



# WRITERS' FORUM

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# Chink

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"Ease your clutch foot up," Sam orders Dong Ping. "You're ready for a smoother ride."

This is Dong Ping's third driving lesson, in his roommate Sam's battered Toyota. Sam says that Dong Ping will never become an American unless he learns to drive. Dong Ping does not reply that he has no intention of becoming an American. When he first arrived two months before he had held the idea of departure in his mind like a simple, but nonetheless true, equation: PhD = China. But now he's not so sure. Even his family expects him to stay, despite the fact that his mother made him swear he'd come home. His father, though, had said nothing. He wouldn't ask for something he didn't think he could get.

Sports cars and Mercedes whiz by as Dong Ping grips the wheel. It's a Saturday in early November and he and Sam are on one of La Jolla's wide boulevards. The streets are crowded with shoppers, driving from store to store. Frilled turkeys and obese Santas dangle from the lamp posts. The season of consumerism has arrived, Sam informs him, but Dong Ping can't see that it ever really left.

Four blocks in advance, he flicks the turn signal. "In Shanghai," he says, "it is often so crowded the bicyclists must move together, like a flock of birds."

"Cars are more like startled chickens," Sam says, propping his feet up. "Or ones with their heads recently removed." His green high tops leave black smudges on the dash. As usual he wears shorts, displaying the light brown fuzz which covers his long legs.

Dong Ping stalls in the midst of his turn. Behind him the elderly driver of a BMW convertible taps his horn. Without looking around, Sam thrusts his hand out the window, middle finger extended. The

man holds his fist down on the horn.

"Fascist aristocrat," Sam says over the blast. "Ignore him."

Dong Ping stares at the steering wheel, momentarily unable to remember which gear is where. "Put it in neutral first," Sam instructs. Dong Ping studies the diagram on the end of the gear shift as he starts the car. He applies too much gas and they lurch forward.

"Happens to the best of us, Jim," Sam says.

Jim is the name Dong Ping adopted soon after his arrival. On E-mail no one even knows he is Chinese, although that wasn't his intention. In a long stretch between stoplights, he quickly reaches fifty. Accelerating is his favorite part of driving.

"Downshift now, that's a good way to memorize where the gears are. Less wear on the brakes, too."

"But the light just turned green," Dong Ping says.

"I guarantee it'll change before we get there. This intersection's called Red Square: red in every direction and no progress. Get it?"

Dong Ping wonders sometimes if Sam realizes how smart he—Jim, Dong Ping—really is. Indeed he often wonders if intelligence translates at all; in China he never felt so stupid as he can feel here. "Maybe it should be called Tianammen," he says, downshifting into fourth. The engine revs.

"Tianammen," Sam repeats. "Good one. Soon you'll be doing stand-up." Sam spends many late night hours watching talk shows and comedians on TV, rather than studying for his long overdue orals in sociology.

Dong Ping puts it in third, slowing the car with a jolt. Then he grinds the gears, searching for second.

"Ouch. Wait a sec." Sam reaches over. "Clutch in? There she is." He shifts the car into second.

"Where should I go next?" Dong Ping asks at a stop sign.

"Wherever. You might get less traffic if you take a right here. Or you could practice parallel parking at that shopping center three blocks down."

Dong Ping chooses parking, which Sam has told him he will have to perform for the driver's test.

Sam turns on the radio. It's playing a song which was popular when Dong Ping lived in Shanghai, although there of course the lyrics were translated and sung by a Chinese. He had thought it was a Chinese song until he'd heard it over here. He can't understand most of the English now—songs are still barely decipherable—but he recalls it was a story about the kind of boyfriend the singer wanted.

"Who's singing?" Sam asks, turning up the volume. He frequently gives Dong Ping what he calls "culture quizzes."

Dong Ping listens harder. Into his mind comes the image of a woman dressed in black underwear, her hair a golden helmet. She

resembles the girls on the packages of imported condoms, sold in Shanghai street markets. The song fades out, her voice repeating, "Immaterial, immaterial," which, Dong Ping automatically registers, means unimportant. "Madonna," he says.

"None other than the mother," Sam declares.

Dong Ping turns into the shopping center, trying to recall the words of the Chinese version which, he suspects, were altered dramatically from the original. He finds an empty space in front of a pharmacy. The slot is far longer than the Toyota, but he knows it will take numerous attempts to insert the car into it. Parking, he has found, is much more difficult than driving.

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When they return to their campus apartment in the late afternoon Sam disappears into the bathroom, to shave and shower for the second time that day. That evening he will visit his ex-girlfriend Kelly, with whom, he has confessed to Dong Ping, he is still in love. Dong Ping has never been in love. In China he was considered rather good-looking, but his parents and teachers always told him to finish his education before thinking about girls. He would have gladly ignored such advice had he found anyone worth ignoring it for.

