

Demonstrations

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A Thesis

in

The Department

of

English

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the Degree of Masters of Arts (English) at

Concordia University

Montréal, Québec, Canada

March 29, 2021

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**School of Graduate Studies**

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Entitled: Demonstrations

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## **ABSTRACT**

Demonstrations

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“Demonstrations” is a collection of six short stories which follow protagonist James Kou, a young, middle-class, Hong Kong Chinese-Canadian immigrant studying English literature in Lennoxville, Québec, and later, returning to his birth place of Hong Kong, as he navigates the multiple facets of his personality and begins to understand who he is and where he comes from. These stories explore issues of internal and external racism, familial relations, the rediscovery of culture, language, ancestry, place, and redemption in the form of restorative relationships. The settings of Lennoxville, a majority white and rural area in Québec, and Hong Kong, a majority Chinese, former British colony, reflect the complications of identity exemplified by James. The historical moment of spring and summer 2019 in which majority of these stories take place, as well, imbues James’s visit with an added significance, as it is in this year China attempts to pass an extradition bill which allows detainment of Hong Kong citizens or citizens from other territories such as Taiwan who are deemed dissidents or criminals. The fear however is that such power would be used to suppress political dissent; the proposed bill as of summer 2019 is another example of China’s encroachment upon Hong Kong, an island which is and is not a part of China. Hong Kong in the summer of 2019 saw some of the largest pro-democracy demonstrations yet.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author wishes to thank Professor Kate Sterns, Dr. Jessica Bardill, Professor Sina Queyras, Dr. Sunny Lau, Fil Walker, Paula Walker, Dale Walker, Colin Walker, Peter Walker, Marie Walker, Emily Walker, Evelyn Mocherman, Patrick Kennedy, Pamela Kennedy, Sean Kennedy, Michael Kennedy, Mayumi Osafune, Ning Lau, So Kuen Fong, Queeny Lau, Iris Cheung, Bassii Lau, Rokie Lau, Elaine Lau, Frankie Wong, Leo Wong, Charmian Ho, Giovanna Ho, Jade Wong, Tony Chan, Ma-Ma, Jeremy Chan, Fanny, Faithe, Sarah Chan, Peony Chan, Phoebe Chan, Anson Lam, Christie Lam, Jenna Kalinsky, Dodi Weill, Dr. Gregory Brophy, Dr. Claire Grogan, Dr. Shawn Malley, Dr. Linda Morra, Dr. Jessica Riddell, Dr. Steven Woodward, Dr. Patrick McBrine, Dr. Justin Pfefferle, Professor Heather Davis, Professor Chad Gibbs, Lisa Driver, Cynthia Touchette, Kevin McKenna, Jose Dela Cruz Ingel, Valerie H.B., Christoph Nitsche, Sebastien Lareau, Cole Eby, Etienne Vallée, Louis Pigeon-Owen, Adriana Wiszniewska, Abigail Roelens, Andrew Roberge, Michael Shaw, Valerie Amyot, Adèle Dumont-Bergeron, Andre Simoneau, Élyssa Lécuyer, Amy Donovan, Chelsea Obo, Megan Gail Coles, Deanna Radford, Joel Robert Ferguson, Linzey Corridon, Krystale Elastyrk, Danaë Stark, Joshua Quirion, Michael Menezes, Adam Haiun, Charlotte Frank, Hannah Davis, Curtis McRae, Camille Henkel, Hugh Deasy, and Raquel Neeser-Carazo, for their cherished friendship, guidance, and support.

Without the help of these teachers, family members, friends, fellow students, and more, none of this would be possible.

Thank you.

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## Fourth Semester

I was writing and in due time, when I could finish two more pages, I planned to be on my way to meet up with Cole.

He appeared disheveled, not in any way which would be considered out of the ordinary, but simply notable. His outfit was blue.

“Yo, I got the hookah working. Here, let me put some coals on,” he said.

It had been a long day and the late afternoon stayed as it was, giving us the feeling of having time. Everything was glowing. In the parking lot, there was a table set for beer pong with fifteen or so students and another ten nearby. They were drinking. It was a party.

We stood on the second-floor balcony and watched. Cole passed me a beer. We drank as the speakers from the top floor of another apartment building played remixes of songs in which Post Malone’s “Congratulations” might be combined with Kid Cudi’s “Pursuit of Happiness”. Tempos and pitches were altered; it kept us on our feet.

“It’s Isabelle,” I said.

“Where?”

“In the green coat, over to the side. She’s quite beautiful, isn’t she?”

“Oui-oui, oui-oui,” Cole said with an inflected Quebecois accent, as he was apt to do; it sounded more like “way-way, way-way.”

I was enticed, seduced from a distance. I believed she had one of the most beautiful faces and bodies I had seen in a long time. It was rare that a woman could captivate my attention for so long simply based on appearance. The music played and people drank.

“There’s Ali too. She’s a cutie, huh?”

“Oui-oui, oui-oui.”

“Who do you think that is? Speaking to Isabelle.”

“I think that’s Ali’s boyfriend actually.”

“Oh, okay, okay.”

The balcony gave us protection. Here we were observers and I did not need to speak to anyone. Isabelle and I had made eye-contact, but she turned away.

“I’ve only spoken to Isabelle once,” I said.

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah. We were at the English Department party actually. I was drunk. She was drunk. I went up to her as I was leaving and asked, ‘How’s it going?’ She said, ‘I’m good, James, you?’ And I said ‘Good. Wait, what’s your name again?’ She said ‘Isabelle.’ And then I said ‘Actually I know your name, sorry. I was just trying to be cool.’”

“Man, that’s the thing, man. Girls appreciate if you say something, even if it’s something dumb. It’s better to be confident and say something stupid than say nothing at all.”

I drank from the can.

There were two more people in the parking lot. One I knew from class named Granton, the other I did not know. The one I did not know shouted, “Come and join the party!”

“What?”

“Come and join the party!”

“What do you think? Shall we?”

“Yeah sure, why not? Wait, let me get this hookah going and maybe have another beer or so.”

“Sure. You know it’s a good idea. Yeah, I’d like to go, maybe I can intercept Isabelle before she leaves.”

“Yeah.”

The coals were hot and placed at the top of the hookah. We puffed until there was smoke and I pulled hard for I had been clean for some time. The last time I smoked cigarettes had been eight days ago, on the night of the second couch burning, and I had not smoked weed since the first week out of school when I found myself depressed. I smoked the hookah. Still, the music played. We drank our beers and acted leisurely. I played with the vapours, letting them waft out and be inhaled through the nose. It was another day of days. When we were ready, we strutted through the doors out to the parking lot. We watched the beer pong for a while and when enough time, and alcohol, had passed, I approached Isabelle.

“Isabelle.”

“Yeah.”

“May I ask you a question?” I did not wait for an answer. “Did you cut the cuffs of your jeans yourself?”

They were frayed, high above the ankles.

“No,” she smiled. “I bought them this way.”

“Oh, okay. How are you?”

“Good, you?”

“Good. Hey, Ali.”

“Hey. Can I ask you a question? Was your grade for Gothic Lit like three or two percent higher or lower than your annotated bibliography?”

“Yeah, something like that.”



“I knew it. Annie!”

Annie came over.

“He got the same thing too. Two or three percent higher.”

“Yo! No way, okay, because I’m smart, okay? I’ve been writing since I was eight and in all my other classes, I’m doing really well and all my teachers say, good work, Annie. Okay, and I didn’t do too well on my annotated bib., you know. I did it the night before, so I’m like okay, I’ll do better on the essay. And let me tell you, oh man, I worked on my essay, okay? I worked really hard. And he gives us the final grade and I’m like, what happened? I write to him, I ask, could I get a grade break down? Nothing. No reply.”

“Yo, he doesn’t answer me either,” I said.

“Nothing,” Ali said.

“We’re just going to go up,” a man said, touching Ali’s shoulder.

“Okay. This is my boyfriend, Matt.”

“James.”

I gestured to Isabelle as she walked with Matt. Suddenly the conversation became dull and I was merely being polite.

“I’m cold. I think I’m going to head inside. Do you want to come in?”

“Sure.”

The sun was setting and the sky took on a solemn, dark blue. A number of stars emerged. We walked upstairs where the apartment was filling. The doors stayed open as I made my way into an open area between two bedroom doors.

“Yo, I gotta piss like a racehorse,” Cole said.

“Piss, man.”

“Okay. I’ll be right back.”

But we stayed together because where I stood was by the bathroom, and the crowd was there and pairs of eyes flittered about the room and conversation murmured.

“James!”

“Chadia!”

She hugged me. She was black, beautiful.

“How are you?”

“Fine.”

“Fine? What do you mean?”

“Good.” I was shouting.

“Alright, we’re all going to the Gait. Come on, people, let’s get out of here, let’s go,” a large fellow was shouting through a microphone.

“Are you coming to the Gait?”

“Certainly.” I offered her my arm.

“Oh, look at you.”

I shrugged. She took my arm.

“Excuse me,” I said, as I passed through the dense crowd.

“You said ‘excuse me’!” She was laughing. I shrugged again.

Outside, we met up with Theresa who did not speak until I spoke to her and told her I had watched her film. She thanked me.

“Okay, see you at the Gait?” Chadia said.

“Sure.”

“Okay.” They departed.

“Wanna go to the Gait?” I asked.

“Sure,” Cole said. “I still gotta piss like a racehorse.”

“Piss, man! What are you doing?”

“I’m going, I’m going.”

