

NC-17

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Say a man and woman, naked, sit on the floor across from each other. Light envelops the couple, outlines their profiles in gold. One can trace down the slope of the man's right shoulder, ascend and descend the shorter hill of the woman's bent knee, before arriving at the curve of her breast. The woman hooks her fingers around the man's neck. The light comes from somewhere above and behind her, darkening her face and obscuring her eyes, lips, and brows. The man's face, on the other hand, glows white. His eyes are closed. He smiles.

Say one spring afternoon, a boy named Mickey Fan sees this image on the cover of a VHS. He leans back against his parents' bed and cradles the tape in his lap. A moment ago, he was searching for his report card in the cardboard box of files under the bed, and now he holds what he believes to be his father's dirty movie.

The tape feels as warm as the handshakes he receives at church. He doesn't know that the man bathed in light, who smiles with his eyes closed, is Marlon Brando. Our boy is nine years old, an inhabitant of a single decade. He doesn't lift his head when the El rattles the window. Inside his parents' bedroom, he has not yet crossed paths with *Last Tango in Paris*.

Mickey reads, in a tiny box on the back of the VHS, *NC-17*. The rating cites, among other things, *strong sexual content*. The words pulsate with a deep red that nobody at school

would ever claim as a favorite color. Inside a pack of playing cards, Mickey keeps a folded spread of Cindy Crawford, which he ripped out last October from a *Playboy* at the Shell station. Cindy Crawford standing against a white-haloed wall, wearing nothing but a shawl that lingers at the cliffs of her hips. Her nipples and belly button, when taken in at once, resemble a ghost spooked by its own reflection. To Mickey, all of a woman's body is NC-17.

From the other side of the door, his father laughs. Though far away in the apartment, his voice fills the room, comes to Mickey with the closeness of a whisper. As if by reflex, Mickey tucks the VHS back inside the folder labeled *TAX*. He worries for his mother.

#

That night, Mickey notices for the first time how his parents slink and slither in the narrow kitchen without touching each other, as if by some strange harmony his father sucks in his stomach at the precise moment his mother exhales. The scent of scallions woos him into their path. His father reaches for the chicken powder in the cabinet, and Mickey's mother, ducking his father's arm, elbows Mickey in the jaw.

My God! she says. She blows air on Mickey's jaw, and his father inspects it for a bruise. Forgive me, she says, though Mickey doesn't know if she's talking to him, his father, or God. She is an accountant for a Chinese Community Center with very little money to account for. She touches Mickey's nose, his ears, his neck, but not his jaw.

After dinner is ready, Mickey's father ushers them to the living room, where the three sit around a circular table with a spinning glass tray. His father plucked the lazy Susan from an alley next to the church he leads in Bridgeport, strapped it to the top of his Accord wagon. The table seats twelve and blocks the view of the television from the couch.

Before they eat, Mickey's parents link their hands through him. He grips their hands more firmly than usual. His mother's softens in response, while his father's clamps tighter. Thank you, Lord, you keep us full, he says, the only part of the prayer in English. The table is too large for his parents to reach each other.

Say this is a love story.

#

Say Mickey's best friend and neighbor, Todd Vitkus, had parents who were in love. Many nights Mr. and Mrs. Vitkus came up to Mickey's floor in their two-flat and filled a vacant arc of the lazy Susan, taking turns kneading each other's thighs under the table. Todd never seemed to notice, but Mickey sometimes dropped a chopstick so he could sneak a glance. The hands never shied. Over potstickers and potato pancakes, Todd's parents spun stories of growing up in Pilsen under the fierce grip of Lithuanian mothers and fathers, who, much like Mickey's parents, forgot to say their articles—and when the grammar finally stuck, it was always ze mob, ze cops, ze pig, ze bitch. Todd's father always squeezed his wife's knee harder when he laughed.

