.

On my own cell I sent a WeChat to Kelvin asking for updates. His message reply confirmed my worst nightmare. My dad had unknowingly signed our the land on which our ancestral home was built upon away to the group Shirley's dad own. He also said my mom kept asking what did it mean, for she still believed that Shirley was going to be her future daughter-in-law, and if that was the case, the house would still belonged within 'the family', which was not too bad. Unfortunately my dad knew what that meant, so the two old people quarreled.

I made Kelvin to promise to take care of them for me until I come back.

The doorbell rang. It was Marvey and Jessie. I rushed out with a suitcase full of my belongings and the small backpack that belonged to Jessie, grabbed Marvey's hand and left with them without so much as looking back at Shirley.

“What was that about?” Simon, who was peeling the shell off some peanuts while watching a Spanish soccer game over the internet TV, asked his sister.

“I guess he found out.” She said coldly. “It doesn't matter. The deal was done.”

“You're such a bitch.” He said.

“I told you it would work,” she said. “Dad will believe me now.”

“Woman,” Simon said, “you make me cringe.”

Chapter 31: Leave

“My superman figure!” Jessie threw the comic book I bought for him on the ground. “I want it back!”

“It's not possible anymore.” I said, too tired to argue with him. “I will get you something else actually made in the USA.” Only then he got a bit calmer, that little bastard.

“What's happening?” Marvey asked nervously.

“It's a sick world out there,” I could not help but felt pessimistic over mankind. “I expected more from them. More integrity, more openness from these Harvard students...I have fallen victim to trickery again. I couldn't believe myself that I have ignored all the warning signs just to get two free flight tickets to come see you in Boston.” I put my face in my hands, unable to reconcile the reality with the lies I had been living in. I thought I had it all just a few moment ago, and now all was lost.

Kelvin had called upon his father for advice on the matter. The best lawyers working for him had given their advises, that unless there was solid proof of any illegal means the Shirley's father company, the Sun of China Group, had used to coerce my parents into signing of the contract, or when there was any tampering of the contract, it could not be voided nor countered in court. The fact that Shirley's men had my parents' trust at the time of signing and the later reversal of the verbal promise given, which was related to renovating of the apartment as our future family home, it was our own private matters, which should be solved privately and not through legal means. Basically, there was nothing they can do, Kelvin told me gingerly over the phone. The 'good' news about this was, there were more families who had been misled into signing contracts in giving up their lands

on the same area. Kelvin's father, being a family friend, had committed the legal resources he had on hand to help us build a case for class action against the Sun of China Group. While I was still in Boston, Kelvin said, his head a lot clearer than mine, I should just enjoy myself. There would be a lengthy and complicated process ahead of me.

“You don't think they go to school in Harvard, do they?” Marvey frowned. “I mean, they are smart and all, but Harvard? No...they are attending, when they don't skip class, a private college in Cambridge. Since there aren't that many Chinese students over there, they join our student association and events. Why, what did she tell you?”

I let out a sigh and wiped the sweat off my forehead. “She told me a lot of things.” I stood up and paced in a circle around Marvey and Jessie who were sitting on the edge of the flower bed outside of the apartment building. The sky was getting dark. The endless, rich dark blue reflected my feelings at the moment perfectly.

“I am so screwed.” Thinking of about the argument between my generally peaceful mom and dad because of my stupidity. I could see in my head my mom crying excruciatingly hitting herself on the chest, choking on tears, and my dad frowning, face full of disappointment and remorse. The ancestral land was bestowed on us from his father, which was in turned inherited from his father's father and so on for hundreds of years. It was absolutely not for sale. God knows how many set of bones was buried in our back yard, where their owners had found a final resting places within the confines of their own land, passed down from one generation to the next and was supposed to be so until the end of time. I alone, was responsible for the interruption of the tradition, of the dead souls' eternal peace, of the possession of the only tangible assets our family had. Without that piece of land, we would be all shelterless souls, dead and alive, when

we could no longer afford the high rent of the city. My parents' retirement dreams were now gone. The marriage they foresaw for me was now down the drain. We had to work for the real estate companies in order to pay the exorbitant rent of the city with the fruits of our labor and nothing to claim our own at the end of the month except the body which we were born with and mouths of our family members to feed. This was a punishment worse than hell. Worse than hell.

I checked my wallet for Jessie and my flight tickets. Luckily it bore no association to Shirley so unless she was extremely vile, as long as she did not cancel the flights, the tickets would still be valid for the return trip back to Shanghai a week away.

“Could I stay with you? I don't have anywhere else to go...” I asked Marvey apologetically. A hundred and eighty dollars, that was all I had in my possession until the end of the month. Despite the fresh incoming flow of cash, I could not buy a set of new plane tickets home for both of Jessie and I because in the next couple of hours of its arrival there would be all sorts of automatic transfer out of my pitiful bank account to repay my debt, for water, for electricity, for health insurance for my parents, for the monthly payment of the various electrical appliances we filled our homes with.

“You have had such a rough time in here...let's get away. Come with me to my parents.”

That was exactly what I wanted to hear. With my last hundred and eighty dollars, Marvey helped me book two budget flight tickets to Minneapolis and I left the whirlwind of human betrayal and disappointment behind me, at least that was the hope.

Chapter 32: Small town America

As soon as we arrived at Minneapolis airport, we were picked up by Marvey's dad who were supposed to drive us all to Alexandria, Marvey's hometown with his Dodge truck.

Her dad was a big guy, almost as if he was built to last the hostile winter days of Alexandria. Like the generic father characters I had seen in countless American TV series and movies, he wore a dusty green baseball cap over his head, a loose-fitting worn out T-shirt that said something smart, a pair of khakis Bermuda shorts and a pair of open toes shoes. Together with his short pepper color stubble, everything about him lent him a friendly, familiar look.

Marvey had told him about my somewhat accidental heroic act on the flight to Boston. Recognizing immediately that I was the Chinese guy that was for a brief moments on National news the following days after the alleged terrorist attack, he rushed towards me, shook my hand and gave me a heartfelt hug as soon as we cleared custom and stepped into the arrival hall.

“Hi, sir, my name is Zhong, but my English name is Jong with a J. Nice to meet you.” Remembering the proper etiquette, the little that I actually learnt from Shirley while she was my English replacement teacher when I came to think of it.

“Oh, com'on. We're in America now, don't call me sir. I feel like I am back in the military again when you do that. Call me John. And let's get you an Americanized English name as well. We're gonna call you John, just like me. It's a great name. I could recommend it.” He laughed at his own joke.

I did not want to be called “John”, but the pronunciation was closed enough to my Chinese name so I conceded. Marvey whispered in my ear that I needed to pardon her father for all his nonsense. I told her not to worry about it. All fathers were essentially full of nonsense to their kids regardless of ethnicity, if you know what I meant.

When we arrived at their house in Alexandria, we were immediately fed with what I believed was the “All-American Breakfast” by Marvey's really sweet mother who also told me to call her by her first name, Heather. On the massive wooden dining table, there were pancakes, sunny-side up eggs, bacon, sausages, hash browns, blue berry muffins, banana bread, a deep-fried schnitzel for each of us and lots of lots of fresh-squeezed juices and soft drinks to choose from. I felt like I was in heaven. No more organic, bio, soya, vegetarian, low-calories, low-sugar, low-sodium stuff for the health conscious Boston city people. Here in Alexandria, they served the real breakfast what could give you the strength to last the day. Of course, Heather told me, that there would still be food of equally impressive variety and portions for lunch so I did not have to stuff myself thinking that this would be the first and last good meal of the day. More was to come.

Marvey smiled at me as I mumbled “thank you very much for cooking,” to her mother with a mouthful of food. I had almost forgotten. People do not speak with food in their mouths in America, unlike where I came from. “It was delicious.” I said again when I was done chewing. Jessie nodded in unison. His conditions back home was even worse than me. I doubted whether he had ever even had breakfast in his life when he had a mother who would be out almost every evening till late and never getting up until the middle of the day.

Heather had made our beds before we arrived on the second floor of their lovely wooden house. Shirley's apartment on the Bund was huge, but this place? This place was massive compared to it. John Senior explained that they had two acres of land behind the house and whenever we like we could take a dip in the new pool he built himself to test it out. I could believe it when he said it was amazing treat for the summer times in Alexandria.

“Marvey, I don't understand.” I said to her when we were alone with Jessie in our room, unpacking our clothes from the suitcases.

“What do you not understand?”

“Your parents had a car, a majestic home and land to their own. They consume sumptuous meals every day and could enjoy all kinds of luxury in life within their own home and yet, you are working as a maid for Shirley and Simon in Boston. Cleaning, cooking and doing all their dirty works they didn't want to do while you are busy studying as well. I find it really strange!”

“Ha.” Marvey laughed. “Do you know how much Harvard cost a semester?”

“I don't doubt it is a lot, but your parents surely could afford it, no?”

“I guess you don't know how America works yet. Everything you see here belongs to the bank. The car, the house, the furniture, the appliances. They are all under financing. Even my degree. I am on student loan for 90K. The rest was luckily paid off by my scholarships, or I would have to, I don't know, start dancing in a strip club.” She giggled at the joke that was not funny at all.

“That's amazing, what your parents could borrow. Surely they have very nice jobs and salaries to get these exorbitant loans?”

“My dad is a veteran. He gets VA-guaranteed loans for a much higher amounts than he would have otherwise. Together with my mom, we could afford a lot. We do live quite well over here, if you ask me, as long as we can pay our monthly payments, which is why I need to do my part.” She smiled, as she pulled out wrinkly pieces of Jessie's clothing packed in haste when we left Shirley's place so her mother could iron them later.

“And your neighbors?” I looked out the window of the second floor bedroom. There were identically beautiful homes on both side of the streets. Their front lawns green and their garages parked with shiny, big new cars. A man came out of his house to mow the lawn. “Do they all live like this? Do you think they are all in debt?”

“I don't know for sure, of course, but if it was so easy to borrow, most people would do it. So yes, I think most of the houses and cars you see here are probably financed.” Marvey waved to the man, who waved back with a kind smile. “A few houses in the neighborhood foreclosed in the last couple of years.”

“It is a lot harder to get loans in China than in America.”

“Well, that's why we have the sub-prime mortgage crisis and the housing market crash a few years ago. The house prices in this area are still recovering. Most people would not get back their investments when they sell their houses now.”

