

# The Apostrophe

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*The Hong Kong Writers Circle is a member organisation for writers of all levels and of all genres.*

*On an annual basis, the Hong Kong Writers Circle publishes an anthology of short stories. In this publication, The Apostrophe, the five points of the bauhinia flower (Hong Kong's emblem) are paralleled each quarter by exactly five original pieces, each of which has a connection to Hong Kong.*

*The Apostrophe is edited by members of the Hong Kong Writers Circle.*

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# The Illusion of Action

Editor's Note

The interpretation of what it means to act – or not act – or pretend to be acting (what is acting, if not pretending?) depends on both the author and the reader.

In Issue # 7 of *The Apostrophe*, the five pieces examine the difference between words and action, and the identities from whence they both arise.

The very concept of identity underlies the main drivers of action in “Act Like a Clone”, as well as self-concept in “The Reminder”. But “Two Memories of St. Michael’s”, highlights the stark contrast of speech and deeds.

Meanwhile, in “Walk Away” the characters remain almost motionless as the scene plays out; the actions they have done, or wished they had taken, are implied or remembered. The story asks the reader to consider the meaning of love in the face of violence. And in the novel excerpt “We’ll See the Animals One Day”, the absence and presence of love is demonstrated through actions but revealed in words.

By ruminating on this contrast, readers may find another paradox: that choosing to read and understand is fundamental to the most deliberate acts of our lives.

Jan Lee, Editor-in-Chief



# Act Like a Clone

Anne Jiao

## One

She called me “One” when I came out of the OBA, cold and shivering – the world white, twinkling and fluorescent. They wrapped me in something soft and blue to make the cold and wetness go away. Then Kathleen – my master, as I would later come to know her, a woman with light hair, periwinkle eyes, and red lips – handed me a reflective plate.

“Look into it,” she said. I saw a face – her face – gazing back at me. I knocked the plate away, feeling the first bloom of pain in my hand. I heard her chuckle, “She came out even better than I thought..”

“They’re beautiful, aren’t they?” the man in the white coat said. “She takes after her master, of course.”

Kathleen smiled. As she lifted my face up into the blinding light, I squinted. My breath caught in my throat and I began to cough. I heard the beeping of the machine as my throat tightened.

“What’s wrong with her? She’s coughing blood.” Kathleen looked at me in concern.

It was the last thing I heard before falling into darkness.

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Kathleen told me that they had misprinted a section of my lung, that the damage, though not serious, was chronic. She strapped a portable, teal oxygen tank to me, to make my breathing and my work easier. She explained why I was created: to fulfill the basic needs of my master. I began to do small errands for her: sweeping the checkered, marble floors as she went to her

auditions, tending her gardens, bringing her friends tea as they discussed their arts, sometimes even watching her practice her lines.

“What do you think, One?” she would ask, after she finished reading her lines. I could never quite understand them, or the point of them. She’d give me a pitying look. “You don’t get it, do you? I always forget no matter how human you look, that you simply are not. I can’t imagine what it would be like to have my genes for creativity snipped away like some flyaway branches.”

She referenced this about me frequently – that I didn’t understand her, that I wasn’t human, that I didn’t know pain or emotion. As if to prove this, she and her friends liked to do “Spellings” on us over tea.

“Dance on Colette’s lap, One,” she’d command. I’d feel my insides clenched like a fist, followed by a heat spreading into my body. My body’s movement would take me unawares. The physical exertion made me wheeze, sending my master’s friends into peals of laughter.

“No wonder you don’t dance, Kathleen. It’s absolutely hideous.” Laura would say, contorting her face until she would cry from laughing.

I could see my master’s jaw tighten as she looked at me. She’d wave away the command with a swipe of her fingers on her tablet, and I’d fall into a heap on the Persian rug, trying to catch my breath.

“I assure you, my dancing looks nothing like that. One just isn’t made for strenuous exercise; the lab misprinted her lung.”

“That’s quite uncommon at my lab, Kathleen. Perhaps you need to upgrade.” Isa said as she stroked her Number’s long, jet-black hair. It was a perfect image of her, sitting at her side.



I could feel my master's excitement from the care she put into her dress, the slight lilt in her voice, and the brilliant baubles she stacked on her wrist. She even asked me to change out of my usual white muslin uniform, handing me a sky blue, boat-neck dress from the back of her closet. She put it on me, and it was unlike anything I had ever worn: soft, cool, and satiny against my skin.



“All of the best Talents will be there, One. I was so lucky Colette secured us an admission.” She brushed my blond hair as if I was a doll, until every strand was secured into a tight, low chignon.

“I do hope I run into Damon. Surely he’ll know who they chose for Anastasia. Or perhaps he can put in a good word with Logan, if the part is not decided yet. What do you think?”

Her eyes met mine in the mirror. My master was a vision in red, wearing a long, low-cut dress that swept the floors like she would sweep hearts.

“Yes, Kathleen, if you think that is best.”

Kathleen sighed in exasperation. “Don’t you Numbers have anything to say other than, ‘yes, master, no, master’? I’ve never understood why they delete so many of your talkativeness genes. I’d prefer that to this complete stoicism.”

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The house was perched on the hill amidst a Milky Way of city lights. We heard the chatter of voices even from the outside. We wound our way into conversations.

“How good to see you!”

“I loved you in *Midwives of Verona*! You were absolutely brilliant”

“What do I have to do to work with you, Kathleen? Kevin is a bore to deal with when I’d rather just deal with you.”

“I’m looking to go into film exclusively for the next year, Peter, so I won’t be up for any of your pilots this season,” Kathleen said with a coy smile.

“Stay here with the other Numbers, while the adults talk,” Kathleen whispered to me, as Peter took her arm and led her away.

I wandered the party aimlessly, from the table with the miniature bites to the tall windows looking out onto the brilliant, aqua pool. The other Numbers acknowledged me and I dangled my legs into the lukewarm water. There wasn't much to say to one another – we did our duty, and our duty was to not talk unless we were spoken to.

There was a commotion behind me at the hall's entrance, a crowd, and a surge of whispering energy. When I walked into the room, my eyes were drawn to the man at the center of adulatory pats.

“We all knew it would be you, Richard! Man of the hour.” The man held a golden statue in his hand that matched his cropped, silver hair and tanned skin. His blue eyes glimmered as he replied,

“It's about time! It only took twenty two years and five nominations – I thought I was going to become the next Scorsese.”

“Are you comparing yourself to Scorsese, now?” The group laughed. I leaned against the spiral staircase, observing them from afar.

I wondered if I'd know that feeling of laughter. And as if he had heard the question in my mind, the man named Richard shifted his gaze, from the man next to him to me. I could feel a strange thing – a heat climbing into my neck and face – the feeling of my breath catching. He strode towards me, chest high, confident.

“You must be Kathleen Newland. I was hoping you would be here.” I couldn't answer, so I simply looked at him. I wanted to ask him why he was hoping, how he knew my master's name,

and who he was. He seemed to waver a little at my silence – a small worried furrow of his brow.

“How are you doing tonight?”

“I am ... well.” I replied. I wondered what my master would say in my place. She would surely have a witty remark, a quick response. Instead I asked, “Why were you hoping?”