Then when Mickey turned seven, Todd stayed over in his room for three straight days. They played Egyptian Rat Screw until their hands purpled from slapping the cards and each other. At one point, Todd kissed Mickey on the forehead, though Mickey would remember it as something he'd dreamed. The night after one of Todd's aunts took him home, Mickey's parents pushed tomato-eggs into Mickey's bowl and talked about *the incident*. They talked as if discussing local and national news, as if they didn't live where the news happened. As if Mickey's mother was a country, or a world, away from Mrs. Vitkus, who during *the incident* had climbed on top of a creaky table and slugged her fists against her chest. (His parents didn't say why; Mickey wondered if she was trying to grow bigger, the only way adults could.) Mickey's

father, soft-spoken even during his sermons, could never match the rage of Mr. Vitkus, who seized two legs of the table and flipped it over, causing Mrs. Vitkus to tumble backwards and crack her head against the doorframe. Poor Todd, Mickey's parents said. According to the aunt, he'd seen it all happen minutes before coming upstairs.

To Mickey, this incident two years ago made Todd an all see-er, which is the fastest route to becoming an all know-er. The kind of person you ask, on a walk to school through spring slush, the morning after having discovered your father's secret tape, what NC-17 means.

Is it like X? X is dirty, right?

The air is tinged with a sulfur smell from the refineries. Mickey can't recall sweating this much since he swiped the *Playboy* page. He sheds the jacket his mother forced him to wear and wraps it around his waist, before thinking better of it and slinging the jacket over his shoulder.

Is NC-17... X-X-X?

Todd wedges his chin between his thumb and forefinger. He takes his time answering.

They're the same, dummy.

Mickey nods. Like they both got strong sexual content?

Todd strokes his chin. I mean, they're both awesome.

#

Later that week, Mickey invites Todd over while his parents are away at Bible study. As Todd waits in the living room, Mickey pads into his parents' bedroom and opens the cardboard box. He stares down into the files, among them *HEALTH, SCHOOL, INSURANCE, CONTRACT, TAX*. He feels heat rising from the box.

In a different story, the two boys would sit under the cover of the lazy Susan and watch *Last Tango in Paris*. Despite the squirming in his stomach, Mickey would tell himself that the

movie was everything he had dreamed of. The way the man suddenly, forcefully, picks the woman up. Kisses her and pins her against the window. The moaning, the patch of hair between her legs. The pantyhose ripped down to her knees and stretched across like a hammock. Coming without touching. The scene with the butter. The man asks the woman if there are jewels inside her, and she says, *Family secrets*. As she tries to crawl away, he slides on top of her, muscles down her arms. *No*, she cries. *Oh, God*, he says, *Jesus!*

Say this is not that story. In this story, if Mickey reaches deep enough into the hot bed of secrets, the air would be charged with possibility: people could fall in love, people—like Todd’s parents, his father living in Wisconsin now—could fall out of it. This is what Mickey believes: if he pulls out his father’s video, his mother could leave them in an instant. Instead of the tape, Mickey proffers Todd a deck of playing cards.

Cards are the boringist, Todd says.

Mickey, grinning, says, *I know*.

#

Say God proves the existence of love, Mickey’s father preaches. Say if you believe in God, then by extension you believe in love. Mickey caches these words, along with his father’s unwatched secret, in the folds of his brain. He has the fortune of forgetting. His mother begins accounting for Sears, and his father earns tenure-track at a seminary in Evanston. When Mickey is thirteen, they move north to the suburbs, to a neighborhood near the seminary and their new church where children sell lemonade in front of houses with wooden fences, where academics live among students who don’t have to take out loans, and neighbors post missing dog posters offering \$500 rewards. The Fans adopt a dog, a Dachshund named Zipper.

During meals at their rectangular elm dining table, Mickey sits at the head flanked by his parents to his left and right. These days, Mickey's mother props her feet in his father's lap, and his father presses his thumb into the flesh below her toes. He circles the inner and outer arches to the heel, gives her Achilles a little scratch, uses the same hand to nudge a bead of rice stuck at the corner of his lips into his mouth. At the Jewel-Osco, his father shakes the mist off a crown of broccoli in her face, and she squeals, claws at him, sticks a finger between his teeth. Walking from the car to the front doors of church, sitting in the movie theater, stepping over wet sand at the beach, Mickey's parents now hold hands. It feels like something they're practicing, like they've seen the popular white students at Mickey's school, whose relationships are themselves like practiced imitations of their white parents' relationships—*this is where hands have always belonged*, the gesture says, *this is how it works*.

