

# 322 READER PART 6

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# The Only Real Day

by Frank Chin

The men played mah jong or passed the waterpipe, their voices low under the sound of the fish pumps thudding into the room from the tropical fish store. Voices became louder over the voices of each other with the thickening heat. And Yuen was with his friends now, where he was always happy and loud every Tuesday night. All the faces shone of skin oily from the heat and laughter, the same as last week, the same men and room and waterpipe, Yuen knew them. Here it was comfortable after the cripple in Oakland. He hated the sight of cripples and one had spoken to him tonight.

"That's impossible," Huie said to Yuen.

Yuen grinned at his friend and said, "It's true. You don't know because you were born here, but I remember that morning. I awoke with my father and my son, and we walked out of our house to the field, as we did every morning, and we walked to the peach tree and stood in a circle around it, as we did every morning, you see, huh? And we dropped our trousers about our legs and pissed at the base of the peach tree, making bubbles in the earth and mud over the roots, wetting the bark. And we stood watching the urine sink into the dirt, and the bubbles burst . . . as we always did after fertilizing our peach tree. And then I said I was going to Hong Kong the next day with my wife and son, and that I was leaving my father and mother, and I did. I left; then I left Hong Kong and left my family there, and came to America to make money."

"And did you?" Huie said.

"Make money?"

"Yes, did you make money?"

"I'm still here, my wife is dead . . . but my son is still in Hong Kong, and I send him what I can." Yuen looked up to the light bulb and blinked. "It's good to get away from all those American women that work in the restaurant," he said, not wanting to speak of his son or China. All the men were speaking loudly, shouting when they laughed, throwing the sound of their voices against the close walls of the room. Yuen enjoyed the room when it was loud; the noise of the voices of friends was exciting after a week of privacy in a kitchen; "The boy should come sometime," he thought.

"Perhaps you could," Huie said, laughing, "Perhaps you could make love to them, Yuen older brother." The men laughed, showing gold and age-yellowed teeth. Yuen snorted against the friendly laugh. "Not me," he said. He lifted the punk from the tobacco, then shot off the ash with a squirt of water through the stem. "I won't speak their language. I don't like them working in the same place as me. They don't think I'm anything anyway. They



change their clothes and smoke in their slips right outside my door in the hallway." His head lifted to face his friends, and his nostrils opened, one larger than the other as he spoke faster. "And anyway, they don't care that I come out of my room and see them standing half naked in the hall. They're ugly; they all have wrinkles and you can see all the dirt on their skins and they shave their armpits, and their powder turns brown in their wrinkles. They're not like Chinese women at all." Yuen chuckled, making it all a joke for his friends.

"I've always wanted to see a real naked American woman. There's something about the..." Huie said. "Ahhh, I know." He laughed and stuck out his tongue. "They've got bigger breasts than Chinese women, and their teats are prettier." He grunted and put his hands inside his jacket and hefted invisible breasts, "Like those so pink and pretty on the calendars!"

"I don't know. All the ones at my place are old... and you can't tell about pictures..." Yuen pulled at the deep smoke of the waterpipe. The water inside gurgled loudly, and singed tobacco ash jumped when Yuen blew back into the tube. He lifted his head and licked the edges of his teeth. He always licked the edges of his teeth before speaking. He did not think it a sign of old age. Before he broke the first word over his licked teeth, Huie raised his hand. "Jimmy Chan goes out with Americans; blonde ones with blue eyelids too, And he smokes cigars," Huie said.

"That's because he has money. If Chinese have money, everybody likes them" Yuen said. "Blue teats... pink eyelids, everybody."

"Not the Jews."

"Not the Jews," Yuen said, "I saw a crippled Jew... he looked like a Jew..." Yuen stopped, not wanting to talk about the cripple with his friends.

"The Jews don't like anybody," Huie said.

"The Jews don't like anybody," Yuen said and smiled.

"Nobody likes the Jews!" Huie said. He pulled the tip of his nose down with his fingers. "Do I look like a Jew?" The men sitting at the mah jong laughed and shook the table with their hands. Over their laughter, Yuen spoke loudly, licking the edges of his teeth, smiling and saying, "What do you want to look like a Jew for? You're Chinese!" And the roomful of close men was loud with the sound of tables slapped with night pale hands and bellyfuls of laughter shrinking into wheezes and silent empty mouths, breathless and drooling. "We have a Jew at the hotel my restaurant is in, Jews and Americans," Yuen said, and touched the glowing punk to the tobacco and inhaled through his mouth, gurgling the water. He let the smoke drop from his nostrils and laughed smoke out between his teeth, and leaned back into the small spaces of smoke between the men and enjoyed the whole roomful.

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Yuen was a man of neat habits, but always seemed disheveled with his moist mouth, open with the lower lip shining and dangling below yellow teeth. Even today, dressed in his dayoff suit that he kept hung in his closet with butcher paper over it, and a hat he kept in a box, he had seen people watching him and laughing behind their hands at his pulling at the shoulders of the jacket and lifting the brim of his hat from his eyes. He had gathered himself into his own arms and leaned back into his seat to think about the room in San Francisco; then he slept and was ignorant of the people, the conductor, and all the people he had seen before, watching him and snickering, and who might have been, he thought, jealous of him for being tall for Chinese, or his long fingers, exactly what, he did not know or worry about in this half stupor between wakefulness and sleep with his body against the side of the train, the sounds of the steel wheels, and the train pitching side to side, all amazingly loud and echoing in his ears, through his body before sleep.

Tuesday evenings Yuen took the "A" train from Oakland to San Francisco. He walked to the train stop right after work at the restaurant and stood, always watching to the end of the street for the train's coming, dim out of the darkness from San Francisco. The train came, its cars swaying side to side and looking like a short snake with a lit stripe of lights squirming past him, or like the long dragon that stretched and jumped over the feet of boys carrying it. He hated the dragon here, but saw it when it ran, for the boys' sake. The train looked like that, the glittering dragon that moved quickly like the sound of drum rolls and dangled its staring eyes out of its head with a flurry of beard; the screaming bird's voice of the train exciting in him a child's impulse to run to grab, to destroy.

Then he stood and listened to the sound of the train's steel wheels, the sound of an invisible crowd being sucked after the lights of the train toward the end of the line, leaving the quiet street more quiet and Yuen almost superstitiously anxious.

He was always grateful for the Tuesdays Freddy walked him to the train stop. They left early on these nights and walked past drugstores, bought comic books, looked into the windows of closed shops, looked at shoes or suits. "How much is that?" Yuen would ask.

"I don't know what you're talking," Freddy would say when he could not answer in Chinese.

"What a stupid boy you are; can't even talk Chinese," Yuen would say, and "too moochie shiyet," adding his only American phrase. "Come on, I have a train to catch." They would laugh at each other and walk slowly, the old man lifting his shoulders and leaning his head far back on his neck, walking straight, when he remembered.

A look back to Freddy as he boarded the train,

a smile a wave, the boy through the window a silent thing in the noise of engines. He would shrug and settle himself against the back of the seat, and still watch Freddy, who would be walking now, back toward the restaurant. Tonight, he realized again, how young Freddy was to be walking home alone at night through the city back to the restaurant. He saw Freddy not walking the same way home, but running next to the moving train then turning the corner to walk up a street with more lights and people. Yuen turned, thinking he might shout out the door for Freddy to walk home the same way they came, but the train was moving; Yuen had forgotten, the train was moving. And he had no right. Freddy had heard his mother say Yuen had no right so many times that Freddy could say it too. In Chinese. That he was not Yuen's son. That this was not China. Knowing the boy could say such things made Yuen's need to shout and scold more urgent, his silence in front of the child more humiliating. Yuen was still and worked himself out of his confusion; the beginning of his day off was bad; nothing about it right or usual; all of it bad, no good, wrong. Yuen thought it out of his mind until it was funny, then relaxed.

"Jimmy Chan has a small Mexican dog too, that he keeps in his pocket," Huie was saying, "It's lined with rubber."

"The little dog?" Yuen asked. And the men laughed.

"The dog . . ." Huie said and chuckled out of his chinless face, "No, his pocket, so if the dog urinates . . ." He shrugged, "You know."

"Then how can he make love to his blonde American with blue whatever, if his pocket is full of the dog?"

"He takes off his coat!" The men laughed with their faces up into the falling smoke. The men seemed very close to Yuen, as if with the heat and smoke, they swelled to crowding against the walls, and Yuen swelled and was hot with them, feeling close and friendly, friendlier, until he was dizzy with friendship and forgot names. "A Chinese can do anything with Americans if he has money," Yuen said.

"Like too moochie shiyet, he can," Huie shouted, almost falling off his seat, "He can't make himself white!" Huie jabbed his finger at Yuen and stared. The men at the table stopped. The noise of the mah jong and voices stopped to the sound of rumps shifting over chairs and creaks of table legs. Heavy arms were leaned onto the tabletops. Yuen was not sure whether he was arguing with his friend or not. He did not want to argue on his day off, yet he was constrained to say something. He knew that whatever he said would sound more important than he meant it. He licked his teeth and said, "Who wants to be white when they can have money?" He grinned. The man nodded and sat quiet a moment, listening to the sound of boys shouting at

cars to come park in their lots. "Yuen always knows the right thing to say." "You're your mother's ass, play!" And the men laughed and quietly returned to their game.

The back room was separated from the tropical fish store by a long window shade drawn over the doorway. Calendars with pictures of Chinese women holding peaches the size of heads, calendars with pictures of nude white women with large breasts, and a picture that someone thought was funny, showing a man with the breasts of a woman were tacked to the walls. The men sat on boxes, in chairs, at counters with walls of drawers full of herbs, or at tables against walls under calendars. They sat and passed the waterpipe and tea and played mah jong or talked. Every night the waterpipe, the tea, the mah jong, the talk.

"Wei, hey, Yuen, older brother," a faceless voice shouted through the smoke, "Why're you so quiet tonight?"

"I thought I was being noisy . . ." Yuen said, "Perhaps it's because my employer's son might be sick again."

"The boy?" Huie said. Yuen stood and removed his jacket, brushed it and hung it on a nail. "He has this trouble with his stomach . . . makes him bend up and he cries and won't move. It comes and goes," he said.

"Bring him over to me, and I'll give him some herbs, make him well in a hurry."

"His mother, my employer, is one of these new-fashioned people, giving up the old ways. She speaks American talk and has American women working for her at her restaurant. She laughs at me when I tell her about herbs making her son well."

