

The Strongest Shape

By

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Abstract

The Strongest Shape is a collection of four short stories. Each piece attempts to explore the role of caregiving within Asian-American families, and its relation to inheritance, identity, religion, and, especially, trauma and shame. The first story takes place in a Chinese Christian community whose traditional values affect the way a single mother and her racially ambiguous daughter perceive themselves within the church. The second and fourth stories are linked by recurring characters and the theme of inheritance—particularly of mental illness and violence in the family history. The third story, only five pages long, presents a young and soon-to-be-broken family through short, fragmented memories. The title of the collection comes from Kirstin Valdez Quade’s short story “Family Reunion”: “They were perfect, the three of them: related, joined. A triangle, the strongest shape there is.”

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I Know My Mother's Achilles' Heel

Her mother had informed her two weeks ago that the new AC system would be installed just in time for the first day. The previous year, her mother had also promised that the upcoming all-girls church camp would be much more comfortable—the bathroom plumbing fixed, the mold removed, the cockroaches exterminated. Had Christine been more suspicious of these promises, she would not have wound up here, in the sweltering congregation hall on a Thursday afternoon, fanning herself with her journal along with the other middle school girls.

She was sitting in the back row of pews. The lights were dimmed, and the projector was displaying the PowerPoint on the screen. “Jesus loves *YOU*” was printed in a bold block font with the obligatory image of Christ in the lower corner. At some point, Pastor Shi, the youth pastor, had broken into Chinese, as he usually would when he received divine inspiration. Beads of sweat dripped from his chin as he raised his arms and shouted. Mrs. Shi sat in the front at an angle, breathing through her mouth and jotting down notes with frequent nods. Sam sat beside her in the front, no longer next to Christine. Sam's back was straight and her hands were folded, releasing her fingers only to take occasional notes.

Christine's mother had last been seen running around in the kitchen, even though she was officially in charge of leading the smaller high school group. She had not disclosed to Christine how she had gotten the position, but it was clear, seeing how many late-afternoon meetings she had attended in the past several Sundays, that she had to fight her way into becoming a counselor.

In goading Christine to sign up, her mother had grasped Christine's shoulders, shaking them a little. "Please, Chris. Sam will be there. It'll be fun. You'll have fun this time." It seemed neither of them was having much "fun" at the moment.

"Let us pray," said Pastor Shi in English. His gaze lingered on Christine for a split-second longer than it did the others. Perhaps he knew. Perhaps he had found out. Or perhaps he was simply treating her with the pitiful special-treatment the Shi family had always given to Christine and her mother—inviting them to dinner every other week, offering rides to and from various church events, lending an ear whenever Christine needed a more "fatherly adult figure's advice." Christine's mother, who usually never failed to thank the Shi's, had once confided to a friend over the phone that their antics were "patronizing" (a word Christine had to look up), as they seemed to believe she couldn't even feed her own family.

During the long prayer, Christine found herself staring at Sam, whose head was bowed. She was wearing a white summer dress, and her hair was tied up—probably by Mrs. Shi. The light from the projector was making her skin glow. It was... pretty. She looked really pretty.

"Amen," said Pastor Shi. He soon dismissed the youths from the hall, and Christine hurried outside and breathed in the fresher air, untainted by evaporated sweat. A few cars drove past the church, and the tires jumped over potholes and kicked up gravel. Though it was only about a ten-minute drive to the nearest stores and neighborhoods, the location still felt secluded. Across the street was the old warehouse

that housed large white trucks; the high school boys had once told her that it was the same kind of truck that child kidnappers drove.

Old Auntie Mei was sweeping the entrance in a sun hat that seemed just about as old and worn as her. She, along with the other elderly members, had been among the first to found this church fifty years ago, or so Christine had read from one of the welcome brochures. Auntie Mei's back was hunched over, eyes trained on the broom, not noticing the dust that had settled again in the places she had just swept. In her old age, she had formed an odd habit of inviting herself to janitorial and/or maintenance duties that only she believed were necessary for the church's well-being, like painting one side of the nursery walls forest green while leaving the other sides their original baby blue. Though nobody deemed her to be a real danger, most of the children and teenagers avoided eye-contact, for fear of becoming the next target of unsolicited scrutiny, which usually had to do with the sorry state of today's younger generations.

About a week before camp, after the normal Sunday celebration, Christine had, in fact, become the subject of Auntie Mei's attention for a brief moment. She had briskly hobbled towards Christine from the other side of the congregation, waving with the full length of her arm. Standing before Christine, she had squinted her beady eyes and patted Christine's cheeks. "I finally figured it out," she had said with her fast-paced Shanghainese dialect. "You're Indian." The remark had turned a few heads nearby, and Christine had not been able to reply before Auntie Mei soon began chasing down another individual across the room.

Outside, following her mother's advice about sunlight, Christine stepped back underneath the shade and pressed against the cooler bricks, so as not to make herself tanner than she already was.

"Christine!" The voice sounded like Mrs. Shi's.

Christine lifted herself from the wall and smoothed the back of her T-shirt.

Mrs. Shi was approaching, cheeks flushed from the heat inside. She gave Christine a tight side-hug, as though they hadn't seen each other every day for the past week. "What did you think of the sermon today?"

Christine shrugged. "Humid."

Mrs. Shi laughed too loudly. She waved at Auntie Mei. "Totally! Whoo, it feels so nice out here!" Mrs. Shi also wore a summer dress, like her daughter. She stepped out into the sun without hesitation and stretched her arms.

"We're thinking," she continued, turning back around, "of taking you girls out for ice cream. Get yourselves cooled off before small group."

Christine shrugged. "My mom's making pizza. I said I'd help her."

"Oh, well, she's got plenty of help from the other kitchen staff." Mrs. Shi's hand rested on Christine's back, guiding her, with a slight push, towards the vans. "I'm sure she'll do just fine. All the girls are joining us, too. It's a great way to bond." She was smiling too widely.

The other girls, about fifteen in all (not including Christine), began to file outside, giggling, almost skipping. Sam was somewhere among them. "Yeah, but we watched that

last year,” Christine heard Sam say. “Plus, my dad’s theme this time is being *led* by the Holy Spirit, so we *absolutely* have to watch *Holy Ghost*.”

“It sounds so weird that you call Pastor Shi your dad,” someone else chimed in.

Sam seemed to emerge from the crowd. As though by instinct, she turned to Christine. Her smile quickly faded, and her focus immediately returned to the group, who responded by quieting down their own small-talk. It had been the trend these last two days—Christine’s presence sucking the life out of Sam’s new friends. Strange that the other girls didn’t appear to pay much direct attention to Christine, but she couldn’t be too sure. For all she knew, Sam had spilled.

This was completely unfair. Especially since Sam used to share secrets with Christine all the time. She had earlier this week revealed that, when she grew up, she wanted to get a tattoo on the back of her neck, because her parents would probably never look there. “What kind of design should I get?” she had whispered to Christine while they lay in their sleeping bags. “Maybe an animal. Maybe like a snake!”

“Why a snake?” Their eyes had adjusted to the dark by then, long after everybody else had drifted to sleep. They had been lying on their stomachs, Christine’s chin resting on her hands.

“They’re *fierce*.” Sam hissed and clawed at the air.

“Snakes don’t have claws.”

“They have fangs though.” She made biting motions and hissed louder.

“Shhh.”

But Sam would never actually get a tattoo. She was homeschooled, sheltered, naïve. When pressured, she would not actually follow through. She was a liar.

Christine turned back to Mrs. Shi. “I’m just gonna go help my mom if that’s okay.”

“Well, if you change your mind, we’ll be at Ben and Jerry’s. I’m sure your mom will give you a ride.”

“Okay.”

Somewhere behind her, Sam was laughing again. It sounded forced.

Mrs. Shi had lied—her mother was currently working on the pizzas alone. In the kitchen, which was even hotter than the congregation, Christine tasked herself with kneading the dough, or shredding the cheese, or pouring the tomato sauce—whichever distracted her the most. She opened the cabinets in search of bowls and mixing spoons, and stood on her toes to reach the top shelf.

“Chris,” said her mother. “Chris, wait. I know you’re trying to help, but I have a system going. A very. Organized. System.” She emphasized each word with her hands. She was wearing her apron from home. There were ingredients separated and compartmentalized to different corners of the long countertop table.

“Sorry.” Christine handed the ladle back to her mother, who piled it neatly with the tomato sauce jars.

“Where are the other girls? Why aren’t you with them?”

“They’re going to Ben and Jerry’s.”

“So you’re not joining them.”

Christine shrugged. “They’re just gonna talk about God and stuff.”

“Well, this is a church camp. The whole point is for you to bond with each other through Christ, not help me make your guys’ meals.”

Christine shrugged again, pulling up a chair nearby. She watched her mother knead dough and every once in a while wipe and streak flour onto her brow. “You don’t have to make pizza, Mom. Just order from Domino’s.”

“That wouldn’t make me a good kitchen staff member, now would it?”

“But you’re a counselor.”

Her mother lifted her index finger. “One who goes above and beyond.”

No other camp volunteer besides her mother took on two people’s jobs. This was likely because no one else would agree to do this without some form of compensation. Christine wondered how much of the food costs were actually being covered by church finances.

“So you really don’t want to go?” said her mother. “Sam’s with them, isn’t she?”

Christine sank forward in her seat. “So?”

Her mother glanced at her. “Are you two okay? Did you have a fight?”

“No.”

“She’s your best friend.”

“No she’s not. She doesn’t even go to my school.”

“She’s going to high school with you next year.”

“I don’t care.”

“Weren’t you excited about camp just a few days ago?”

“*You* were excited, not me.” Christine wiped away the sweat running down the back of her neck. “They didn’t fix the AC like you said. You said they would fix the bathrooms, too, and they didn’t.”

Her mother turned to her, eyebrows raised with a look of slight pity. She walked over and knelt beside her. “I know. I’m sorry.” She peeled off her gloves and ran her fingers through Christine’s hair, which was wet and tangled at the ends. Christine pulled away and started brushing at it. Unlike her mother’s, Christine’s hair was wavy and reacted badly to humid days. “I just want you to make friends.” In the summer, her mother tanned, but was still shades lighter than Christine.

“Mom?”

“Hm?”

Christine glanced down at her hands. “Am I Indian?”

Her mother paused. “What?”

“Am I part-Indian?”

“Where’s this coming from?”

“Auntie Mei.”

Her mother stood up. “When did she tell you this?”

“A while ago.”

“And you’re finally asking now?”

Christine shrugged.