At the wedding of his father's colleague's daughter, Mickey, now fifteen, watches his parents caper about like children on the dance floor, their feet off rhythm, their twirls slow and clunky. They wave Mickey over but he pretends not to see. Not their invitation, and not the way they toss their heads back and laugh with the others. Not his mother in the throng of bodies, as she corrals his father's face toward her with both hands and kisses him with insistence.

Say this is a love story.

#

Around the time of the wedding, Mickey walks across the Moroccan rug in his house's media room and spots under a shelf of DVDs, in plain sight of the other VHS tapes, *Last Tango in Paris*. All their tapes have gone unwatched since their VHS player broke down a year earlier, and there are no plans to replace it. Mickey has made passing glances at the shelf before, but never noticed his father's relic until now.

He wriggles it out. The cover clings to the tape as if fused to it. The man and woman don't look like the naked couples on the Internet who slap each other in cleanly lit bedrooms; on this cover, they might as well be making love in a dust storm. *Marlon Brando*. He recognizes the name—a titan of cinema, he's heard at school from Leonard Bach, the son of professors and a new kind of all know-er, one who sprays his knowing in all directions and receives only insults and mockery. But if the video isn't dirty, what is it?

Instead of watching the video, Mickey watches his mother. These days she is both at home and at work, having mastered the trick of being in two places at once. Her fingers spider-crawl over the tabs of her company files until they arrive at precisely the right one. She types and clicks the mouse at the speed of talking. When she pulls away from the keyboard, her fingers must land somewhere, must keep moving, whether in circles around her temple or over the thin bones of Mickey's shoulder. He shrugs her off. I'm trying to read, Mom.

When Mickey's father returns home, his mother slows as she passes her husband in the hallway. She bumps her hip against his. She leaves her hand behind his neck for entire episodes of imperial dramas, her arm betraying no sign of fatigue. When Mickey's father returns to the pulpit as a distinguished guest preacher, Mickey peers up and catches his mother watching the man the way someone lost in a movie watches the screen. When his father says Amen and opens his eyes, he looks straight at Mickey's mother. Mickey is convinced he can see no one else. It's probably what the man in the video would do.

Now every time Mickey passes the media room, the letters on the VHS's spine linger like an afterimage. There might as well be lights flashing around the actual tape. *NC-17*. What happened to the days when his father hid his secrets in a cardboard box of files under the bed? In

his memories, the idea of the video remains dirty, pulsating red and hot, but also familiar. An old friend. One day, Mickey looks through his parents' address book and makes a call.

It's Mickey.

Mickey from upstairs. Remember?

Hey, have you ever noticed that life is kind of like a porno?

All those years without calling Todd, and this is what he says, Mickey thinks. It's a wonder the guy doesn't hang up.

What I mean is, everyone's just performing, right? But what if they were just performing for you. Like, love isn't real and shit.

Love is real, says Todd-from-downstairs.

Says who?

It's a chemical reaction, man.

#

That winter, before school resumes, Mickey takes the El southbound. As he waits to transfer at Howard, he watches a couple who look like they could be in college standing under a flickering heat lamp. The girl palms the guy's mouth as if to push back the fog coming out of it. She lifts up the edge of his beanie and tongues a wisp of his hair. On the red line, Mickey picks a seat facing north so he can watch the scenery leave him. The lovers under the heat lamp soon diminish, as do the billboards for STD testing and Broadway in Chicago, the gutted trees. The glint of the sun on the tracks blinding him as the train's steady palm pushes him backwards. He steps out to the cold at Cermak-Chinatown, and two familiar stone lions greet him at the station's exit.



Todd waves from across the street, a lit cigarette perched between his fingers. As Mickey makes his way toward him, Todd takes one last drag and buries the cigarette in the snow. He looks older, as he always has, always mistaken for two or three years above his actual age. Next to Todd and his wild hair and bushy eyebrows and veiny eyes, Mickey could pass for someone in middle school, though they're both fifteen.

You're back, huh? Todd asks.

Guess I am, Mickey says.

His old friend smirks. Sure. For now.

