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Queen Academy

<i>Prologue</i>	<i>1</i>
<i>One</i>	<i>4</i>
<i>Two</i>	<i>13</i>
<i>Three</i>	<i>22</i>
<i>Four</i>	<i>28</i>
<i>Five</i>	<i>38</i>
<i>Six</i>	<i>48</i>
<i>Seven</i>	<i>58</i>
<i>Eight</i>	<i>66</i>
<i>Nine</i>	<i>73</i>
<i>Ten</i>	<i>94</i>
<i>Eleven</i>	<i>102</i>
<i>Twelve</i>	<i>123</i>
<i>Thirteen</i>	<i>132</i>
<i>Fourteen</i>	<i>140</i>
<i>Fifteen</i>	<i>144</i>
<i>Sixteen</i>	<i>156</i>
<i>Postscript</i>	<i>164</i>

Prologue

A journey occurs simultaneously in space, in time and in the social hierarchy.

Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes Tropiques*, 1955

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In San Francisco, on the runway, the plane touched down with a deafening clangor, jerking forward as if to once again take off. Kang shut his eyes amidst the cries of his fellow passengers, his heart pounding in his throat. He clutched the seat before him, spine bent and head buried between arms. Flashing in his mind was his parents waving goodbye, at the small airport in his hometown two days before. Then, there came his boyfriend's tongue forcing its way into his mouth only yesterday, a tight embrace pressing the air out of his lungs. Many curious eyes were on them, because they were outside the immigration cordon at the Beijing airport. But HC didn't care. Kang struggled himself out of HC's embrace. "Join me in four months!" he raised his voice. "We'll celebrate 2011's first light together!"

How terrible if all ended here, before his own study even began, before their plan of reporting themselves across the Pacific had its chance. He must do something, like shutting his eyes tighter and opening his mouth wider, crying at the top of his lungs. Clatter and friction whirled around him, pulverizing his words, the crew members' PA announcements, and some babies' high-pitched shrills. Horrific howling broke out when an overhead bin failed somewhere back in the cabin, content spewed and heading to the heads, arms, and backs underneath.

Such a cacophony lasted until a force rammed his head straight into the seat before, then shoved his shoulders fiercely back. He peered out of the window and saw the tip of the plane's wing glinting over the water. Only a few yards from the ocean, it seemed, and Kang felt both shocked and relieved. There was a hush in the cabin, for a second before cheers and claps erupted

everywhere. Kang also laughed, with his back drenched in a cold sweat, his calves shivered uncontrollably for seconds. He thought of calling his parents and HC but stopped at the thought of the time difference—it was in the small hours there, and how much would it have cost?

He turned to his neighbor and wanted to say something, anything, to mark their incredulous luck. The neighbor was already standing up from his aisle seat, a white man in his late thirties and in a mustard-striped shirt. Sprucer than the other, primarily Chinese, passengers, he had already turned to Kang with a wide smile, broad-shouldered and arms outstretched, twisting the V of his shirt to reveal the cropped bristles across his pecs.

Kang's mouth turned dry as his throat contracted tight. It was unusual for him not to notice an attractive man, and he blamed it on the dim fluorescent light when he had just boarded the plane, the long sleep that lasted on and off throughout the flight. He had probably slept for only half an hour the night before, talking with and holding HC in HC's tiny apartment.

“Lucky us!” the neighbor said and took a step closer.

“Lucky us,” Kang fitted himself into the embrace.

“Are you a student here?” The man released Kang, although Kang wished to stay longer. This close, despite the ebullience around, Kang did not miss how the tips of his eyelashes perked up and touched the lower rim of his brows.

“Yes, heading to Stanford for a master's in statistics,” Kang said, with confidence to prop up the volume above all the other passengers.

“Wow,” the man raised his voice as well. “Where did you go to college?”

“Tsinghua in Beijing, you know?”

“Of course, the best in China. I'm Roger.”

“Kang, Kang Li. Nice to meet you.”

He extended his hand again, and more tidbits fell after the handshake: a 21-year-old fresh graduate coming to America for the first time, a Beijing-based UNICEF officer heading home for a break. One wanted to learn from the world's best; the other wanted to help with the best intentions. Roger's home was north of San Francisco, Marin or Marlin, about one hour's drive. Kang did not care. In front of him was a handsome man. He thought of sharing he had a boyfriend to test the water, but decided that it was irrelevant. A handsome man is a handsome man, and it doesn't matter if he is gay or straight. For a moment, Kang wondered about the prospect of finding a boyfriend here, in this new country, in his new life. The idea's inappropriateness struck him: he and HC had separated for only fourteen hours. He caught a moment when the conversation lost steam and sat back into his seat, waiting quietly for the crew members' further instructions.

Then all passengers were led to deplane, the unhurt ones to a file of airport shuttles, the hurt ones to circles of emergency crews and paramedics. Kang followed the bigger group to the airport terminal and then passed a separate passageway through the immigration, a special arrangement likely to assuage the landing's impact. The officer beckoned to him, and asked him only two questions before stamping his passport.

"I heard you had a runway overrun"? she said, handing back the passport. Kang did not understand "runway overrun"; he held his passport and bore an embarrassing smile.

"Welcome to America!" the officer said, flashing a friendly smile. Kang thanked her and took his exit, only then thinking of giving his handsome neighbor one last look. He paused and scanned the queues folding onto themselves behind the row of immigration cubicles, the mustard-striped shirt nowhere to find. He turned about-face and gave his luggage a sharp pull, striding into his new life with firm steps.

For the following days, the plane landing story became Kang's default icebreaker, as he visited various student services and discussed coursework with peer advisors. People expressed surprise and concern; they offered advice and free pens. "Boeing 777 Crashes at SFO"—the student service manager of the Statistics Department pulled out her San Francisco Chronicle, pointing to the title in block letters. Kang enjoyed being the source of information, a first-person, insider account that complemented the media coverage. He also enjoyed that his English was good enough to get through his points, the unexpected compliment that he did not, in fact, have much of a thing called an "accent." Even checking the "Asian" box offered him some small thrill, a slightly different vantage to see himself anew.

The class would begin in two weeks, so it was time to figure out his new life's parameters. Where he would study: the Main Quad, a rectangular square ringed by sandstone buildings and an arcade, fitting more to his mental image of a Middle Ages cloister than a harbinger of modern science. How to get there: a red-white bike he bought at the bike shop on campus, second-hand but without even a single scratch on its coat of paint. He paid extra for a family studio in the graduate residential pocket called Escondido Village, so when HC came, they'd have all that space to themselves. Pacing through the spacious kitchen and along the perimeter of the irregularly shaped bedroom, Kang felt it was set up for a kind of life he didn't yet know how to live. The Palo Alto downtown-bound bus stopped just around the corner, and Kang could see the passengers waiting from his living room. In the quiet of the afternoons, the sun percolated through the canopy of a giant oak and a stone pine, casting dapple disks on the carpet.

To be able to study here was an achievement and a privilege, and Kang reminded himself that he had to work hard to stand out. The expanse of the campus impressed him, but the ready

availability of nature—lawns, forests, grassland—lifted his spirit. In his previous imagination of the US, signs of science and democracy (like the space shuttle and a politician giving a concession speech) had occupied the central spot; but now, in the day-to-day, it was the cleaner streets and better-maintained facades that impressed him the most. Strangers seemed more friendly, beaming and greeting, with an air of confidence and nonchalance.

Idyllic, tranquil: walking around the Escondido Village and its immediate vicinity, these words once thought only GRE-useful flashed in his mind, even their inflections bearing a soothing quality. All the effort he had made to come here—the long hours spent studying, the TOEFL, and the GRE—felt all worthwhile, as the cleaner air and the more golden sun themselves were sufficient justifications. He was pleased that he had decided to come. When did the idea germinate? Was it when he was six, a neighbor got a scholarship from Seattle and invited everyone for cake? Or when he was nine, when a classmate of his grandfather's returned with a box of books as a gift after four decades abroad? He could not recall. Maybe neither, as it was the Hollywood movies and sitcoms that left their lasting marks, or perhaps it was both, specks and nuggets compounded by many more similar moments, accumulating with time and forming a discernable shape.

What he did recall, though, was that he and HC would make their trans-Pacific video call, his 4 pm and HC's 7 am, the sun goldening the indolent air here and rising behind the light smog there. The first time they video-called, Kang started by shifting his camera to the sun to let the golden rays shine through. Coming here was his idea; HC only got on board reluctantly. As a Chinese literature major, his editor assistant career--three-month-old by now--had more room for growth at home, while Kang's statistics diploma could open more American doors. Kang hoped the golden sunrays and the crisp, smog-free air could set the right, enticing tone; he wanted to cement HC's excitement about coming here.

But HC seemed distracted. “What’s the matter?” Kang shifted the camera back to his own face.

“Nothing,” HC murmured, forcing his eyes to open wider. “Just that I didn’t sleep well last night.”

“Missing me too much?”

HC took a pause. “Lin came last night,” he said hesitantly, “and we probably drank too much.”

Kang’s heart sank, and he knew why. The first time he met Lin, they were both at an offline Tsinghua bulletin board organized by the “Homo Love” section. HC and Kang went together as a couple, but Lin’s attention was glued only on HC. Kang had to declare his “ownership” by putting his hand on HC’s shoulder, and only then Lin backed off and began to talk to Kang. He had since behaved all properly around, inviting HC and Kang for dinners or karaoke nights, sometimes the couple only, sometimes as part of a larger group. Kang thought he’d swept the unfavorable first impression to oblivion; his sudden suspicion surprised and discomforted him.

“What’s the occasion?” Kang asked, pretending nonchalance. “Why did Lin come?”

“Oh, we just ran into each other after work. Haven’t seen him for a while, so I invited him for an impromptu dinner.”

Kang imaged the two having dinner and tried to hold on to that mental image. He asked what they had had, for retroactive participation than gleaning incriminating evidence. When he shifted back to talking about his first impression of America, he felt his earlier elation had evaporated. He proceeded to his apartment, bike, and classes insipidly, as if nothing exciting was happening in his new life, in his finally realized dream. A few times, his mind even turned blank

for what to share next. He filled the gap by reciting the canteen's various offerings he had savored for lunch.

After the video call, he tried to brush off his worry by reason: that HC had volunteered the information, that he must trust HC. They had been together for a while now: two years and four months at Tsinghua, two months more since their graduation in June. The first time he saw HC at an anthropology elective, Kang remembered, his whole being lit up as if struck by a lightning bolt: the most handsome boy he had ever set eyes on. Then, what delight it was to find him again, only two tables away from him in a study room in the library. His body trembled over the audacious way he came up with: jotting down "I want to be your friend" on a slip of paper, then dropping it right on the open book HC was pursuing.

Bubbles burst in his heart when HC looked up, nodding his reciprocal willingness. On their first date, the pair strolled along the lake on campus with hands clasped. HC told him the stories he had been submitting to literary journals, and he shared that he was also a literature buff beyond his mathematics coursework, that his favorite Chinese author was Cao Xueqin and his foreign favorite was Milan Kundera. He hadn't been reading much of late, but how about the two of them reading and critiquing a book together? Wouldn't that be a joint project that could deepen their ties?

He came out to his parents that summer break, presenting a photo of HC and introducing him as his boyfriend. Stunned, his mother cried and begged him to change, but even in that situation, she'd acknowledged HC had good looks and presumably a matching character. "Why can't you just be friends?" she murmured with defeat, "why must you be boyfriends?"

Because we love each other, mama, he had said, holding on to that magical word. There was no reason to turn away from that precious thing even then, and over the next year, he would

expand its definition to include a future of both on the other side of the Pacific. The side that is of more sunshine, of more sciences and freedom.

For the next few days, he still shifted his camera to the sunshine during their Skype sessions, as he still reiterated his schedule and recited the list of what he had had for lunch. But hearing HC's voice a split second later than seeing the lip movements, he was also conscious that he was all alone here. When the call ended, HC's feedback bounced in the empty room, off the wall and rolling under the bed, and he became weary of the distance between them, what it could do to what he had once thought solid.

He decided they could spice up things. Before the session ended on Saturday, he asked HC to hold on. "Shall we try this, babe?" he said, taking off his T-shirt. "Something hot," he smirked and felt aroused by his own words.

"Wow, are you doing what I think you are doing?" HC chuckled, sitting back in his chair.

"What does it look like?" He chuckled also. He stood up and dropped his pants, flashing his white brief to the camera. "Do you like what you see?"

He sat down again, seeing HC also striping down to the underwear. They had seen each other naked, of course; they had lived in respective dorms and saved up for day-use hotels once in a while, and they both felt the urge to make the most out of that precious private space. Different positions. Different porn. Yet now, with their desire for each other mediated by a camera, a monitor, and a transpacific cable, he felt uncomfortable seeing him rubbing himself. He refocused the camera on his face and upper body, and HC did the same. He squinted at HC's face twisting as were the muscles on his lean arms, his quickened panting and forceful gasps heating up his blood flow to the flashpoint. He shut his eyes and forced himself to come at the same moment, and when he opened his eyes again, he saw semen droplets even on the screen and the keyboard.

This was the most erotic thing they had done together, its wickedness heightening the pleasure. He suggested they could do it daily, multiple times per day even. HC only laughed, neither nodded nor shook his head.

The next day he went to buy a microwave, so he texted HC to wait for him. But HC did not answer his call when he returned from Fry's Electronics. He made dinner and went to bed with a weight on his heart, and when he woke up again, he decided to call HC again even though he did not have much time. The first class today was at 9 am.

The phone rang and rang, but HC only texted him, "can't talk now, call you tmrw." The curtness poured a bucket of cold water all over him, and he shivered till well into his first Stanford class.

The class was Statistical Inference, a foundation course. The silver-haired professor spoke with an accent from behind the lectern, and about half of the students filled the rowed seating looked Chinese. He had expected this: Chinese students flocking to America for technology and science, waves and waves over the last century and a half, one peak at the decades after the May Fourth New Culture Movement, the other after Deng Xiaoping reopened the country after the Cultural Revolution craze. What went contrary to his expectation was that there seemed to be more girls than boys—he had expected to see a much more biased sex ratio, in the ballpark of 5:1 as in his college mathematics courses. Even with the weight of HC's text still on his heart, he scanned the room for cute boys. Finding none, he forced his concentration to follow whatever the professor had scribbled on the blackboard.

During the break, a bespectacled Chinese girl with shoulder-length hair approached him. "Hi, I am Shiao-min," she extended her hand. "Are you Chinese?"

He nodded and soon learned her purpose was to establish a study group. Back when he was a freshman, each student was assigned to a class so you'd have an automatic study group to fall back on, but here, basics like study groups had to materialize out of students' own efforts. Grassroots democracy of sorts? He gave back his contact information, and only after Shiao-min returned to her seat, he realized that his facial and arm muscles were all tense. He was struck by the degree that HC had constituted his life: during the two-and-a-half years together, he seldom interacted with anyone beyond him and their small circle of gay friends. Talking to girls had almost become a novelty, a skill he would have to relearn.

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He left the class alone, then lunched at a corner of the cafeteria. He checked for the time as he buried himself in a carrell in the library, and when 4 pm arrived, he called HC without texting him first to check his availability. This time, HC answered only two rings after.

"Is everything ok?" he asked, words quickened. "You even didn't answer my phone yesterday."

Silence.

"Hello?"

HC cleared his throat first. "Yes, Kang, something happened."

"Yes?" Kang leaned into the rim of the table.

"At work, yesterday, I was promoted."

"Congratulations!" Kang sounded not excited at all. His calves felt tight. His mind had already leaped steps ahead but hoped otherwise.

"Yes, from assistant editor to editor. This is totally unexpected because an editor had just resigned, so they needed someone to fill in right away. They said they were impressed by my

performance over the last three months, so they'd like to promote me anyway; this is just an opportunity to make it happen earlier than they had intended."

Kang sat back in his chair, silent as trying to make sense of what he'd just heard. "So, are you also saying what I think you are saying?"

"Kang, I am saying, um, I am saying, I think my opportunities are all here; I think I'd like to stay on this job."

"What about Mills College? What about your admission to their writing program—"

"I meant, Kang, we are back to square one. This is my country; I am comfortable here. I don't think I can be as comfortable there; I cannot even read through an English article without consulting a dictionary."

"But either can I! We both can learn, and we will learn."

"It's different."

"Different how? We used to read and critique books together, remember? All the Mo Yan, Zhang Kangkang, and Italo Calvino that we had read? That was our joint project. We'll take learning English as another joint project."

"Our cases are different, Kang. Mathematics is a universal symbol; you can learn and practice it anywhere. But I am a Chinese lit major; the language is the air I breathe."

"So," Kang's throat was dry. "Are you still coming in December?"

"Kang," HC's voice was small. "Let's be honest. You know I always have doubts. You know that a degree from a community college would do me no good."

"What about—us, then?" Kang's voice quivered.

"Well," HC said slowly. "You know, I, I don't want to do long-distance."

"Not even for me?"

“You can come back!” HC’s voice was shrill and wobbled. “It’s you who thought science is advanced there, and it’s you who like their culture. More freedom! More democracy! Who said all that? I like Kunju, but you prefer western opera. You said you want to go to the US, again and again and again. What’s the point of doing long-distance for two years and then breaking up?”

“How can you do this to me? Just three weeks after we separated from each other?” Kang snapped.

“I am sorry, Kang,” HC’s voice broke. “But this is what I have to do. We can still be friends; come to see me when you are back for a visit.”

Kang felt his throat become so tight; he felt the urge to fly back to Beijing and talk through this with HC face to face. He had seen breakup scenes on TV all the time, but even thus primed, he did not expect the physical weight of air.

He put down the phone and looked westward. The sky was burning, in gold, carmine, and purple. The colors then got all mixed up, collapsing along his cheeks.

He still followed the routine: class, lunch, the library, dinner, but was keenly aware that the elation of new life was gone. The presence of people—his fellow students filling the classrooms, his study group discussing assignments in a study room in the library—dampened a burning restlessness, but the wound always cracked back open once he was alone. By the library carrell, a weight shifted around his heart; sitting in the bed, a stiffness piled up in his limbs.

The paradox: he sought those lonely moments, as if his wish was to wallow in the solitary sadness. He sat in his living room in the dusk light and couldn't believe how quiet it was. Back in Beijing, at Tsinghua, he lived with three dormmates in a building of over 100 dorms, and there were at least 20 similar buildings in the dorm complex, and the complex itself was situated in the megacity of 20 million, which never stopped its murmurs and blares in the backdrop. But now, just after 7 pm, there were already no pedestrians or cars on the road despite the still-high sun. The breeze grazed his face lightly through the open window, crispy with the chill of the dusk.

And in that quiet, snippets of HC swam back, stinging, biting. With them, the questions: where he was, what he was doing, whether he was thinking of me, whether he was seeing someone else. And with the questions came the age-old imageries: their first kiss at the peak of Fragrant Hill, the shivering alacrity when he first lay by his side in a day-use hotel. His mother cried and protested until the last moment before he had brought HC home, but once HC arrived, his parents still put on broad smiles and threw a banquet of his favorites. All these memories churned out in Kang a restlessness, pressured by the thickening darkness so that he could hardly sit still. He paced about in the oppressive living room and then held on to the windowsill; he forced out long exhales to calm himself.

Then, lying in bed, all the sweet memories shapeshifted into anger, for a moment, that was, as he blamed HC's heartlessness and selfishness. Betrayal. So stupid! Yet the physical contact with the bed also whisked back HC's body, smooth and burning with desire. He masturbated with snippets of HC next to him, the thick lips pressed on his nipples, the warm erection growing in his hand. He was confused and did not know whether to love or hate, mourn or salvage his love. He panted as a primitive pleasure ejected from him. His panting soon transited into a sob.

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His study group noticed his change, and he found himself hesitant to answer their queries. Opening up this dimension of life was not in his habit, and he had his sexuality covered so tight that in college, most of his classmates had spent four years with him without knowing he preferred boys. He faked a smile and said everything was fine, but later, when something at heart was so full that he felt he was short of the energy needed to guard his secret, he told Shiao-min what had happened. She stared at him, then extended her arms. He fell into that small space of warmth, keenly aware that this was the first body-to-body contact in months.

Two weeks after the breakup, he forced himself to the block party at the Escondido Village multifunction lounge. For him, the party's high note was the discovery that Americans were still motivated by free food and free drinks—he had thought America was so prosperous that its inhabitants were beyond such petty calculations—but the main melody of the experience was silence. He hardly spoke, less because he did not want to, more because he did not know how and what. As he nodded to the stories of surfing camp in Maui or backpack trips in Sierra and faked polite smiles to hide his ignorance of the places and the activities, he attributed his marginality to his own foreignness. It is more than that his mastery of the English language was fledgling; it felt like his familiar world—the karaoke parlors, the strolls around the lake with HC, and the hole-in-

the-wall restaurants offering chicken skewers even after midnight—were incongruent. Discomfort grew out of that incongruency, and he found the instinct was to divert fellow party-goers’ attention away. Is foreignness something that needs to be hidden? Is being Chinese a source of shame?

So many questions in life did not have an answer, like how his parents would respond to the breakup? He still called them regularly, each Saturday evening before going to bed. Father, a mid-level manager in a state-owned petroleum company, usually had his Sunday mornings free, but since Kang’s coming out, the father-son conversation was reduced to mostly trivialities: weather, the current whereabouts of neighbor kids Kang had grown up with. Sometimes, Kang felt the urge to yell into the phone, “Dad, let’s stop wasting time and open up to each other!” When his father picked up the phone and started his weather report, Kang interrupted and asked for his mom on the phone.

Mom was a primary school teacher. She was usually better at sensing things when they were off. “Anything the matter?” She asked with concern. He began by saying he was already struggling with the coursework, but then let the breakup pour out of his mouth. It surprised him slightly, when he went through the major inflections with controlled emotion: no breaking voice, no sob; only hesitation here and there, a wish to go through the heartbreak fast, but a reluctance to let go of a pair of ears.

Mom comforted him, but did not go much further than that. He knew she was still not 100% with his being gay; his coming out had put her in a closet. After he put down the phone, he revisited the conversation and wondered whether his ability to retell with controlled emotion meant he had already got to the nadir: recovery had already begun, and things would only improve.

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But it still took him more weeks to seek the company of his own kind: new gay friends, a boyfriend even—is that too soon? He signed up for Stanford Pride’s mailing list; he marked the group’s next mixer on his calendar. This was late October already, but the afternoon sun was warm enough for venturing out in a shirt. The blue arrow on his phone directed him to a renovated barn house with “FIRE TRUCK HOUSE” block letters standing out on the pediment, but the rainbow flag assured him this was the right place.

The entrance was wide open, and noise wafted out. Once inside, Kang saw a hall full of people in small circles with drinks in hand, talking and laughing aloud. He walked in their direction, but the way was barred by a table with three staff members in crimson hoodies with white STANFORD lettering. The middle one smiled at him, beckoned him over, and extended a marker and a sticker.

Kang was unsure of what was expected of him. “Do I put down my name here?” he asked, picking up the pen and the sticker and waving them slightly in the air.

“Yes,” the staff member replied after a pause. “Then stick it on your shirt, like this,” he added, patting his own chest for demonstration.

Kang did that, and then stepped into the crowd. Some flitting eyes noticed him but then slid away, without any recognition or pleasure. Everyone except Kang seemingly had come with companies, insider jokes, and explicit and implicit understandings of the situation. With none of such at his disposal, Kang was flustered and wanted to hold onto something solid—even as small an object as a drink. He scouted the room for where people had gotten their drinks.

It was another table at a deep corner of the hall. A few cans of coke and opened alcoholic drink bottles stood on one end of the table, a bucket filled with ice and more cans and bottles

occupied the other. Just as Kang picked a diet coke, another white guy also came by, waited until Kang stepped aside to make room for him, and also picked a diet coke.

Kang waved his can and smiled at the guy. “Good choice,” he said. The guy had brown wavy hair that Kang had never seen in person.

The guy smiled back, as his eyes glided across Kang’s name tag. He withdrew his smile and nodded to Kang quickly, but then turned away without saying anything.

Kang didn’t give up, though. He opened his can and took a sip, his hips leaning on the table for support. He scanned the room and took further swallows, too quickly so that the fizzling sensation along his esophagus made him grimace.

For a while, nobody came to refresh their drink. Kang noticed a few circles in the back of the hall that looked loose, the guests all holding drinks but with faces somewhat stiff. He walked up to the one with the four least-threatening-looking people and inserted himself. Two guys shuffled and made space for him, but nobody addressed him.

“Hi, my name is Kang,” so he offered.

A flurry of introductions followed: Kevin, Liam, Mike, and Mike, but nobody said anything after that. Kang felt awkward, plus the need to offer the group an appreciating token, for the small kindness of admitting him.

“This is my first time in America,” he said, “I came from China about six weeks ago. When I landed, I almost died.”

“Really?” The four men all gasped with intrigue. “How come?”

Kang felt a relief, which injected a dose of energy into his voice. “The plane landed with tires—err, how to say it, broken—”

“Burst?”

“—Yes, the plane landed with burst tires, so it could not stop and kept running forward faster and faster. I thought we would rush into the ocean and then sink.”

“Gosh,” Mike No. 1 said. “But you didn’t, I presume?”

“No, the pilot was good; he managed to stop the plane right at the last moment, when the nose of the plane was already over the water.”

“I have a similar story to tell,” Mike No. 1 now pulled the story away from Kang, his eyes brightened and his voice animated. “I had to make an emergency landing at San Jose Airport once, because my landing gear failed.”

Everyone’s eyes were on him. “I just got my pilot certificate the month prior; I had gone solo only twice before, and this was my third time.” Mike No.1 took a sip of his drink, then resumed with his chin tilted upward. “It happened that my date was onboard also; I took him to a wine tasting in Napa to impress him.”

“What?” “Wow.”

“Yes, you can imagine the pressure I had to operate under. I mean, I learned how to make an emergency landing in the manual, but this is totally different. The plane has retractable landing gear, and in normal situations, you just switch a handle to set it in a locked position. That day, however, the signal light refused to turn green. I panicked. I couldn’t recall anything I had learned from the manual; my recollection of what I did was blank. I functioned purely by instinct and common sense, like reducing the speed and pushing the yolk forward.”

Kang listened intently: the bumpy ride after the hard landing, the tense evacuation from the cockpit, and finally, the moment Mike and his date were on the runway, their stiff limbs defying their instinct to run away. Surely, Mike’s was a better story. He had the feeling of inadvertently

entering a competition of scary landing stories and losing it, judging by the other interlocuters' reactions.

“I also have a story of crashing,” Mike No. 2 said, “in terms of scariness, it is not even close, Mike, but still.” He crumpled the paper cup he had been holding, taking a few steps toward the conversational circle's center. “We were driving home from visiting our grandparents, and it took us three hours to cover the distance that usually takes one. We inched forward and finally saw the wreckage on the shoulder. There were at least ten vehicles: one truck rushed through the divider into the opposite traffic and crashed into the first car, and the cars behind were all driving fast, so they all rear-ended into the cars in front of them, a domino that grew and grew.” He raised his left hand to a vertical position and hit the palm with his fisted right hand, which Kang understood as an imitation of the collision.

That car crash happened during election time. The conversation then turned to politics, names of places and events that meant nothing to Kang. He tried to memorize them, just to familiarize himself with his new context, but after two or three attempts, they were fused into each other, a palimpsest whose meaning was no longer clear. He shifted his attention back to the ongoing conversation: Liam was telling about his encounter with a politician when he was skiing somewhere, Tahoe or Taiho or something like that. Kang had never skied before, but everyone else was nodding and uh-huhing, seemingly following one hundred percent.

“Where is it?” Kang had not voiced a word for a long time; he felt this was his chance.

There was a hush, hanging only for a second before Kevin's explanation and spelling out the place (“T-A-H-O-E”), but Kang still sensed it, the disbelief hidden under the friendly façade. And after that, the four seemingly talked with even less concern about whether Kang could follow.

Kevin spoke to Liam with their eyes locked; Mike No. 1 and Mike No. 2 interjected at the most proper moments. Either way, they talked on as if Kang was not there.

It had been a while since Kang had finished his coke, but only till now, the weight of the empty can became discernable, a pillar that had anchored and sustained him. He chose a moment to raise the can, signaling his intention to refresh his drink. Mike No. 1 nodded to him as an acknowledgment, but the others simply talked on as if not noticed. Kang got back to the drink station, but all drinks were gone by now, and when he turned back to Kevin, Liam, and the Mikes, he saw that his place was already taken by somebody else.

He could look for another conversational circle to go through all these again, but he felt much less motivated. He had found himself alone at parties back in China, but never before had he felt such out of place. He still held his emptied coke can, though, to pretend that he was still part of the party, making connections and having a good time. Another Asian guy dropped by, and Kang had his hope up a little as somehow, he expected him to be easier to connect to. But at his “All gone” comment, the Asian guy just shrugged, forced out an expression between smile and grimace, and then quickly headed back to where he had come.

There was no point in even trying more, then. Kang suddenly felt a pang of defeat. He returned to the entrance and saw the three staff members in maroon hoodies still sitting behind the table, forming a conversational group themselves and chatting with interest. Everyone was only responsible for their own happiness, and the source of your unhappiness must be inside yourself.