It was usually only noticeable when they shopped together, the other patrons sometimes turning their heads and raising their eyebrows at a mother-daughter pair that appeared nothing like mother and daughter. But what was only irksome in public had been downright shameful in the Chinese Christian community, the “Grandmas” and “Grandpas” having nothing better to do post-retirement than gossip about her mother’s supposedly promiscuous former lifestyle.

Her mother sighed and walked to the other end of the kitchen, pulling out a large pan from one of the cabinets. “Auntie Mei steals from the offering box, did you know that?”

Christine rested her chin on the countertop. “Mom.”

“She really does! And she’s not even discreet about it.” She paused in thought. “I bet if you gave Auntie Mei a world map with no labels, she wouldn’t be able to find India. Or America for that matter.”

“Mom.”

Her mother made no eye-contact, staying focused on flattening the dough into the pan. “You’re Chinese, just like the rest of us.” Her tone was dismissive.

Before Christine could respond, Uncle Paul and his wife walked into the kitchen carrying several two-liter bottles of soda. “Oh, mother and daughter helping us with dinner tonight?” he said in Chinese.

Christine’s mother smiled and nodded politely at them. She readjusted her apron and tucked her hair further into her hair net. “Did you greet Uncle and Auntie,

Christine?” she said in an exaggeratedly accurate Chinese pronunciation, along with a gesturing tilt of her head.

Christine stood back up and addressed the two as best as she could articulate in Mandarin. Though she wished she could ask her mother more questions, she knew now was not the time to make her look bad in front of the other church members, so she snuck away.

After dinner, the girls gathered back into the congregation for worship. They sang “Blessed Be Your Name” and repeated the chorus several times before moving on to the next verse. Each repetition of the chorus grew in intensity, and the percussionist appeared to be having a convulsion towards the end. Surrounding Christine, the high school girls had lifted their arms high, their heads tilted up to the ceiling. In comparison, she felt stiff and emotionless, arms only half-raised and head bobbing just slightly to the rhythm. She was sandwiched between these girls, but she felt she stood out, her darker complexion noticeable to any of them.

The light shining on the wooden cross cast a miniature spotlight on all the stage performers. At the very least, she thought, she was glad not to be assigned lead singer during this summer’s camp. The last time she had to formally perform on stage was in December, when she had played as Shepherd 2 for the nativity scene.

Christine remembered how, in the car, on the way to the Christmas celebration, she had sat in the backseat behind her mother and Dan, the former boyfriend. She had worried, after getting cast the part, that she hadn’t deserved the role, since many of her

baptized and very faithful peers seemed much more willing and eager. She, unlike them, had never *felt* God's presence before, thereby making her unworthy, and thereby making her the kind of hypocrite that Jesus always accused others of being.

“Mom?”

“What is it, Chris?”

The spilling that came afterwards was complete and unfiltered: Why couldn't she feel God? Was there something wrong with her heart? What if it was made out of stone? Did God hate her? Was it possible that God loved everybody in the whole wide universe except for her? Was she going to a special place just for her in hell? Her tears fell onto her sandals, white bathrobe, and stuffed sheep named MooMoo.

Dan, being the faithful deacon he was, had soon pulled over and taken out his Bible. He then, in an effort to comfort her, had read aloud relevant verses in rapid succession, grandiosely and passionately. Christine had quieted herself, but only because she realized, gazing at him through her tear-blurred vision, that Dan's nose always flared in the middle of passionate speeches.

Ultimately, what had calmed Christine was the sight of her mother in the passenger seat, staring at her with a pleading look, as though she were thinking, “Please don't do this to me now. Please not before the play. Please just behave.”

The music changed to “Here I Am to Worship,” and Christine came back to herself again. Somewhere behind her, she knew Sam was chanting the same lyrics—“You're altogether lovely...”—to a God they had both been taught to believe at a

young age. They had sung this song yesterday as well, Sam making a show to sing the loudest and most enthusiastically.

It was three days ago that Sam had quietly confided that she considered Christine to be the one person she trusted the most. “I can talk to you about anything.” Sam had been scootching up to her in their sleeping bags, her breath smelling like watermelon-flavored gum, her sleep attire a thin tank top whose straps fell off the shoulders. Though it had been difficult to discern in the dark, Christine could just make out Sam playfully biting her lower lip.

After the song, Christine turned behind her and noticed Sam in the crowd. Her face was a bit flushed, and her eyes had a focused intensity, the same one she had given Christine three nights ago. Seeing her, Christine remembered what she had wondered that night—what would it be like to kiss her?

After worship, Christine learned about the dangers of romance novels and romantic comedies, some of which were “pornographic.” The girls had split up into smaller groups: the high schoolers with Christine’s mother and the middle schoolers with Mrs. Shi. They had gathered into a small classroom and formed a circle near the opened windows, which let in a dusty breeze.

“I know it’s tempting. All the girls around you will be watching them. But it gives you false ideas of your future husband.” Mrs. Shi had passed around a worksheet with a pixelated black-and-white banner at the top that read, “Your body is a temple of Christ.”

Sam sat across from Christine with her hands resting on her lap. She smiled at her mother's words and nodded along politely, but Christine caught her stealing nervous glances throughout the lecture. Meanwhile, Beth and Angela were rocking back and forth in sync, silently giggling at Mrs. Shi, who seemed to be ignoring them very deliberately. The one new girl in a ponytail had been picking at her braces and wiping her fingers on her shorts for the duration of the discussion. These three girls had slept the closest to Sam last night; so far, there were no signs that they had been told anything.

"Those romance books give girls *false expectations*," Sam chimed in, with a vocabulary that was clearly not hers. She appeared to be looking directly at Christine, though slightly beyond. "They make us think we need to start dating now. They make us think we can fall in love now, even though it's *definitely* not real."

That night, the two of them had been lying close, breathing each other's air. The movements and snores of everyone around them had faded into a whirr in the background, and it felt, for just a brief moment, as though it was only the two of them in that room.

Mrs. Shi grunted. "That's a very good point, Samantha."

"How come it isn't real?" asked Hannah, sitting next to Christine. "If we can already love God and our family, we can love other people, too."

"But it's not the same love," said Sam. "Plus, we're only thirteen. We can't love people like that. What we feel is lust. It's corrupted."

In reality, the kiss had been no more than a peck. If Christine thought about it enough, she could even say it had been an accident. That was what she should have said

immediately afterwards, watching Sam jerking away. After a pause, Sam had whispered, “That’s not right,” pulling back more, covering her mouth. “It’s a sin.” It had been the first invocation of God Sam had ever made to Christine.

“Corrupted?” said Christine. She surprised herself when she spoke up. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

Christine knew what gay people were and what they did, but she was not one of them. They existed, out there, beyond herself, and so she was not one of them. They did things like date and kiss and sleep with each other, but she did not. It had been an accident.

Sam glanced at Mrs. Shi in surprise, then turned back. “It means we’re all a bunch of hormones now. It’s something you have to control, through God.”

“Control?” said Christine. “It’s not like you’re perfect either.” Sam had once revealed that she had snuck out of home and kissed a boy named Todd Devins, whose mouth tasted like nachos. If anyone had been sinful with their body, it was Sam.

Everybody else sat silently.

“Now,” said Mrs. Shi, gesturing her hands at Christine, “this is a safe space. We don’t judge other people for what we think they do.” She quickly flipped back to the group worksheet and directed everybody to the next passage, asking for volunteer readers. After regaining control of the room, Mrs. Shi glanced at Christine, sitting up straight with an air of confidence. It seemed to say she didn’t just *think* she knew what Christine did, but simply knew.

“You can call me Sam. My parents don’t like that name, but I do.” Sam had made this remark several months ago, after having just invited herself to sit next to Christine during a youth group Christmas celebration.

“I’m just Christine.”

Shortly following their introduction, they had chatted all the way through the movie *Catching Hearts*, and made shadow puppets against the projector screen, ducking down as soon as an adult turned around. It had been the first time Christine felt comfortable in a church setting, felt included—knowing somebody else (the pastor’s daughter for that matter) had also not been completely swept away by “God’s grace.”

Now, Christine was the only person lying down in the back row. She could hear whispers in the other pews. She wondered if their secret conversation included talk about her. Or talk about her mother, who was asleep with the high schoolers in one of the classrooms. She wondered if her mother had adequately lead the high school girls’ small group this night; a good session probably amounted to nobody snickering during “the dangers of premarital sex” talk, or any mention of her mother when she had been a teenager herself.

It wasn’t until about one in the morning that most of the whispering quieted down, and some anonymous person began snoring loudly. Christine, exhausted too, finally allowed herself to relax...

“Hey.”

Christine opened her eyes. She wasn’t sure how much time had passed.

“Hey, Christine?”

There was a dim light that illuminated the nearby area. Sam was standing by Christine's head, hugging her pillow. The light was coming from her phone.

"Can we talk?" asked Sam.

Christine sat up.

Sam knelt down, hair falling and covering her bare shoulders. "I know you think I'm mad at you." It was hard to make out the details in the dark, but she was likely wearing the same tank top and shorts from the other night. Her scent was something lightly sweet. "But I'm really not."

"You've been ignoring me."

"I just was figuring things out." Her voice was now a murmur. "I've been talking to God a lot 'cause I didn't know what to do." She nuzzled her mouth into her pillow. "You're my best friend. Like, my bestest best friend. I can really tell you anything. You'll do anything for me, and I should do the same for you. And we shouldn't let stupid hormones get in the way."

Christine slipped out of her sleeping bag. "Hormones?"

"So that's why," she said, edging closer, ignoring Christine at the same time, "I forgive you."

"Forgive... me?"

"I forgive you."

Before camp, Sam had once asked Christine what kind of things her mother used to "do," a question that revealed the extent to which the rumors had spread throughout the church. When Christine had answered that she didn't know, Sam had appeared

disappointed. Then, leaning in to Christine's ear, she had whispered that she had once watched reruns of *Grey's Anatomy* while her parents had been away. "They were having lots of..."—she looked around—"...sex."

After Sam declared them friends again, she pulled her sleeping bag and pillow to the empty spot near Christine. She whispered a happy "Good night!" before rolling to her side. Christine couldn't exactly take back her acceptance of Sam's forgiveness now. Sam was soon still. The pew underneath Christine felt hard.

She got up and quietly made her way to the bathroom. The hallways were illuminated by nightlights along the walls, and there was another crack of light from the kitchen. Peeking through the half-opened door, Christine discovered her mother counting ingredients off a checklist—probably making sure there would be enough for tomorrow's breakfast.

And Christine wondered, rushing back to her sleeping bag, how many additional acts of repentance her mother would have to do now.

Everything had fallen back into place the very next day. Sam and Christine ate their meals together again, and sat next to each other once more during the sermons. Christine's mother was pleased, scooping big spoonfuls of mac and cheese onto their plates.