We walked. It was dark and I was not yet drunk. As we crossed the bridge over the Massawippi, Cole turned into the forests along the shore. I waited with one foot on the guard rail and a hand on my beer.

“You could have had a bad bitch, non-committal. Could have helped you with your career, just a little.” There was a crowd behind me and they were singing “Truth Hurts” by Lizzo. It had been featured in a recent Netflix movie called *Someone Great*.

“I wasn’t sure about it. My roommate loved it and she convinced me to watch it.” It was Aunika speaking. She seemed kind, but I only knew her through acquaintances.

“Why men great ‘till they gotta be great?” I asked, as they passed me. I was quoting the song.

“Yes!” she said.

“Big mood right here. You’re a big mood, man,” a man said as he passed me. He was the end of the first congregation but in no way the last of the crowd.

“What do you mean?”

“Standing out here, drinking your beer. It’s a mood.”

“Thank you.”

Cole returned.

“Good piss?”

“Yeah!”

“Yo, I was informed that I was a ‘big mood.’ This gentleman said so.”

“Yeah, man. Big mood!” They were ahead of us and stopped and the four of us walked together.

“Yo, what’s your name, man?”

“Cedrick.”

“James.”

“Owen.”

“Cole.”

“What do you study?”

“Business management. You?”

“English. Yo, you’re a pretty big mood yourself, with a bottle of Coke in one hand and rum in the other. You don’t need a cup if you can mix it in your mouth.”

“Hell yeah!”

They drank.

“Here, can you take this for a while? I’m done for a bit.”

“Finish it, man.”

We were walking to the Gait.

“Nah, nah, I can’t. Man, Lauren should not have left me alone with you. Every time she leaves me with you, I get shit-face wasted.”

“She should have known better.”

“She trusts you, man,” I said.

Cedrick shook his head.

\* \* \* \* \*

We passed the security our IDs and one checked my backpack of paper, notebooks and pencil case. We entered. The crowd was hesitant, near the bar and two were on the dancefloor. Confident, I moved to the bar.

“Double rum and Coke, please. Cole, what do you want?”

He hesitated, then leaned his small, bird-like body across the counter. “Ricard’s.”

“Red?”

“Yeah.”

We paid and drank. I tossed my backpack and jacket between a speaker and a wall. There was music and I took the drink, I took the drink. It was time to take the drink. The two dancing were Granton and his friend, the one who had called us to join the party.

“I took your advice,” I said.

“What?”

“You told us to join the party.”

She looked confused.

Granton exclaimed: “Ah, lui. Les deux gars sur le balcon.”

“Ah, oui! Ça va?”

“Oui, pas mal, pas mal. Ça va bien?”

“Oui-oui.”

“Santé.”

“Santé.”

“James.”

“Amélie.”

“Enchanté.”

“Granton.”

“You good?”

“Yeah.”

We were dancing and then, after a while I excused myself and found Cole and told him I craved a cigarette. He asked if I had one and I said no, so we went outside. The air was fresh and we did not think of the ones we loved. Cole entertained the idea of climbing to the roof, which I had done once but had been too scared to try a second time. It seemed what motivated me was a desire to get away and feel an escape from my troubles. In that moment, however, I was calm. I only needed tobacco. There was a vehicle parked and two puffs of smoke came from the windows and two tall, beautiful women stepped out. One held a pack of cigarettes. They were speaking Spanish.

“Excusé, est-que je peux avoir uno cigarro?”

“Que?”

“Cigarro?”

“Sure.”

Cole spoke Spanish. They conversed, but I did not understand. They passed us each cigarettes.

“You guys will like this. They’re from Columbia, they have two filters. One’s water and the other’s mint, no, grape.”

“And you pop them at the same time?”

“Yeah, you can.”

We popped. We smoked.

“Where are you from?”

“I’m from the States, New Hampshire.” She was tall. She was lovely. “You?”

“I was born in Hong Kong, but I grew up in Toronto and Lennoxville.”

There were more cigarettes and they went quickly. When the ladies finished, they went inside and it was just me, Cole and the night sky. Then, Granton and Amélie exited and I greeted them. Amélie was Snapchatting her friend Jacob who apparently had not shut up during *Avengers: Endgame*.

“Je t’aime, Jacob, mais ferme tailler.”

“Come on, Jake,” I said, “just keep quiet, kiddo.”

There was laughter.

“Your friends were just trying to enjoy the movie. Shut the fuck up, Jacob,” I said and they laughed again. “Hey man, is that a cigarette of marijuana?”

“Yeah.” Granton was holding the number.

“May I?” I dragged and it was lovely, god-sent.

“There’s tobacco in that. I don’t know if you mind.”

“I don’t mind.” The conversation meandered.

“Where are you from, man?” I asked. The number was passed.

“Montréal, man. You?”

“Yeah! Montréal, man. Hell yeah. Man, I’ve always thought Montréal was the heart of Canada, you know? And Toronto, I don’t know, like the head or wallet or something stupid.”

“You’re from there?”

“Nah, born in Hong Kong, grew up in Toronto and Lenny. Yo, I’d love to live in Montréal someday, though.”

“You should! But, you know, sometimes I hate Québec.”

“I know, right?” Amélie shouted.

“You got me, girl. You got me.”

“Wait, why?”

“Bill 21.”

“Honey, don’t even get me started.”

I paused. “Well, what do you think of the language laws? Some good, some bad?”

“I don’t know,” Granton said. “I think the intention behind it is good, but I think the laws can be loosened, you know? Like what, Bill 101, and something like 90% of the Anglophone community moved away. And the French immigration exam, I don’t know. Sometimes it seems kind of unreasonable.”

“I kind of like it.”

The number was unlit. Granton brought the fire.

“I think it’s cool that there’s French, I just think some laws could be loosened.”

“Like what?”

“Maybe the whole sign thing, or the school entrance thing, you know? How you need to have family who have gone to English school before to get in.”

“Look, look, look,” I said. I took deeply from the joint. “You’re in Education, right? You’re what, second year?”

“Yeah, second year TESOL.”

“Okay, okay, check this. My mom is Ari Lin.”

“Wait, what?” Granton was exclaiming. “Amélie, Amélie!”

“Quoi?”



“Check-ça. Okay, son mère est Ari.”

“No!”

“Oui.”

“I love Ari!” Amélie was saying. “She’s so pretty.”

“Oui, I know.”

“She’s so good, but she always asks ‘Do you know what I’m saying?’ Like, okay, we know.”

“Oui, okay, okay, wait.”

“Oh my god, I can’t believe this. She’s always talking about you. I thought you were like five or something.”

“Nope.”

“Okay, wait, he’s trying to say something.” Granton passed the weed.

“Right, okay. Listen.” I hitched up my pants. “Listen. My mom’s Ari, right? And part of her research is the idea of plural-lingualism. Whereas, before teachers were all about in this class you speak this language and in that class you speak that language. That is, that classrooms can be taught in a mix, to encourage multi-lingualism, because that’s how we make meaning of things, caliss!”

“Caliss!” Granton was excited.

“I still can’t believe you’re Ari’s son.”

“Yeah.” I took a long drag, let it waft, took it by the nose and exhaled slowly. “Just don’t tell her I was smoking weed.”

“No, no, wait, can I take a Snap?”

“Uh . . .”

Amélie was recording and the four of us, Cole too, were in the video.

“Lui, il est le fils de Ari.”

“Wait, don’t tell people.”

“No, this is just for the people who know her. Just education students.”

I sighed. “Just keep it on the down low.”

“Yeah, sure.”

Campus security drove up and I had the joint in my hand.

“Oh, shit, should I?”

“Yeah, here.” Granton took the number and tossed it behind him. We resumed conversation. Security entered the building and we finished the number and followed suit. The music was going as it would go and I quenched my thirst with a rum and Coke and later a shot with Cole and a bottle of beer to keep it smooth. The DJs played and the lights moved. They moved everyone. There were glowsticks at the bar and I put two on and attached another to someone’s cast. He was happy to oblige, but the conversation at that table was dull and I was drunk enough, high enough to waft away without notice. I danced a while with my eyes closed, or looked to the black painted ceiling with wandering colours flashing over. It was some state. And amidst it all I saw a girl. Of course, it would be a girl. Multiple times we made eye contact, prolonged from her, prolonged from me. She looked young, as if she was in her first year and she had that quiet innocence of Ontario girls. She was beautiful because she seemed out of place, as if she did not really want to be there. And she kept her friends close. On her arms, her braceleted arms, were ten or fifteen glowstick bracelets and when I glanced at her, she noticed. In that sweet, altered state, a sentence came to me and I could not help myself.

Inebriated, I wandered over to the speaker. From my backpack I took pencil and paper, placed it atop the speaker, and wrote. I wrote and I wrote. There was noise and it rattled my ribs and made my brain bounce in my skull. I ended up on the floor, cross-legged, water bottle beside me and beer close too. I wrote by the light of my phone. It was intoxication and I wrote.

## Homelands

James Kou awoke in his girlfriend Renée Morin's bed, in her apartment. In the morning quiet, he heard a solitary bird singing from a leafless branch. The blinds were down so he only knew it was there by its song. He felt it was a reminder that there was life beyond his.

Renée stirred awake and James stiffened his body as if he had died.

"You can't fool me," Renée said. "I know you're alive."

James maintained the charade for a moment, then opened his eyes.

"It's Good Friday today," Renée said, getting out of bed and getting dressed. "Do you know what that means?"

James shook his head, covering himself in sheets.

"Party time." Renée smiled. "Woo-hoo," she added, and James laughed a little.

"Invite your friends," she said.

"Maybe," James said.