"Herbs make me well when I'm sick."

"They can make any sickness well," Yuen said. "They made my brother well, but he died anyway," Huie said. He took off his glasses and licked the lenses.

"Because he wanted to."

"He shot himself."

"Yes, I remember," Yuen said. He scratched his Adams's apple noisily a moment. "He used to come into the restaurant in the mornings, and I'd fix him scrambled eggs. He used to always speak to me with bits of egg on his lips and shake his fork and tell me that if I could speak American talk, I could be cook at the restaurant. I could too, but the cook there is Chinese anyway and buys good meat."

Huie sighed, said "Good meat is important I suppose." Then put his mouth to the mouth of the waterpipe.

"What?" Yuen asked absently at Huie's sigh. He allowed his eyes to unfocus on the room now, tried to remember Huie's brother's face with bits of egg on the lips and was angry. Suddenly an angry old man wanting to be alone, screaming. He wiped his own lips with his knuckles and looked back to Huie.

Yuen did not want to talk about Huie's brother. He wanted to listen to music, or jokes, or breaking bones, something happy or terrible.

"His fine American talk," Huie said. "He used to go to the Oakland High School at night to learn."

"My employer wants me to go there, too," Yuen said. "You should only talk American if you have money to talk to them with . . . I mean, only fools talk American when they don't have money. If you talk to them without money, all you'll hear is what they say behind your back, and you don't want to listen to that."

"I don't."

"No."

"He received a letter one day, did he tell you that? He received a letter from the American police, and he took the letter to Jimmy Chan who reads American well . . . and Jimmy said that the Immigration Board wanted to know how he came into the country, and wanted to know if he was sending money to Communists or not." Huie smiled wanly and stared between his legs. Yuen watched Huie sitting on the box; he had passed the pipe and now sat with his short legs spread slightly apart. He held his hands together between his legs and his head was down now, his eyes just visible to Yuen. Huie's slumped body looked relaxed, only the muscles of his hands and wrists were tight and working. To Yuen, Huie this moment looked as calm as if he were sitting at stool. Yuen smiled and tried to save the pleasure of his day off visit that was being lost in morbid talk. "Did he have his dog with him?" he asked.

"His dog? How do you talk about a dog when I'm talking about the death of my brother?"

"Perhaps the concern for the boy," Yuen said, "I shouldn't have let him wait for the train with me tonight."

"Was he sick?"

"That too maybe . . ." Yuen said; he did not want to talk about the cripple in the magazine store. It would not be funny to talk about, and Yuen wanted to laugh.

"Bring the boy to me next week, and I'll fix him up," Huie said quickly, and put his glasses on again. Yuen, out of his day off, loud, cheerful mood, angrily and ashamed of his anger, listened to Huie, "My brother was very old, you remember? He was here during the fire and earthquake, and he told this to Jimmy Chan." Huie stopped speaking and patted Yuen's knee. "Yes, he did have his little dog in his pocket . . ." The men looked across to each other, and Yuen nodded. They were friends, had always been friends. They were friends now. "And my brother told Jimmy that all his papers had been burned in the fire, and told about how he came across the bay in a sailboat that was so full that his elbows, just over the side of the boat could feel the water, and about the women crying and the men

shouting, and that no one thought of papers, and some not even of their gold."

"Yes, I know."

"And Jimmy Chan laughed at my brother and told him that there was nothing he could do, and that my brother would have to wait and see if he would be sent back to China or not. So . . ." Huie put his hands on his knees and rocked himself forward, lifting and setting his thin rump onto the wooden box, sighed and swallowed, "My brother shot himself." Huie looked up to Yuen; they licked their lips at the same moment, watching each other's tongue. "He died very messy," Huie said, and Yuen had heard it through again, for his friend, as he had a hundred times before. But tonight it made him sick.

The talk about death and the insides of a head spread, wet all over the floor, the head of someone he knew, the talk was not relaxing; it was incongruous to the room of undershirted men playing mah jong, and the men, quieter since the shout, were out of place in their undershirts. Yuen wanted to relax, but everything was frantic that should not be; perhaps he was too sensitive, Yuen thought, and wanted to be numb. "You don't have to talk about it if it bothers you," Yuen said to his friend.

"He looked messy, for me that was enough . . . and enough of Jimmy Chan for me too. He could've written and said my brother was a good citizen or something . . ." Huie stopped and flicked at his ear with his fingertips. "You don't want to talk any more about it?"

"No," Yuen said.

"How did we come to talk of my brother's death anyhow?"

"Jimmy Chan and his Mexican dog."

"I don't want to talk about that any more, either."

"How soon is Chinese New Year's?"

"I don't think I want to talk about anything any more," Huie said, "New Year's a long ways off."

"Yes, I know that."

"I don't want to talk about it," Huie said.

Each man sat now, staring toward, past each other without moving their eyes, as if moving their eyes would break their friendship. He knew that whatever had happened had been his fault; perhaps tonight would have been more congenial if he had not taken Freddy to the magazine store, or if the cripple had fallen just once, or had not been there. Yuen could still see the cripple falling, falling and stumbling up and falling again faster than people could push him, falling as if he expected to be pushed, and how Yuen had wanted to push that obscene man down crashing into the cement. The joy it would have given him was embarrassing, new, unaccountable.

"Would you like a cigar, Yuen, older brother?"

Huie asked, using the courtesy.

"No, I prefer the waterpipe." He watched Huie

spit the end of the cigar onto the floor.

"You remind me of my brother, Yuen."

"How so?"

"Shaking your head, always shaking your head . . . you do too much thinking. You have to shake the thinking out to stop, eh?"

"And I rattle my eyes, too." Yuen laughed a moment. "But what else am I to do here?"

"I don't know," Huie said and looked around, "Mah jong?"

"No."

"Are you unhappy?"

"I have my friends, right? But sometimes I have a melancholy feeling."

"Just like my brother . . . too much thinking, and thinking becomes worry. You should smoke cigars and get drunk and go help one of your American waitresses shave her armpits and put your head inside them and tickle her with your tongue until she's silly. I'd like to put my face in the armpit of some big American woman . . . with a big armpit!"

"But I'm not like your brother," Yuen said, "I don't shoot the back of my head off with guns."

"You only have to do that once."

Yuen waited a moment, then stood. "I should be leaving now," he said. Tonight had been very slow but over quickly. He did not like being compared to an old man who had shot himself.

Huie stood and shook Yuen's hand, held Yuen's elbow and squeezed Yuen's hand hard. "I didn't mean to shout at you, older brother."

Yuen smiled his wet smile. Huie held onto Yuen's hand and stood as if he was about to sit again. He had an embarrassingly sad smile. Yuen did not mean to twist his friend's face into its muscular contortion; he had marred Huie's happy evening of hoarse laughter and alcoholic wheezings. "I shouted too," Yuen said finally.

"You always know the right things to say, older brother," Huie squeezed Yuen's hand and said, "Goodnight, older brother."

And Yuen was walking, and was out into the tropical fish store. He opened the door to the alley and removed his glasses, for the sudden cold air outside fogged them.

For a long time he walked the always damp alley, between glittering streets of Chinatown. Women with black coats walked with young children. This Chinatown was taller than Oakland's, had more fire escapes and lights, more music coming from street vents. He usually enjoyed walking at this hour every Wednesday of every week. But this was Tuesday evening, and already he had left his friends, yet it looked like Wednesday with the same paper vendors coming up the hills, carrying bundles of freshly printed Chinese papers. He walked down the hill to Portsmouth Square on Kearney Street to sit in the park and read the paper. He sat on a

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wooden bench and looked up the trunk of a palm tree, looking toward the sounds of pigeons. He could hear the fat birds cooing over the sound of the streets, and could hear the grass snap when their droppings dropped fresh. He looked up and down the park once, then moved to the other side of the tree, out of the wind, and sat to read the paper by the streetlight before walking. Tonight he was glad to be tired; to Yuen tiredness was the only explanation for his nervousness. He would go home early; there was nothing else to do here, and he would sleep through his day off, or at least, late into the morning.

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He entered the kitchen and snorted a breath through his nose. He was home to the smell of cooking and greasy sweat of waitresses. His employer wiped her forehead with the back of her arm and asked him why he had come back so early; she did not expect him back until dinnertime tomorrow and was he sick? He answered, "Yes," lying to avoid conversation. He asked her where Freddy, her son, was, and she said that he was upstairs sleeping. Yuen nodded, "Of course, it's late isn't it," he said, avoiding the stare of her greasy eyes, and went upstairs. He looked once around the kitchen before turning at the first landing. He saw the large refrigerators and the steam table, being objects that made work for him, and he realized that he was truly tired now, and sighed the atmosphere of his day off out of his body. "You're trying to walk too straight, anyway, Yuen," his employer said from the bottom of the stairs. He did not understand her and went on up the stairs.

At the top of the stairs he turned and walked down the hall past the room of his employer and her husband, and past Freddy's room, toward his own room next to the lavatory. Facing the door, on the other side of the hall was a standup wardrobe, a box with two doors and rack inside for clothes, where waitresses kept their white and black uniforms and changed their clothes. A redheaded waitress was sitting inside the wardrobe smoking a cigarette. She sat between hanging clothes with her back against the back of the wardrobe, her legs crossed and stretching out of the box. One naked heel turned on the floor, back and forth, making her legs jump to the rhythm of her nervous breathing.

Yuen walked slowly down the hall, his head down, and his fingers feeling the edges of his long hair that tickled the tops of his ears. He looked down to the floor but could not still see the bare legs jutting from out of the box, the long muscles under the thighs shaking to the turning heel. He knew she was ugly. He snorted and walked close to the far wall; he would walk past her and not look at her. She

did not move her legs. He stopped and leaned against the wall and stepped one foot high over her legs, then lifted his other foot and gingerly swung it over the waitress' ankles. As the foot was over her ankles he glanced into the box and saw her pull a strap over her shoulder and giggle. He hopped to keep his balance and she kicked his ankle as she said, "Hiya, Yuen." The old man tripped, stepped down quickly and stumbled. He felt his shoe scrape the waitress' leg to blood and heard her short squeal. He turned in his fall and threw an arm toward her and kept falling with his legs tangled with hers. The waitress' legs twisted against his and she turned over to look for her cigarette inside the box. The nylon slip made her rump gleam as it swung up and down in front of Yuen's face, and he sat on the floor far from his face, far away from anywhere, confused and dazed from his fall as he watched her rump jiggle against her slip and heard her shouting and pounding after her cigarette inside the box. Huie had wanted to stuff his head into an American woman's armpit, and Yuen looked but did not know where her armpits were. He began to feel the jabs of her toes paining into him as she crawled deeper into the box. He rolled over onto his belly and grunted himself up to his hands and knees. He had dropped his hat and could not find it. He was pure unembarrassed angry now and slapped at the waitress' feet each time she jabbed him. He could not find his hat. He looked under the waitress.