Despite their renewed friendship, Sam's overall demeanor had not reverted back. She still sang the loudest during worship, and she still annoyed the other girls during small group with the exaggerated effort to raise her hand before everybody else for every

single question. No longer did Christine hear of Sam's rebellious exploits at the movies with Todd Devins or secretive viewings of *Grey's Anatomy*.

Christine could sense both of their mothers paying even closer attention and congratulating themselves for their daughters' mended relationship. Now, more than ever, Christine felt as though she would suffocate under the weight of their gaze.

"Okay, favorite secular band on three," said Sam, raising her fork. They and some other seventh and eighth-grade girls were seated at a round table in one of the classrooms across the congregation. "One, two, three—"

Most, including Christine, knew to answer "Switchfoot," save for the poor soul who went with her heart's choosing and blurted "One Direction."

"Okay. Now favorite Bible verse on three."

How long were they going to keep this up? Your favorite artist is Taylor Swift, Christine wanted to say; you've never had a favorite Bible verse; you used to come to my house just to read *The Hunger Games*, and you told me you shipped Katniss and Gale, even after the third book. How long was this nonsense going to last?

The final morning of camp, everyone was scheduled to have a short one-on-one meeting with Pastor Shi in his office. Christine and Sam had signed up for back-to-back time slots. Sam was first.

While Christine waited for her turn, she entered the empty nursery and sat on the floor by the wooden blocks. The hot room smelled like sour baby powder. If she could,

she would go back to that night and ask Sam what exactly she had meant by her forgiveness.

Her mother knocked on the opened door. “You ready? Nervous for your meeting?” She shut the door.

Christine shrugged.

“Well, don’t be.” Her mother knelt down. She began fixing Christine’s hair and patting away the wrinkles in her shirt. “If Sam can do it, so can you. Did you not wash your face this morning or something?” She pulled out her handkerchief and wiped Christine’s mouth.

Christine pulled her head away and pushed her mother’s hands aside.

“It’s good to see you two worked things out.”

Christine looked up at her mother.

“You guys are good for each other.” Her mother tucked Christine’s hair behind her ears.

“If you like her so much,” grumbled Christine, “then ask *her* to be your daughter.”

“What?”

Christine stood. “Why don’t you ask Sam to be your daughter? If she’s so perfect!”

Her mother froze, mouth slightly open in disbelief. “You know that’s not what I meant.”

“You’re the one who made me come to this stupid camp!” said Christine, pointing at her mother. “If you didn’t make me come, nothing bad would’ve happened.”

“Is this about... I thought you and Sam worked things out.” Her mother lifted herself from the floor. She approached and placed both hands on Christine’s shoulders. “I wanted you to come so you could bond with the other girls. That’s all I wanted.” She sighed. “Why do you have to make things so much more difficult?”

Christine jerked away. “I’m only like this because you couldn’t keep your body to yourself back then. You gave into your bodily temptations!”

Her mother froze. Her face contorted with genuine pain.

In this instant, Christine finally understood why Sam could so quickly switch to church-speak. It was so easy, so accessible, so direct.

“What did you say?” said her mother.

“I—I didn’t—”

“Is this how you see me?” said Christine’s mother. She pointed at the door. “You believe the things they tell you?” It was the first time her mother acknowledged that “they” existed. Though she was glaring, she had a tired expression in her eyes. “You think what they say is true?”

Christine shook her head. “No. I don’t.”

“Then why would you say that to me?”

Christine remembered, back on the night of the nativity play, that she had announced her single line, eyes still red and puffy from the car ride, with so much enthusiasm that the entire congregation had applauded loudly for her. It was all of the

pent-up emotions that hadn't quite come out in the car. "COME, LET US GO SEE CHRIST OUR LORD," she had shouted. After the performance, a crowd of adults had swarmed around her. Her mother, standing next to her, had never looked so proud, so certain that their sins had been cleansed in the eyes of the church.

"I just wanted to make them like us," said Christine, hanging her head. "I tried. I was just doing what you said for me to do. I was making friends."

There was a long pause.

"But I messed up," Christine continued. "I didn't mean to. I was just trying to make friends..." She kept her eyes down. "I don't believe what they say about you."

Her mother breathed deeply. She took Christine's arms gently in her hands and knelt. "Is it with Sam?" she said, quietly.

Christine nodded.

"Can you tell me what happened?"

She shook her head.

"Did you repent?"

Christine hesitated, then nodded. "I was already forgiven." She realized she hadn't bothered to pray to God. She checked the time; Sam was supposed to be finished.

"Then why are you so worried?"

"I don't want them to hate me."

"Them?" Her mother glanced at the door. "Is it that bad?"

Christine nodded.

"Does anyone else know?"

“I don’t know.”

There was a knock. Sam was calling Christine’s name. Her mother stood quickly and let go of Christine. “Don’t tell Pastor Shi,” she whispered.

Sam opened the door. “Found you!” She beckoned for Christine to come out. Christine’s mother stretched a smile at Sam and waved.

“Go on,” said her mother. “You’ll do great.”

Pastor Shi’s office had a fan. It blew back Christine’s hair. He looked like a villain on a TV show—the curtains were closed behind him and the back of his office chair extended above his head. “Have a seat,” he said, motioning.

Christine sat, tucking her hands under her legs.

“I heard from Samantha that you two had been somewhat distant these past few days at camp.”

Christine nodded. “But now it’s okay again.”

“Well, I’m glad to see you two are friends again.” There was something about his voice that was rehearsed. “I know Sam was concerned you two wouldn’t be able to make amends to the situation.”

The thought of Pastor Shi hearing about that night from Sam swept across her mind. How much had he found out? How much had Sam told? Christine could see the scene unfolding again: the two of them on the pew lying on their stomachs inside their sleeping bags, their heads meeting in the center... Sam sitting up, eyes wide, hands over mouth; “But that’s not right. It’s a sin.”

“What did Sam—Samantha—tell you?” she muttered.

“All I know is that it was eating her up a few days ago.”

“That’s all she told you? What else did she say to you? What did she—”

He gestured silence with an outstretched hand. “I told her what I’ll tell you: it’s important that you two stay friends and learn to grow together in Christ, as *sisters*.”

“Sisters...”

“Friendship is the greatest love we can experience. John 15:13—‘Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends.’”

“I’m sorry,” said Christine. “I’m really sorry.” She wasn’t sure why she was apologizing, or to whom. It was all she could think to say.

They prayed together after the pastor had recited a few more verses from the scripture. Christine followed along, but most of her thoughts were directed to her mother and what she would do. Her mother would never blame Christine; her mother would take full responsibility; her mother would accept any blame as punishment from God for how shamefully she had behaved in her youth. Christine knew she had been and always would be the embodiment of her mother’s sins.

Christine chased Sam down the hallway to the restrooms. She grabbed Sam by the shoulders, startling her. “How much did you tell your dad about what happened?”

“What?”

“The... thing. How much did you tell your dad?” They were standing by an old couch and several racks of folding chairs. The incoming air from the open window was musty; there had been forecasts of rain.

“I—what?” Sam jerked her shoulder away. Then, realizing what Christine had meant, she said, “I thought we were through with that.”

“But he knows, doesn’t he? You told him.”

“But... he’s my dad... He’s the pastor!”

Christine covered her face with her hands and shook her head. “That makes it even worse. Why would you do that? Why would you tell him?”

“I—” She paused, then stood up straight, indignant. “I didn’t know what to do. I didn’t know who to talk to! And I didn’t tell anyone else!” She was nearly shouting, hands clenched into fists. Her reaction startled Christine. Why was Sam suddenly the angrier one? “I forgave you already!”

Christine pointed behind her. “But *they* won’t!”

“What? Who?”

They both looked down the empty hallway.

“Them,” Christine said, now almost whispering. “People. People will find out. My mom. They’ll hate us even more.”

Then Sam, too, relaxed and lowered her voice. “My dad won’t tell anyone. I’ll tell him not to. I’ll go now.” She began walking towards his office.

Christine shook her head and pulled on Sam’s arm. “There’s no point. No one keeps secrets about us. Not even the pastor.”

“But—”

“It’s too late.”

In a few hours, Pastor Shi would hold a final meeting with the other camp counselors, including her mother. The next Sunday celebration was going to reserve fifteen minutes to a photo slideshow, complete with Christian rock music and a voiced-over overview of the camp’s activities. Even if she would not be asked to speak, Christine would be required to stand on the stage, in front of the congregation, along with everybody else.

“But,” said Sam, “it’s not a big deal. No one would care, right? It doesn’t matter, right? We’re just a bunch of stupid teenagers.”

“But your dad’s a pastor,” repeated Christine. “And my mom’s my mom.”

“That doesn’t mean anything.”

“Yes it does.”

“You don’t know.”

“Yes I do.”

Christine had learned, when she was younger, that no matter how many times she would try to scrub her face lighter with a loofah, she would never actually look the same as her mother. She had spent many nights praying to God, begging to let her feel his presence, but she would never actually be able to. It felt as though, no matter what she did, her outcome wouldn’t change.

“You did this,” said Sam. “It’s because of you. It’s your fault this happened. Why did you even do that in the first place? How did you expect me to know how to react?”

Even now, Sam seemed to Christine implausibly beautiful, for reasons that made her feel ashamed—her lips, her straight hair, her pale complexion. “I’m really sorry.”

“I just wanted us to be best friends again. That’s all I wanted! To go back!” Sam’s eyes were welling. “All I had to do was forgive you!”

Behind them, Christine heard her mother calling. They both turned. Her mother’s shadow crept around the corner, growing in length. At this very moment, her mother’s reputation was still intact. The hallway was narrow. There were no shortcuts and no exits along the way. The church and the warehouse across from it were the only landmarks for miles. If Christine could run away, she would not be able to do so without passing her mother, the woman she had betrayed. She would probably get lost out there.

Keeper of the Forest

A week after we last spoke, I found your flip-phone in the bottom drawer of your office desk. It had been turned off, and there were several missed calls, most of them from me and your brother. The last call you had made was on a Thursday, right before I last saw you. Soon after the discovery, I called the police station.

“You’re not reporting an actual body this time?” said one of the officers who arrived.

“There is no body. A person who works here is missing.”

“Missing for how long?”

“Since Friday last week.”

“You haven’t checked the forest area?”

“We would’ve found him by now if he was in there. Please, if we can’t find him, then you guys will have to do the searching.”

“You sure he didn’t just up and leave?”

“He doesn’t do this kind of stuff. He’s reliable and punctual and he doesn’t leave his phone behind. I was the last person who saw him.” I realized as I was speaking that, with you gone, I would be the only person coming into the office.