"You're always talking to those Chinese exchange students at parties. Why not invite them? Let them see how the other half of the population lives?"

"When I do," he said, "it's generally because I've grown tired of speaking English."

Renée was applying a pale foundation to her skin.

"They might like the practice," she said. "Invite them over."

"They're not my friends."

"What do you mean?"

“When I speak with them, my vocabulary is limited. I can only talk with them about so much. Most of the time I just ask questions, and sometimes, if they’ve been drinking, they’ll say words I have no clue what they mean, but I nod along anyway, because I get the gist of it.”

“What are you getting at?”

“They’re not my friends.” Both he and Renée held a long silence. “I just like talking with them to practice my Cantonese.” He wanted to add, “and to talk with someone who looks like me,” but held his tongue.

“You can practice with me?” Renée smiled again, brightly. “There’s no English or French only policy in this apartment. Do you think I’d be with you if you didn’t speak another language besides my own two?” She stood then and cradled James’s head with her hands.

“Dating you is my free-entry-into-Chinese-culture card, don’t you know?”

James laughed a little.

They kissed, and Renée left sweet-smelling foundation all over James’s neck and face.

\* \* \* \* \*

Renée left for work in the afternoon, and James took up the grocery list she’d left for him. He walked the short distance into town. The day was cold and he flipped up his collar to protect himself, and dug his hands into his coat pockets. He entered a shop.

“Good morning, Mr. Leung,” James said in Cantonese.

“‘Good morning’? It’s already afternoon.” Mr. Leung folded a Chinese newspaper. He sat behind the counter.

“I’ve forgotten the word for ‘afternoon’.”

“You’re improving, though. Have you watched any of the shows I recommended you? Some are direct from Hong Kong.”

“They didn’t hold my interest.”

Mr. Leung’s shop was a welcome respite for James in Lennoxville. It was clichéd to see a Chinese or East Asian person running a convenience store, and indeed all the convenience stores in town were run by East Asians, but Mr. Leung was the only one who spoke Cantonese. Plus, his store was the closest to Renée’s apartment.

“How’s Robert?” James asked.

“He’s okay. Was arrested for a DUI the other day. Disrespectful son. I give him so much, you know? And he just squanders it.”

“It’s the North American influence,” James said. “Too much individualism. Not enough thinking as a collective.”

“You might be right, James. He’s out of touch with his roots.”

James felt Mr. Leung’s dark eyes focus in upon him, momentarily. James realized he had never questioned Mr. Leung further about where he had immigrated from. Mr. Leung would say China and the conversation ended. How much of his life was unspoken, simply because James hadn’t cared to ask?

“I’m just looking for a few things,” James said.

“You know where they are.” Mr. Leung unfolded and read his newspaper.

There was no real reason for James to be in this shop except for his short conversations with Mr. Leung. Things here were more expensive than at the local grocery chain and a recently opened “Marché International” boasted better quality and variety.

James picked up a water bottle and a pack of gum. Mr. Leung scanned the objects. James wanted to say more but he didn't know what. As he left, he said, "See you later."

Mr. Leung nodded, unreadable in his expression.

\* \* \* \* \*

As he left the store, James constructed imaginary dialogues where he thanked Mr. Leung, then told him about his returning to Hong Kong later in the summer. He imagined himself acting as a hero for Robert, or flirting, appropriately, with Mrs. Leung. He would tell them about his family, and that he had been toying with the idea of staying in Hong Kong. This, he had not even told Renée.

James went to the local grocery chain and picked up the rest of the list.

Checking out, he practiced saying as few words as possible, imitating Mr. Leung's unreadable expression. Like the cashiers, James had memorized their scripts and knew they would ask how he was paying—at which he'd flash his card—and then if he needed bags—to which he'd hold up his reusable bag. Every time he bought something, he wanted the cashiers to think he didn't care, or wasn't paying attention. The store manager always put the prettiest girls at cash.

\* \* \* \* \*

Renée and James met in the same English Literature program at university. They'd stayed together for most of their school career, with the exception of a few months in second semester

when James wanted to “find himself”—a euphemism for wanting to see other people, which he couldn’t bring himself to do.

There had been a rain storm the end of their first winter semester, when everything was thawing, before they started dating. He’d asked her for a ride home. In the car, the seatbelt accentuated her chest, and although he knew it was not polite to stare, he caught himself looking, then at her face. She was strangely beautiful.

For a while, they kept their attraction secret, spending time in places at the school nobody went, just to talk, away from their friends. Every now and then, he’d ask if it was alright to hold her hand. He thought she was always leaving—this was what made his desire so overwhelming.

Sometime in their third year, Renée got an internship at the university which James had applied for too. He had said congratulations, but inside, thought she must have distracted him.

She had applied for a Master’s at the university and was accepted. She would continue her studies while he was scrambling for work. He used to think she needed him, but now it seemed he was the one who needed her. She had her own apartment and would give him money. She had started taking beginner’s Mandarin and Cantonese and was on track to surpass him in skill. James hoped leaving for Hong Kong would give him something like perspective. He wanted to forget her and remember where he came from.

In Renée’s apartment, he gathered ingredients, followed the instructions and prepared dinner.

\* \* \* \* \*



James scrolled through his contact list of Chinese friends—for each name he'd insisted they write their Chinese and English names. He had a feeling they'd all be happy to attend, if they weren't busy. One contact, Taylor, had cornered James in the library once to ask what methods one should use to approach Canadian girls. All of Taylor's tried-and-true plays from China didn't seem to translate. James had said something like, just be yourself, be honest and open.

What he really wanted to say was improve your English and try to understand women. At the same time, James knew he was aiming too high, that the party girls Taylor was going after would never go for a guy like him. He was not yet acculturated. He had complained that it was only Chinese girls going for him and he wanted to experience "the local cuisine".

It was college but there were still high school hierarchies. Taylor's ambitions were superficial. It was skin colour he cared about, not the person. Focus on your career, is what James thought he should have said.

He put his phone away and checked on dinner.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Hong Kong is spectacular," Tristan Boulanger said.

James, Renée, and her high school friends, Tristan and his partner Annie, were sitting around the kitchen table. Renée held James's hand under the table.

"There are mountains. There are buildings. And the people! They're helpful, and courteous. I don't think I heard a Chinese person say a bad thing while I was there."

"Except about the government, maybe," Renée suggested, partly joking.

“Well, yes. But nothing about us,” Tristan replied.

“We really thought we’d have trouble since we didn’t speak the language, but you can really get by with just English,” Annie said.

“It’s a former colony,” Renée said.

James put his hand on her knee. She placed her hand on top of his.

“I hope you guys took pictures.” She beamed.

“We did! We’ll show you.”

Renée turned to James; he saw how happy she was. How genuinely happy. How come he was never as happy as she?

“I’m learning Cantonese,” Renée said, “and Mandarin. I’m waiting for this one to invite me back to his home country.” She leaned over for a kiss and James obliged. He preferred keeping their fondness for one another private.

“Tell us about your home country, James,” Annie said. “And no shortcuts, we want to hear everything.”

James felt overwhelmed with anxiety. Often, when people asked him this, they were questioning his birth place, and what “sort of Asian” he was; where he’s *really from*? He gave the regular, rehearsed story which began with his birth place, so as to lessen any further questions.

“I was born in Hong Kong,” he said. “I immigrated to Canada with my mother when I was six. We lived in North York, and Newmarket in the GTA. She got us citizenship, took the test, sang the song with her hand over her heart. Then she got a teaching job here in Lennoxville, and we’ve been here since. Since I was thirteen.”

“That explains your English,” Annie said.

“Thank you.”

“It’s actually a pet peeve of his to hear that statement,” Renée said, gripping James’s knee. “He finds it presumptuous that because he’s Chinese he doesn’t speak English. Tell them the story about that guy.”

“I’m very quiet,” James said. “I never know what to say. My brain doesn’t think fast enough. Or too fast, and I don’t know which thread to pull, which code to use. It’s why I like her: she talks enough for the both of us.”

“And then some,” Renée laughed.

“One night, some friends and I are out at a bar—back when I was drinking, smoking, feeling quiet. And this first-year kid comes up. He’s enjoying himself. An Ontario white guy. He starts talking to me and I don’t answer. He keeps asking me for answers and I give him nothing. I just want to sit alone. He’s drunk and he’s built up the notion that I don’t speak English. So, after a while I start speaking to him in Cantonese. I’m giving him a real heart-to-heart, but it’s in a language he doesn’t understand. A language no one around me, then, understood. I might as well have been speaking to myself. A private joke. I didn’t speak a word of English to him.

“My friends defended me, saying I did speak English and was doing a degree in it, but he didn’t believe me. Truth was, I knew—or maybe presumed—we would never see each other again. That his was a connection not worth making.”

“And?” Tristan asked.

“I don’t know. I’ve never seen him again.”

“I don’t get it,” Tristan said. “Why would you do that?”

James had never given it much thought. He became aware that he looked different from the people around him. They looked the same. He looked different. “I didn’t want to give him the

satisfaction. I didn't want him to know how much time I'd spent studying English. How much I cared to fit in."

\* \* \* \* \*

After the guests left, Renée took care of dishes while James kept out of the way.

"Did you enjoy yourself?" she asked.

"Mhm."

"Food was good. Thank you for that."

"You know it."

"You didn't invite your friends."

"They're not my friends."

"Something on your mind?"

She looked so sweet then.

"I'm going to Hong Kong. For the summer. I'm thinking I'll visit for a while, but maybe if the opportunity is right, I'll stay, find some work." James said this last part without really knowing if it was true. There was more to it, but he needed her to ask him more questions before he exposed his vulnerabilities.