The waitress stood from out of the wardrobe and pulled her slip straight around her belly. She looked down to Yuen, his head nodding, dangling on his neck. He looked like a large bird feeding on something dead, and the waitress laughed. "Come on there, Yuen," the waitress said, "I was just playing," and bent to help the man up. She took his shoulders with her hands and began pulling gently. The door to the bathroom was open and the light through the doorway shone white on the front of her powdered face. Yuen saw her face looking very white with flecks of powder falling from light hairs over her grin, a very white face on a grey wrinkled neck and a chest warped with wrinkled skin veined like blue cheese and thin muscles. He did not like her smiling and chuckling and breathing into his face.

"Are you all right now, Yuen?" she asked. He did not understand. He felt her holding him and saw her smiling and saw her old breasts quiver against her hanging slip and the skin of her chest stretch across her ribs, not at all like the women in calendars and magazines, Yuen thought. He took his shoulders closer to his body and she still held him, squeezing the muscle of his arm with strong hands, and pulled him towards her and muttered something in her rotten throated voice. He leaned away from her and patted his head to show that he was looking for his hat. He chanced a grin.

She looked at his head and moved her fingers

through his hair. "I don't see a bump, honey. Where does it hurt?"

He felt her body close to his face. The smell of her slip hung into his breathing. He was angry because he felt that she thought he was stupid. "My hat! My hat!" he shouted in Chinese. He took an invisible hat and put it on his head and tapped the brim with his hands.

The waitress, also on her knees now, moved toward him and felt his head. "Where does it hurt?" she said. "I don't feel nothin' but your head."

He stood quickly and leaned against the wall and glared stupidly at her.

"I was just trying to see if you're hurt, Yuen," the waitress said. "Did I touch your sore or something?" She held her arms out and stood. A strap fell from her shoulder; she ignored it and stretched her neck and reached toward him with her fingers. "I was just joking when I kicked you, honey. I thought it was funny, the way you was stepping over me, see?" All Yuen could hear were whines and giggles in her voice. He shook his head. He held his coat closed with his hands and shoved at her with his head, "Go away, Hui Yah!"

A door opened and Freddy stepped into the hall in his underwear. "What'sa wrong?" he asked. The waitress turned then, fixed her slip and brushed her dry hair out of her face. "Make him understand, will you?" she said, pointing to Yuen. She jabbed her arm at Yuen again. "Him, he's . . ." she crossed her eyes and pointed at her head.

"She's drunk!" Yuen said, "Tell her to go away."

"I was joking, tell him. I didn't mean to hurt his old head."

"Don't let her touch you, she's crazy tonight."

"Do something! I can't."

"What? What?" Freddy said, "What? I don't know what you're talking."

The waitress was in front of the boy now and trying to explain. Yuen stepped quickly down the hall and pushed the boy into his room and closed the door. "Go to sleep . . . your stomach will hurt," he said.

"What'd you push me for?" the boy asked in English. He kicked the door and tried to open it, but Yuen held the knob. The boy shouted and began to cry.

"Coffee," Yuen said to the waitress and pointed to her, meaning that she should go have coffee. The waitress nodded quickly and took a robe from the wardrobe and went downstairs.

Yuen went to his room without looking for his hat. The boy opened his door and followed Yuen and stood in the doorway and watched Yuen hang his overcoat in his closet. Yuen did not notice the boy and locked the door in his face.

The old man put a hand under his shirt and rubbed the sweat under his armpit. He loosened his

belt and flapped the waist of his underwear before lying on top of his bed. He felt under his pillow for his revolver; it was big in his hand. Then he swallowed to slow his breath and sat up to untie his shoes.

He saw the dark stain of blood on the heel of his right shoe and dropped it onto the floor. 'I guess I can't tell,' he thought, 'She'll say I kicked her.' He rapped the wall to speak to Freddy. "Wei, Freddy, don't tell, all right?"

"I don't know what you're talking. You . . ." Yuen heard nothing through the wall a moment. He wished that Freddy knew Chinese better than he did. "You hit me in the face," Freddy said.

"I didn't."

"You did, and it hurt."

"I'm sorry then. Does your stomach hurt?"

"You hit me in the face."

"Uhhh," Yuen groaned, and rolled away from the wall. He would buy Freddy a funnybook in the morning; he would buy Freddy a dozen funnybooks and a candy bar in the morning. He leaned back into bed and began unbuttoning his shirt.

He stopped and blinked a moment; someone knocked at his door again. He felt for his revolver.

"I got some coffee, Yuen bak, old uncle, are you all right; Anna says you hurt your head," he heard Freddy's mother say.

"Go away."

"But Anna says you want coffee. Have you been drinking?"

"I don't want coffee."

"Since you're here, I told the colored boy not to come in tomorrow morning . . . What's your hat doing in the bathroom?"

"Leave it," Yuen said, "Just leave it, I'll get it in the morning." He coughed and rolled over on the bed and coughed once into his pillow.

"You got a letter today . . . with your American name on it, Nelson Yuen Fong . . . your name looks nice," the voice outside said.

"What?" Yuen mumbled.

"Nothing. I'll keep it until tomorrow for you."

He coughed phlegm up from his chest, held it in his mouth, then swallowed it. His face was warm in his own breath against the pillow; he relaxed the tightness of his closed eyes for sleep . . . 'My hat's probably all dirty if it's in the bathroom . . .' and did not get up to shut the light.

The hallway outside was quiet now. He felt his eyes smarting and feeling dirty. He was not sure whether or not he was asleep. It was late; the night was wider, higher without lights on the horizon or lengths of sound filling the streets. The air was not silent but excited without noise. Yuen could hear sounds on the edge of hearing, and, listening for them, the small sounds of almost voices and cars somewhere, he occasionally heard nothing. Perhaps he was sleeping when he heard nothing, he thought.

If he opened his eyes now, he would know . . . but he could not open his eyes now, for he decided that he was asleep, sleeping, finally.

"How was it when we met?" he thought. He flexed his shoulders and put his arms about himself and lay on his side, his legs crossed, and he remembered himself, then, coming up the stairs one day with hot smoke from his waterpipe thickening and pleasant in his lungs. He had stopped in his doorway to see a small boy with large potato chip ears holding his revolver. He had thought it was his son at seeing the boy's knees. That was funny. That was laughable now.

*Tomorrow he would buy Freddy a dozen funnybooks and a big candy bar, even if he was not angry any more.*

And now truly asleep he was sitting at a table with this boy, but the boy's head was that of his own son, then the head of Huie's dead brother with scrambled eggs flecking the lips. It was a huge head with all the flesh looking soft as if it had been boiled for soup. Yuen wiped the boy's lip but more egg came up where he had wiped the egg until the lips were gone. And the boy laughed and took Yuen's hand and pulled him up. They walked from the table and were in a field with a birdless sky above them, smooth as skin and blue as veins. The boy pointed, and there, on the edge of the world was the peach tree, and they dropped their trousers about their legs together, and urinated the long distance to the tree and watched the streams of their yellow liquid gleaming under the bright sky. They urinated a very long time, and Yuen was surprised. He squinted to see if he was reaching the tree. The boy was laughing and urinating at Yuen's feet now, making mud and splattering piss onto the man's legs. "What are you doing?" he asked.

"Coffee," the boy answered in the waitress' voice and laughed. Birds, small black, with long wings were flying from the horizon now, coming low and fast from behind the boy.

"Was it that I didn't pray?"

"Coffee!" the boy answered.

Yuen was sinking; he could feel the lips of mud clinging to his ankles now. And the birds, silent except for the sound of wings, dived on him. "I'm going to die. Too moochie shiyet, I'm going to die," he said, still fertilizing the peach tree on the horizon. He was not shouting. "It's true!" He awoke to his own voice and the sound of curtains in the wind. His eyes were staring straight up with thick moisture over them. He felt under the sheets around his ankles to see if there was any wet. There was not. He got up and spat into the wash basin, then turned out the light, listened to the silence a moment for the sound of waitresses in the hall, then returned to sleep.

He bathed with his underwear on this morning and plugged the keyhole with toilet paper. He

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combed his hair then returned to his room. He had found his hat on the lid of the toilet. He did not like the hat any longer; it was too big and the band was dirty. The dream had left him by the time he went downstairs for breakfast, but he knew he had dreamed.

He sat down at a table at the end of the long steam table. He could hear a waitress laughing shrilly outside in the dining room, not the same waitress as last night, he knew, for the breakfast waitresses were different from the ones at dinner. He took a toothpick from a tin can nailed to the end of the steam table and put it in his mouth and sucked the taste of wood and read his Chinese paper. He did not greet his employer; she was younger than he was and should be the first to give greetings, out of respect. But, she was his employer; he did not think of that very long. He was reading about Chiang Kai-shek making a speech to his army again; he liked Chiang Kai-shek, he decided. Every morning, reading the paper, he decided he liked Chiang Kai-shek; it was a familiar and pleasant thing in his life, and he enjoyed it. "He made a speech to his army again," Yuen said.

Freddy was sitting at the table and said, "He made one last week to the army."

"He's forgotten last night," Yuen thought, and answered, "That was to the farmers. This time it's to the Army. Next week to everybody." This was part of every morning also.

Margie wiped her hands on her apron and sat down next to Yuen. She took an envelope from her pocket and unfolded it. Before removing the letter, she turned to Freddy and said, "Go upstairs and change your pants. And comb your hair."

"I'll be late for school. I gotta eat breakfast."

"Go upstairs, huh? I don't have time to argue!" Margie said.

"Can I use your comb, Yuen bak?"

"You got a comb. Don't bother people. I wanta talk to him."

Yuen gave Freddy his comb, which he kept in a case. Margie watched the boy go past the first landing and out of sight and then took the letter out of the envelope. "I read this letter of yours," she said. She looked straight at Yuen as she spoke, and Yuen resented her look and the way she held his letter. "Who said you could?" he asked, "It might have been from my son; what do you want to read my mail for, when you don't care what else I do?"

"Now you know that's not so," Margie said, "Anyway, it had your American name on it."