While I filed a report with the police, I radioed Ashley from Area 5 to come by patrol during the morning shift.

“I’m sure he’s doing all right,” she said. “Sometimes people just need to get away from it all. I’m sure that’s what it is.”

“I don’t know about that,” I said.

I spent the morning filing away paperwork, and considered clearing your desk of its notebooks and papers, but then decided against it. When Ashley returned in the early afternoon, I thanked her and grabbed the car keys. Arriving at the entrance, I parked the Jeep, and meandered through the forest. I stepped over the dried fall leaves in search of the usual ropes, ribbons, and colored tape; the usual wire-cut holes in the fencing; the usual abandoned tents; the usual notes cursing and condemning the living world. Though Ashley had come back without finding anyone, I wanted to search carefully. It was quiet for some reason. I didn't see any animals on the main trail, and no hikers either.

A few hours passed when I reached the top of the Lakeside region, peering through the space between the two oak trees that overlooked the lake. The sun was at its three o'clock position, scattering its light on the water so that the surface glistened. Walking towards the beach, the ground below my boots softening into white sand, I realized that I would never see you again.

I drove straight back to the office, bursting through the door. "He's gone," I announced, to the empty room. Ashley had already left. I noted your desk, with its usual stacks of journals and notes. "Jason's gone forever."

"Let's be clear," you had said, a year ago, "about this ranger job." You tossed the car keys to me. You hoisted up your backpack, pointing at the parking lot. The sun was barely up, and opening the door, I felt a breeze from the lake. "You're not there to check on the campers when you patrol. The hikers, too. They're not your concern."

I kicked at the gravel below my feet. "I figured as much."

“You’re a strange one, you know? People don’t get assigned this area as soon as they’re hired.”

“You guys sounded desperate.”

I hopped into the Jeep. I remember I wanted to seem eager in front of you.

You threw everything into the backseat and crawled into shotgun. You asked me, pointing towards the forest, “You’ve heard about this area then.”

“I know about it.”

“Doug told you during the interview?”

I shook my head. “He didn’t exactly interview me. I was just... hired.”

“So how do you know about it?”

“My family came here a long time ago for vacation. Back when it was still a tourist attraction, of course.”

“Then you know there’s a lake here. And when you have a lake, it gives people more options.”

I didn’t respond. I adjusted the rearview mirror and turned on the ignition.

“You know what I’m getting at, right?” you said. “Turn left at the stop sign.”

“That this won’t be easy, especially for a newbie like me.”

“Even the experienced ones quit or transfer after a month. Two, tops.”

“And that’s what you think I’ll do?”

You shrugged. “I’m just telling you the facts. You’re about to go patrolling for the first time. Most people don’t realize what they’re doing until they find their first body.”

When I met you, I could see that you were no older than I was. I turned to you. “I know what suicide looks like. My mother hanged herself here. I’m familiar enough with it to know what I’m getting myself into. You have no reason to doubt me.”

You glanced at me, then gestured to turn right. I could see the main entrance to the forest. “All right,” you said. “Just double-checking.”

For the last few months, in your apartment, during our pillow talks, you would ask me what was on my mind, a meaningless habit of yours. Sometimes, I would tell you about my mother, and my memory of her braiding my hair, on the beach, murmuring that if she ever died, she would want to die somewhere beautiful.

You once shared with me the story of how you had run away at sixteen, from your now bed-ridden mother and your older brother. You had always been self-conscious about the way you appear—similar to your father. And yet, when you had visited home four years ago, your mother had wept in your arms. “It’s baffling, isn’t it?”

“What is?”

“The way mothers are. She was fighting to get out of the bed to hold me, even though I look like the guy who once abused her. I have his same tendencies, too.”

On the night that you had run away, when you were sixteen, you and your brother had gotten into a fight and he had driven you out of the house. “It’s understandable, though, why he would do that. I remind him of the bad memories, especially of our father.”

Listening, I held you close, resting my head on your shoulder and draping my arm across your chest. I wanted to ask you if you had seen your father recently, and if you resented him.

“Do you miss your mother?” you asked.

“Why do you ask?”

“Sometimes I wish she knew what I was up to. My brother’s the kind of person who wouldn’t share these things about me with her. But I sometimes want her to know. Don’t you?”

“No,” I said.

“Why not?”

“What would I even tell her?”

“That you’re saving lives, right?”

“Not hers.”

A few months before you disappeared, we had gone patrolling together. It was supposed to be uneventful. You said you had not noted anything on last night’s night patrol. Our biggest priority was to put up the new sign postings: “Your lives are a gift. Please turn back. Call 1-800-273-8255.”

No one had cut through the fencing. Nor had we seen any cryptic note leading up to a site. There had not been any ribbon trails that led to an abandoned campsite. The first real sign was a single shoe on the ground. Then we both looked up.

The man was swinging from the branch, and I could almost hear the creaking. His long hair was covering his face. His whole body was limp.

I turned to you. You were leaning over a tree, covering your mouth.

“I saw him yesterday,” you said. “I talked to him. He said he was camping. He wasn’t near the restricted areas. He showed me his bag. It was normal camping equipment. He was setting up a campfire. He had his tent ready, right over there.”

I reached over and touched your arm. “Jason...”

You pushed me aside.

“It’s not something you could’ve known.”

“I could’ve questioned him more.” For a long while, you stood there, digging your fists into the tree. Then, almost instantly, you lifted yourself up, sniffled, and dug your hands in your pockets. You turned to me. “We have to radio Doug.”

“Right,” I said.

Doug arrived soon and examined the body. You observed the corpse with an almost bored expression, and offered to climb up and bring the body down, shrugging and nodding when Doug asked if you were sure.

In my memories, my mother’s hands are sandy and wet. I no longer remember her voice, except for the words, “Let me braid your hair.” I was eight. She faced me towards the beach, and her hands pulled and ran through my damp hair.

My mother was a beautiful woman. Not because I remember her face, but because I remember my impression of her. Staring at the wall catatonically, murmuring to

someone who wasn't there. On lucky days, she would notice me if I called hard or long enough.

But usually, with the exception of these small memories, my mother is a corpse. My father, a police officer himself, had no qualms about leaving photographs of the corpse in his study for his eleven-year-old daughter to stumble upon. It was clear that, since she had hanged herself during the hot summer, the noose had wound around her neck so tightly that her head was no longer attached when she had been found. Her body itself had become a nest for the maggots, down to the exposed bones.

When I called you on my first night patrol, three months ago, it wasn't because I was scared. The night had been going fine. It was when I realized partway that I was standing under my mother's tree that things started falling apart.

"Hello?" you said, groggily.

"Come get me," I said through the phone. "Please." I was holding my knees.

"Eva?"

"My flashlight's out of batteries." My flashlight, I'm sure you knew, was fine.

"Where are you?"

"I'm at the edge of Lakeside. Come get me."

"That's only half a mile away from the entrance."

"I fucking know that! You think I don't know where my mother hanged herself?"

There was a pause on your end. "I'll be there soon."

I waited. The waves were crashing on the beach. I could hear animals scurrying around the forest. It felt as though insects were crawling beneath me.

I saw your flashlight and heard your footsteps approaching.

“Eva?”

I whimpered, like the child I am.

You shined the light over me and walked up close, ready to kneel.

“Turn it off,” I said.

“Huh?”

“Your flashlight. It’s too bright.”

You nodded, flipping it off, and I heard you step away and sit down.

It was enough to know that you were there, somewhere nearby. I couldn’t see you, and I couldn’t hear you over my own gasping cries, but I knew you were there. As I wept, I imagined what you must have looked like, and concentrating on you made the mental images of my mother’s corpse go away.

“I’m sorry,” I said.

“It’s fine.”

I chuckled. “I thought I was ready for the night shifts, but clearly I’m not.”

“Yeah. It took me a while, too.”

I could hear you shifting your feet.

“You know it’s hereditary, right?” I said.

“What is?”

“Schizophrenia. I used to do a bunch of research on it in college. Now I’m at the age when I can get it, at any point. Any day now, you know?”

I heard you get up. You turned on your flashlight. “We should get going.”

“I still need to patrol.”

“I’ll do it.”

You motioned for me to get up and follow you back. We walked mostly in silence, every once in a while stopping to listen to the waves, another habit of yours that I noticed. “You don’t have to do this,” you said.

“No, it’s fine. I’ll figure out this patrolling thing. I can handle it.”

“No, I meant this job in general. You have other options. More than the rest of us. You have a college degree.”

“But,” I said, “where else do I go?”

My father called me on a Saturday, about a week after you disappeared. It was evening already. I had spent the entire day in bed when the phone rang, and I had the option of letting it go to voicemail. For some reason, in my drowsy state, I imagined you were the one calling. I might have even said your name when I answered.

“I heard about your co-worker from the news.”

“What?”

“I think I’ve seen that man before.”

“Dad?”

“Is he that same man who attacked the journalist in the photo?”

“What? No, that’s not what happened.” I was finally lucid. He was talking about the time that local reporter had wanted to conduct an interview as you were about to patrol. “He told me he was pushing someone aside so he could do his job. That’s not ‘attacking’.”

He sighed loudly. “You weren’t there when it happened. The journalist reported that he was assaulted.”

“He’s never been violent around me. I don’t have any reason to think otherwise.”

“I still think he seems dangerous, especially now that he’s on the loose. He’s not armed, is he?”

I could picture my father on the other end, sitting at the kitchen table with the TV remote in his hand, flipping it onto CNN. “I would actually be more relieved if he was just out and about,” I said. “But that’s probably not what he’s doing. I don’t even know if he’s alive anymore.”

“Eva, you’re still young. You’re only 23. You have a whole life ahead of you. What makes you think you need to be there?”

“I’m here because people like me don’t belong anywhere else.”

“You’re not one of those people. What reason do you have to be there? Why that town?”

“You know why.”

“Your mother is gone already. You can’t save her—”

My father, unapologetic that I had discovered the photos of my dead mother, had said to me, “Remember what it looks like to be alive and then dead. Remember what it feels like right now to see her like this.”

“Let me be clear,” I said, now up and pacing. “I’m not here to find my mother. Don’t forget that the only reason I’m here is because of what you failed to do. We made no efforts to find her and prevent all of this when she left. It’s rangers like Jason who make sure to prevent the kinds of deaths—”

At the mention of your name, I was reminded again of my own failure to save you.

I hung up.

We found you three days later at the bottom of the lake. You had tied weights around your ankles.

They asked me if I wanted to see your body. I declined.

I have wondered what had been going through your mind as you walked into the water. Have you considered whether or not the world could do better without you? Perhaps you thought the act would in its own way be heroic, a freeing of your family from yourself.