He follows Todd down the same streets they once walked on their way home from school. The air coats his nostrils with the stench of ammonia. They cross under the El tracks and through several alleys, where wind or swerving cars have uprooted sections of wire fences. Todd takes Mickey to a street farther west from Chinatown, where most of the businesses are still owned by the Cantonese: delis, small-time law offices, an art school, vacant office space, all capped by apartments with tinted windows. Mickey remembers walking along this street on the way to the Community Center, the fire escape ladders above him vibrating as the El howled past blocks away. He trails Todd past a couple massage parlors before they arrive at one with a pink awning: Prosperity Spa. Todd shoots him a knowing look.

The girls here, he says, aren't like the prudes where you're from.

He twists the doorknob. But it's locked.

Hold on.

He jiggles the knob and raps on the screen, but there's no response.

Right when Todd looks ready to give up, a white man sidles up beside the boys. The collar of his jacket shields half his face. Eyeing them without turning his head, he presses an

inconspicuous brown button on the side of the doorframe. A ringing as if from an old-fashioned telephone reverberates from inside.

Shoo, the man says under his breath. But when the door buzzes open, the boys slide inside with him. The small, dim lobby smells of air freshener. Three women sit on beanbags around a low table, watching a television the size of a computer screen. They're wearing dark red pants that could be made of velvet. For a second, Mickey wonders if he's walked into a sleepover. The women's faces appear young the way Mickey's mother's face appears young—so young, as they say, for a mother. The man looks at the boys, the women.

Yang-Yang, the man says, just one hour today, if you'd be so kind.

With those words, he is granted passage with one of the women past a screen of wooden beads. Mickey tries to focus on their footsteps, but soon all he hears are the beads clicking against one another, a local news reporter's monotone voice. He tries to make eye contact with Todd in order to confirm his earlier implication. Mickey has heard of rub-and-tugs in the city, though it was only after he left the city that he became aware of them. You got to speak in code, the white guys at school have told him. And we're not talking about Chinese.

A bubble pops, and then another. The two women resume chewing their gum. Their eyes stay trained on the television.

We have money, Todd says. He elbows Mickey's side, gesturing for his wallet, which Mickey offers without thinking. Prying open the inner flap, Todd reveals two hundred dollars, the Christmas money Mickey had forgotten he was carrying.

We're good for it, Todd says. One hour? Okay? Please?

The women turn away from the boys and speak to each other in a dialect Mickey doesn't understand. Finally, they walk to the cupboards along the far wall and trade two stacks of towels

for Mickey's pair of one hundred dollar bills. As with the man before them, the women lead the boys past the clicking screen of beads, into a hallway not much bigger than the kitchen in Mickey's old apartment . They split the boys into separate rooms. Mickey's room is completely bare, save for the massage table and a nightstand next to the door, on top of which sits a single lit lamp.

Undress, the woman says.

But what Mickey hears is *address*, and the thought of providing a street name, to be outed as a visitor to this once familiar neighborhood sends him into a quiet panic. Instead of giving his Evanston address, Mickey provides, in a moment of crystalline remembrance, the address of the low-rise brick building next to the El tracks where he lived one floor above Todd.

The woman laughs. Undress, she says again, and leaves the room.

Mickey stands there with the towels limp in his hands, replaying the woman's voice in his head until he realizes his mistake. After taking off his shirt, he dashes on top of the table and plants his face in the headrest, if only to avoid looking the woman in the eyes.

Soon he hears the door crack open and her returning footsteps. There is the sound of a squish, and her palms rubbing against each other. As Mickey stares at the tiled floor, a pair of hands suddenly comes into view. A sharp, verdant aroma crawls up. The woman peels off one of the towels from his back. When her palms land, it's as if a heat lamp is beaming down on him. Her hands, vibrating with warmth, press against Mickey's neck, his shoulders, down to his underwear, at which point the hands pause—she laughs again, asks how old he is, and Mickey says, I'm in college. She keeps whispering, Relax, relax, and as Mickey's whole back becomes slick with oil, his muscles loosen and his face melts into the headrest.

She slides the heels of her hands in one deep motion from the small of his back up to his neck, and completes the motion by grazing her fingers through his hair. When she's done with his back, or right thigh, or left calf, she covers the section back up and smooths out the towel, as if to acknowledge that part of his body and the time she spent with it. Say to Mickey, a massage is not just a massage. The woman is leaving little love notes on his skin. She asks him to turn around and lie on his back. She rests a hot towel under his head and another one over his eyes. She is the first person to reach high enough up his thighs that she touches his pelvis. With each new motion, she asks, Pressure okay? Too much? Enough?