One of his mother's greatest fears is that he will marry an American, which is as far from anything that Dong Ping can imagine. Their mouths are so large, their behavior dauntingly effusive. He thinks of his English teacher last year, Miss Martinson. She was a young American woman with big feet she didn't attempt to hide. When she'd left Shanghai she had hugged him, her favorite student, good-bye, and it seemed she might crush his bones like dried flower stalks, a prospect which at the time did not seem unpleasant. He had never before been embraced by a female not in his family.

He knows, however, that his chances of being embraced here are slim, especially by an American girl. He sees the way most of them look at him, when they look at him at all—their eyes blandly expectant, as though at any moment he'll deliver a bowl of wonton soup, or tell some sad tale of the injustices of socialism. Chinese girls are considered sexy here, but never Chinese men. Chinese men are too skinny and serious to be sexy.

Things would be different, of course, if he spent his time with other Chinese. But that was something he had early on decided not to do. Why be in America if you have only Chinese friends? he'd thought, although more and more, he knows why. But Dong Ping has made it a general rule to speak only English, except when teaching Sam the names of dishes or the occasional curse. Even with

other Chinese students lately he has gone so far as to answer in English questions put to him in Chinese. They gaze at him strangely then, as if they don't understand what he's saying, although most of them, having been here longer, speak English much better than he does.

Dong Ping gets his post office box key out of his desk drawer and puts a light jacket on over his "San Francisco '49ers" T-shirt, a shrunken hand-me-down from Sam. Had Dong Ping's mother been there, she would have scolded him for not wearing enough clothing. By now, snow would already have fallen on the mountains near his village in Shaanxi province. The coldest he'd ever been, though, was during his four winters at Fudan University in Shanghai, despite its warmer temperatures. The cold at home was different somehow, clothes and food and habits all designed to mitigate it. One of his most vivid childhood memories is of holding his face above a heaped bowl of steaming noodles, to thaw his chin and nose.

Beyond the apartment complex, although the air is mild and it's still broad daylight, the street is eerily bereft of people. This is not unusual in La Jolla, but nonetheless Dong Ping feels dejected, as if everyone were attending some event to which he hadn't been invited. He cannot remember this ever happening in China. Even in the pre-dawn there was always some old man weaving through his T'ai Chi, or a vegetable vendor from the countryside, his heavy cart pulled by a tump line strapped across his forehead. But here the streets were often empty except for the cars.

Six blocks away he enters the post office. In his box is a notice for a package. Behind the counter stands the worker who'd first assisted him in September, when, after purchasing his stamps, he'd wandered the building in search of paste, to seal his envelopes and stamps securely. Eventually she'd leaned out her window and barked, "Can I help you?" It had taken three repetitions for her to understand his stammered request, after which she'd stated, "Our stamps stick by themselves." She had worn that expression common to many of the American faces he encountered: a mixture of pity, puzzlement, and superiority. Most Americans' knowledge about his country, he has come to realize, is limited to what they've read on placemats in Cantonese restaurants.

When he reaches the front of the line Dong Ping looks down at the counter and thrusts the yellow paper at her. She slides off her stool without a word. But when she brings out the cloth-wrapped package, she says, "A little something from home, eh?" Dong Ping nods. He knows that in the States parcels are taped and stapled in brown paper, not sewn in cotton. As he walks quickly away she emerges from the back and follows him to the door. Does she expect him to open the package in front of her? he wonders. But he's just the last customer, and without a word she locks the door behind him.

Outside it has already become dusk.

Although the traffic is far down the road, Dong Ping waits at the intersection for the "walk" signal. In the dimming light he examines the parcel. His address is written in his father's hand, with Dong Ping's name both in characters and Pinyin syllables. During the Cultural Revolution one of his father's minor penances for being an intellectual had been to write, in his beautiful script, sign after sign denouncing the old culture. Then in public he was made to burn the signs. His father liked to say that so much practice had greatly improved his calligraphy.

A shrill, tortured chirping comes out of the metal box beside Dong Ping's head. Sam had informed him that the noise alerts the blind that it's safe to cross the street. As Dong Ping passes in front of the cars, he thinks how rare it was in China to see a lone blind person. Either they were accompanied by a relative, or, more often, two or three blind people would walk together, arm in arm, sticks extended. They always seemed to manage well enough.

Music comes faintly from the open windows of his second floor apartment, and the lights blaze cozily against the dusk. But when he opens the door he can immediately tell that Sam has already left. Dong Ping stands in the doorway, freshly astonished by the luxury of his student housing unit: refrigerator large enough to hold nine dishes, hot running water any time of the day or even night, and, most luxurious and strange of all, his own room. Never in his life has he had his own room. The first weeks he couldn't sleep in there, would often on purpose fall asleep on the living room couch, in a room where at least there was the suggestion of another inhabitant. The nights he could hear Sam snoring through the walls Dong Ping slept most soundly, imagining his grandfather and younger brother nearby.