Kang walked past them and continued. The afternoon sun was already low and waiting to fall, and there was a new chill in the air. Kang couldn't believe that during the hour he had spent inside, he had spoken probably only ten sentences in total. He took out his phone and dialed HC's number. He even wasn't sure what time it was over there.

The ringtone rang and rang, and then the synthetic voice prompted him to call back later. Kang did not mind it. “HC HC HC HC HC I miss you I miss you I miss you I miss you—” He cried out until the last breath was pressed out of his lungs, and then slumped down onto the curbside. He sat there and gasped for air, recovering from the call and the silent defeat inside. The rainbow flag fluttered above him, its flapping sound monotonic and meaningless.

He attended a few more parties, neighborly or gay, and they all turned out to be similar setbacks. In the shadow cast by them, he lingered at the core of the campus: near the Statistics Department, the student union, or the Main Quad. The classrooms, the canteen, and the library annul the quiet; the images, sounds, and smells of people lift the weight of loneliness. On his way to the morning class, his ears picked up the bicycles' ticks and whines before their owners dashed by from behind, confetti of laughter bellowing in their wake. Between the class sessions, his eyes scanned for cute boys as he followed the flow, arrested by bared arms, broad shoulders, and the curves of swelling pecs. He forgot his loneliness at these moments; he felt connected in a roundabout way.

He noticed a fresh, upstanding quality in the male form, the air American boys/men carried. A distinction that he could discern and not put into words; a shining acuteness that riveted. He did not recall sensing it back at home. Not that he hadn't seen blue eyes and golden eyes previously—he had seen plenty in the movies or on the TV screen—but it felt like either media had flattened the dimensionality, or had filtered out a critical light on the physiognomy. The men here look better in life, full and layered, aminated by a vitality so novel and fresh.

He found himself starting the practice of having his to-go dinner at a bench on the mall, by the fountain outside the Drama Department. If he timed his arrival right, a group of varsity athletes would run past right before him. It was pleasant to witness them in training, the fleeting image of their curly hair and golden limbs. And when the group disappeared after turning at the nearby intersection, he often found himself mildly surprised at what was bellowing in their wake.

Sometimes, that was a taste of wistful longing. That's how the wish of running with them tasted like, he thought, different from the remorse of being alone without HC, and similar to the

wish of effortless mingling at the parties. He looked up at the dusk sky and felt he did not know how to achieve them. He bit and tried to tear off flaky skin from his lower lip, so hard that it bled.

Another time, it was a series of men in flashback. At five years old, he had found himself gravitating toward a shampoo commercial on TV, where a bearded, middle-aged white man took a shower with the branded shampoo, his shirtless torso revealing close-up down to the midriff. Why did a Chinese shampoo maker feature the white man for the domestic audience? He had never thought of it before, let alone know the reason. At seven years old, he trailed the steps of a boy one grade above, at the rests between periods or in the long dusk after the class was dismissed. He had not yet understood what was happening, only that he could not resist the pull, the magical dimples on that face welling deep with—what? No apparent reason, it seemed now, just the pull was real. He could still recall its power now.

Then, at about ten years old, Kang bought his first CDs: Jimmy Lin and Ricky Martin. He didn't like their music that much; he was more drawn to their smiles, the way they lit up their handsome faces. Sixteen years old, and first time in Hong Kong, he took the escalator out of the Central subway station five times, just to etch the skincare advertisement on a billboard there in memory: the model's dewy stubbles after applying the product. And, when he was twenty years old, he and HC kissed for the first time, eyes closed but what light he had seen, many-splendored, borealian.

He then thought of his neighbor when the plane crashed at SFO. For no reason, it seemed. It already felt so long ago. He now appeared more as an idea than a concrete image, probably wasn't even that handsome to begin with. To see more attractive men, those more mature ones than the jocks he had just seen, one would have to go to San Francisco. By now, he had already been there twice, the first time just for sightseeing, and the other for a concert at the Symphony

Hall. Each time in the city, he had run into handsome, mature-looking men walking by in the streets. He thought he started liking their beard fading along their jawlines. He also liked their air, uplifting just like the Stanford jocks' but more mellowed, arresting and even warm.

Maybe, he could move to San Francisco, just for the men, simply to widen his circle.

He sat in the autumnal chill, feeling a momentary peace. With all these men he had connected one way or another being called back, he felt a void in his heart was partially filled, and he wanted to move on.

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Soon, it was Thanksgiving recess already. He had the whole week off but nowhere to go. Once the homework was completed, all the days ahead gazed at him like a gaping mouth. On Thanksgiving itself, it had been raining since morning, and it was all dark even before five. He picked up a novel but put it down after flipping through only a few pages. Outside, the darkness pulled down heavier squalls of rain, and the evening storm buffeted the canopies of sidewalk trees in all directions. He turned on the heater and stood by the window, looking at the orange light cones of streetlamps shivering in the pummeling rainfall. Contrasting this violent cadence, the indoor stillness felt depressingly uneventful, its half bleak, half chilly quality tangible and expanding, edging so smoothly over into the realm of sadness and self-pity.

He grinned: sadness and self-pity. Boredom. Loneliness. Streaks of thoughts now paraded through his mind: the old idea of HC, the new idea of having a boyfriend. Here. Now. What does love even mean, and how to find love in this foreign land? Thoughts and raindrops fell simultaneously, momentarily in focus and then sliding into oblivion. Hidden dissatisfactions churred up frustrations without targets, and the urge to action was getting stronger—but do what?

He opened his laptop and typed “gay dating site.” His eyes brightened by the links filling the screen immediately after, the sheer volume of loneliness and love-seeking out there. He uploaded a few photos onto Match.com, composed a blurb, and then set his filters without much thought: less than 32 years old, taller than 5’8, within 50 miles. His heart was beating fast, and he decomposed that as coming from three sources: the novel situation in life, the surreptitious air of online dating, and the excitement of keeping up with time—this was supposed to be the 2010 way to locate love.

With his profile completed, the site allowed him to click on man after man. His eyes lingered on the warm smile of a white English literature lecturer at San Francisco State (Ph.D. dissertation on John Milton), the straight ridge of the nose of an Indian doctor, then the beefy body of a Chinese American engineer living in San Jose (motto: *carpe that diem*). He clicked on the heart-shaped marker on the top corner of these profiles and took advantage of his free-trial period to initiate icebreakers. The long raining night had a purpose again.

He was hopeful. A part of him felt calm, while another, the one that had been hibernating for a while, was agitated. The next day, he checked his phone probably every half an hour. But none of the recipients of his hearts responded. Perhaps they’ll respond after the holiday? He thought, trying hard to refocus on his novel.

By the time classes resumed, their response still had yet to materialize. At the usual carrel in the library basement, he pulled out his laptop and clicked on the saved profiles. The Indian doctor’s nose was straight as it had ever been, while the Chinese guy still practiced the motto of *carpe diem*. The most handsome of all, the white lecturer maintained his kind smile, looking at Kang from the screen, his chin slightly tilting up, his eyes shining with hope.

There was a kind of uplifting, expectant youthfulness on that face, softening his square jawline and lighting up the innocence. There was also something pensive yet relaxing about it, something not easy to put down into words. If forced, Kang might describe it as a tad of poetic melancholy that percolated through his eyes, or a ray of bookish dolor that illuminated the slightly aquiline shape of his nose. It was a telltale for the volume of Milton, Shakespeare, and Jane Austen he had absorbed, a look that composed poems and prose on everything it touched. If Dmitrii Rudin taught English literature in our time, Kang could imagine this was what he looked like; or it befitted a Dorian Grey, who time-traveled to now and lived with a much healthier psyche than Oscar Wilde had ever granted.

Staring at him, Kang could also imagine the rest of his body, cut off from the photo but vivid in his—Kang’s—mind: upright frame, lanky limbs, not too beefy as a muscly hunk but still meaty enough to fit out appealing proportions. He posed for the photo with his left arm akimbo, his right arm casually slung a jacket over his broad shoulder. Spring breeze gently ruffled his sleek black hair as it slightly flipped open the top of his white shirt, revealing a hazel patch of curly chest hair...

So again, Kang’s eyes ran through the blurb: ... I teach English Literature at San Francisco State ... I wrote my dissertation on John Milton ... Like many others, I prefer white men over other ethnicities.

Wait. What?

A shock, so Kang returned to reread the whole sentence to ensure he’d grasped its meaning correctly. He had no recollection of having read the statement the first time he’d found the profile; he could not believe a humanities professor had actually penned something such blatant.

Another student was passing by, so Kang snapped shut the laptop and turned off the carrel's reading light. The strange thing here was the seeming ease with which the professor made the statement, the readiness he applied categories like "ethnicity" and "white"—shouldn't "race" be more appropriate here? Back at home, Kang had never seen himself through these lenses. He was a man, not a Chinese man or Asian man but just a man, a boy and then a man, without any adjective, mark, or qualification to fix him to a category.

Being rejected was always painful. He himself had rejected someone back in his freshman year. He no longer remembered the boy's name but could recall his face, the meaty nose still evoking a distaste after the years. Where to draw the line between lookism and racism?

Kang turned the light back on. Even with that light, Kang saw no answer but more question marks.

Often, hope is just a matter of perseverance. Kang never received a reply from his three interests, but in the following weeks, a few Hearts did land in his inbox. One day after the last final, Wednesday, he went out on a date with a man whose profile picture did not impress him much. He still decided to go on the grounds of filling his day, or practicing dating with an American, or just getting his membership fee's worth. He emailed his number, and the man texted him the time and place.

The set time was six. Kang biked to the place, a food court rimmed by a bar that was a stone's throw away from the Palo Alto train station. He assumed the place earned its revenue most from catering to downtown's lunch demand, because now it was dim and cavernous, having less than ten patrons scattering about. Kang searched for a face matching the profile, and felt a pinch of disappointment when he saw the man sitting in a dark corner with a glistening on his bald head. He had to remind himself that the man, at least, had not lied in his photo. He was not on a date; he was here more to practice for the real date to come.

The white man—his name was Mark—stood up upon the sight of Kang, arms stretching out awkwardly for a hug. He wore a striped shirt and folded his coat neatly over the back of his seat. Kang leaned down for the hug and extended his arms to pat Mark's back, but somehow his hand missed the target and landed on where the shirt was tucked under the belt, the bouncy impression of the folds of flesh.

“Great to see you, Kang,” Mark said in a high-pitched, small voice.

Kang felt the deepening of his disappointment, so he beamed a broad smile to hide it. “Good to see you, too, Mark,” he said as he fumbled for what to say next. “Thank you for your agreeing to postpone our meeting for a week; I just finished my final exam, so I am finally free.”

“Oh, yeah, what are you studying at Stanford again?”

“Statistics.”

“You must be one of those Asian guys,” Mark said, flashing his dimples, “smart smart smart.”

“Where did you go to school?” Kang blushed and wanted to throw the ball back.

Mark took a sip of the wine. “As a matter of fact,” he said after making an audible swallow, “I went to Stanford as well. I don’t want to age myself, so let’s just say it was a while ago.”

He laughed as he said this, so Kang laughed, too, thinking slightly higher of Mark. He said no to Mark’s gesture of buying him a drink, then gave the man before him a closer scan. The smooth jawline offered no indication of stubbles, the light but dense burrow ran across his forehead as he smiled. He was sure that Mark was older than his profile age of 38.

“Have you met many people online? Mark asked.

“No, not really,” Kang rolled his eyes and did not know why. “You’re the first one I’ve met there.”

“Get out of here,” Mark grimaced. “Someone cute and smart like you?”

Kang straightened his back and sat back more comfortably in his seat. “It was true,” he tried to grimace, but a bubble of delight rose in him and brightened it into a grin. “So, what do you do?” he asked relaxedly.

A series-B startup CEO. Mark wasted no time in revealing his title, and quickly balanced the implied money-making prowess by explicitly mentioning his interests in philanthropy, wine, and travel. A well-balanced human being, Kang guessed this to be the conclusion Mark wished him to draw. He listened to his story in the comfort of the chair: his college study abroad in Berlin when the city was still divided, his involvement with his seven foster children.

But why is such a great human being single? he wanted to ask. And why is such an accomplished human being interested in me, a 22-year-old who has not yet tasted “real” life? he wanted to know.

Maybe there would be a next time for these. For now, he wanted more to heed and understand the shifting of grounds between them, how Mark’s image grew and his own dwindled. Would that process, ultimately, bring them to the same height? Could he imagine a future of his own that included Mark?

No, a voice in him answered firmly, only if Mark looked more like HC, or the English instructor, or all the men who had never responded to his hearts.

But why is the look so important?

When they became aware they were the last two customers in the bar, Mark asked, “Will I see you again?” His voice ran thin towards the end, as it also tilted high.

Kang was standing up already. He wanted to say that he had already decided to move to San Francisco, so it might be harder for them to see each other. But then he would have to explain why, his empty apartment and HC’s broken promise.

“I hope so,” Kang said, “but I am moving to San Francisco, so it might not be the most convenient.”

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Kang wasn’t lying when he said he was moving to San Francisco. The idea had been brewing for a while, as there was no reason to pay extra for an empty space that would never be filled with HC. It then flashed during his visits to the city, the attractive men he simply ran into in broad daylight and on random streets. It finally barges to the fore as he decides not to go home for the winter break. Why not spend the time settling in the gayest city he could hope for?

San Francisco—or Castro, to be precise. Two years ago, before the Beijing Olympics, a postcard from a friend attending a summer school at Berkeley informed Kang’s first impression of the neighborhood, the vertical sunrays and the gigantic rainbow flag. On his own third visit to the city, on the Saturday after handing in his Monte Carlo Simulation mid-term, Kang specifically went to the neighborhood to spend an afternoon, and he liked it: the slightly languid feeling under the sun, the ample men, two of them stark naked, flowing by. He saw “For Rent” signs posted on the windows, and he imagined behind them, how his own life could unfold.

Back to Stanford, Kang spent hours on craigslist and in sending out queries. Then, during his fourth time in the city that consisted of spending the whole Sunday touring ten listings, he applied for and got a room in an apartment.

The lease would start on the first day of each month, giving him more than half a month after the final exams to pack and get ready. On the last days of 2010, after his boxes piled up in his room, Kang did not rush to unpack but took a walk in his new hood. Standing at the intersection between Castro and Market, he saw the straight two-lane street flowing downhill and then uphill, flanked by Victorians of two or three stories like cutouts from fairytales. This was the same view in the postcard, but the crisp air, the whir of the bus, and even the contact of his sole on the paver had blown in life. A little provincial, yes, compared to Beijing’s skyscrapers and wide boulevards, but also calming and approachable. A side note: when these houses were erected, he recalled historical photo images, most houses in his hometown were still made of bamboo sticks and mud adobes.

For a moment, he felt a sense of security or content or calm, and he thought it had something to do with the fact that his rooming apartment was only four blocks away, that his security deposit was paid in full, and that his new roommate—Zander studying creative writing at

the University of San Francisco—seemingly friendly and reliable, despite he was not that good-looking. That shouldn't matter; he is straight. And perhaps, he could guide me to a different social segment of the city?

People passed him. Kang's throat went dry when he spotted a handsome man walking toward him at a distance. He looked away but counted the time and shifted his eyes back when the man should be close enough. He could not recall the last time he felt so tense, wary of being judged and ready to judge back at the same time. The man's eyes met his but slid away a split second later, during which Kang gathered that one, he was family, and two, he was not interested.

He thought of the English instructor and his blatant statement, but surrounded by all the people, all the liveliness of the street, he chose to be hopeful. Strolling down and then crossing all eight sidewalks at the crossing between Castro and the 18th, he was thirsty for the shape, the hue, the texture, the gait, the silhouette of the men, the many around him who were beautiful, handsome, debonair, stubbly, hunky, beefy, riveting, bewitching, strapping, thickset, brawny, seductive, enticing, lanky, hairy, chiseled, gym-honed, barrel-chested, lumbersexual. He had not seen such a scene before, as if his whole life had been a tunnel, only periodically lit up each men occurred and then disappeared. The recollection of Beijing crowds only foregrounded black hair and pale skin, reminding him now of a stale room full of cigarette smoke. Something different was flowing here, elevated by all that brown, hazel, blond hues, roughened by the tough cuts of lines and shapes. Spicing them all up were the bars opening to the sunshine like sensual mouths, the unmarkable club doors adorned by remarkable, bigger-than-life shirtless model posters. Promises of illicitness; temptations of decadence.

He found his eyes glued tightly on the next man coming closer in the opposite direction. The man was bald but well-built, neatly trimmed beard running down from one temple to the other

to show off the well-cut jawline. Kang begged the goddess of chance in silence for the man to return his look; he imagined scenes that could happen between the two of them, since it was already such a fantastic chance that they were crossing paths out of the seven billion. Stretching that slight chance a little, it did not seem too much to imagine the same goddess would direct the man to pause his steps, drop his jaw at the sight of Kang, and ask him out for a date.

“I am available right now,” Kang would say.

“Oh, yeah? Lucky me,” he would say, “I am available right now, too.”

“Do you like the Peet’s here, or Spike’s Coffee?”

“How about Café Flore? It’s nice to sit out today.”

“Or we can head to my place,” Kang would tremble to let these words out, “I’ve just moved into the neighborhood.”

“Oh, how convenient, and how wonderful,” the man smirked. “After you.”

The man was getting closer, but not even making eye contact. Kang felt no inhibition, so he stared for what felt like five long seconds as they crossed shoulders; he even turned to give a last look at the man’s broader shoulder that expanded his jacket, the tapering waistline that was surely hidden under. He wouldn’t know how to put a name to the feeling in his heart now, the melancholy for a missed chance, and the sadness of being passed over.

It was almost five when Kang got home after his stroll. Originally a single-family on a backstreet, the building saw separate entrances built for its two stories, and then the upper living room singled off as a second, furnished bedroom, which would be Kang’s home for the coming year. Suitcases of clothes, books, and other everyday items were still stacked on the wooden floor, and the quiet shrouding the whole apartment indicated Zander was not home yet. The loneliness

he had tasted back in Stanford emerged again, but now, with the city lights starting guttering outside, he felt more at ease and considered what to have for dinner.

He had only brought with him packs of ramen, and he didn't feel like going out again just for the groceries. He headed to the bathroom to wash his hands in preparation for his ramen dinner. He let the flow of coolness carry away the suds and tracked the splash mindlessly, but was caught by his reflection's warped and utterly unfamiliar nature in the mirror. The reflection resembled him, but he was surely not the selfsame person: his eyes were too apart, his eyebrows too high, and his jawline too soft. The whole complexion also appeared drab, lacking liveliness under the fluorescence light.

What's wrong with this picture? He stared critically, resolved to analyze what was off yet resisting the idea at the same time, as there was a pain in seeing the distance between yourself and the standard. Kang thought he knew what the standards were by now—the deep-set eyes, the pointy nose, the strong chin— and at the same time, he understood what he had been doing: comparing his own face with the images of men he had seen today.

Were white men more attractive than the version of men he embodied?

He shut his eyes tightly, as if to force out the thought like dust that had invaded his eyes. His mind evoked HC's face as a defense, but only found in a deeper panic that even the melting power of HC's smile had diminished. Prompted by a sense of defeat, he switched off the light with force and slammed the bathroom door behind him, his heart thumping loud in the thick silence of the empty apartment.

He retreated to the kitchen and felt better there, with his eyes adjusted to the dark and made out the contour of things. He put the kettle on and waited for the boiling point, forcing the scientific side of his mind to come up with yet another line of defense. Amidst the kettle's hissing sound, he

thought of a statistics law called the law of large numbers, which states that the average of a sample approaches the population's mean as the sample size increases. Maybe white men were more beautiful simply because he had not seen many like him around, and the sheer number of white men had set the standard and cast him as an outlier? He then switched to the literary side of his mind and checked what it had to say. He searched for words to describe how he felt and found them: dejected, self-shame, inferiority complex. He poured the boiling water over ramen and, took a pinch with his chopsticks, blew it cool before taking a bite. Only then he realized how bland it was: he had neglected to pour in the spice pack.

“Like many other men, I prefer white men.” That statement flashed in his mind, already familiar, already making sense. He pulled out his phone and flipped to the English instructor's profile. Under the orange light he was yet familiar with, the professor appeared even more handsome than he had remembered.

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For the next two days, Kang fed on ramen. His stash would have allowed him to keep on for the week, but on the third day, he opened a pack and was set back by the smell. He opened the fridge and took out Zander's salad and sausage. It was only after the food was already consumed that he felt a bout of regret; he knew he would have to replenish it. Maybe his subconsciousness rused him into stealing just to get him out of the house.

On his way to the closest market, Kang passed a coffeehouse and saw an extraordinarily handsome cashier manning the register. He felt the magnetic pull and paused at the coffeehouse entrance, to stabilize the tiny bursts of trembling all over. He regathered himself after a long exhale; he pinched himself to muster the courage and headed to the register.

The cashier had the bluest eyes and most charming stubbles. Kang averted his eyes as he ordered a danish and a latte, feeling inferior to the most perfect god from Classical Greece. He picked up the danish and chose an empty seat by the window, but his eyes could not focus on a spot other than the cashier for five seconds. He adjusted his seats and pretended to watch the pedestrians. When he turned back to the cashier again, he was already occupied with welcoming the next customer.

Of course, a man like that takes no interest in you! Kang felt annoyed at his own stupidity, as well as a skein of guilt for wasting time on this detour. Throwing \$7.36 on the unneeded food also pained him: he knew his thrifty parents worked hard on his tuition money and living expenses. He reminded himself to look for on-campus jobs once the new quarter started in about a week.

“No. 11! No. 11!” The barista called, the same number on his receipt.

Kang jumped at the call, but his right knee thumped into the leg of the table. The counterforce pained him as it pushed him back into his seat, but instead of falling into the center of the chair, his weight fell on the corner, and the three-legged chair tipped over as it was structurally unprepared for such an uneven push. Before Kang realized it, pain flashed at his points of contact with the tiled floor: his palms, his rump.

Customers around came to the rescue; one hand extended towards him and then another. He grabbed the closest hand and let that force pull him up. He thanked the hand’s owner, and at the same time quickly judged that he—an Asian man probably in his late thirties—was tall and average-built, a tad too thin to be his type.

“Are you hurt?” The soothing bass-baritone lifted Kang’s not-so-high-regard for his looks.

“No,” Kang patted the dust off. “Can I buy you a coffee? Thank you for lending me a helping hand.”

“Don’t mention it,” the man grinned. “I’m heading out, actually.”

“Thank you again. I must’ve made a fool of myself.”

“It can happen to anyone.” The man extended his hand again, for shaking this time. When Kang’s met his, he felt something hard had been passed with it.

A name card read Simon Chu, Consultant at BCG; his email and phone number were in small font. Kang’s facial expression must have revealed his surprise at being introduced this way; Simon Chu made an eye to relax him.

“Call me if you like,” he said and then walked out.

“No. 11!” the barista called again, nodding to Kang as she had linked the number to his face. “Your latte is ready!”

They all stemmed from that business card: the parties that Kang would later attend, the men Kang would later meet and hanker for. After Simon slipped it into Kang's hand, it was a straightforward chain of events: Kang called, and Simon invited him to his birthday party the following weekend. Kang had to make an excuse to get out of another party that Zander had invited him to. And in that railway apartment crowded with guests, Kang fared better social anxiety-wise as he knew that, at least, he could lean on Simon's interest in that houseful of strangers. He was not interested in him in return, but he did feel appreciative. He thanked Simon again for lending him a hand at the coffeehouse and inviting him to this party; he asked if Simon could invite him to more parties to make more friends. He knew he was using Simon and was sure Simon was aware of it.

"Sure," Simon didn't seem to mind. "What kind of parties are you interested in? Dinner parties or dance parties?" Kang felt slightly embarrassed at not even knowing parties here were categorized as dinner vs. dance.

"Both are good," he replied, equivocal in part to hide his ignorance. "As long as there are lots of people."

Simon gave Kang a sharp look. "My friends and I actually planning to go to a dance party this weekend. How about you joining us for dinner first, and then we go dance together?"

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Kang had never seen so many swarmed into a nightclub.

Once, HC took him to Destination, the primary gay hangout in Beijing. He remembered seeing it packed by a cheerful and tipsy Friday crowd, fifty of them perhaps, a hundred at most. But that was no match to the scene unfolding before his eyes now, flows of clubbers emerging

from street-parked cars, swaggering toward the SOMA club. Following the flow, Kang, Simon, and Simon's two friends, Derek and David, stopped for the ID check and cover, then gushed forward into the dreamland. Lasers flashed, and Lady Gaga blared, leading them into a cavernous hall that was Van Gogh-esque, starry but chaotic. Instantly, Kang understood the promise of the space, which was alluded to earlier at the entrance by the lustrous posters featuring muscled hunks stripped down to their minimalist underpants. The bulges. The shapes. Now, the promise was lying unobstructed in front of him, raw and undraped, venturing to get inside through eardrums and nostrils, pupils and follicles: an all-out attack. Around, most patrons had taken their shirts off. Bodies were shaken into rapture; all minds were soaked in inebriation—and that was just the first floor. Corridors and stairs led to a labyrinth of further rooms and chambers, where energies of the night rest and recharge before flowing out to the main hall again, following whatever direction the desire set its heart on, the booties shaking like there was no tomorrow.

Derek and David soon disappeared in the crowds, and Simon had also emerged anew from his cocoon of normality, wiles glistening in his eyes. He took off his shirt and loosened his belt to reveal more abs, shapeshifting into a flirtatious social butterfly. He careened, skillfully dodged one upcoming throng of partygoers after another, zigzagging through the interstitial gaps between throngs of Roman soldiers or Greek gods—the clientele was predominantly white. That efficiency of motion improvised into the efficiency of interaction, when Simon planted himself next to a circle of friends and acquaintances chatting to each other. Instantly, the other party would recognize him and call out his name with exaggerated surprise and delight: “Siiimomnnn!” They hugged each other as they pecked on the faces with loud muahs, followed by a trade of introductions: “this is X and Y” and “this is Kang.”

“Hi, nice to meet you!” Kang extended his hand and shouted out his greetings. The other party returned a louder shout as he gave Kang a quick but intense scan. Kang knew the questions being asked beneath that façade: who was this person? Was he handsome and fun enough to be my friend? He slathered all the confidence and fun he had on his face, wishing to pass as an unquestionable one of “us,” a member of the fun group who unquestionably fit the space’s promise. Sometimes, Kang even managed to chitchat a little, but most often, the new friend would turn right back to Simon, shouting his most recent updates and running his hands along Simon’s rumps.

Oh, Lady Gaga, do you ever get weary? Do you have to emboss yourself onto every word uttered in the land of dreams?

When no more friends and acquaintances were introduced, Kang danced with Simon but only halfheartedly, as his attention was floating around, on alert for the next good-looking one. At one moment, he stared at a handsome boy not far from him with intensity, wishing the boy’s gaydar could pick up his strengthened signals and respond in kind; the next, someone else riveted his attention: a shirtless white hunk was making out with an Asian, amidst the crowd and not far away from where he stood. The Asian was also shirtless but short, his body lacking the resolute lines that his white lover proudly showed off. But the white hunk seemingly did not mind. He still kissed him passionately; his hands caressed the Asian’s smooth back.

So, there was hope for him, after all. *This was indeed*, Kang now thought, *the dreamland.*

The world had expanded, sweeping to oblivion HC’s betrayal, the English instructor’s racist line, and the unrequited hearts. The solution to his problem was right here, where the gay men of the whole of San Francisco congregated, waiting to be introduced to him by Simon or bumped into by chance. This was a year’s worth of boyfriend candidates, the beginning of parties leading to further parties, and friends introducing him to other friends.

“This is Michael,” Simon yelled to Kang and drew his attention to a shirtless white man standing by, the prominence of whose thick chest glared at Kang when the disco ball flashed in their direction.

“Your chest is perfect!” Kang had never greeted anybody else this way, but there was a first time for everything. Before Kang knew it, his own hands also reached out and landed squarely on Michael’s chest. The first contact featured the cold sweat and fine hair, but a split second later, the solid touch of meaty substance quickened Kang’s breath. The daring nature of such an action emboldened him even more. He ran his hands down to Michael’s belt and playfully pulled the buckle; he felt his blood rushing down in his veins and giving his groin a tickle.

Michael did not budge. A flicker of what looked like amazement flashed in his eyes, then transformed into a sluttish glint as a muscle contraction rippled across his chest. He let Kang pull his buckle but then placed his own hands on Kang’s chest, then ran them down along Kang’s thin torso and groped lightly here and there.

“You have a nice chest, too!” Michael concluded after his brief examination. “Very nice!”

Kang waited for his next move, but Michael dropped him all of a sudden. Before Kang understood his about-face, Michael had already pulled his squared chest away from Kang and merged with the crowd. A flash from the disco ball swept before him, illuminating a throng of buffs gesticulating in Michael’s direction.

Simon exchanged a look with Kang. His earlier smiles vanished. “You are a potato queen, aren’t you?” He shouted.

“A what?” Kang shouted back.