“Excuse me?”

“You said you were hoping to see me here. Why?”

The man blushed. “Well, I just always thought it would be great to work together on something.” He turned to me with his blue eyes, a little sheepish. “All right, it’s not as casual as that. I have a story, and it’s never gotten made. It’s a strange story – maybe too much so – but it’s stuck with me. And I always thought of you in it, even though we’ve never met. Do you think I’m crazy?”

My breathing stopped and the world spun. I fell into him, listening to the sounds of my own rasps. My purse. I saw a swirl of familiar red swoop in and Richard’s shocked face as my master caught me in her arms, and pulled the oxygen mask over my face.

“Sometimes, I feel as if I’m the one taking care of her.” Kathleen said. “I’m Kathleen Newland.” She said, stretching out her hand to Richard. “And this is One.”

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We saw Richard more and more in the coming weeks. He brought dinner over, or wine or little gifts. He brought bright fuchsia orchids. Kathleen preferred the white ones, but never told him otherwise.

It was after the twelfth bouquet that he brought up the project. I poured coffee from the French press into porcelain cups for them in the sunroom, and his eyes flickered to me momentarily before turning to my master.

“You’d be amazing for it. The character is beautiful, untouchable. Thomas wants Laura Anderssen, but he doesn’t know I already have you in mind.”

“My Laura? I didn’t know she was up for the part at all,” Kathleen said, sipping her coffee to hide her satisfaction. Richard had pleased her, though I could not quite tell how. They sidled closer together on the couch.

“All you have to do is say the word, and it’s yours.”

“Well then ... yes.”

They leaned into each other, and sealed the promise with a kiss.

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“Just because he’s won an Oscar doesn’t mean he’s loaded, you know,” Colette said at one of their weekly high teas.

“The artsy ones never make the big bucks.” Isa nodded in agreement, “What was the last tentpole he made anyway?”

My master sniffed in disapproval as I massaged her shoulders and neck.

“You know none of that matters to me. Just his talent, which he has a tremendous amount of. Have you seen Raven? It was visionary.”

“My dear Kathleen, your tastes have changed in so short a time. I never took you for the artsy, horror type,” Laura smirked.

Her muscles tensed underneath my hands like the tension of the conversation. They had stretched just a bit too far. Kathleen took a slow sip of her coffee, considering Laura over the rim.

“Yes, you’re right. That’s much more up your alley, Laura. It’s too bad about the Truly, Madly role. If only Richard had written two parts for it instead of the one reserved for me.”

My master’s uncoiling muscles showed her pleasure at Laura’s embarrassment.

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Richard made me dress up for the occasion. The inside of the store glimmered softly, its walls in midnight velvet, as if we had walked into a jewelry box ourselves.

“You know Kathleen better than anyone,” Richard said. “Just walk around and pretend you’re her, and pick out something she would like. I’m sure they designed your tastes to be similar.” He gave me a boyish grin. “I actually feel rather clever, thinking up something like this.” I avoided looking at him for too long, and simply nodded.

The lady took out a tray of glittering rings. “Madam, take a look at these – they are some of our finest.” She laid three rings in front of me: the first, a large yellow cushion diamond the size of my thumb with a halo of white diamonds surrounding it, the second a sizable solitaire, simple and elegant, and the third, which I picked up gently.

It was delicate and pink, and the smallest of the three. I couldn’t help but bring it closer to my eye, its color was so pure and brilliant.

“Ah, the lady has good taste. It is rare to find a true pink diamond these days, but we were able to procure one from

Western Australia just a few months ago. It's one of our owner's favorite pieces, even if it is just under one carat in size."

"Do you think she'll like it?" Richard asked me in a whisper.

"Yes," I answered honestly. "It's the most beautiful one."

Richard smiled as he turned towards the woman helping us. "It looks like we have a winner." He pulled a thick yellow envelope from his briefcase and slipped it across the glass table. "Tell Tim Graff this should cover it."

"Of course, Mr. Henderson," the woman said with a smile. "Come back soon."

Richard strode out the door, as I followed with some effort.

"I wonder if she'll say yes," he mused to no one, tucking the box into his worn jeans.

I wondered the same, but never got to find out.

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## Two

I didn't like the way she ordered me around – furious when I did something wrong, and ungrateful when I did it right. I didn't like the way her friends were always saying things with smiles and grins as weapons, their words full of hidden meanings I didn't understand. I didn't like the way she looked at me, accusing and exasperated, full of insults and reprimands at the tip of her tongue, and Spellings at her fingertips.

"I much preferred One," she said wistfully to Richard, glaring at me. "Even if One was wishy-washy and slow, and breathed like a locomotive, at least she wasn't stubborn like Two."

I didn't like the way she pretended I didn't have two eyes, a slightly hooked nose, and ears like hers – pretended that I couldn't see, smell and hear just like her.

“Stubborn?” Richard laughed, “Numbers are just toys. They are as stubborn as you want them to be, my dear.” He patted Kathleen's hand, and she flicked his off carelessly as she turned back to her script. Richard looked a little hurt, but continued after a cough, “What script is that?”

“Just the new Nate Resnick script that's making the rounds.” Richard's face looked pinched.

“I never understood the town's infatuation with him. He writes such garbage! Just empty lines that require millions of dollars of special effects per page. You aren't actually thinking about going after that, are you?”

I could see Kathleen bristle. It was easy for me to sense the annoyance in her motions, in the whiteness around her lips as I poured their drinks.

“I don't see why not. It's strong in the eighteen- to thirty-five demographic, so Kevin recommended me for the audition,” Kathleen replied casually, flipping through the pages in a more concentrated fashion. “And besides, the pay isn't bad.”

“But it's so unlike you!” Richard's forehead scrunched up like a misused rug. “I can't imagine you as just some bimbo in an action movie—”

There was a snap as the script's brads hit the glass coffee table, perhaps harder than she intended. I set down their drinks.

“Well that's what acting is, isn't it? Being unlike yourself.” Kathleen took a sip of her cocktail. “At the end of the day it's entertainment. It doesn't always have to be so deep.”

I headed back to the kitchen island to prepare the fruit, and heard the tension in Richard's silence. I took the honeydew I bought from the market, and broke into its flesh with a thunk. I knew how much the sound grated on Kathleen's nerves, but sometimes I liked to make her suffer the way she made me.

Richard spoke in measured tones, "Is that really all it is to you? Anyone can make entertainment, but not everyone can make art. If that's all it is, then Two here could be a dumb blond in an action movie."

Kathleen's eyes flicked towards me in irritation, and gave a mean laugh. "You're joking. Two couldn't be counted as attractive to anybody with eyes. She's so ... off."

"And who do you think that comes from?" Richard said as he belligerently gulped down his whiskey, missing the gash of hurt on Kathleen's face.

Kathleen touched her nose, a tic I noticed she had when she felt insecure. She recovered with her own barb. "Well, someone has to put money on the table."

"And what do you mean by that?"