The Friday before you stopped coming to the office, you had been staring out the window, and I had been packing away my things. We had both been avoiding the paperwork we had been putting off. It was a normal workday.

“They do it here because it’s beautiful,” you said. “Is it too much to ask that we die somewhere peaceful?”

I glanced up. “No,” I said. “I think we all want that.”

“Why do we do this job? If they’re doing it on their own terms, who are we to stop them?”

“It’s our job,” I said. I had assumed that you were tired because it was a Friday. You had taken five of the night shifts this week, and you had found another body just that Wednesday. You had asked that same question a few weeks ago, and then went on to intervene with a young man who had already started climbing one of the trees. I didn’t think much of your questions. “You know what our responsibilities are better than I do.”

I should have known by the way you stared out the window—leaning in, facing the direction of the lake; it almost appeared as though you were about to reach towards it.

“Jason,” I said. At this point, I was getting up to leave.

You turned to me.

“You should go home,” I said.

You nodded. “I will.”

I walked towards the door. “I’ll see you Monday?”

“Yeah, sure.”

“All right. See you then.”

Last week, during my lunch break, I headed towards the beach. I collected foot-sized rocks, and one-by-one set them down into the sand, grinding them in. I placed

each stone into the sand, distancing each one as wide as I remembered your strides used to be. It didn't take many before the last stone touched the water.

I hiked back towards the forest to examine my work from a distance.

It looked horrible at first; my footsteps were clearly tampering with yours. But eventually, the wind and waves smoothed away the imperfections, leaving only your path behind.

Your memorial service was small, with attendees including everyone from the park, a few who lived in the same apartment complex as you, and your brother. The church service had been dreary and depressing. The pastor seemed bored that he had to do this so many times a year. I sat behind your brother and his family during the service. He sat straight the entire time. He was lankier than you, and maybe just as stoic.

After the service, your brother tapped me on my shoulder and introduced himself as Brian while we all lingered around the lobby. He asked how I knew you. He was soft-spoken like you, and I had to lean in just to hear him. In his hands, he held your cremation urn.

“We worked together.”

“Oh,” he said. “You’re... Eva, right? Eva Kinoshita?”

I nodded.

“Jason wrote me a while back. He talked about you.”

“Really?” I probably sounded too enthusiastic. “What did he say?”

“It was a while ago. Said you were a new hire or something. Mentioned that you two got along pretty well.” He paused and scratched at his chin. “I don’t know. Got my hopes up a little.”

“Hopes up?”

“Like maybe he was ready to settle down with someone. I mean that as in starting to care for someone else and become responsible for another person.”

“You don’t think he was doing that for his job?”

“I mean more like a commitment.”

“He was committed to his job.”

He stared at me. Then he shook his head and sighed. “Right. He was.”

“I’m sorry,” I said. “That’s not my place to say.”

“It’s not mine either. Not anymore, at least.”

I gazed at your cremation urn. “Do you plan to scatter his ashes?”

“I’m not sure where.”

“I think I might know a place.”

I drove him back to the forest, still in our funeral clothes. I led him through the long path, crossing over the restricted area signs. As we hiked, he kept watching over the marble urn, hands gripping it protectively.

“I’m not actually sure,” I said. The air was cool and smelled like the recent rain. The wet leaves felt soft and my steps felt buoyant. “It’s all just speculation. Whether he’d want to be scattered here. Or maybe even at all.”

“At this point, you probably know him better than I do.” Brian glanced around us, at the remnants of rope hanging off the trees, and the rusted fencing lining the beach entrance.

“No. I don’t think I do,” I said.

We finally stopped between the two oak trees, peering down at the beach. I gestured to him the rocks that walked into the lake, and explained what I had intended them to mean, all the while understanding it probably had nothing to do with what you really wanted.

Your brother nodded, and I unlocked the gate. He walked towards the waters, stepping alongside the stones, matching in the length of his strides. I stayed behind. Once he reached the shoreline, he knelt, putting his hands over his face, and let the waves wash over his feet.

He stood, wiped his eyes with his sleeves, and opened the top. When he felt an incoming breeze, he tilted the urn, and I watched the wind lift up your ashes and scatter them onto the sand.

We returned to Brian’s wife and daughter waiting beside their car. His daughter waddled to him, and he lifted her up, putting down the urn. She had changed her clothes already, now wearing a pink bow and pink dress. Two tufts of hair sprang out behind her ears, passing for pigtails. She held onto Brian’s neck, and, after some goading, introduced herself as Cynthia.

“Thank you,” said Brian. “It’s probably not my place to say, but I think he would’ve been grateful.”

Cynthia pinched at your brother’s nose, and he playfully flinched and pretended to bite her finger. His wife approached us. Cynthia extended her arms to her mother, and Brian handed her to his wife. We greeted each other, and I went through the motions of noting how cute Cynthia was, each of us chatting politely about meaningless topics.

“He was a good person. I hope you know that,” I said.

Brian gazed at his wife. “He’s probably told you about our relationship then. You know we didn’t always get along.”

“I know that you had trouble with him because of who he is, but really, I thought I could trust him. If he had his father’s violent tendencies like he said, I didn’t see it.”

Brian nodded. “I know. He’s changed a lot, even though I wasn’t there to help him grow. And I’ll have to live with that.”

Cynthia seemed tired, her eyes closing and body going limp. “I shouldn’t be keeping you guys,” I said. “You have a family, and it’s probably a long ways back.”

I picked up the urn, and handed it to Brian. He provided me a business card, advising me to call or email him if I wanted to keep in touch, for any reason. “Say bye to the nice lady,” he said, lifting Cynthia’s hand and making a waving motion.

“Bye-bye,” slurred Cynthia, thumb in mouth. In embarrassment, she nuzzled her nose into the nape of her mother’s neck.

“It was nice meeting you,” said Brian’s wife. She looked like the kind of mother who would attend to her children, with warmth and constant concern.

“See you,” I said.

The three of them waved at me once more through the windows as they drove away.

My father had left a voicemail while I was at your service: “Eva. Come home. Please.”

You have been gone for two months. We have yet to find a replacement for you; the other rangers stop by every so often to take extra shifts off my hands. For the most part, I have taken on your job duties. Tonight, I am finally back to patrolling the forest. Five miles away from the entrance, I find a newly perched tent. It sits among the bed of rock-jasmine that you once photographed. I notice a woman inside when I shine the light over the campsite.

You had taken more night shifts than the rest of us. How many of these people did you find? How many of these people did you rescue? How many of them needed to be rescued? What did you say to them? Is there a number of people you should save that constitutes “enough”?

The woman must have heard my footsteps stepping over the leaves. She unzips the tent and peers outside, squinting to the light. She appears to be in her thirties, with bobbed brown hair.

“Evening,” I say.

“Evening,” she mutters.

“Camping for the night?”

She nods. “I’m sorry. I don’t mean to intrude.”

“Don’t worry; you’re not intruding. I’m just patrolling the area.”

I kneel down and set the flashlight aside. “How long do you plan to stay out here?”

“Not long. I guess maybe—maybe just for the night.”

“Okay,” I say, nodding. “And you plan to go back home tomorrow?”

“What?”

I shrug. “I just want to be certain that you’ll go home tomorrow. I don’t mean to sound nosy. I just—because you just never know these days anymore. You think someone’s fine, but they’re really not, and you just never seem to see the signs and all.”

She is staring back at me with a pained and confused expression, and I fear that she can see my inexperience. I peek inside the tent and soon notice her hands covering a pouch of pill bottles.

I look at her and smile. “I don’t think I’ve introduced myself yet. I’m Eva. And you are?”

“I’m... Melissa.”

“What brings you here tonight, Melissa?”

“I’m just—just—clearing my thoughts.”

“Right.” I nod. “Sure. And do you mind sharing those thoughts?”

“Just—about my family.”

“You have children?”

“I have a son.”

“How old is he?”

“Seven.”

“Is he from around here, too?”

She shakes her head. “He lives with his father.”

I realize I am leaning into her. In the dark, her hair is black like my mother’s.

“Why aren’t you home with them?” I ask.

“I mean, it’s...it’s probably for the best. I missed his spelling bee contest. I was... away. And I forget when it’s time to pick him up from school. It’s just...I don’t—I’m not fit to do anything, you know? I can—I just—I can barely remember to put clothes on myself.”

I sit down and cross my legs. I scoop up woodchips and pass them back and forth between my hands. “My mother left when I was eleven.” I shrug. I know it’s not professional of me. “I dunno. Maybe you’re right that it was for the best that she wasn’t by my side, but I would’ve liked to know that she was around, out there, somewhere. Even if not with me, she was somewhere, alive.”

I hear the crunching of leaves several feet away, and for a moment I wonder if it is you. The steps quicken, and nearby branches break, and I realize it is a deer.

“Melissa,” I say, “I think you should go home, wherever that may be. Anywhere is okay. It might not always seem like it for a while, but your son is waiting. Whether or not you’re actually here, alive, he’ll be waiting.”

I watch her. She is breathing deeply and holding herself, curled up into a ball.
And I see the familiarity of her posture—holding her knees, staring blankly.

“Are you still with me?” I say.

There is a drawn-out silence.

“Melissa?”

“Yeah,” she finally says.

I reach out my hand. “Let’s go back.”

She hesitates, but takes it. “Okay.” She nods. “Okay. Take me back.”

Slowly, we trek through the woods, returning home, like mother and daughter,
hand-in-hand.

Happiness

You open the front door to find your five-year-old daughter standing muddy-faced next to her best friend and the friend's mother. She is crying and her knees are shaking. She buries her head into your stomach, grabbing at your T-shirt. You notice her right shoulder drooping and her arm hanging limply.

"It all happened so fast," says the friend's mother. "We didn't even get to see who did it."

"There were two," says the best friend.

Your wife shoves you aside and pries your daughter towards her by pulling her limp arm. She cries out and squirms away.

Five minutes ago, when you saw the dark clouds approaching overhead, you considered calling her home. You realize now that those clouds were very obvious omens. If you had followed through with your instincts and gone outside earlier to the playground, you could have prevented this.

For the next several weeks, you teach your daughter to brush her teeth and eat with her unbroken left hand. You help her dress and put on her sling every morning. When you send her off to the school bus, you no longer know if she will come back intact. You have stopped going to your weekly soccer practices, and between your classes, you drive by her school to check in.

Meanwhile, your wife has been roaming the neighborhood to confront every boy who matches the description of "short blond hair" or "dark curly hair." She also tells your daughter in a stern tone, "If anyone on the playground is mean to you, you come home

and tell Mom right away. I'll take care of him." You imagine her holding a little boy by his shirt collar and "disciplining" him with her broken English. "Did you push my daughter off the play structure?" You sneer at her for believing herself to be the better parent.