He goes into the kitchen and takes the scissors from the drawer beside the sink. Carefully, he snips the thread binding the parcel. Inside is a letter, his father's old copy of Tang dynasty poems, some packages of pickled radishes, a plastic sack of dried mushrooms, and a surgical mask, worn in winter to warm the lungs and prevent the spread of disease. He feels a surge of annoyance and affection, that his mother would go to the trouble of including this, despite the fact that he's told her it never gets really cold here. Or maybe she sent it because in his last letter he'd mentioned all the cars and smog. For an awful moment he imagines himself wearing the mask to class. In San Diego he'd seen a scrawny beggar so enveiled, holding a sign with the one word, "AIDS."

He folds the packing cloth into a neat square, until the only character remaining visible is "Mei," the word for "beautiful," also the first syllable of "America." America is, of course, not beautiful in the way he had been led to believe. But he does admire the cocky

way Americans throw their shoulders back, as though their lives were something they could choose, as if, indeed, they owned the world. This was an expression taught by Miss Martinson. She'd said it meant to feel great. The class had told her it was a truly American expression: in China, even if you felt great, you would certainly never feel like you owned the world. She had laughed loudly, showing her teeth. She believed they would succeed in life if they studied hard and did their best. She did not realize the importance of connections and family, not to mention sheer luck. But Dong Ping too has stopped believing in luck. The only thing he believes in anymore, he tells himself, is physics. His grandmother would have said he'd believe in luck again if his own turned bad.

Although he knows he won't use either, Dong Ping tosses the mask and packing cloth into what Sam calls the "earthquake preparedness" drawer, where they keep their large supply of ramen noodles. At the Mexican market they buy ten for a dollar, a price that nearly rivals the cost in China. Dong Ping selects shrimp-flavored and turns the knob of the electric stove, then fills a pot with water. Into the water he plunks five rolled balls of ground beef. To that he adds a few minced leaves of cilantro, which he keeps with its stems in a jar of water in the nearly empty refrigerator. He rolls a piece between his palms until they reek of it. Then he covers his face with his hands and breathes in.

In America, eating, like combing his hair or bathing, is usually just another task to accomplish. Since he was plucked from home at age sixteen, after scoring so highly on the national physics exam, only rarely has he had really good food. But at least at Fudan he always ate with others. They hunched over their bowls of rice and gobbled noisily, fighting off the hunger which marauded their bodies. He remembers how once, after a long time of only vegetables and rice, the cafeteria had served donkey, which he had never eaten before. It was some of the most delicious meat he had ever tasted, a fact he had mistakenly relayed to Sam. His roommate goes through brief periods of vegetarianism, during which he lectures Dong Ping about the dangers of animal products.

Purposefully forgoing meat, however, is something Dong Ping can't imagine himself doing. It will be a long time, or maybe never, until he adapts to many American customs. When he cooks, for example, he still uses every edible part, unlike the Americans he knows, who toss out the fish head and all but the broccoli's flower. Dong Ping sucks the marrow from every bone, gnaws the fat off each gristled joint. At home it demonstrates bounty and satiation to food or the table. But here, surrounded by people so wealthy they don't even consider themselves so, he feels more impoverished than he ever has.

He rips the plastic open and dumps the noodles into the roiling

water, stirring them with a chopstick. Then he holds his face above the steam, considering whether or not to have some of the pickled radishes. He must remember to tell his mother not to waste money sending him such things, since Sam takes him regularly to an Asian market which sells most of what he might want.

Out the window he sees a pudgy red-headed boy, the son of his neighbor. Last week the boy had pulled back the corners of his eyes and hissed, "Slant-eyed slope," as Dong Ping emerged from the laundryroom. Dong Ping had felt more embarrassed than offended. He'd considered telling the child's father, but had not wanted to shame him. Since then the boy has kept his distance.

Dong Ping gets his bowl out of the cupboard. He remembers Miss Martinson writing on the board derogatory words for blacks, after they had read a story by a black man in which many of those same words were used. As he drains the noodles over the sink, he recalls that she had also listed slurs for whites. He can't recall the ones for whites or blacks, but he does remember those for Chinese. Many were from the Vietnam War, she'd explained, but were often used indiscriminately for any Asian. The class had sat very quietly as she enunciated each word. They were deeply embarrassed for her, that she did not realize her rudeness.