"At least I don't think I'm above working and earning my keep. At least I'm not bitter about other people's success. At least I can admit my failures –"

"Truly, Madly was not a failure – it was an experiment! And you agreed to it–"

Kathleen cut him off, "An experiment that ruined my film debut, something that you were happy to risk because it didn't matter to you. And now, just because I'm trying to pay for our lifestyle by doing something commercial, you look down on me as if I'm a Number to be controlled and manipulated? I don't need this."



“Your reputation? I put my reputation on the line when I put you up for the role – an actress who had never even been in a real film. Do you know how many strings I had to pull? How many people I had to convince? You know, maybe Thomas was right: I should have just gone with Laura. She, at least, would have appreciated the artistic vision, and not been a total sell-out.”

My Master’s face flushed, “A sell out? Why don’t I hear you calling me that when I pay for your trips to New York? Our vacations to Italy? Your car collection? Why don’t I hear you complaining about my hard-earned money when you haven’t had a real directing job for the last six months?”

Richard stood up abruptly and commanded, “That does not warrant an answer. Two, give me my keys.”

In the kitchen, I stopped mid-chop.

“You don’t get to boss her around. Two, come here. I’m your Master.”

“Unbelievable,” Richard muttered, picking up his keys on the table.

“Where are you going?” Kathleen asked in a measured voice.

“Out.” He slammed the front door shut.

Kathleen faltered in the silent aftermath, her face crumbling. It was strange to see her so weak. I wasn’t sure whether what I felt was a wave of disgust or smugness. When her eyes met mine, I sensed her fury.

“Don’t you judge me,” she spat. Her command twisted into me like thorns, working its way into my insides until I thought I would faint from the agony. Even so, I knew my master was only passing her pain onto me so that she could tolerate it.

I still hated her for it.

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They'd set the stakes beforehand, and sat us Numbers around the table with colored pencils and paper. A house in Aspen, the newest Tesla model unreleased to the public, an antique watch – expensive things treasured by each of them. I didn't understand why they'd want to gamble it all away. But perhaps sometimes it was a thrill to fall.

A woman named Colette lifted the drapery to reveal a golden birdcage. A bright-bellied robin fluttered about inside.

We turned to it as Kathleen's friend said to us, "A bird. Draw this bird." She recited, "A bird is a noun –"

Laura, a blond and blue-eyed beauty, chuckled, "it's not like they've gone to grammar school, Colette. A noun. An educated Number – how ridiculous!"

"Next we'll have them recite 'the rain in Spain.'" Isa added, sending the group into a peal of laughter as Colette gave them a stern look.

She alone remained stoic as she continued, "A bird is a warm-blooded, egg-laying vertebrate distinguished by the possession of feathers, wings and a beak, and typically by being able to fly. Numbers, you may begin."

The other Numbers, dumb as sheep, each picked a colored pencil from the table and studiously observed the bird in the cage. I disdained them, their blank looks and blind obedience. My lips curled in a snarl, as the other Numbers' gazes flicked cautiously from me to their task.

"My, Kathleen, your Number certainly has a temper. She's so unlike you," the woman named Isa said to her.

If only she knew Kathleen like I did, I thought to myself.

“I’ve told Richard how stubborn Two is, but he doesn’t believe me. Two – draw. Now.” I directed a growl towards my master, but could feel my hands moving of their own volition, picking up a red colored pencil and scribbling onto the sketch paper as the other Numbers watched me.

I saw the smirk of satisfaction on my Master’s lips, and I hated her power over me.

“How is that Richard of yours anyway?” Laura chirped, diverting Kathleen’s attention from me.

“Yes, I’ve heard he has a new project. Darling, isn’t it? I heard it’s just been attached to that new indie starlet – what’s her name–” Colette chimed in.

“Penelope Grave?” Isa asked.

“Yes, that’s the one,” Laura recalled.

“She came out of nowhere didn’t she? No one’s even heard of her, and I heard she was working at Ceconi’s when she was discovered,” Colette said with disdain.

“I’m surprised Richard didn’t ask you, Kathleen,” Laura said.

My master swallowed as she managed, “It conflicted with my time on Transistor II. He asked me of course, but Kevin just couldn’t fit it in.”

I knew this was not the truth. I’d seen the script on Richard’s table when I took him his late-night snacks of peanuts and a glass of coffee liqueur and warm milk. He had worked on it painstakingly for the past three months, waking up at two, then writing until the break of dawn before settling back into the bed next to Kathleen, locking it up on the second shelf of his drawer.

I had also seen Kathleen, biding her time until Richard was at the studio or running an errand, carefully taking the first shelf out of

Richard's drawer, then slipping the script out from the second shelf, feasting on the latest draft before tucking it back inside.

Her lips grew thinner each day Richard answered, "Nothing of note!" when she asked if he was working on anything. I saw the way that she coveted the role, sometimes making me recite the lines with her, even tolerating my gruff, broken speech to practice until she got it perfect. All for an audition that Richard never asked for.

"Such a pity!" Laura's tone seemed far from pitiful. "Can't Richard reschedule around you? After all, you are his fiancé now—"

Isa clapped her hands together, "Oh yes, do show us your ring, Kathleen! I haven't had a chance to examine it."

Kathleen was happy to change the subject, and displayed her hand proudly. The pink diamond was small but brilliant, shooting the light from its rose tinted facets into the sunlit room.

"Richard was quite clever. He asked my Number to go with him to pick it out! Not Two of course, thank god – her tastes are horrid."

I clenched my teeth at the insult, as I tried to make sense of the bird in the cage. I could see the women lean in towards my master's hand, squinting at the glittering thing.

"It's on the smaller size, isn't it?" Laura laughed, as I saw a flicker of doubt on Kathleen's face.

"It must be the writer's salary," Colette said. "Prestige doesn't always bring money, you know."

"I've always respected those who are keen to make art rather than cheap entertainment," my master replied. Though I noticed

she retracted her hand, hiding her ring hand underneath her right one.

“I think it’s quite beautiful,” Isa said. “Besides ladies, it’s the man who matters –”

The alarm went off. Instantly, we Numbers set our pencils down. The women rose from their couches and walked around the table as we bowed our heads obediently. They pointed and laughed at our drawings – all of them scribbles.

“Don’t you know you’re drawing a bird, not an elephant?” Colette said, as she smacked her Number on the back of her head. The other women laughed. I swallowed the bile in my throat, and hid it with a snarl. If only I could shake out of these shackles they’d coded into me.

Laura walked around to my side of the table and carelessly picked up the paper I had scribbled on, insult ready at the tip of her tongue. Instead, she gave a little gasp of delight. “My goodness, I do believe we have a winner.”

“Don’t keep us waiting, Laura, what has the rebellious little Number done now?” asked Colette.

Slowly, with a smirk, Laura turned the paper over. Just like the others, scribbles of red spread over the page in nonsensical whorls. Then unmistakably, in no more than dark scribbles, the word “Die”.

Although I had meant it as an insult, the hatred bursting through my veins, spilling out onto the page as I stared at these worthless beings that thought they were better than me, I realized I had written my own fate. I knew it when I saw the way my master looked at me.