"Well . . . What did Anna tell you about last night? You know what she was really trying to do, don't you? I'll tell you, don't believe what she says. She eats scraps, too."

"Oh, Yuen bak, you're so old, she was trying to see if you had a cut or a hurt on your head was all."

"I don't like her anyway," Yuen said. He went to the steam table and ladled cream of wheat into a bowl and sat down to eat it. "What are you looking at? You never see me eat before?"

"Don't you use milk?" Margie asked.

"No, you should know that."

"But your letter, Yuen bak, you're in trouble."

"What for?"

"It's from the immigrants. They want to know if you came into this country legally."

Yuen looked up from his cereal to the powder and rouge of her face, and oil from her Chinese skin had soaked through the mess. She smiled with her lips shut and cheeks pulled in as if sucking something in her mouth. He did not like Margie because she treated him with disdain and made bad jokes, and thought she was beautiful behind the steam table with an apron and earrings. And now she did not seem natural, to Yuen, being kind and trying to soften a harsh voice. "That's a bad joke," Yuen said.

"I'm not joking. Do I look like I'm joking, old uncle?" Here you can read it yourself if you don't believe me." She shoved the letter to him. He pushed his cereal bowl aside and flattened the letter on the table. He put his glasses on, then without touching the letter, bent over it and stared. He saw a printed seal with an eagle. The paper was very white; he noticed, and had a watermark that made another eagle. He removed his glasses and licked his teeth.

"You know I don't read American," he said.

"I know," Margie said, "Why don't you eat your breakfast and I'll tell you what the letter means; then you can get the dishes done."

Yuen nodded and did as she said. She wiped her hands on her apron and told him that the letter said that the immigrants wanted to know if he had any police record in the City of Oakland and that he was to go to the police and have his fingerprints taken. She folded the letter and ran her thumb along the creases, leaving grey marks where her fingers had touched. Yuen took the letter and unfolded it again and put on his glasses again and stared down at the piece of paper. He took a pencil and copied something he saw in the letter on a napkin. "What's this?" he asked, pointing at the napkin.

"That's a 'T'," Margie said.

"What's it mean?"

"It doesn't mean anything; it's just a 'T'."

"Did I make it right?" Yuen asked and saw Margie nod. He lost interest in his 'T' and wiped his face with the napkin. Margie was not his friend, he decided. He sighed and straightened in his seat; he was very conscious of the noises inside him, like the sounds of the night on the edge of hearing, only now, he could feel the noises, in his throat, in the muscles creaking over his shoulder blades. It ached his body to sit straight, to stretch the old skin of his shriveled neck firm and tight as he raised his head to see where

he was. He had to sit straight to feel strength in his muscles now; aching slightly assuaged his fright. He thought about aching and wanting to ache. Every white muscle in his body felt raw and tender with soreness, at the base of his spine, and the muscles from his neck down to his shoulders and the hard muscles behind his armpit; he was conscious of every corner and bend in his body, and all this was inside him, private, the only form of relaxation he had. He wanted to sit back and enjoy himself, ignore the letter for a short moment. He looked to Margie. She looked away and he realized that she knew that he was frightened. He did not want her pity, her face to smile kindly for his sake, for he had always pitied her, and now he hated her and was frightened of her also because he needed her help.

She patted Yuen's shoulder and stood up and went to the foot of the stairs and called for Freddy, "You'll be late for school!" Then to the old man, "I'm going to have to tell him later, you know."

"Freddy," Yuen said, as if beginning a story-reading with the boy.

"Everyone will know sooner or later. They come and ask people questions, the immigrants," Margie said. They could hear Freddy stamping on the floor above them.

Yuen put the letter in his shirt pocket and removed his glasses and put them and the case in the tin can with the toothpicks. He went around the steam table to the dishwashing area, lit the fires under the three sinksful of water and started the electric dishwashing machine.

He put a teaspoonful of disinfectant into the washwater, then a cup of soap powder. He watched the yellow soap turn the water green and look like smoke as the green rose to the top of the water. He turned and saw Freddy sitting at the table again. "Wei, good morning, kid," he shouted, over the noise of the dishwashing machine. He waved a hand and smiled at the boy. Freddy looked up and waved back, then looked back at the breakfast his mother had just set in front of him. "Come here, Freddy, I got some money for funnybooks for you!" Yuen switched off the machine and repeated what he had said in a lower voice.

"Freddy's late for school; he has to eat and run," Margie said. She turned to Freddy and said, "Be sure you come right home from school; don't go to Chinese school today, hear?" She leaned through a space between a shelf and the steam table to see the boy, and steam bloomed up her face and looked like a beard.

"Oh boy!" Freddy said, and Yuen saw that the boy was happy.

"What did you tell him?" he asked Margie.

"That he didn't have to go to Chinese school today."

"Why? Don't you want him to be able to talk Chinese?"

"I want him to take you to the city hall this afternoon and do what that letter says," Margie said. She lifted her head back on her neck to face Yuen, and Yuen looking at her without his glasses on saw her face sitting atop the rising steam.

"I don't want a little boy to help me," he said. "You think I'm a baby? I'll call Jimmy Chan and ask him to help me. Freddy's too young to do anything for me."

Margie flickered a smile then twisted herself out from between the shelf and the steam table. "You've been watching too much television, old uncle, Chinatown's not like that any more. You can't hide there like you used to. Everything's orderly and businesslike now."

"How do you know Chinatown? I don't watch the television. And I know Chinatown. Not everybody is quitting the Chinese ways like you, you know."

"Ham and!" a waitress shouted through the door.

"Ham and!" Margie repeated. "I'm just as much Chinese as you, old uncle, but this is America!"

"What?" the waitress said, jutting her head through the kitchen door again.

"How're the eggs done?" Margie asked.

"Oh, scram'led!"

"Scram'led," Margie said and broke two eggs into a saucepan and began beating them with a large fork. "Listen, Yuen bak, I don't want to get in trouble because of you. I worked hard for this restaurant, and I gave you a job. Who else do you think would give you a job? You're too old to work anywhere else, and you'd have to join the union and learn American talk. You don't want to learn American talk? That's your business, but if you get in trouble here, I'm in trouble too. Now just do what the letter says . . ." she whipped the eggs faster, ". . . and just do what the letter says and don't make any trouble for me." She poured the eggs onto the griddle and turned her back on Yuen to fold the eggs with a spatula.

Yuen jerked his head up and straightened his back, his eyes flicking glances off and on Margie like any angry rooster. "Make trouble for you? I am in trouble!"

"And I'm trying to help you the best way I can. Now let me alone and go back to your dishes. Can't you see I'm nervous? Take the day off. I'll call the colored boy; leave me alone, will you?"

"I'm sorry," Yuen said, "I'll wash the dishes."

"I said take the day off." She quickly slid the spatula under the eggs and slapped them onto a plate. She had forgotten the bacon.

"The bacon," Yuen said.

"Freddy," Margie said, "You don't have time for your breakfast. Go take that little pie in the icebox for your teacher and go to school now."

Freddy looked to Yuen. "I'll walk you to

school," Yuen said. "Be back in time for the dinner dishes," Margie said after Yuen.

Looking down the street, they could see a shattered image of the morning sun on the lake. The grass on the shore was covered with black coots and staggering seagulls. Yuen had his glasses on and could see the trees on the other side of the lake and sailors walking with girls, and he could smell the stagnant water as he walked the other way with Freddy.

The boy watched the ground and stayed inside Yuen's shadow as they walked. Yuen glanced at the boy and saw him playing his game and knew that Freddy had forgotten last night, the waitress and the cripple. They were beyond the smell of the lake now and in the smell of water drying off the sides of washed brick buildings, and Yuen's morning was complete and almost gone. "What are you carrying?" Yuen asked.

"A pie for teacher," Freddy said.

Yuen smiled his wet smile. They stopped at the street that had the train tracks in the center. "Mommy said your hat was in the toilet."

"Do you want to go to San Francisco with me?"

"I can't. I have to go home after school."

"I mean right now. Would you like to go to San Francisco on the train right now?"

"I have to go to school."

"I'll take you to some friends and they'll give you some herbs for your stomach."

"But it doesn't hurt."

"For when it does hurt. They'll give you herbs that will make your stomach stop hurting again." Yuen put a hand on the boy's shoulder and stood in front of him. "I'll buy you a lot of funnybooks and a candy bar . . ."

There were more people on the train now than at night, and the train was dirtier in the day. They caught the train at the end of the line, near Freddy's school. As the train started, it rang its electric bell that sounded like a thousand screaming birds; they were moving noisily across Oakland towards San Francisco. Freddy had to adjust his hold of the pie when Yuen put his arm around the boy's shoulders. He was glad to have the boy with him; he was young and did not have to know what the man was doing, and he enjoyed being with the boy; that was something that he could still enjoy.

The train moved quickly, swaying its cars side to side over the tracks, and Yuen looked only once out of the window to the street full of people. He had been in Oakland for twenty years now, and he still felt uncomfortable in the streets. On the train he could sit and did not have to walk with the people. At night he did not see as many of them. He moved past quickly, out of the shadows of the tall buildings, and was moving down a street lined with low wooden houses now. He could see Negro women with scarves around their big heads, elephant hipped women with

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fat legs walking slowly down the street; the train passed them, and now there were no more houses. They were in the train yards, and the train screamed its electric bell toward the bridge.

They passed broken streetcars and empty trains in the yards, and saw bits of grass growing up between the railroad ties; beyond the yards they could see the flat bay and the brown dung floating next to the shore. And they could smell the bay, dirty and thick smelling. Last night he had slept past this part of the route. "Shiyet," he said for the boy to smile, and the boy smiled. Yuen realized now what he was doing. He was trying to be brave, and knew he would fail. He felt the letter in his coat pocket without touching the letter and thought of how he would take the letter from his pocket to show Jimmy Chan.

The sounds of the wheels on the rails changed in pitch and they were on the bridge now, with shadows of steelwork skipping over their faces. They were above the bay and could see the backs of seagulls gliding parallel to them, their beaks split in answer to the electric bell. Yuen could see the birds stop and hang on the air with their wings stiff, then fall and keep falling until the bridge blocked his vision, and in his mind he counted the splashes on the bay that the seagulls made. He looked down to Freddy again and took Freddy's face in his hands and saw pie on the boy's lips. Freddy took his hand out of the paper bag and grinned. "That's bad for your stomach," Yuen said; he was too nervous to smile, he thought, then, 'No, not nervous, numb.' And suddenly, calmly, he was numb, and that was all he was; it was not pleasant or aggravating, not even lonely. The electric bell sounded and they were moving in a slow curve toward the terminal at the San Francisco end of the line.