"Oh," Renée replied. "How long have you known?"

"Since before winter break."

"And you didn't tell me?"

"No."

“Congratulations,” she said. “I know—” she began tearing up. “—it’s been a while since you’ve been back, so it’ll be good for you. I just wished you had told me first. You have to tell people things, James.”

His immediate thought was to question if he could trust her.

As if reading his mind, she said, “You can trust me. I’m not trying to hurt you.”

“Will you wait for me?” James asked. He wanted her to say no.

“I don’t know, it’s all a bit sudden.”

“I’ve been thinking about it for a while now.”

“I know you have.” She wiped tears from her eyes. “You don’t have to run from me. I like you as you are.”

“But what if you’re wrong? What if I’m not as good as you think I am?”

“Poor, poor boy. We’re learning a phrase in class. *Hao bo, hoi fōt tien hong*. Step back, and the horizon broadens. Do what you need to do. I need to sleep.”

James felt torn between staying and going. Maybe it was late. “Can I still stay here tonight?” he called down the hall.

“Yes.”

He went to her.

## Teacher-Student

Dr. Laura Yao was packing her bags when James Kou knocked on her office door.

“James,” she said, “what can I do for you?”

He hesitated, looking first at his feet and then around the room. There were so many books he had never read that he could have spent a lifetime reading, catching up.

“Dr. Yao . . .” he said.

“Call me Laura.”

“Are you sure?”

“I insist.”

He did so with reservation. “Laura, I was wondering if you would go for a walk with me.”

“A walk,” she said. “That’s very unusual.”

“I wanted to ask some questions. I’m graduating soon.”

Laura put her books down. “That’s right. Congratulations,” she said.

“Thank you.”

“You won’t be here in the winter semester.”

“No, Dr. . . . Laura.” He had his left hand in his right hand. He stood straight. “I’d like to walk with you.”

The young man was nervous, and there seemed to be something on his mind. If she walked with him, she might end up driving in rush hour to Montréal. Then again, today was the last day of classes and it was unlikely she’d return to Lennoxville until next semester.

“A short walk,” she said.

The young man smiled. “The bike path,” he said. “To the end, and we’ll turn around.”

“Okay. Lead the way.”

They left the red brick English-department building and began walking towards the bike path. Here and there, groups of students mingled, leaving from, and going to, some place. Laura reminisced briefly about the days when she was a college student, which seemed now far away and yet could have been yesterday.

James stayed quiet until they reached the start of the bike path, where ancient trees rose up around them.

“What did you want to ask?” Laura asked.

She was at least thirty years his senior and at that age, had little patience for games. However, he was her student and so she felt responsible for sending him along the right path.

“There’s not a lot of people of colour in Lennoxville,” James said.

“And the sky is blue. What’s your point?”

Laura could tell by James’ facial expression that he was searching his brain: thinking, recoding, rephrasing.

“Where’s home for you?” he asked.

They crossed a train track which cut through the forest.

“Montréal.”

“Are you going back there for Christmas?”

“Yes. Where’s home for you?”

“I’m not sure. I was born in Hong Kong, but I immigrated to Toronto and Lennoxville later in my life. I’m going back to Hong Kong, after I graduate.”

A wind blew through the treetops and dislodged snow fell over them.

“I want to know more about where I came from,” he admitted.

“You have family there?”

“My mother and I here in Canada. Everyone else is back ‘home’.”

Laura began to suspect what he wanted and tried to offer something from her life. “My parents immigrated here. I was born in Montréal. I have some family back in China. I consider both those places to be home.”

James was nearing what he wanted to ask, but felt he had no right way to express it.

“I haven’t been back to Hong Kong in ten years.”

“That’s a long time.”

“Do you ever go back to China?”

“When I can. A lot of my extended family are having children, so I’d like them to know me as they’re growing up.”

“Do you know the language?”

“Mandarin? Chinese? Yeah, I had to learn it. I grew up speaking it with my parents but had to take the time to learn to write it after. Look, James, what do you want?”

They stopped in the middle of the forest. The trees surrounding them must have been hundreds of years old, much older than he was, present long before he or Dr. Yao’s family had immigrated to Lennoxville.

“I don’t know what I’m doing with my life. How did you do it? How did you, well, integrate so well?” The more he spoke the further from himself he felt, as if he were ascending to somewhere far away.

Dr. Yao thought she understood what was going wrong with James.



“It takes time,” she said. “But, one by one, pieces start falling into place. What are you trying to figure out?”

James looked to the darkening sky and felt embarrassed admitting this, but said it anyway. “Love,” he said.

Laura brightened. “That’s pretty vague. What do you want to know about it?”

“Why does it seem to come to others so much easier than it does for me?”

“Do you know what you want?”

“I have an idea,” James said, remembering a past relationship.

“So, what do you want?”

“Someone who loves me.”

“Why?”

“It would be nicer than not having it.”

“I’ll say this: On the one hand, you have your career. The degree you’re completing will help your career, and this should always come first. On the other hand, you have romantic relationships. This should only make the career sweeter, not be the only thing worthwhile in your life.”

Laura recalled then how wholly she’d given herself over to her first husband, despite his growing resentment.

“Can I tell you a story?” she said. “I’m divorced. We’re on good terms but if I don’t ever have to see him again, that’s fine by me. We met in grad school. We were both seeing someone else at the time, and when those relationships ended we stayed close friends. There was always the possibility that something would happen. And it did. We thought it was the perfect relationship. We were best friends. But we wanted different things. I can’t have children. I told

him this; I guess he never believed me, or thought it would somehow change. There are operations, but we couldn't afford it. So, he began to resent me. He thought I had tricked him, deceived him. Silly men. Anyway, I told him over and over again this fact about me; he refused to believe it. Eventually, we divorced. I want you to know that I really thought it would work. I gave it my best effort. I loved him, and I was hurt that he couldn't accept me for who I am. My point is, I don't regret any of it. There was heartache, but I took the chance. I talk to some former students of mine, and occasionally we talk about dating and everything now seems so casual as to be meaningless. Some people like it, but not me. The bright side is, if I hadn't been hurt like that, I wouldn't have met my partner, Guy. Nor got my postdoc. That's another thing, my academic studies kept me going. When men were unreliable, I always had my career, and my friends."

They stood still on the bike path.

"Sometimes it just seems relationships are bound to end. Why start them at all?"

"Why did you go to college if you knew it would end?"

"Because I knew I'd get something from it."

"Go on."

"And I'd change."

Dr. Laura Yao smiled at James. "Relationships change people," she said. "The question is are you willing to let people change you?"

"I let books change me."

"That's not the same. Books ask very little of you. Just to read, or listen, but everything you give to a book, in terms of interpretation, is private. And books never change. You can keep returning to a book throughout your life and the words there are set. The only thing which

changes is your perspective. Books aren't people. Someday, today really, you'll have to leave the nest. You can't be in school forever."

"What will I do?"

"Focus on your career." Dr. Laura Yao decided to say something she wasn't sure was true. "You have a bright future ahead of you," she said. It was vague enough that it might be true and there was no harm in encouragement. "You're going to Hong Kong this summer?"

"Yes, Dr. . . . Laura."

Gently, she began nudging him to turn around. The sun was setting and she needed to go home. "You're afraid to go back."

James nodded.

"Why?"

Dr. Yao nudged him to move a bit faster. James wasn't sure how to answer. He was afraid of seeing his father. He thought by seeing him again he would be complicit in his father's guilt. He was afraid of the language difference too, or that right away he'd be spotted as different, one of the ones who left and built a life elsewhere.

And where had he gone? To a small town in Québec, where there must have been only a few Chinese people.

James didn't know what he was.

"I don't want to disappoint anyone."

"What do you mean?"

"There's a rap lyric that goes: 'Too black for the white kids and too white for the blacks'.'" The rapper was Earl Sweatshirt.

"You worry you won't be accepted."

“Yes, Dr. . . . Laura.”

Her cats at home needed feeding. They crossed over the train tracks. They had not made it to the end of the bike path.

“It’s natural to feel that way, especially when you are young. Trust me, it took me years to accept who I was, but once you do, you’re free. That’s what I want most for you.” They were on campus again. “I want you to be free. Let go of the past. The world is huge and you’re going to Hong Kong.” She grabbed him by the shoulders, shaking him, then screamed a little in excitement. “That’s very exciting! Not everyone can do that. Appreciate what you have and be grateful. Look, do you know why I can’t have kids. It’s genetic, runs in the family, in the women. So, my life is a miracle. I’m not even supposed to be here. Bless my mother’s heart. She tried so hard and here I am. The same goes for your mother and your father. You’re lucky to be alive.” She had spent too much time talking, but felt obligated to ensure he was okay. She wanted to wrap up the conversation. “My parents passed away last year,” she said. “Within months of one another. You don’t know what it means to be alone until you lose your parents. There are so many things I wished I had done with my parents. Certain conversations, activities. I miss them so much. I’m older now. I’m unhappy about the loss, but that’s why I’ll take a sabbatical soon. My students, they’re like my children. Even you, James, you’re a pain sometimes, but I still think of you as being like a child to me. What I mean to say is, don’t wait until they’ve passed to appreciate your parents. Learn from me. You belong, wherever you are. It’s easy to think, looking around here, that it’s a white man’s world, but we can all do our part. One by one, we decolonize the system and elevate minority voices. But you must learn to speak up. I can’t always be there for you. Here, I want you to take my phone number. If you ever need

anything or someone to talk to, just text or call me. I'd be happy to help. Now, I have to run. Be safe."