"You should know these terms," she'd declared. "Not, of course, ever to use them, but to know when they're being used." Dong Ping had realized then that, like his father, she had an inordinate belief in the power of words. Dong Ping himself prefers numbers, symbols. But dutifully he had recorded these terms for his race and lodged them in his memory, just as he did other vocabulary which might appear on the GRE's.

He pours the noodles into the bowl and sits at the table. The ugly names flood into his head. "Gook," he says, for the first time aloud, pronouncing it to rhyme with "cook." The word reminds him of one Sam recently used. "You are a true-blue geek," Sam had claimed, after Dong Ping had been at the lab for twelve hours. He hasn't told Sam that he spends much of his time there staring at the wall, unable to concentrate. "Gook geek," Dong Ping says now, tentatively, as if considering an answer to a difficult question.

He empties the flavor packet onto his food, stirs, and lifts the bowl near his face. "Chink," he murmurs to the noodles, then frowns. There is another meaning for this word, and he searches his mind for it, as if scrolling down a computer screen. Soon he locates the word's alternate definitions: a crack, and also to make a crack, or to fill one up. Do Americans think of these other meanings when they call a Chinese that? Dong Ping doubts it. But the name approaches the way he felt when arriving, how he still feels: that he's standing in the crevice between where he came from and where he is now. He knows such a crack will never be entirely closed, no matter how

narrow it becomes, no matter how long he is here.

He bends his head to the raised bowl and scoops some noodles into his mouth. Although he is alone, he tries to eat quietly. In America, he has learned, slurping does not indicate a healthy appreciation of one's meal, but is merely considered rude.

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"On the freeway, remember: stay in the right lane," Sam says. They're headed to L.A., to spend Thanksgiving with Sam's family. The last time Dong Ping had driven on the freeway he'd gotten caught in the passing lane, engendering the blaring hatred of those speedier cars behind him. "No loss of face to get passed," Sam adds. "Just keep right."

"Like George Bush," Dong Ping retorts, accelerating onto the ramp.

"Exactly. Better yet, like Nixon. Don't you Chinese love old Tricky Dick?"

"Ah, the great Nixon. He stood on the Wall. He brought our people together."

"A lying egomaniac."

"The qualities of all great leaders." He grins at Sam to indicate he is joking. Sometimes Americans don't get it when he is trying to be funny.

Sam grimaces and shakes his head. "So young and yet so jaded."

"The best jade comes from China."

"So it does." Sam leans over to glance at the dash. "Watch your speed there."

Dong Ping is delighted to see that he is going seventy, his fastest yet. The real beauty of America is that you can go anywhere, although of course that didn't answer the question of what happened once you got there.

"Possible unmarked cop coming up on the shoulder," Sam warns.

Dong Ping lifts his foot and taps the brakes lightly, as Sam has taught him, to slow his speed without drawing attention to himself. But the police car turns on its hidden lights and enters the road behind him. Dong Ping's entire body flushes instantly with heat.

Sam takes his feet off the dash and sits upright. "Okay, be cool," he says. "Let me do the talking." He pushes his curly hair back from his forehead. "I love cops. They love me."

Dong Ping pulls over. Glancing at Sam, he experiences a deep feeling of foreboding. Sam wears a holey T-shirt that reads, "U.S. out of North America." It still confounds Dong Ping, how Americans criticize not just their leaders and government policies, but their country itself.

Dong Ping fumbles in his pocket for his learner's permit. The

policeman, he notices in the rear view mirror, is black. Four years ago he'd seen his first Negro in Shanghai, where there were many African students, commonly referred to as "black devils."

Sam leans across him as the policeman approaches the window. "Hi, officer. I guess we were speeding."

"Your friend here was," the cop says, unsmiling. "Do you have a license?" Dong Ping hands it to him. There is a long silence as he studies it. "Do you realize you were going seventy-one miles an hour? Do you realize I could revoke your learner's permit?"

"His English is terrible, officer," Sam interrupts. "He's a visiting scientist from China. Let me translate." Dong Ping's eyes widen, but before he can protest Sam turns to him and says. "San wu ben dan chao ni made. Jiaozi kuaizi dofu!" Dong Ping's stomach churns loudly and he blushes, in response, no doubt, to the Chinese for "dumpling," and the unkindly reference to his mother.

"It's my fault," Sam adds. "I should have told him to slow down. Can you give me a ticket instead, as the accompanying driver?" He waves his license in the air. Dong Ping feels the blood throbbing at the edges of his ears. It is unwise to risk making an official feel foolish. Don't the police have connections with the embassy, and the university? In China everyone knew if you had problems with the Public Security Bureau.

The cop glares at Sam. "He has to understand our rules or he shouldn't be driving."

"He does understand. He was probably just thinking in kilometers. They have kilometers over there. We were talking about his country, which he misses very much."