Chinatown was very warm and the streets smelled of vegetables and snails set out in front of the shops. Among the shopping Chinese women, Yuen saw small groups of Americans with bright neckties and cameras pointing into windows and playing with flutes or toy dragons inside souvenir shops. Yuen bought Freddy some funnybooks and a small cap pistol and took him to Jimmy Chan's restaurant.

The dining room was dark with chairs stacked on top of the tables. A white jacketed busboy led them between the tables toward the office. Yuen left Freddy outside to read his funnybooks, then went inside after removing his hat.

Jimmy Chan's bow tie was very small against his thick neck, and the tie wriggled like wings when he spoke. Jimmy Chan's dog was walking all over his desk and Jimmy laughed at it when Yuen came in. "It's a chee-wah-wah," he said and asked Yuen to sit.

"How are you?" Yuen asked, "You haven't been to visit me," he said, beginning with courtesies.

"I'm busy. Going bankrupt to hell and damn."

Yuen nodded, then quickly put his hand into his coat pocket. "I got a letter from the United States," Yuen said.

"I can't help with letters from the government. I can't tamper with the government. I'm going to be naturalized next year, but people think I'm a Communist already because I got a big restaurant. I'm going bankrupt. People think I'm a smuggler. I'm not a goddamn all to hell smuggler!" All of his swearing was in English and sounded more obscene breaking the rhythm of his Chinese.

"Maybe you could read the letter?" Yuen held the letter out, and Jimmy Chan put a cigar into his mouth and took the letter. The dog walked over to Jimmy Chan's hands and sniffed, then sniffed at the letter. Yuen said, "Don't let your dog dirty the letter."

"It's a chee-wah-wah. You think I'd let my chee-wah-wah walk on my desk if it was going to dirty things up? . . . I'm sorry if I seemed short-tempered just then, uncle, but you asked with such force. You see, men with letters like this have come in before, and never, never, have they ordered me or asked me anything straight out. I was surprised. You should be in business. You should be a general!" He turned and held the letter up to the light and stared at the watermark. "Fine paper they use," he said, and patted the dog.

"I thought you could give me some advice."

"You don't want advice," Jimmy Chan said, "You want me to help you. Perform a miracle. But you said advice. I'll take you on your word and give you advice. There is no advice I can give you. Just do what the letter says. Want me to translate it? It says go to the police. Get your fingerprints made. Get your record of arrests and have the police send a copy to the government. It says it's only routine. Right here, just like this, 'I am routine.'"

"They might send me back to China."

"Not if you're all legal."

"Well, still . . ."

"Uncle, my sympathy is free. My advice too. I sympathize with you. You can't hide from them. They even have Chinese working for them; so you can't hide. I sympathize with you, but the only Chinese that get ahead are those that are professional Chinese. You didn't know that when you came here, and now you're just another Chinese person that's just stoically all Chinese and in trouble. I can't help you."

"You could write a letter for me telling them I'm all right," Yuen said. He leaned back as Jimmy Chan pushed papers to both sides with his hands and elbows.

"Uncle. I don't know you're all right. And I don't want to know. I'd like to help you; I'm grateful to your generation, but you're all anachronisms. You could have avoided all your

trouble if you had realized that Americans like Chinese as novelties. Look at me. I'm happy; I like Americans. I'm becoming an American citizen, not because I want to be like Americans, but because it's good business; it makes Americans happy to think that I belong to them. Look! They like Chinese better than Negroes because we're not black; they don't like us as much as Germans or Norwegians because we're not white. They like us better than Jews because we're smaller. But! They don't like chauvinist Chinese because they remind them of the Indians. So . . ." he clapped his hands together and spread them and glanced around at his office, then adjusted his bow tie and grinned. "This is being a professional Chinese!"

"I don't like Indians," was all Yuen could say.

"But helping you would be bad for me. So I write a letter for you. I'm investigated, and then I get a letter. I don't become a citizen. Nobody likes me. Your people don't like me any more because I'm nobody and you'll say I stepped on you by trying to become a citizen and a professional Chinese. I have no friends. You see? I'm in more trouble than you."

"I'm going then, thank you," Yuen said and stood. There was no anger in his voice, and, looking at Jimmy Chan, Yuen could see that Jimmy recognized this reaction in him also.

"Listen, uncle," Jimmy said from his seat, "Don't do anything goddamn silly, if I can help with anything else, I'll be happy to do it. Want a job?"

"No," Yuen said and started to leave.

"Uncle, I trust you. I know you have a job and all that. You're respected here; I know that too." Jimmy stood and took a long time to walk around his desk to Yuen's side. He put an arm around his shoulders. "You are a wise man . . . if you die; die of old age. I feel bad when I can't help, and I feel real bad when men die." He grinned and opened the door for the old man, "But you're a wise man."

"Didn't even offer a drink," Yuen said outside with the boy.

Pigeons dropped from the sky to walk between the feet of people, and ate grains dropped from the cages of squabs and chickens in front of poultry shops. "Stupid birds," Yuen said, "Someone will catch one and eat it." He laughed and the boy laughed.

"I'm hungry," Freddy said. Yuen nodded and pointed at the pie still in Freddy's hands, then shrugged and went to eat.

As they left the restaurant, Yuen walked quickly. He held Freddy's hand and pulled him down the streets and pointed at fire escapes and told him what Tongs were there and what he had seen when he had been at parties there, and he walked over iron gratings in the sidewalk and pointed down inside and told Freddy that at night music could be heard

down there; they passed men sitting next to magazine stands and shook hands. Then Yuen went to the bank and withdrew all his money in the form of a money order and borrowed a sheet of paper and an envelope, and in Chinese, wrote his son: "This is all the money I have. You will not get any more. I'm dead. Your father." He put the letter and money order in the envelope, addressed it, then went to the post office branch and mailed it. San Francisco was nothing to him now. He had said goodbye to his friends and seen the places he used to visit. They were all dirty in this daylight. The value of his death, to himself, was that nothing in his life was important; he had finished with his son and his friends and San Francisco, now he was going home. The tops of the buildings were shiny with their white tile and flags, Yuen saw. 'Jimmy Chan was wrong,' he thought, 'but he helped me start the finish. I'm a very lucky man to know when all I am to do in life is done and it's time to die. Jimmy Chan is too mercenary to know that. He doesn't know the difference between me and Huie's dead brother; that's unfortunate.' But Yuen knew himself well enough not to have to cringe or make excuses. He walked quickly down the hill, believing himself to the bus stop. Freddy had to run to keep up with him.

"What'd you take him to San Francisco for? And why'd you go, anyway? Do you know I had to wash all the dishes and cook too; that colored boy wasn't home, you know," Margie said, "You think I'm a machine or something."

"No, I'm sorry," Yuen said. Margie would not understand if he explained that he was all right now, he thought, so he did not try to explain. He smiled.

"Well, you have to hurry if you're going to get back in time for the dinner dishes. I'm sorry, ah bak, old uncle, but I'm all worried. All right?" She put a hand on his shoulder.

"All right."

Margie took the letter from Yuen's pocket and sat down at the kitchen table and looked at the letter. Yuen sat down next to her and put a toothpick in his mouth. Margie stared down at the letter and began scratching a slow circle around a breast. She talked to Freddy without looking at him. "Uncle's in trouble . . . Freddy, I mean uncle's got to go to the police and get his pictures taken. And you have to take him and help him answer questions police will ask in this letter."

"I been walk all day, mommy. I don't wanta walk no more," Freddy said, "Why don't you go?"

"What do you mean?" Her voice lifted shrill, startling Yuen. "How can I go?"

"You got a car," Freddy said, stepping backwards. "Listen," Margie said, "You take this letter . . ." she lifted the letter and pinned it with a safety pin inside Freddy's coat. "And you go to where the fingerprint place is and you tell them to read it, that the United States Immigrators want

them to read it, and that everybody like Yuen bak, huh? And you take him." She gave the boy some crackers to eat on the way and helped Yuen stand.

"Do you know how to get there?" Yuen asked at every corner. They walked streets full of rush hour traffic, walked past parking meters, a gymnasium, and Yuen put an arm about Freddy and held him. "Where are we in all this?" Yuen asked and pushed Freddy toward the edge of the sidewalk with each word.

"We got to go fast now, Yuen bak, or the police will close," the boy said.

The streets were not crowded, but everywhere on the sidewalks, along the sides of buildings Yuen saw people walking, all of their eyes staring somewhere beyond him, the pads of fat next to their stiff mouths trembling with their step. They all moved past him easily, without actually avoiding him. Yuen held the boy's hand and walked, numbing himself to the people.

The long corridor of the city hall was full of the sound of feet and shaking keys against leather-belted hips, and waxed reflections of the outside light through the door at the corridor's end, shrunk and twisted on the floor, as they walked further down, past briefcased, hatted men, nose-picking policemen, newspaper vendors with aprons. "Where do we go?" Yuen asked.

"I don't know," Freddy said, "I can't read all the doors."

In a low voice, almost as smooth as a woman's, Yuen said, "Do you see any Chinese around? Ask one, he'll help us." His hand rested on the back of Freddy's neck, and was very still there as they walked.

"Excuse me. . ." a large man said, walking into them, and they were trying to walk through each other a moment, then they were falling with the large man holding Freddy's head and shouting with a grunt of excuse me's; their legs all tangled, they fell together into a soft crash. The man stood and brushed himself and said, "I'm sorry, coming out of my office, lot on my mind; you all right? Your father looks sick. . ."

"I have a letter," Freddy said and opened his jacket to show the letter pinned to the inside of the collar.

"What's this?" the man asked, bending again. "A safety pin. All you people are safety pinning each other, my god," he muttered. He took the letter and took a long grunt to stand up. Freddy turned and helped Yuen, who was still on the floor, waiting, and staring with drool over his lips up to the man. Yuen lifted himself to a crouch, rested, then stood and held Freddy.

"Immigration people want him fingerprinted," the man said, "You poor kid. Do you live under the freeway project?" He brushed his hair under his hat as he spoke. "I'll take you there. It's upstairs."