*

"Daddy loves you so, so much," you coo as your daughter wakes to your voice. Your wife has just stormed out of the house. As your daughter squints her eyes, you hum the tune to "You Are So Beautiful" by Joe Cocker. Though you can barely mimic the raspy, gargling lyrics, you at least can sing the title. Your inability to carry a tune and your funny accent make her giggle more than anything else.

"If you could live with only me or Mommy, which would you choose?"

She yawns. "Both."

"Yes, but if you only had to pick one, which would you choose?"

She ponders longer this time, watching you. "I don't know."

*

Late in the afternoon, you and your wife are upstairs, continuing the fight from several nights before. What initially started as a heated two-way lecture on parental responsibility has escalated to an explosive argument about sole custody rights. Your wife's threats to leave and take your daughter with her have become more frequent, but you know you have the upper hand: your daughter must live here to continue attending school; you are the graduate student with the rights to live in this apartment; you are the

resident; you are the breadwinner. You have everything your daughter needs. You have it all.

Neither of you has kept an eye on the time, but you both hear movement downstairs, and you realize that school has ended half an hour ago.

When you and your wife reach the first floor, you find your daughter squatting over the broken glass vase that you had smashed onto the floor. With her left hand, she grasps the broom, which is almost twice her kneeling height, and clumsily sweeps the shards onto her security blanket. You remember that you were the one who misplaced the dustpan. She pinches the edges of the blanket and carries it to the trashcan.

You grab her by the shoulders and pull her away from the mess. She winces. "It's dangerous to handle glass! You'll get yourself cut!" You snatch the broom out of her hands.

Your wife snaps at you to shut up. She settles on the sofa and motions for your daughter to sit on her lap. Together, they rock back and forth as your wife runs her hands through her hair. It reminds you of your daughter's visit to the hospital, while you were waiting for the results of her X-Rays. She clutched your wife's neck tightly while you sat next to her, attempting to console her over her sobbing. Even then you were beginning to understand that her need for you was already diminishing.

*

You used to let your daughter go out to play after school before you would arrive home. "All you have to do is leave your backpack at the front door so Daddy knows

you're home." You no longer allow her to do so. You have made changes to your office hours so that you can return home earlier and wait for her by the bus stop.

One afternoon, you do not return on time. You find the backpack by the door and you panic at the thought of her out in the open. You hurry to the playground, and you discover her standing in the tallest section of the play structure, the same place she fell. She is looking down through the opening at the wood chips.

She jumps.

You freeze.

She lands flat on her feet.

She smiles to herself, then scurries back and climbs to the top once more.

You stand at the edge of the playground as she leaps off the play structure again and again—her broken arm held close to her core, her good arm stuffed into the pocket of her unzipped jacket and lifted high as though it is a wing, her body taking off and landing steadily. As you watch, you realize that sooner or later, you will no longer be able to contain her, to possess her. And you suddenly feel an overwhelming and perplexing happiness.

"Dad!" your daughter says, finally noticing you. She runs to you, baring her front teeth. One of them has come loose. "Dad, did you see? Did you see me jump?"

"I did! That was amazing."

"The next time I fall, I won't get hurt."

"I know," you say, kneeling and taking her hand. "I know you won't."

But, there are many things you do not know. You do not know that in a few months, you will be offered a teaching position in San Diego. You do not know that you will accept the offer. You do not know that I will not go with you. You do not know that from then on, you will see me only sporadically, and the last time you do, I will harbor a loathing for you so absolute that the rift will make you eventually forget what I look like.

Of course, you do not know these things right now.

You lead us home. "I'm proud of you," you say.

Ying Xiong

Earlier this morning, Brian awoke to the sensation of his unborn baby's throat pressed between his fingers. Half-lucid, he watched his child morph into the face of his brother, writhing in his grip. Hands trembling and back sweaty, Brian sat up. It was almost seven. The morning sunlight was filtering through the curtains, into the bedroom. As he calmed his breathing, he turned to his fiancée sleeping beside him. She groaned and rolled onto her other side, her arm cradling her pregnant belly.

Now, with less than an hour left in the trip, Brian begins to feel the full dread of meeting his little brother, Jason. He drives down a long stretch of interstate road, traveling east on I-90, the sun directly in his eyes. His sedan, an old stick-shift Civic, may no longer handle long trips after this one.

The request to meet his brother in their old hometown, so hastily planned over the phone two days ago, did not strike Brian as dreadful then. Immediately after the arrangement was confirmed, his biggest preoccupations were to take time off work and to notify Heather.

"Make sure my mother doesn't find out I'm meeting him," he said to her, two nights ago.

"Why not?" said Heather. "I thought she's wanted this for years."

"We don't want to get her hopes up. What if he doesn't end up coming?"

In his last visit to Ma's, she had asked, once again, if Jason had ever replied to the wedding invitation. "Don't let him get away this time," she had said.

"Doesn't she deserve to at least know?" asked Heather.

“If Jason’s a no-show, it’ll just break her heart again,” said Brian.

Noticing that the radio is getting staticky, he adjusts the station. It is 10:23 in the morning, and Heather is probably preparing for her 11 o’clock shift. He realizes now that he forgot this morning to freeze ice cubes that would help with her morning sickness. He was scrambling to reroute his drive so that it avoided toll booths. Until this slip-up, he had consistently carried out his responsibilities, his reliability reassuring him that he would make an excellent husband and father.

Ahead, there is a brief stretch of unexpected traffic at the exit point where he should get off. As he waits, he wonders how his mother would react to seeing Jason again, and if she would finally forgive him for making his brother leave. “I have lived a hard life, Brian,” Ma had pointedly said, during one of his recent visits. “I have lived a hard life but I have not asked for many things. All I want is to see both of my sons together during a happy occasion. Is that too difficult? Is that too much to ask for?”

This is a pattern he has noticed lately whenever he visits Ma. There is always some trepidation in her eyes or sense of doubt in her speech, especially if Heather tags along. He catches Ma observing their interactions closely, and displaying a motherly protectiveness over her soon-to-be daughter-in-law: “If you move too far away from your family, Heather, it will be hard to find help there. It’s better to stay close.” It is clear that Brian seems to Ma a source of concern. There is something unsettling about being seen in such a way—the bad guy in a suspected crime he has yet to commit.

This particular feeling, in its essence, is not unlike the eerie uncertainty he felt, back when he was eight years old, waiting for his mother to come upstairs. It was a

routine that started with her while she was pregnant with Jason. Around two in the morning, he would hear her slippers fall on the staircase. It was slow and methodical, distinct from the rapid and irregular thuds of his father's fists downstairs, only moments earlier.

As she would enter into his room, he would close his eyes and lie still, relaxing his body and taking deep breaths through his mouth. During the day, Ma was usually out of sight. When Brian would come home from school, she would usually stay upstairs watching TV. Sometimes, he would find her completely buried in the sheets. There would be static blaring from the television monitor. She usually wouldn't notice him standing by the doorway, no matter how long he stayed. It was during these moments that Brian felt as though Ma were only a ghostly hologram, not truly present.

The uncertainty of these moments were of the same variety as now: being near Ma—the realness of her weight on the bed plus the smell of her clothes—yet not knowing, upon waking up in the morning, if it had all been a dream. His mother, hinting at his father's violence without explicitly saying so. Except now, more than twenty years later, the focus of her fears has shifted onto Brian, almost as if she has known all along what he had done to Jason in the past.

In his dream last night, though now he can only recall bits and pieces, Brian was sitting on a bed, holding his child in his arms. The wall was painted yellow by the incandescent lights. There was an indiscernible murmuring beyond the room, and his body suddenly shrunk back into his eight-year-old self.

The baby was crying.

Now it was lying on the bed.

It was the softness and looseness of the skin in his hands, the solidity of the bones beneath his weight. More than what he was seeing, he was disturbed by how real the baby's throat felt. "You did this, Jason," Brian remembers whispering. "You did this to Ma, to us. It's your fault." He recalls marveling at the ease with which he could dictate the outcome of a life.

As the GPS notifies him to turn left at the traffic light, Brian switches lanes. He checks the map on his phone. There is about twenty minutes, of the three-hour drive, remaining.

It is unclear how Jason will react to seeing him again. Three years have passed since they last saw each other. Jason is now 19 and Brian 28. A couple days ago, when Jason answered Tuesday's phone call, his voice rang deeper and fuller, though with hints of the same uncertain tone as the night he had been left behind. In their last moments, the two had gotten into a fight, with Brian repeatedly striking Jason in the face.

Brian had been swiveling around in his office chair as he prepared to dial. He recalls counting three rings before Jason picked up. He remembers saying, at one point, "I understand if you're unsure, but we'd really want you to be there."

"We?" said Jason.

"Me, my fiancée, Ma."

"Even you?"

"Well, you're my brother."

Jason paused. "Is it out of duty then? Family obligation?"

“No, I do want you to come.”

“But you had to say first that we’re brothers.”

“Jason, please. You don’t need to make this more complicated than it needs to be. I want you there. I’ve been waiting to see you again. Ma wants you to be there, too. She’s been waiting for your reply.”

For several seconds, it was silent. Brian could hear whirring in the background.

“Listen, Brother,” said Jason. “I mean to go back eventually. I really do. But I don’t know if I’m ready yet.”

“What do you mean not ready?”

“I mean you and Ma haven’t seen me in three years.” Jason sighed. “You know how you said Ba had these dark patches near his eyes? You even showed me pictures.”

“Why do you always have to bring him up?” asked Brian. “What does he have to do with any of this?”

Jason continued, “I looked it up. It’s called melasma, apparently.”

“Why does this matter?”

“Because I’m starting to get it, too. Little spots here and there. It’s the little things, Brother, that you have to get over. It’s weird, looking in the mirror at yourself and seeing him. How would you react, if you saw me at your wedding and I looked almost exactly like him? How do you think Ma would react?”

Brian reaches the transit center, where he and Jason have agreed to meet. He parks his car against a curb across from the bus stops. He realizes that, even though he had lived in the city for ten years, he almost never visited downtown. The buildings are

vibrantly colored and the air lacks the smokey smell of his current Chinatown neighborhood.

Not even a week ago, Ma made a point to call him and remind him of her fondness for Heather, because she is “the kind of woman I was not.” The underlying message was clear, and Brian made every effort to reassure Ma: “I have and I will take care of her. And our child. I love her.”

Brian steps out of the car and stretches his arms. He walks toward a bench and sits in the shade. Soon, the Greyhound pulls into its designated stop. Brian stands. He can’t see beyond the tinted windows. The driver opens the door and steps outside to open the luggage compartment.