### Three

“What happened to the others before me?” I asked my master. She was taking special care approving my hair and my makeup today, though I knew her schedule by heart and there were no auditions on the calendar. I could feel her hands, more wrinkled and freckled than mine, touch my face and turn it towards her as if it was a porcelain cup she meant to drink from. Her hands were so soft. Mine were like cowhide in comparison.

“Why do you ask?”

“Just curious.” In the cupboard behind the kitchen where I slept, there were relics of others like me, like her: marks on the walls counting the days, secret compartments under floorboards. They’d been cleaned so thoroughly that the smell of bleach still woke me up sometimes.

She shrugged, curling my hair in voluptuous waves. “They weren’t as perfect as you. The last one was an animal.” She said that with her teeth gritted, and I knew not to push further, knowing her expressions as well as my own.

“Master, what role are you preparing me for today?”

It was something she started doing when she got her last role. I’d been sitting out in the audience after bringing her her coffee (black but sweet), watching the director explain for the tenth time that he needed more from her, he needed her to imagine the pain, take on the character he had written – a woman living through the Dustbowl, with the mouths of five hungry children to feed, watching her baby die of starvation as they waited for her husband to return from the next town with news, sustenance and hope.

“I need you to understand this woman’s suffering. Not just seeing the death around her, but choosing to live through this pain every day for the survival of her family. You get it?” The

director said, barely able to contain his frustration. My master nodded confidently at the note.

“Of course Evan. I’ll hit it in the next scene tomorrow.”

I could see past all that with her. I knew she was shaking in her boots, not knowing what to draw from. She stayed awake that entire night, practicing the same lines over and over in different tones, making minute changes to her facial expression, none of them convincing. “What do you think he means by suffering, Three?” she asked me when I made her her nightcap of whiskey, lemon and chamomile. “And choosing living versus death? I’d have chosen a quick end if I was ever in the Dust Bowl. Might as well give up at that point and save yourself the trouble.”

She didn’t wait for my answer.

When call time rolled around at dawn, she had lost her voice as well as her confidence. In an effort to avoid the whole thing, she gave me an Implicit Spelling. It was what she did sometimes at their terrible tea parties, so she didn’t have to face Evan’s wrath for another day. She typed in a few strings of text on her keyboard, which coded the commands into my neurons, executing the lines into the ribosomal motion of my cells and limbs. “Go to work.” “Act like I would.” “Act out the lines attached.” Kathleen had uploaded the scene’s lines, so that I knew them by memory. She left everything else open to my interpretation – either by accident or laziness – and in front of Evan, I delivered what he was looking for. How could I not know the suffering of someone whose fate had been sealed by forces beyond her control? How could I not understand the hopeless struggle time and time again to break free of those chains?

When it was over, the director was dumbstruck, letting the camera run longer than intended as he took the moment to recover.

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She'd expected him to fire me on the spot, so that she could blame me rather than herself. But when the call came from Evan, with compliments, elation even, she continued the ruse. She sent me to filming every day after that. I knew by her commands, less and less exact, that she trusted me now. It gave me power over her. I was starting to understand her desires as if they were my own.

So when she told me to get the title from Richard for the ring, I knew she wanted me to seduce him, to make him want me, to hurt him more than he had hurt her with the barbs and insults, and the broken engagement.

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"I know who you are." Richard's smile fell from his face the moment he opened the door and saw me. "She would never do this herself."

"And what's that exactly?" I asked coolly, not giving in.

"She would never come here like this and face me head on. She always takes the easy way out." His look was derisive, confident.

"Oh, really?" I stood up to my full height, letting the waves of hair that my master curled for me cascade down my shoulders with a flip. "Well, Richard. I'm actually not here to go to battle with you—I'm here for the title to the ring."

There was a shudder of uncertainty in his eyes, then some emotion. It might have been wistfulness.

"It was always about money with you—her wasn't it?"

I stayed silent. Kathleen had left the lines optional in my Spelling this time. I toyed with my words, played with the idea of tears. Instead I settled on the mimicry of the emotion of his



eyes and the words, “It was never the money. It was about feeling loved, and you could never make me feel that way.”

He looked at me, stricken. Of course it wasn’t all true, but my master had Spelled me to hurt him. He went inside the house and moments later, he appeared with the piece of paper he shoved into my hands, “Maybe you—she—whoever you are—will understand after this.” Then he closed the door with a heavy thunk.

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The moment I stepped into the small jewelry shop, there was a wave of recognition, and a hint of peaked interest from the attendants.

“Ah, Ms. Newland, you get more beautiful every time I see you. Are you sure you are not getting younger?” The man, somewhere in his sixties, looked elegant in a dark navy suit, his gray hair slicked back, a flash of white teeth on tan skin.

I recognized his picture from the binders of faces Kathleen made for me to learn. “Mr. Graff. A pleasure.” We kissed on both cheeks as a greeting.

“I’d like to return an item of yours,” I said, taking out the velvet box.

With a slight crinkle in his brow, he replied, “I’m sorry to hear that. We so rarely have unhappy customers—”

“It’s an absolutely beautiful piece. I truly wish I could keep it, but my life circumstances have changed. We’ve decided to go our separate ways.”

There was a hint of curiosity on Graff’s face as I opened the little ring box to show him the forlorn engagement ring.

“I’m sorry to hear it.” Graff said gently. “Shall we take a look?” He slipped behind the glass cases, setting the item on a tray.

“Ah!” A smile hovered on the ring maker’s lips as he held it closer to his eyes. “This is a very special piece, one of the most valuable pieces we own. I always wondered who had made off with it.”

I was surprised by this tidbit. Kathleen had described it in the journals I organized for her as “a ring so small and ordinary that it appeared Richard had simply accepted any ring he could buy with his meager savings.”

“Oh?”

“Yes Ms. Newland. There’s quite the story behind this piece. Didn’t your ... friend ever tell you?”

I shook my head, as Mr. Graff folded a piece of white paper and polished the gem. “This diamond came to us through auction. You can see from the color how special it is.” He placed the ring onto the white paper and shone a light through it, scattering the diamond’s pink facets onto the neutral background.

“You see, pink diamonds are among the rarest finds in nature, and even with all the technology we have today, we cannot unravel the mystery of why and how such a color can manifest itself in diamonds. It is so valuable that countless people have tried to reproduce the effect in labs, so much so they have actually reduced the value of seeing a true natural pink diamond in person. Do you know how much a true pink diamond is worth, Ms. Newland? Over \$500,000 per carat.”

“Few people in the world could afford such a gift for their beloved. He must have cared for you very much.”

I slowly nodded my head. Would Kathleen believe such a story? She had always been skeptical when it came to Richard, especially after the affair.

“How in the world did Richard convince you to let go of such a valuable piece?”

Mr. Graff smiled mysteriously. “It’s not my story to tell; it’s Mr. Henderson’s.”

There was a softness in Mr. Graff’s rejection, as if he was waiting for an excuse to tell me. I took out the title from my purse and slid it across the glass case.

“Richard gave me ownership of the ring, Mr. Graff. Don’t you think I deserve to hear its full story?”

Mr. Graff paused for just a moment before taking the title and answering, “Very well. Do you know the actress Penelope Grave?”