“A potato queen,” Simon repeated. “You’re Asian, but you prefer white men.”

Kang felt more exposed than surprised by the accusation. He felt a chill freeze him in the middle of the dancing floor, but the other shirtless bodies continued to bump into him and set him into motion. The thought that Simon's friends and acquaintances here were mostly white did cross his mind, but here he was, pouting at Kang's bias with resentment.

Simon's eyes were cold. Even though he seemed recovered and grinned at Kang's silence, his earlier effulgence was switched off. He took Kang's arm and led him away, so they were standing on the second floor and looking down moments later. Packs of bodies twisted beneath them, as if Simon and Kang were standing before an aquarium tank, schools of sardines with mouths open and gills flapping, for oxygen and more space.

Kang tried to think of something fun to say, but the veering music beats prevented any sentence longer than ten words from forming in his mind. He felt empty, to see the connection between Simon and him lost and turned into this pile of shattered snippets. He looked at Simon and saw that he was all quiet, leaning against the banister and lost in some thought as he oversaw the tank of man sardines. He suddenly wanted to apologize, for not being interested in him but still leading him on.

He walked up to Simon and embraced him. He could feel the sweat that had seeped through Simon's T-shirt and now merged with his own on his palms. He could not believe this was in the middle of January of 2011, supposedly still right in the middle of the winter.

"I'm taking off," he said with genuine appreciation. "I had such a great time, and I don't know how to thank you. I hope to see you again soon!"

He tried to plant a kiss on Simon's cheek, but Simon broke free from his embrace. He saw Simon's lips move as if forming some words, but nothing came out in the end. He waited for the awkward moment to pass, then waved goodbye. At the stair exit, Kang turned back to take a last

look at Simon, who was already leaning on the railing over the boiling floor, his back bent. When the disco ball's next round of flash swept across him, Kang thought he had shrunk within that short time frame.

--

At home, in the fridge, Kang's baby carrots also shrunk. Kang had bought them two weeks ago with other vegetables and fruits, but the package somehow fell in the crevice behind the crisper. It was when Zander could not push the crisper fully in that he took the crisper out, together with the root cause of the jam. Kang saw the baby carrots and took ownership; he had forgotten about them.

"I thought I've eaten them all," he said.

"Probably still edible, just shriveled," Zander said with nonchalance.

Kang picked the package up and took one out. "I like them. Always wonder: what do they do to make them grow in their shape?"

Zander looked at him with curiosity. "What do you mean?"

"I meant, in where I come from, carrots usually are much longer, some as long as my elbow. But these babe carrots are so small, so maybe they dig them up before they mature?"

"Wait," Zander laughed. "You think they are actually carrots babies, like not fully grown carrots?"

"They are not?"

"No," Zander laughed a loud laugh. "They are actually baby-cut carrots. It is just a small piece cut from an ordinary carrot."

"Oh," Kang looked back at the carrot at hand with interest, "really."

“Yes,” Zander said. He turned to the fridge, taking out a loaf of bread and a pack of salad greens. “What are you busy with these days? I seldom see you,” he asked, attention to the food and pouring dressing to the salad greens.

“Study, mostly,” Kang said, taking out his leftover sauteed chicken and broccoli and putting them into the microwave. “I didn’t see you, either. Aren’t your classes all evening classes?”

“Yes, but I have an on-campus job that keeps me busy,” Zander filled a kettle and set it on the stove. “And, I am seeing someone.”

“Nice,” Kang said. He gave Zander an intent look, his scrawny frame and acne clusters.

“She’s a classmate,” Zander said, his eyes shining. He then turned to make the salad. “A novelist masquerading as an accountant.”

“Wonderful,” Kang said and took out his leftovers. “I haven’t been reading novels for a while. Not since I came to the States.”

“Well, you are busy; going down to Stanford twice a week and stuff.”

“Three times,” Kang said as he sat by the dining table. “What are you writing these days?”

“Not as much as I should,” Zander chuckled. “I’m reading ‘The Red and the Black’ again, *‘Le Rouge et le Noir.’*”

“Stendhal?” Kang paused his chopsticks. “The classics are still on your syllabus?”

“More like I am reading it for myself. You know, I find it very relevant. You read it?”

“Yes, but in middle school, so I’ve almost forgotten what the book is about. Back then, during the summer breaks, I had little to do, so I read a lot.” Looking back, about half of Kang’s readings were authored by Europeans and Americans of the 19th and 20th centuries, and the other half by Chinese writers with a modernist bent, active after the May Fourth Movement that had

called for a cultural overhaul against the paragon of the west. When he picked up reading again after starting dating HC, his choice of books seemingly stayed with that taste.

“It is about his poor kid longing to be part of the upper class, but he is constantly rejected.”

“Oh,” Kang gasped. *I knew that feeling!* “You like it?”

The kettle was boiling, as if also prompted by some internal eagerness. Zander opened the freezer and took out a package of frozen vegetables.

“Love it,” he exclaimed. He tore the package and poured out the frozen greens and reds, which hit the water with a series of splashes.

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A few days later, that weekend, Kang’s mind also splashed when he saw him: the suntanned skin, the steely build, and the lines of muscle. His dark brown body bristles spread evenly over the chest and then ran down toward the navel, sedimented along the troughs between packs of core, and finally disappeared behind the belt loop of a pair of ultra-low-rise jeans.

“What do you want?” he now asked, beard along his jawline trimmed into the most seductive shape. His cobalt blue eyes were now wrapping Kang with their dreamy depth, mesmerizing one part of him and hoisting the other above the clouds.

You, Kang mouthed to the guy’s puzzled face.

“Rum and coke, please,” Kang now made his voice clear. This was the warmest day in February, and Kang was hanging out with Derek and David. He bombarded them with text messages since their encounter back in January for a chance to hang out, and it took the couple a month to deign to meet on this Sunday Funday. Kang was still a rookie in the bar scene; he had never stepped into this bar called Lookout and only Googled the popular drink names before heading out.

The bartender nodded to acknowledge Kang's order, and then turned back to the tall shelves of bottles of diverse shapes and colors. His broad back tapered along the perfect hyperbolas of his tawny waist. All bartenders here served the clients shirtless, and Kang felt obliged to pay for that extra service.

He left a 100% tip on the counter and walked back to his gang with the glass of drink in hand. "I have never seen a guy hotter than that bartender," he said, still awestruck.

"Yeah," Derek nodded at the image in agreement. He was a handsome man in his early thirties, originally from Hong Kong but came to the States at eight. David, his twentysomething boyfriend, was born to Hongkonger parents in San Diego. Kang did not find David attractive, so he was intrigued by Derek's answer. If he found the bartender attractive and given his own good looks, why did he choose David?

Inappropriate questions to ask, of course. Kang lingered his lips on the rim of the glass to hide it. The three of them were standing on the balcony, directly above the intersection of Noe, 16th, and Market. It was one of those blessed Sundays in San Francisco, blessed in the sense of the abundance of golden sunrays, or the expanse of a blue-white sky. It was blessed, as a moderate temperature put t-shirts on people's bodies in late February, and the golden California poppies bloomed in the springy crispness along the sidewalks. The decade-old streetcars rattled along a bend of the tracks, crawling through lines of cars waiting patiently behind traffic signs. Through the cantilevered windows of the bar, Kang could see gay couples walking across the intersection downstairs under the aegis of green lights, hands clasped, gait unhurried.

Kang shifted his attention back to the patrons. He felt an urge to comment: "It is interesting, that people in the bar are so segregated racially."

“Maybe except him,” David nodded and pointed to an Asian guy laughing out loud amongst a circle of white hunks. His crew cut and bulky muscle were not far off from his companions’. Even Kang himself conceded he was delicious.

“That’s Damien. He’s a potato queen.” Derek replied with a matter-of-fact nonchalance. “Simon told us you are, too?”

“No, I am not,” Kang said, suddenly feeling shameful to own up to the name, “I recognize hotness in all races.”

But his authentic voice was humming something else. *Your competition!* His eyes could not help but be glued to the group, the muscle lines and the golden hair, the bouts of laughter and the air of ease. He gulped empty his drink but too quickly so choked; he bent down and coughed until the last liquid was out of his trachea.

David and Derek did not help him. They stood where they were, holding their glasses and their posture. Like what happened at the club with Simon, mentioning “potato queen” seemingly changed the atmosphere. Kang leaned on the railing over the street to stabilize himself, suddenly feeling stranded. He could only hold tight to his empty glass; he could only vow to himself, *I will be you one day, Damien, I will be you someday.*

“Wanna go to a house party together?” A new message from Simon, after a month-long hiatus. Kang could not help but feel excited. He bought a pot of orchids for Simon’s place, and offered to treat him to dinner. Simon accepted the flower but said no to the dinner.

“You are a starving student!” he said. “Can’t accept.”

Kang was moved. Stepping into the diner two blocks down from Simon’s condo, he vowed to treat Simon better despite that he could not accommodate his advance, if that still was what Simon intended. If his bias was clear to Simon and he was still invited to parties, maybe he had made peace with it and treated Kang more as a friend? Such thoughts comforted Kang during the dinner, from when the waiter passed the menu to when Simon picked up the receipt and signed his cursive signature.

This March evening, right after the start of the Day Light Saving time, the setting sun painted the sky in Rothkopian layers. The two of them walked five blocks uphill, rang a bell, and the door opened to a house party. Greetings and introductions. Smiles. Drinks and finger food. A bright entertainment space combining a living room and a kitchen, a chic staircase leading to a penthouse. Furniture with sleek modern lines and a bouquet in a large jar, tiny bubbles bonding to the stems like fine grains of salt. Scattered across all there are guests chatting, laughing, and resuming chatting again: there was so much in life to talk about, as there was so much going on around the world.

Kang poured some soda, took a sip, and grimaced at the thousands of miniature bites of the fizz. Close to him, there was a circle of chatting gay men, all with a red plastic cup in one hand. Simon and Kang inserted themselves into the circle, and exchanged a quick, faint smile with the other members. Despite nobody greeting him first, Kang knew that Simon’s presence affected him:

he would not feel so in a roomful of strangers just by himself. He kept silent but was relaxed enough to enjoy the conversation flowing around him, the story arcs and the hearty laughs.

To call what floated around him a conversation was a stretch, because it soon became apparent that only one man—the white man in this group of Asians—was leading the talk. *Manologue*, Kang thought of the title of a news article. The feminist journalist lambasted the practice of men monopolizing speeches, but it worked for Kang just fine now.

“What’s his name, do you know?” Kang asked Simon.

“Tim,” Simon said.

Tim held the circle’s attention not only because he talked more, but because he was taller, 6’2 or 6’3, so everyone was literally looking up to him. He had this air, the influence that could catch idle attention and draw it in, or the assurance that did not directly promise knowledge and fun. The content of his speech was told in a stentorian and slightly whiney voice, floating from some starting point that Kang had missed but landing on the food scene in San Francisco, about the abundance of culinary options in contemporary America: Italian, French, German, Scandinavian, Salvadoran, Jamaican, Mexican, Ethiopian, Indian, Filipino, Chinese, Korean, Japanese, Vietnamese, basically everything, singular or fusion, options atop options. “They all come to us!” He exclaimed with pride: *we have insider access to all your ethnic enclaves, so you have no secret before our American eyes!*

The other Asian guests in the circle now began to chime in:

— “Have you tried this or that restaurant?”

— “No, there is always a line.”

— “Oh, people would wait that long for that?”

— “That ramen is the best in the city. You have to.”

— “What is the name again?”

— “We always go there for dim sum.”

Amid all that back-and-forth, it suddenly dawned on Kang that all the Asian guys here were competing for Tim’s attention, touting their own cultural authenticity and culinary connoisseurship with the hope of exchanging for that special bond. A day-to-day example of a larger cultural patterning: individually named western reference vs. their collectively marked eastern counterparties: Baker’s beach vs. China beach, Euler’s Theorem vs. Chinese Remainder Theorem. Back to the immediate context, he had never thought there were so many potato queens; he had not expected such an intense competition.

So, how do you fare against your competition?

He should be fine, his mind relaxed after comparing himself—his looks, his education—with these men. He looked back at Tim and thought he would be worth it. The Asian guests here seemingly all knew this instinctively, because with that height, that build, that hair, and that face, he would be the trophy we could bring around and show off. You potato queens are not alone, you share the same name so you are interchangeable from one another, really. Chinese or Japanese or Korean or Filipino or Cambodian or Laotian or Hmong or Vietnamese all do not matter, because, as the white man Tim had said, we all come to you— “They all come to us!” [work more]

Kang looked back at Simon, who looked all normal and relaxed. Kang suddenly realized Simon had been quiet all along, all polite but didn’t join the competition game.

“Are you alright?” Kang asked.

“Very much so,” Simon appeared slightly surprised. “Why.”

There was a small commotion at the entrance, a whistle, a few high-pitched greetings, and more exaggerated *muah* sounds. Kang turned back as the other guests and saw the Asian just

entered taking off this jacket. He was only wearing a tank top, and his arms and pecs bulged proudly.

Kang had seen the face somewhere. And the body....

Damien, yes, the name surfaced for the potato queen he had seen from afar. At the Sunday Funday. Weeks before. This close, his smooth, dark skin passing before him, Kang felt his breath pause for the beauty. He tried not to keep looking at him, but he kept looking at him. Being so impressed by an Asian man made him not a pure potato queen, wouldn't it?

Damien walked up to Tim, hugged him and kissed his cheeks. He then turned to repeat the greetings with the lesser beings. Someone took the opportunity and introduced Damien to the rest of the circle. When the arms full of musculature extended out toward Kang, Kang was initially inhibited by a sense of inferiority to hold it.

“Kang,” he bit his lips to generate enough power to hold Damien’s hand. “Nice to meet you.”

“Nice meeting you,” Damien said, locking his eyes with Kang’s before moving on to the next man. He did not ask for Kang’s strange name again, so Kang wasn’t sure whether he had left an impression. Damien was already huddling Simon now—Simon knew everybody.

“You know Damien?” Kang still asked without knowing why, after Damien moved to two men after.

“Everyone knows Damien!”

--

The more often Kang compared himself with his mental image of Damien, the more he concluded that it was the muscles that had placed Damien in the higher league. After the beginning of the Spring Quarter, in early April, Kang signed up with a gym in Castro. He went there on Tuesdays

and Thursdays, right after returning from his Stanford classes. Once, as he walked out of the gym and headed home, his father called. Kang picked up the phone just to say that he was tired. Can I call you back in an hour, Dad?

Dad quickly clarified that the gym was in the city, not on campus.

“Do you have to pay for your school gym?”

“No,” Kang said. He sensed where the conversation was heading.

“Then why are you not saving the money?”

“It is a better gym. Really prefer to call you later. Talk to you soon, Dad!”

Kang could not admit his other motivations: to taste more eye candies and to try his luck at turning a random encounter into a relationship. On this day, just as he walked past a row of joggers thumping the treadmills to the zone of free-weights, he saw a hunk there flexing his muscles before the mirror wall. His azure tank top balanced suntanned skin tone and coppery-golden hair so well that Kang gazed at the image in awe. The curves of his biceps glistened under the recess lights; he preened in different angles for the most satisfactory look.

And then the hunk did something even better: with a visible swift contraction of flexors, he pulled up the hem of his tank top to the nipples, revealing a chiseled six-pack and a clean-cut Apollo’s belt. He twisted his torso slightly to the side, examining those bulges from a fresh perspective. Approved. His face exuded pride, and his composure radiated assurance, the accomplishment wrought by nature and nurture, the good fortune of nucleotide sequences and extensive gym efforts. He cocked his head up slightly as he dropped the hem off, and with chirpy steps he then walked up to a squat rack, to load up the bar with weight plates.

Kang followed him to the next corner, to take one last look at the delicious eye-candy. But on his way there, he saw a new person approaching his direction with a trainer, an Asian whose

gender he had a problem determining. Something in the gait indicated this was a man, an impression supported by the absence of ample bosom; but the shoulder-length hair suggested otherwise, as the fat face and lack of facial hair. *This must be a man*, Kang stared at the person longer and then decided, the exact moment he decided that his man was unattractive. From the corner of his eyes, Kang traced this man following his trainer's instructions, his bending into a downward dog pose. And when he stood up straight again, he did a hair flip and tucked his shoulder-long hair back behind his ear, in a way that reminded Kang of a girl's demeanor. Compared to the earlier white hunk, his whole existence was a joke.

Kang felt shame rushing to his cheeks. If the hunk saw this one, what would he think of him and maybe, by association, of the racial label this man and Kang shared? Kang felt a force directing him in retreat, away from the androgyne and to the safety free from the intimidating hunks. He wanted to walk up to the androgyne and declare the truth: *because of men like you, we as a group have all been dragged down!*

He did nothing of such kind, of course, but the shame deepened so he retreated to the darkest corner of the gym. He had to hide there a long time before he dared to reemerge.

--

This Spring Quarter, April, May, and June all began with quizzes and exams. After the Quarter ended in the middle of June, Kang's GPA dropped from 3.9 to 3.5. He didn't know whether this meant these two courses were harder or that he had slacked. In the small shock of Shiao-min's 4.0 GPA, he concluded the second reason had more truth. The student academic counselor comforted him, saying that he should not sweat over it as 3.5 was still a good grade. Indeed, when Kang started applying for a data science summer internship in San Francisco in April, nobody even queried about his GPA. He was judged purely on his interview performance, which was bad for

the first chances. He had to spend significant time working on the exercises and found an online coding bank per Shiao-min's recommendation. After that, he got the hang of the interviews and finally got an offer from Google.

"So happy for you," Mom said over their weekly call. "Gain as much experience as you can at such a famous company. It will do you good."

"Of course, mom," Kang replied, "of course." He did not mention that he wanted to stay in the city in part for its men.

--

Another Friday evening, another a crowded dance floor. Deafening music. Glaring flashes. Go-go boys flailing around a metal pole, titillating all desiring eyes with their prominent packages. Rambunctious patrons were on the loose, high on Ecstasy or booze.

Kang was hanging out with his new friends Terry and Eddie, a Taiwanese American and his white boyfriend from Maine. He had met them at some party. Since April, or May, when they first started hanging out on Friday night, the three of them always came at midnight, to drink, dance, and comment on the other patrons. "How about that guy, is he your type?" Terry would ask between sips of drinks. "Do you like the one over there?" Eddie would counteroffer with his own list. Every week the same questions were asked and answered, yet none seemingly got tired of them. Unfailingly the new Friday would offer its sumptuous fresh meat, and Kang, Terry, and Eddie would devour them Platonically and from a distance.

When they were tired of the crowd, the noise, and the senseless Platonic manhunt, they took breathers out in the nearby back alley. They were not the only ones there, and sometimes Kang could sense pairs of eyes fixing on him. He was cute, after all, with his muscle training starting to yield perceptible effects. For the previous few weeks, this mid-aged white guy always

donned the same black leather jacket, unbuttoned to reveal the tight white deep V-neck underneath. Kang knew that for some twinks, the muscled daddy look was a turn-on, and he knew this leather-jacket guy was performing this kind of dream man of twinks. But the problem was that his shoulders and pecs were not thick enough to sustain the stock idea of a hunk, and his intenseness—or his garishness, or both—scared people away even from a distance. Kang had never seen anyone approaching him.

“So that guy is here again,” Eddie had also noticed.

“Yes, he always comes in the same outfit,” Terry agreed.

Kang felt bad for the man, because he knew what it tasted like to be rejected simply by how he looked—but he did just that himself. He did not want to think deeper into this issue, so he just followed his friends back inside to dance near the go-go boys. He bumped into another dancing figure close by, who turned an annoyed face but changed it into a grin the next moment.

“Terry!” now the bumped-into guy called out.

“Ah,” Terry flashed an awkward smile, “this is ... Tony!”

This Tony was not in good shape. He only had a pair of tight underpants on, but thick layers of flesh overflowed the elastic band. He hovered between Terry and Eddie in an awkward movement, taking every moment to deliver a subpar performance of a nonchalant, attractive hunk. Before Kang realized it, Tony’s hugging of Eddie was over, and his attention is turned to Kang now. His piles of fat pressed onto Kang’s chest, his arms snaked around Kang’s waist. The impression of cold sweat led to the image of a snake in Kang’s mind, and with Tony’s hand fumbling under his shirt, Kang felt some precious part of him was invaded by some slimy, slithering creature.

Kang pulled himself from Tony and pushed him away with force. “Leave me alone!” He blared, took advantage of the moment and headed back out. He felt disgusted by the sticky

impression of Tony's cold sweat; he needed the chill evening air outside to cool down his anger. Back outside in the alley again, he saw the earlier leather jacket man was still there. His eyes lit up at the sight of Kang, but Kang simply bypassed him as if not noticed. He found an empty corner in the depth of the alley and stood there to cool down; he tucked his shirt back in and wished to get free from all the unwelcome attention he had received.

Terry found him. "Tony ... you know, because he is fat, he has to fight harder to get what he wanted."

Kang nodded. The chill of the night had cooled him down. He regretted his actions because he took sympathy for their stances. He thought that if he—and all others—did not silently laugh at the leather jacket man, or if he did not silently judge Tony for being so fat and awkward, there would be, in fact, more hope out there, for them but for himself also. And that hope was not merely for a boyfriend or a partner, but hopes that were bigger, nobler.

He extended out his arms and hugged Terry, more tightly than usual. "Say goodbye to Eddie for me, will you?" He planted a kiss on Terry's cheek. "Tell him that I suddenly have a headache."

--

The same regret was the first emotion Kang woke up to on Saturday. In the mid-day sunlight, he suddenly recalled he had not spoken to Simon since the last Sunday Funday back in February. His texts were replied to with days of delay and then not at all; his phone call went straight to voicemail. The lingering regret from last night prompted the thought in Kang to call Simon once again, as he still wanted to clear the air.

But again, there was only Simon prompting a voicemail: "Hi, this is Simon, thanks for your call. Please leave a message after the beep."

Beep.

So he was really doing it, blocking me out for being a potato queen. Even in a court, people are allowed to defend themselves and be heard, but apparently, here in Simon's court all verdicts are final, the defendant is whisked to prison with no right to appeal.

Kang organized his thoughts; he spewed out these random bits:

—You dated white men yourself, Simon.

— I feel attracted to white men but hate myself for that. Many times I could not even tell which emotion was more potent, the attraction or the hate.

—And why do you want to cut me off simply because I am not attracted to Asian men? Our friendship is not based on that ground.

— I am not harming anyone for not being attracted to non-white men. I still treat all people with respect and courtesy. Have I ever insulted you? (Yes, a bit lame.)

—It is not that I was born to be attracted to white hunks. It all started after I came to the United States. Why are you holding me responsible and blaming me for that?

—And why are you rushing to a conclusion and blocking me off? Why don't you try to understand the reasons behind what you see, any reasons for God's sake?

But that was already too long a message to fit in a voicemail.

So, what makes white men so attractive?

The deep-set eyes: their steel lines and elegant lashes;

The flowing, curvy hair;

The golden glisten of the hair on their forearms;

The powerful jawline and the shadow of stubbles;

In front of him, you lower your head and feel bad about yourself.

--

There was a party to go to. The first year in graduate school was already behind Kang, and the freshness of Kang's data scientist internship at Google still hovered over him like a halo. He texted Eddie and Terry, asking if they were going to any parties as the Fourth of July was just around the corner.

“Yes, we plan to go to one in Oakland. Why don't you come at seven to our place this Saturday, and then we can go together?”

Kang brought an orchid in a terracotta pot as a belated gift, hoping his gratitude could stay with them as long as the flowers bloomed. “Ah, thank you,” Terry smiled as he put it on a foyer console table next to the entryway, “it is lovely.”

They chose the subway over driving, because the party hosts lived close to the 12th Street station in Oakland. The exit led them to a July night so chilly that they put on windbreakers when they hit the sidewalk. The last ray of sunlight cast long shadows from the imposing art deco buildings rising around, now all in decrepitude, with only the gilded decorative lines and stucco indicating that they were once buildings of significance, that it was the history, rather than the

future, that brought the city with the needed assurance of itself. Kang could not see a single soul in all the directions he looked. Littered newspapers and soiled food packages ballooned past him like foam on a windswept beach; steel shutters were drawn in front of one shop after another. The nightfall brought out the city's saddened, phlegmatic dimension, with unnamed, looming dangers lurking in the rows of dark, seedy alleys.

The three of them quickened their steps. Turning left into a dark side street, Kang saw a ground-level apartment unit all lit up, with a hubbub of chatting, laughter, and music wafting out in all directions. Instantly he knew it must be the party: the only fun left for the townsfolk to enjoy, an oasis of safety in a desert of bottomless decay.

The hosts were a Vietnamese pharmacist and a white yogi. They embraced each arriving guest with feigned exaggeration, half flirtatious and half cordial. A thought flashed in Kang's mind that the yogi was a cutie—but the pharmacist not much so. The room in front of him was of an irregular shape. Combining the living room, the kitchen, plus the dining room all in one, it was already filled with about thirty partygoers. The heat prompted them to take off their windbreakers, which the hosts then speedily whisked into the bedroom. Patterned recessed lights and a row of pendant lights over the kitchen counter illuminated the whole space, accentuating, more than anything, a bar ambiance by their dimmed and purple-pinkish lambency.

And here he was, right underneath the row of pendant lights, a tall and decent-looking white man standing solo, taking a sip from a half-full glass. It was uncommon to see a man like that drinking just by himself, as usually, people would have come to his side in throngs, competing for attention, pushing for a chance. Kang's eyes followed his purple-pinkish silhouette, from the broad shoulders to the lanky arms.

“Ah, here’s Pavel over there; let’s go and say hi.” Terry gesticulated in the man’s direction as he pronounced his name. *Pavel*. Kang etched that name into mind as they got to his side. The man’s eyes met Terry’s, quickly swung to Kang and then back to Terry, and the hard brows of his softened in that back-and-forth. Greetings. Hugs. After the quick succession of all that there came the introduction: “Pavel, this is my friend Kang. Kang, this is Pavel.”

“Hi, nice to meet you.” The man had this accent that Kang could not pinpoint to a particular locale. A slight disappointment: *non-American*; but to be burst in a split second: good enough—*Pavel. Russian? Polish?*

Kang looked up to his eyes: deep-set, clear. A tenderhearted, sad feeling was welling up there, a feeling that brought back Kang’s memory of his own breakup, the sadness he had ever tasted in life. *And perhaps*, Kang thought, *all these were what could connect us, an implicit comprehension of the sad registers of life?* Kang pushed away HC’s image from his mind and shifted his attention back to the man’s question: “What do you do?” Kang liked the way that thin-lipped mouth trembled to let out the accents, the tiny dimples that flashed as he spoke.

“I’m studying statistics at Stanford,” Kang said, “in the master’s program. Now I am doing a summer internship at Google.”

“In the city?”

“Yes. I moved to the city earlier this year, so I don’t have to take those Google buses.”

“My office is in the building right next to your office,” Pavel said. “I work for a developer.”

“Web developer?”

“No, real estate developer.”

Not bad. “I heard the real estate market is scorching now,” Kang said. “Whenever I go to a party in the city, people always talk about how the housing prices keep going up.”

“Yes, it’s all because San Francisco has this strict thing called zoning regulations—I mean, I am not focusing on San Francisco at work, but being in the industry, I still know a thing or two about the Bay Area market.”

“What’s zoning?” Kang asked.

“Zoning is when a government divides a city’s land area and imposes restrictions on how each zone can be used. Like here, where we work—the financial district—is for non-residential purposes, while, say, Castro, is zoned for residences.”

“Okay,” Terry acknowledged the facts offered so far.

“But even in residential zones, the city poses density and height restrictions, so you cannot have complexes like the one we are in, to house the increasing population. Demand and supply: economics 101.”

“Sure,” Kang also nodded to show that he was following. “Makes sense.”

“So, the city has created a situation where demand and supply mismatch.” Pavel rose and crossed his arms to mimic how the demand and supply curves intersect with each other. “When the demand increases”—he moved his left hand to cross his right at a higher point—“we see higher housing prices. That easy and simple. We have this system called capitalism.” He dropped his hands and picked up his drink. “Maybe I can tell you more another time, over coffee or something.”

“Sure, I’d like that,” Kang said, feeling a pull of elation as the coffee invitation, if really meant, could also hint at romantic interest. He looked back at Terry and just realized how little he had spoken.

“Ah, I didn’t mean to monopolize the conversation,” Kang gave Terry an embarrassed smile. “You two must have a lot to catch up on.”

“No, I’ve been enjoying the conversation,” Terry said, putting on a knowing smile. “Eddie and I are also thinking about buying. Probably will ask you about it when we’re more serious.”

“Sure, shoot me then. You know what, I always tell people to buy in this city. When the whole market tanks, San Francisco stays flat; but east bay? Ha ha. Where is Eddie?”

“Somewhere—oh, over there,” Terry said after a brief search. “And how’s Mikey?”

Pavel took another sip of his drink. “Mikey and I broke up last month,” he responded drily.

“Ah, I’m sorry to hear—”

“No, it’s ok, you know, I feel ok. We are very different; we want different things in life, so it is natural we parted ways.”