As Brian crosses the street, he half-expects to see his brother in his thirteen-year-old form, shifting in his seat before the school principal. The feeling of dread is the same as back then—not knowing what exactly he would see. Face muddied, with swollen cheeks and a split lower lip. Entering the principal’s office after Jason’s middle school lunch period. Finding Jason sitting with his head hung and with a tear in his pants. “I didn’t mean to,” said Jason.

According to the principal, a boy named Robby had gotten into a fist fight with Jason. Robby’s face had turned blue by the time the supervisors had managed to pry Jason off. Even as Robby gasped and wheezed, Jason continued to lunge at him, hardly contained by the adults.

“Why would you do this?” asked Brian.

“He was bullying me because I don’t know my dad.”

Parked in the guest lot, Brian gripped the steering wheel. He listened to Jason apologizing in the backseat.

“When Ma hears about this, she’ll be devastated,” Brian recalls saying.

“I didn’t mean to,” said Jason.

“But you did it anyway.”

“Because he wouldn’t stop making fun of me.”

“How would you even think to nearly strangle someone? I don’t understand. Who taught you that?”

“I won’t do it again.”

By the luggage compartment, Brian waits and watches the passengers who exit and continue past him. Jason finally steps out, in worn hiker boots and a heavy jacket. His duffel bag is similar to the one he used to own.

Brian calls to his brother and waves. When Jason turns and sees Brian, his shoulders relax and he smiles. His hair is cut short, and his face is long, a bit like Ma’s.

“You and Ba,” Brian said, back in the school parking lot that day. “You remind me of him. Maybe you know him better than you think.” He turned on the ignition, and observed his brother from the rearview mirror. In that moment, seeing Jason so pitifully slumped in the seat, Brian suddenly wanted to see his brother’s devastation. A kind of justice for the crimes committed against Ma and him years ago. He proceeded to tell Jason about their father, emphasizing the times Ba had nearly strangled their mother. “You knew to choke Robby, just like Ba did. You’re just like him.”

Jason sets his bag on the ground. He embraces Brian, patting his back. “Brother,” he says, almost relieved. “It’s good to finally see you.” His voice is hoarse. He is almost as tall as Brian now, and smells of the outdoors.

“You’re back,” says Brian, holding his brother. “Forgive me, Jason.”

“So when is the wedding again?”

“June 23rd,” says Brian.

“Wow, so it’s coming up pretty quick.”

The diner is rustic with dark oak walls. Its service is slow, even during lunch hours: a few individuals stop by to pick up orders, and some co-workers arrive in groups during their breaks.

“How long have you two been together?” asks Jason.

“Almost two years. Our anniversary’s in September, and we were planning to get married then. But, uh, we found out she’s expecting, so things got moved up.”

“Oh, wow. That’s... really good news. Congrats.”

Brian nods. “Ma was happy to find out about being a grandmother.”

Jason takes off his jacket. “How is she? Is she well?”

“She’s got some chest and back pain, so she’s usually home nowadays.”

“Oh.” Jason takes a sip of water. “That’s not because of—”

“Ba? That’s what she thinks.”

The waitress returns with their order of burgers.

“I tried calling home once,” says Jason. “A while back. I was staying at this shelter, and I borrowed the phone from the front desk.”

Brian wipes his knife and fork with a wetted napkin. “I know. I heard.” According to Ma, Jason had apologized to her and said, “Tell Brian I don’t blame him for what happened. Tell him I’m sorry for all the trouble I’ve caused.”

“What did you do?” asked Ma.

“I caught him stealing money, Ma. I was reprimanding him. That was all.”

“I’m sorry,” says Jason. “It just felt like—I dunno. I didn’t know how to explain what happened. She doesn’t resent me for hanging up, does she?”

Brian reaches for his water. “She’s your mother, and you’re her son. She still talks about you all the time. You’re still her Ying Xiong.”

The waitress stops by again to refill their glasses and ask if they are enjoying the food.

“Thanks,” says Jason, nodding at the server. He neatly sets his utensils down to both sides of the plate. He bows his head and prays. This catches Brian off-guard. For about a minute, he watches his brother lean over the table, folding his hands, mouthing. It almost seems as though he is pleading.

“You’re religious now,” says Brian, after Jason finishes. He reaches for the ketchup bottle.

Jason shrugs. “Trying it out.”

“For how long?”

“Maybe a few months or so.”

Brian picks out the onions. “Why the sudden change?”

“My co-worker. He’s really insistent about this kind of stuff.” Jason shakes more salt onto his fries. “It’s... nice, I guess. I don’t know if I can believe all the creation myths and the flood stories.” He shrugs again. “But maybe it’s because I was never exposed to that stuff as a kid.”

“I remember Ma used to go for a few years. She’d take me every once in a while.”

“Really?” Jason wipes his mouth with a napkin. “She never told me.”

“It was way back. I was maybe four, five years old. It was a small Chinese Christian community. The appeal was they taught English and helped with some finance stuff.”

“Oh. So it wasn’t like she ever believed in God?”

“If she did, she definitely doesn’t anymore.”

Jason nods and eats another fry. “Is there a reason she never took us to church?”

“I guess... if she thinks God or the church didn’t help her much back then, there’s no reason to continue. Maybe she just decided it wasn’t for her... or us.” Brian sets down his utensils. “Do you think we should’ve gone to church when we were little?”

“I dunno,” says Jason. He scratches his head. “I’m not saying she did anything wrong by deciding against it—”

“I know.”

“But maybe it would’ve helped, a little.”

“With what?”

“Well, recently, I’ve been starting to make sense of things. And going to church and listening to other people talk about their struggles—that helps.”

When he speaks to Brian, Jason maintains eye contact—a stark contrast to years ago, when his gaze would constantly shift.

“Brother,” says Jason, “there’s a lot of things I’ve been wanting to tell you. Things that I’m starting to realize after all these years.”

Brian glances up from his food. “What kind of things?”

“Like realizing that we’re all meant for something. I’ve always thought this way about people, but now I especially do: I believe in fate, Brother, in destiny. I think everything happens because it’s meant to happen.”

The remark takes Brian aback. “Fate?”

Jason nods. “I’ve always believed that. But before, I used to hold that idea against myself. Now I’m starting to see how it’s a blessing.”

Though Brian has not stepped foot in a church for years, he is familiar enough with their language to recognize it in Jason’s speech. It is surprising to see how quickly his brother has internalized and picked up their lingo. “What do you mean by ‘blessing’?”

“As in everyone is here for some purpose. Nobody here is a waste of space or just drifting around without any reason. Everything is meant for some greater, higher purpose.”

Brian sits back and examines his brother. There is enthusiasm in his voice and eyes, a sense of confidence Brian is not used to seeing. He notices a scar on the bridge of his brother’s nose.

“I have something to show you,” Jason continues. He reaches for his duffel and pulls out a shoe box. “I’ve found a place, where I am now. I work at this state forest. I protect people. It’s a job that only people like me can do.” Inside are dozens of Thank You notes and cards addressed to various park rangers. The oldest ones date to over a decade ago. “I’m saving lives, Brother. That’s my job—saving lives. These people—they go to the forest ready to do horrible things to themselves, and it’s my job to prevent it.”

Brian wipes his hands and takes out a card addressed specifically to Jason. It is hand-made, by a child. It is a crude drawing of what appears to be Jason, the child herself, and her older sister.

“I’ve heard of this park,” says Brian. “The high suicide rate, right?”

“The soil is supposed to be really fertile, so the forest density is unusually high. It’s one of those places where people go if they never want to be found again.”

“So you do intervention work,” says Brian.

Jason nods.

“How long have you been working there?”

“I started half a year ago.”

Another card is written in cursive—a brief letter thanking the rangers for finding the writer’s husband in time.

Brian places them back in the box. He looks to Jason, who returns his gaze. It is as though Jason is seeking approval from him.

“It’s not the most noble job,” says Jason. “Not by any stretch of the imagination. It’s a depressing place to work. But I think it’s what someone like me is meant to do. Not everyone has the mental fortitude to stay for long, but I have yet to leave.”

The waitress comes back to refill their waters.

“You think about this a lot, don’t you?” asks Brian. “This idea of fate.”

Jason nods. He scratches at the scar.

“Do you remember the baseball game?”

“Baseball game?”

“The first one you competed in. You were in middle school.”

“A little,” says Jason. “Why?”

“The team was celebrating on the field after you guys won. There were all these dads running out and then there was just us two, standing there and watching. And you asked me why you never met our father.”

Brian remembers he had told Jason, “You mean you don’t think Ma and I are enough?” And, as Jason shook his head, Brian put both hands on his brother’s shoulders. “We’re all you need. Got that? Don’t ask about this again.”

“Do you still resent me for not telling you the truth?” asks Brian.

“Ma didn’t tell me either though.”

“But do you?”

Jason sighs. “I resent more that you decided to tell me one day, out of the blue after I got in that fist fight, and you had to rub in the fact that I reminded you of him.”

After arriving home from that car ride, Jason ran upstairs to his room, slamming the door shut. For the duration of the in-home suspension, he kept himself locked in the room, leaving only when he believed no one was paying attention.

“It was one of those moments where things clicked for me,” says Jason. “Why I always felt these violent urges. It just hurt that you told me the way you did.”

“And what about that night?”

“That night?”

“The night I forced you away.”

Brian recalls grabbing Jason’s shirt collar and striking his face as his brother weeps and apologizes. It was at 2 AM, three years ago, after Brian had found Jason huddled in an alleyway by the dumpsters.

“Do you have no sense of gratitude?” said Brian, approaching.

Jason squinted at the street lights, eyes bloodshot, smelling like pot.

“I know you’ve been stealing Ma’s money. Is this what you’re using it for?”

Brian grabbed his brother’s arm. “I don’t care what you do out here. Get stoned or drunk or high and kill yourself for all I care. Don’t do it with Ma’s money.”

“Brother—” says Jason, closing the shoe box.

“What you’ve been saying about fate. How do you make sense of what I did to you? Do you think it was supposed to happen? Was I meant to do that?”

That night, as Brian struck his brother, he finally felt powerful and in control; Jason’s struggling gave him a strange sense of exhilaration. He wonders if this was what allowed Ba to abuse their mother so frequently.

“Don’t come back,” said Brian. And he left his brother, nose and mouth bloodied.

“I stole Ma’s money,” says Jason. “You care about her more than you care about me. That’s how it’s always been.”

“Do you really believe that?”

“It’s the truth, isn’t it?”

Jason’s hands rest on the table and touch the edge of the shoe box. His face appears expressionless, but he breaks eye contact and purses his lips.