I recalled a face in a screener Kathleen had watched, and a name discussed at one of her friends’ tea gatherings.

“Yes, of course. She’s had quite the trajectory to stardom, hasn’t she?” I said.

There was a look of pleasure on Mr. Graff’s face as he put the ring back into its box. “Yes, well.” He leaned in closer to express the intimacy of the subject, “Penelope is my only niece. I adore her, and have known her dreams of becoming an actress since she was just a little girl.”

He pulled out a photo from his breast pocket, a headshot of a girl with deep auburn hair and gray eyes, beaming into the camera. “You know how competitive the field is, don’t you, Ms. Newland? I’m sure you remember your first auditions. Well, Penelope had all the right credentials – she graduated from the

Yale drama school, she had a great demo reel, and she had the right work ethic, but she chose to never reveal her family connections. She changed her last name to Grave instead of Graff. She said she wanted to earn her place like everyone else instead of just getting it like that.” He snapped his fingers for emphasis.

“That’s very admirable.”

“Indeed, she worked as a waitress for years! Can you imagine, with her pedigree! So when Richard came in here looking for a Graff ring, I found an opportunity I could not give up. He was very much in love with you, and insisted nothing would do but the very best. Yet even a man of his stature could not afford it. So I offered him a deal – a role for a ring.” Graff was smug with his own cleverness.

My brow furrowed in confusion, “I don’t quite understand.”

“Penelope’s first role, of course – you must have seen it. Darling. Your husband’s best work in my opinion! And the role was so sought after.” His eyes narrowed a little, a hint of suspicion behind the pleasant veneer. I had seen Darling many, many times, though until now, I had never understood why.

“Yes, of course. The story played so well with Penelope’s method acting and Richard’s naturally contemplative shots.” I assured the jeweler.

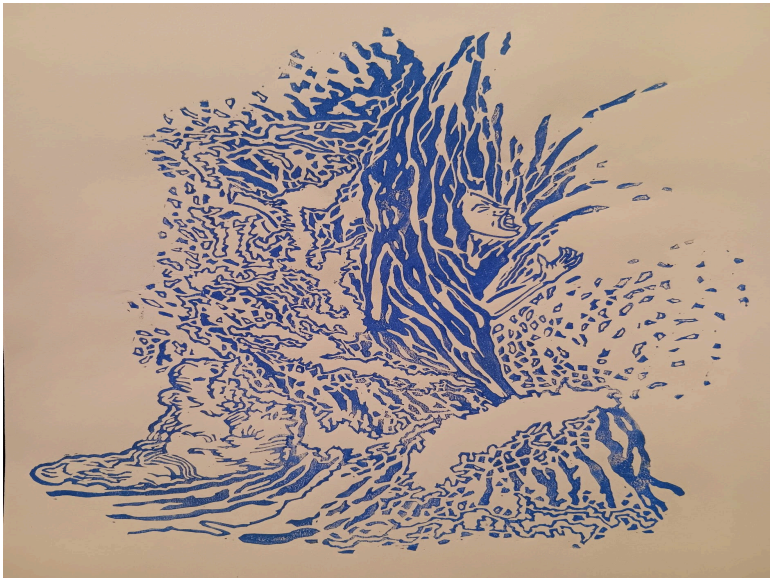
“Exactly!” Graff said proudly. “Can you imagine her pleasure when she got the call back? When she got the most coveted role in town, without any help from her family?” He lifted a conspiratorial brow. “And all because of this little ring.”

And as I gazed at the ring in question, I understood that this is what Richard meant my master to understand – that he had tried so hard, in so many ways, with his actions to love her.

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When I returned, with the ring consigned, my master was eager to see me. I imagined it was because she'd stayed inside all day, shuffling from one room to the next, making note of some other task she'd put me to once I got back, some imperfection to iron out. I had turned my day over and over in my mind so thoroughly – each revelation a small twinkle of a ring's facet – precious and glittering, the little beauties in flawed understandings, missed meanings of the human heart, that when she asked me what happened with my day, I answered with a pleasant smile that held the secrets close to my chest.

“Nothing of note.”



# Two Memories of St. Michael's

D.J. Hamilton



I.

A sunny Sunday, last of the weekend,  
gliding down Garden Road, I pass  
St. Joseph's and the echo of organ  
and drone of voices pulls me into the past.

St. Michael's Elementary School,  
circa '68. Try to imagine  
those stern-faced nuns,  
with their long black habits, and  
rosary beads dangling in the wind,  
playing tennis.

How else to have  
such a powerful backhand stroke?  
Sister Rose, the mother superior,  
had a particularly lethal smash.

Slowly she'd walk, between rows of desks  
giving us all the stink-eye.  
You'd wait then, just as she passed,  
her back to you now, you'd make a face  
and pow! She'd backhand smack the back  
o' your thick head hard enough  
to lift you out of your seat.

I saw that, she'd say, not turning around,  
with the eyes God put in the back of my head  
to watch over the bad deeds  
of sinful little miscreants like you.

Does she really have eyes  
in the back of her head?  
One trembling little child asked  
no one in particular.

God made many miracles, she said,  
not all are listed in the book of the saints.

## II.

At Beyrouth Bistro between beer and bites  
of doner-kebab I notice, a fellow customer,  
with black smudges above his brow.  
And recall again the mumbled Latin of my youth.  
*Memento, homo, quia pulvis es,  
et in pulverem reverteris.*

The priest is pushing,  
pushing,  
*Remember man that thou art dust*  
pushing his thick thumb  
*And unto dust*  
pushing his thick thumb into my forehead  
*Remember man that thou art dust*

*And unto dust thou shalt return.*

I remember this because,  
It's the only thing  
that priest ever said  
that wasn't a lie.





# We'll See the Animals One Day

Wilfred Wong

## Spring 1950

Beneath the stuffy, cotton-made lamb suit, Kim Shan peeked out over the stage and into the audience. The stage lights were nauseating, daring the performers to avoid eye contact with those in the seats below. The moisture had wicked into the insides of the cotton that made up his lamb mask, and he could see tiny shrivels of steam emancipating from his sweat – the angle of the lights accentuating the effect. Before the performance, he had checked the seats below in the designated area for parents from his class. He was looking out for his father's familiar face of his father, complete with the same chevron moustache that he had known since he was born.

His tall, gangly friend James, type casted as the giraffe, nudged Kim Shan in the shoulder. That was the cue for him to move forward with the rest of the farm animals. He hadn't been on a trip since his mother passed away, but remembered the one time the family visited London just two years prior. He remembered urging his parents to let him see all the animals he had read about on his prized 100 Animal Stories. At the London Zoo, he recalled the three giraffes and the flock of lambs being put in separate enclosures. His father told him that giraffes were from a place called "Sashahara" in Africa and that there was a logical and scientific reason why their necks were so long. This piece of knowledge did not go down well with his kindergarten class teacher, who had told him that God made it so because they were made to look out for angels from heaven. On the bus back to their hotel, his mother argued with his father over whether they should stay, and not return to Hong Kong. His father contended that no one in London would employ a Chinese doctor and that he did not want to be selling dim sum at a Chinese restaurant.