“Negative equity,” I said. It was a popularized term on the media. “I know the term but I did not know anyone who suffers from it personally, because most of the people in my social circle could not get a mortgage in the first place. We had no equity to begin with.

“I know, Zhi told me.” Marvey said, but she trailed off.

“Property prices in Shanghai is second highest in China. For a fifty square meters apartment like the one I live in now with my parents,

will cost me at least three hundred thousand US dollars.”

“This place is three hundred thousand dollars.” Marvey said.

“Geezes. Look at the space you get.” I estimated it was at least two hundred square meters, just counting the house.

“It's normal in this part of the country. And of course, my parents bought this place a while back.”

“What's the down payment rate?”

“I don't know. It's like five or six percent?”

“I would have to pay twenty five!” I slumped on one of the soft twin beds by the window and let out a laugh. I did not doubt that Marvey and her family work just as hard as my family and I did in China, but the quality of life for the price they pay seemed to be much higher than what we got. “Well, I wasn't going to pay anything because I had the land. Guess I should start saving for a house from now on, instead of keep paying the rent for my apartment in Shanghai.” A headache struck like lightning on my temples. My eyes blurred out for a second as if lens out of focus.

“Don't think about it for now.” Marvey said. “Not all hopes are lost. We will find ways to get it back. *Yi qie dou hui bian hao de*. Everything will be all right.” She put her hand on my back.

Jessie let out of a yelp. A white bull terrier had ran upstairs to our room and climbed on top of Jessie. The boy had never played with dogs before. He was scared.

“Could we take the dog out?” I suggested, a solution to keep the dog safe from Jessie.

“Why? You don't like Rocky?” John Senior appeared at the threshold of our room. He whistled Rocky towards him, who quickly obliged.

“In most residential places in the Shanghai, one is not allowed to keep pets.” I explained. “Most kids in Jessie's generation have never seen or played with a real dogs before. Or cats for that matter.”

“What kind of life is that? Never touched a dog before?!” John Senior asked rhetorically. “I'll make sure he learns to live with them when he is here,” he said, and led us, together with Rocky downstairs to the massive backyard. Jessie clutched my hand tightly in fear.

Chapter 33: Drive to walk

John Senior owns a Dodge Ram with two rows of seats. The automobile was exactly what one would expect from a truck. It's wheel was half a meter tall. For me, it was a monster of a truck, but he said that his own was just a moderately sized truck. Next time when the show 'Monster Truck' came to town, I was invited to join him to the show, he said, to see real mammoth of a truck were like. I made a mental note to look up what kind of event 'Monster Truck' was.

After installing all six of us, his wife Heather and the Bull Terrier Rocky included, into the front seat, and Marvey and I on the back seat with Jessie safely tucked in between us, John Senior drove us to the lake side.

There were lots and lots of lake in Alexandria. Lake Carlos, lake Ida, lake Darling...Marvey said she do not know the exact number of lakes in the area. The city Alexandria had a rather small local population, but tourists that came here to visit the lake resorts abound. It was voted, according to my quick search on Wikipedia, one of the top ten best small towns in America by the website Livability dot com.

We started the trail at the giant Viking statue that had extremely pale skin. It donned the telltale Viking double horned hat and held a shield that said "Alexandria, the birthplace of America." Strangely, I had never heard of this theory. John Senior explained that they have found a old stone dating back to 1362, the oldest ever found. Runestones were left behind by the Norse during the Viking expansion. And that by discovering America's oldest runestones, Alexandria had the claim of the first place which was settled by Scandinavians.

“What about the natives American?” I asked naively. America was long inhabited by native Americans, so how could Alexandria, by discovering some artifacts that belonged to another civilization claimed to be the birthplace of America? John Senior did not seem to like my question, and he pressed on, holding the leash of Rocky in one hand and his wife's on the other. The couple walked easy and relaxed, just like tens of others that passed us by on bikes or by foot walking along the Central Lake Trail towards Garfield. It was a Saturday afternoon. It felt like a Sunday afternoon.

“What's the difference between Saturday and Sunday?” Marvey asked me.

“You haven't been in China long enough to realize I guess. Most companies in Shanghai has a six days work week.”

“You were able to come out with us most of the time on Saturdays!” She said, recalling our past together.

“Well, that's because I worked an extra hours between Monday to Friday and took days off for you girls during the summer. I work for a Startup, it has perks.”

“You're using your own holidays. Those days off were not perks. That's what you were entitled to.”

Entitlement was a foreign concept to me. I knew exactly what the word meant and I could imagine how good it must felt to feel like I was entitled to having my Saturdays off if I spend my own holiday quota. But when everyone else was toiling in the office while you were taking days off, that never sat well with me. I felt almost guilty every time when I said 'Have a great weekend' to my fellow colleagues.

We stopped at a cafe in the Arrowwood Resort by lake Darling. I took the opportunity to pay for everyone else and to my surprise, John

Senior did not fight for the bill with me. He even made what seemed to be a joke about how it made sense for me to pay given that I had chosen a seat at the end of the long table, and by convention I was supposed to be paying. I was baffled by what he said, but I would gladly pay the bill nonetheless. Just when I was about to pay, Marvey wanted to slip me two twenties under the table for the bill because she remembered better than me that I had no money left to my name after the purchase of the two flight tickets. I froze on the spot from embarrassment since I did not want to take a women's money, especially not to use her hard-earned money to invite her and her family back. My face reddened for a moment as I was trying to figure my way out of the situation.

“Let me do it.” John Senior waved the waiter over to his side. “John, I was just teasing you. You're my guest, plus you barely consumed anything by our standards. It's my treat.” He handed his credit card to the waiter who swiped it on the spot. Everything together was only fifteen US dollars. Not that I had the money to pay for it, but fifteen was relatively cheap for such a luxurious tea time by the beautiful lake at a resort. I was starting to really like America, for all its bourgeois comfort. If I were as heavily in debt as John Senior and his family, I would not be drinking tea or coffee anywhere. I would be sipping tap water out of a bottle and serving others tea or coffee somewhere in a cafe on a Saturday afternoon.

This relax attitude towards life was revealing. As we walked back along the same trail towards the parking lot in the late afternoon, I became quiet. What was I so worried about all these years? What were all these people around me worried about all these years? There were lots of other people out there in the same or worse financial situation. They were not all contemplating how to marry rich, they were not all wasting days and nights trying to please their bosses while secretly wishing to strangle them

before their bosses strangled them with work. They were not all busy plotting their grand scheme of early-retirement by tricking their friends, their neighbors, the government for their own's financial gain. They were taking their lives one day at a time, appreciating life, appreciating family time, appreciating nature in their spare times they had when they were not working for money.

I barely took a moment to appreciate nature. Come to think of it, the only time I did it was when I was so upset I wanted to commit suicide in the Huang Pu river. That night I went to the river side, looking in despair out across the Bund and that was when Marvey came over to ask me to take a picture for her with her iPhone.

“Marvey, can I borrow your cell phone?” I asked.

“Of course, what for?”

“Let's take a selfie together by the lake.”

She smiled. I loved her smile. The smile I saw in my head every night lying in bed before I fell asleep since I had met her. It would be forever captured on the picture we were taking now.

“Photo bomb!” John Senior poked his head into the frame and said as the iPhone clicked.

His wife heather was laughing so hard at his goofy husband that I could not bare getting angry with him for ruining Marvey and my selfie. We took a group selfie together in the end to satisfy her father's appetite for posting for photographs.

“That second one is really nice!” Heather said. “Send it to me. I am going to print it out and put it in a frame.”

I did not recall hearing anyone print a photo because they liked it so much for so many years.

“I will put them alongside your photos together with Jong in your bedroom.” Heather said to her daughter, who turned red almost instantly.

“Mom! Don't talk about my bedroom! It's private!”
Surprise. Surprise.

Chapter 34: Church of God

We went to church together on Sunday morning.

The Alexandria Covenant was housed in a nice brick structure with a big cross on top of the center building. It appeared to have been recently renovated.

It was my first time in a Christian church. Actually, it was the first time I was actively involved in religious activity in my life because religions in China were invisible, and illegal. It was practically a crime to congregate for religious purpose. Of course lots of people practice local beliefs which were ingrained in their everyday lives individually without getting into any trouble.

Still, I had a scare the first time I hold a Bible. Heather had given me a Bible and asked Marvey to guide and translate for me if I could not follow the service or the verses. I said thanks to her thoughtfulness and quickly left the Bible on the back of the pew directly in front of my knees.

“Money matters are spiritual matters!” The pastor proclaimed on the stage. He was a middle-age man in his late forties or early fifties. He did not have a stand in front of him like how it was in a lot of television shows I watched. He was just standing there speaking with his microphone in one hand, Bible in the other, opened to Ecclesiastes 5:10. The passage was then read together, “whoever loves money never has money enough; whoever loves wealth is never satisfied with his income. This too, God said, is meaningless.”

“Alright!” John Senior, along with a couple of others in the audience said in reply.

“Do you spend your time worrying about money? Do you spend your time worrying about how to accumulate more money? Do you spend your money on how to accumulate even more money? And do you spend your time and money on people who care only about money and not about each other? The pursuit of money is destroying relationships between people. It is because we have approached money matters as if they were financial matters. How hard is it to monitor or money flow? No hard, I'd say. All you need was elementary maths. It was all addition and subtraction. How hard is it to budget? We all know it doesn't take a PhD. Many housewives do it everyday triumphantly. How hard is it to start saving? You have seen your child done it, just like you have done it yourself when you got your first piggy bank to save up your pocket money. And yet many of us are struggling with money matters now that we are adults.”

I let out of gasp. I felt like the pastor was talking to me directly.

“I will say this again. Money matters are spiritual matters, not financial matters. You don't know where your money has gone because you did not put it on things that mattered to the heart. You wish always to have more money because you did not do it because it will make you happy. The accumulation of it does not feed your soul.”

“Let us recite Matthew 6:19-21 together!”

Marvey picked up the Bible in front of me and flipped to the right passage the pastor indicated with expert speed. She pointed to the text and started reciting with the rest of the church. “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and vermin destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moths and vermin do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”

The rest of the sermon I could not recall on paper, but it had deeply affected me. I had listened to all kinds of talk on money, from financial software to stock picking theories, from mutual funds saving plans to experience shared by the rich and successful at various conferences on their thoughts about how to become just like them. And yet none of it touched me as deeply as this sermon the pastor delivered. As a matter of fact, none of those advice had really worked out for me as well.