The cop examines Dong Ping unblinkingly, then writes something on his small clipboard. He tears off a pink slip of paper and hands it to Dong Ping. "Just a warning this time, but don't do it again. We've got you in the computer for this."

Dong Ping nods, in his relief forgetting that he is not supposed to understand. The cop leans down into the window, his face only inches away from Dong Ping's. It occurs to Dong Ping that this is the closest he's ever been to a black person. All of a sudden he hears Miss Martinson's strained voice pronouncing, "nigger," a word he had until that moment forgotten.

"You understand everything I'm saying, don't you?" the cop says. His pupils sparkle darkly and for a second, with his lids narrowed, his eyes look almost like Chinese eyes. Dong Ping stares back and doesn't answer.

"Thanks so much, officer," Sam says. "China thanks you, America thanks you. A great act of diplomacy."

The cop shakes his head and straightens. "Watch yourself," he says, pointing one finger at Dong Ping. "And you too, smartass," he says to Sam. He saunters back to his car.

Dong Ping collapses against the seat. His legs feel as if they are filled entirely with liquid. "How did you do that?" he mutters. Never in his life will he be so unafraid as Sam.

"Do what?" Sam says, grinning. The cop pulls past them, nodding curtly in their direction. "Want me to drive? Actually no, you should keep going. Back in the saddle and all that."

Miss Martinson had explained this expression, adding that it wouldn't really apply in China. "You Chinese don't ride horses, you eat them," she'd remarked, sounding slightly repulsed. But what about Mongolia? he had wanted to protest. What about the tombs outside Xian, full of life-size clay horses? And anyway, horsemeat was a luxury few Chinese could afford. In America, he's recently discovered, such meat is fed to dogs.

He twists the key in the ignition and places his quivering hands on the wheel. Sam glances at his blanched face. "You okay?" he asks.

Dong Ping nods. "Return to the horse's back," he says. Five miles down the road he remembers to say thank you, a habit he has not yet fully acquired. Why would you thank your friend or relation unless you had no intention of reciprocating? People here, though, say thank you for everything, even when—and almost, it seems especially when—they don't mean it. But, because he does mean it, Dong Ping thanks Sam first in English, then in Chinese.

"De nada," says Sam, using the only Spanish Dong Ping understands.

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The lawn of Sam's home is yellowish brown, not lush green as Dong Ping had anticipated. The house stands within a mysterious moat of red rocks, out of which jut a few scraggly bushes. Dong Ping thinks they could use a good dose of nightsoil, but he knows better than to mention that. He glimpses a pool in the backyard. His mother will be pleased when he describes this, although it might cause her worry. Neither Dong Ping, nor anyone else in his family, knows how to swim, a fact he has managed to hide from Sam. Dong Ping hopes that because it is, technically, autumn, he will not be expected to go in the water.

Sam's sister is in the kitchen, washing dishes. The first thing that occurs to Dong Ping is that she does not look like a person who would wash dishes. The next thing he thinks is that she is one of the most terrifyingly pretty girls he has ever seen. She is, he knows, a senior in high school—thus only a few years younger than himself—but she looks much older, or at least more sophisticated. She wears a short shirt that reveals her belly button, which is pierced by a thin silver ring. Her hair is long and wavy and dyed as black as a Chinese girl's. But in no other way does she resemble a Chinese girl. Her

body is that blend of muscular voluptuousness particular to the American female. She wears no bra and her nipples visibly graze the cloth of her blouse. Dong Ping does not know where to look. Eventually he chooses the kitchen sink.

"This is Angela," Sam says. "She's a brat." She throws a wadded paper towel at Sam. "Angela, this is Jim. He's a genius."

"Hi," Angela says, moving forward and holding out her hand. Dong Ping stares at it a second before realizing he's meant to take it.

"I've never met a genius before," she says. "Sam thinks he's one but isn't. What's your real name?"

"What?" He takes his hand back from her damp, firm grip. "Oh. Dong Ping." He wonders if he will ever get used to the directness of Americans.

"Dung Ping," she repeats, then giggles. Early on Sam had told him the meaning of that word, as well as the potential obscenity of his surname when pronounced correctly. English often seems a minefield of the obscene and the absurd.

"Dong Ping," he says.

She tries again, serious, doing better this time. "What does it mean?" she asks, tilting her head slightly, her reddened lips parted.

Sam looks at him with interest. "Yeah, what does it mean?"

No one has asked him this before, and Dong Ping is surprised by how much he wants to tell them, despite the fact that they'll probably be disappointed. Americans are so easily disappointed. "In Chinese the surname comes first," he says.

"Your 'Dong' to my 'Goldenburg,'" Angela injects.