"Thank you, Dr. Yao," James said.

"Laura."

"Thank you, Laura." He took down her number and Laura ran to the English-department building. She did not turn back to look at James. She imagined him standing there, clutching his phone to his heart, having made a connection.

## Mentorship

In his last undergraduate semester, James Kou worked as an English tutor for recently immigrated Chinese children in Lennoxville and Magog. He'd been offered the job by a Chinese friend of his family, who, through having similar playgroups for their children, knew most of the Chinese people in the neighbourhood – which were few. Of his two tutees, James's favourite was a thirteen-year-old girl named Mei. She was his favourite because she seemed to want to learn, and was smart and respectful. The other tutee, a boy, was far more into sports and could get by without much difficulty. He was the first-born son in his family, and so was given special treatment. James imagined he played up the strong and silent type at school. Mei, on the other hand, needed good grades, and especially advancement in English, to unlock opportunities later on. James found himself more invested in planning for Mei's lessons, imagining the wild things he could say to make her laugh.

Today would be their last lesson before separating for the summer. James and Mei sat at the kitchen table. He explained his plans.

"I'm leaving for Hong Kong before July first, and won't be back until the end of summer."

"I'm going to China," Mei said.

"We might be close," he nodded. "I wanted to know if you'd like to resume in the fall. After summer."

"I'll have to ask my mom." She left, returned. "She said it'll be good."

"Yes, resume?"

"Yes."

“Great,” James said, putting both hands, palms down, flat on the kitchen table. “That means I can give you homework.” He smiled.

Mei sighed loudly and said it was annoying of him to give her homework for the summer.

“One book,” he said, “one essay. That’s it. I think you’ll learn a lot from it.” He passed her the book.

She flipped to the last page. “474 pages?”

“She knows what she’s doing,” James said. It was Madeleine Thien’s *Do Not Say We Have Nothing*. “It’s good. It helped me understand my history. It’s fiction, but helpful.”

Mei asked what it was about.

“What does the back say?”

“There’s a family in Canada and they discover their past takes place in China during the revolution.”

“Which?”

Mei hesitated, then said Mao Zedong in Mandarin.

“Right, that’s the Chairman responsible for the revolution called The Cultural Revolution. Do you know about Tiananmen Square?”

She shook her head.

As an English tutor, James had asked there be no Mandarin during lessons. In reality, he did not speak the language and so could not help her translate anyway. He asked her to use the internet for translations instead.

“There’s this famous photo of a student standing in front of a tank. You know, a tank? One of those war machines. And you zoom out and he’s actually standing in front of a line of tanks. Like ten of them. And he’s just one person, delaying the tanks. . . Anyway, there’s a lot

going on with that revolution. Read the book like you would any book. When you've finished it, write a response. What did you learn? What do you remember?"

"How do you want me to send it?"

"Email," James said. It was a simple answer.

"I'll be in China. There's no Google in China."

"WhatsApp?"

"Only WeChat."

"No Facebook?"

"No."

Only China-owned forms of communication were permitted in the country.

"WeChat then. We'll figure it out later. We only have so much time now. Let's look at *One Crazy Summer*."

She took out her copy which was really James's copy that he'd lent her to read. He'd read it for a class last year in 2018. Like his copy of Madeleine Thien's *Do Not Say We Have Nothing*, both books were heavily annotated, as if James had been deciphering the words, leaving traces for a future reader.

He picked up the book and felt again that he held a world between his hands; briefly, he'd occupied the skin of someone else and been comforted, but also disturbed. There was the world of the book, and there was the world of reality.

"You finished it. What's it about?" He smiled.

"The three characters Delphine, Vonetta, Fern, take an airplane to meet their mom. It's been a long time since they see each other, and they don't want to see Mom."

"Why?"



“She’s crazy. She writes poems and wants . . .”

“Wants?”

Mei gestured for James to wait, and translated the word on her laptop.

“Equality,” she said.

James nodded.

“She’s a Black Panther and she wants equality for black people. They are mistreated and she wants equal rights.”

“And this makes her crazy?”

“No. She has . . .” She searched again for the translation. “. . . passion. And her family abandons her when she needs them most. She’s too concerned with the fight. They don’t . . .”

“. . . see eye to eye,” James suggested.

“What?”

“When two people don’t understand one another, we say, they don’t see eye to eye.” He gestured from his eyes to hers. “Go on.”

“She’s concerned with the fight and forgets her role as mom. So, Delphine, Vonetta, Fern move away.”

“Where?”

“New York. With their father and grandmother.”

“Who?”

“Big Ma.”

“And what does she say at the start? Before the girls get onto the plane to see their mom?”

“Behave.”

“Right. What does it mean to behave?”

“Follow the rules? Do what you are told?”

“Is it good to do what you are told?”

“I don’t understand the question.”

“Why does Big Ma tell them to behave?”

“So they don’t stand out.”

“Right, to do what you are told can make you invisible. And to be invisible sometimes means . . .”

“. . . being safe.”

“So, there are times when being invisible keeps you safe. Do you remember what happens to Huey Newton, Bobby Hutton and their mother Nzila, while the girls are in California?”

Mei flipped through the annotated pages.

“They get in trouble with the police?”

“Exactly. Nzila and Huey Newton are arrested. Bobby Hutton is killed by the police. Why does this happen?”

Mei looked in the book for answers. She wasn’t sure.

“Society wanted white people to have more power than black people. So, the black people stood up and were fighting for . . . equality . . . and the police didn’t like this, so they used their power to try to stop this movement. We’re running out of time, so why don’t we move on to the ending.” James smiled again at Mei. “Nzila is arrested. What do her daughters do?”

“They find her poems, read it at a Black Panthers rally, each reading a section.”

“And do you remember what the feeling is that the daughters have?”

“Power?”

“Repeating the words of their ‘crazy poet’ mother, they feel power. It’s a shared power.”

James suddenly felt like crying. “Are there characters who don’t like the names they’re given?”

“Fern doesn’t like the name Nzila gives her.”

“Right. Nzila, whose original name is Cecile, gives Fern a new name. But ‘Fern’ and her father don’t like it. Nzila refuses to call Fern ‘Fern’ when she’s staying with her. What does she call her instead?”

“Afua.”

His time was coming to an end. He’d wished he’d done more research. He didn’t know when he’d hear from her again. He checked his watch.

“Afua,” he said, “is a word from the Akan language. The Akan are a group of people from West Africa. It means ‘born on a Friday’. Nzila is from the Yoruba language, meaning ‘Path’. The Yoruba people are also from West Africa. The idea is that Cecile rejects her previous name and gives herself a new one. Nzila says: ‘My name is Nzila. Nzila’s my poet’s name. My poems blow the dust off surfaces to make clear and true paths. Nzila.’ Nzila is a proud, beautiful, black woman who embraces the language of her people and refashions herself using that language. She is born with one name but decides to take on another. What’s so important about names?”

“It’s how people call you.”

“Exactly. My English name is James. But my Chinese name is Sum Si. Your anglicized Chinese name is Mei, but do you have an English name?”

“No.”

“Excellent! It’s a choice. You have a choice. How you want to be called is your decision. Don’t ever forget that.” James was excited. “For the Chinese, it’s very common for people to only be given Chinese names, and later on in life they choose an English one, and . . . well, it’s your choice, but can you make me a promise?” He held out a pinky finger on his right hand determinedly.

“What?”

“If you do choose an English name, make it a good one. Make it the best one you can find. Because it’s *your* name. For life. My parents named me James. The most English name I can think of. Unless I change it, I’m stuck with it. Be careful what you call yourself.” James smiled broadly.

“Okay,” Mei said. “I’ll choose a good name.”

“Promise?”

“Promise.”

They locked their pinkies and the promise was sealed.

“I think that’s my time for today,” James said. “But read Thien. There’s a lot you can learn from that book. I want you to buy your own copy. You can keep mine . . . for now. But I want it back someday.”

She nodded.

James packed up. “Read the books. Think about all that’s happening. Write to me as soon as you can. We’ll meet again in the future.” He stood and she followed.

“Thank you, teacher,” she said.

“You’re welcome, student.”

She left to get James's payment. He felt abruptly empty, as if he would never see her again. His books would be hers forever. Even if they met again, he was unsure if he'd want them back, or if he preferred her to keep them. He wanted more than anything for her to love her own culture, to never feel ashamed of being Chinese, as he had, to never diminish herself just to fit in. But she was young and all her life not yet written. If she carried fond memories of their time together, and the books and themes discussed, later into her life, he'd be content. He accepted the money when it arrived.

Mei's mother offered him a fermented rice dessert. He said he'd take it for the road, lying when he said he had somewhere else to be.

## Arriving at the Airport

James Kou and his father, Thomas walked from the airport to the car, with James's luggage in tow. His father noticed and took the luggage from him, wordlessly.

They arrived at the car.

"Is this a new car?" James asked.

"Used, but basically new. New to me."

Thomas opened the trunk and stowed away James's luggage. James walked to the right side of the car, then remembered in Hong Kong, the driver's seat was on the right.

"You want to drive?" Thomas said.

"Maybe. I'm a very good driver."

The two entered the car, Thomas in the driver's seat and James as passenger. They put on their seatbelts.

"Is that right?"

"Yep. I once drove Toronto to Montréal at 140 kilometers per hour. The whole way."

"That doesn't prove you are a good driver."

"It proves I was in control. I made it, didn't I?"

His father shook his head.

"Just because you go fast does not mean you are a good driver."

"So, what does?" James asked. In his head, he was already preparing his own answer.