“Where can I buy a copy of this book?” I asked Marvey when the service ended.

She let out a soft laugh. “You can get it in every book store in the world.”

“No, not really...” I said thoughtfully, thinking if I had ever seen one in my life. I supposed I could download it online, or couldn't I?

“Take this one,” Marvey stuffed the Bible in my hand. I was reluctant, because it belonged to the church, I explained. “No, take it. It belongs to us anyway.”

I looked around the church and saw there were still many Bibles left on the back trays of the pew. “Do you mean people leave their Bibles in the church normally?”

“Yes, why not?”

“Wouldn't they get stolen?”

“They are here for our convenience. And if they disappeared, that means someone wish to read God's words direly, and that is more than welcomed.”

“What do you do then when your Bible disappear?”

“We share with our neighbors.” She smiled at me as if I had just asked the silliest of questions.

I tucked the book under my arm and went over to fetch Jessie from the Sunday School classroom.

Chapter 35: Thunderstorm

Two days later, we huddled around the television, watching the latest weather forecast which was all what the news of the night was all about as thunderstorms raged outside.

In anticipation for more severe weather, we had driven up to Wal-Mart a few hours ago to stock up on edibles that did not require any cooking. It was chaos in the store, people were fighting for fruits and baked goods, as well as bottled water.

John Senior had stoked up a fire in the fireplace to keep us warm despite being in the middle of summer as the temperature dropped significantly to only single digit after the sun went down that evening.

“I'm bored! I'm bored!” Jessie shrieked, acting childish as ever. “There is nothing to do in here.”

“Shh...” I hushed him. “If you behave, we can go play video games online upstairs.”

“Well, sorry guys, the internet is out for now.” John said, as if he was glad something evil finally went away. “Our service provider got one of their hubs struck by lightning and nobody in this area is getting any internet any time soon.”

“What?” I said in disbelief and instinctively pulled out my smartphone to check for signal.

“Trust me, Junior. It's all over the news.” He pointed at the scrolling text at the bottom of the screen which told the same thing.

“Let's put a puzzle together.” Marvey said, sitting down next to me and the boy on the rug with a box the size of a takeaway container.

“1000 pieces puzzle. Let's try to finish it together tonight.”

“Puzzle?” Jessie and I said in unison. Neither of us had ever put a puzzle together before. I meant, who had the time?

Chapter 36: Puzzle

“Is it like Candy Crush?” Jessie asked again, in different words. “That game is for girls.”

“Not that kind of puzzle,” Marvey explained as she opened the box in her hands. “A jigsaw puzzle. They are pieces of a bigger picture cut into different shapes so that you will need to concentrate and put them back together.”

“That's sounds like a really stupid idea,” the boy said bluntly. “You break it apart and then you put it back together. What is the point?” I was glad Jessie was the one who said it, because I had exactly the same thought in my mind. Of course I did not want to voice it out lest I would disappoint Marvey, who looked very enthusiastic about this group activity.

“Well, look at this!” She poured the content, one thousand pieces of puzzles, on to the carpet, and said, “This is more challenging than all the other puzzles you plan online.”

“I wouldn't say that,” my mouth opened before I could control it. “But sorry, you were saying?”

Marvey gave me a look, then she continued, “do you know that human brains consist of two parts? The left hemisphere and the right hemisphere? The left brain thinks logically and rationally. It is very good at math and sequences. Our right brain is creative and emotional. It recognizes imagery and patterns better.”

“Yes! Of course!” Jessie said proudly, thinking this might be his excuse to pardon himself from this boring activity, “our teacher taught us that already.”

“Do you know then that there is continuous communication between the two parts and when you put puzzles together, it exercise the brain cells, activate the connections and increase their efficiency and capacity? You won't have Alzheimer's when you're old if you exercise your brains regularly.”

“Are there moments when our brains are not exercising?” I questioned. “That would be almost like brain dead...”

“Well, watching tele, for example, has been the classical example of brains being in hypnotic state. Your brain activity is higher when you're sleeping than watching television.”

“Are you serious?” I eyed the glossy eyed John Senior who had been watching the news for the last couple of hours since we arrived from home. He paid no heed to what we were saying and kept his eyes glued to the screen. Surely he must be processing some information, right?

Marvey asked Jessie to pull out all the pieces with flat edges from the pile because it was easier to start from the edges of the puzzle. It will serve as a kind of frame in which we place the rest of the pieces. “When putting a puzzle together, a chemical called dopamaine will be released. It helps with learning and memory. If you do it more often, you will find yourself better at concentrating and being more alert in general.”

“I just felt like falling asleep,” I said to Marvey, as I squinted under the dim light inside the house at the darker color pieces that Jessie threw at me which looked almost exactly the same except for their shapes.

“Am I supposed to be putting these together? They look the same.”

“Look again.” Marvey said, holding up the two pieces I had in front of me in the light.

I squinted at them, and saw, after my eyes adjusted to the light, the details finally. “Oh, okay, I see the lines now. They appear to be different parts of the picture frames.”

“Very good.” Marvey nodded in encouragement.

Marvey's puzzle was a painting of an art museum by some old Dutch artist I did not know. The painting was itself a painting of fifteen or so paintings and statues, with a dozen of museum visitors dressed in gowns and waistcoats from the 18th century, the Age of Enlightenment chatting among themselves as they appreciated the arts around them.

“My therapist gave it to me,” she spoke of it without warning. “He said that looking at the same image for a long period of time has a meditating effect. It can induce calmness and tranquility.”

Seeking psychological help was not very popular in my culture, however, again from my study of American culture on what Marvey claimed to be hypnotizing, brain-death inducing television shows, I knew it was quite a common practice. I was happy for her that she sought help when she needed it.

“It's the perfect thing to do in such a stormy night. We all need some peace.”

I did not answer, toying with the random pieces I picked up from the pile with my fingers to see if those I picked out would fit together. Even though we spoke in a foreign language, her good will was not lost. I understood her undertone.

“Uncle Jong, you are doing it wrong!” The little brat yelled at me. “You need to put the edges together first like Miss Marvey said!” He climbed across the pile of puzzle pieces and snatched them away from me.

“Hey!” That got me worked up. “Let's see who put the most pieces together first!”

“I'm going to beat you to it. You're doing it all wrong.”
Marvey giggled at our silliness.

Chapter 37: Tornado

At around 6:30pm a day later, the National Weather Service had issued a tornado warning for Alexandria. The outdoor warning siren was activated and we could hear a loud beep from inside the house.

John Senior had his hand held radio on. The broadcaster read out a message from the Weather Service. “A confirmed tornado has been located over Ottetail Lake. It is moving with very high speed towards the South West. All residence of Alexandria are advised to take cover NOW. Move to the basement or an interior room on the lowest floor of a sturdy building. Avoid windows. If you're outdoor, move to the closest substantial shelter and protect yourself from flying debris. I repeat, the National Weather Service has issued a tornado warning. A confirmed tornado has been located...”

I had never seen a tornado before, and blindly I moved closer and closer to the windows as the occupants of the house busied themselves with packing their valuables to ready themselves for the hideout in the storm shelter below the house, which I did not know exist until now.

Through the reinforce window panes, I could see the column of swirling cloud from afar, sweeping towards us in slow motion. I still had faint hope that it won't hit us, but John Senior later explained that it only looked slow because it was still far, and it won't be long when it was too fast for my eyes to catch.

He grabbed me by the shoulder and dragged me down the stairs. At the staircase, I ran into Marvey, who asked me where was Jessie.

“He is taking his afternoon nap upstairs.” I replied.

“No, he is not upstairs!” Marvey said, breathless. “And he is not down here either.”

“Where is Rocky?” Heather yelled from the second floor, after her search for the dog had come up empty.

“Are they outside? Are they both outside?!” Marvey said, distressed.

That was when I came out of my tornado stupor. I was no longer in awe. I was afraid. I need to find Jessie. I need to find Jessie now.

Marvey and I both started up the staircase at the same time, wanting to race outside in the backyard to search for Jessie and the dog, and we crashed hard into each other. Marvey faltered backwards. I grabbed her by her arm before she fell down the stairs. That was when John Senior shove his wife towards me as well and shooed all of us downstairs. “You're the man of the house now. Take care of my wife and daughter.”

“John!” Heather cried out after her husband who already slipped out through the back door and slammed it shut immediately to keep the wind out of the house.

I looked out the window and saw the ever growing tornado turning the sky above us darker and darker. Branches of the bushes in the front lawn quivered and pieces of them broke off from their main bodies, pelting the wall on the front of the house as if they were bullets.

“Let's go downstairs as he instructed.” I hurried the ladies.

“Yes, mom don't worry. Dad can handle it. I trust him.” Marvey said.

Inside the shelter, we locked the door but kept our ears open to any sign of someone outside wanting to come in. The wind was wheezing in through cracks between the windows of the house and we heard it even inside the shelter.

After about five minutes of waiting, there was still no sign of John Senior coming in. Heather said to us with trembling lips, “let us pray. Let us pray to God for mercy upon this family.”

She huddled us into a small circle and spoke her plea to God. I did not know if the same God would become my God, but I pleaded anyway with her in my heart for John Senior and Jessie's safe return. I would not forgive myself shall anything happened to him, who was not my son but was almost as important as my own. “I want to go look for them.”

“You're thin as a sheet. You'll be blown away!” Marvey said. Her words were not very flattering. “Stay here with us.”

Just when I was about to be convinced, I spotted the redness that started to shade Heather's big blue eyes. It had already been almost eleven minutes and her husband had still not come back. Gentle as she was, she did not want to say it out loud but I could tell from her imploring eyes that it would be something she appreciate.

“Let me do it. We will come back together, all six of us, including Rocky.” I did not know where I got that confidence. I had never walked in a wind storm before, lest a tornado. Yet I felt like those were the only right words to say to these two women who had taken care of me while I needed it the most. Before I had time to think everything through, I unlocked the shelter door, bolted for the staircase and out the back door.

Chapter 38: Hold on to me

“Johnnnnn!” I shouted. “Jessssie! Where are yooou?”

As soon as I stepped out through the back door, I was slammed by the gust of wind with my back against the door. I had never felt anything quite like that. Storms in Shanghai generally mild. There was once where storm warning was activated and everyone had to leave work immediately before it hit, to put tape crosses on our windows lest they would break. If I was not wrong, the wind speed was only about 75mph. From what I recalled, the wind I felt now ripping my hair and facial muscles away from my skull was at least a 120 or more mph. It was expected to get stronger by the minute as the tornado got closer.