He nods. "'Ping,' like Angela, is given by the parents. The sound is ordinary, but written it is an unusual name. It comes from the character for peace."

"Show me," Angela says, grabbing a notepad and pencil from beside the telephone. Dong Ping writes his name, picturing as he does so the fluent strokes of his father's calligraphy. He points to 'Ping.' "My father did not realize this name might be embarrassing for a boy. But now I am accustomed."

"Oh, I like it," Angela exclaims, examining the characters as if they made sense to her. "It's so hopeful or something."

Sam snorts. "Like Mom and Dad were hopeful, when they named you."

She ignores her brother. "So why'd you change it when you came here?"

Dong Ping flushes guiltily, thinking how upset his father would be if he knew. "It is only for temporary convenience. Legally I kept my true name." But on visa and university forms he's been Americanized, not to Jim, but to Ping Dong. It's a bad joke which he doesn't fail to get. "Most Americans are not good at Chinese names," he

adds. "With Jim I do not have to make explanations."

"Like now," she says, grinning.

"I haven't mind."

"No, no," she laughs. "You have one but you don't."

"I beg your pardon?"

"It's 'I don't mind,' not 'I have no mind.'"

"All right," he says. "I do not mind." Clearly she's not embarrassed for him, so Dong Ping doesn't feel embarrassed himself.

Sam opens the refrigerator. "Refreshment?"

"Yes, please."

Sam goes into the pantry and Angela leans closer to Dong Ping. "Speak in Chinese," she requests softly, as if she is asking him to do something he oughtn't.

Dong Ping hesitates only a moment. "Shenme shuo?" he says.

"What'd you say?" she asks intently.

"I asked what I should say." He can't help himself from grinning.

"No, I mean it," she protests. "Talk like you're talking to me."

"Ni hen piaoliang," he says without thinking.

"What's that mean?"

"I said your house is very nice." Dong Ping cannot remember ever lying so blatantly to someone's face. What he has really said is that she is very pretty, something he has never said to anyone. He is relieved when Sam appears, carrying a six pack of beer.

"A half-hour in the freezer and then our holiday will begin," Sam says as he stacks the bottles in the icebox. "C'mon, I'll show you around."

\* \* \*

Sam takes him through the house, pointing out the television, the downstairs bathroom, the back porch and pool. "As they say, 'My house is your house.' Make yourself at home."

"Okay," Dong Ping says, although he's uncertain what exactly that entails.

As they ascend the stairs Sam says over his shoulder, "Don't pay any attention to Angela. She flirts with everyone."

"I don't mind."

Sam raises an eyebrow.

"You'll be sharing a room with me," he says when they reach the upstairs hallway. "Hope that's okay. Mom's converted the guest room to her office."

"No problem." This phrase has an exact Chinese equivalent, so dong Ping says it often, although it's difficult to pronounce correctly. On TV he'd heard a comedian do an exaggerated imitation of the switching of "r's" and "l's" by Asians. Since then he's tried to speak even more precisely, although he suspects that he still fre-

quently says what he does not mean. He remembers how once Miss Martinson, intending to say in Chinese that she was a teacher, had instead declared that she was a mouse.

Sam opens a door at the end of the long carpeted hallway. He flops down in an armchair and points to the bed Dong Ping will occupy.

"I am most used to sharing a room," Dong Ping says, placing his bag on the floor. "In Shanghai I lived with seven other boys."

"No wonder you're such an easy-going roommate," Sam says. "I'd go crazy with that many other people. Were you still speaking by the time you graduated?"

"Oh yes. We are the closest of friends. They are like my brothers now."

"I'll say. I've only shared a room once in my life, my first year of college, and that was awful. You Chinese are better at brotherly love."

"We have to be good at it," Dong Ping says. "We have no choice." He thinks of all the empty rooms they have just walked through, how the very air seems tinged with loneliness. Such a house could hold many Chinese families, but not, he knows, if that house is in America. Here families are something to escape from. Buildings are constructed with privacy in mind, not common space, and on the street one car after another carries a single passenger. Individuality, he is slowly beginning to understand, is the hardest American lesson, the one nobody prepared him for.

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"Call me Lucinda," Sam's mother keeps insisting, which Dong Ping would if he could remember it. But for some reason his mind won't take hold of her name. So when he needs to address her he says Mrs. Goldenburg. In China he wouldn't have such a problem. He could simply call her "aunt." He imagines himself saying that in English and coughs in order not to laugh.

"Have some water, Dong Ping." For the last twenty-four hours Angela has used his name at every opportunity, which he rather likes. After breakfast she had run twelve miles, a feat he is sure he could never accomplish.