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Don't worry, if things go bad, you can call me, Councilman Papagannis. I'll find you a nice foster home. Conditions must be very bad for you people under the freeway project." He adjusted his hat with his fat fingertips and walked quickly upstairs, swinging his arms after them with each step. They walked into a narrow hall with benches, and at a desk, sitting on a high stool, in front of a typewriter, his sleeves rolled sloppily over his elbows, was a police sergeant, typing. "You can wash that ink stuff off your fingers in there, through that office, you see?" he was saying as they walked up to his desk. "What do you want? You'll have to wait in line. All these men here are in a hurry to get fingerprinted, too."

"But I got a letter and supposed to tell you how people like Yuen bak, him." Freddy pulled Yuen to the desk.

"What?" the police sergeant said.

"Immigration people want him fingerprinted and photographed," Councilman Papagannis said. "Here's the letter. I'm Councilman Papagannis. I'd like to see them out of here in a hurry, you know, for the boy's sake." The Councilman shook his head and removed his tight-fitting hat.

"Says here they want a copy of his record, too," the police sergeant said.

"Well, do it!" the councilman said, stuffing himself between Yuen and the boy. The police sergeant took out a form sheet and put it in the typewriter; then he picked up the telephone and asked for the city's record on Nelson Yuen Fong. He put the telephone down and looked up to the councilman. "Never heard of him," he said.

"Nefarious," the councilman said.

The police sergeant removed Yuen's hat with a short motion of his arm, "Hair color, grey," he said and began typing. He dropped the hat onto Yuen's head.

Yuen took the hat from his head and looked inside the brim. "What for?" he asked.

"Nothing," Freddy said and took the hat and held it. Yuen watched now, his eyes wide with the lids almost folding over. This was all a fine joke for Yuen now. They were all so somber for his sake, and he had finished already. He could say anything and they would not understand, but Freddy might understand a little, and Freddy was too young to see the humor of the situation. 'Freddy should not be here,' Yuen thought, 'I'll buy him some funnybooks when we leave; he'll like that and won't feel so bad.'

Freddy yanked Yuen up to the edge of the police sergeant's desk and held his sleeve tightly. "How much do you weigh?" the police sergeant asked.

"He don't talk American," Freddy said.

"What is he?"

"He's alien," Freddy said.

"I mean, is he Filipino, Japanese, Hawaiian?"

"He's Chinese."

"Fine," the police sergeant said and typed, "Now ask him how much he weighs."

Freddy pulled at Yuen's coat until the man half knelt. Freddy's first word was in English, and Yuen frowned, then smiled. The boy stamped his foot and glared from the police sergeant to Yuen. He never knew the boy would ever hate him for not being able to speak American.

"You are how heavy?"

"What do you mean?" Yuen asked, "I can't understand you."

"You are how many pounds?"

"What's your old man say, boy?"

"We don't talk good together yet," Freddy said in English, and in slow Chinese, "You are HOW MANY POUNDS?" The boy stood straight and shouted, "How heavy the pounds?"

"Oh, how many pounds do I weigh?" Yuen grinned and nodded to the police sergeant. The police sergeant nodded and pointed at Yuen's stomach then patted his own belly. "Hundred and thirty pounds heavy," Yuen said.

"Hundred and thirty pounds," Freddy said. The police sergeant typed.

After the questions, the police sergeant stepped down from his high stool and held Yuen's arms. "Tell him we're going to take his picture now, boy." Freddy told Yuen, and Yuen asked Freddy to ask the police sergeant if he could comb his hair before being photographed. The men laughed when Freddy asked.

Freddy stepped away from Yuen and held the light blue stripe of the police sergeant's trousers. Yuen turned his head and combed his hair.

The police sergeant kicked a lever that turned Yuen's seat around. The police sergeant snapped a picture. Yuen yelled once and stared at Freddy. "Atta boy, Nelson," the police sergeant said, "Now for fingerprints." He took the frames from the camera and tapped Freddy next to the ear. "Tell him to get down now."

"Yuen bak, get down now."

They walked home with the first blue of the dark night coming. Yuen patted the boy's shoulder and kept asking him to stop and buy some funnybooks, but the boy pulled Yuen's sleeve and walked quickly, saying that he was hungry. "Come on, Yuen bak, I'm hungry," Freddy would say when the old man stopped to sit on garbage cans and nod his head at street corners. He sat as if he would sit forever, without moving his body or fixing grey hairs that the wind loosened, his head nodding slowly like a sleeping pigeon's. "Are you mad at me?"

"No," the boy said quickly.

"Your mother's waiting for us, isn't she?" he said, then stood and walked further and said, "You're a funny son. . ."

He touched the boy as he walked and muttered to himself louder as they neared the hotel restaurant.

All his old age shook in his thick-veined hands as he tried to gently touch Freddy's nose or his ears or to poke the soft of the boy's cheeks. "You're almost as tall as me. . . did you see the policeman's face when he saw me?" He stopped to look at the boy. In his slouch walk they were very close to the same height. Before he would have been disturbed to be the same height as a young boy. He took a breath and tried to straighten, then sighed; he was too tired, but that was not important. "And that chair . . ."

He walked slower as they came to the back door of the restaurant. He looked up to the light over the door with pigeon droppings on the hood. That light had gone out only once while he was here, and he had changed the light bulb himself, he remembered, and had polished the hood and wiped the bulb. It was his favorite light in the whole restaurant, perhaps because it was the light that had helped him open the door when he returned from San Francisco, or perhaps because it was the only light outside. "It's stupid to think about a lightbulb," he thought, but he could enjoy stupidity now, after all this time of trying to be smart.

He could hear Margie shouting the names of foods back to waitresses as if she was swearing, and could hear the sound of cold meat touching the grill, of running water, the heavy door of the tall icebox slamming. He waited to open the door and held Freddy's wrists together with one hand; then both hands were twisting Freddy's wrists. He shuddered and closed his eyes. "Help me upstairs," he said, "I don't feel well."

He leaned heavily on the boy, pushed him against the wall as they walked; the boy pushing at Yuen each stair up to his room.

In his room, Yuen sighed and fell backwards to his bed. He stared a moment to the ceiling. The boy did not leave the room. Yuen closed his eyes and pulled at his nose and wiped it with his fingers and smiled to the boy as he raised his face to stare at Freddy. He saw the boy clearly now, and the smile on his face closed, but his mouth remained open to loud breath. It no longer felt like a face, no part of him, his skin, his fingers, nothing felt like anything of his now; it all felt old and very dry and hot. "I have an idea," he said slowly, and took the gun from under his pillow. "We used to try to swallow our tongues to choke ourselves when we were scared, but we always spit them out, or couldn't get them down . . . I want you to watch so you can tell them I wanted to."

"I don't know what you're talking," the boy said, staring at the gun.

"I'm going to die myself," Yuen said in Chinese the boy would understand.

The boy stared and moved his face without speaking for a long time. "Who? You . . . what are you doing?"

"Your mother can find a dishwasher. She's a good businesswoman."

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"Who'll buy books?"

Yuen pointed the gun at one ear, then switched hands and pointed the gun at the other ear. He looked at the gun and held it with both hands and pointed it at his mouth, aiming it into the mouth, toward the bulge at the back of his head. "Is that all I am to you?" He was angry at the boy now, even though he knew the boy did not know anything to say. The boy hit himself with a fist and shouted, "Yuen bak!" Freddy leaned and fell backwards, stepped once toward the old man before stopping against the towel rack. Then Freddy was weeping and groaning, holding a pain in his shoulder where he had hit.

Yuen looked over the gun and watched the boy's rhythmless stumblings in the close room. He released the hammer to safe and sighed a longer sigh than he had breath. "Can't do nothing . . ." he muttered. He went to the boy and pulled him to the bed and wiped over the boy's head with his hand. "It's all right, Freddy," Yuen worked for enough breath to speak. He bent to untie his shoes, dropping the gun to the floor when his fingers could not work the shoelaces. "Will you help me bathe? I feel . . . very weak." "I've failed," Yuen thought, but he had known he would, had expected it.

"Yes."

"I have soap; you can have some, if you like."

"I have soap too."

He patted the boy's shoulders with his hands and clutched into them with fingers as he pulled himself to standing. "You're a funny son," he said before turning to undress. "Help me with this."

Freddy held a towel about Yuen's pale waist as he took him out of his room to the bathroom and helped him into the tub. Freddy plugged the tub and turned on the water. Yuen eased himself lower into the water and did not complain about the temperature. He leaned forward and asked the boy to scrub his back. His body was loose over his bones, and the same color as his colorless wrists, with thick veins through the skin. He took the boy's hand and looked onto his face with eyes covered with thick moisture like the white of an egg. "You didn't write me," he said clearly, and, his body quivering, rippling water away from his waist, Yuen died. He closed his eyes with his mouth opening to the shape of a sigh, and at the end of the sigh, his chest low into the shapes of ribs, he was dead. There was no more for him; he had finished it.

Freddy took his hands from the water and put his cheek on the edge of the tub. His death had seemed so impersonal, as if he had given up the boy also. The boy tried to work his face to tears once more, as he felt he should, tears not all for Yuen, but for himself now because Yuen had been *his*.

Margie came up the stairs and walked down the hall noisily, saying, "Well, how did it go, you two?" before she leaned her head into the bathroom. \*

## Food for All His Dead

*"Jus' forty-fie year 'go, Doctah Sun Yat-sen free China from da Manchus. Dats' why all us Chinee, alla ovah da woil, are celebrate Octob' tan or da Doubloo Tan . . . !"*

The shouted voice came through the open bathroom window. The shouting and music was still loud after rising through the night's dry air; white moths jumped on the air, danced through the window over the voice, and lighted quickly on the wet sink, newly reddened from his father's

attack. Johnny's arms were around his father's belly, holding the man upright against the edge of the sink to keep the man's mouth high enough to spit lung blood into the drain. . . .

The man's belly shrank and filled against Johnny's arms as the man breathed and spat, breathed and spat, the belly shrinking and filling. The breaths and bodies against each other shook with horrible rhythms that could not be numbed out of Johnny's mind. "Pride," Johnny thought, "pa's pride for his reputation for doing things . . . except dying. He's not proud of dying, so it's a secret between father and son. . . ." At the beginning of the man's death, when he had been Johnny's father, still commanding and large, saying, "Help me. I'm dying; don't tell," and removing his jacket and walking to the bathroom. Then came the grin—pressed lips twisted up into the cheeks—hiding the gathering blood and drool. Johnny had cried then, knowing his father would die. But now the man seemed to have been always dying and Johnny always waiting, waiting with what he felt was a coward's loyalty to the dying, for he helped the man hide his bleeding and was sick himself, knowing he was not waiting for the man to die but waiting for the time after death when he could relax.