So that could explain the sadness I saw earlier, Kang thought, even though he said he felt okay. He must be a man still in convalescence, a patient essaying himself into recuperation. Kang felt his tongue tremble slightly, forming at its tip a question inquiring what had happened, more details please, more drama welcomed. But a sense of appropriateness held it back—you have known him for just five minutes.

A silence followed suit, slightly awkward probably because of the impossibility to truly access another’s pain, compounded by the imperative to show and act in empathy. But right then, Eddie waved in Terry’s direction from across the room, and both Terry and Kang had seen that. He was flanked by a group of pretty Asian boys, whose alcohol-induced ruddiness on their faces was visible even from a distance. A true rice queen—and what does Terry see in him? Are they in an open relationship of some sort?

Terry waved back exaggeratedly, and then turned to Pavel. “I will see what’s happening. Will talk to you later, Pavel, it is so nice to see you tonight!” As Terry was saying all that, Kang

debated quickly in mind whether to stay. He wanted to, but then thought he was here only because Terry and Eddie had invited him.

“Sure, see you soon, Terry—and nice to meet you, Kang, what’s your number?” Seeing that Kang was also leaving, Pavel took out his phone, unlocked it, and extended it in Kang’s direction.

Kang took over Pavel’s phone and punched in his number with bubbles bursting at his heart. “I’ll talk to you later,” he tried to hide it when he handed the phone back. “Would like to know more about your thought on the housing market!”

There was no urgent business on Eddie’s side. He simply wanted to crack a joke in the presence of Terry, performing the role of a fun figure in the company of pretty Asian boys—not all that pretty in Kang’s eyes, no surprise. One joke led to another; one group merged into the next. Introductions came in one after another, but in the end, Kang could only remember one name: Pavel. The broad shoulders, the sadness in the eyes. Kang looked again at where he used to be, right beside where the artificial marble kitchen counter opened to a sink. The two hosts were standing there now, and Kang’s glance caught the moment they burst into a peal of shrill laughter.

It was a successful party, after all. Kang scanned the other corners of the room, but Pavel was nowhere to be seen.

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Kang knew where to see Shiao-min, though: this Friday, over lunch. Like Kang, she also had found an internship in the city at a finance data company, Thomson Reuters, which was only a few blocks away. The lunch was their first catch-up since their internship started. After chatting about what tasks their jobs entail, Shiao-min changed the topic.

“Did you do anything fun for the Fourth of July?” she asked.

“Yes, I went to a party.”

“Oh? What kind of party?” Shiao-min’s eyes brightened.

“Err, just some friends I met, some people who lived close by.”

“Can you bring me next time?” Shiao-min looked at Kang in earnest. “My studio at Financial District is in a high-rise, you know, those like in China’s, and I know no one. I spent my evenings binge-watching Netflix episodes.”

Kang was hesitant. “Ok. Did you go anywhere for the Fourth of July?”

“What kind of people are they, those who went to the party you went to?” Shiao-min stayed with the last topic. “Americans? I found it hard to socialize with them.”

“Me, too,” Kang said. “Hard to get close.”

“So I only hang out with Chinese students. But living in the city, I know no one. Ask me to join your next party?”

“O-kay.”

Maybe it was the hesitancy in Kang’s voice that put her off. “You know,” she resumed her drawl after a long pause. “You’ve changed a lot in one year. I remember you were different when I first met you.”

“Really?” Kang was genuinely surprised. “How?”

“I don’t know, it is hard to put to words. It feels like you are hiding more of yourself.”

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But on Facebook, it was hard to hide yourself. In the invitee list of the Oakland party’s Facebook event page, Kang found him. Full name: Pavel Novak. Birthday: August 15th. Relationship status: Single.

But is he into Asians? There was always, always this question. There was an ex of his, a Mikey that could be either white or Asian, Latino or Black; there were the two mutual friends, Terry and Eddie, but that Terry was Asian and Eddie was white told Kang nothing about what type of gay man Pavel was. Scrolling down the page, it looked like Pavel had never really posted anything—or maybe these contents were not public? There were no photos of Mikey nor even a selfie, and the last posts Kang could see were all friends wishing him Happy Birthday last year—*it was almost a year ago. And how old was he, by the way? He looked thirty, at least, old but attractive in a mature way.*

Well, perhaps this partial list of birthday-wishing friends could still divulge something. A quick frequency count: during Pavel's birthday week, 46 friends had wished him happy birthday on Facebook. Out of the 46, 5 were women. The 41 men followed a bimodal distribution: 23 Asian, two black, one potentially Latino, and the remaining 15 or 16 were all white. The over 50% Asian percentage in the male sample far surpassed the racial group's fair share in the larger population across the Bay Area or the nation.

There was only one conclusion that could be reasonably drawn from the data: Pavel Novak was a rice queen.

The phone dinged. Kang grabbed it swiftly up from the table, wishing it were a message from Pavel. But it was again a text from Terry.

“Sunday afternoon tea dance?” It asked.

“Sure. Come to your place first again?”

“K.”

“What time?”

“3:30 pm.”

Succinctness. You only get that with time and with the right people.

Kang arrived punctually. The three of them boarded the streetcar at Market and Dolores, then disembarked at Market and the 9th. The weather had been benign since sunrise, but by now, the afternoon fog had started rolling in. Shivers of chill parachuted from the half grey, half blue sky, and quickened the three’s steps as they passed imposing buildings with brick facades and elegant stuccos. Once, they must have all been buildings of significance, and after enduring a long, steady decay, now they began showing the first signs of gentrification. *What does Pavel have to say about gentrification?* Kang wanted to ask.

They waited in line outside of an Art Nouveau building, paid the cover, and had their IDs checked by the bouncer. A zigzagging corridor swelled into a cavernous hall, where deafening beats, flashing disco ball glitters, and the sheer mass of dancing bodies assaulted Kang’s sensory perceptions. Forcing their way through swaths of shirtless male bodies, Eddie and Terry led Kang to the center of the dancing floor and started shaking their booties to the music. The disco ball glow now turned blue. Everyone around was shirtless, wobbling and bobbing to Nicki Minaj. The electronic beats penetrated all the openings of Kang’s body—ears, mouth, pores—and shook his

frame from these points of contact. An enlarging, rushing feeling of excitement spread across Kang's limbs and torso, its sole purpose being to synchronize his movements with the beats, and forge ahead to break all the inhibitions Kang had ever known. Dance! Break! Dance!

Terry and Eddie took off their shirts. They tucked them over their belts and behind their backs like twirling tails, then yelled at Kang against Beyoncé's loudest voice: "C'mon, take it off!" Kang hesitated, but before he knew it, Eddie was already by him, grabbing his t-shirt's hem and rolling the fabric up with force.

"Okay, Okay!" Kang landed his hands on top of Eddie's and paused their motion, then took over from where Eddie had left off and dragged his shirt off.

Eddie's eyes lit up at Kang's exposed chest and midriff; his hands ran over Kang's shoulders, pecs, and abs. "Shit!" he yelled unbelievably and looked back to Terry. "Shit, aren't you turning into a delish hunk? Terry, check this out!"

By his side, Terry was also beaming and nodding approvingly, but he only gave a light pat on Kang's shoulder. "Good job!"

I'm getting there! Kang laughed at Eddie's and Terry's positive feedback, and the image of Damien flashed in his mind. A rush of levity rose so naturally inside him, elevating his confidence into even more forceful movements synced with the beats of the music. *I could dance here till the morning dawns*, he thought, *or maybe I will get lucky with a white hunk?*

A tall figure with broad shoulders and lanky arms suddenly forced himself in between the three of them, the face looked like Pavel's—was Pavel's—but Kang's eyes were tied to the body, shirtless and glistening and he had never set eyes on before. Chest well-defined and abs taut, the body was meaty where it should be meaty and lean where it should be lean, emanating a fresh sexy aura that was both confident and assertive, a dazzling embodiment of all the virile virtues.

Kang did not call out his name, but moved his eyes to meet his. The eyes now wrapped around Kang with the same concentrated, woebegone look as at the party Kang had met him, visible like bright winter stars in a span of darkness sliced up by intermittent bouts of laser aurora.

Then he moved to Kang's back, snaked his arms around Kang, and pulled him into his embrace backward with force. His tight muscles rubbed Kang's back with their firm, solid substance as they would do in lovemaking, rising a heated, arousal sensation in Kang mixed also with ribald jitters and a rush of mortifying embarrassment, the same feelings that Kang imagined would rise if he were caught of having sex in public. Kang closed his eyes; Kang rode on. He could feel a growing bulge rubbing his rump, cold sweat from this other person smeared all over his back and arms.

The two must have made a fantastic couple, because someone around whistled and howled boisterous "yeah!" repeatedly. With his eyes still shut tight, Kang imagined that both Terry and Eddie were also looking at him, his face lit up by rapture, his muscles taut with excitement. *Oh keep it on Pavel and I would let you pack up all my inhibitions; I will travel with you to your wildest destinations!*

But Pavel released him. A forceful drop, completed with the same assertiveness when he first folded Kang into his arms. Kang halted his movements with a modicum of confusion and disappointment; he opened his eyes and saw Pavel was planting goodbye kisses on Terry's and Eddie's cheeks. The thin lips of his—Pavel's—trembled as if he was trying to murmur some parting words, but whatever he could have said was instantly drowned by the beats. The rowdy noises. The rambunctious lights. He left in a swiftness that led Kang to think of a tornado, one that had just completed ravaging a village, and eagerly swirled en route to conquer the next target.

The next target was someone about the same height as himself. This far, this dark, Kang could not see his face clearly. He had even lost track of where Pavel was from time to time, and a force pulled him in that direction. He needed to know who that target was. He needed to see.

The disco ball only cast a thin belt of silver light. Pushing away a few bodies in the way, Kang made out the faint contour of Pavel in the dark. When the laser swept across the pair again, Kang could see Pavel was making the same movements to the other guy as he had to Kang a moment ago, his package pushed forward into the guy's rump, his hands moving across the chest and abs. The guy's body was well built in nice proportions; his face was turned away from Kang, but by the head's geometry and the hair's straightness, Kang could tell he was Asian—he must be. *Pavel is a rice queen, after all.*

Pavel is also a man of options, many, many, many more Asian boys—many more than just Kang and the guy he is dancing now with—must be vying for his attention, dreaming of landing in his arms, his bed. Kang had always known this abstractly, but now he was witnessing the fact with his own eyes. *Maybe his asking for your phone number doesn't mean anything?*

“Ouch!” A foot stumped heavily on Kang's. The offender—a tall, bovine white guy with too many moles—only gave Kang a careless look that was not even apologetic. Before Kang knew it, the guy had already turned back to sync his movements with his friends.

Kang wanted to feel angry, and he did. He pushed closer, stepping on a few feet in the way as if they were trash thrown on the floor. When the next flash of laser swept before him, he finally saw the face of the Asian guy who had been dancing with Pavel.

Damien.

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Damien Kim. Kang typed the name in the search bar of Facebook and hit return. The hit came out more forcefully than he had intended, so Kang ran his index finger on the key to check if it was still okay, as if it was a creature with feelings and could get hurt.

And here he was, shirtless amongst a group of shirtless whites, group picture time against a giant rock, with an expanse of green ocean shimmering in the background under a larger expanse of white and blue. Cabo, said the caption. Judging from the angle of the sun, it must be the early afternoon, or even in the late morning, noon-ish, when those suntanned bodies decided to have their perfect colors and shapes recorded at their prime, in their superlative twenties and thirties, possibility right in the middle of a beach party.

Then, he came again, inside some posh restaurant with another group of whites, all in fitted sweaters and wearing the trendiest hairstyles: skin fade with long waves, or simply the classic pompadour, in vogue again after yet another cycle of peak and trough. No caption was given to anchor the image to a particular time and place, although apparently, the sweaters indicated a colder temperature, as the interior Kang evinced a lambent ambiance. It could be just a Sunday dinner party in San Francisco, as simple and innocent as a birthday celebration, or a pre-Super Bowl soirée. But the occasion could also be fitting for a group of handsome friends' celebrating their own beauty, a gathering specifically for that purpose, an occasion of narcissistic indulgence.

The list of possibilities could go on, but by Kolmogorov's axiom, they would still sum up to one truth, that Kang was envious of Damien and wanted to overtake his place. Thought experiments would be easy, as how easily he could scratch off Damien's faces in the photos and put in his. All of a sudden, Kang found himself posing with a group of speedoed hotties in Cabo, taking delight in that his long hours in the gym were finally paying off, attested to by his posing now as a swimwear model, waiting for the camera shutter to click under a scorching sun. And

barely a moment later, he was having dinner before attending a Beyoncé concert in New York, feeling elated at being in the circle of beautiful David Hardy, a fitness model whose suggestive pose had graced the glossy cover of GQ.

Surrounded by these brawny and exuberant white men, Kang/Damien had finally achieved his single wish for the longest time: tossing away his Asian build and looks, shedding off the whole burden of the culture and his history. All gone: the build and the looks, the culture and the history: fed into the shredder, sent out to whoever takes them in a registered mail. What a splendor, what a lark! This was a free country, where he could pursue whatever standard he deemed worthy, to become whomever he desired to become. He remembered the night when he vowed to put anything Asian behind, a night when he was ten, struck by the neighbor boys' beautiful golden hair under the sun. Now, at the age of twenty-five, Kang/Damien had finally succeeded: all-American, all freshly handsome when he looked around, all Asian-ness scrubbed off, spirited away without even a trace. That was the reason for the dinner tonight, a memory in the permanent record in Facebook's repository. Allow me the honor of making a toast: Asian no longer, forever white! *I am the notes of the New World symphony; I am the fireworks of the Fourth of July: what a splendor, what a lark!*

And while Damien Kim enjoyed his glee at finally achieving equality, Kang Li saw more evident than ever that the path ahead leads nowhere.

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It was almost 9 pm when Kang got home after another dinner with Terry and Eddie. He connected his phone to the charger, then went to the basement to remove his laundry pile from the drier. The washer and drier set were shared with Zander and the downstairs neighbors, and Kang always left his laundry to Sunday evenings, as the last task of his weekly ritual. Before he got to ironing, he

switched on his computer, found a Philip Glass soundtrack, and clicked play. He always listened to some music while he did his ironing, as the tedious task could pass faster that way, almost a burden no longer. And then he thought, since I am already online, how about checking out Facebook to see whether there had been any updates.

“Coffee?” A new message with that title waited for him in his inbox. Next weekend, Sunday afternoon, at Café Sofia at Noe and Market. Could I have the pleasure?

That really depends on who sent the invite in the first place, of course.

And he was overjoyed to answer yes, because it was an invite from Pavel Novak.

Pavel was already there when Kang arrived at Cafe Sofia. He was checking something on the phone, but as he noticed Kang's gaze, he promptly packed his attention and wrapped it all around Kang. His tenseness evaporated, shapeshifting into a bright, warm smile.

Kang walked up to his table and paused. "Let me order something first."

"Okay," Pavel said with a quick, friendly easiness.

Kang returned with a mug of cappuccino, pulled out the chair across the table, and sat down. It was when Kang looked into Pavel's steeled eyes that he realized that this was the first time he'd seen him in daylight. His face was somewhat handsome: big jaws slightly lacking angular lines, deep-set eyes a tad wider from each other than Jamie Dornan's. A face not so pretty to quicken Kang's heart, but still winsome enough to rivet his attention, with details to appreciate (curly eyelashes, for example) and cues to chew on (again, what is the story behind the sense of sadness?). It was, Kang thought, a pleasant and complex face.

They began with the usual conversation starters, updates from the day-to-day that lasted long for two practical strangers. At the conversation's first hint of faltering, Kang threw a question to open a new direction: is it still a good time to buy real estate in the city?

"I thought you were still in school?" Pavel said.

"Yes, sure," Kang said, injecting confidence into his words. "But I can still plan ahead, right?"

"True, true," Pavel leaned closer. "Basically, I have this basic framework, demand and supply, very simple and straightforward. The demand is growing, since the population keeps growing, and the supply is restricted, because of the government's rules—I mean, I understand the

reasons behind the rules, but they are in place so that the supply is unlikely to meet the demand's growth. So, my recommendation is always this: you need to be in this market."

"Yes," Kang nodded. "I see the same happening in China over the last decade, demand outpacing supply, so you always had to be in. And once you are in, you sort of could just sit there and count the growth of your equity."

"Right," Pavel took a sip of coffee. "Where in China are you from? Your English sounds very good—when I first met you, I didn't detect much of an accent."

"Ah, thank you. I come from a small city that most people had never heard of—Yantai, it is called. But it is not far from Qingdao, the place that produces Tsingtao beer."

"I've heard of the brand before," Pavel said. "I think."

"And are you from here?"

"No," Pavel took a sip of coffee. "I'm from the Czech Republic, another place famous for its beer."

"Yes, Budweiser."

"Uh-uh," Pavel shook his head with a knowing smile. "A common misperception. The Budweiser you buy here is an all-American lager, made here in America, by Americans, and from American barley malt. The American brewery that produced Budweiser got its original idea from the Budweiser from my country, produced at a brewery totally unrelated to the American copycat."

"Ah, I dunno this story," Kang said, "I don't drink much beer."

"Do you drink *baijiu*? I went to this party hosted by a Chinese mixologist the other day. He poured us each a shot of Mao—, Mao what, you must know, he said every Chinese knows it—"

"Moutai?"

“Yes! That! I’ve never tasted anything like it before, like my tongue was on fire. My friend then tried to mix it with something else, grapefruit juice and grapefruit bitter, and god, that stuff is good! He told me that *baijiu* cocktail is on the rise even though it might take more time, like before vodka and tequila became mainstream base liquors, they had also fought their respective uphill battles.”

There was a look of expectation on Pavel’s face: perhaps a look for more insider information on the current topic. But Kang knew little other than what he had already shared. He felt some delight in knowing that his country’s national drink was gaining international popularity, a “soft-power” sort of thing, but this meant little to him personally—he did not enjoy alcohol, to say the least. Back in China, his friends and classmates always hung out in delis and karaoke parlors. Bars were a new scene to him until months ago, and he went there less for the alcohol but more to follow the American custom and to meet more men.

But intuition informed him that there was no need to make explicit his disinterest in alcohol and his true motivation of bar-going; he thought he could upturn his lack of knowledge into a positive situation.

“I’d love to learn more about all that you’ve discussed,” Kang said, “mixology, beer, or wine. Do you know much about wine?”

“I indeed consider myself a wine connoisseur. I take weekend winetasting trips, and you always learn so much about wine from these trips.”

“Where do you go? Napa?”

“Hell, no, Napa is all for tourists; they overcharge you all the time. I go to Sonoma instead, to Anderson Valley, or even to Santa Cruz Mountains in the South Bay or Fillmore in the East Bay.”

“So many options,” Kang said, taking the chance to put out his bet. “Winetasting always has this sophisticated air associated with it; I always wanted to know more about wine.”

“If you like, you are welcome to join me next time.”

“Thanks,” Kang said, a smile spreading over his face and covering his laughing out loud at heart—a second date! Or a chance to be together, at least! A small success he had just had, but he felt he needed to connect with Pavel in another way, and more so to have a clearer idea of Pavel’s interest.

“What’s your story of coming to America?” Kang decided to start with the apparent connection. “You know, as an international student myself, I’m always interested in learning more about others’ journeys to this country. Hope it’s not that personal.”

“Not at all,” Pavel’s answer sounded candid. “I came when I was fifteen, the summer I finished middle school in Brno. That was not long after the fall of the Berlin Wall, you know, so everything came as a shock.”

Kang did a quick calculation. So he’s in his early thirties, then, he thought, ten years older than himself. He quickly reiterated to himself that the age difference did not matter—*he still looked young, and was the white hunk closest to his reach this far*. Pavel’s discernable, non-American accent had led Kang to assume that he had come to the US later in life, for college or graduate school like Kang himself; he had thought of asking for his college experiences as a follow-up. But Pavel’s reference to the Berlin Wall gave him another idea.

“I just thought of something,” Kang said. “My mother had been collecting stamps all her life. I meant, we were all poor back then, and stamp collection was one of the hobbies that did not cost much. I remember she had this Chinese stamp featuring the main building of the Beijing

Stamp Factory, which was built with Czechoslovakian technical assistance. Do you know about this?”

“No, not really.”

“Well, my country was backward back then. The US helped us fighting against the Japanese during the WWII, and then the Soviet Union helped us to build an industrial basis during the Cold War. Other socialist countries, like East Germany and Czechoslovakia, also helped. The Beijing Stamp Factory was one example of Sino-Czechoslovakian cooperation. My mother said that Czechoslovakia had also issued a stamp of the same design; she said she had been looking for it.”

“When was this? When did the stamp come out?”

“I don’t know; it must be long ago, the 1950s or 1960s, before my mother was even born, or when she was still little.”

“Ok,” Pavel did not sound very interested. “We Czechs don’t like to remember the time we were part of the Eastern bloc.”

Kang thought of all the Milan Kundera he had read. Václav Havel. He decided to save the common Communist history for another time. “My mother visited your country a few years ago, and she thought she might be able to find the stamp there, the Czechoslovakian stamp that has the Beijing Stamp Factory building in it. But you know, it was a package tour so they didn’t have much free time, and Austria, Hungary, and Slovakia were also on the itinerary. In the end, they only got two days and a half in the Czech Republic. My mother didn’t find the stamp, but still, she loved your country, Český Krumlov in particular.”

Pavel’s eyes lit up a little. “Nice that you know ‘Č’ is pronounced like the ‘Ch’ in China. I like those small towns in the rolling hills, too, but overall, you know, maybe because I grew up

there, I didn't find them not that impressive—I took them for granted, perhaps. I preferred the small towns in Asia, like those in Japan and Korea. I've been to Hong Kong and Taiwan and would like to go to the mainland someday. Maybe you can take me there, be my guide.”

Kang knew he should not take this suggestion literally, but still felt more comfort or safety in just being himself. He decided to press on. “What do you like about it?” Kang said, “I meant, Asia?”

“I saw this Chinese or Japanese painting when I was young, you know, a little man with a straw hat sitting under a ginormous hill or rock. I always had this mental image of Asia as a misty mountain, with trees and temples only half visible. There's always a sense of mystery, a calling, even, to explore and learn more.

“However,” Pavel then chuckled, “when it comes to dating Asian men, I'd prefer them to be more straightforward.”

There was a child-like glee in Pavel's voice, washing away the last trace of sorrow there that Kang still remembered as part of Pavel's first impression. Kang wondered: *is he suggesting I should be more straightforward with him?*

He went through his contacts with Pavel quickly, the Oakland party and the T-dance; he was unsure about the meaning of “straightforward” in this context. *Does he mean he values honesty?* Kang didn't recall telling him any lies. *Or does he mean “more active”?* At the T-dance, Kang had followed and ridden along with his lead. *Is he encouraging me to take the initiative?* The memory of Pavel dropping him for Damien also surfaced.

Kang felt the urge to make a bet. “Going back to the topic of winetasting,” he said, “do you want to take me somewhere the next weekend? I'll defer to your choice of a winery.”

“Someone is taking the initiative now,” Pavel said flirtatiously. He rose his mug and upturned it midair, the last drips falling into his tongue extended out under the last moment. He then gave his upper lip a few licks; his eyes narrowed in Kang’s direction, as if squinting to make out something in the distance.

“I am throwing a party next weekend, a potluck. Winetasting can wait. How about you come to my party first?”

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Coming to Pavel’s party meant not coming to Zander’s reading, a monthly gathering at an open-mic space that Kang went to only once, but Zander kept extending invitations. Zander was hanging out with his girlfriend Lisa on the living room couch when Kang told him he could not go. He took Kang’s polite decline coolly, then jokingly asked whether this meant Kang was seeing someone.

“Actually, maybe.”

“Really?” Zander looked genuinely happy. “Who is he?”

“A real estate developer,” Kang said. “We met at a party.”

“Where’s he from?” Lisa sounded interested.

“American,” Kang said, “Czech American.”

“Nice,” Zander said. He paused, mouth agape as if his mind was busy with something.

“Can I ask you a question?” he said, with a glint in his eyes.

“Yes?”

“Please don’t take offense; I am just really curious. In the gay circle, are Asian boys as popular as Asian girls are in the straight dating scene?”

Kang froze. His good mood, sustained by the prospect of being in a relationship with a white hunk, had instantly fallen and broken.

“No offense,” Zander said, volume tapering under the weight of an apology. Lisa also smiled an embarrassing smile.

“Well,” Kang forced his dimples to form a smile. “We’re trying to be.”

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The street Pavel lived on basked in the setting sun so indolently that Kang slowed down his steps, as if to avoid disturbing the hush hovering above these front yard gardens, where flowers blooming in one lot interlocked with those of different colors in another. Trailing behind him was Terry and Eddie, each holding a bagged contribution to the potluck—Vietnamese takeout they had ordered from the deli on their block. Alongside Kang was another man, about the same age as Kang but taller. He had a ruddy complexion and sandy hair, and a boyish aura that would instantly put him into the “jock” category. Kang could not help but steal look at him from time to time.

This young man was with Kang, Eddie, and Terry for a reason. The evening after Kang left Café Sofia and Pavel, when he was having dinner at Eddie and Terry’s home, the Facebook invite to Pavel’s potluck chimed on Kang’s phone. Kang paused his eating and gave the “Going” button a click. He scrolled down the guest list and saw the names of both Terry and Eddie there, but then the name Damien Kim cauterized his eyes. He let out a yelp of annoyance.

“What?” Terry had asked.

Kang had extended his phone to before Terry’s face. “Look,” he said.

“I have an idea,” Terry said, after acknowledging Kang’s problem and giving it some musings. “Eddie’s cousin James is in town over the next weekend. He is very handsome—you’ll see! How about we bring him along and ask him to act like your boyfriend?”

“To get Pavel jealous?” Kang asked. “But I don’t really know what’s going on between him and Damien. You know, he might be interested in both or neither of us.”

“If nothing is going between then, there’s also no harm to signal that you have options,” Terry chuckled and put down his rice bowl, excited by his idea. “If the goal is to have Pavel fall for you, James might not be the force that moves the needle; but if our goal is just to enhance your image, the presence of James can be just a reminder for him that if he is interested, he should act quickly.”

“Why would Pavel fall for this?” Kang was still unconvinced. “If he was interested in me and saw that I go with a boyfriend, he might think that I’m already taken.”

Terry backtracked a little. “That may be true, but, for gay people, it is almost like having a facelift if you are associated with hot people.”

“Why, how hot is this cousin?”

Terry rolled his eyes. “A piece of fresh meat. Straight, though.” Eddie chimed in: “yes, James is hot—but his hotness is being wasted for being straight. But in this case, all it takes is that you two appear close. As Terry said, it can only do you good, as Pavel will either get that you have options, or at least as more worthy of hanging out with.”

“Really?” Kang was still unconvinced, but already open to giving it a try. “Would your cousin be willing to do this? The whole situation would be so awkward; I am terrible at faking anything.”

“Relax,” Terry said. “Now that I think more about it, I agree with Eddie that you guys don’t even have to act like boyfriends. Just interact naturally, as good friends, perhaps, only that Pavel needs to see you two interact because the point is just to remind him that you have options, and there are hot guys out there interested in you. There’s not even much drama if you think about it.”

“Wouldn’t James find it so strange?”

“You don’t have to worry about that,” Eddie said. “He’d stayed with us a few times before; he is all cool with the gay stuff—it’s not asking him to kiss you or anything. The last time he stayed with us, we were also having a party at our house, and many of our guests hit on him, and he apparently enjoyed it. He’s visiting now before heading back to New Hampshire to start his MBA—so at least you two math minds would have things to talk about.”

Eddie was an art major but now managed a store. He had this mental image of an MBA being very mathematical, and every time he said this, Kang felt some clarification urge. But this time, Kang thought it was a trivial matter to be bothered. They were helping him, and he would give it a try. He found himself very excited to meet this James, to enjoy being seen with a hot guy. He was even drawing this mental image of him, a real jock with ruddy cheeks and sandy hair.

“Already drooling now, aren’t you?” Terry gave Kang’s shoulder a joking punch, and Kang blushed.

The week flew by quicker than usual, and when Friday came, Kang left work early on the pretense of not feeling well. He did not really have to inform his manager as most of his colleagues left by 4 pm anyway, but still, he considered it a good practice and might help score a good exit review and a potential offer to a full-time job. He went home, took a shower, applied Old Spice, and changed to a fitted t-shirt. He put on a jacket and ventured out into the balmy dusk, and his heart quickened when Eddie introduced James: what a beautiful young man he was.

“What did you tell James?” While the four of them were heading to the car, Kang pulled Eddie aside and asked.

“We asked him to act out like the hugest rice queen you’ve ever seen!” Eddie winked. “Kidding! We explained that you are interested in Pavel, but only asked him to act like a good friend when he was around you—he is free to mingle with the other guests, and maybe he will

pick up a useful thing or two from them. My sister has entrusted him to his favorite gay uncle, so I need to make sure he's always having a good time!"