His mother urged him to think of the future for Kim Shan. On the flight back, his mother talked neither to him nor his father, sulking whilst downing one glass of wine after another.

Kim Shan pushed to the front of the flock of animals and began to recite the short monologue about sheep, “Baa, baa, baa ... the wool that I have is great for coats...” The cat boasted of her ability to catch rodents whilst the cow humbly provided milk for the benefit of children’s healthy bones. He peeked again over the stage towards the second row and saw Evelyn and Uncle Wai Yip sitting on either side of the empty wooden seat. Evelyn caught his stare and waved back, smiling from ear to ear. Wai Yip followed and waved as well, but Kim Shan caught his uncle side-eyeing the empty seat.

Wai Hong puffed on his third cigarette outside the community centre. Suet Mui had been here with him on Christmas Eve. It was right after their trip to London, when their son performed as another sheep for the Christmas celebrations. What is it with all the sheep? To Suet Mui’s displeasure, he had excused himself in the middle of the show, right after his son’s chorus. He was smoking the same brand as he did for years – World filter cigarettes. He tried to remember how many cigarettes he had smoked that day in front of the same polished wooden plaque that bore the name of the centre. Vaguely, he recalled the number three from the depths of his memories. It might have been two, or four, which he acknowledged to have been a possibility. He threw the unfinished stub into an ashtray and made his way back into the main hall.

The stage lights glimmered brightly on Kim Shan’s face as he eyed his father making his way to his seat. His father gave him a curt wave before squeezing past Evelyn at the end of the aisle. For the rest of the performance, he sang his little heart out.

Later that night, Kim Shan smelled the familiar blend of liquor and cigarettes on his father’s clothes as he was carried to bed.

The odour was soothing and lulled him closer to his dreams. He regained strength as he was laid onto his England national football team pillow. He opened his eyes and asked his father, “Could you sing me a song?”

“It’s a little late for that, don’t you think? You’ve had a lot of singing tonight already, Shan-shan,” Wai Hong said as he pulled the matching covers over his boy’s body. He had grown quite a bit these two years. He wondered if he might need to find a longer blanket the next time they were at the department store.

“Ma ma would have sung me a song even if it was late,” said Kim Shan, “Could you tell me a story?”

The words stung Wai Hong’s chapped lips. He felt his lips bleed onto his tongue as he bit into it, “Ma ma ... Ma ma isn’t here anymore, boy.”

Kim Shan turned and faced the wall, hiding his soured face. His father mistook it for anger, but it was not. He stood up, lingered for a second, and turned around to switch off the lights, “Goodnight, Shan Shan.” For the past two years, they had not really talked about Suet Mui. It was not as though Kim Shan did not know that his mother had passed away. It was not as though Wai Hong did not know that a time had passed which would not return. Perhaps too much of it was unspoken: words and feelings hidden and pasted over like the crack on the wall behind the football poster.

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The next day, Wai Hong woke Kim Shan at seven for the trip back to school. Wai Hong had pulled some strings with his old friends down at the church to get Kim Shan admitted to the Brothers’ School for All last year. Kim Shan would probably have passed the admission process on his own without a hitch, for he never lacked talent and smarts.

In the family's ivory Ford Anglia, father and son played a game of naming English team players. Without trying to be polite, the father was genuinely losing this round. Kim Shan stumped him when he named the reserve keeper. Secretly, Wai Hong would have preferred that his son put his memory to use elsewhere better.

The roads wound on as the drizzle of rain washed over the car's windshield. A leaf was stuck on the corner of the glass, just out of reach of the ageing wipers. "I wish I didn't have to return to boarding school," tested Kim-shan, his eyes fixated on the deep brownness of the leaf. Ever since his mother was ill, his father would, at times, act erratic. He wished that this was one of his more communicative days.

"I've always thought that boarding school was the right choice for you. Ever since your mother left, I've thought you shouldn't be spending too much time at home," said his father. In fact, he barely spent any time at home when his son was not around, electing to hole up at the hospital instead. He continued, "It will be better for you to socialise with kids your age. I wish that I was sent to boarding school at your age."

"You know I hate the kids at school... and the brothers are too strict," said Kim Shan as he ventured further into unknown territory.

Wai Hong was patient but dismissive. "You'll learn to like them one day. I couldn't think of kids you'll be happier around. On the other hand, you get to spend a lot of time playing football after school hours. If I had put in the amount of time you do, I would have played real professional football."

Kim Shan knew there was no point in persisting on this topic and tried hard to consider the positives. Indeed, he loved football and had dreamt of playing professionally one day. Perhaps his father did know best. His father was the wisest man he knew. He tried

to change his thinking but could not manage to erase the sulk on his face for the rest of the ride.

Wai Hong let his son off at the roundabout before the school entrance. A young boy of Kim Shan's age waved at him. Wai Hong told him that he would pick him up again on Sunday, two fortnights later. Kim Shan watched as the family car pulled away from the curb and down the windy drive that led to the roundabout, wishing that time could speed up and he would see his father arrive again.

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For the next four weeks, he worked hard on his studies and tried to stay out of trouble. He achieved a B on his mathematics mid-terms, something that he had not been able to do before, and an A in his English and History classes. But trouble always found its way back to him. Two weeks after he was brought back to school, he had a bust-up with Hing Fai, a boarder who also played on his football team. Earlier in the morning during practice, they could not see eye to eye after a collision when both blindly went for the same cross. When brushing their teeth later that night, Hing Fai chided him for being sent to boarding because his mother was dead and his father did not want anything to do with him. Kim Shan retorted by saying that Hing Fai had two parents alive who sent him to boarding school because both did not want to have anything to do with him. Kim Shan acted strong but his heart was weak, and he shoved Hing Fai into the adjacent sink. The prefects on duty called for the brothers immediately, and Kim Shan was sent to the discipline master that night.

On the phone call to his father the following day, his father gave him a dressing down.

"But he insulted Ma ma, and you as well," Kim Shan talked back when his father asked him why he had lost his cool.

“It’s all in the past already. Ma ma is not coming back.. There’s no point dwelling on her any more. You have a bright life ahead of you – don’t waste it.” He ended his monologue drily, “You know that your mother would have been disappointed in you. You have to make her proud. You know she loved you.” Kim Shan wanted to yell into the phone but did not do so. The scream came out of the void in his throat that reached straight into the place where his heart was supposed to be. At that moment, he had already forgotten who he was angry with.

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In a fortnight, he was allowed to return home. He managed to steer out of trouble’s way because he was temporarily banished from football practice. His father arrived on time in the family car on a damp Friday evening. As Kim Shan exited the main entrance to the school, he saw the bobblehead of his father leaning on the window frame of the driver’s seat. The giant willow tree planted in the roundabout made his father look miniscule. His father seemed deep in thought, as always. Kim Shan took a moment, whilst his father was unaware of his presence, to appreciate his father’s figure. He seemed to have grown a bit older in the past month. The accustomed smile on his father’s face had developed an aching quality. His usual lean face had gotten marginally tighter in the past year, accentuating a pair of high cheekbones. His moustache, with its same painter’s brush aesthetics, seemed to barely hang correctly. Kim Shan recalled himself staring at the mirror just earlier that morning when he was washing up. He had struggled to see his father’s features in himself; he had grown older and taller for sure.