They left the roundabouts and were now on the highway.

"Being considerate of other drivers. Being conscientious that there are other people on the road, and that they're not cars, but people, driving cars."

This was not James's prepared response, and it bothered him, so he said what he wanted to say.

"That's true, I guess. I was thinking about going fast. Like in racing, and how you have to feel your g-force and stay low and balanced in turns. Downshifting so your RPMs can always go—" James held his fists in front of him, then imitated the roar of a race car engine, and rocked back against his seat, as if he were accelerating. He continued to pretend he was racing until his father noticed.

"Can you drive standard?"

James paused. "I've driven standard once, in a friend's car. On a back road."

"And?"

"I stalled it a few times, but when I was driving it was fine."

"Driving is easy. It's starting and stopping which is difficult. You don't drive standard, but you know to downshift through corners?"

"Video games. The internet," James said.

He believed himself to be intelligent, and that, despite his lack of hands-on experience, he understood what it meant not only to drive, but to drive fast, as in a race.

"That's no real experience," Thomas said. He wanted to go further and dismiss his son entirely, concluding with something like, "You know nothing about driving," but decided against it. His son had bright, gentle eyes, like his mother, Ari Lin, and they signalled to Thomas a deep self-consciousness, a trait which Thomas prided himself on being without.

Still, he recognized it in his son, and restrained himself.

"How's school?" he asked.

“Good. I just graduated and in the fall, I’ll be starting my first internship as a junior copywriter.”

“You’d like to write advertisements?” his father asked. “You’d find it very suitable here in Hong Kong then. Everyone’s trying to sell you something, and more often than not, it’s nothing you need. They’ve just convinced you to put your money forward.”

“I see it as art. How you persuade someone to, well, care. To invest. Time or money.” James said proudly. In reality, James wanted to be a poet. However, he knew the journey to be a long and often fruitless one, and in the meantime, he needed a job.

“See it how you like. It’s all sharks in Hong Kong. No, that’s not true. There are fishes here too. Someone has to feed the sharks.” Thomas glanced at his son. “We have some English graduates at Hope Community Church as well. Not many. Most of those who work there aren’t formally educated, but some are. You know me, my English is bad. So I get the English grads to do promotions and website blurbs. Does that sound like fulfilling work for you? Would you want to work in Hong Kong?” This was directed at the back of James’s head.

James turned then. He wanted to see his father’s eyes, but before their eyes met, Thomas’ gaze had turned back to the road. James felt a deep guilt in his stomach. He loved his mother much more than his father, and had no trouble admitting it. His parents had divorced when he was eight and James recalled only a few memories of Thomas and his mother in Canada together, before the separation caused Thomas to return permanently to Hong Kong.

James could never understand his father. He believed the reason to be that his father was, at his core, pathetic. The emigration of his wife and child to another country, his son being raised by another man, had provoked in Thomas an unearned sense of fatherly duty to work hard and provide monetarily, but which had left him alone, without family. James felt anxious because he



knew many desolate men who, for whatever reason, confided in him, and so it often became his role to absorb and attend to their sorrow.

“It’s possible,” he said, finally. “We’ll have to see how this internship goes. It’s paid.”

James smiled at his father, who saw it and nodded.

Some time passed before either of them spoke again. Thomas put on the radio, then said the channel was not as good as it was before, then put on a Cantonese pop album from the ’80s.

“Your music sounds so girly,” James said.

Thomas measured his words. “If you understood what she was saying and how poetic her lyrics are, you’d say different.”

“When your mother and I were dating,” Thomas began—he immediately regretted having started the sentence, but finding no way to turn back, continued— “this artist was very famous. It was what all the kids listened to. Ari was the one to introduce her to me. I met her—” he paused to make sure his son was listening, as these were narratives he did not intend on repeating, “—at church group. That was the only place our respective Christian schools allowed boys and girls to hang out. I didn’t really believe in religion then, and I still struggle with it, even as a pastor, but your mother believed it then. I bet she still does. She went every Sunday, and I’d watch her. The way she walked. Her smile. I was a boy then. And she was a girl.” Thomas smiled, and looked to his son, who felt obligated to smile back.

“I asked her out many times. She was two years my senior. It was different then. Now, sex is on everyone’s mind. Back then, a date was just to get to know each other. On our first date, I took her hiking. On our second, I took her to a record store. I had saved my money running errands for your grandfather, and I told her to pick any record and I’d buy it for her. This was the album. She had a record player and I didn’t, so we’d listen to it at her family’s

apartment, once she felt comfortable inviting me over. All her sisters loved me. I'm handsome and charming after all."

James smiled again at his father. They had reached one of Hong Kong's island-to-island tunnels, which ran under a dense body of water. James was transfixed by the constancy of the orange and white ceiling lights, which gave the impression that it was day, even here.

"I have it on USB now. Look." Thomas pointed to a USB plugged into the car's radio. "All that music on so little space."

The songs, playing at low volume, and the echo and wind of many cars sharing the tunnel filled the silence. There were two lanes travelling in this direction, on this side of the tunnel, and with nowhere to turn, left or right, Thomas kept a steady distance from the cars ahead and behind.

"So, no girlfriend?" Thomas asked.

"Not exactly," James said, then feeling a need to comment further, said, "I don't know. I'm not sure I'm ready for any relationship."

"Why?"

"They're messy. People are messy. Peoples' stories never seem to fit. What do we do with these experiences? Where do we put them, these stories?" James asked, rhetorically, but now found himself wishing either of them could invent an answer.

"You learn from them," Thomas said. "You collect your failures and learn from them."

"And other people's experience?"

"You learn from them too."

"But doesn't it feel wrong to try to coax stories out of people? What if they're perfectly happy keeping them to themselves?"

“People share what they’re comfortable sharing.”

They drove out of the tunnel. A parting in the clouds shone sunlight onto their faces. They opened and adjusted their sun visors. James could not stand to look at himself, so he drew the shutter over the mirror on the sun visor. He observed that his father kept his opened.

“People carry so much baggage,” James said. “It’s like every time I meet someone new, they leave so much crap everywhere. And then my life becomes messy. I don’t want that. I want a simple life,” James said. “I want to wake up, go to work, come home, unwind, sleep, do it again. If I could, I’d take pills with all my nutrients, then I wouldn’t have to worry about eating. People are overrated.”

This last comment pained Thomas because he sensed an undercurrent of resentment, and that perhaps his son was berating him, calling him “overrated”. Thomas wanted to understand why his son was so afraid, and moreover, if he was at fault.

“I find your comments bitter and cynical. Nobody is alone. I am your father. You have a family, and friends.”

“I have no friends.”

“You have no friends? Then who do you go to when good things happen?”

“No one. I celebrate by myself,” James said.

“You’re lying,” Thomas said. Then: “I used to think like you too. For most of my life, I was alone. I didn’t think anyone wanted me, so I became strong and faith guided me, but I still felt alone. I had family and friends, but they never felt like friends to me. Because I told them nothing. I knew they would leave eventually, so I made it happen. But when you get to a certain age, something strange begins happening. Your friends begin dying, and there’s nothing you can do about it. I’ve lost four friends. From childhood, church group, work. It’s never easy. And the

one thing you always think is, I wished I'd talked to them more." Thomas paused. "And it is in those moments, that God guides me the most."

At the word, God, James felt repulsed, recalling all the time wasted in Sunday school, the prayers before eating and the deep shame of his heart's desires.

"Yeah, but you're old," James said. "It's easy for you to believe that stuff, because you're desperate."

An old impulse to backhand his child came over Thomas, but again, he restrained himself. "One day, you will know you need other people."

"Every time I get close to others, I get hurt. It's never them. Always me. Why do I have to get hurt?"

"Everybody hurts."

"Not you. You don't seem to feel anything at all."

"I'm sorry, James," Thomas said. "I didn't mean to hurt you or Ari in that way. It was never my intention. I wanted to be the happy television family. You have to believe me."

Just then, a memory came to James.

"Do you remember this?" he asked. "Before Mom and I left for Canada, you picked me up from an after-school play practice. I suspected you had been drinking because you weren't driving. We rode the subway, and you had a paper. You sat across from me, crumpled the paper, threw it at my head, laughed, then told me to pick it up. I refused because you had thrown the paper. Then at the next station, you got up and said, 'Find your own way home,' and got off the train without picking up your trash. I was six."

"I don't remember that. But we were probably close to home. I had faith you'd come back."

“The point is, you did something to amuse yourself, then when I disobeyed you, you became angry and left. I made it home, but the feeling—,” James had trouble finishing the sentence. He wanted to say more, but thought his father’s expression was too curious, as if revealing his vulnerabilities was yet another joke whose detritus James was left to collect. “I picked up that paper. I put it in the trash.”

“Responsible,” Thomas said. “Good on you.”

The highway curved and now to their left were shipping ports, stacks of crates, and various cranes. James indulged himself by imagining he was a dock worker operating all that heavy machinery, and how small, yet powerful, one might have felt in that occupation.

Neither father nor son looked at each other. The dependable car went along and when the album concluded, Thomas did not press play again. James felt now that his trip had been ruined, and he resented having to stay with his father while he was in Hong Kong. He wanted to undo his seatbelt, open the door and roll out, or disappear entirely.

Thomas imagined no better resolution. He had apologized and believed that he meant it, but could not understand why his son did not accept, until he thought too about his own father, Daniel.