“So given that, you think it was inevitable for that to happen?”

“Why are you asking me this, Brother? You’re getting married and having a kid soon. You’re moving on with your life. And I am too. I’ve been trying to make peace with everything.”

“I know you have.”

“Is it my forgiveness you want? Before you start your new life?”

Two days after that night, their mother filed a missing person’s report. For the next year, she would always ask Brian, “Did you do something to make him leave? What did we do to make him go? What did we do wrong?”

“I want to make sense of what happened. What I did to you. And what happened to me and Ma so many years ago.”

“Maybe this isn’t the best place for that.”

The waitress arrives with the check.

“Do you want to see our old house?” asks Jason. “You did ask to come here for that reason, right?”

Brian nods. "It's not too far from here."

"How close?"

"About a twenty-minute drive. I checked before I got here."

"When did we leave—when I was one?"

Brian nods. "Right before then."

It is almost two. The skies are cloudy, and there are heavy winds outside. If they go now, there shouldn't be anyone home, assuming there are residents in the first place.

Brian remembers that his old home was decrepit, located in the outskirts of the town. It was one of the few places affordable to Chinese immigrants with student visas. His memories of the house have always been that it was dark, with few windows that faced the sunlight.

Now, the houses appear newly renovated, their chipping paint recoated with bright colors. Brian still recognizes the way the streets curve, and how the wooden play structure had a spiraling slide.

"This is it?" says Jason. He peers out the passenger window. They have parked by their old mailbox. The lawn has been recently mowed, and there is a wind chime hanging above the front entrance.

They step up to the porch. Jason knocks and Brian peeks through the window. He can see the empty living room. His old sofa had a flowery pattern on it. The one inside leans against the opposite side of the wall, with a minimalist design. It faces a flat-screen TV and a small coffee table.

“No one’s home, it seems,” says Brian.

Jason also looks inside.

“See the door to the left?” says Brian. “It leads to the basement. Never really liked the place. The pipes made this terrible gurgling noise.”

“You told me once you were afraid of going up the stairs too quickly,” says Jason.

“The one going upstairs is around the corner.”

Brian remembers the distinct sound the house made. The floors creaked and groaned in such a way that he wondered if he would fall through. He would skip past the fifth step on the staircase and maneuver around a particular tile in the living room that he marked with a Sharpie.

“How long did you know that Ba was abusing Ma?” asks Jason.

“I always had a feeling. I used to spend a lot of my evenings just watching him, waiting for him to do something, so I could see what I was hearing every other night.”

In the dimly lit living room of his childhood home, he remembers the figure of Ba, sitting at the corner of his desk, back turned to him. Brian, meanwhile, would dangle his legs over the sofa. He was still too short, at eight years old, for his feet to reach the floor. Swinging them, he would observe the way Ba could sit so perfectly still for hours. The single lamp beside the table would cast a slanted shadow over the wooden floors. The only sound would be the rustle of a turning page or the quick adjustment of his glasses.

Only while watching Ba could Brian recognize his father’s true identity. From behind, his father resembled the Clark Kent he had read in his comic books—the combed

black hair, the large torso, the muscular arms. Here, though, knowing what was happening in the middle of night when his father believed him to be asleep, the feeling left him more frightened than in awe.

“It’s disturbing, to think back to it now,” continues Brian. “It was a feeling I had about Ba, but there was still a part of me that wanted to believe he was some sort of role model. Even then I wanted to mirror him.”

Brian would practice on the couch, propping himself up. He would stop kicking his feet. He would pull back his shoulders. He would lift his chin. He would slow his breathing. He would stop blinking. Holding, waiting, concentrating, he would finally feel it: this sharp pain in his watering eyes—his laser-beam powers—and this pressure building in his chest—his super strength.

“I thought maybe it would help me understand why he did what he did.”

It was an intoxicating but terrifying sensation, because he knew that the moment he let go, all would be lost again. The fragility of his powers was much like the fragility of Ba’s peacefulness. Brian had sensed that some nights could be quiet because Ba had willed it so. By forcing this stoicism and discipline onto himself, Ba could hold himself back and maintain calm within the house.

On one of the nights that Ma would come upstairs to visit Brian, she had told him, “Brian, have I ever told you about the time you were born?”

She whispered, and told him how she couldn’t understand what the nurses were saying when they had taken him away. Ba would drive them to the hospital right after his accounting classes at the local university. Together, the two of them would watch him for

hours outside the NICU. “We were so lucky that we were able to save you. Everything your father worked for, the reason why he brought us here, was for you. Ba loves us more than anything else. Never forget that. Ba loves us very, very much.”

“And yet,” says Brian, “less than a year later, I’m being dragged out of bed because we’re leaving Ba forever.”

Brian steps off the porch and motions for Jason to follow him. The backyard is a shared space for all residents, with soccer field lines drawn by a former resident. They step around to the back and peer through glass windows. The staircase is now fully visible on the other side.

His final moments in the house had ended abruptly. On the night that they left, Ma, at three in the morning, had woken him and pulled him out of his bed, with everything packed. Without changing, he drowsily pulled his own suitcase out of the house, to the waiting taxicab outside. In the backseat, he watched his neighborhood pass by, and hugged Ma’s arm as she cradled her stomach.

“There were only a few things I knew for sure: that we weren’t living with Ba anymore, that Ma was pregnant with you, and that she sees you as the reason we left.”

Jason turns to him.

“Ma calls you Ying Xiong for that reason. She says you saved us.”

“Is that what you think?”

“I think if not for Ma wanting to protect you, we would’ve stayed for much longer.” He turns to Jason. “But it’s difficult for me. When I used to see you, I would be reminded of here.”

“Is that still true?”

“I wish it wasn’t. To be honest, you don’t look that much like him; you’re more like Ma in many ways. The eyes and mouth.”

“But that’s what you say if you force yourself to think that way.”

Brian glances back inside. He sees again the shadowy figure of his father, standing over Ma. And he wonders if what he witnessed really happened, or if it was conjured up in his dreams.

“Even now when you see me, you associate me with Ba and this place, right?”

Brian sighs. “I don’t blame you, Jason. Not anymore, at least.”

“I know you don’t try to anymore.”

“I was supposed to be the one to protect you.”

The winds are picking up, even as sunlight peeks through the clouds. An elderly neighbor comes outside and calls to them, asking them what they’re up to.

“Excuse us,” says Jason. “We were just visiting.” He starts towards the front of the house again, heading for Brian’s car. Brian nods at the neighbor and follows his brother behind.

They settle into their seats. “After that night, I spent a lot of days just wandering around and fantasizing about what I would do to you. I hated you. I was plotting revenge, and it got to the point where I was thinking of ways to kill you. And then I would hate myself for thinking that way about my own brother.”

On some nights, Brian would stumble upon Jason in his room, kneeling in a prayer-like pose, pleading as if he deserved some form of harsh punishment. “I would change if I could. I would. I really would if I knew how.”

“Brother,” says Jason, “if I said I forgave you, I wouldn’t be honest. I know you regret what happened, and I know you won’t do that to me or anyone again, but that doesn’t mean I can forgive you.”

Brian sighs. “Do you still hate me?”

Jason ponders. “I’m not sure.”

“Are you still angry with me?”

“No. I’m not that anymore.”

“Do you think you deserved it?”

“I haven’t figured that part yet either.” Jason buckles his seatbelt. “I told you before I’m trying to move on. Even if I didn’t deserve it, I wound up where I am now. I know I’ve changed, and I can’t stay angry knowing that I’m a better person now.”

“You have changed,” Brian affirms.

Jason checks the time. “Can you take me back to the bus stop?”

“You already knew you would be going back to the park today,” says Brian, glancing at Jason’s return ticket.

“I took time off work to meet you, but people can’t sub for my shift for too long.”

At about 4, another Greyhound pulls back to its stop. The sun is still shining, reflecting its light off the bus. Jason pulls his bags and gets up from the bench opposite the station.

Brian reaches for his brother's arm. "Will you be at the wedding?"

Jason turns. "It's your happy day. Don't let me ruin it. Tell Ma I'm sorry, and that she doesn't need to worry about me."

Brian lets go. "I can't force you to do anything. You're an adult now. But we all want you back. You won't ruin anything." He reaches into his pocket for his wallet, and offers Jason a business card.

Jason ponders. "When's the baby due?"

"In around seven months."

"So you don't know the gender yet?"

"We don't plan to know before it's born." Brian places the card in Jason's hand. "Don't let me get in the way of family."

Jason examines the business card. The bus driver begins to close the luggage compartment doors. Jason turns to Brian. "I have to get going, but I'll think about it." He runs across the street, toward the bus, calling for the driver to wait. Brian stands. He cannot help but wonder, when he drove his car away that night, if his brother made any effort to chase him home.

Jason waves before stepping inside. The bus closes its doors and the ignition starts with a rumble. In his head, Brian hears his brother calling from the alleyway: "Don't go, Brother, please. Please. Please don't leave me."

Five weeks after their meeting, during the wedding reception, Jason will show up unexpectedly. His suit will be loose-fitting—likely borrowed—and his tie will hang crookedly off his neck. In Ma’s arms, he will apologize and ask for forgiveness. She will hold him to her chest, cradling his head in front of onlookers.

The ceremony will take place outside Heather’s former church, where her parents currently attend. Tents will be perched outside on the lawn. The attendance will be small—no more than fifty people—and the food will be prepared by the church’s kitchen staff.

Brian will notice Jason watching him from the edge of the dance floor as he waltzes with his wife. Jason will look around the room and greet old family and friends he has not spoken to in years. Some will attempt conversation, during which Jason will nod and smile politely, appearing very uncomfortable.

Brian and Heather will approach him. Brian will be out-of-breath, more exhausted than his pregnant wife. Heather will reach out her hand and coerce Jason into dancing with her.

“I don’t know how,” Jason will say.

“Then I’ll lead,” Heather will say.

Many years later, as Brian scatters his brother’s ashes upon the beachfront, he will think back to the wedding day, a small moment when he truly, purely loved his brother, with no tainted memories of Ba and the old house. He will wonder why he never shared this with Jason, and if doing so would have had a different outcome.

From the edge of the dance floor, Brian will laugh at Jason's initial clumsiness—slipping on the wooden floors, clutching Heather in order to prop himself up. Soon, his brother will gain his balance, and the two will begin twirling, breaking away from the waltz form as though they are the only ones dancing. It will remind Brian of the old days, when the two would place couch cushions and pillows on the floor while Ma would be away. Jason, five years old, raising his arms so he could be picked up. And Brian, lifting Jason into the air and spinning until the two would fall.

Works Consulted

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