All these were the backstories leading up to this moment, when Kang, James, Terry, and Eddie had walked out of their street-parked car, and now uphill towards Pavel's. Supple branches of sidewalk trees dangled, foregrounding the brush-shaped crimson flowers with their layered shades of greens. Further uphill, where the residential lots stopped along with the road ended in a *cul de sac*, and a barren hillock cast a hulking shadow in their direction. At a particular angle, through a vent in the treetops, Kang had a quick glimpse of the downtown spires shining under a setting sun. This was Bernal Heights, a neighborhood that assumed a small-town, suburban aura on the southern rim of San Francisco. Its silenced downtempo, Kang now realized, was actually typical for San Francisco once you are away from downtown, or simply two blocks from any of those commercial pockets scattered across the city.

When Pavel opened the door, the flowered sidewalk trees were the first thing that Kang mentioned. "We call them 'toilet brush tree' here," Pavel joked. "Like all San Francisco public services, the street cleaning persons never do a thorough job, so imagine what the street would like in weeks, when these brushes start to fall."

Both the host and the guests chuckled. Each guest was then greeted in turn. When James's turn came, he introduced himself as "Kang's friend."

"Welcome," Pavel just said with unperturbed friendliness. No wheel seemed to turn in Pavel's mind, and Kang thought he needed to make his fictitious closeness to James more explicit.

"My friend, too," Eddie added. "We hope you don't mind that he just tagged along."

"Sure, come on in," Pavel said as he took the guests' coats. "It's a potluck, the more, the merrier." He led the guests in the direction of party noise—the small volume of conversations,

laughter, and jazz that was cocooning in the kitchen. The last sun cast its oblique rays through the sunroof, and many other guests had already gathered in circles. As they entered, Kang gave the other guests a quick scan, and concluded that there were no familiar faces.

Seeing the four new guests entering, some of these guests paused their conversations to offer their rounds of hugs and cheek kisses. The weight of strangers' eyes tensed up Kang for a moment, but he countered all that pressure by cocking up his head and smiling a broad smile at James. He knew the presence of James was making a difference; the great looks by his side was the ticket to safety and inclusion.

But then, the sight of Damien leaning by the counter and chatting with a hulky white man caught him unprepared. When he recovered from this momentary shock, he realized his heart was full of envy. He reached out to James and held his hand almost out of a reflexive action, one that triggered a moment of surprise on James's face but not the withdrawal of the hand.

Holding on to that acquiescence, Kang gave James a light pull, and the pair was now in motion, heading toward the deck where Pavel was behind a table distributing drinks. Passing by Damien and the hulky white man, Kang deliberately slowed down a bit. He was sure Damien was one of those gay men whose gaydar was continuously spinning for the next hot target. While Kang himself might not be Damien's type, the sight of James the jock would surely have its effect.

He slowed down right in front of Damien, eyes on him and seeing his small eyes rolling and fixating on James. Jumped on Kang, and then back onto James. Kang paused and Damien called out toward him this time. "Hey," he said, "I know you, and you are—"

Kang waited for the syllables forming his name from the pair of thin leaps and got "—Eddie's friend, right?" He thought he was ready for minor humiliation of sorts, but when it actually came and took the form of forgotten name, he still felt slightly hurt.

“Yes, I am Kang,” he said, flushed a little. “And you are David, right?”

“Hi, I’m Damien.” Damien extended his hand to James, ignoring Kang.

“I’m James,” James said, “Kang’s friend.”

Kang pulled James’s hand closer, being instructed more by appreciation than the need to make Damien jealous. He was arrested by disgust toward the superficial man before him, even as a voice in him still praised the proportion of his muscular body at the same time.

“Oh, right, you are Damien,” Kang said, “Pavel’s boyfriend.” He decided it was the time to throw the bait.

Damien’s eyes stayed with Kang’s for a moment. “I wish, haha,” he said finally.

That was all it took. Just as Damien faced James again, presumably to ask his name again, Kang pulled James away in the direction of Pavel, who was now on the deck working on his contribution to the potluck—barbeque. But what do you supposedly achieve by this? Kang knew he was now just being rude; he could not articulate the rationale behind how he behaved.

By the grill, behind the smoke, Pavel’s face froze for a split second at Kang and James’s clasped hands. His eyes switched from Kang to James and back to Kang quickly, and in that process, his initial surprise subsided. “Help yourselves,” he said to Kang and James as he pointed to the small pile of meat on the plates by him, his voice normal and stable.

“Thanks,” Kang said, taking some meat from his plate. “Any chance I’d try your *baijiu* cocktail tonight?”

“No *baijiu* in this household,” Pavel said. “Not yet. But I offer wine, whiskey, gin, vermouth, or herbal liquor from my Bohemian hometown. There is also juice, soda, and whatnot. You and your friend can help yourself—James, how do you know Kang?” He shifted his addressee

but looked down at the meat he had been working on, as if he was not particularly concerned about how the question would be answered.

“We just met recently, through Eddie,” James answered with the truth. “I’m just visiting.”

“Oh,” Pavel straightened his shoulder plates and looked up. “Didn’t know that; thought you live here.” He gave Kang a quick glance, but Kang lowered his eyes in time to evade it. The lowered eyelid felt heavy, and Kang knew that was the weight of embarrassment: not only due to his deceitful intention and rudeness toward Damien, but also the ease with which his plan was crumbled by a single question.

Told you, can’t pretend. He imagined telling this to Terry and Eddie. He wanted to know where they were now, but his body had turned rigid that even searching for them had become a challenging task. For a while, Kang could only stand there, hearing, “No, I am visiting Eddie now; I’m going back to the East Coast for an MBA later this month,” vaulting out of James.

“Nice. Do you have a concentration?” Now, it was Pavel speaking.

“Finance, probably, but you are supposed to have exposure to all business fields.”

“How exciting. Where on the East Coast are you from?”

“Maine. Close to Acadia National Park, the prettiest national park of America, in my opinion.”

“I agree. We—my parents—used to have a cabin there. I still remember that they bought it when I was about to enter college.” Pavel passed the plate of meat to a guest, and then put on new ones on the grill.

“Marinated rib eye, more here,” he said to James, pointing to the packages of meat stacked by this side. “Got them from the Korean market. So, when we arrived at the house, immediately we noticed there was no running water. I meant, there was no running water system there, so the

house relied on a well, but no water came out from the hose, so we figured the pipe must be blocked, or the well needed a drain. We had to go to our neighbors' while my father hired an engineer to figure out what was going on. After days of digging, he said we need a new well! So we had to cut our vacation short till he worked it all out, because when you had to knock on your neighbor's to use their shower and bathroom, three times a day and three days in a row, the vacation was no longer fun."

Something in Pavel's story loosened Kang's body from its rigid state—at least, now he could raise his eyes and look at the man of his dreams. There was so much he still did not know about him, he thought, and then he was grasped by a need—a desire—to learn more. He regretted signing up with and then actively engaged in Eddie and Terry's plan; he felt sorry for using James and being rude to Damien. He wanted to unmake all the lies and pretenses; he felt the urge to share something true about himself.

"My mother has found the Czechoslovakian stamp," Kang said calmly, taking advantage of a momentary silence where the Arcadia cabin story had ended, but the new conversation topic had now yet taken form. He explained to James the backstory of the stamp quickly: how it was his mother's long-time wish to have the Czech one paired up with the Chinese one, and how her mother traveled in Czechia with this stamp on her mind, only that her lack of English capacity and the tight itinerary had kept the wish a wish still.

"Then I thought, why can't I help to make her little dream come true? I simply went through Amazon, eBay, and OTTO and searched for the stamp, and then I found it from a seller in Germany. It is an album of all the stamps Czechoslovakia issued in 1959. I PayPal'ed the seller, and he sent me the whole album, which I then sent back home as my birthday gift for my mother. I used to send her flowers yearly, but the stamp makes it more personal and special."

“Indeed,” Pavel said, and the sadness in Kang’s first impression of him suddenly returned to his face. “You know what,” Pavel’s eyes fixed on Kang, “I’d like to see the two stamps side-by-side myself. Can you ask your mother to send you a photo?”

“Deal,” Kang said.

The plate by Pavel’s side was full of new meat, and Kang offered to pass it back to the other guests this time. He invited James to go with him, and headed directly back to Damien.

“Damien,” Kang called his name as he extended the meat plate, but Damien continued his chat with a goateed man as if he had not heard.

“Damien,” James took over the plate and extended it to within Damien’s reach. “New meat is ready.”

The goateed man widened his eyes, and picked some into his plate with his fork. Damien followed suit, but still did not even look up at Kang.

“Looks nice,” he looked up at James instead.

“Taste better,” James said, “rib eye.”

“Wow,” Damien took a bite and gasped, a line of meat juice trickling down at the corner of his mouth. “Do you know where Pavel got this?”

“Some Korean market,” James said.

Kang turned, looked for Terry and Eddie. He still disliked Damien, but was relieved for having done what he just did. For the first time in recent memory.

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He returned home, tiptoeing as he noticed the dark living room, with only a beam of dimmed light seeping through under Zander’s room. He heard the bed cracking, and then cracking, and then

cracking, and he knew what was happening there. He had not seen Zander and Lisa much lately; he assumed Zander was now spending more time away because Lisa had a studio all to herself.

He knew he should go directly to his room, but he paused at Zander's door, holding his breath. The bed not only cracked rhythmically; its louder cracks banged the inner wall. He found it hard to imagine Zander, scrawny Zander, could have that powerful a pelvis, those powerful thighs.

Then he noticed the rhythm's effect on his body, even in the dark, even just with the sound, and even only in his imagination. He sidled back to his room and closed it without making a sound. His last sex—masturbation excluded—was a video session with HC, and he had lost count of the months.

If he met HC for the first time now, would he even find him attractive?

He wiped Zander's and HC's faces away and imagined Pavel instead, his square face with his ruddy cheeks, then his budging, chiseled nakedness. He touched himself and quickened his breath.

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“Do you want to come to my place for dinner next Saturday?” Kang read this text—from Pavel, sent precisely a week ago—for the umpteenth time as he stood before the mirror, undressed except for a pair of newly bought briefs. He was checking himself to ensure he was ready for the best scenario.

This best scenario was more possible now than ever given three facts: that Pavel interacted more with him than with Damien during the rest of the potluck, that it was Pavel who first texted the invitation, and that Pavel had also sent him a reminder text only yesterday. He pressed his chest,

curled his biceps, and saw the arousal effect such motions had on him, bulging even larger as he imagined the look on Pavel's face if he could see now.

Hold it, he commanded himself, save it for the actual action.

He put on his favorite shirt and jacket, then Uber'ed to Bocana and Cortland. He had already been familiar with the quiet, slopy street, the bathroom brush trees' crimson flowers. Without the other guests taking up the space and sapping his energy, Kang felt much more at ease in Pavel's house this time. He picked up a framed family photo from a shelf in the living room, and found himself struck by the family resemblance between the mother and the son.

"You just look like your mom," Kang said.

"That's when we first arrived here, in New York," Pavel said. "My parents retired last year and moved back to the Czech Republic."

Soon afterward, they were in the kitchen. For half an hour or so, Kang stirred the risotto as Pavel prepared the salad and attended the ribs, already marinated and put in the oven. Then they sat by a two-person kitchenette table, clicked their wine glasses, and started with their food. Quickly Kang found himself sharing his tasks at Google, and as he moved on from one project to the next, he felt a comfort only domesticity could offer crawling back. He remembered having been close to it only once, having come with the move-in with HC and then gone with the breakup.

"I felt it a bit strange," he confessed, "to feel so comfortable around you. Haven't had this feeling for a while, not since my breakup."

That information led to an exchange of counts of exes and their stories: Kang only had one, but Pavel the Casanova had five.

All Asians, of course.

“You know, I have been thinking about your stamp story,” Pavel said. “My mother also has this objective she wants to achieve all her life: she was adopted, and she knew she had a twin sister somewhere out in the world.”

“Wow,” Kang interjected, seeing the parallel.

“Yes, the story went like this: after the Soviets invaded Czechoslovakia, my biological grandparents on my mother’s side were locked up. The state took away their twins, and my adoptive maternal grandparents took in my mother.

“My mom had been searching for her sister ever since. My father was an electrical engineer. When he got the chance to immigrate, initially she didn’t want to come because this meant leaving her sister behind. But my father said, ‘maybe she has also migrated, maybe she is dead.’ With the money we make in America, we may have more means to continue your search.”

“So has she found her?”

“No, not really. You would think Czechia being such a small country, and with all the information on the Internet, it should be easy.”

The conversation tapered as the dinner concluded, but Kang didn't feel any need to fill the silence that was not at all awkward. He thought of the other sides of Pavel he had observed: the storm he had stirred on the T-dance floor, the moments during their dates that had showcased his flirting prowess. But none of these Pavels mattered now. For the time being, Pavel was the family who listened attentively to his projects, he was the family with long and pained stories.

An invitation to stay for a movie was extended and accepted, and somehow the decision of watching *The Hours* was quickly agreed upon. Both Pavel and Kang had watched the movie multiple times before, but the mood was set up right for it. They sat side-by-side on the sofa, Pavel leaning on a long lumbar pillow and Kang inches away from him by the armrest. Kang’s attention

was split: the pupils of his eyes followed Clarissa buying her flowers, but his peripheral vision continued tracking the motion of Pavel's, as it minded the gap between Pavel and himself. Laura attempted to kiss Kitty, Pavel gave his own nape a scratch; Virginia essayed to flee, Pavel curled up his right knee slightly. Then, at the same time Richie smiled farewell and twisted his body off the windowsill, Pavel also turned his into a more comfortable position on the sofa, his right hand atop Kang's thigh, his face resting on Kang's chest.

It is happening, Kang thought, *in the summer of 2011*. With the slightest trembling, he extended his arms, holding Pavel from the back. And upon the cue, Pavel flipped his torso swiftly and before Kang knew it, his weight was already on him, his lips searched for and then pressed heavily onto his. Gasps and pants. A cacophony of conversations. Philip Glass. All in the background, all so far. Kang's attention shifted back and forth between all these and the surfaces of contact with Pavel, the kisses he planted over his face and neck, the hard-on pressed on his thighs and stomach. He had already known what would happen: Laura flies in from Toronto, Virginia pens her last letter to Len; he was just waiting for the sign for the resolution: Pavel's caressing hands loosening his belt and drilling under his new underpants, or his standing up and pulling him up with him, leading the way to the bedroom upstairs.

Pavel indeed stood up; Pavel indeed pulled Kang up. But instead of leading Kang upstairs, he dropped Kang's hands and tidied up his clothes and pants; his fingers combed through his hair to move them back to their familiar shapes. Confusion braided with hope, carrying Kang until Pavel led him to the front door. Part of Kang still hoped the course of things would turn, the final tension resolved as the ultimate unknown melted by complete frankness. He hoped and did not hope; he awaited and did not await. More than anything else, he noticed Pavel's lips trembled, and the intense, woebegone look returned.

“I really enjoyed our time,” he said finally. “But let’s wait till the next time.”

“Ok.” What else could Kang say now?

“Good night, Kang,” Pavel said.

“Good night, Pavel,” so he said back.

Again, what makes white men so attractive?

The thick nape that expands the width of the head;

The smooth curve of the skull;

The ducktail of hair quantum jumps to the finest down;

The inflection of the keens cut at the golden ratio of the legs.

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Midway from San Francisco to Point Reyes, Kang and Pavel stopped the car, and stood in the summer breeze. Windswept grassland and rolling farms surrounded them, a blue dot so close to the ocean on the map, but they neither saw nor heard the break of the waves. Kang guessed the blue must be surging under where the grassland ended, under the precipices he could not see.

Kang shifted his attention back to the scene right before him, a side road perpendicular to the main route and flanked by cypress trees. He reckoned that there were more than twenty of them, the trunk of each requiring the interlocking arms of several people to encircle its girth. High above, the expanding branches interleaved into each other, entwining a canopy over the potholed path that ran towards a two-storied white house at the end, partially eclipsed by thick shades.

The density of the canopy created a sheltered feeling, a sanctuary perhaps, beckoning to the passing tourists to pause their journey and take an afternoon stroll. Golden shreds of sunlight percolated through the regular gaps between the trees and irregular interstices of the canopies, improvising a light show that held Kang's attention for a while. Following the sunrays, he could see the droplets from an earlier rain on the tips of undergrowth, poised to fall with the next breeze. A plaque by the roadside, brown background and white block letters, explained that the white building at the road's end once served as a radio receiving station, and Kang let a shred of

disappointment run through his mind. To him, this place was more befitting for a research station, where a top-secret military mission was carried out during the last war against Japan, the epicenter that changed the course of history and saved lives. There should be another plaque somewhere around here, telling him precisely that instead.

“There is something I need to tell you,” Pavel said suddenly, his face serious. Maybe the same things were running in his mind—the sheltered feeling, the secret missions, Kang thought; perhaps all these items prompted for him the same associations.

“What is it?” Kang asked.

“I am—HIV positive.” Pavel looked into Kang’s eyes. His words were clouded in faint shame and reservation at the beginning, but as they hit Kang one after another, a sense of relief, confidence even, had replaced them.

Unbelievable.

Somebody must have hit Kang right on the head, and for a moment, he froze there, dazzled and transfixed. He mustered some courage to meet Pavel’s eyes, the bluest, expectant pair, but the usual tender feeling towards them did not emerge. In their stead, snippets of thoughts galloped across his mind at the same time—*this is not a death sentence what does it say about Pavel as a person what if I could get it how many men he has slept with*—coming and going so quickly that Kang could not spare his attention on anyone. Standing at the crest of this dizziness, he felt what left stable for him boiled down to two options: either-or, black-and-white.

At where the land meets the sea and the shades met the sun, Kang held his breath and waited for his own decision to come.

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“Babe, let me tell you my story, then. You already know that I came here when I was fifteen, but I didn’t tell you that was also the year I came out. My parents didn’t take it well; my mother blamed it on America. For a long time—my boarding school years and the first years of college—I barely spoke with my parents; most of our communications were mediated through my little sister.

“But then she was gone, a traffic accident. I still find it surreal every time I recall it. She was crossing an intersection, but a truck ran the red light and rammed into her. Just like that. Just that one moment. My little sister Maria was already gone when my parents got to the hospital. She was not twenty yet.

“You can only imagine how devastated my parents were. I was at USC at that time, so I flew back to Long Island for the funeral. We made up after that, my parents and I; we again talked to each other. I moved back to New York after graduation, for work and to be closer to them. One year later, I got into Berkeley Haas, where I met Chris, my first boyfriend. He was also at Cal, doing a Ph.D. in double E. Have I told you that his family migrated from Hong Kong to Vancouver after Tiananmen? Yes? Okay. So Chris went to high school there in Canada but did his undergrad at Stanford and then graduate school at Cal. We finished school at the same time, he got his Ph.D., and I my MBA. I stayed in San Francisco for him because he was a hardware engineer, and here had all the jobs in his field.

“We rented a place on Hope Street in Menlo Park. When I go to the Peninsula now, I still make a point to see it. Just sit in the car by the street and look at the house from the outside. The landlord was into topiary, so the building had a hedge cut into the shape of a parapet. What is topiary? It is the practice, or art form if you call it, to cut your hedge into different shapes. Vancouver has lots of houses with topiary hedges and Chris liked it. Anyway, you will not miss our Menlo Park home if you were on the block.

“It was the gardener who had supplied me with weed. I mean, it was recreational and all harmless. I had been using it since college, when I was not talking to my parents. I didn’t have many friends. I think it is a European thing, you know, I came here too late to bridge the cultural gap. Why do you find it so surprising? Because we are all white? No, no, everything in Europe is different from here.

“But you see, Chris came from this Chinese family super conservative on such matters. He was furious when he found out I smoked pot. It wasn’t that I was hiding it from him; it just hadn’t surfaced. But now, it had become a problem. Our relationship deteriorated after moving to Hope Street, not just over marijuana but our different lifestyles. We could fight over to take off shoes or not—I mean, I have had enough Asian boyfriends now to know that you always take off your shoes before entering an Asian household, but it took me some time to get used to it.

“I admit it is my fault that I cheated on him first. I am not proud of it, and I will not hide it. When Chris found out, he simply packed and moved out. In the wake of the breakup, I began to have suicidal thoughts and was diagnosed with depression. The psychiatrist almost begged him to hang on for another week for the medicine to kick in, and indeed, benzodiazepine had saved me. Yet, the days still felt so empty. The hours were still coming. Seconds. Weeks. Months and years ahead without Chris.

The empty hours became easier to endure when I was high. I started to use more powerful drugs, meth. I went to ‘party and play’ that went on for days and nights nonstop. And then, kaboom! I contracted HIV after a bareback encounter.”

“So you know who had passed it to you?”

“Yes, a Thai lawyer.”

“Are you still in contact?”

“No, I don’t even know where he is now.”

--

Type in: What is meth?

Hit return.

Methamphetamine is a powerful, highly addictive stimulant that affects the central nervous system. It takes the form of a white, odorless, bitter-tasting crystalline powder that easily dissolves in water or alcohol. It was developed early in the 20th century, originally used as nasal decongestants and bronchial inhalers. Its effect includes increased activity and talkativeness, decreased appetite, and a pleasurable sense of well-being. These characteristics make it a drug with a high potential for widespread misuse. It is a potent stimulant with a longer lasting and more harmful effect on the central nervous system.

Then: How long does it take to become addicted to meth?

Hit return.

Drug addiction cannot develop after a single use of any kind of drug, including methamphetamines. Addiction is a pattern, and only occurs when a person uses a substance repeatedly. However, since meth is extremely addictive, those who use once may find themselves wanting to use it again. From there, repeated use is common.

Note to self: ask how much Pavel had used in the past; determine which category he fell into.

Then this: What are the signs of meth addiction?

If you’re worried that someone is developing a meth addiction, there are some signs that you should be on the lookout for:

- Hyperactivity

- Jerky movement
- Twitching
- Paranoia
- Dilated pupils
- Rapid eye movement
- Skin sores
- Agitation and irritability
- Lowered appetite
- Poor sleeping patterns
- Mood swings and outbursts

Note to self: on alert for any such signs in Pavel.

Then type in: What is party and play?

Some gay, bisexual and other men who have sex with men use drugs specifically to facilitate or enhance sexual encounters. This phenomenon is commonly called party and play (PnP).

Then, this: How does drug use impact relationships? – *But, isn't it already too late to gain this knowledge?*

Couples in which a partner abuses drugs are often very unhappy. As drinking or drug use gets worse, it starts to take more and more time away from the couple, taking its toll by creating an emotional distance between the partners. These couples also report that they fight and argue a great deal, which sometimes can become violent. When the partner with the drug problems resorts to her old ways to reduce her stress, the couple might be locked in a vicious cycle, where substance use causes conflict, the conflict leads to more substance use as a way of reducing tension, conflict about the substance use escalates, more drug use occurs, and so on.

--

Kang felt he need to talk to someone about Pavel. He reached out to his friends.

“You should not be boyfriends with him. People with addiction problems are bad partners in life, because when they encounter obstacles and problems, they respond by reverting to drugs. That is the worst way of response.” (Terry.)

“Well, he is attractive, that’s true, but if I were you, I would be really careful. How would you enjoy the sex if the danger of being infected is always looming there?” (Eddie.)

“I think it is okay as long as you are careful, you know, it is no longer a death sentence now, more like a chronic disease you live with and manage.” (Zander.)

“I would think it’s okay, you know, they can control the reproduction of the virus now. It is no longer a death sentence. As long as you have sex safely, you should be fine.” (Derek.)

“I could not sleep at night after you told me his story. He has endured so much hardship.” (Shiao-min.)

--

Pros, and cons. Let’s approach the matter from this framework.

Pros: the trophy boyfriend of your dreams, from the outside, the appearance at least.

Cons: the adversity you don’t see in his deep-set, blue eyes, those circulating underneath his thick muscles.

Pros: you now have the power to decide, the uplifting zest of having the upper hand; cons: the simmering doubt that if he was not positive he would not choose you, as half of the Asian boys in town must be eyeing that spot under his weight.

Pros: he is ready, right here and available; cons: like Terry had told you, his virus his drugs his mental disease will effectively make a menage a toi out of this relationship.

Pros: but there is even an element of excitement in this, that you get to gather the first-hand experience to answer the question, “What does it feel like to live with an HIV-positive, depressed meth user—potentially addict”?

Cons: but what happens if you get the virus from him together with medical bills and nuisances throughout the rest of your shortened life, what about your career perspective if he also turned you into a meth head yourself?

--

But when you had a single focus, or when your field of view was constrained, or when you had a strangely strict criterion, you knew all that information you gathered and all that pros-and-cons analysis were only detours. You proposed to have dinner, at his place, and the moment you saw him, you reached out to his hand, and pulled it to your lips. You communicate your decision by licking the golden hairs on his forearm.

You smelled rosemary. He had just showered. He had known your decision when it was still unbeknown to yourself.

After dinner, after the dishes, Pavel led Kang upstairs. They hugged each other and started kissing. Their exploring hands wrinkled each other's shirts and then slipped under the fabrics. Pavel disrobed himself; his hands paused, and his eyes urged Kang to follow suit.

But Kang held on. In between quickened breaths, Kang pressed one side of his face onto Pavel's chest, rubbing his cheek on the bristles there. He closed his eyes to enjoy that sensation, the sandpaperiness, tiny pricks. He opened his eyes again, the lights on the neighboring foothill guttering behind the swaying toilet brush tree branches. He cocked his head back slightly to give the man of his dreams a better look, the defined pecs and the troughs along his six-pack. He suddenly felt embarrassed to show him his body, wary that after all the time he had spent in the gym, it was still not even close to Pavel's that was also a piece of artwork.

"Can you dim the light, please?" Kang said with a quivering voice.

"Sure, babe," Pavel's hands caressed his arms. "Don't worry, you are perfect."

The light was dimmed, so Kang, too, took off his shirt. His chest was hairless, bulging but not yet as defined. He desired as he feared Pavel's attention, the first time he revealed himself to a white hunk. Pavel shifted slightly to see him from different angles, his lips landed on his shoulder and zigzagged across his torso.

"Your body is a piece of art," Pavel said as his lips continued their explorations downwards. His arms were upstretched, his fingers lightly flicked Kang's nipples.

Kang moaned lightly, as each of Pavel's flicks only pumped more excitement down there. He was naked now. He contracted his rump, and the pointy tip of his momentum absorbed by Pavel's waiting mouth. The swallowing and gagging sound that Pavel was making now reminded

him of the last time HC did the same to him: when was that? The last night in Beijing before he headed to this country, to this?

He pulled himself out and pushed his upper body onto Pavel's. He was extra careful that his body was pressing onto Pavel's at an angle, so his erection was touching the bedsheet and not Pavel's. He flipped and lay parallel with Pavel so that he could rub them both at the same time; he twisted his body to get poised for the culmination and felt his blood boiling in all his veins. When he reached the point of no return, he yelled out loud as elation pushed its way out.

Pavel flipped up, his mouth wrapped him in time, and he quickly swallowed the whole load. No one—well, there had just been HC—had never done such an erotic thing to him; he felt he was floating on a high tide of elation. And carried by that tide, he rolled down to Pavel, whose excitement was still proudly workman-like. He used both hands to work on it, his mind etching the shape and color into his memory.

But Pavel suddenly pushed him away. "I am close, don't touch it." It was only now that Kang noticed the dripping precum. There were only two drops that Kang could see, one right on the cuticle of his right index figure. He wiped it off on the sheet quickly, then rose that finger back high to examine if there were cuts of any sort.

"It should be fine, right?" Kang asked, with some worry after Pavel came on himself. He tried to retrieve each motion his hand did their work, each possibility of contact.

"I think so," Pavel said between gasps. "You don't have cuts on your hand, right?"

"Not that I know of."

"Then it should be fine," Pavel said as he sat up. His tone was nonchalant, which actually calmed Kang a bit. "You know, for your sake, I am fine with staying short of penetration in the future, either for me or for you, just for extra safety."

“Okay,” Kang said without much thinking, “I’m okay with that.”

“I am okay with that, too,” Pavel said as he flipped off the bed. “Do you want to shower first?”

“No, you go first.”

With the water running in the master bathroom, Kang picked up his phone, and started searching HIV testing sites and hours.

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There were appointments right the next day, but he had to wait out the window period. Day and night the next weeks, he felt he was of two minds, the normal self working, eating, and sleeping, the other heavy and worrying and unable to break from his imagination of the worse-case scenario. Folding quilt, chewing lunch, his mind was split and elsewhere at the same time, being here and now and repeatedly at that future moment, how he would go through the tests, how the doctor would approach him and reveal the verdict: normal, or stigma; same, or change. And there were moments he had already stepped in foothold of a positive person, his thoughts and planning flowing from that vantage point.

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“Kang Li, Mr. Kang Li?” The nurse pushed the door open from the inside and scanned the four patients in the waiting room. Kang was the youngest, or at least looked so. As he stood up and walked to the nurse, he felt the other patients’ gazes befall him. Instantly, a blush started to burn his cheeks.

“It’s alright, hon,” the nurse patted him lightly on the arm as he passed her. “I will take your vitals first, and Dr. Rodriguez will see you in the room at the end of the corridor.”

Kang nodded to her; he had his vitals taken and waited nervously for the doctor. When the doctor came in, Kang felt even that handsome face could not lift the weight on his chest. He was short of breath.