Before his passing, Daniel had been a truck and cab driver. His long stints away from home had permitted him to be unfaithful to his family with no perceptible consequences. Thomas, however, could discern when his father was drunk, and developed, too, an intuition for when his mother, Dorothy was truly concerned for her, or her children’s, well-being. Thomas had once heard his mother’s shouting and entered the bedroom to position himself between his parents, only to be lashed as well.

Thomas had never wanted to become that man. He had promised himself to never raise his hand in violence. And yet, he reflected, he had hurt his family by being unfaithful. He wished now only that his son could accept his apology.

“Your grandfather,” Thomas said, swallowing, as both had been silent for so long, “never apologized to us. That was the way of men back then. Where the husband, father was the head of the family. All he did, we accepted. And your grandmother endured many beatings. I was powerless. She never remarried, even after he died.” Thomas wanted to add, “You have no idea how good you have it,” but worried the statement would alienate his son from him further, so he said, “Relatively speaking, you are very fortunate.”

James frowned. He disliked the perceived condescension with which his father was addressing him.

“You were never around,” James said, stomping his foot unintentionally. He felt as if the more he expressed these feelings in words, the more irrepressible they became, like a drip in a dam causing an irreversible burst.

“I know,” Thomas said, softly. He loved that his son was speaking. Never had he had the chance to speak to his own father in this way while he was alive. Thomas had only wanted a better life for his son. Still, he withheld the impulse to apologize again, hoping his silence indicated he was listening and welcomed any other truths James wanted to share.

James hardened his expression, and any softness or self-consciousness eroded in his attempt at masculine stoicism.

“I love you, James,” Thomas said, finally. He looked to his son who would not look back.

James thought about his mother Ari, and what she would do. She would take the high road, forgive him, or at least be self-aware enough to avoid him and those conflicted feelings.

James could not escape. There was a reason he had returned. He wanted to know what it was that he had left behind, and from where he'd come from, and this was it.

“Thank you, Thomas,” he said.

## Demonstrations

I awoke in my father's apartment having dreamt I was in an opium den. I'd stayed up late into the night reading translated accounts of time spent in those dens from the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In my dream, I'd somehow inhabited the body of a user. It took me some time to remember belonging to my own body.

The analgesic had a direct correlation to the history of Hong Kong. When the First Opium War ended between China and Britain, Hong Kong, little more than a small fishing island, was handed over to Britain.

I stretched and left the room. In the living room, my father's girlfriend's seven-year-old daughter, Forest was watching videos on her mother's phone. She looked up and said good morning and I returned the statement. I sat with Forest on the couch, looking at my phone too. Not because there was anything worth looking at, but because I wanted her to feel she was with a friend. Em, my father's girlfriend, woke next and said she was taking Forest to Sunday School and she'd go to church herself, if I wanted to tag along. I politely refused. There was nothing for me there.

\* \* \* \* \*

"May I be serious with you for a moment, James?" Em asked. We were walking Forest to Sunday School. "It will be just you and your father soon, and we need you to take care of him. His drinking, at times, it gets out of control."



She had given me this speech ten years ago, the last time I was in Hong Kong. This time felt more sincere, pleading, and although I generally refused via an ambiguous silence, I thought I should be responsible. I pretended it was my first time hearing of it.

“It’s not enough for him to have one or two. He wants to get to a certain point. He wants to be able to sleep.”

She went on like this, describing my father’s troubles for a while. When she and her daughter were around, he limited himself, but when he was alone, it was a different narrative. He had been hospitalized recently, sometime before my return, for acute alcohol poisoning, a fifty-two-year-old man. She said it was my obligation as his only son to keep him in check. We dropped Forest off at Sunday School. We walked to Em’s church, then parted ways.

\* \* \* \* \*

Regrouping for lunch at a restaurant in the mall, it was the first I’d seen of my father since the night before. He’d slept in. Seeing him standing outside the restaurant, talking on the phone, looking to his tablet device, reminded me that on that return trip I made ten years ago, we had vacationed in Thailand. He had a pack of cigarettes in his dresser in the hotel and I had flushed them, one by one, crushing them before dropping them into the toilet. I worried about his health then. We never once spoke of it.

In the restaurant, my father played a game on his tablet device where he commanded an army of Chinese soldiers. The soldiers went wherever he directed them, fighting and putting their coded lives on the line, doing everything to ensure his victory.

He began speaking about a real-life employee of his.

“She had a lot of problems in the past,” he said. “She thought of ending her life, and often phoned me just to talk. I think I helped her a lot. Many people were abusive to her, and I guess at some point, she believed their criticisms to be true, that she deserved such treatment, so I had to be there for her, to save her.”

I wasn't sure why he was telling me this story.

“It's common,” he continued, “in my line of work for me to see disadvantaged youths or hurt children, and they've internalized that sense of neglect. They think they don't deserve nice things like love, forgiveness or grace. They're very hard on themselves. But now, with my help, this employee, she's made a full recovery. In all honesty, all I did was listen. I think that was the hardest part for her, admitting to her pain.”

Our food arrived and occupied us so we wouldn't have to speak. Forest and my father played games on their devices.

\* \* \* \* \*

After lunch, my father left to take his employee to high tea. I went walking with Forest while her mother packed their bags for a business trip to Guangzhou, where they're originally from. Em worked as an aesthetician and kept up with the latest fashion and makeup trends. She was sixteen years younger than my father.

I liked walking with Forest because she was still very young. The young, I thought, gave up information more freely, unaware of possible consequences. In turn, they were rewarded for their vulnerability. When she was born, I was fifteen. If I provided her the slightest prompt, or even silence, which I was apt to do, she responded to her heart's content.

It is true what they say about children being like sponges. As we walked to the store to buy pop, she went from describing the life cycles of silkworms, to silk harvesting from the cocoons of the worms, to where one goes after death, and comedic television programs for children she enjoyed watching with my father. At all these turns, I encouraged her to keep talking, by giving her indications I was listening closely, exclaiming aloud, nodding quietly, asking further questions or just being present. The more I encouraged, and acted happy, the more I could hear her unrestricted speech. I found something comforting in how freely she spoke.

\* \* \* \* \*

Forest and Em left for Guangzhou later in the afternoon. Alone in the apartment, I continued reading both of Teju Cole's recent novels, *Everyday is for the Thief* and *Open City*. I was curious to read about immigrant experiences, especially of characters with multiple homelands in fiction. Something about the fictional genre spoke more to me than memoir, or anything purporting to be truth.

I spent the afternoon in silence, reading my books.

\* \* \* \* \*

I have a memory of being with my father in Beijing on a business trip. This was before I left for Canada so I must have been younger than six. We're at a big dinner and there are Chinese businessmen all around. They are drinking and celebrating, and my father's taken on that air he has when he's entertaining or trying to impress. He's making jokes, catering to everyone's needs;

be it food or drink, he calls the shots. He's brought me along. Maybe my mother was unavailable, or still hurt from his actions. Maybe he wants to show me off, his only child, his son. To be born male in Chinese culture is significant. Men were let off the hook more often, more easily forgiven, regarded as something heroic.

My father is drinking and he stands to make a toast. I want to try something I've learnt from an American movie on television. While he's standing, I pull his chair further back. When he sits, he crashes to the floor. He looks at me as if I'd betrayed him. He recovers quickly and all the businessmen laugh. I have never spoken to him about it. I wonder if he remembers.

\* \* \* \* \*

My father returned to the apartment and put on the television.

In Hong Kong, almost everyone watches the same television channel. It has been this way since I last returned. Whenever I've entered a Hong Kong residence and they've asked if I wanted to watch TV, this was the channel they put on. It sometimes felt like the only channel.

The entertainment featured varied widely: from news reports of daily local and global happenings, reruns of TV programs from past decades, newer relationship-based dramas, imported and dubbed-over Korean or Japanese dramas, food or travel shows with smiling hosts who went places, tasted things, and— momentarily— made viewers feel they'd travelled with them. Now, however the channel was broadcasting rerun footage of last night's, and this afternoon's, anti-extradition bill demonstration. Although nightly there seemed to be variations in the narrative, I could not help but feel we were watching the same clips again and again.

I believed most Hong Kong citizens must have agreed forced extradition was unacceptable. There was so much outrage and emotion, it was difficult not to care and become impassioned. I wanted to fight for my life. I imagined myself as a stronger, taller man, fighting off police officers with my bare hands, while fellow citizens stormed symbolic locations in the name of freedom. Part of me wanted to get my body between the belligerents, but another part thought, what use was another wordless body?

\* \* \* \* \*

In the evening, my father and I were to have dinner with his friend, Brother Way. My father introduced him as a former trainer he'd met at the gym. Brother Way and his wife, Miranda, said they remembered me from when I was young, and how small I was then. Not like now: now I was a grown man. They asked about my life in Canada: was there indeed as much snow as shown on TV, hockey playing, moose, and year-round skating? They asked if I spoke French. Feeling comfortable in the language, I said: "Oui, je parle le français." They applauded my pronunciation.

Brother Way opened a bottle of wine. He asked if I drank, and I said no.

"He's afraid to drink in front of his father," my father said.

The topic of conversation moved away from me, but part of me wished they had asked me to speak more French. I could say anything in that language and they would not understand.

\* \* \* \* \*

“The children are crazy,” Brother Way said. “There are good kids, and peaceful protests. But my daughter was telling me, there are protestors who carry death notes. They’re ready to die. Thomas, do you even remember the last time you were willing to sacrifice that much?”

My father shrugged. The wine was making his face red.