That night, father and son stayed up late in the father’s study to listen to England’s game against Spain in the World Cup. Kim Shan knew his father wanted to tune in to the Brazilian match instead, as they were the host nation, but his father told him it was unnecessary. His father joked that it wasn’t as though the Brothers at the school would let him stay up the following week

listening to the radio. Moreover, his father predicted that the English would be eliminated soon anyway. When the game started, the radio announcer mentioned where the game was played. Kim Shan left his seat and wandered over to the bookshelf. Between a book about psychopathology and another about world history, he took out a folded world map that his father had bought him. Laying it out on the glass panel above the large wooden desk, he pointed out where Rio de Janeiro was located. Tracing his fingers northwards, he stopped at the place where the Amazon rainforest was marked. His father's glance shifted from the spot where the trees were drawn, towards Kim-shan's face.

“Do you remember that I've promised Ba ba and Ma ma that I'll take you there to see the animals one day?” said Kim Shan after a short pause.

“I do, son. You also promised to take me... I mean us, to a safari in Kenya and to the Arctic to see the polar bears.” Wai Hong's eyes softly focused on the light's reflection on Kim Shan's cheek.

“I don't think ... I still want to go anymore,” said Kim Shan as his fingers traced the length of the Amazon River, passing by the cartoon figure of a jaguar.

“One day, that feeling will come back. I do not know when, but it will. You might not be going with your Ba ba and Ma ma then. You might be going with your own wife and kids when the time comes,” said Wai Hong as he put his hand on his son's neck. Kim-shan gave a brief jolt as his father made contact, snapping out of his trance. It had been a while since any words actually gave him any comfort over his hurt.

The English lost 1:0 to the Spanish thanks to a goal from Athletic Bilbao's famed striker Zarra. At the end of the game, his father folded the map up, and returned it back in between the two books on his shelf.



# Walk Away

Shivani Sarwal



Tara could hear a steady, rhythmic sound interspersed with faint conversation. It wasn't a whisper; it was just distant—far enough to be discernible but not enough for her to know two women were talking. Her body felt numb, her mind foggy.

Lifting her right hand, she touched her eyes. Her fingers felt cold against the bruised, warm eyelids. A whiff of disinfectant filled her nose. She moved her fingers over her face, feeling each feature closely. It hurt. As she lifted her other hand, she felt a shooting pain run through it. Something was sticking into it—an IV line.

'Oh! You're up. I thought another day would go by without hearing your voice.'

It was Stella.

'Uh ... Stella?' Her lids were too heavy for her to open her eyes.

‘Yes, sweetheart. It’s me.’ Warm fingers gently circled her wrist, and pain shot through her body. She muffled a groan.

‘Am I in a hospital?’

‘Yes, dear.’

It all came rushing back to her. The pounding, the pain, the feeling of being mashed into pulp, the gush of warm blood down her neck, and the thud.

A tear left a meandering line along the wrinkles in the corner of her eye. It stung.

She felt Stella’s breath, her warmth, leaning close. A soft cloth wiped the tears from her eyes and nose. Those she held found a way through her nose.

‘Stella.’ Her own voice came from somewhere deep.

‘Yes, love?’

‘Andy?’ She choked back tears.

There was a long pause.

‘He’s in the ICU,’ hushed Stella.

Then, in a firmer tone, ‘You should have hit him harder.’

The slow drone of the air conditioning, the rhythm of the monitors, the distant conversation, a siren far away, Stella’s perfume, the sterile stench of disinfectants, the smell of her own blood—her senses were becoming keener.

As Andy dragged her by the arm, a brass unicorn was the only thing within her reach. She had grabbed it with her other hand, and before he could react, with all her strength, she had hit his head. Once, twice, thrice ... until he lay motionless. Then she called the police.

She remembered when she first met Stella. She looked lovely in her blue scrubs, accentuating her pale blue eyes, her blonde hair tied into a tight ponytail, and her full lips pink from the gloss.

She smiled. ‘Stella McNeal. I just moved from OB GYN.’

‘Tara Thames.’ She instinctively brushed the curls away from her face, showing the bruises from last week.

Stella gasped and said, ‘You have to leave him. Like, now.’

Tara smiled and walked past her. ‘See you around.’

In the following year, there wasn't a single day that Stella wouldn't entreat her to walk out on Andy. But Tara always brushed it off.

It was getting worse. But as Andy bruised her body, Stella healed her heart.

A week ago, she had told Stella that she would tell Andy. She was leaving him.

Stella said, ‘There’s no need for it. You don't have to tell him. Just walk away.’

‘But I owe him an explanation.’

‘You owe him nothing!’ Then, realizing how much Tara needed her, she added, ‘I fear for you. Please, just leave quietly.’

A familiar clatter next to her bed brought her back from her reverie. The nurse had just dropped an empty vial into the bin. She felt the sting of the antibiotic as it slowly entered her veins. She pursed her lips, biting the scab; warm fluid oozed.

A wound had opened.

‘Oh Tara.’ Stella stifled a sob. Tara felt a damp towel wipe the blood off her lip.

‘Stella.’

Stella's voice, usually upbeat, sounded broken. Tara regretted not having listened to her sooner.

She hated herself for years of inaction.

'Can you hold me, please? I'm scared.'

Stella edged closer, lying next to her. Tara imagined how beautiful Stella must look right now: her big blue eyes, flushed cheeks and blonde hair cupping her perfectly oval face with a tiny dimple, one that appeared when Stella would smile just a little.

That dimple—it was like a child, eager to be scooped in his mother's arms. A trickle dropped onto her warm, flushed cheek. Stella was crying.

'You know what I want to do now, Ste.' She called her Ste, sometimes.

'What?' Stella's voice was a whisper.

'I want to open my eyes. I want to see your angelic face, and look into your deep blue eyes.'

Stella was sobbing.

She held out her hand, and Stella grasped it tenderly. 'Come closer, will you? I want to look at you.'

Tara opened her eyes a slit. Her lids were heavy. She could feel Stella's breath, her perfume mixed with sweet perspiration.

The distant ambulance, chatter in corridors, paging announcements, and loud nurses and doctors shouting orders were all fading. The room was cold.

A steady beep filled the sterile silence of the room. A nurse came in and turned off the monitors.



# The Reminder

Jay Oatway



The two men, clad in camouflage fatigues and high-visibility vests, sat without words under a cold blue November sky on the last day of deer season. Their warm breath rose like puffs from two chimneys. As a white-tailed buck stepped into view, the men

somehow drew even quieter, signalling to each other without words. Full antlers—maybe a 20-pointer. A big trophy.

The younger man, Matthew, held the rifle, and his breath. The crosshairs in the hunting scope aligned with the buck's heart. As he began to squeeze the trigger, he couldn't steady his shakes.

It would be his first kill.

The older man, sporting a bushy moustache and a cowboy hat, whispered, 'Nice and easy. Just like you practised.'