I picked up a grovel the height of about a meter and with it I crawled my way forward. After a minute or so, I finally felt acquainted to walking under such tearing winds and could walk without it.

As I said, we had 2 acres of land in the back of the house. It was lined with trees grew in natural distribution on both sides of the pool. On the right, the land sloped downwards and at the end of it where it reached a plateau, there was a small lake and beyond it, the small wooden shed stood.

I scanned the land left and right, and the three of them, John, Jessie and Rocky were nowhere to be seen. How was that possible?

My immediate reaction was to look inside the shed. It would make the most sense. As soon as I lifted my right leg to make a step forward, I was torn completely off ground for a second or so and I stumbled backwards on to the wet ground. My body completely smeared with layer of wet dirt. I deemed that was a suitable time to use some of the curse

words I picked up from John Senior when he was watching the Wolves playing basketball the other day.

Then I heard barks.

“Rocky!” I yelled instinctively, even though I doubt Rocky would response to my call of his name. I laid low to follow the sound of his barks and it seemed to be coming not from the side of the shed, but the other side where there were thick growth of trees, some of them swaying, their leaves flapped erratically in the wind.

Finally I caught glimpse of Rocky, barking feverishly at a broken off tree trunk.

I launched myself towards the nearest tree and hugged it. Then I used it as my support to stand up. And I saw a dark object lying under the tree trunk. It was waving Rocky away.

“Go! Go now Rocky! I will be right in!” It was John Senior's voice, and in his arms Jessie, who was crying senseless, but one could only see his facial expression of torment, and not the sound in the roaring wind. The man on the ground was dragging his injured leg with his elbows out under the trunk to no avail.

“Raerrrr!” He pulled again, and ended up screaming in pain.

“John!” I screamed across the field.

He spotted me and shouted immediately, “get over here! I'm stuck! You've got to pick up Jessie and bring him inside. Rocky as well! He wouldn't go!”

A strong gust of wind blew through the clearing and I was shoved forward. I lost my grip on the tree and fell a second time, and this time I cared only a little. “I'm coming overrr!”

The wind was getting stronger and it was not helping me getting to them. I picked up a fat broken twig and poked it in the direction

of Jessie. "Jessie! Grab it! Grab the twig with your hand and don't let go!" I shouted.

He wouldn't listen. Jessie kept shaking his heads and his tears were streaming down his face. There was a cut on his forehead and blood was streaming down from it.

John Senior momentarily forgot about the pain in his leg and he sat up with all the power he has in him. With a swift motion, he wiped the blood off from the boy's forehead and stretched out his arms to hand him to me. I dropped the twig and lunged myself forward to catch him, watching out not to fall on the trunk on the ground between us.

As soon as I grabbed Jessie, I did not care. I tucked Jessie in one arm and scooped the stubborn dog up, whose limbs were fraying in the air still, reluctant to leave his owner behind, and I ran for it. It was slightly easier than expected now that I was heavier, with the weights of the boy and the dog with me. I stumbled my way back to the house and delivered them immediately into the arms of Heather who got out out the shelter to watch us from behind the back door.

"Get them down." I said. Marvey had poked her head out from behind the staircase as well. She rushed forward to capture Rocky by the leash on his neck before he could run outside. Dragging and pulling, she managed to bring him down to the basement. Jessie wrapped himself around her legs all the way down.

"Where is my husband?" Heather asked in alarm. "Is he coming after you?"

"His leg," I said in a haste and turned around to go back out. I fumbled with the door which was slammed tight by the opposing wind. "He is stuck behind there by a fallen trunk. I need to get him out," I said to her, struggling with the unyielding door.

“He's my husband, not yours. Let me do it!” She took my place in front of the door and peeled it open.

“It's really windy outside...”

“I am not a hundred and sixty pounds for nothing!” And out she went. As soon as she slipped out the door slammed against my face by the wind.

I peered haplessly outside and stood there motionless for a second, wondering what to do.

“Come here!” Marvey yelled from the bottom of the stairs.
“Let's not lose everybody!”

She was right. I bolted downstairs and shut the door of the shelter, knowing that if I stayed out, she would not bare locking it, and we would all be in trouble when the tornado hit us.

Chapter 39: Make you feel my love

“When the rain is blowing in your face, and the whole world is on your case, I could offer you a warm embrace, To make you feel my love.” Adele sang from the mp3 player lying on the ground. *“I'd go hungry; I'd go black and blue, and I'd go crawling down the avenue. No, there's nothing that I wouldn't do, to make you feel my love.”*

Tears rolled down the face of Marvey as she huddled herself closed to me, her head on my shoulder and her chin resting softly on Jessie, who had fallen asleep bracing her. Next to us Rocky lied whimpering softly in front of John Senior, his wife tending to his wounds on the leg.

I sat there, looking at the family, and thought to myself, “this is what I want.”

Once in a while in your generally uninteresting life that you feel like life had led you to an unfamiliar territory so full of wonder, so mesmerizing and so completely different from what you were used to that you felt that you did not deserve it, and that if you were to close your eyes to rest just for a second, everything would disappear. This was one of those moments. From weariness, both for the storm outside and the flitting serenity around me with the family, I kept myself awake even when everyone eventually drifted off to sleep, absorbing through my five senses every little detail of my surroundings, entering them into my memory, so I could review this moment in pleasure when it passed.

For a second time in this trip, Marvey had fallen asleep next to me, her moist breath I could feel on my damp skin in every inhalation. I dared not to move, for fear of waking her.

We waited the storm out till the morning. I felt a sharp neck pain when I was waken by a stream of bright day light filtering in through the door of the shelter, which John Senior had opened. Hopping back on one leg to wake up his wife who had fallen asleep on the cushion pad lying on the ground, he caught my eyes and realized that I was also awake. He winked at me and said, “Good morning”.

Gently, I straightened my back, and the movement woke Marvey. She opened her eyes partly and looked in my direction.

“Did I fall asleep on your shoulder?” She asked softly, Jessie, asleep, still cradled in her arms.

I nodded, smiling, and gave the aching muscle on the back of my neck a good hard squeeze.

“Everything's clear upstairs.” John Senior poked his head down from the top of the staircase. Despite the injury on his leg, he still managed to hop around the house and took a good look at the damage that was done by the storm the night before. “We've been lucky, only one or two window panes were cracked. Looks like the tornado didn't do much damage.”

“It went the other way.” Heather's voice was heard from the living room. She had gone up to turn on the radio first thing after she got up.

The vegetation in the backyard were not so lucky. Any flowers that we could still discern were left petalless, the land which used to be covered in neat short grasses was now a mishmash of ugly brown spots with wilted blades. Weeds near the pond were tangled in impossibles knots as if they fought with each other during the storms. The trees suffered the most. Many trees toppled, one over the other in some areas, broken in the most

agonizing fashion near their bases. Sharp-edged wooden shrapnel raised from these tears in to the sky threatening to scrap anyone that come near.

The next couple of days, I volunteered myself to help John Senior clear the mess around the house, pulling down trees that were half way down, salvaging what's left of the garden furniture and cleaning the debris-filled pool.

Jessie was initially afraid to leave the house, but after a few days he could finally put the traumatic experience behind him. Along with Rocky, the loyal dog which Jessie realized was not so scary after all, he would come to bring us refreshment from inside the house that Heather gave him and played catch, or whatever games they could invent together in the yard afterwards.

I had never done so much menial work in my life. I might have helped my parents put together a piece of furniture together or carry some stuff here and there, but all these unfamiliar landscaping, gardening work outdoor was back-breaking. They tired me out completely such that I could fall asleep almost as soon as I lied down on the bed without impelling self-effacing thoughts on myself that usually occupied the period of sleeplessness. My insomnia was cured.

Chapter 40: Father and Son

One night after dinner, John Senior invited me to come with him to the shed, which turned out to be a rather impressive private refuge.

Surrounded by tools neatly lining the all four walls except for the doors, we sat on the two sides of a long work bench, a part of it temporarily cleared out for our beers, stashes of home brew taken from a fridge in the shed.

“I made them with chocolate. Try one.” He said, popping the lids off of both of our beers.

“Chocolate?” I asked. We clinked our beers together and each took a sip. “This is the first time I have ever heard that one can make beers out of chocolate.”

“You can make beers out of everything, as long as the yeast eats it.” He sat contently and burped.

“It tastes good. Really good.” This was a totally new sensation to me.

“You're leaving on Saturday, isn't it?”

“Yes, sir. Back to China. To Shanghai where my parents live.”

“Would you like to come back? Would you like to meet us and be our guest again? Because you're always welcome.”

“This week has been an amazing experience.”

“I don't doubt that.” We chuckled. “You've probably never seen a tornado quite like this before.”

“No.” I said. “And I would love to come back again to visit your family if I am still welcome.”

“So you're gonna just say goodbye to Marvey, go back to your life in Shanghai and get on with your life?”

“That has to be, back to the grind in Shanghai. Sort out the mess with my parent's land. I assumed Marvey told you about the land...” I swallowed hard at the mention of this weak spot. “I am very fortunate to be able to come to America and not only to see it but to experience living in an American home. It's very different from where I came from. People here are a lot friendlier and kinder. Our popular media has a different portrayal of Americans.” I skipped the part where they portrayed the stereotypical American as someone who was lazy, obese, lack self-control, mannerless and stupid enough to elected George Bush as their national disgrace.

“I'm sure America is happy to hear,” he said, “what do you think of Marvey?”

I was not prepared by this question, and I almost choked on the beer. Whizzing, I answered, “Your daughter is a wonderful person. She is kind, and sweet, and very beautiful...” I trailed off.

“I have always wanted to meet her Chinese boyfriend from school...”

“I'm not her Chinese boyfriend,” I interrupted, “from school.”

“I know.” He gave me a look for interrupting him with unnecessary information. “You're not the same guy in the photographs she framed two years ago and not the same guy whose photo frames she broken into pieces either. What I wanted to say is...look, I don't want her to get hurt. Not again.”

My eyes were glued to his. He had obviously thought about this. This was not an impromptu conversation.

“You're from China and Marvey is from small town America. The two of you have huge cultural differences and different family

backgrounds. She's now studying in Harvard and you are working in Shanghai. When she graduates, she will have a different life from the one you see her in now and you would have met a lot of other people.”