“I’ll tell you this right away,” the doctor said. “You are negative.”

“Oh, my god,” Kang sat back in the chair, his cheeks pulling a smile out of their own volition. He did not remember the last time he was so relieved.

“I know I am probably overacting,” then, he found himself apologizing. He wanted the handsome doctor to like him.

“I have seen many patients like you,” the doctor flashed a smile. So cute. “This is how our brain worked, jumping to the worst-case scenario and fixating on it. I hope the hard fact of the test results can put your mind at ease. Now, tell me the context of your exposure?”

“Sure,” Kang said, his worrying self felt like one incarnation away. “My situation is this: I am, err, seeing this positive man. We always use protection, but once, my hand touched his semen. There was no cuts so this exposure was basically riskless, still I had been occupied by this for days. I think I have the basic knowledge of the virus, but still, I guess I want to see whether you think there’s more I should know.”

The doctor licked his thin lower lip. “The most I can share with you, you have probably known already, like that there are only three routes of transmission for the virus. The virus is, in fact, not easy to get transmitted. Your boyfriend is taking medication, right?”

Boyfriend. The first time Pavel was referred to by a third person by that title. Kang felt he had to allow a moment for it to set in. “Yes, Viread and some other drugs, I believe,” he said, in a lighter tone because it still felt so new, to regard Pavel as that special person to him.

“That’s the typical antiviral treatment to control the reproduction of the virus. In the stage we are in now, we are still unable to kill all the viruses that have already entered your boyfriend’s body, but we can delay their reproduction. If his viral load is undetectable, then your chance of getting it from sexual intercourse is really low. Does that help?”

“Yes, I know the chance is low, but I don’t know why, my mind was arrested by it.”

The doctor smiled. “I’ve seen cases like this all the time, our mind occupied by the worst-case scenario. I can read you a few statistics.”

He pulled out his phone and hovered his fingers over the screen. “Here, according to a 2007 survey, the risk of infection per 10,000 exposures is 138 for receptive anal intercourse, 11 for insertive anal intercourse, and negligible for biting and spitting. That was three years ago and now we’ve made some progress since. Do these statistics help calm your mind a little?”

“Yes,” Kang said, his body was tense, now more because of the embarrassment for fussing over a close-to-nil chance.

The doctor sat back in his chair. “So again, in your situation, I really think there’s not much to worry about. As long as your boyfriend keeps taking medicine and you practice safe sex, your risk remains low.”

Kang thanked Dr. Rodriguez again. He sat forward in preparation to leave, but the doctor continued, “and FYI, Gilead is testing HIV prevention medications out there, and the results are encouraging.”

“Wow, really, a vaccine for HIV?”

“Sort of. If it is approved, it will be a true game-changer.”

“I’d like that,” Kang said.

“Wouldn’t we all,” the doctor smiled again.

Pavel took Kang out for dinner, to celebrate their first month into a relationship. “My favorite Italian place, hope you’ll like it.” He had explained before they left Pavel’s place—Kang kept his own apartment, but spent all weekends at Pavel’s now. Now Kang stood at the entrance after Pavel, examining the velvet draperies, leathered seats, and wall-mirrors to form an opinion. A cozy, neighborhood place, he thought, packed so the food must be good.

“Pavel?” The blonde waitress walked up to them and smiled at Pavel. “Your seats are ready, so follow me, please.” Friendliness welled up in her eyes, and Kang was waiting for her to spare some for him. But she turned about-face after gesturing to Pavel, leading the way through the main corridor of the dark interiority.

At the seat, the waitress pulled the chair out for Pavel, and Kang pulled out the seat across and seated himself. He looked around and quickly judged that the mix of men and women patrons made the clientele different from the predominant male one in Castro. He thought of commenting on this, but the waitress was already back with a water jar. She poured water into Pavel’s glass to two-thirds full and started introducing tonight’s specials. She finished the summary and turned to smile at Kang for the first time tonight. She poured water for Kang, then turned back to Pavel and asked if he had more questions.

“I don’t understand,” Kang said after she was gone, urged by the need to complain. “Why was she only interacting with you, as if I am not also here?”

“Humm, I didn’t even notice,” Pavel said. “Don’t overthink about it, probably she just thought I am a regular.”

“So you know her before?”

“No,” Pavel admitted, “but again, it’s really nothing; I didn’t even notice.”

When the food—Pappardelle Bolognese for Pavel and squid ink linguine for Kang—arrived, the waitress put Pavel’s food down first on the table. “Bon appetite,” she said, smiling her sweet smile toward Pavel. Kang looked up at her and waited for his turn, but the waitress turned and headed to the next table.

“See, this is what I meant,” Kang said, “the white hunk gets his service first.”

“I think you overthink things,” Pavel said, in a plain tone that even seemed annoyed slightly. “We are celebrating here, so let’s switch to a celebratory mood, shall we? And to double the sweetness, my treat this time. Really hope you could enjoy the dinner.”

Kang was annoyed that Pavel did not even acknowledge the problem, but he did not want to blow this out of proportion. She could be behaving this way subconsciously, out of some white-to-white affinity. He shifted his attention back to the food. Pavel was explaining: “this is their specialty. Word has it that it takes them ten hours to cook this delicious source.”

The weight of the fact that he would be consuming a taste that had been belabored on for ten hours led Kang to slow down his chewing. There was the acidity of tomato, twisted by cinnamon and the zest of lemon; there was also a hint of smokiness, exuded from paprika and accentuated by the aroma of oregano. He thought it was delicious, but perhaps not to the degree that Pavel had hyped. He was about to ask Pavel about his squid ink pasta, at which point two men who were supposedly simply passing by their table stopped and called out Pavel’s name.

“He—llo!” Pavel stood up in response, hugging them in turn and offering his cheek.

Kang looked up to them, two Asian strangers who were both tall and handsome, well-dressed in tailored pants and expensive-looking windbreakers—another windy San Francisco August night. One of them wore a smile that appeared affected to a degree of exaggeration, the other was petting his pompadour back to its prime shape. At one point in their back-and-forth

chitchat, the smiling one put his hand on Pavel's and Pavel did not withdraw. There was this look in the Asian man's face that Kang found no phrase other than "carnal register" to describe, and that, Kang thought, had planted a gag-inducing taste in his throat.

Kang stood up. His motion and the sound of his chair scratching the floor turned three pairs of eyes.

"Oh, Calvin and Gene," Pavel said, "this is my boyfriend, Kang."

Calvin and Gene's smiles were still frozen on their faces. They gave Kang a quick scan, long enough to form a hasty judgment.

"Oh, honey, you are so lucky!" Calvin turned to Kang and said, feigning the tone of a smitten lover.

"Oh, new boyfriend so soon?" Gene said without turning to Kang, his hand dropping away from Pavel's. "What happened between you and Mikey?"

"We broke up in March, so this was not 'so soon,'" Pavel said somewhat defensively, his finger flashed midair to and then back in Kang's direction, clarifying the referee of "this." Sensing Kang's fume, he must have realized that the catching-up had stretched into the realm of rudeness toward Kang by now, so he wrapped it up by hugging the two men again and kissing them goodbye. He sat facing Kang with a flirtatious smirk still lingering at the corner of his mouth.

"So, who are they?" Kang felt his annoyance stoked by both curiosity and the worst kind of hunch, that Calvin and Gene were Pavel's "party and play" mates.

"Oh, some friends from the old times." Pavel looked away, down at his food to take a bite. "This linguine is so good, you really should try some of mine." He did not wait for a response from Kang and simply swapped his plate with Kang's. He dived into Kang's Pappardelle right away,

twisting his fork to wrap the fat noodles around the tines. He took a sip of his wine, washed down the residuals of food in his mouth, and proclaimed, “this wine goes really well with the source.”

Kang had been quiet through this performance. *What is he trying to hide?* He could not help but wonder. *But this is a celebratory occasion, this is the first month anniversary of living in my dream.* He balanced himself between pressing on the problems and not, leaning towards the latter on the grounds that this was a special day at least, and that he still had more than enough self-control to spare.

He dived back into his noodle; he took a gulp of wine—when will they go wine-tasting, as Pavel once mentioned? In the darkness of this cavernous space, his first impression of Pavel crawled back and superimposed on the boyfriend before him, the sorrowful Pavel, the woebegone hunk. Now he thought he had understood the reasons, not just Mikey but his mother his sister his HIV his depression and his meth problem, and maybe, with time, the problems and mysteries of tonight would be resolved also.

The squid ink linguine was tasty, its umami taste sharpened by the zest of brined lemon, its residual fishy taste of the clam that refused to be toned down by onions and spices he could not even name. Kang soaked his questions in the inky source and hid his worry in the shells of clams. He found himself actually flashing a smile at Pavel, when he raised his glass and clicked Pavel’s with a clear ting.

“Happy first month anniversary!” He toasted.

“Happy happy happy!” Pavel singsonged.

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At home, the first evening since Kang's weekend at Pavel's, Zander was apparently unhappy. "What's wrong?" Kang asked, as the two of them stood by the kitchen table to have the chat of the day.

"My bicycle," Zander said. "I parked it outside of Mollie Stone's and went in shopping. When I came out, its back wheel was gone."

"You meant, stolen?"

"Yep."

"Never heard of this before—I mean, I know people steal the whole bike, not just the wheel. It's not worth much, right?" Prior to coming to the US, Kang hadn't even linked the concepts of "stealing" and "US" together. Even now, simply stealing the back wheel broke his stock idea of what stealing was.

"Yeah, a hundred, probably. I've had it stolen before."

"Second time?" Kang was surprised. "Wow."

"Yep. But I guess it was ok."

"How?"

"I meant, if you are stealing something as inexpensive as a bicycle wheel, you must be in a really dire economic situation."

"You think so?"

"I think so. Compared to this thief, even I am privileged. I think it might be a good thing, a wealth redistribution." Zander was even smiling now, faintly.

"Ok," Kang said, put off by the logic. "I just hope the other portions of your wealth won't get redistributed this way."

"If it is just once every month, that I can afford, and happily so," Zander said.

--

“So, are you happy?” Over the phone, mom’s question rang. They were at that portion of their weekly call, when day-to-day details had been exchanged, and more substantive issues were not yet discussed. Kang had just relayed the news that he had started seeing someone.

“I think so,” Kang hesitated.

“You ‘think’ so?” mom said. “You’ve already chosen this route less traveled; you’d better be sure.”

If Pavel less the virus and the depression and the drug, Kang thought. He could not voice such thoughts, of course.

“So, what’s holding you up?” mom pressed. “From feeling happy.”

“I don’t know, maybe because he’s not Chinese.” The main motivation was on top of Kang’s mind so he readily picked it, but he had to twist it so it sounded like a negative point.

“Oh, he’s not?” mom sounded surprised. “What commonalities can you two have?”

“We both are human,” Kang said, annoyed.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” the annoyed infected mom also. “I am genuinely concerned, but you just want to get off the hook easily.”

“I was just stating a fact, a truth.”

“Any couple can say that; you are just saying that to get off the hook.” Mom was getting emotional, and regret flashed in Kang’s mind: maybe it was time to be more open to her?

But mom’s next sentence closed the window. “Well, Kang, whenever I ask about your relationship, you’ve always found ways to run away. You are an adult now, so you can do what you like to do. But as your mother, I still bear a responsibility, so I still have to say what’s I think

as right for you. My only advice for you is this: if you two don't have much in common, your relationship is doomed."

With that, she hung up.

--

Kang did consider mom's question; he fumbled across his mind for commonalities between Pavel and himself. Wine? But it was more like he was cultivating the interest with Pavel's help. Business? No, he was more interested in Pavel's interest in real estate than in the business itself. Mathematics? No, Pavel detested math. Literature? Pavel seldom reads other than news and wine blogs. Art movies? Oh, yes, that could be one. They'd watched a few together.

The list was short, and conspicuously so. But Kang did not like to think that they were together just because Pavel was his type, and he was his. So when Pavel suggested adopting a dog together a few Sundays later, Kang's first reaction was delight—shared dog ownership could mean a commonality they cultivate together, like the novels he had read and discussed with HC together. Pavel made suggestion when the morning sun splashed on their naked body in bed—they had just had another mutual masturbation session; the bell of a remote church tolled.

The second thought at the idea prompted Kang to raise his head slightly, from its nestling position on Pavel's chest to see how serious Pavel was. "Why?" He asked. He realized his second thought was like doubt: is it too soon for such an undertaking? He had not owned a dog before, so he had no idea what to expect.

"It could be our joint project," Pavel said, "a task we can both shoulder some responsibility." He raised his head slightly also, to plant a quick kiss on Kang's forehead before it fell back to his extra-large pillow. "I used to have a German Shepherd. Now with you coming here for the weekend, I think I am ready to take another dog."

Kang tried to imagine a young Pavel with a bigger-than-Pavel dog, the pointy ears, slick fur of brown interwoven into black. “I’ve never owned a dog,” he said, “but we had this neighbor who had had one. I don’t know what breed it was—back then, in China, people were not as breed-conscious as they are now. We call my dog was of the *tugou* breed, meaning a native dog, or a rustic dog.”

Kang’s right arm, buried underneath him, started falling asleep, so he twisted his body under the quilt and lay on his back. “He was named ‘Little Yellow’ back then,” he continued, “he was so cute. He stayed with us for over a year. Then there was a campaign that forbade urban dwellers to have dogs; our neighbor had to take Little Yellow away, or he could be killed by these *dagoudui* people, the dog exterminators.”

“Ew,” Pavel exclaimed, his hand fumbling under the quilt for Kang’s member. “Back under Communism, there was a time that Czechoslovakia had the same policy.”

“Yes, I read it in Milan Kundera’s novels.”

“But now, we are both here. It’s a free country, and we can have as many dogs as we want.”

“Sometimes I thought San Francisco has too many dogs; I read that there are now more dogs in San Francisco than human babies. And you know, dog owners often don’t pick up after their dogs.”

“So we will not only skew the dog/human ratio even more for the city, then,” Pavel said, after giving Kang’s right nipple a light bite. “We are also going to create more shit for the city.”

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The following week, Kang had his first Friday evening drink with Pavel at Badlands, but his plan of enjoying the time out with Pavel was continuously interrupted by a stream of patrons stopping by to say hi: all young, all Asian. Against the background noise of other patrons and wall-mounted

TVs, these interrupters yelled their greetings with all sorts of accents, they smiled with all kinds of broad smiles. Standing next to Pavel by the counter, Kang was curtly addressed and then willfully neglected. He was only a satellite, eclipsed by the moon and pushed to oblivion after making a short-lived trail in the nightly sky.

But in this nightly space, by his social butterfly of a boyfriend, Kang had a new feeling after the initial bout of resentment. This was a feeling of not actually there, a detachment introduced by a glass between him and everything. While Pavel laughed with another friend he hadn't seen for a while, Kang hid behind the feeling and examined the floor-to-ceiling booze shelf. He imagined in each level there lived a genie, and at his snap of fingers, all of them came out to grant him a wish.

These genies all looked the same, though, like Barbies and surprisingly lacking diversity. The patrons that continued to flow to Pavel also all looked similar: *not real threats like Damien Kim but were typically shorter, thin, and not so pretty*. Kang wondered what Pavel had to do with them, whether this meant the rice queens tend to have dubious aesthetic standards. But so, by implication, he himself was not pretty, either, a conclusion that was uncomfortable to admit.

He turned to his rum and coke, gulping it all down in one swallow. The alcohol burnt all the way down to his stomach; he signaled to the bartender for another.

The earlier, detached feeling was now gone, probably broken by the alcohol. He knew he was reverting to an earlier state of jealousy and annoyance, the stronger emotions interlaced with a marvel at how much one could get by simply being white and hunky at Castro, where promiscuity and lasciviousness hovered above every ceiling like bacchanal specters. Then, again, these stronger emotions were gone as a lightness rose from the inside and submerged him. He felt again detached

from his presence, Pavel's popularity somebody else's problem that concerned him only in some indirect, roundabout way.

He leaned deeper into the bar, squeezing the last drop out of the lemon segment to his second rum and coke. Before he knew it, he had already inserted himself between Kang and the umpteenth stranger interrupter, his hand on the guy's shoulder, caressing. The boy retreated, face smeared with surprise but then smiling, so friendly that Kang smiled back, not simply pro forma but with some genuineness.

"Cheers to Pavel!" He raised his glass to the stranger and toasted him.

The boy pulled himself away. He did not raise his glass.

"Cheers to all Casanovas!" Kang raised his glass even higher.

"Honey, sit down?" Pavel intervened. But before Kang could, a bout of nausea churned in his stomach and knocked his esophagus gaging. Kang bent down as if being hit in the stomach. The content of his glass poured from his shaking grasp.

Pavel stabilized Kang from the back. "Are you ok, babe?" He shouted, against Kate Perry's blare.

"I'm alright!" Kang shouted back, wiping off the thin stream of chunk dangling off the corner of the mouth. *You are making a fool out of yourself!* A clear voice declared in him, coming out of nowhere. "I am alright!" Kang repeated, to stress his point to Pavel and also to shout the voice.

Only then did he feel the weariness, the weight hanging over his stomach. He sat on the floor, knees touching his elbows and back against the bar's plywood.

"Babe, let's go home?" Pavel said, from some faraway place and in a small voice.

“I’m alright!” Kang insisted, leaning more weight against the bar. He thought he could rest here, on the floor and beneath the bar stools, finally free from the bombardment of strangers and Pavel’s past.

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He would not think about these strangers after; he was so willing to move forward to a life unbothered by the past together. That life would only whirl around projects embarked upon together, since when they had decided to be together.

Like the project of owning a dog.

“How about this one?” Pavel clicked on the profile of a brown mutt on the PetFinder app, gesturing for Kang to have a look. “This is my favorite,” Pavel said as Kang took over the phone and scrolled through the photos showing the dog in different poses: sitting and being cute, playing and being cute, and in some caretaker’s folded arms and being cute. “You can also go back to my profile to see all the other dogs I liked.”

Kang did precisely that. “Yes, I agree Lincoln was the cutest,” he said after concluding that the first mutt was his favorite. “Although he doesn’t look like a Lincoln to me.”

“He’s more like a Matt to me.”

“Chocolate mousse.”

“Rob.”

“Apricot.”

“José.”

“Caramel.”

“Is that your way of saying you want to eat him, Mr. China?”

“Hey, I guarantee you that 99.99% of Chinese had never tasted dog meat—it’s the Koreans!” Kang protested with some deviant amusement. “And what’s so bad about eating dogs? When humans first domesticated wolves, they mostly served two functions: keeping the owner’s body warm at night and their stomach full when there was no other food. Without the dog meat that your ancestors consumed, there would be no you standing here.”

“Well,” Pavel pulled Kang close and kissed him. “That would be a tremendous loss; I’d prefer standing here and looking at you.”

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Two days later, over brunch, Pavel said he had filled out the application for Lincoln. They were sitting outside on the patio of a Castro restaurant, and the Labor Day sun was shining profusely. Pavel said this behind his sunglasses and in his seersucker jacket; he combed his flowing hair with his fingers like a glamorous movie star.

But Kang wanted to tell him something else. “I checked out a copy of DSM from the Stanford library yesterday; I wanted to read through the depression section to better understand your situation. Maybe we can read it together, say, this afternoon?”

Pavel said he would like that; he appreciated Kang’s gesture. They left a generous tip to the handsome waiter and then strolled around under the generous sun, hands clasped and gait slowed down. Random passengers, some amazingly hot or beefy, cast look at Pavel as they passed. Kang noticed because he was checking out these hot or beefy men himself—not overtly, more like a glance at a distance, followed by a quick snap when the target was much closer. And in these close-up snapshots, the target invariably had their eyeballs slant, the white part prominently facing Kang and the colored—blue or hazel or black—iris part angled, strained in Pavel’s direction and rotated as the couple got closer, closer, and then across.

Kang thought he was used to this already, moments accrued to a more immense inequality. He did not feel particularly annoyed, even though he still wished that some of these eyes would see him. He also wanted to enjoy the sun more, because for the whole summer, the city was covered in clouds that had been coastal fog, chilly wind blowing and howling like agile beasts sprinting across the roof. Now, in September, that beast finally calmed down, having decided to roll up like a cat and nap under the autumnal sun.

The two of them waited for the traffic light at Castro and 18th to turn. “Look!” Pavel gave Kang a nudge and then pointed his figure across the intersection.

Across the intersection, the corner building blunted its otherwise vertical-angled corner with a narrow strip of straight façade, and Kang had seen people turning it into an unofficial memorial by placing candles and bouquets underneath. Now, a circle of spectators occupied the space, and through the gaps in that circle Kang could see a ring of low fence and the dogs frolicking inside.

“Is that a dog adoption event?” Kang said, “they’ve had it there before.”

“Yes, but look at that dog!” Pavel’s voice was of excitement. “It looked like the one I had applied for!”

They jaywalked diagonally across the intersection. Pavel pulled out Lincoln’s photo on PetFinder app. “Yes, this is him!” He declared, his face slathered with sunlight. He bent down, tsked at the dog, patted his head, and tousled his hackles as he came close. “Can we walk him a little?” He asked an adoption agent, in a slightly coquettish tone.

The dog was leashed and taken out of the pen. He was shorter than Kang’s knee height, and Kang reckoned that he was about 2 feet in length. His ears were erect at the bottom but

inflected down at mid-length, so when he talked in tow, after his initial resistance overpowered by the pulling leash, his ears flapped like a butterfly.

“We’ll take him.” After a circle along the block, Pavel said to the adoption agent.

So instead of reading DSM together, the couple spent their afternoon shopping. They bought a dog bed and two bowls, packages of dog food made of bison and salmon. The cute sales guy persuaded Pavel to buy a pet camera seemingly just by smiling at him, and Pavel purchased the most expensive model, motion-triggered and could record hours of footage, on top of the real-time monitoring from Pavel’s laptop. When they returned with hundreds of dollars worth of goodies, a text on Pavel’s phone informing him that Lincoln was adopted at a mobile adoption event today. They were truly sorry.

“It was us who adopted the dog!” Pavel texted back. “Something is just meant to be!”

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Mid-September, Kang finished his internship and spent the whole week at Pavel’s place. One day, right before his autumn quarter started, Pavel returned home with the news that he would have to spend the next week in New York.

“Why don’t you join me for even just the weekend?” Pavel asked.

Kang did what that would require: arranging a sitter for Little Yellow (previously Lincoln), booking and taking a Friday redeye. He had never been to New York before. After dropping off the luggage at the hotel, Kang stepped into the Midtown morning with Pavel and marveled at the scale of things, the glass and steel walls of the skyscrapers, the wide streets, and the sheer abundance of people. A transplant of an Asian megacity on the east coast, Shanghai, Tokyo, or Seoul in Americanland, filled with blonde people and black people, tourists and businesspersons, cosmopolitan confidence and chicness. There was so much to see: the subway lines whose pillars

by the tracks reminded him of the Santa Cruz pier pillars, the magnolia trees outside a cozy West Village bookstore led his imagination traversing backward or forward to a tree-full bloom. They had their brunch at a restaurant named East Pole; they tasted cupcakes at Magnolia Bakery.

The curved staircase of Guggenheim and the modern landscape design of High Line brought out as much marvel in him as those muscled, tanned, and shirtless hotties jogging along Hudson River, whose disappearance behind a corner along the esplanade of Battery Park brought out in Kang much regret and remorse. So much was happening this autumn, the world was in swirls; and even without doing anything other than sightseeing, even simply by the automatic continuation of the breath and the heartbeat, Kang felt he was also part of it, the collectivity of the whole, a sparking mission right over the reflections of the river, perpetually on the verge of emergence.

When the night fell, Pavel took Kang to see a play on Broadway, a sequel to *A Doll's House*. As they walked out of the theater with the flow, Kang told Pavel that he liked it because now he'd heard the story from Torvald's side for the first time, and he had learned that no one could claim the status of a pure victim. He told Pavel that Ibsen's original play had a tremendous influence in China when it was introduced around the fall of the last dynasty, prompting Lu Xun to reflect on the consequences of revolution and catapulting Jiang Qing, the actress who played Nora and later became Madame Mao, to national fame. They talked on as they passed clusters of happy people talking and laughing, cluster after cluster, school after school. It felt like the whole Broadway was singing, on fire with intellectual stimulation, with fame for everyone imagined or real shining right at the next corner of the street, within reach once all clocks of the Manhattan struck midnight.

They passed the Lady M Cake Boutique by Bryant Park and ordered the last slice of matcha crepe. They walked back to the night, and every tree in Bryant Park had wires of lights wrapping around them, from the trunk to even the tiniest branch, and from below looking above the whole grove seemingly was made of those wires of lights, scintillating into a future that extended well beyond the certainty of our plans, the repetition of our routines.

“Kang, I love you.” Pavel suddenly uttered.

Kang looked back at him, his eyes bright as the tree light. With the eternity of light trees as the witness, Kang thought, he would choose to believe in that.

What about white men that made them so attractive? Kang decided to ask his fellow potato queens for their opinions. He had by far known quite a few of them.

“They look more defined than Asians.” (Terry Lin.)

“I like their chiseled look. Even for cars, I like those squared ones.” (Kevin Takeda.)

“I dunno, it is hard to say. I just like them, personal preference, I guess?” (Ivan Hui.)

“When I grew up in New Jersey, I was not attracted to Asian guys at all, perhaps because there were not that many back there. It was only after moving to San Francisco that I saw more of them and started to find some attractive.” (James Hsu.)

“Back in high school, I was attracted to white boys only, because, you know, their hairs on the forearms were all golden.” (Eugene Yi.)

“Probably because I was surrounded by them when I grew up.” (Marshall Li.)

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There are also questions to the rice queens, to get their point of view.

“Why am I attracted to Asian guys only? I don’t know ... I came to San Francisco from Nebraska and got infected by yellow fever, I guess.” (Edward Ferguson.)

“I always wanted to date someone who looked different. I wanted that since I grew up in Connecticut.” (Chris Field.)

“It is just a personal preference.” (Chad Hansen.)

“Because you guys are cute!” (Jeffery Williams.)

“Their eyes are beautiful.” (Charles Metcalf.)

“Cute, cute, cute.” (Nick Chinchio.)

“You guys are all cuties!” (Juan Fernández.)

“I feel tender around Asians or Latinos; it is very strange, like I am transformed to a better self.” (Hector Brown.)

“Because I am an Asian trapped in a white body.” (Ben Freeman.)

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Finally, Pavel took Kang to winetasting. This was already October, weeks after their New York trip. The original plan was only a day trip to Anderson Valley, but upon learning that Kang had no idea what a “road trip” was, Pavel decided to devote a whole weekend to it. But as he had what he called a “nasty flu,” they had to postpone the trip for one week. Kang did not get to see Pavel during the week, and there were cases when he called, Pavel did not even pick up. So when he met Pavel for the first time right on Friday before departure, he felt he need to query about his boyfriend’s flu.

“I’m fully recovered,” Pavel said. “Slept for the whole day and it helped.”

“That serious?” Kang did not remember the last time a flu knocked him down hard like that. “The next time you are sick, let me come to help you, ok?”

“Ah, sweet babe,” Pavel winked. “I didn’t want to pass it to you; it was pretty nasty.”

“I don’t mind; I insist.”

“Okay, I’ll let you come the next time.”

Kang felt a tiny happiness radiating from this intimacy with Pavel. “Excited for the trip,” he said as he buckled up.

“This is called a weekend getaway,” Pavel explained to Kang as he adjusted the seat for leg room. “An escape.”

“An escape from what?” Kang adjusted height of his seat. “Your life in the city?”

“That’s the idea.” Pavel started the engine.

“But what’s so bad about the city life to ‘escape’ from?” Kang genuinely did not understand. “Your home is here; you work, eat, and sleep here. In the countryside, you still eat and sleep. So what are you escaping from, really? Work? But you have to work unless you are a billionaire, so there is no escape from it—and actually, you are supposed to love it. Supposedly, it is not a burden but a calling, and supposedly, you should have no reason to even want to escape from it.”

“It is just a saying,” Pavel said blandly. “How’s school?”

“We learned a new classification model called Support Vector Machine just today,” Kang said, slightly disappointed at the quick end of the “escape” discussion. “It’s pretty complicated, something about mapping the analysis to another space and then mapping it back. I haven’t fully comprehended it yet; I hope I can still have some time tomorrow to work on it.”

Pavel looked away from the road and at Kang for a moment. “You’ve got the book with you?”

“Yeah,” Kang said. “So I am trapped; no escape for me.”

“I hope you can graduate soon, babe,” Pavel said. “We can then do some true getaways.”

“I have been thinking about it, actually,” Kang said, moved by that Pavel had been thinking about their future. “For me to work in this county, I need an H1B visa, which needs to be sponsored by my employer on my behalf. They must submit the application to immigration within a certain period, typically in April. Now, I think Google likes me, so maybe they’ll offer me a job. Counting on that, if I can graduate this quarter, I can get my visa submitted in time. 2012 could mark my first year with a career!”

“Wonderful,” Pavel said, revving the engine for the freeway on-ramp. “Can you graduate this quarter?”

“I think so. I need only 45 units and I have that.”