*" . . . free from da yoke of Manchu slab'ry, in'epen'ence, no moah queue<sup>1</sup> on da head! Da's wha'fo' dis big a parade! An' here, in San Francisco, alla us Chinee-'mellican 're pwowd! . . . "*

"It's all gone . . . I can't spit any more. Get my shirt, boy. I'm going to make a speech tonight. . . ." The man slipped from the arms of the boy and sat on the toilet lid and closed his mouth. His bare chest shone as if washed with dirty cooking oil and looked as if he should have been chilled, not sweating, among the cold porcelain and tile of the bathroom.

To the sound of herded drums and cymbals, Johnny wiped the sweat from his father's soft body and dressed

<sup>1</sup> queue (kyōō): pigtail.

him without speaking. He was full of the heat of wanting to cry for his father but would not.

His father was heavier outside the house.

They staggered each other across the alleyway to the edge of Portsmouth Square. They stood together at the top of the slight hill, their feet just off the concrete onto the melted fishbone grass, and could see the brightly lit reviewing stand, and they saw over the heads of the crowd, the dark crowd of people standing in puddles of each other, moving like oily things and bugs floating on a tide; to their left, under trees, children played and shouted on swings and slides; some ran toward Johnny and his father and crouched behind their legs to hide from giggling girls. And they could see the street and the parade beyond the crowd. The man stood away from the boy but held tightly to Johnny's arm. The man swallowed a greasy sound and grinned. "I almost feel I'm not dying now. Parades are like that. I used to dance the Lion Dance in China, boy. I was always in the parades."

Johnny glanced at his father and saw the man's eyes staring wide with the skin around the eyes stretching for the eyes to open wider, and Johnny patted his father's shoulder and watched the shadows of children running across the white sand of the play area. He was afraid of watching his father die here; the man was no longer like his father or a man; perhaps it was the parade. But the waiting, the lies and waiting so long with a flesh going to death that the person was no longer real as a life but a parody of live things, grinning. The man was a fish drying and shrinking inside its skin on the sand, crazy, mimicking swimming, Johnny thought, but a fish could be lifted and slapped against a stone, thrown to cats; for his father, Johnny could only wait and help the man stay alive without helping him die. "That's probably where you got the disease," Johnny said.

"Where, boy?"

"Back in China."

"No, I got it here. I was never sick for one day in China."

The man began walking down the hill toward the crowd.

"Back in China. . . ."

They walked down the hill, the man's legs falling into steps with his body jerking after his falling legs; Johnny held his father, held the man back to keep him from falling over his own feet. The man's breath chanted dry and powdered out of his mouth and nostrils to the rhythm of the drums, and his eyes stared far ahead into the parade; his lips opened and showed brick-colored teeth in his grin. "Not so fast, *ah-bah!*" Johnny shouted and pulled at his father's arm. He was always frightened at the man's surges of nervous life.

"Don't run," Johnny said, feeling his father's muscles stretch as he pulled Johnny down the hill toward the crowd. "Stop running, pal!" And his father was running and breathing out fog into the hot night and sweating dirty oil, and trembling his fleshy rump inside his baggy trousers, dancing in stumbles with dead senses. "Pa, not so fast, dammit! You're going to have another attack! Slow down!"

"I can't stop, boy."

They were in the shadow of the crowd now, and children chased around them.

"Look! There they are!" the man said.

*"Dere you're, ladies and genullmans! Eben da lion are bow in respack to us tonight!"*

The crowd clapped and whistled, and boys shoved forward to see. Old women, roundbacked in their black overcoats, lifted their heads to smile; they stood together and nodded, looking like clumps of huge beetles with white faces.

"Closer to the platform, boy; that's where I belong," the man said. He leaned against Johnny's shoulder and coughed out of his nostrils. Johnny heard the man swallow and cringed. The man was grinning again, his eyes anxious, the small orbs jumping scared spiders all over the sockets. "Aren't you happy you came, boy? Look at all the people."

"Take time to catch your breath, *ah-bah*. Don't talk. It's wrong for you to be here anyhow."

"Nothing's wrong, boy; don't you see all your people happy tonight? As long as . . ." he swallowed and put his

head against Johnny's cheek, then made a sound something like laughter, "as I've been here . . . do you understand my Chinese?" Then slowly in English, catching quick breaths between his words, "I be here, allabody say dere chillren're gonna leab Chinatong and go way, but 'snot so, huh?" His voice was low, a guttural monotone. "Look a'em all; dey still be Chinee. I taught da feller dat teach dem to dance how to do dat dancer boy. Johnny? dis're you home, here, an' I know you gat tire, but alla you fran's here, an' dey likee you." His face was speaking close to Johnny and chilled the boy's face with hot breath.

The boy did not look at his father talking to him but stared stiffly out to the street, watching the glistening arms of boys jerking the bamboo skeletons of silk-hided lions over their heads. His father was trying to save him again, Johnny thought, trying to be close like he had been to him how long ago when his father was a hero from the war. The man spoke as if he had saved his life to talk to his son now, tonight, here among the eyes and sounds of Chinese.

"I'm sorry, *ah-bah*, I can't help it . . ." was all Johnny could answer sincerely. He knew it would be cruel to say, "Pa, I don't want to be a curiosity like the rest of the Chinese here. I want to be something by myself," so he did not, not only because of the old man, but because he was not certain he believed himself; it had been easy to believe his own shouted words when he was younger and safe with his parents; it had been easy not to like what he had then—when he knew he could stay; then, when the man was fat and not dying, they were separate and could argue, but not now; now he was favored with the man's secret; they were horribly bound together now. The old man was dying and still believing in the old ways, still sure—even brave, perhaps—and that meant something to Johnny.

*"An' you see dam bow in respack now, an' da's good lucks to ev'eybody!"*

The lion dancers passed, followed by a red convertible with boys beating a huge drum on the back seat.

Johnny knew the parades; the lion dancers led the wait for the coming of the long dragon, and the end. The ends of the parades with the dragon were the most exciting, were the loudest moment before the chase down the streets to keep the dragon in sight. He was half aware of the air becoming brittle with the noise of the dances and the crowd, and, with his father now, was almost happy, almost anxious, dull, the way he felt when he was tired and staring in a mirror, slowly realizing that he was looking at his own personal reflection; he felt pleased and depressed, as if he had just prayed for something.

"You know," the man said, "I wan' you to be somebody here. Be doctor, mak' moneys and halp da Chinee, or lawyer, or edgenerer, make moneys and halp, and people're respack you." He patted the boy's chest. "You tall me now you won' leab here when I die, hokay?"

"I don't know, pa." The boy looked down to the trampled grass between his feet and shrugged off what he did not want to say. They were hopeless to each other now. He looked over his shoulder to his father and could not answer the chilled face, and they stared a close moment onto each other and were private, holding each other and waiting.

Policemen on motorcycles moved close to the feet of the crowd to move them back. The boys wearing black-and-red silk trousers and white sweatshirts, coaxing the clumsy dragon forward with bells and shafts, could be seen now; they were dancing and shouting past the reviewing stand. The dragon's glowing head lurched side to side, rose and fell, its jaw dangling after the goading boys. As the dragon writhed and twisted about itself, boys jumped in and out from under its head and belly to keep the dragon fresh.

"Maybe I'm not Chinese, pa! Maybe I'm just a Chinese accident. You're the only one that seems to care that I'm Chinese." The man glared at the boy and did not listen. "Pa, most of the people I don't like are Chinese. They even *laugh* with accents, Christ!" He turned his head from the man, sorry for what he said. It was too late to apologize.

"You dare to talk to your father like that?" the man shouted in Chinese. He stood back from the boy, raised

himself and slapped him, whining through his teeth as his arm swung heavily toward the boy's cheek. "You're no son of mine! No son! I'm ashamed of you!"

The shape of the bamboo skeleton was a shadow within the thinly painted silk of the dragon, and boys were shouting inside.

"Pa, *ah-bah*, I'm sorry."

"Get me up to the platform; I gotta make a speech."

"Pa, you've got to go home."

"I'm not dead yet; you'll do as I say."

"All right, I'll help you up because you won't let me help you home. But I'll leave you up there, pa. I'll leave you for ma and sister to bring home."

*"From da Pres'den, of da United State' mellical 'To alla ob da Chinee'-mellican on da celebrate ob dere liberate from da Manchu. . . ."*

"I'm trying to make you go home for your own good."

"You're trying to kill me with disgrace. All right, leave me. Get out of my house, too."

"Pa, I'm trying to help you. You're dying!" The boy reached for his father, but the man stepped away. "You'll kill ma by not letting her take care of you."

"Your mother's up on the platform waiting for me."

"Because she doesn't know how bad you are. I do. I have a right to make you go home."

"It's my home, not yours. Leave me alone." The man walked the few steps to the edge of the platform and called his wife. She came down and helped him up. She glanced out but did not see Johnny in the crowd. Her cheeks were made up very pink and her lipstick was still fresh; she looked very young next to Johnny's father, but her hands were old, and seemed older because of the bright nail polish and jade bracelet.

Johnny knew what his father would tell his mother and knew he would have to trust them to be happy without him. Perhaps he meant he would have to trust himself to be happy without them . . . the feeling would pass; he would

wait and apologize to them both, and he would not have to leave, perhaps. Everything seemed wrong, all wrong, yet everyone, in his own way, was right. He turned quickly and walked out of the crowd to the children's play area. He sat on a bench and stretched his legs straight out in front of him. The dark old women in black coats stood by on the edges of the play area watching the nightbleached faces of children flash in and out of the light as they ran through each other's shadows. Above him, Johnny could hear the sound of pigeons in the trees. Chinatown was the same and he hated it now. Before, when he was younger, and went shopping with his mother, he had enjoyed the smells of the shops and seeing colored toys between the legs of walking people; he had been proud to look up and see his mother staring at the numbers on the scales that weighed meat, to see the shopkeepers smile and nod at her. And at night, he had played here, like the children chasing each other in front of him now.

"What'sa wrong, Johnny? Tire?" He had not seen the girl standing in front of him. He sat up straight and smiled. "You draw more pitchers on napkin for me tonight?"

"No, I was with pa." He shrugged. "You still got the napkins, huh?"

"I tole you I want dem. I'm keeping 'em." She wore a short white coat over her red *cheongsam*, and her hair shook down over her face from the wind.