In front of Mrs. Goldenburg squats a monstrous turkey and a stack of plates. Painted in blue on the white china is a classic scene: a lake, a temple, a man ascending a steep mountain. "White or dark, Jim?" she asks, shining blade poised above the bird. Dong Ping stares at her blankly, wondering briefly if he has been insulted.

"What kind of meat," Sam explains.

"Everything is fine," he says, vaguely aware that this is not quite what he means. His English suffers in group situations.

Sam shakes his head. "It's a tradition. You gotta choose your meat at Thanksgiving."

Dong Ping tries to recollect Miss Martinson's lecture on American holidays, but all he can remember right now is how in springtime they drain chicken eggs, then paint the empty shells and hide them. The Goldenburgs watch him expectantly. He clears his throat. "Liver is delicious, please."

Angela makes a gagging sound and Dong Ping reddens. Sam looks at her sternly. "Everything's taken out of the turkey," he says to Dong Ping. "Then it's filled with stuffing—bread and spices." Dong Ping wonders if, as with the eggs, they throw away the animal's insides. Chinese considered organs some of the best parts.

Mrs. Goldenburg's tanned hands sag above the carcass. "How about some of each?" she suggests.

"Yes, thank you."

"Skin?" she asks, and Dong Ping again wonders for a second if he has missed something. "I'm afraid it's rather fatty," she adds, her gold bracelets jangling as she saws.

"He'll like that, Mom," Sam says. "Everybody's not on a diet in China." Dong Ping has explained to Sam that Chinese considered fat delicious and a proof of opulence and generosity.

"You certainly could stand to put on some weight." Mrs. Goldenburg carves three thick slabs, then reaches with a wide spoon inside the bird and plops a brown, gooey mound beside the slices. Sam passes the plate to Dong Ping. It feels ominously heavy as he places it on the table. He's still not used to eating such large, intact pieces of meat.

"Angela?" Mrs. Goldenburg asks.

"White, thinly sliced, just a little stuffing," Angela orders.

"Please," adds Mrs. Goldenburg.

"Puh-leez."

"And are you vegetarian today, Sam?"

"Turkeys are made so stupid by overbreeding that they'll drown in a rainstorm," Sam replies. "When they feel a raindrop they look up to see what it is. But they forget to look back down and eventually their throats fill with water."

"Gross," Angela says.

Mrs. Goldenburg points her two-pronged fork at him. "Is that a yes or a no?"

"What the hell. It's a holiday. Gimme a slab of that fatty dark meat. Better yet, give me a whole leg."

"Watch your language, please. And I will not have you gnawing like Henry the Eighth at the dining room table." She carves two pieces and dollops stuffing on top. For herself she cuts one small wedge of white meat. Dong Ping notices that his plate is more highly piled than any of the others. This, at least, is something

recognizable: the guest has the most food, and must gorge himself until he cannot possibly eat anymore. But in China everyone would serve themselves from dishes in the middle. The host would select with his chopsticks the most delicious pieces and place them in the guest's bowl. The guest, of course, would demur repeatedly, and the host would, in turn, insist.

"Gravy, Dong Ping?" asks Angela, lifting a container which resembles a cream pitcher. He wonders if he is supposed to soak the meat with milk, like cereal.

"It's made from the juices," Sam elucidates. "It's good. You should try it." He demonstrates, pouring the thick brown liquid over his turkey. Dong Ping comforts himself by noting the gravy's resemblance to oyster sauce.

"I'm glad you could join us on this special day, Jim," Mrs. Goldenburg says, her voice quavering slightly. She clears her throat and glances at her children. Angela and Sam sigh loudly and put down their utensils. "Let's give thanks," Mrs. Goldenburg says with solemnity, inclining her head forward, in the direction of the turkey.

"Thanks," Angela murmurs dolefully, raising her eyebrows at Dong Ping. He studies his plate, where only the bare blue peak of the mountain remains visible amid the piles of drab-colored food.

"Yeah," echoes Sam. "Thanks a lot."

But what are they thankful for, exactly? It strikes Dong Ping that he really has no idea. And is the guest in this circumstance required to speak? Before he can decide, Sam asks him to pass the salt and pepper. Dong Ping takes this as an indication that the ceremony is already over. Either he missed his chance or he was meant to keep silent.

The Goldenburgs begin to eat. Dong Ping picks up his silverware. He does not lift his plate off the table, nor does he bend to it, but, like his hosts, he sits up straightly and brings each forkful with the utmost care to his mouth. Throughout the long meal the food seems very far away.

\* \* \*

Angela plunks down on the sofa beside Dong Ping. He's in what Sam termed 'the family room,' reading the newspaper. "Mind if I join you?" she asks.

"No. Thank you." A few hours have passed since dinner. "Sam is sleeping," he says, feeling that he should explain his presence alone here.