I nodded, my head remained in a lowered position as he continued, already could guess the underlying message of what he was trying to tell me.

“My daughter, the joy of my life, she surprised us by getting herself scholarship into one of the best schools in the country. No one from our family ever has gone that far for college. She is a very ambitious person. She likes to travel and she likes to improve her knowledge. At Harvard, she associates with people of grand pedigrees, high academic achievements and lustrous futures.”

“And when she graduates, she will be busy with the new life she establishes for herself and be working hard towards her life goals.”

“I understand, sir.” I said.

“This is the life she has chosen for herself, without Heather and my interference.”

“I understand what you are trying to say, sir. I am not good enough for her. I won't try anything if that is your worry.”

“No, I did not say that.” John Senior put down his beer and looked at me in the eyes seriously. “That is not what I am trying to say.”

“I have heard similar introductions before.” I explained. “I am used to it. I never fared very well with the fathers of girls I like...”

“You are mistaken. I only want you to know that every action in life has its consequences. And before you take an action, you consider all possibilities and your ability to deal with the possibilities.”

I nodded obligingly.

“Don't nod so fast,” he pled. “Think about it for yourself.”

Perhaps out of habit, I nodded again. I made a mental note to stop nodding when people told me something.

“Will I feel happy when I leave all of this behind as if it is just a dream? Will I be happy when I don't get to see her anymore? Will she be happy without ever seeing me again? Those are the questions that you should ask yourself.”

“Sir, I think about them all the time...” I confessed honestly, “already before I came to America.”

“And what are your conclusions?”

“Marvey has a wonderful life ahead of her. I know full well that I am not good enough for her, but if I have the opportunity I will give her all I have and I will love her and cherish her. I will never let anyone hurt her again and I will work on my life, so that hopefully, one day, I will grow into the man that is worthy of her.”

“And now there is an opportunity.”

My jaw dropped. Was he actually advising for it? “I don't understand...”

“I have observed the two of you. You are avoiding each other since the storm hit.”

“No, I...we have a lot of work to do in the yard.”

“I appreciate all your help, but I don't suppose you are filing in an application to be our gardening boy any time soon. You're here for Marvey, so act like it. Let her know that you're here for her, you're trying to please her dad because you love her.”

“She probably doesn't think much of me...” I asked, dumbfounded. “There are people out there that can give her a lot more than I do.”

“And yet she is not with them now. She is with you, in our house. She asked you to spend time with us. When you truly truly love someone, then you can overcome any hurdle. I am just an old man who knows nothing much about the modern world anymore, but I could tell Marvey would be devastated if she could not see you again.”

“I'm a nobody. She will forget about me.”

“Is that what you want?”

“No.”

“Well, then consider this. You have self-esteem issue that is plain to see. I don't know why you feel like that, son. But you shouldn't feel like this about yourself. You make others worry more about you than you think when you shy away from opportunities lives have given you because you think you're not good enough to seize them and claim them as your own.”

“Did Marvey ask you to talk to me about this?”

“What I want is my daughter to be happy. We cannot help her much further in life. She needs someone else, to give her support, to let her spread her wings without a worry in the world because she is loved and protected. Could you do that for her?”

“I will try my utmost.”

“That's the spirit.” He said. “So cut all the nonsense about what you deserve and don't deserve. Go for the thing you love like you own it. Be a man.”

I stared wild eyed at him.

He continued, “Heather and I were together since high school. Sometimes I think that if she didn't meet me, she would probably be like her friends who left town, and has a career of her own, instead of the wife of a grumpy veteran, taking care of the house, cleaning and cooking for us. It

was a waste of her talents. And yet when I have these moments of insecurity, she would tell me that love is not about sacrificing yourself to make the other person happy. Love is gaining so much more from being with each other that it does not feel like a sacrifice. I don't ask a lot from my future-son-law. All I want is that he could make my daughter feels so loved she would not regret choosing to be with him.”

I looked down into the barrel of the glass bottle, lost in thoughts.

He smiled and took a gulp from his beer and burped again. It was a loud and satisfying one.

Chapter 41: Life

On Friday evening, I packed my bags and Marvey helped Jessie with his. We slept at the usual bedtime in this household, 10:30 pm, and woke up at 6 am to catch our budget morning flight back to Boston, so that we could be in the airport in time for the next leg bringing us back to China.

I did not say anything unnecessary to Marvey, like everyone, probably including you, hoped. No, Marvey and I were never meant to be. All the talk about me not being worthy, while that was true, was only an excuse. If I had wanted Marvey to become my girlfriend, I knew I only had to ask.

Yet I did not.

It was all nice and memorable, my time at Marvey's, being by her side, living with her amiable family, forgetting all about my usual weariness over money and girlfriend. But none of this was real. It was just a vacation, a refuge from reality, a wet dream for a Chinese boy.

I had now experienced how they lived, in small town America. You hardly see other people when you were not at work. You have to drive everywhere. In the week that I was at their place, I only saw Marvey waved at her neighbor once and Heather talked to two Mormon missionaries and one Avon saleswoman. The rest of the time, they either watched television, or worked on some chores, or home improvement project they invented, until the storm which made it necessary, at home.

To be honest, given that nobody was hurt during that episode of hellish weather, I could now say I was even glad that the tornado decided to stop by Alexandria, because other than that, probably nothing else interesting would have happened the whole trip, in reality that was. The

online game Jessie was playing was also pretty eventful, but then I could only watch, because there was only one keyboard and I was the older one. Chinese morals dictated that the old should not fight with the young.

To summarize in one word, I was rather bored with how Americans living outside of the big metropolitan that were always featured in exciting television series conducted their lives. No wonder Walt, from Breaking Bad, started cooking Meth and led a thug life that he would not get out of despite all the setbacks in his family life and health. A adventure-filled criminal life was clearly far superior way to lead the rest of his dying days than sitting at home, bored, in small town America.

Of course, there was more in my mind. Not Marvey. Indeed that was strange. I dreamt of Marvey day and night when I was in Shanghai, even when I was with Shirley, the supposed 'perfect girl'. Now that I was next to the girl in my dreams, while she was still as amazing as I recall, under the 24/7 scrutiny of her parents and my adopted son, my brain automatically suspended all lustful thoughts and compartmentalized the last of my amorous feelings for Marvey. It was remarkable how I could now see her more of a younger sister, a younger friend, than a potential love object. It was not Marvey but Shirley that was on my mind.

Yes, Shirley. Shirley, the epitome of all that was evil in Chinese society. Her angelic face, her snake-like deception, her wolfish ambush and her scorpionic instinct to kill.

I might have appeared to be busy at a variety of things throughout my stay at Alexandria, but in my head, I was only busy with one thing, planning on how to topple her from her throne.

Chapter 42: Gratification

Building upon the Confucius belief that one should work hard and live frugally and a good number of years of famine under Mao's rule, the modern Chinese work ethics was one of the few exemplary characteristics of my people that we could hail proudly internationally. For a group of people with such an upbringing to have brought up the next generations of materialistic whores that worshiped money and covet power over the less fortunate or the gullible was the century's biggest mystery. Of course, this was not a phenomenon that occurred uniquely in China. Most countries had seen their fair share of moral decay. If there were no geological and language barriers, the rich of the Central Kingdom might be pals of the rich of Putin's Russian Empire.

Certainly not everyone was corrupted, or corrupted to an intolerable extreme. The worst thing I did might be to coax the free English class from my company through my relationship with the HR lady. That was nothing sensational, and a rather wide spread phenomenon. Our pay was so little even the most righteous person would turn a blind eye to these occasional chicaneries.

Having someone ancestral land stripped from him was a far worse violation of other's property. Having cleared my conscience, I snuck up to the 15th floor of the building where Shirley and Simon lived by the Charles River in the three hours that Jessie and I had as overlay before our flights fly out to Shanghai and got on with my first step for revenge.

There were two types of people in this world: those who first invest all the hardwork and enjoy the fruits of their labor at the end, then there were those who seek immediate gratification from the activities they

engaged in. I was unmistakably the first type. And I had had enough of people taking from my plates where I saved the best food for later. This was not going to happen again. No one was going to ever steal from me again.

I unlocked the front door easily with the key I stole from Marvey's drawer at Alexandria, since she would not be needing it anymore now that her very good friend, yours truly, was reduced to such state by her once-employer, and I looked around. There was no one in the living room. Stealthily, I slid into Shirley's bedroom on my thick, white woolly socks worn specially for this occasion to reduce the sound of my steps, and found her tablet lying unattended on her desk.

I lurched at it and woke it up from sleep mode without the prompt to enter any password. Shirley was careless for someone with so many secrets to hide. I pulled up her chat history with this man whose message I accidentally came across last week and exported it via email to myself. I thought there might be other conversations that might prove useful as well, so I exported a dozen more, carefully to include the one between Simon and Shirley. Five minutes later when that was all done, I logged out of my own email account, wiped my finger prints carefully with the hem of my shirt and slipped out of the house.

That was when Marvey gave me a call. I had forgotten to turn off the sound, so I quickly dismissed it. She tried a couple of times and seeing that I did not wish to pick up, she sent me a text message.

Annoyed, I wanted to swipe it away but accidentally opened the message. It said, "Cameras are watching you. Leave immediately!"

Instinctively I glanced up at the corners of the room and located a dark round object. Was Marvey watching? Was this one of those security devices that notify their owners when they detected movements in

the house? If Marvey was watching, then surely Shirley would be as well. I shuddered, and bolted for the door.

“Let's go!” I grabbed Jessie, who was playing with his fingers by the flower beds around the corner from the building entrance and lunged him in my arms, together with our luggage to the nearest taxi standing at the end of the street, ignoring the unspoken etiquette of picking the taxi at the front of the line.

“Airport. Quick please. We have a flight to catch!”

I did not text Marvey back. It might sound absurd because she was the one who notified me of the imminent danger which would befall me if I had stayed a moment longer at Shirley's flat. Yet I felt suspicious of what saying more to her would entail, for fear that her phone was also tapped. I had forgotten that Shirley and Simon were the living treasures of their powerful father, the owner of the Sun of China Group. They were likely much targeted for robbery or kidnappings in China. I was stupid to assume that because we were outside of the country that the appearance of lack of security was the whole truth.