"I wanta walk," he said. "You wanta walk?"

"I gotta gat home before twalve."

"Me too."

"I'll walk for you dan, okay?" She smiled and reached a hand down for him.

"You'll walk *with* me, not *for* me. You're not a dog." He stood and took her hand. He enjoyed the girl; she listened to him; he did not care if she understood what he said or knew what he wanted to say. She listened to him, would listen with her eyes staring with a wide frog's stare until he stopped speaking, then her body would raise and she would sigh a curl of girl's voice and say, "You talk so nice. . . ."

The tail of an embroidered dragon showed under her white coat and seemed to sway as her thigh moved. "You didn't come take me to the parade, Johnny?"

"I was with pa." Johnny smiled. The girl's hand was dryfeeling, cold and dry like a skin of tissue-paper-covered flesh. They walked slowly, rocking forward and back as they stepped up the hill. "I'm always with pa, huh?" he said bitterly. "I'm sorry."

"sall right. Is he still dying?"

"Everyone's dying here; it's called the American's common cold."

"Don' talk you colleger stuff to mel I don' unnerstan' it, Johnny."

"He's still dying . . . always. I mean, sometimes I think he won't die or is lying and isn't dying."

"Wou'n't that be good, if he weren't dying? And if it was all a joke? You could all laugh after."

"I don't know, Sharon!" He whined on the girl's name and loosened her hand, but she held.

"Johnny?"

"Yeah?"

"What'll you do if he dies?"

Johnny did not look at the girl as he answered, but lifted his head to glance at the street full of lights and people walking between moving cars. Grant Avenue. He could smell incense and caged squabs, the dank smell of damp fish heaped on tile from the shops now. "I think I'd leave. I know what that sounds like, like I'm waiting for him to die so I can leave; maybe it's so. Sometimes I think I'd kill him to stop all this waiting and lifting him to the sink and keeping it a secret. But I won't do that."

"You won' do that. . ." Sharon said.

"An' now, I like to presan' da Pres'den ob da Chineese Benabolen' . . ."

"My father," Johnny said.

The girl clapped her hands over her ears to keep her hair from jumping in the wind. "You father?" she said.

"I don't think so," Johnny said. They walked close to the walls, stepped almost into doorways to allow crowding people to pass them going down the hill toward the voice. They smelled grease and urine of open hallways, and heard music like birds being strangled as they walked over iron gratings.

"You don't think so what?" Sharon asked, pulling him toward the crowd.

"I don't think so what you said you didn't think so. . . ." He giggled, "I'm sort of funny tonight. I was up all last night listening to my father practice his speech in the toilet and helping him bleed when he got mad. And this morning I started to go to classes and fell asleep on the bus; so I didn't go to classes, and I'm still awake. I'm not tired but kind of stupid with no sleep, dig, Sharon?"

The girl smiled and said, "I dig, Johnny. You the same way every time I see you almos'."

"And I hear myself talking all this stupid stuff, but it's sort of great, you know? Because I have to listen to what I'm saying or I'll miss it."

"My mother say you cute."

They were near the top of the street now, standing in front of a wall stand with a fold-down shelf covered with Chinese magazines, nickel comic books, postcards, and Japanese souvenirs of Chinatown. Johnny, feeling ridiculous with air between his joints and his cheeks tingling with the anxious motion of the crowd, realized he was tired, then realized he was staring at the boy sitting at the wall stand and staring at the boy's leather cap.

"What are you loo' at, huh?" the boy said in a girl's voice. Sharon pulled at Johnny and giggled. Johnny giggled and relaxed to feeling drunk and said, "Are you really Chinese?"

"What're you ting, I'm a Negro soy sauce chicken?"

"Don't you know there's no such thing as a real Chinaman in all of America? That all we are are American Indians cashing in on a fad?"

"Fad? Don' call me fad. You fad youselv'."

"No, you're not Chinese, don't you understand? You see it all started when a bunch of Indians wanted to quit

being Indians and fighting the cavalry and all, so they left the reservation, see?"

"In'ian?"

"And they saw that there was this big kick about Chinamen, so they braided their hair into queues and opened up laundries and restaurants and started reading Margaret Mead and Confucius and Pearl Buck and became respectable Chinamen and gained some self-respect."

"Chinamong! You battah not say Chinamong."

"But the reservation instinct stuck, years of tradition, you see? Something about needing more than one Indian to pull off a good rain dance or something, so they made Chinatown! And here we are!"

He glanced around him and grinned. Sharon was laughing, her shoulders hopping up and down. The boy blinked, then pulled his cap lower over his eyes. "It's all right to come out now, you see?" Johnny said. "Indians are back in vogue and the Chinese kick is wearing out. . . ." He laughed until he saw the boy's confused face. "Aww nuts," he said, "this is no fun."

He walked after Sharon through the crowd, not feeling the shoulders and women's hips knocking against him. "I'd like to get outta here so quick, Sharon; I wish I had something to do! What do I do here? What does anybody do here? I'm bored! My mother's a respected woman because she can tell how much monosodium glutamate is in a dish by smelling it, and because she knows how to use a spittoon in a restaurant. Everybody's Chinese here, Sharon."

"Sure!" the girl laughed and hopped to kiss his cheek. "Didn' you like that?"

"Sure, I liked it, but I'm explaining something. You know, nobody shoulda let me grow up and go to any school outside of Chinatown." They walked slowly, twisting to allow swaggering men to pass. "Then, maybe everything would be all right now, you see? I'm stupid, I don't know what I'm talking about. I shouldn't go to parades and see all those kids. I remember when I was a kid. Man, then I knew everything. I knew all my aunts were beautiful, and all my cousins were small, and all my uncles were heroes

from the war and the strongest guys in the world that smoked cigars and swore, and my grandmother was a queen of women." He nodded to himself. "I really had it made then, really, and I knew more then than I do now."

"What'd'ya mean? You smart now! You didn't know how to coun' or spall, or nothin'; now you in collegar."

"I had something then, you know? I didn't have to ask about anything; it was all there; I didn't have questions; I knew who I was responsible to, who I should love, who I was afraid of, and all my dogs were smart."

"You lucky, you had a dog!" The girl smiled.

"And all the girls wanted to be nurses; it was fine! Now, I'm just what a kid should be—stupid, embarrassed. I don't know who can tell me anything.

"Here, in Chinatown, I'm undoubtedly the most enlightened, the smartest fortune cookie ever baked to a golden brown, but out there . . . God!" He pointed down to the end of Grant Avenue, past ornamented lamps of Chinatown to the tall buildings of San Francisco, "Here, I'm fine—and bored stiff. Out there—Oh, hell, what'm I talking about. You don't know either; I try to tell my father, and he doesn't know, and he's smarter'n you."

"If you don't like stupids, why'd you talk to me so much?"

"Because I like you. You're the only thing I know that doesn't fight me. . . . You know I think I've scared myself into liking this place for a while. See what you've done by walking with me? You've made me a good Chinese for my parents again. I think I'll sell firecrackers." He was dizzy now, overwhelmed by the sound of too many feet and clicking lights. "I even like you, Sharon!" He swung her arm and threw her ahead of him and heard her laugh. "My grandmother didn't read English until she watched television and read 'The End'; that's pretty funny, what a kick!" They laughed at each other and ran among the shoulders of the crowd, shouting "Congratulations!" in Chinese into the shops, "Congratulations!" to a bald man with long hair growing down the edges of his head.

"Johnny, stop! You hurt my wrist!"

It was an innocent kiss in her hallway, her eyes closed

so tight the lashes shrank and twitched like insect legs, and her lips puckered long, a dry kiss with closed lips. "Good night, Johnny . . . John," she said. And he waved and watched her standing in the hallway, disappearing as he walked down the stairs; then, out of sight, he ran home.

He opened the door to the apartment and hoped that his father had forgotten. "Fine speech, pa!" he shouted.

His little sister came out of her room, walking on the toes of her long pajamas. "Brother? Brother, *ah-bah*, he's sick!" she said. She looked straight up to Johnny as she spoke and nodded. Johnny stepped past his sister and ran to the bathroom and opened the door. His mother was holding the man up to the sink with one hand and holding his head with the other. The man's mess splattered over her *cheongsam*. The room, the man, everything, was uglier because of his mother's misery in her bright *cheongsam*. "*Ah-bah?*" Johnny said gently as if calling the man from sleep for dinner. They did not turn. He stepped up behind the woman. "I can do that, *ah-mah*; I'm a little stronger than you."

"Don't you touch him! You!" She spoke with her cheek against the man's back and her eyes closed. "He told me what you did, what you said, and you're killing him! If you want to leave, just go! Stop killing this man!"

"Not me, ma. He's been like this a long time. I've been helping him almost every night. He told me not to tell you."

"You think I don't know? I've seen you in here with him when I wanted to use the bathroom at night, and I've crept back to bed without saying anything because I know your father's pride. And you want to go and break it in a single night! First it's your telling everybody how good you are! Now go and murder your father. . . ."

"Ma, I'm sorry. He asked me, and I tried to make him understand. What do you want me to do, lie? I'll call a doctor."

"Get out; you said you're going to leave, so get out," the man said, lifting his head.

"I'll stay, ma, *ah-bah*, I'll stay."

"It's too late," his mother said. "I don't want you here."

The time was wrong . . . nobody's fault that his father was dying; perhaps, if his father was not dying out of his mouth, Johnny could have argued and left or stayed, but now, he could not stay without hate. "Ma, I said I'm calling a doctor. . . ."

After the doctor came, Johnny went to his room and cried loudly, pulling the sheets from his bed and kicking at the wall until his foot became numb. He shouted his hate for his father and ignorant mother into his pillow until his face was wet with tears. His sister stood next to his bed and watched him, patting his ankle and saying over and over, "Brother, don't cry, brother. . . ."

Johnny sat up and held the small girl against him. "Be a good girl," he said. "You're going to have my big room now. I'm moving across the bay to school." He spoke very quietly to his sister against the sound of their father's spitting.

Sharon held his sister's elbow and marched behind Johnny and his mother. A band played in front of the coffin, and over the coffin was a large photograph of the dead man. Johnny had a miniature of the photograph in his wallet and would always carry it there. Without being told, he had dressed and was marching now beside his mother behind the coffin and the smell of sweet flowers. It was a parade of black coats and hats, and they all wore sunglasses against the sun; the sky was green, seen through the glasses, and the boys playing in Portsmouth Square had green shadows about them. A few people stopped on the street and watched.