"Sam's always unconscious when he's home. You'd think he never got a wink elsewhere. Does he sleep all the time at school?"

"He is too busy watching TV."

"Poor Sam." She laughs. "Mom says he's too much like Dad, the

way he can't finish anything. Like how Dad couldn't see through to the end with us. But you're not like that, I can tell. Sam says you'll finish way ahead of him. How old are you, anyway?"

"Twenty," he says, embarrassed. She shouldn't be telling him these things about her family, although from Sam he knew of Mr. Goldenburg's departure seven years before.

Angela stretches her legs out on the table in front of them. "God, you're only three years older than me and you're already thousands of miles from home. What's it like to live in a different country?"

"Different," he says. He doesn't mean to be glib. He just can't think of any better answer.

"Railroads and laundromats, that's what we know about Chinese here. And high SAT scores. Chinese kids always do great on tests. I do lousy on tests but I'm still smart."

Dong Ping laughs. Like Sam, Angela seems nearly fearless, although it occurs to Dong Ping that he might be mistaking outspokenness for bravery. Maybe they're just afraid of different things.

"I hear you almost got busted," she says.

Dong Ping refolds the newspaper. "Excuse me?" he asks.

"The cop." She nudges him in the arm. "you know, seventy-odd miles an hour."

"Oh, yes." He recalls the cop's shrewd, almond eyes. At what point, Dong Ping wonders, had he given himself away?

"You sure got lucky."

"Yes," he says, but it was something other than luck, although he isn't sure what. He knows though that he escaped punishment partly because the cop realized he was lying.

"Sam says you're a natural speed demon, that your first time out you went sixty," Angela says, flipping her hair over her shoulder.

"This I learned from my teacher."

"I bet. Sam drives like a bat out of hell, and has the tickets to prove it. Did your family have a car in China?"

He laughs and Angela blushes. "Dumb question," she says.

"There is no reason you would know. I assumed a great deal about America before I came here."

"Were you right?"

"Occasionally." He smiles. "Not often."

"I bet it's a lot worse than you expected."

"Yes. But also better, sometimes."

"Will you go back?"

He smooths his pants over his thighs. Beneath his palms the sharp ridges of his kneecaps feel like the bottoms of upturned bowls. "I don't know."

"Do you want to?"

"This too I do not know."

She cocks her head to one side, a gesture Dong Ping recognizes

from Sam, right before he delivers a punchline. "What do you hate the most here?" she asks.

Dong Ping hunches forward. Americans rarely inquired about his opinions of their country. Or they wanted him simply to make comparisons, and so often there was no comparison. What they really wanted to know, anyway, was how America was better. Or there was the other type of query, asked by those who pictured only fat, grinning Buddhas when they thought of China. These people asked about Lao Tzu and shiatsu, chakras and qi and body points, as if Asia were a borderless land, populated solely by mystics. There is nothing he can say without offending her. He sighs and shakes his head.

"Sorry," Angela says. "Probably what you hate most are nosy Americans."

"I do not hate them," he says, peering over his shoulder at her. "They just surprise me." He realizes belatedly that perhaps he has been rude, but she doesn't seem insulted.

"Let me ask this, then," she says. "What do you miss?"

Relieved by this familiar question, he reclines into the pillows. "My family, of course. The cooking of my mother." He laughs. "I mean, my mother's cooking. My brother and I would wash and slice the vegetables while my father cut the meat." This is a scenario he has described before, which seems to satisfy some idea Americans have of his previous life. "When the oil was very hot she threw the food in. It made a wonderful sound."

"But what besides people or things or places?" Angela asks. Her earnest expression reminds him of Miss Martinson's classroom face. But elsewhere his teacher had appeared grudgingly defensive, as if something were about to be taken from her, or already had been. He knows now what she must have felt like—that she was always about to be made a fool of, and that she might not even realize it when it happened.

He turns away from Angela, recalling in that instant how it was to live amid people who looked like he did. Inconspicuousness is entirely different from the anonymity of America, which will hollow him out, he fears, as surely as an Easter egg. Maybe what he misses and what he hates amount to the same thing. But such an equation doesn't follow, for what he has left behind and what he has reached are too disparate even to be opposites.

He feels Angela's stare on him and, for what seems the millionth time, he searches for words. Will he still be doing this in a year, or five, or twenty? He cannot imagine thinking in anything except Chinese. And anyway there is no English for what he misses, for what he knows he won't get back, even if he does go back. But he remembers, in summer, bicycling alongside the rice paddies—how, after a rain, that singular green seemed to be a very source of light.

He runs a hand through his hair and faces her again. "Maybe the better question is, What do I not miss?"

"Okay," she says, her large but beautiful mouth smiling. "What don't you miss?" And there is so much he could say, and it could mean almost anything.