“Smart babe, finishing a master’s in one year and four months!”

“In the UK, it always takes just one year,” Kang said. “Some undergraduate classmates of mine went there, and they have already done by now.”

“Are they staying in the UK?”

“More people choose to return home these days,” Kang said. “I guess five years ago, staying would be the preferred option, but now, there are more opportunities back at home.”

“Well,” Pavel said, extending his right hand to hold Kang’s left. “I hope you will stay here, with me.”

“I know,” Kang said, giving Pavel’s hand an affective squeeze.

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Pavel and Kang stopped for dinner after being on the road for an hour, and it took them another two through the winding road to get to the hotel. Kang had read before that it was supposed to be a property with a central garden and a ring of cabins, but in the dark, it was just a flood light illuminating an entrance by the main road.

They found a key in an envelope outside the office with Pavel’s name on it, and both fell asleep quickly after shower. The following morning, Kang woke up early and reviewed the chapter on Support Vector Machines. When Pavel got up, he walked up to Kang and saw all the symbols and formulas on the page. He did not say anything, only planted a kiss on Kang’s forehead. He showered and then planned for the itinerary, the vineries he wanted to visit and their opening hours. He went to the canteen and brought back coffee and confectionaries. It was only until almost 10, when the first vinery on his list was about to open, that Pavel walked up to Kang and kissed him again.

“Babe, would you be ready soon?”

Kang closed his book. "I can go," he said. He was still unsure about the actual transformation of Support Vector Machine but thought the rationale was now more evident. It might be a good time for a break, actually, a chance to step aside from the admiration for those who had devised such a method.

He had thought it was an overcast day, but once out, he realized it was drizzling, more like fog than rain. Branches, still leaved, bent under the gathering wetness above them, and a breeze was enough to knock down fat drops right onto their heads, the tiny thrills germinating from their napes. By the end of the forest, the valley opened up before them, patches of vineyards flanked by verdant hills appearing not high, tops still buried under quilts of gray.

The vineyards Pavel chose had passed the prime season, their grape branches mostly bared, twisting to strange shapes and appearing not higher than stumps. Yet the neatness of their ranks, their ups and downs along the slopes still held Kang's attention, signs of devotion that were not qualitatively different from those contained in the theories of Support Vector Machine.

The two of them were the first customers. The tasting room was housed in a restored old apple processing facility. Pavel led the way along a narrow, steep wooden stair and seated himself before the counter in the second-floor tasting room. A bespectacled blonde soon walked up to them.

"Welcome!" she said, shifting eyes between Pavel and Kang. "My name is Jenny, and I'll be your host today."

"We only need one tasting," Pavel said, to her and then turned back to Kang. "We can just share one tasting. If you like the wine, we can always buy a bottle."

"Sure," Jenny said. Kang nodded, as all these were still new to him. He did not know what to expect.

"First time here?" Jenny asked.

“Not for me,” Pavel said. “But this guy,” he gave Kang’s shoulder an affectionate hug-squeeze, “not just first time to Philips Hill, but a winetasting virgin.”

Jenny chuckled, then jumped to introduce her wine. “We’ll be following the order listed in this tasting menu,” she said as she slid it before Pavel. “We’ll start from the whites, our 2007 Riesling, and then 2008 Gewurztraminer. These are the specialties of our winery—we are the only one growing these grapes here, in this valley. We’ll then move on to the reds, Pinot from our neighboring property, and Cabs we sourced from other vineyards in the valley. We’ll end with a young Oppenlander, also Pinot Noir. Sounds alright?”

“Yes,” Pavel said, diving his attention to the tasting menu.

“What are those names?” Kang asked, “what is Pinot?”

“These are the names of the grapes,” Pavel said with patience. “Riesling, Gewurztraminer, Pinot Noir and Cabernet Sauvignon. These are different kinds of grapes, so their wines would have different tastes.”

“I see,” Kang stuck his tongue out. “I thought they made up these French names to make wine-drinking sounded sophisticated.”

“Well, I am a sophisticated person,” Pavel said. “That’s why you are with me.”

Jenny returned and poured the first glass. “How does it taste to you?” She asked Pavel, after giving a brief explanation of the product.

“Tropical fruits, definitely,” Pavel said firmly. “It is quite sweet, so I will give it that. There’re also some hints of agave, and mint?”

“Good,” Jenny said, her eyes following the glass passed to Kang. “What do you think?” She asked.

Kang took a sip, and “Alcoholic” and “sour” jumped to his mind immediately. The first term would be redundant, so he let only the second out of his mouth.

“Yes,” Pavel said, “any others?”

“A hint of bitterness,” Kang added.

“Good,” Pavel said, “but I’d call that a mineral taste.”

“Ok, sour and mineral,” Kang concluded.

The game went on. Each time Jenny poured them a glass, Pavel would offer his characterization, and then ask about Kang’s thoughts. For the last pour, Pavel asked Kang to taste first and say how he’d describe the wine. Kang couldn’t really taste the difference between this pour and the previous, so he just said, “plumb, mineral, like the last pour.”

“No,” Pavel said, “this one is better.” He went on to explain the winemaking process, how each step—the soil, the microclimate, the storage—all could introduce flavors. Jenny echoed him, saying that the Pinots from two neighboring vineyards in the valley tasted “completely different,” because one vineyard was under the fogline and the other above.

When they walked out of Philips Hill, the sky had cleared a little. Pavel’s left hand carried the bottle of Gewurztraminer he had purchased, the right hand holding Kang’s tight.

“I’ve learned so much,” Kang said. “Thank you for taking me here.”

Pavel looked back, a tender emotion flowing out from his eyes and embraced Kang. “I am only doing this for my own benefit,” he said. “I will fast-track you to a wine connoisseur, so that I’ll have a company for all the winetasting to come.”

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That night, after tasting the wine they had bought during the day, in the king-sized bed in the hotel, Pavel and Kang made love—or they tried to, within the limit that it was not penetrative. “There’s

still much we can do, like we can watch porn to heat it up,” Pavel said, next to Kang in the bed as he typed in a URL. Kang felt a slight weary about the ease with which Pavel entered the website, but his eyes were also arrested by musculatures and tawny skin tones the next moment. He moved his pillow close to Pavel’s and threw himself into it, eyes following the matrix-like arrangement of videos unfolding row by row as Pavel pulled down the scrollbar, all those windows of intrigue and mise-in-scène passion.

“How about this one,” Pavel said after rolling down to the bottom of the page. “Seemingly, it featured an interracial couple, like us.”

Kang agreed. The movie opened with a muscled white hunk already naked in the bed, arms crossed behind his head and leg spread. A smaller Asian, dark-colored and without muscles to speak of, walked up to him and buried his head between his crotch. The white man’s member was massive and quickly made the Asian man gag. Although the latter also touched himself, the video did not give his member even one second of camera time. Throughout the five minutes that took the white hunk getting climax, the camera showed only his frontal image and only the Asian man’s back.

“What is this?” Kang felt the need to express his annoyance, even though he liked all the camera time the white man got. “Why is the Asian man hiding all the time? As if he doesn’t have a dick worth showing.”

“Relax,” Pavel said, “this is only a porno.” His hands now approached Kang and started rugging him. “Your member is very worthy of showing,” he said, “it has a beautiful shape.”

Kang felt his enlarging under Pavel’s hands. “Still, I don’t like the movie. The white man is the sex icon, but the Asian man has to hide his penis throughout.”

“Let us show off yours then,” Pavel said, removing Kang’s briefs. “See what I am talking about? The little Kang, so proud, so beautiful.” He bent down, wrapping Kang’s member in his mouth deeply.

“So big,” he disgorged the thing and caught his breath. “So delicious.”

Kang let him work on it. He closed his eyes, imagining himself as the video’s white hunk. He still disliked the scene, but the expectation of pleasure was more powerful. He recalled the white man’s movements in the movie and tried acting them out, hoping that as they had turned him on, his actions would turn on Pavel.

Once the decision to graduate had been made, Kang saw a new light in this relationship with Stanford. Every detail now seemingly gained an additional significance, from the rhythmic clang of the train he took three times a week, to the taste of Thai curry from that a hole-in-the-wall eatery on the basemen to the Psychology Department. His student life still had at least one more month shelf-life, but he already felt that his student days were behind him, and he was standing at some future spot and looking back. Preemptive nostalgia: a wish to hold on to the present, even before it has become the past.

His internship manager at Google made him an oral offer, and the certainty of his future sank him deeper into melancholy. Perhaps because of this feeling and the accompanying reluctance to say goodbye, Kang filed his petition to graduate only on the deadline, the first Friday of November. That evening, when he and Pavel talked about it, Kang suggested they could make another road trip to mark the occasion. The following weekend could work, but how about putting it off for two more weeks, taking advantage of the Thanksgiving break?

They clicked open the map. Death Valley: the decision had quickly settled on the national park. How about Little Yellow: take him with them; how about hotels: this and that dog-friendly one. Pavel would need to take the Monday through Wednesday off, and the two could even drive off the Friday afternoon before. They would then spend the whole week there, with the option of cutting it short and making it back home for their first-ever Thanksgiving together.

Even with preemptive nostalgia piled on, the set Friday arrived sooner than Kang had mentally prepared for. Walking uphill to Pavel's place, Kang went through the rest of the trip plan again in his head. The route: westward to Fresno, Kern County, and then down directly to Stovepipe Wells at the heart of Death Valley. Dinner: slated to happen at some roadside fast-food

restaurant, probably after Fresno. Drinking water: a pack of a dozen bottles that should have already been purchased by Pavel and loaded into the trunk. And Pavel: yes, he should have asked for an early off, so he should be home by now, 4:06 pm.

Using his copy of the front door key, Kang let himself in. Little Yellow walked up to him, sniffing and whining, but the rest of the house was still as if in slumber. No steps running downstairs, no whistling from a kettle of tea. Little Yellow's bowl at the dining corner was all dry, and once Kang filled it, the dog darted toward it and voraciously lapped up the water.

Kang paced back to the stair. "Pavel," he called, his words plopped into the still silence. No vibration, no swish. Tick, tock, the second hand of the clock on the wall proclaimed its existence, each step louder than the immediate last, irreversibility, irreversibility; question mark, question mark.

"Pavel, are you home?" Kang called out again, as he walked up the staircase.

An utterance, inarticulate and smothered. Short, with an end as abruptly as its beginning.

Kang quickened his steps. In the bedroom, Pavel was lying on the bed, clothes still on but face down, the left cheek buried under the pillow, and the right cheek facing Kang. With all curtains drawn down, the room appeared almost as dark as at night. Kang switched on the light and saw Pavel's right eye was, in fact, open. The corner of his mouth twitched slightly, as if snippets of words had already accumulated there, waiting for the last push to be whole and uttered.

"Pavel!" Kang called, "are you ok?"

Pavel's right eye remained still, lifeless like dead people's that Kang had seen in the movies. The whole body's stillness registered in Kang's mind only then, much so that Kang wondered whether its ambulatory faculty had been gone. He reached out for Pavel's forehead to check whether he was running a fever, and his palm landed on a layer of cold sweat.

“Pavel! What happened?”

A stream of tears ran down the corner of the eye. “Kang, I am sorry.” Pavel did not rave, and his articulation was surprisingly clear, but the right eye remained in the same stillness as when Kang walked into the bedroom. It never met Kang’s directly, as if it needed to stay still, focused one elsewhere that was far away.

“What’s the matter, would you tell me?” Kang’s throat tightened, and he could feel tears welling up.

But silence switched back on. The eye remained open. The body kept still.

Kang went to the bathroom and soaked a towel in warm water. Then he wrung it out, came back, and wiped off the cold sweat from Pavel’s forehead. The stream of tears had already dried, but the trace of it remained. Kang wiped it off together with the cold sweat on the face, and then the sweat further down, around his neck. He sat down on the bed by Pavel and tried to turn Pavel face-up, so that he could continue wiping off the other side.

“I did it again,” Pavel said with a strange slurring drawl, “I can’t go to Death Valley this time.” His body felt heavy, resisting Kang’s effort to turn him on his back.

“You did what again?” Kang asked with a chill running through his spine. *Meth?* The term suddenly sired in his mind. Rarely had the term surfaced in their four-month-long relationship, and Kang had thought it belonged to the realm of “things past.”

“Meth?” Kang let the word out, in a surprisingly calming tone.

Pavel yielded no answer.

“Go home.” It took Pavel another long moment to produce these words. He raised his hand slightly above the bed, holding it in midair, and then, using that hand, he drew a curve in the air,

slacking the control of it along the way, so that gravity pulled it back to the bed with an acceleration momentum. Thump. Stillness resumed. Kang knew he meant to gesticulate his verbal command.

“I will stay,” Kang said, “cannot leave you here like this.”

“No, go,” Pavel ordered in a queer tone, borderline comical, but Kang could tell underneath it was all sternness and urgency.

“What would happen to you?”

“I have been through this before. I will be fine. I will call you tomorrow.” Pavel’s logic was still clear, but his voice suddenly turned into a murmur, like a stream of somniloquy. Right before Kang’s grandmother passed away, when he was a college freshman, she specifically instructed his parents not to summon him back. “I don’t want Kang to see me like this,” Kang’s mom paraphrased later, referring to the bloatedness caused by late-stage liver cancer. And maybe Pavel had something similar in mind, and Kang knew he could be persuaded by that.

Pavel shut the right eye forcefully, and another stream of tears rushed down his cheek.

“Pavel—” Kang called out again, but Pavel’s eyes remained closed, and the lines of his face softened as if he was truly asleep. When one was extremely weary, that could happen, conversing in one moment and sleeping the next. He was not feigning; Kang was willing to believe that. And Kang would let him face the painful withdrawal alone; he would let him decide about his own life.

Kang wiped Pavel’s face and neck again, and covered him with a thin quilt. He switched off the light, descended downstairs, and stood in the darkness of the living room. The circle of the sectional sofa. The piano at the corner of the room. The grandma’s embroidery on the wall. In the darkness of the living room, he could still make out all these objects. What he couldn’t determine

was the exact location where his familiarity with them all had broken; he felt he was in the house of a total stranger.

He heard Little Yellow in the kitchen. You poor thing, Kang thought, you probably had not eaten. He walked to the kitchen and fed him a full bowl, and just like he had expected, the dog dived in without even chewing the kibbles. He opened the backdoor to let the dog out into the backyard. He waited for Little Yellow to find a spot to release himself and decided to leave. He would return the next morning to check on Pavel and feed the dog.

The dog returned. He walked directly to Kang and lay down by him, unbothered, it seemed, by the condition his owners had found themselves in. No, Kang could not let him stay here tonight, even if that would mean violating his apartment's "no dog" rule. He put the leash on him and filled a bag of dog food, ready to leave but realized he had to use the bathroom himself.

He peed in the dark and walked to the sink. He turned on the light and noticed Pavel's phone lying right there, next to the sink and face-down, its flashy orange back reflecting the recess lights.

Temptation rose suddenly. Before Kang knew it, he was already holding the phone and pinching Pavel's birthday digits, shivering in fear and excitement. I need to know what happened! A thought went by as he tried the YYMMDD format; I am only trying! He keyed in MMDDYYYY as his face burned. If DDMMYYYY wouldn't work, he'd put down the phone, even though Pavel's SSN and Czechoslovakia's Independence Day were already on the lineup. He paused and listened to the movement upstairs—there was none—before entering the last digit, and as the tension rose, there was even a tiny part of him hoping that his guess would not work.

But his last guess did work: the password page evaporated, and the colorful squares of apps appeared. Kang went directly to Facebook and scrolled down the InMails, his index finger moving

but stiff. Damian Kim was the topmost name his eyes encountered, his smile still charming and vile even confined in that small profile.

Kang dived in, ignoring the last warming of a voice inside of him. The first exchange happened only yesterday morning, “Looking forward to tonight!” the first line read.

“Me, too!”

“Dixon and Stephen coming?”

“Yeah!”

Whatever their party was, Kang was not invited. It did not take a leap of belief to link it to the state Pavel was in. “I did it again,” this had been what he said. Whatever had the four men done together—assuming there were only four—for the first time or again, it could not be good.

Party and play? The phrase flashed in his mind, settling a chill in his guts.

But that was already the end of the latest exchange. Kang switched to the call records and texts, but no further clues were found there. He switched back to Facebook, scrolling down into the past. His eyes widened at the exchange where Pavel shared their plan of the Death Valley trip with Damian, and his heart beat unpleasantly at the feeling that a private pact between Pavel and him was broken. His violation of Pavel’s privacy now felt only justifiable and justified.

Exchange: Damian asked Pavel about the trip to New York: “Have you had time to visit Fire Island? I still missed the party at Richard’s beach house.”

Exchange: Damian asked Pavel what he saw in Kang, after Pavel told him that Kang took his positive status “well.” “He’s so cute, and he has this fresh look and attitude to everything,” Pavel’s reply went, “the fresh-off-the-boat taste.”

Exchange: the night before Pavel invited Kang to his home for the first time, Damian had, in fact, spent it in Pavel's bed—this exchange was particularly painful. None of them referred explicitly to the sex, but the reference to the rump pain could only mean that in this context.

Kang sat down on the toilet bowl to stabilize himself. This was only Facebook, and this was only Damian. What about all the men he had to meet at the T-dance, Badlands, and all the other bars and clubs? Were they all his one-night stances, hookups, and party-and-play mates? Too many, the possibility dizzy and enormous, making Kang fear the truth beneath.

He had to remind himself: that he still wanted to know the immediate cause of Pavel's state upstairs, and he braced himself for the most likely scenario: meth and orgy euphemized as “party and play.”

He dived back in, to Gmail this time. He scanned down, picking the Asian male sender names to click on. In the first email, someone in Toronto replied to his message on a pos dating website only last week, describing Pavel as a knight in shining armor straddling a white horse. In the second email, sent by an LA actor back in October, the sender said that he would be in town next week, and would like to spend the evening with him like they did when they met first.

He left the toilet and came to the living room, turning the light on as he entered. Little Yellow dashed out from the kitchen, running ahead of Kang as if leading the way. Kang sat down on the sofa, and Little Yellow jumped on to sit by him. He gave him a quick pat, and then turned to the phone. The fact that Pavel was with him the day the actor was in town did not really relieve him. He still felt such a heavy weight pressing right on his chest.

But before figuring out where else to look, his burning curiosity must be satiated: who was this actor, and how did he look? A single search revealed his personal website, where photos featured a handsome Korean American. But even for him, the professional highlight was the one

and only appearance in a prime-time sitcom on ABC. It took Kang a while to find the show on Netflix, and then fast-forwarded to about half an hour in; and yes, here he was, a receptionist in a law firm, shivering as a white partner delivered him an angry scold. Such a pathetic appearance in the show, five seconds in total; but this was what he had put on his personal website, the proudest moment of his acting career.

How sad, him and me, all of us.

He put the phone down. He felt tired suddenly, hollowed as if experiencing his own kind of withdrawal. He assumed Pavel's closer contacts were all on Facebook or Gmail, and if neither source divulged his secret, he probably went to some virtual group or ventured out to some saunas to release his urge. These were domains so alien that Kang did not even know how to imagine what Pavel had been through; he felt so far away from Pavel, for they could want such different things in life.

Fourteen

The following morning, Kang called Pavel before leaving home. No answer, so he waited for fifteen minutes and called again. Still no answer, but he decided not to wait this time. The Uber dropped him right off at the toilet brush tree outside Pavel's house, and Kang again entered using his copy of the key.

He gasped.

Pavel was sitting right there, on the living-room sofa where they made out the night they first made dinner together, the same one where they had since watched countless movies. He sat there awkwardly, back straight, leg crossed, and face haggard, with pouches under the eyes and weariness in every furrow of the face.

"Kang," he said, at least he was talking again in his normal voice, and looking at Kang's eyes while he spoke.

"How are you feeling?" Kang wanted to sound like the caring boyfriend, but the air in the room pushed him away from that stance. It felt heavy, the air, as Pavel thrust his phone in Kang's direction outright, the shining orange case like a fire in the bring morning.

Kang picked it up and saw that the webpage was opened to a video clip. He gave the play button a click.

It was this very room. It was an evening. The light was on, and Little Yellow ran through. But then, there was Kang himself. Pavel's orange phone case blazed in his hand, and if you zoom in a little, you could see the engrossed look that Kang wore, his eyes rolling down, taking in the next bits of information from the phone.

All captured in the pet camera, the last time the motion detector was triggered last night.

“I was—” Kang lifted his eyes up and gave Pavel back the phone. “—I was—” somehow, his sentences hung and refused to be complete.

“You were invading my privacy.” Pavel sat back into the sofa a little. His eyes narrowed, cold.

“So?” provocation entered Kang’s voice, before he was aware of it.

“That’s not acceptable.”

“It is acceptable to have an orgy right here?” Kang said, his eyes fixed on Pavel’s.

“This is my house,” Pavel said after a pause. His voice was small at the right beginning, but came back to almost normal as more syllabus rolled off his tongue.

So it had indeed happened, then, plus that it happened right here, in this house. Kang felt more of a pang of chilling sadness than anger, as if, for the first time, he through Pavel and found only ugliness at the core. Darkness. And the sadness only intensified because he could not refute his reason, that this was his house and, by implication, he could do whatever he wanted.

“Indeed, you can do whatever you like in your house,” he said. “But you can’t do whatever you like in a relationship; not something of this.”

This kept Pavel silent for a second, but the fightback darted back quickly. “Indeed, you cannot spy on your boyfriend.”

Never before Kang had expected this—not when he worried about Damian, not when he was depressed by Pavel’s past that he sat down on Badlands’ floor. Guarding one’s past was one thing, being as unreasonable as not to acknowledge one’s own mistake was another.

“Seriously?” he said in a patter of menace, “you are lecturing me now? The boyfriend who could not even stay loyal, to whom even flings are not enough, and only orgies can fulfill his urge?”

“What do you know?” Pavel bellowed.

“I knew nothing because you don’t tell!” Kang shouted back. “I don’t know who these people we ran into at Badlands were! I don’t know you’re jonesing for meth all the time! I don’t know who you had sex with the day before we were supposed to go on our road trip!” He was crying and shouting at the same time now. He stepped closer to Pavel for the intensification of fighting; he saw the pet camera’ staring black eyes on the mantelpiece. Would it record this? He thought, for a split second.

“Those are all my past; I can choose to share or not.” This was the weapon Pavel was picking to use now, and Kang could not believe it—no one had ever treated him this way.

“The orgy is not something in your past! It happened here only three days ago! It happened when we were still boyfriends!”

“Well, we’d better not be!” Pavel stood up from the sofa, shouting at an even louder voice. Veins bulged on his thick neck; spittle dotted the corner of his mouth. It was really a complete stranger shouting at Kang, and for a moment, Kang was ready to imagine this person walking up to him, slapping him, striking him. He felt his whole body shaking uncontrollably, from the surprise (*well, hadn’t you expected this somehow?*), the anger, and the hurt.

“So this is how you deal with problems.” This was all he could say. He took out his copy of the key, and threw it on the floor. It felt outside the carpet and bounced, but Kang walked up and gave it a hard kick, as if it were the rightly object to receive all his indignation. The key flew across the dining nook and fell among the pile of wires next to the media center, making a muffled thump before the sudden restoration of silence in the house.

He paused there—they both paused there, giving each other the last look, etching that into permanence with a mental iron burned hot by strong emotions. Then Kang turned and stomped to the door. He turned the lock and opened it with force, and with a greater force, he shut it behind

him. He thought of his things that were all shut behind him; he thought of Little Yellow's bed, food, and pickup bags. He almost stopped there, to turn and knock at the door, and to talk to Pavel again about these, and Pavel would return to the person he remembered.

He slowed down; he almost did all that—even though he thought Pavel's wrong gravely outweighed his own, although he felt he had power over Pavel because he was free of the virus. But he gave himself a pinch on the thigh and walked downhill. All these could wait, but leaving Pavel behind could not.

That feeling of every movement of life is off, from how you breathe to how your arms swing when you walk. The self-consciousness hangs there that every move is different from its usual mode, a miasma that blots each and every waking moment.

And that feeling of a hollow expanding in your torso; that only your volition is physically holding up the remainder of you, responsible for pulling everything together. That feeling that even if it is a sad volition, you still need to hold onto it tightly, because otherwise, your whole life would disintegrate into pieces and bits that you can no longer recognize.

And that feeling of being physically swamped in exhaustion, while your consciousness core keeps ramping up. You can almost feel a column of hyper-wakefulness running through the back of your brain, throbbing with the same pulse as it pulsates through your temples.

And now you know all these feelings; and now whenever you try to think of these feelings, you think of him.

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But the world does not pause for your feelings. Three roadside bombs are detonated in the Iraqi city of Basra only days ago. 26 Pakistani soldiers are killed after a NATO helicopter opened fire on a Pakistani checkpoint. Even your finals are still happening in about a month: Monte Carlo methods, Numerical Methods for Differential Equations, and an algorithm elective from Computer Science.

And there was still Little Yellow who had to be taken care of. When Kang walked him in the Castro, he saw Pavel in places where he was not. In the cheekbones and jawlines of models gracing the ad posters, the contours and gaits of strangers on the street. There was always a time lag between the shock when the visual cues leaped into the eyes, and the click of a recognition that

understood the association. And what filled that split of a second could be either nostalgia and anger, depending, it seemed, on the angle of the sunlight at the time of encounter, or the prime effect of minor preceding events preceding that Kang himself did not register.

Anger: a new emotion, taking control of Kang faster than he could comprehend. He could feel its gaining strength with time, Pavel's meth problems and orgies at the highest pitch. And carried by that emotion to a different vantage point, Kang's inward eyes saw so many more moments of inequality: the waitress's ignorance of him at their first week anniversary dinner, the Asian boys flocking to Pavel at the bars. In the hierarchy of looks, Pavel would still rank higher than him despite all his misdeeds. And perhaps, another Asian boy is already knocking at Pavel's door now, begging for the experience of being treated like trash.

Even though he treats you like trash, you still uphold the lookist hierarchy?

Because he treats you like trash, you still uphold the lookist hierarchy.

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And all the ways you try to part from a person:

—the temptation of deleting his phone number and texts from your phone but the pain of actually doing so;

—the impulse that led you to defriend him on Facebook and the immediate regret and the temptation to add him back;

—the pain you went shopping to the same supermarket you used to go to together, the stuffy, depressing air there, too thick for the dim ceiling lights to pierce through;

—the way you deliberately avoided the main roads of Castro to go to take public transportation to school, fearing less about running into mutual friends but more the imagined ghosts of your own past selves;

—and the strain you push your body into sprinting after a five-mile run, you were gasping for more air like you were calling him back to your life: “try again, try again, try again.”

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But the world does not blink at your attempt for amnesia. 176 cars crash in chain-reaction crashes in Nashville, injuring 16 and claiming one life. The former New Jersey governor is subpoenaed, in connection with the collapse of a derivatives broker and the disappearance of customer funds. And at least eight children have died in Ecuadorian Amazonia, after being bitten by rabid bats.

None of the acquaintances Kang had met through Pavel reached out and offered sympathy: Calvin and Gene they once ran into in the Castro restaurant, the flock of Asian boys they ran into at the bars; or the ones they had invited home for dinner parties. None of these people contacted Kang in any way, even though they had all first sent out friend requests on Facebook, even though they had known.

They were firstly his friends and his friends first.

There were many other reasons, of course, equally valid and equally unrelenting. Non-interference. Shyness. Their being dump, shallow, double-faced assholes. The need to focus one one's own problems, and the assumption that you were adult enough to deal with your own problems.

They were not your friends, to begin with.

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So this was your struggle, and yours alone. The night now felt so long. Heavy also. Empty also, despite Little Yellow being allowed curling itself up on the bed now. The dog exuded warmth, but not the kind you longed for. Your heart longed for. What you needed was to hold on to the facts

of life that an HIV-positive stranger had cheated on you blamed you and shouted at you; what you needed were answers answers and answers, the desire to know, to understand, and to get even.

Get even: a new thought.

Even as in: how Pavel had been treated by the world, his exterior covering up his interior, blinding the eyes and misleading the minds;

Even as in: how Pavel had been behaving that night, his not acknowledging his wrongdoing, his refusing to back up from the key that Kang had thrown at him;

And even as in: his non-action even after Kang slammed the door, his not materializing behind it, his not repenting his mistakes and begging for a chance over which only Kang could have the discretion. Even as in that confidence that boyfriends were just pieces of garment, you can simply take one off and switch another on.

Slap Pavel's face: but he would slap back;

Graffiti Pavel's door: the security camera would alert him;

Douse Pavel's house with gasoline and throw in a match: he would be identified, arrested, and sent to prison.

How Kang wanted to get even, but he knew Pavel's power was secure. The eyes the jawline the musculature all magical, full of spells and charms. Gripped by an urge, one that aimed at the multiple targets of getting even and getting revenge and putting himself out there at the same time, Kang went back to Match.com but then shut up his computer. Who was still on dating websites these days? Everyone was on Grindr now.