The Indian taxi driver shot me a smirk and said, “no problem sir. Please wear both of your seat belts now!” And he romped on the gas.

It was always a comfort when you went outside of your county and to finally met people who understood you on first count.

“Airport, we are coming!” He pronounced to no one in particular, pleasant at being tasked to deliver us on our urgent business, whatever he had deduced it to be.

Chapter 43: Special Treatment

There were a million reasons why one would not want to be picked out by airport security, but being picked out because one was identified as an anti-terrorism hero in current circumstances was an exception and it sped things up tremendously for us.

Apart from the few selfies I had to take with a few of the younger security officers not quite vigilant as they should be on their jobs, Jessie and I were fast-tracked across check-in and security checks. We were sitting comfortably in the First Class lounge sipping the teas that the hostess made specially for us while waiting for boarding. Unexpectedly, we had been allowed into the First Class lounge even without someone who held the First Class card traveling with us because of my fame. I presumed that now I was behind security, there was no way she could stop me from leaving now and had the local police arrest me for break-and-entry.

Still I was not completely relaxed. Without me realizing, I was pacing nervously back and forth the couch that Jessie was sitting on who was reading a comic book the hostess of the First Class lounge had handed him on request. With the WiFi provided by the airport, I could download the message histories that I exported from Shirley's phone and started browsing for any incriminating evidence.

Barely did I read five rows did I realize who had entered the lounge. The loud tocks of her sharp heels coinciding with the loud thumps of my jumping heart.

Jessie called her name out . “Miss Shirley!”

I turned around as she undid her seemingly expensive branded shawl from her shoulders, all the while her gaze was transfixed on me in a

derisive stare. Behind her, a well-dressed bodyguard followed. He had no expression.

“What are you doing here?” I asked, putting away my phone despite knowing that she would not dare to do anything in the airport.

“I'm going to skin you alive,” she said in a heavy voice.

Never had I heard her talk like that before. Now that I had witnessed it I kicked myself for not realizing her menacing potentials having spent so much time with her.

I felt my legs weaken. I sat down on the couch opposite to where she had taken a place and returned her stare. Jessie noticed the tense atmosphere and turned to ask me, “are you two not in love anymore?”

“No.” We answered at the same time.

Chapter 44: Rush

Our flight back was rather uneventful, because I volunteered to switch our seats with a couple and a crying baby from economy class. The passengers of the economy class as well as the couple were quite pleased at my admirable act of kindness. I just hope that the baby cried as loud and as annoying as it could in First Class, preferably in the ears of my sworn enemy.

I let down my guards too early. As soon as I walked towards the arrival gate after picking up my luggage did I realize there were a group of black suits clad men waiting for Shirley and I, most specifically I from the satisfactory glances they threw at me through the gap of the sliding doors slamming open and shut repeatedly as other passengers poured out to the arrival hall.

Shirley, followed by the silent minion who carried her luggage, walked pass us, stopped, turned around and gave me a cold smile before continuing her journey out to meet her hired guns. At least in America they thought I was a somebody. If I cried foul, I might get some protections in the Boston airport. Now that I had arrived in Shirley's home tuft, despite it also being my hometown, one that was overstuffed by countless of faceless, nameless, penniless fools like me it could not spare any more mercy, I think I would be handcuffed and hand-delivered into the arms of my powerful adversary and her rather menacing-looking entourage. She could really skin me alive if she wanted.

“Why are we standing here?” Jessie pulled on my sleeves.
“Let's go home! Let's go home! Ultraman is on TV in twenty minutes!”

A poor man like me did not have a lot of resource to pull on last minute. One thing I had, however were loyal friends, especially friends from soccer who were used to seeing fights on and off fields and were not easily threatened.

A mere message in our chat group and the whole team appeared at the airport except one or two who were otherwise engaged. We were at least fourteen, with everyone on the rooster and what not, all of them wearing our soccer team's blue and gray striped uniforms. The wife of the captain was there, too, carrying bouquet of flowers for my homecoming.

“Welcome! Welcome! Adept in air, agile on land. Pudong Hero, strikes eleven! Strikes eleven!” Everyone in our soccer team, Pudong Hero chanted loudly as Jessie and I walked out of the gate to the dismay of Shirley's hired hands. Our team had won ten games so far this season. The additional strike was due to their creative counting of my extra strike-down of the violent man on the flight to Boston, likely broadcasted as well by the local media.

The team huddled together as I approached. The captain gave me a heartfelt embrace and the rest of the group hustled us into the big tour bus that goalie Wong occasionally borrowed from his work to drive us to our games at the temporary parking area. From the back window of the bus, we watched Shirley watched us from her unmistakably luxury ride parked only a few space behind, her men crowding the sides of the car, waiting for orders of what to do.

“The whole team of Pudong Hero Number 4 is here. She wouldn't dare doing anything funny!” Our left defender, Brother Chong, said. “Besides, Brother Fei and his squad is here.” Brother Fei, a city patrol,

a policeman of sorts, was one of the people I thought missing from the group. I was grateful he turned up as well.

Just as Goalee Wong started driving away, we saw Brother Fei and his team swept down on the group that had aggregated around Shirley's car.

We sat relaxed on our seats and they started asking me about the events that transpired when I was in America. As soon as I got to the main point, we heard the sound of screeching tires behind us.

“They are chasing us!” Little Buddha, the smallest guy in the team who was our striker exclaimed.

Then there was a loud bang on the right side of the bus. A car the same model as the one that picked up Shirley was hit us.

“Do they not want to live?” Brother Chong said. “Our bus is five times the size of their car.”

Samuel, our trainee, a boy who studied a few years in Sweden and got himself an English name asked, “what did they do to Brother Fei?”

“You should ask what do they want to do with us!” Midfielder Lui corrected him. “Do they want to get everyone killed on the road?”

The driver from the other car rolled down his window and mouthed the words for “Stop the car” multiple times.

“John, what in the world did you steal from her?” Goalie Wong asked me. “I want to know if I am going to die for the right cause.” He swiveled the bus around a sharp bend at the crossroad and headed towards the highway. The car that was following us missed the entrance and went straight ahead to another direction. Another car stepped into our view just when we thought we lost our pursuers.

Goalie Wong's question came at the right moment. Without hesitating for another second, I pulled up the most popular online forum in

Shanghai, opened a new titled “Dirty secret of the Burn Pit group” , write a short description and dumped all the chat histories that I had not the time to check myself on it with my anonymous account.

Jessie, the brat that spent too much time watching crime television series and movies, immediately knew what he had to do. He fired up his smartphone camera and start shooting a video of the chase.

Chapter 45: Broadcasted

We circled the city for about an hour, trying to run away from our pursuers when Goalie Wong cursed at his bus, “Dammit! I'm running out of gas.”

“Already?!” Brother Lui climbed from his seat to the front of the bus to converse with the now panicking driver. Goalie Wong just finished a three day trip from Hangzhou to Shanghai. He got to the airport as soon as he dropped off his passengers at their hotel. There were no time to pump any gas in. The thing with big buses were that their meters went down very fast towards the end, and it was hard to gauge how long gas would last.

“I wasn't expecting a car chase, okay?” He shouted so that everyone could hear him.

“Where are we now?” Brother Lui scanned left and right.

“About five kilometers from the soccer field.” There were only five soccer fields opened to amateur teams in Shanghai, despite the size of the city. Any land that was not occupied by government buildings, public recreational areas, skyscrapers nor existing residential buildings would soon be converted to an area for commercial purpose by its owner. Pudong Hero Number 4, along with the rest of the Pudong Hero teams, could maximum get two slots at the University soccer field in a week. There were barely any slot for practice.

“You don't mean we are driving towards the university?!”

“I don't know where else to go! I couldn't lead them to our houses, could I?”

“It's good.” I shouted from the back of the bus. “Go for it! The university is good! Park your bus at the field!”

The field was next to a row of campus housing. On such a warm summer days, a lot of students had come out of their dormitory to chill with their friends as they watched whatever game that was playing at the moment in the field.

“What's the plan?” Little Buddha asked me.

“Go to the center of the field!” I cried.

“The center?” I heard he said in disbelief. “Do you want to get beaten in public?”

“That's the whole point.” I replied, praying that this would be a wise decision.

As soon as we parked the bus, I carried Jessie on my shoulders and we ran towards the center of the field. At the beginning the teams playing soccer there at the moment were confused. Some stopped on their tracks to look at what we were doing, others started cursing and came towards us, that was until they saw a group of suspicious men in suits climbed out of their Mercedes parked obliquely next to our bus abruptly and streamed on to the field after us.

The referee blew his whistle repeatedly at these men, who were, in stark contrast to us, not wearing any sports uniform and obviously did not belong to the field. One of the guys ripped the whistles from this mouth and kicked him in the stomach. As he fell to the ground, the crowd roared.

Their anger had fallen on deaf ears, because as soon as they reached us they started thrashing their arms and legs at my soccer brothers and I, ignoring the public around us.

One man spotted me behind the captain's wife, who was now holding Jessie's hand trying to run towards the dormitory entrance away,

and he pointed at me to the others.

“That's the guy!” He bellowed to his fellow mercenary.

I back towards the center of the field and held up my smartphone “Come get me!” I beseeched. Although they did not understand why I had to provoke those men, my team mates came to my defense. The two group broke into a brawl.

“What is happening?” There were voices coming from the PA system around the field.

Another voice replied that he did not know.

As I expected, this match, albeit amateurish, was broadcasted live to local channels because it was the quarter finals. The voices belong to the commentators sitting at the top level of the five story dormitory which doubled as the commentator and VIP area for guests at the soccer matches here. They were now describing the scenes that unfolded before their eyes as if it was just another normal game. Our fight was but another soccer match for them.

“We've gotten a tip,” I heard one of them said as I was dodging the punches of the tallest man in the group. “This is breaking news, ladies and gentlemen, happening right in front of our eyes. The Pudong Hero Number 4 team is being beaten by some men that had attacked the city patrol at the airport earlier. Reports indicated that they were spotted only moments before that incidence with the oldest daughter of Li Kun, who was now suspected to be connected to the current violence.”

“Is that not He Yuan Zhong?”

“Who?”

“The South Sea Ip Man!”

“That South Sea Ip Man that fought off the two rogue passengers on the Hainan flight two weeks ago?”

The crowd cheered as soon as they heard the name that the media had dubbed for me.

“What do you think they want from him? Why would Li Kun's daughter wants to beat him?”