As the woman's touch falls into rhythm—calves, feet, toe, toe, toe—Mickey's eyes grow heavy underneath the towel, and the fingers that flatter his body begin to lose their connection to a hand. The hand severs from the arm, and the arm drifts away from the person. The woman's touch recedes. The old-fashioned telephone rings, first in the building, then in Mickey's head. His mind wanders to his father's once secret, now public video. He becomes the man on the cover of *Last Tango in Paris*. When he was nine, he wondered why the man's eyes were closed when a naked woman was sitting across from him. (The massage therapist shuffles her feet again. Footsteps patter out the door.) But what if he's been reading the image all wrong? Yeah, Mickey thinks, the man played by Marlon Brando smiles, but not because of who hooks her fingers around his neck. He smiles because his mind has gone somewhere else, and he's happy there. Maybe he's thinking about America, if he actually is in Paris. Maybe he's thinking about another woman. Where he's gone, that's his secret.

But others can have secrets, too.

The woman in front of him, with her face in the shadows—does she close her eyes? Does she smile? To where has her mind gone?

#

Say love is a construct. One that's easier to accept in a story than outside of one. Say to Mickey, this will be the most moving idea of love that he will muster. Every day there are intersections between real, unconstructed people, and these people choose, often without explanation from religion or science, to call a particular intersection love. They risk being wrong.

By the time Mickey wakes up at Prosperity Spa, the hot towel under his head has turned into a cold lump, straining his neck. The woman is no longer in the room. After slipping his clothes back on, he finds the three women in the lobby on their beanbags around the table, watching *The Simpsons*. The one who gave Mickey his massage smiles at him, then laughs, the other two soon joining the chorus, *Sleepy boy, sleepy boy, did you have a good sleep?*

He books it out of the spa. Only when he's retreated blocks away does he realize he left without asking about Todd. He thinks of going to the old three-flat, where Todd probably still lives with his mother, but no longer remembers how to get there. In the spring, Mickey will receive a call: So how was your girl, man? I mean, I did the stuff, but help me remember. Make me feel like I'm there, you know, like I'm... with you. Tell me *everything*. Mickey will say, It was good, and Todd-from-downstairs will say, Is that it? and that will be the extent of how they intersect.

For now, in the dead of winter, our boy runs from the warm place, from the echoes of the three women's voices, from what makes him sweat. He boards the El northbound. The moon flashes between buildings. At one stop, wind whistles through the open doors and sprays snow flurries over the faces of the sleeping couple across from him. When the couple jolts awake, the train has already resumed its motion. For a moment they scrunch their wet noses and look around

with wonderment, as if they have become suddenly aware that this life inside the train is a dream, and what is real, where they dream, lies outside among the white, sparkling dust.

#

Say, a man and woman are feeding each other sliced tomatoes in their kitchen. Pulp runs down the man's chin, and the woman wipes it with her pale, blue sleeve. Seeing the sleeve stained, the man guides the woman's arm toward the sink and scrubs it with soap. The woman says, It's okay, and the man says, I know. Then they notice their son standing before them. He's dwarfed by his puffy coat. Where had he been all day? Their chests tighten at the thought. The boy's cheeks are red with cold, and by his side he holds a VHS.

What's this movie about? The boy asks.

The man looks a little closer. He squints, though his eyesight is perfect.

Is this yours, Mickey? What is this?

The man doesn't notice the woman behind him, shutting the faucet.

The woman pats her sleeve with a paper towel. Zipper scurries into the kitchen, and she crouches down to scratch behind his ear.

My boy, she says. She stands up and draws the VHS from Mickey. She turns the tape over once, then twice. Has the woman on the cover always looked this enamored? The man this old? The tape feels heavier than she remembers, though the images lighter, softer. She sets the tape face down on the counter. She runs her hand through her son's frosted hair. It's a love story, she lies. But you are too young.

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### THREE PHONE CALLS

1.

Oh? I don't remember I said it, but it's true. You cried on the whole flight to America. I was a young mother and your dad was already one year in Houston, and when we left China it was freezing cold, and we never lived in an environment which had air conditioning.