“I can’t remember either. These kids are ready to die for a cause. You know what really bugs me. I’m against extradition. But these kids who fight and want to die, they’re fighting police officers, other Hong Kong citizens. What’s the plan? Knock down all the police, then move on into China? If China wanted to, they’d come in with their guns and shoot everybody. All eyes are on us now. Nobody’s coming to help us. Maybe a few good tweets will be written, but China is coming. These kids are idealists.”

Night had fallen, but my father was still entertaining, or being entertained. He asked for another glass.

“They’re doing something, Way,” he said.

“There’s only so much you can do.”

My father, the contrarian, said, “Do you believe in independent Hong Kong? What about you, son?”

Startled, I shrugged. I had no idea I was participating in this conversation.

“I think it’s a dream. But we rely too much on China,” Brother Way said. “Extradition is insane. But do we really need Hong Kong citizens to die? Maybe it’s a question of martyrs. There hasn’t been any real, significant death to shock people into action. To shock them into caring. It’s beatings, but no death.”

The room became quiet.

“We should probably leave soon, Way,” my father said.

“One whiskey.”

“One.”

Whiskey was poured.

“Think you could read my son’s face?” my father said.

I had been daydreaming, then perked up when I realized the conversation was about me.

“You sure? I don’t know if he’s up to it. Does he even understand all that I’m saying?”

“He understands. He’s just quiet.”

“Very quiet.”

I had the feeling of being observed.

“Go on,” my father said, finishing his whiskey. Brother Way poured him another.

“James,” Brother Way said, “I was a trainer, in the past, but now I have another job. I’m hired to read faces. It’s less what’s expressed immediately but what the constituent parts of the face signify. Shape of nostrils, earlobes, arch of eyebrows. Facial features programmed from birth. I’ve studied this for most of my life. Now, I’m paid to do it. My boss, one of the richest men in Hong Kong, extracts minerals from Africa, then refines them in China, before they’re sold wholesale. At each of the stations he runs, he hires me to examine all potential employees’ faces. Some I can tell right away will work themselves to death, and some I can tell are lazy or delinquents. My boss’s wealth has a lot to do with me. So, can I read your face?”

There was not much else to say. I agreed.

“You’re quiet. You like listening. But there’s a wild side to you, which you labour to conceal. Backed into a corner, you’d fight for your life. If you believed in an argument, you’d fight for it with all your power. You also want to look older. That’s why you’ve grown so much

facial hair. But your face is not one for a beard. Your chin is like a wallet, and the longer the hairs on your chin are, the more money leaks out of it.

“This is not true of all chins, only yours. Yours is a face suitable only for moustache. You are also very popular with ladies. You smile a lot and girls like that. Have you been with many women?”

They observed me and I said, “I’m not comfortable saying.”

“So, many then,” my father said. “Were they all white?”

I repeated what I said.

“You’ll have many chances, trust me. And you like older women too. Smart girls.”

“Older?” my father asked. “Why?”

“Thomas, you’re living in the past. That’s why you want younger girls. Your son is actually quite smart. That’s why he wants to be with older girls. More mature.”

“I know he’s smart,” my father said. He poured himself another whiskey.

“He’s a fighter, but James, promise me one thing. No more fighting after you turn twenty-five.”

I asked why.

Brother Way laughed. “You’ll be twenty-five. It’s time to start solving your problems with your words.”

“He’s actually very muscular,” my father said.

“Yes,” Brother Way said. “In the chest, but that’s muscle gained from weightlifting. If he was disciplined in a martial art, his shoulders would be more developed. His are muscles for show.”



“Let me ask you, James, do you want sons? If you want sons, you must marry a woman with an upper lip which points down. Yours points up. If you do not marry a woman with an upper lip which points down, you’ll have daughters. Do you want that?”

I wanted to say, I’d love to have daughters, but instead I said, “I don’t know.”

Brother Way nodded. “There’s one more thing. I’m not sure if I should tell you this.”

“He can handle it.”

“How old are you now, James?”

“Twenty-two.”

“Good. So, there’s still time to change.” Brother Way closed his eyes and interlocked his fingers as if gathering energy to deliver the next assessment. “If you stop caring about how others perceive you, you can fly.”

“When we go shopping, he’ll find clothes he likes but won’t even try them on. Say’s they’re too loud.”

“I like the art,” I said.

“My employees,” my father said, “say I’m like an icepick. No matter how you carry me, I stand out. Because I’m free. You, on the other hand, are like an icepick wrapped in a bag, wrapped in a bag. It’s like you want to be invisible.”

My father’s hand movements seemed to be getting out of his control.

“Can I teach you something, James?” Brother Way asked.

I nodded.

“Come sit with me on the ground. I want to teach you a meditation. Do you meditate?”

“Sometimes.”

We were seated on the ground.

“There’s an emerging branch of Buddhism which concerns the quantum, or universal energies. Imperceptible things. I want you to sit with your legs crossed, hands on your knees and close your eyes. Breathe in, breathe out.”

I knew my father was watching.

“When I tell you— not yet— to open your eyes, I’m going to give you something, okay? Open your eyes.”

Out of the darkness, the room and Brother Way came into light. He was sitting in front of me holding out nothing. There was nothing between his hands, and yet as he moved his hands around the spherical nothingness, there seemed to be resistance, as if he were holding onto an invisible energy.

“I want you to take it,” he said. He passed me the spherical nothing and I took it. I did not know if it was a matter of persuasion or something beyond myself, something imperceptible except through touch and belief. He told me to compress the energy, but indeed, there was resistance.

I laughed aloud.

“Strange, right?” Brother Way said. “If you expand your hands, you can add more energy, growing it until it’s big enough to protect you. Some people have naturally big energy spheres, but some people have small energies. Keep kneading this ball every day and you’ll soar.”

I kneaded the sphere of invisible energy and felt myself gaining stability. I was in control.

“When you’re ready, shrink it down, reabsorb it and store it here, in your lower abdomen.”

I kneaded it into a smaller sphere, picturing quantum energy flowing away from it, through my hands and arm, returning to the flows of my body, then pushed the small sphere into my lower abdomen. This was my life, and I could live as I wanted.

“Thank you, Brother Way,” I said.

“You’re welcome. Knead the sphere every day and you will soar.”

\* \* \* \* \*

My father said we had to go, so we made our goodbyes. I thanked Brother Way again and waved to him and his wife, Miranda, who’d left us alone after dinner. I felt happy and accomplished. We rode the elevator in silence.

Walking home through the courtyard, my father said, “You’re happy.”

“I am.” I beamed.

“You know he lied to you,” my father said. “He said he was responsible for growing that man’s companies. That’s only partly true. Brother Way is actually that man’s driver. He was just given a few opportunities to read people’s faces and he made a few lucky guesses. It’s mostly make-believe anyway. Old ways of thinking, you know? If there’s one thing that man’s good at, it’s persuasion.”

Normally, I would have stayed quiet and let my father speak his mind, but now I felt defensive of Brother Way. “I thought some of his observations were true. I have tended to date older women, and it was generally because I thought they were smarter, or we had more in common. It is true, too, that sometimes I care too much how other people see me.”

“The future stuff is unrealistic in my opinion. The problem with fortune telling or any ‘art form’ like this is they can just say a lot of general things, and the client reads too deeply into it, thinks they’re telling the truth, connected to something deeper. This is why I keep fewer and fewer friends. Nobody can help me. Nobody knows me but me. It’s all tricks and games. Especially in Hong Kong.”

I suddenly felt pity for my father. I’d done so much in my youth to emulate him and for what reason? His relationships were superficial, based on mutual benefit, but where he always thought he was the more helpful, doing others a favour. I told him I felt happy, and he became upset because it wasn’t due to him. Maybe I’d outgrown my father, no longer needed him; maybe I never had.

\* \* \* \* \*

We returned to the apartment and my father put on the television. It was broadcasting a rerun of the same news footage from earlier in the afternoon. He kept the volume low, almost inaudible. We sat in silence on the couch together in the near dark, watching. He opened a box of red wine, poured himself a cup, and resumed playing his game on his device.

The television light washed over us, mindlessly, for a while, before he said, “Was it true? About your liking older women?”

I said yes.

“Your mother was two years older than me. We’re not so different, you and I.”

I felt different.

He was drinking like crazy. He muted the television completely.

“I’m tired, son,” he said. “I cannot keep fighting. I’m sure you can, but I can’t. The situation in Hong Kong is very bad, and it’s only continuing to get worse. I’m scared we will lose our freedoms. I want you to help me immigrate to Canada. I’m sorry for hurting your mother. You have to realize I was young, and your mother was the only woman I’d ever been with. When I got my job at the youth center, it was unusual for someone so young to hold so good a position. I attracted a lot of girls. It wasn’t my fault— no, it was. And I’m sorry, truly. But it’s the past. How long can you hold a grudge for? What’s there for you to lose?”

I had rarely spoken to another man with such candour, and rarer still was it that we’d speak and look one another in the eyes, but when I turned and saw his, they were watering. I looked away.

“You drank too much,” I said, softly.

He began to cry. “I beg you, son. Please. Do you have it in your heart to forgive me?”

I didn’t know what to say. My mother and I had moved to Canada, in part, to put distance between us and him, to have a chance at a fresh start, and now here he was asking to be in the same country. There was so much that I couldn’t prepare him for: the depressions of winter, the loneliness. How well could he assimilate, a man of fifty-two? And his girlfriend, and her daughter: would they come too? They wouldn’t be able to do it alone— and I didn’t want to be helpful.

“It’s past,” I said, reassuringly. I smiled at my father.

“Will you look into it? Helping me immigrate?” he said. His body language was that of a guilty child, asking for grace.

“Yes,” I said. Empty words. I hoped by morning my words would be forgotten.