I held up my phone as I slipped from my assailant's feverish grab and took the opportunity to wave it in front of the camera that was now focused on me. “Check the internet! Check the internet!” I screamed at the top of my lungs.

Brother Chong grabbed me all of a sudden from behind and pulled me towards him. Two milliseconds later the body of a man crashed to the spot where I was standing.

“Did you upload everything?” He asked me as he was fending off another attack. The assailant jabbed his eyes in the chaos which made him really mad. He slammed his palm hard on the guy's face and shoved as hard as he could.

“Yes! It's on the internet.” I could now spot some people from the audience checking their phone, looking for the treasure of information I left on the message board. I hope someone would read it and spread it soon, before it would get pulled from the internet by whatever dark forces that lurked on the internet, working against the common people.

“Then let him have the phone.” Brother Chong said wisely. “Let him have the phone before one of us get killed or kill someone by accident!”

It was a pity to let go of my smartphone, although it was not my own property but my company's. Lots of photos from my trip to Boston were stored there and I hadn't had the chance to download it to my personal computer yet.

“Just let go!” The tall guy going after me echoed Brother Chong's advice.

“Aaarrhh!” And with unwillingness I threw the phone as far as possible behind me. The tall guy rushed towards it, his eyes transfixed to the projectile. When the phone was about to land, he went down on all four to close the distance between him and the phone. He missed by a huge margin. Not a soccer player, we concluded.

It did not matter to him of course. His aim, we could now all guess, was to destroy all evidence stored in my phone. He was hell-bent on his aim that he scrambled immediately to his feet and tried to stomp the device as hard as he could with his right foot.

“Everything's on the internet!” One of the commentator yelled through the microphone. “Stop the fight everybody. Everything's on the internet already.”

“Our analysis at the Headquarter is now analyzing the data for us now. Please be patient and stay on this channel as we find out for you the truth behind his scandalous fistfight unfolding now at the Bao Shan University soccer field.”

A dozen of campus security had finally arrived and came rushing towards the field with their jingling handcuffs and batons. They hit our assailants, as well as our own men with their swinging batons indiscriminately. Our men were quick to be subdued, being unwillingly dragged into the fight. We squatted and huddled ourselves in a circle on the center of the field like baby ducks. Cuts and bruises lined the visible areas of my team mates. Shirley's hired guns tried to escape naturally.

“It appears that He Yuan Zhong has been swindled out of his ancestral land by someone called Shirley. Li Kun's daughter's English name is Shirley Li, our analyst confirmed.”

“The chat history that was posted on the internet only twenty minutes ago titled The Dirty Secret of the Burn Pit group is pointing towards her involvement in this unscrupulous act. Please stay tune as we get more data from the Headquarter on this.”

“Now on the field, it appeared that two dozens of campus security had arrived and there were more now parking their wagons on the left and right entrance in a triangle. It seems like they are building up blockades on both sides.”

A few men in suits tried to blend into the by-standing audience, but they were being shoved back to the field by crowd of angry students.

One man climbed on the Mercedes and tried to pull it out of the parking lot. With both sides of the exit blocked, he decided his best chance of escape was to run through the middle of the field.

“What the hell does he want to do?”

“It appears that the criminal wants drive his car through the middle of the field so he could reach the other side that was not blocked!”

“Pubbbff!” A loud bang reverberated in the air. “Pubbbf! Pubfhhh!” Another two loud bangs caused the women in the audience to scream and the men to cringe.

“Someone shot the tires.” The car lost control and spinned on its final intact tire.

“It's not stopping. Looks like the driver is still giving gas!”

“Pufbbaaaff!” The last shot sent shrapnel of glasses through the air. It had pierced through the window pane and shot the driver on his forehead.

“This is breaking news, ladies and gentlemen It appeared that the armed police arrived and had shot down the criminal.”

The car lost thrust and skidded on the wet grass. We hurriedly scrambled to our feet in case the car glided towards us. After a few moments it screeched to a halt, splashing mud everywhere in the process.

Everyone was rounded up and transported back to the Bao Shan police station when the penal transportation, two a huge caged vans, came to pick us up. The dead man was carried on a stretcher into the back of an ambulance to the morgue.

Chapter 46: Evidence

The incriminating chat I had obtained in Boston from Shirley's tablet were enough to convince the world that she had conspired with the architects and executives working for the Sun of China group to hoax the land out of my family. There were other evidence to foul play in the way the group had tried to obtain land in the same area for their grand luxury flats project.

Despite that, being stolen from her device at her own home, the chats were not admissible as legal evidence. Since the theft occurred outside of the jurisdiction of the Shanghai criminal court of justice, Shirley could not do anything to me except to file a theft report in Boston from oversea, herself under strict court order forbidden to leave the country while under investigation for criminal incitement of the assault of the city patrol at the airport, and the so-called Bu Shan Soccer Field Rampage by the media. Such a filing would likely result in a state arrest warrant out for me in Massachusetts, and even United States. A pity, because despite everything I said, I would like to see it again.

“Wait a minute.” My phone rang. I pulled it out of the leather sheath to see that it was Kelvin. I was daydreaming at work again about what had transpired. The hair-raising event that occurred the day before to me and my soccer brothers was still imprinted in my mind. I was exhausted physically from the fights as well as jet lag, and mentally I was in no mood to write software for our supermarket clients, but this was Shanghai. The world would not stop on your behalf, and a holiday request to the upper management could not be altered so easily. It was two and a half weeks and

two and a half weeks exact it should be. Nothing more, and less would not be reimbursed. Of course, if I was like Brother Chong and Goalie Wong who broke some body parts and had to stay at the hospital, I supposed my company had no choice but to let me go.

Luckily, unlike the others, I did not suffer any huge bodily injury. The only real damage was in my heart. All the photos I took in Boston with Jessie were now irretrievable stuck in the memory card of my smashed smartphone which I tossed away under Brother Chong's advice to get the violent thugs off our backs. A few of them scrambled for it at the same time and in the chaos one of them landed on it at the end of a jump, stamping the phone into pieces. The corpse of it, was now kept in a Ziploc bag in the evidence box for this case, together with a dozen of other guns that the thugs had on. Luckily they thought we were so weak to warrant shooting us and did not pull them out.

“I have to pick up this call.” I said to two girls who had come over with an extra box of chicken fried rice with eggs during lunch time as bribe such that I would offer them the first hand account of the story between Shirley and I. Until that moment, I was only busy munching on one spoonful after another of the steaming hot fried rice, enjoying my once-in-a-life-time attentions from those normally haughty ladies from marketing department who rarely visited the engineering department, listening to their excitements regarding what they saw on the news yesterday and repeated on social media all evening till this morning without saying a single word.

“Who's calling you? The police?” One of the girls made a guess eagerly.

“Just a friend.” I stood up and walked into a conference room made with glass from floor-to-ceiling and shut the door. The girls stood outside as if they were waiting for me. In fact, they did appear to really be

waiting for me. A rare occasion. I was more used to being ignored, dismissed, forgotten, then waited by and waited on...

“Hey! What took you so long to answer.”

“What?”

“Li Kun is tearing down all the houses on our old streets. It's happening right now!”

“The Sun of China group is under investigation, how could they?”

“No, Shirley is. Not her father nor his company.”

“Does your parents know? What are they going to do?”

“Nothing...they sold the land long time ago, did you forget? That's where they got their capital to make their first investment. ” Kelvin and I grew up together on the same street until our parents both moved out of Feng Cheng Village, looking for better life. His parents left nothing of their past behind. In Chinese, we called this 'Po Fu Chen Zhou', to break the cauldrons and sink the boat. An idiom derived from Xian Yu's heroic act to motivate his soldiers to keep fighting in war since they were at the point of no return. “The news channel number two is reporting some protests over there. Turn on the television.” Kelvin urged.

I grabbed the remote control that was casually strewed on the table together with some stray cables and turned on the television in the room, only to find heartbreaking images of rubble and half collapsed ancient buildings. In front of it, a woman was wailing at the interviewer from channel two. The camera zoomed in on her face. She brushed back the fallen hair that hid her face temporarily. Tears were streaming down her face as she mumbled words of plead to the girl. “This house belonged to my family for centuries. The inner court was erected at least four hundred years ago. Why did no one inform me that they are pulling it down today? The

men from Sun of China group told me they would apply a heritage preservation license for it! They lied! They lied to me.”

My jaw fell open. I recognized this middle-age woman. She was the wife of our village driver for the slow bus number 3 that crossed the villages nearby.

“Why do you think the men from the Sun of China Group lied to you?”

“They want to make money!” Her tone suggested that she thought this was a rather dumb question. “They want to build luxury homes, the kind that we could not afford with our compensations. It's like this everywhere!”

“So you are aware of their intentions? Did you sign a contract?”

“Yes...but,” tears swelled up in her eyes as if she had suffered a great injustice. “they promised. I'm old and illiterate. How was I supposed to know better?”

The cameraman swung the focus of his equipment away from the wailing woman who had knelt on the rubble in the peripherals of what used to be her land, thumping her chest in agony, and zoomed in on the female reporter. Microphone in her hand, she fought her compassion down her throat, made a description of the situation now at our street and said, “The old makes way for the new. This has been the cycle of life for centuries. Modern society needs to move forward. Does it always means moving ahead on the expense of our historical heritage? Will we not lose something valuable in the name of city expansion? That's the question we should all spare some thoughts on. News Channel 3, reporter Wang Fang Huang from Feng Cheng Village.” before she closed.

“Does your parents know?”

“No, not at all. They hadn't been back since they signed two and a half weeks ago.” Now panic rose up my spine. We had to stop the workers before they pull down our ancestral house with all our belongings in there. “Damn you, Li Kun.”

“Bastard.” Kelvin agreed with my sentiment.

I turned off the television and pushed the glass door open. “I'm going there. All our stuff is in the house.”

“Go get your parents. I will pick you all up and we'll go with the car. ”

The two girls spotted the weariness from my demeanor. They dashed out after me to the lobby and I only lost them when I forced the elevator doors closed as soon as I slipped in.

Chapter 47: Fire, fire

“Here. Here!” My father grabbed the water hose from a man wearing no shirt. “Let me have it! Now turn up the water for me. Quick!” The man was too concerned about the fire to fight.

He was our neighbor. Someone I only knew the face of and not the name.

“You've come too late.” He said with a frown as he ran to the water outlet and turned the tap wider as my father instructed. “Li Kun's men already torn down everything on our streets.”