Heating? Yes, I mean heating. So we always had the habit of wearing a sweater indoors. And your grandparents — you know we were living with your dad's parents — always ask this, ask that, think I will get you sick. So I put on you an underneath shirt with two layers of sweaters.

We were going so far away, and your grandparents felt like I was going to lose you. You know the *xuèyuán hóngxiàn*? Red thread that connects all family? Can be stretched and tangled, but can't break. It's not me, it's your grandma, was saying to me she has future thought, Thread will break. She was saying, "Oh, you might fall asleep, but the baby may not sleep..."

So she took some cloth and made a leash! Oh, you have to write this. This leash can wrap around your body, and on the other side there's something I hold on to. She and your grandpa watch us walk around with that when we board the bus, make sure I don't take it off until we get to America, or thread breaks. You're like a little dog. Quiet and listening to me. Not crying yet.

Yes, we walked around with the leash at the Beijing airport, and on the plane. When you sit on my lap I wrapped the end around my hand so much times. It's very tight, I can't feel my hand.

I think after we are in the air, you cried.

I remember so clearly now. I wore a green-and-blue-striped sweater. You wore a blue máoyī, another sweater under it, and the miánkù. I don't know how to explain. Like ski pants. The pinyin is m-i-a-n-k-u.

Cotton? Yes, but more than a single layer.

Okay, cotton-padded trousers, but that's not exact. Hold on, I have a picture! After your brother finishes his SAT study, I will tell him to take a picture of the picture, send you a picture.

No, it's not crying crying. Like kun-kun-kun, huhhn-huhhn-huhhn, always moving around, kicking me.

No, I don't know if people around me noticed. Didn't even pay attention.

Of course, first time I see so much Lǎo Měi.

Oh, yes, we had same row seat as a friend's family. They had a boy, too, but older I think, because he has his own seat, not like you. Because I speak English, the family, they don't speak English, and the family's dad was in the same school as your dad, so that's why they said, "Let's come together" — so I can help them with English.

No, I don't know them now. I don't know their voice even. Only when I talked to you now did I realize we were sitting with them, that we were not alone.

Oh, yes, everything was new. I think the meal was sooo wonderful. So many options. There is four or five little boxes in the tray, and in each box they have an option, but you can



have all the options. It all smells so fresh. Like they catch the fish from the clouds. I wonder if they have a kitchen in the back of the plane.

Yes, I'm sure. You're a boy, you never cried loudly. Not shouting, yelling kind of cry. Quiet crying, but crying.

Of course, I still finished the food. You are crying, not me.

When I finally got off and arrived in the airport in Japan, I took off your leash and said go stand in front of the window, so I can see the plane and you. Do you remember the picture of you in Japan with the big orange overcoat over the sweaters, and your face was super red? When I looked through the camera, I realized you were red.

It's because I saw people walking out from the plane, walking like astronaut, and they stare at you, like they realized you are red, that's why. They stared at me like your grandma. And after that I am so hot behind the camera, my sweater is sooo itchy. And maybe I am red, too. I saw you standing by the window, your little head on top of all the clothes. I quickly took off your sweaters, and oh! You started running around, happy.

Of course, I saw your face on the plane. But I didn't know you were sweating. I'm a young mother, how do I know these things? Did you get your brother's text?

No, it wasn't that long. It was only China to Japan you were crying, not Houston.

Just one leg of the flight. Four hours. I wouldn't make that mistake with your clothes on both flights. I'm not that stupid, right?

Tired, yes. But it's not the same.

So what are you doing? You write about yourself, or you write about me?

Say I was a young mother, Harrison. Say typically you are taken care of by grandparents — I'd barely taken care of you myself. I was never left alone with you. I think I did a good job.

But I can still see so clearly, more clearly than the picture. You were so red. It never occurred to me that you were so red, that the plane already has air conditioning.

2.

Yeah, Harry. I read your story. I have... things to say. I was going to email you after case law.

Well, I get why it took you eight years to finish a draft. Jesus.