That orange square of a logo foregrounding a black mask (African? Polynesian?): easy to find, quick to download. The app tells you the distance between the other users and yourself, and a hottie was just half a mile away. He had glassy blue eyes and mischievous smile, in a tank top

whose hem was pulled up to reveal his defined chest and delicate nipples. “Hunks only. No fems, Asians, or Blacks.” Kang scanned through his blurbs, and did not even feel offended.

Another, just one mile away. Torso chiseled and limbs rangy, square jawline full of masculinity. Tanned skin everywhere. Cream of the crop, of course, and beyond your reach, of course also. But the eyes still stuffed themselves with his blurb: “Just moved to Livermore. Only on here for a hookup, and maybe also a gym buddy. Interested in white men only. If you think I am out of your reach, I probably am :P”

Just 500 feet away, there was another hottie with an even more minimalist profile: minimal clothes covering his private parts, minimal words describing his goal: “Horny. Looking.”

“Looking, too,” Kang texted him.

No response.

“I’m looking, too,” Kang texted again.

No response.

Still no response.

A message popped up, an energizing pinch at Kang’s heart. But no, it was not a reply but a new message, sent by a shirtless but headless torso. Asian, Kang could tell. He still clicked it open.

“Kang!” The words froze the eyes. *What the —?*

“This is Sam, remember?”

Kang did not.

“We met once at Badlands, with your bf.”

“Hi,” Kang texted back. He searched in his memory all the patrons who had approached Pavel at the bars, but could not pick a face and install it to this shirtless torso lacking definition.

“So are you looking for yourself, or for you and your bf together?”

Kang put the phone down.

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What else could you do to get even? You were already sinking back in time, back to that swamp when you broke up with your first boyfriend and submerged in the space of friendlessness and unrequited crushes, filled with an insistent and constant inferiority complex. Staying there, feeling nothing had changed since, you were again desperate.

But you did have changed: anger was now simmering in your veins, at the realization that even your god could do harm, at that the perfect physique could go along with nasty actions, and at that you must strike back, to get even.

And you did have changed: you had almost graduated from a most elite institution; you had almost a job at Google. Maybe money could help uplift yourself? The money that you had now earned from your internship?

The idea grabbed Kang. He could almost feel the physicality of it, its claws tearing apart his nerves. He was not only angry at Pavel; he was angry at the world that had catapulted Pavel to a high rank. And if Pavel was only a reification of a type, can he get even with his equivalence?

Slap him!

Hit him!

Dominate him!

He was weary of his own ideas. He wanted to be free from it, but the idea's pressure only tightened, contracting him toward a flashpoint of implosion, generating something like a sadistic pleasure.

He typed in: gay escort.

He hit return.

He was so alert, as if the law-enforcement was already outdoors, siren blaring, walk-talkie buzzing. But the actual outdoor was quiet. The strong desire pulsed in him, from his mind to the muscles making up his calves. He could not resist it: the hunk's luring eyes and enticing muscles; a thin layer of stubble spread over his pecks like wings. He would risk it.

In-call rate?

\$250.

Out-call rate?

\$300.

En route, in the Uber, Kang suddenly felt so thirsty. A visceral dryness burned through his veins, and then intensified into a light trembling when the door opened before him, an almost uncontrollable shake when the same hunk on the photo took him into his arms.

“Hey, babe,” a throaty voice, entangled with cologne. “Relax.”

Kang followed him to the bedroom. The curtains were drawn, and the ceiling appeared low in the dim. Kang trembled in the still air, and the hunk hugged him and murmured something to his ears.

“Shall we get over the payment first?” The murmur rang.

“What?” Kang pulled him out of the hunk's embrace.

“Shall we go over the money part first, so we can enjoy the fun part?” The murmur registered only now.

Kang pulled out the bills, which the hunk counted and folded in the nightstand drawer. He pushed Kang into the bed, then undressed himself. The tanned skin tone, the body hair, the lines of the chest and the brawny arms—the color, the texture, the shape and the implication of power

all that Kang had hankered for so long: a more handsome, all-American jock that Pavel was not. He was right here, in front of you the forceful substance, the manliness, the whole package all stark naked, all in front of you, and now onto you, and now inside you. He didn't even ask for your permission; he simply thrust and thrust and thrust from his position of power.

Wait, aren't you coming here to dominate him?

Maybe you can go through this first, and ask to top later?

The novelty of the situation—the size, the nature of the transaction—manifested itself in excruciating pain, the tip of which a pressing pleasure, a repetitive spasm to push it out; yet unaware of all these, the hunk simply thrust and thrust and thrust, knowing no stop, be aware of no end. The pain swelt. The hunk's repetitive thrusts actually hurt, which created a distance between the points of contact and Kang's core. Kang felt like he was in a movie. The distance feeling was not just the scene; it was the foreignness. It was a feeling that he was not actually there. There was a glass between him and everything. And with that sense of detachment, Kang felt the calmness of the reason that had driven him here.

“Can we switch?” he raised his voice.

The hunk lay down as instructed, facing Kang with his legs wide open. It was even a little hard to believe the beast could be so tame, the dick could curve so high past the navel. Kang reached out and hit it, not too hard, but still hard enough to draw a few gasps from the hunk. Is there enjoyment in exercising your power? Is it satisfying to be on the top?

To be determined. Kang tore open a pack of condom with his teeth, enacting the confident nonchalance of porn actors—all white, never Asian. It pained him that in his limited allotment, he'd never embody that ruddy skin, that golden hair, that deep-set eyes, that powerful chin outlined by a full beard—mattered not how hard he tried. He held the legs, which were suntanned and

covered by fine downs, and tried to lift them up to his shoulders like the top did in that same porn, but lost his balance and had to attempt again. The legs rose to his waist height and fell again on the second try, and the momentum dragged Kang with them until he almost bent over.

The hunk laughed. “New position?”

“Yes,” Kang admitted, evading his eyes.

“Let me help,” the hunk said as he inserted another pillow underneath himself. His rump pushed squarely in the middle hollow, the feathers rammed to the sides and bulged for additional support. He anchored himself further by pressing his palms, forearms, and elbows into the mattress, and with a contract of his washboard abs, his legs were up in the air, drawing a curve and then landing on Kang’s shoulders.

Kang held the legs from under and took his aim. His thighs were taut, his torso a bow at its fullest draw. He felt his body trembling slightly, shaking out more readiness for the imminent entrance. But as pulses of enthusiasm rushed downward, somehow they got blocked or absorbed somewhere around the groin. Looking down, Kang saw his member, workman like a moment ago, was already drooping, crestfallen.

The hunk propped himself up to check what was going on. He withdrew his legs and laughed at Kang’s embarrassment. “It’s ok,” he said, taking it over to his hands, his rubbing. Kang felt the pulsing in the veins there, but all that did not add to a hardness.

“Shall we change back, then?” The hunk suggested, almost tenderly.

Kang lay down quietly and spread open his legs. Smoothly, the hunk entered the second time, and soon again he was in motion. He pushed with his eyes closed, each pounding drilling deeper into Kang’s double pain, a physical one plus a social one, a failure so exposed and so intimate, being pounded so deep into the guts. Why did he even imagine himself as a white porn

actor when up there, and why did he could not perform? Because the contrast between his actual skin color and the skin color beneath him? Or because the difference between his actual size and the diameter he was about to enter?

He could not continue such lines of thought. The bed banged against the wall, and Kang felt his default sense of who he had been suspended, or that he had stepped out of the self he had known, the self that would not find himself in this situation, in this low-ceiling room, with the hunk by him murmuring fake pleasantries—well, “your ass is so fucking tight” might be true, but not “babe” the endearment, not that “you’ve been so good in bed.” The default self was coming back, and he did not want to be here, in this affected intimacy. Kang could feel tears rolling down from the corner of his eyes. He wanted to see the light, the street teeming with normal people.

The hunk intensified his efforts. With an intense bout of rocking, he pulled himself out, followed by panting and gasps and the information that he had come. Inside Kang. Kang’s mind didn’t even consider whether this meant the hunk found him attractive; it was instead focusing on the fact that the hunk did not wait, that he did not even bother to coordinate.

Anger on the rise again, the same kind as that directed at Pavel, at his own, second failure. With it, Kang’s member was back functioning, so he pulled the hunk close to him, hearing a voice shrieked silently in the mind that now it was his turn, and that the hunk was here to serve his pleasure. Kang’s right hand gripped the hunk’s thick chest as the left rubbed himself, firmer and faster, faster and firmer, until he released both hands, and felt all the pressure accumulated at his tightened knuckles and joints released at the same time.

“Wow, that’s a long shot,” the hunk complimented.

They both rose, and with mortification, Kang now saw patches of lubricant all over the place on the white linen, some of them even containing some brown goo. He was too green to know he should have cleaned ahead, and was already too late to wipe it off or cover it up.

But the hunk seemed to take no heed of that at all. Straightly he walked to the bathroom and turned on the water, waiting for it to turn hot enough.

“Got to run,” Kang said, wiping himself with a towel.

“Really?” the hunk stared at him with disbelief. “Without even taking a shower?” His flaccid package swung like a pendulum as he turned to face Kang.

“Just realized I had a prior engagement.” Kang walked up to him and pecked on his lips. “So long!” he said.

He turned about-face and darted for the door. He rubbed his nostrils with his index finger in the Uber, which still smelt like cologne and semen. The semen smell mixed a salty basis with a fishy touch, repulsive as his humiliation was all entangled with it.

In an ideal world, he should have successfully accomplished his mission by this moment. He should have given powerful thrusts, the pink meat underneath shaking at each repetition, moans of joy coming out by the hunk as if pleading to be forgiven. Bliss would have shone in the eyes of the bottom deep set in the sockets, reflecting Kang’s own tattooed arms and well-proportioned physique.

How sad was this: even now, even after Pavel, Damien, the escort, the waitress ignoring him, the boys flocking towards Pavel, the English lit professor claiming preferring white men, the Grindr hunks with “no fems, Asians, or Blacks” signature, Kang still imagined himself as white to dominate the hunk;

And how sad was this: even now, even after he set out to dominant a hunk, it was his own brown goo irredeemably left on the white linen.

How often do you have an insight of life, but don't know what to do about it? Unactionable, too abstract. Like the tropical fish you once saw from behind the aquarian glass, its floating awkward, on the verge of capsizing. Close up, you saw it was missing a fin, its existence a full-body struggle for balance. Nature or nurture didn't matter, it was beyond fix either way. And since you had no way to fix it, having the insight or not didn't matter. Life went on as time unfurled itself. You still had to force out the concentration on your finals, sweeping the breakup, the encounter, and the getting ready for graduation all to the background.

One week after the night with the escort, at 2 am, Kang was still going through the nitty gritty of RSA algorithm in preparation for the final, his phone lit up with a WeChat message from Lin. Kang hadn't been thinking about the name for so long; he had to pause for a second to recall who Lin was: the guy he had once thought HC was having an affair with—antediluvian history. What could he possibly contact him for?

The message was simply a greeting. "Hi, Kang," it read.

"Hi, Lin," he texted back. "Whatsup?"

There was a pause from the other side, but then, the screen flashed with the urgency of call rings. "Whatsup, Lin?" Kang answered, "it's 2 am here."

"I know," Lin said, "but I thought you should know about HC."

"What about him?"

"He's got cancer."

"What?" Kang could not believe it. "What kind?"

"Bladder. He had actually already been going through chemo, and we thought he had been recovering. But today, the doctor found that it had metastasized—it is now in his lymph nodes."

“Oh, no,” Kang could feel his heart breaking. “You guys waited this long to tell me now?” He said “you guys” matter-of-factly and meant to group the two of them as a couple, without a trace of unease.

“He didn’t want you to know, but I thought you should. It’s not that he is sentenced to death, but things are really bad. If it deteriorates, it will go downhill pretty fast.”

Kang felt the welling up of tears. The smile, HC’s when he looked up from the bold, “I want to be friends with you” note that Kang put down before him; the hand, HC’s holding Kang’s against the cold, when they scrolled by the university’s lake amidst a snowfall. The novels they had read together, Mo Yan and Can Xue and Wang Anyi and Italo Calvino. All these snippets of memory flashed quickly before being nudged away by the blank of their two years apart, where Pavel, Kang’s biased desire, and his latest encounter with the escort lived.

Somehow, even such recent memories were already tinted with a faint sepia; even the phone call that constituted his breakup with HC now assumed a tender touch, its sharp edges smoothed away as its harsh words lost their meaning—the whole scene just another interaction with him, a time together carved out from their limited allotment. Seen from an edge of life, the whirl Kang now found himself in, these nuggets had an unexpected calming effect, unmaking the mess the intervening years had brought about. He wanted to share all these with HC, not as a disassociated ex, but as someone who had shared an important journey in life.

“I will need to see him,” Kang said, first in a small voice just to himself, but then again loud enough for Lin to hear. “I will need to see him. Tell him to hold on by the New Year.”

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He could not sleep, so he called his parents. They were cooking dinner together, but the instant he opened his mouth, mom knew something was wrong.

“HC is dying, cancer,” he said, voice calm and clear this time, stating a fact.

“What? No!”

“Yes, Lin told me. And I want to come back to see him—and you two too.”

“Sure, anytime, son,” mom said. “But aren’t you graduating this quarter? Would coming back now impact your visa status?”

“That’s something I will have to figure out,” Kang bit his lower lips. “I will need to talk to both Google and Stanford.”

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He called his manager at Google the following morning. He explained he had a family emergency and hoped that Google could issue him an offer very soon. The manager promised to expedite the process and connected him with the company’s immigration lawyer, who spent half an hour on the phone to clarify that Kang should at least apply for his student OPT—optional practical training—as soon as possible. Kang could leave the country as freely as he wanted, but return after his graduation date using his student visa would not be possible. If he must leave the country now, he’d have to wait abroad for months until his OPT application was reviewed and approved, and he could only come back then, with a physical copy of his resultant working permit in hand. The risk was that the US government might need supplementary materials while he was abroad, and to prepare for some documents might even require Kang’s physical presence. Or, in the worst case, if Kang’s OPT application was denied, then Kang could only come back on a different status, such as a tourist on a B2 visa.

“I will risk it,” Kang said, “I have to go.”

“Understood,” the lawyer said. “I think your risk is low, but be prepared to be out of the country till March. If you are ending your lease, write down your friends’ address, so when the USCIS sends you the work permit, they can forward it to you.”

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The way you tried to part from your dog. If you had friends by the names Terry and Eddie, you would call them about having Little Yellow stay with them, and they would say, “of course, of course.” Little Yellow would look at you as you were still in the conversation, so in the middle of your call, you also stopped by him, to give him a pat on the head and run your fingers through his fur. The dog would lie down suddenly, his belly facing you and his front legs folded up. You had never seen him doing this before, a position you understood as his expression of trust. You finished the call with Terry and Eddie and gave the dog a gentle rub on the belly. The dog rumbled, and you thought he even smiled at you. You picked him up and held him. Your tears fall into his fur.

And the way you part from the life of the whole last year: how you threw half of your stuff away and sent the other half to the garage of, again, your friends Terry and Eddie’s, and how you cleaned your room and the common area twice so that all dog traces (hopefully) would be wiped out. On the way home, a homeless man spit in your direction, the dollop of phlegm only ten feet away from your footstep. “Fuck China, Japan, Korea!” You ignored his howl because why squander your precious last days in the city on this little man. You walk on, passing those houses worth ten million or twenty million or fifty million and casting no second look at them, because again, why squander your precious life energy on them. Your energy was to be spent on the farewell dinner that your friend Shiao-min took you to, the hug she offered you with tears in her eyes when it concluded. The landlord gave you back the security deposit in full and said that he hoped you could stay with him again in the future. You felt less shame than funny inside,

exchanging a glance with your roommate, Zander. He had already given you a parting gift: *Black Skin, White Masks* by Franz Fanon. “The best stuff,” he had said, “I’ve just read it, and I’m sure you will like it.”

And also, the way you thought about him, even all the other stuff to deal with in life had kept you so busy. You hesitated about whether to tell him you were leaving, even just temporarily for three months. His unreasonableness shown till the last moment still brought out in you so much anger, but beyond that, you were also missing the first time you saw him, the feeling of your body contacting his.

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On the plane to Beijing, Kang was again sitting by the window. Next to him was again a white man, in his fifties probably, with remnant handsomeness almost worn out by age. Kang stole a few glances at him, but the man apparently had no interest in chatting.

Relief, actually. Kang was not in a chatting mood, either. He had been under pressure from so many directions for so long, and it seemed only by now, in this enclosed, dim space, that he could finally afford to withdraw into himself, into reflection. He hadn’t been setting foot in China for a year and a half, and how much had happened since, how much he had changed. If that younger, un-American self had encountered his current self, would he look up to him with admiration for his achievements, or he’d look down upon him with repulsion towards his racist inclination? And reversely, what would he make of that younger self now? Was the desire to return to that simpler, better self taking the upper hand, or was it the pride of being a white-men fucked Asian man gloating at a lesser kind of being?

In this interwoven past and present, it was hard to make out where he would stand. There were still ten hours to go, so he took out Zander’s parting gift. Bad timing, as the crew members

began their lunch service. Amidst the order giving and taking and the occasional babies' crying, he sometimes turned to a page and realized he had not taken in even a single word from the previous paragraphs, his eyes were moving down the lines, but his mind did not engage.

So he closed his book, had lunch, and then took a nap. When he woke again, all the cabin lights had been turned off. Around him, a few reading lamps were on, and he saw his neighbor was reading. He turned to the window, the darkness pierced through only by the green dot at the tip of the wing. The engine hummed, almost lulling, and Kang could feel clarity finally descend onto his mind. He pressed on his own reading light, and picked a random page of Franz Fanon.

The black man wants to be like the white man. For the black man, there is but one destiny. And it is white. A long time ago the black man acknowledged the undeniable superiority of the white man, and all his endeavors aim at achieving a white existence.

He let out an involuntary gasp; the author was also speaking for Kang himself.

“What’re you reading?” His neighbor turned to him and queried, perhaps prompted by the gasp. The book he had been reading was resting open on his lap. Kang showed him the title.

“Ok, looks interesting,” the neighbor said, politely hiding his disinterest. “I am reading this book, good stuff.” He extended the cover of his book over the armrest, and Kang saw the title read, “The Roots of American Order.”

“Yeah, looks interesting,” Kang said politely, thinking of Greek democracy, Roman law, monotheistic Christianity, and Enlightenment would probably make the bulk of the text. But after having lived in the US for almost two years, after having experienced alienation and another heartbreak, he knew there were only the good facets of the order. What’s the origin of inequality and sheer meanness of human behaviors? What’s the origin of domination and soul-crashing?

Being democratic and having freedom obliterate all these darker facets; answers to these were likely to be missing.

“What are you heading to China for?” but he wanted to ask his neighbor this before returning to Fanon.

“To visit a professor there—I teach political science in the US myself. I’m then transferring to go to Taiwan to observe their presidential election. You know, the direct flights are getting expensive these days—I bet the Taiwanese are going back to vote.”

Even under the reading light, the neighbor looked all excited. Even his voice, lowered in consideration of the other resting passengers, was tinged with it. Kang nodded politely but did not respond. He knew that the Americans saw their democracy and freedom as their country’s essence, but suddenly, he thought white masculinity, as defined by the history from the ancient Greeks to the founding myth of the nation, from the Industrial Revolution to Pax Americana, was at that essence, too, power-laden imageries and standards of embodiment doing the work of functionaries and snipers.

What a new idea, and in which he thought he understood himself, understood his struggles. It was only in face of that ideal he had become who he was. It was only in looking up to that idea he wanted to unbecome who he had been.

He turned off his reading light and looked outside again, the lonely green flashing at the tip of the wing against the night. He felt a burning sensation with the realization: while he came to learn Western knowledge, he had learned more about his place and his core, how the wish to be a different kind of man germinated there, the growth of it, the blooming of it.

He leaned his cheeks on the small window, feeling the chill cooling the burning idea. Although more content needed to be sorted out, he was still glad about the idea in its current form,

as at least, he was sure that he wasn't born a lesser man, but that his own pursuits had led him to feel he had been one. What he had been pursuing appeared skin-thin, but it was, in fact, thicker than the Pacific and the soil of China and America combined.

All that to be fathomed, to be unpacked. He focused his eyes on the green light at the wing, as if it was a north star guiding him homeward.

From the author's perspective, Kang's story has actually been told before. Only that you have to search for it, cull snippets, collages, and palimpsests from volumes of texts.

In the profundity of knowledge and in the theoretical disciplines, we are their superiors. For besides logic and metaphysics, and the knowledge of things incorporeal, which we justly claim as peculiarly our province, we excel by far in the understanding of concepts which are abstracted by the mind from the material, i.e., in things mathematical, as is in truth demonstrated when Chinese astronomy comes into competition with our own. The Chinese are thus seen to be ignorant of that great light of the mind, the art of demonstration, and they have remained content with a sort of empirical geometry, which our artisans universally process. They also yield to us in military science, not so much out of ignorance as by deliberation. For they despise everything which creates or nourishes ferocity in men, and almost in emulation of the higher teachings of Christ (and not, as some wrongly suggest, because of anxiety), they are averse to war. They would be wise indeed if they were alone in the world.

Gottfried Leibniz, 1697

The poverty of the lower ranks of people in China far surpasses that of the most beggarly nations in Europe. In the neighborhood of Canton many hundred, it is commonly said, many thousand families have no habitation on the land, but live constantly in little fishing boats upon the rivers and canals. The subsistence which they find there is so scanty that they are eager to fish up the nastiest garbage thrown overboard from any European ship. Any carrion, the carcass of a dead dog or cat, for example, though half putrid and stinking, is as welcome to them as the most wholesome food to the people of other countries.

Adam Smith, *The Wealth of Nations*, 1776

I had heard about the material wealth of Western civilization, and its wonderful machines, but when I saw these for myself I was even more surprised. The accounts that people do not pick up what has fallen in the streets and that pedestrians courteously make way for each other, are true. And the efficient means for using fire and water is wondrous; the underground of Paris is riddled with passages for fire and water! The fire is called "gas," which burns without any visible source. The flame is very clear, lighting up the night with a brightness like midday. The water

in Paris bubbles forth in fountains situated all over the city, and people sprinkle the roads to keep the dust down. Citizens live in seven- or eight-story houses, usually made of stone, and more splendid than the residences of daimyo or those of nobles in Japan. European ladies are like beautiful jewels, their skin fair as snow. Even an ordinary woman would cause the famed beauties of Xi Shi and Yang Gui Fei of ancient China to hide in shame. I have come to this belief after comparing European women to a few Japanese and Chinese ladies I saw at the Exhibition.

Shibusawa Eiichi, 1866 while attending the Paris World Exposition
on official delegation from Tokugawa Japan

A bout of fragrance tickled his nostrils, like orchid, like musk. Through the carriage window, Ziyu saw another carriage coming in his direction, an old man sitting inside, and two young men of fourteen or fifteen outside. One of them shone like crabapple flowers, a freshness filling the space between the eyes and the brows. The other appeared a man of the ethereal, with bones made of jade, essences constituted by the moon, emotions configured by flowers, and spirit shone like pearls and gems. Dumbfounded, Ziyu lifted the curtain and stared, and the two pretty boys stared back, their four eyes bright and shining.

Chen Sen, describing the first encounter between a pair of same-sex lovers in *Pin Hua Baojian [Precious Mirror of Ranking Flowers]*, 1849

Down to the middle of the fifth century the most striking and consistent ingredients of the “approved” male figure are: broad shoulders, a deep chest, big pectoral muscles, big muscles above the hips, a slim waist, jutting buttocks and stout thighs and calves.

Kenneth Dover, summarizing ancient Greek male beauty standards in *Greek Homosexuality*

As it is confessedly the beauty of man which is to be conceived under one general idea, so I have noticed that those who are observant of beauty only in women, and are moved little or not at all by the beauty of men, seldom have an impartial, vital, inborn instinct for beauty in art. To such persons the beauty of Greek art will ever seem wanting, because its supreme beauty is rather male than female. But the beauty of art demands a higher sensibility than the beauty of nature, because the beauty of art, like tears shed at a play, gives no pain, is without life and must be awakened and repaired by culture. Now, as the spirit of culture is much more ardent

in youth than in manhood, the instinct of which I am speaking must be exercised and directed to what is beautiful, before that age is reached at which one would be afraid to confess that one had no taste for it.

Johann Winckelmann, “the Father of Archaeology,” advocating for Greek beauty standard in the late 18th century

The two years I spent in London were the most unpleasant years in my life. Among English gentlemen I lived in misery, like a poor dog that had strayed among a pack of wolves.

Natsume Soseki, 1900

No more weeping, but stand on your feet and be men. It is a man-making religion I want. It is man-making theories that we want. I want the strength, manhood, kshatra-virya or the virility of a warrior.

Swami Vivekananda, 1899

And yet, as profoundly important as the leadership of the British forces considered these events, there was at the same time an underlying current of derision, if not contempt for the officials with whom they had to deal. Consul Swinhoe, for example, characterized Prince Gong as “cadaverous-looking” and noted his “timid, sulky demeanor” and “snappish” answers during the ceremony; his retinue, meanwhile, was “dirty and badly dressed.” Chaplain McGhee referred to the prince’s “sulky dignity” and noted with distaste his horde of retainers of “very questionable cleanliness.” And if the appearance of Qing officials generated a degree of antipathy on the part of British observers, the Hall of Ceremonies itself fared no better. As Swinhoe put it, the place “bore the stamp of neglect and tapestry that hung from the unceiled roof was of cheap stuff and faded.” But probably the most telling dismissal of the Qing officials and the ceremony came from Major Graham; he wrote in his diary that “the Punjabs thought it was a miserable durbar, and that the Chinamen looked like a parcel of old women with no hair on their faces.”

James Hevia describing the Sino-England official interactions of the 19th century in *English Lessons*

The details and symbols of your life have been deliberately constructed to make you believe what white people say about you. Please try to remember that what they believe, as well as what they do and cause you to endure, does not testify to your inferiority, but to their inhumanity and fear. . . . Try to imagine how you would feel if you woke up one morning to find the sun shivering and all the stars aflame. You would be frightened because it is out of the order of nature. Any upheaval in the universe is terrifying because it so profoundly attacks one's sense of one's own reality. Well, the black man has functioned in the white man's world as a fixed star, as an immovable pillar, and as he moves out of his place, heaven and earth are shaken to their foundations.

James Baldwin, 1963

You look at them and wondered why they were so ugly; you looked closely and could not find the source. Then you realized that it came from conviction, their conviction. It was as though some mysterious all-knowing master had given each one a cloak of ugliness to wear, and they had each accepted it without question. The master had said, "You are ugly people." They had looked about themselves and saw nothing to contradict the statement; saw, in fact, support for it leaning at them from every billboard, every movie, every glance. "Yes," they had said. "You are right."

Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*, 1970

Ma Hla May came across to the bed, sat down on the edge and put her arms rather abruptly round Flory. She smelled at his cheek with her flat nose, in the Burmese fashion.

"Why did my master not send for me this afternoon?" she said.

"I was sleeping. It is too hot for that kind of thing."

"So you would rather sleep alone than with Ma Hla May? How ugly you must think me, then! Am I ugly, master?"

"Go away," he said, pushing her back. "I don't want you at this time of day."

"At least touch me with your lips, then. (There is no Burmese word for to kiss.) All white men do that to their women."

"There you are, then. Now leave me alone. Fetch some cigarettes and give me one."

"Why is it that nowadays you never want to make love to me? Ah, two years ago it was so different! You loved me in those days. You gave me presents of gold bangles and silk longyis from Mandalay. And now look" -- Ma Hla May hold out one tiny muslin-clad arm -- "not a single bangle. Last month I had thirty, and now all of them are pawned. How can I go to the bazaar without my bangles, and wearing the same *longyi* over and over again? I am ashamed before the other women."

"Is it my fault if you pawn your bangles?"

“Two years ago you would have redeemed them for me. Ah, you do not love Ma Hla May any longer!”

She put her arms round him again and kissed him, a European habit which he had taught her. A mingled scent of sandalwood, garlic, coconut oil and the jasmine in her hair floated from her. It was a scent that always made his teeth tingle. Rather abstractedly he pressed her head back upon the pillow and looked down at her queer, youthful face, with its high cheekbones, stretched eyelids and short, shapely lips. She had rather nice teeth, like the teeth of a kitten. He had bought her from her parents two years ago, for three hundred rupees. He began to stroke her brown throat, rising like a smooth, slender stalk from the collarless *ingyi*.

“You only like me because I am a white man and have money,” he said.

“Master, I love you, I love you more than anything in the world. Why do you say that? Have I not always been faithful to you?”

“You have a Burmese lover.”

“Ugh!” Ma Hla May affected to shudder at the thought. “To think of their horrible brown hands, touching me! I should die if a Burman touched me!”

George Orwell, *Burmese Days*, 1934

The history of racism and anti-Semitism has, up to now, all but ignored the important part modern manliness played in the pattern of prejudice, that the standards by which outsiders were judged were for the most part measured against the bodily structure and spirit of the masculine ideal. Any Jewish or black male or any male thought to be of inferior race can, through his own experience, substantiate this fact. How many of such outsiders have attempted to become insiders through reconstructing their bodies and adjusting their comportment according to the male aesthetic ideal?

George Mosse, 1996