“I can see that.” My father fought with the dancing hose in his aged hands. Green veins surfaced from his arms where the sleeves were pulled up. My mother could not cope with the scene in front of our eyes. Our ancestral house was now no more than a pile of rubble. Dust eddied on the surface still unsettled.

“Come! Help Mr. He put the fire off!” Kelvin's dad, Mr. Zhang called to the dozen of workers that he rounded up from the market. “I won't pay you a dime less!” He shouted after them as they poured down the stairs at the back of the truck to the front of the house.

A fire had broken out. The pike pole that stood next to the house were bulldozed by accident and fell to the middle of our open courtyard. A fall would not necessary caused a fire or power outage, as long as there was still slack in the cables between itself and the next one, and when the transformer stayed undamaged. Of course, this was not the case.

The village had gained electricity only fifteen years ago. To laid a power grind in a poor ancient village developed in a haphazard way meant the poles were erected by people who had less knowledge than they

ought to have, the materials used were less than perfect and repairs were few and far in between.

The fire caught on easily as most parts of the house still contained a huge amount of wooden elements.

“Don't use water!” I shouted at the guys. “You can't put out an electric fire with water! It will only make it worse!”

No one could hear me. I ran to Kelvin and his dad, who immediately saw the problem. “But we have nothing else to put out the fire!” Kelvin squinted.

Just when we were saying that, a spring of fire shot up from the ground when the water hit the high voltage power line. My father was thrust backwards from the shock waves. A man behind he held the old man in his arm just in time and they fell on their butts on the ground over each other. I saw my mother climbed out of the front seat of the truck Kelvin brought us here with and ran towards them.

“No, mom!” Kelvin rushed forward to stop her as soon as he saw me moved. Confirmed that she was kept at bay, I sprinted towards the worker and my father, and helped them to their feet.

“Turn off the hose, turn off the hose!” I yelled repeatedly until everyone near me was repeated it. A man nearest to the fire hydrant heard our call finally and tried to turn the water off. It was too heavy for him. Another man from opposite the road watching us joined him at once. They put their backs into it and managed to turn the rusty faucet anti-clockwise as another shorter, but equally menacing sparks shot out from the top of the downed pole.

“My house.” My father howled. “My house!” He was sobbing loudly when I reached him. His face smeared with ashes and small scraps of broken pieces of woods. The man who saved him had hurt his tailbone

when he fell backwards to the uneven ground. His face showed a tortured expression no less pitiful than my father's. Tears rolled off the corners of my eyes.

“Get our records. Get them in the office!” My father begged me as I approached. “I have stored them in the drawers. The keys are on the top left compartment.”

“What records?!” I asked, “are you hurt?”

“Noooo....! Go get the records!” I was about to pull him up to free him from the bodily tangle with the agonizing worker but he pushed me away.

“The transformer might explode!” I said. I had seen these freak accident enough on the news.

“They are in the drawer of the office desk. You know where they are. Zhong, go get it for me!” My father grabbed my sleeves and shoved me towards the fire unexpectedly. This was when I realized the records he was mentioning must meant a lot to him. The collapsed structure's layout was barely recognizable by an outsider, but not to me. I had lived here for nine years in candle-lit darkness nights after nights in my childhood. I could tell which way was the bedroom and which way was the toilet, the two most important places a kid should know even in total darkness by the construction materials because I would fumble my way to and fro every night by touching the walls and furniture along the way. Ignoring the growing heat, I found my way to the piles of falling wall and beams of my father's office, which lied in between the two important landmarks aforementioned.

I dug my hands under a tall heap my ruins in the approximate location of the Zitan wood office desk and found the tactile sense I was expecting. I called to the men Kelvin hired and they rushed over to help me

dig the table up. It was broken in the middle and split into two unequal halves. The keys were where my father had told me, on the top left compartment however the keyhole of the largest drawer were the records my father indicated was bent out of shape we could not squeeze the key it.

The fire was spreading and our backs were getting hotter. One of the worker had a brilliant idea and he told us to put the legs of the half desk over his shoulders. As soon as we did it he carried it away, watching not to slip on the grovels.

After tending to my father's request, I thought I would go get something of mine before the fire consumed everything. It was obvious there was no way we could put it off with out chemical reagent in hand. Even if the village fire department might have something, I had very little faith in its efficiency.

Poked out from the approximate location of my childhood bedroom was a modern lamp with a metal body I brought there from the city two years ago on vacation to upgrade the lighting of the room. The light bulb and the light shield were smashed and their remnants nowhere to be found. However, it served as an unyielding guide to where my belongings were. Strewed a meter from it was the bamboo box I was searching for. I hugged it tight and stood up. In that instant, an explosion blasted me face down. The height of the bamboo box kept me from smashing my chest and face on to the hard bricks and broken panels on the ground. I was knocked by the force of it unconscious nonetheless. I sprawled on the debris of my childhood memory and fell into a coma.

A half burnt passport in red fluttered in the wind. Nobody seemed to have paid it any attention when they rescued me.

On the passport, it had a wedding photo of myself and my legal wife, our faces smeared

Chapter 48: Superhero

For the third time in one month, I was on television. Not consciously, this time. I was filmed being carried on a stretcher into an ambulance by the nearby Channel 3. Apparently the fireball had seared me so badly my clothes were burnt to shreds, exposing my bottom.

I did not want any more fame to be honest. Best would be that the public forgot about me completely, especially the last footage. Kelvin assured me that there would be more opportunity coming.

He had decided to invite some media to have interviews with my family and I, using his dad's company's PR contacts. His advice was that I should not underplay the damage Li Kun and his people had caused to my family which I had a tendency to do since I was, according to him, such a pussy normally.

The mean spirited, unplanned bulldozing to clear way for his Feng Cheng Tower, the luxury apartment building he wanted to build on the land his men and women cajoled the villagers into selling or transferring to his company, must be broadcasted to the public. While he had the rights to bulldoze, he had no need to do it in such a hurry.

The reason behind was obvious. His daughter had been put under investigation the day before. In a stroke of genius, he decided to act before the world caught up to him. By bringing all the houses down, he ensure that the villagers could not block the start of his million dollar real-estate project since we had nothing left to fight for.

To such a despicable businessman, Kelvin said we have to launch a smear campaign against him on every platform that would receive us. Our mouths were the most effect weapon poor people have.

Just when I had digested today's financial news on the tele that was hung at the corner of the private room Kelvin's dad had kind enough to pay for, Kelvin burst into my hospital room. I wanted to tell him about the dramatic one-day fall in the stock price of the Sun of China group.

“Guess who's come to see you?” He asked, his face spotting a smirk.

“I don't care as long as it's not my girlfriend.” I answered. I could not bear hearing myself say the word 'girlfriend' anymore. It gave me shudders. I made a mental note never to bring up that word ever again.

“Mmm...” Kelvin pulled the door wide open to reveal the persons standing behind it. “Which one of you are his girlfriend?”

“Hi, Jong.” A giant bouquet of bright orange, pink and red Chrysanthemum came into view. I recognized the owner of the voice immediately without seeing her. It was Marvey. She had Jessie in one hand. Her face was blushing, unclear whether it was from the cold or the question Kelvin asked.

Behind her, Paula stared irritated at me.

“Hi Marv. Hi kiddo.” I said, a big smile formed on my face despite the slight pain that it caused.

Paula cleared her throat and swung a kid's backpack to the end of my bed. It hit my toes.

“Hi Paula,” I greeted her. “I'm still not dead. Sorry to disappoint you.” I said cheekily.

Marvey turned around to take a look at Paula's sour facial expression and laughed.

“You've made everyone worried about you!” She said. “Does he know how long he slept?”

“Ya, Kelvin told me.” I replied. “He also told me I got fired.”

“You kind of left work without asking for permission from your supervisor...” Kelvin explained.

“Must I get a written approval from my boss to die?”

Paula rolled her eyes when she saw that I could still speak cheekily as usual despite being wrapped from head to toe with bandages because of my skin burns.

“Thanks for coming, Marv.” I smiled at the only woman in the room deserving a smile.

She returned it and started to fiddle with the vase standing on the side of the room so she could arrange the bouquet. She must have caught the surprised on my face when I saw the flowers and said, “No, Jong. These are not Chrysanthemum. These are Daisies. They are your get-well-soon flowers.”

“Trust me. I explained to her already that Chrysanthemum are for funerals but she still insisted on buying them.” Kelvin interjected.

“Was Paula the one picking them?” I joked. “You shouldn't have listened to her advice. She wishes me dead.”

“Ya, right.” Paula said. “What a mess you've gotten yourself into! You're almost blasted to smithereens trying to retrieve some useless memorabilia. Such a useless fool.”

“What's in the box anyway?” Marvey asked.

“It's nothing important.” Paula answered.

“Hey, Paula, do you know something we don't? What's in there?” Kelvin asked, hungry for gossips. “We grew up together. You never told me you've a treasure chest.” He gave me a look of suspicion.

“It's not that unusual.” Marvey said. “Doesn't everybody has a box like that when he or she was young?” Her words saved me from explaining.

Jessie came forward and poured the content of his backpack on my bed. They were all different colors of water markers.

“Brat, what are you trying to do?” I asked, alarmed.

“Uncle Kelvin said I could draw on your bandages.”

“Look at this.” Kelvin pulled up something on his smartphone and shoved it in front of my face, since I still had very small range of motion. “Spider-man or Captain America. Pick one.”

“WHAT?!” I shrieked at the images of skin burn patients in full body cast that were painted with red and blue paint to look like they were wearing superhero suits. “You'd run out of ink before long!”

“I'd buy him new ones until the masterpiece is finished.” He said to me, then turned to Jessie who was looking at my pristine white bandages of a canvas eagerly. “Go ahead and use your markers. Uncle Kelvin has lots of money. I'll buy you whatever you want.”

“Money's not everything!” I shouted, struggling to move my left leg, trying to dodge the blood red marker in Jessie's hand.

Everyone in the room laughed.

End of Book I.

About the Author

Vann Chow is Chinese and was born in Hong Kong. She started writing stories in English when she was 19, and through them she hoped to share her unique experience and insights from living abroad and interacting with people from all kinds of cultural and social backgrounds with the wider world. Her stories often confront cultural, human rights and social issues. Oscar Wilde, William Somerset Maugham and Alain De Botton are her favorite authors.

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