It was a nice story. I thought the imagery was very pleasant — all the, let me look for it... uh, yeah, the description of the clouds. Seeing the “tops of clouds” and the “shadows of clouds” on the grass. Something about shadows like “dark lakes?” And the “pumpkin-tinted light.” It was pretty. I was getting lost in Mom’s mind. Okay, more spooky than pretty. What’s that she used to say? How she saw colors more deeply than we did?

Okay, the mother’s mind. But come on. Harry.

What? I did like the cloud descriptions.

Look, I got an exam tomorrow.

Fine. You really want to know? Brother to brother and all that?

No. I did not.

Did I say it was boring? You really think I would say that about this? I mean the moment, the journey, is sweet. I don’t have this amazing plane ride to remember Mom by, but... you know what? Maybe your story is boring. Maybe it’s worse.

I mean, I read the fine print. That’s what I do.

Okay — okay. It’s that fucking leash!

You introduce that leash, and the grandparents’ fear of Mom — the young mother, the tired mother — losing the child without the leash. The whole “You must keep the leash on our

sūnzi until you arrive in America” thing. And what happens? Before she takes her son’s picture in the terminal, before she realizes her son is red as tomatoes, before she sheds his four — four! — sweaters and he’s prancing around like he’s in a cruise ship musical, she “removes his leash.” He’s unleashed!

And you’re worried about writing something boring. How about you write me something true?

There’s a reason you keep trying to finish this story, right?

Even this draft just... ends.

I don’t know. Am I supposed to believe that that’s all there is? Just because I can’t ask Mom, am I supposed to believe you?

3.

No, Harrison, I do not have a photo. Your mother was so tired after the flight from Japan, I think she did not know if she was in Houston or a dream.

You looked normal. Big head, chubby cheeks, like Jenny. How is my granddaughter? Is she there?

Okay, make sure she is wearing enough clothes.

Oh, you? Probably a sweater, jacket, something like that. Yellow — bright yellow. In all our photographs in Houston, you are wearing clothes from China, and they are all bright, that was the fashion thirty-five years ago. But you know this, it’s in your book. The fashion.

Of course, Japan to Houston is a great distance.

I am not sure I understand.

No, you were very close to your mother at the airport. I remember you were always holding her arm — not her hand, but her arm. But your fingers were too small and chubby, and they kept slipping, slipping. On the drive back, your mother sat with you in the backseat, still holding you. Your poor father, I was more like the taxi driver.

Huh?

No, I do not remember any leash. What are you, a dog?

Enough, Harrison. You were a good kid, not like your brother. We did not have to worry about you. You liked being around us. Always watching us, learning, asking us questions — even more when you started writing. You know what your brother told me when your book came out?

He said you would always know your mother better than him. Because you are a writer.

You are being too harsh. The important thing is, you did ask questions while she was alive. It does not matter why you asked them. You asked them, you learned.

What kind of question is that?

No, that's ridiculous. She would tell me if she lost you in Japan — she would tell me.

Let me tell you something that actually happened. You were a baby, and when you saw me at the airport, you turned quiet, shy, like with a Lǎo Měi. And when I tried to take you from your mother, you cried. You cried so hard and you would not stop — you cried the whole drive home. I thought maybe I had the wrong child. Maybe my boy grew up faster in the year I was in America, maybe my boy was Dai Chen's boy, who had been standing next to a stranger boy in the airport. Maybe in the airport, I picked the wrong boy.

Dai Chen was my friend from college, his family was on the plane with you. See, you don't remember that. You cannot remember how tired your mother was, how much you held on

to her, your short, chubby fingers, grabbing for the only person who could understand your words. Nothing happened. That is why she was a good mother.

But no, that is what people will think you are saying. Even the other day, Larry, you remember from my office? He actually read your book — the whole thing! And he told me that he could not believe I survived all that stuff in China. I said can or cannot believe?

I don't care if it's not real. Did you already write this story about the flight?

Enough, Harrison. Nobody in this world remembers it like that.

Maybe you cannot finish the story because there is not enough there to make it a story. So that is why you want to put a leash in it. Some ugly image of a tired mother dragging her son. And if she takes off the leash before she sleeps and wakes up to no baby, drama! The uglier the drama, the better. I do not mean to discourage you.

Of course I know what ugly means.

Something that I want to look away from. Something I do not want to imagine.

Harrison, maybe we are using different dictionaries.