A week earlier, Matthew had arrived at the hunting lodge, as big as a church. Built of weathered logs and rough-hewn stone, the lodge bore the scars of countless seasons. Perched atop a gentle rise, it commanded a sweeping view of the rugged backdrop of mountains and trees below and Montana's famous big sky above.

Matthew Leung had grown up in Hong Kong, where space was the ultimate symbol of wealth. No one there owned this much land. In fact, the ranch land was possibly greater than all of Hong Kong's.

Colt Westfall, the older man, met him in the driveway. Greeted him with a warm, 'Howdy,' but did nothing else to help. Matthew carried his own bags into the lodge. He struggled with his two large duffle bags.

'Don't reckon you'll need even half that stuff,' said Colt.

'I just wanted to be prepared,' replied Matthew.

'In my experience, fear brings gear. Find a place to hide all that, then come find me for dinner in the big room.'

The big room, a cathedral to outdoorsmanship, was a sanctuary of warmth and, in times past, of camaraderie, with walls adorned by the trophies of hunts. Old stories had been told by old men again and again, until no one wanted to hear them anymore. A

fire crackled in the stone hearth. Matthew imagined that once its flickering light must have danced upon the faces of the weathered men, their laughter mingling with the scent of pine and woodsmoke. This afternoon, it was empty, hollow.

High on the wall, trophy heads stared down. They were all impressive specimens, save for the one in prime position above the fireplace. It looked like a cruel joke. Matthew had never been in the home of an actual big game hunter, but knew from movies and TV that these prizes were points of pride. This *thing* was the opposite. Its head was too small, with one side marred by broken antlers, and the other side sunken and malformed from the bullet to its face. It was so ugly, Matthew had to look away.

Through the floor-to-ceiling window, the mountains loomed large, their peaks turning white from recent high-elevation snows, a reminder that hunting season was drawing to a close. In this remote corner of the world, far from the pressure of modern life, the hunting lodge remained a place connected to old ideals. It was a place where men like Matthew came looking for something they couldn't easily put into words.

Matthew joined Colt at an old farmhouse table for dinner.

‘How has the season been so far?’ asked Matthew.

Colt pushed a lump of bread into the stew, almost at pains to have to answer the question. He took his time to let the bread soak up some of the gravy, before taking a bite, chewing, and taking a drink from his bottle of beer.

‘Decent. You’re eating the spoils of a big 230 I shot a month back.’

Colt Westfall, member of the Boone and Crockett Club, held the highest score for a white-tailed buck in Montana, a 275—a measurement of mass, symmetry, and tine length the club had been using since 1949. Matthew knew this from the website



where he booked this hunting trip. While the maximum theoretical score was 300, no one before Colt had ever bagged anything bigger than 270.

‘Wow. Can I just say that this venison stew is fantastic. I love the way the gaminess of the meat is balanced by the sweet tanginess of the gravy. What’s the secret? Red wine?’

‘Ketchup.’

Colt let the word hang in the air, watching Matthew’s reaction. He slowed, tasting it differently, unsure if he still thought the same of it. Colt measured every tiny muscle movement on Matthew’s face.

‘So what are you really doin’ here, son?’ asked Colt.

‘Well ... I’ve come, I guess, for outdoorsmanship training, like it said on your website.’

‘I know that. That’s what everyone signs up for, but they often come looking for something else. And I’ve seen the way you’ve been eyeballing me since you first set foot on my ranch. There’s something else going on.’

‘No, no. Just curious. Just here to learn. Trying to take it all in. I didn’t mean to cause any offence.’

‘That so?’

‘Absolutely. You say jump, I say how high,’ Matthew replied with a small laugh.

‘Fine then, have it your way. Meet me in the tackle room, ready to go, at 4:00am, Mr Jumpy. We’ll see just how high you can get tomorrow.’

The big buck drew towards Mathew's left, turning its head slightly, scanning for danger, as if it could sense something was wrong.

As Mathew slowly squeezed the trigger, in that second of forced stillness, he wasn't thinking about the deer's heart in the crosshairs, but what was in his own heart.

*What am I doing here?* Was this the path to what he had come looking for? He kept gently applying pressure, just as he had been taught.

'Squeeze so slowly that when it goes off it surprises you,' Colt had explained while they were training a few days earlier.

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The training had been fairly intensive, and it had done little to make Matthew feel more confident. If anything, he felt smaller now than ever before. At 4:30am, Matthew had stumbled through the big room in search of coffee. The mangled deer greeted him on his way to the kitchen, even more horrifying in the predawn darkness. The fire had gone cold. Matthew couldn't find coffee, and resigned himself to training without his usual comforts.

He found Colt already in the tackle room. Matthew wasn't sure if Colt even slept, but the older man seemed alert and energised. He greeted Matthew with a big cowboy, 'Mornin'!'

Colt opened the gun cabinet and selected a rifle.

'This is a Remington 700, chambered in thirty-ought-six,' explained Colt, pulling back on the bolt action to examine the chamber. 'Always check a weapon that you pick up, or when it is handed to you to make sure that it isn't loaded.'

He handed Matthew the rifle, and Matthew repeated what Colt had just done. The bolt action stuck a bit, and he had to try again with a bit more force to get it open. In the process, the barrel of the gun swung wildly. Colt placed his hand on the barrel, steadying it, pushing it downward and away from himself.

‘And always keep your rifle pointed down and away from people.’

Matthew pushed the bolt action close with a clunk. ‘Oh, sorry.’

‘No need to apologise, son. Just do better,’ said Colt, gathering up a box of .30-06 ammunition, ‘Now follow me out to the range.’

Matthew walked behind Colt, like a child following his father.

Colt loaded the four-round magazine for Matthew and handed it to him.

‘It’s so small,’ said Matthew, ‘I was expecting something bigger like you see in video games.’

‘It ain’t like video games out here, Mr Jumpy. Here you get just four shots, but if you do it right, you should only need one.’

Matthew could feel the pressure of perfection. It felt like his work. It felt like his relationships. Perhaps it was one of the things he’d never escape, even here. But his lifetime of playing video games had taught him a lot about shooting accuracy. This might be his first time on an actual range—Hong Kong had no guns—but he had ten thousand hours of virtual training.

‘Let’s get your scope dialled in. Just aim at the centre of the target. Fire all four rounds, take your time with each shot. Gently exhale, hold your breath for a second or two as you gently squeeze the trigger. Keep both eyes open, see the target.’

Matthew followed the instructions, and Colt watched through field glasses. As the fourth round went off, Matthew knew all of them had missed, low and to the left. He worried that Colt would maybe fail him, and send him home.

But Colt let out a long whistle.

‘Nice grouping, my boy. Not too bad at all. Let’s just make a small adjustment to the scope.’

Colt fished a quarter out of his pocket, then used it to turn the slotted dials on the side and the top of the scope. And handed Matthew another freshly loaded magazine.

‘Try again.’

Matthew, feeling bolstered by the old man’s words, repeated his grouping. This time all four were in the centre of the target.

‘Yes!’ shouted Mathew.

‘Yeah, yeah. Don’t be getting a big head about it. It’s one thing to be shooting at paper targets on a comfortable range. It’s something else to be shooting in the wild. Trust me: whatever can go wrong, usually does.’

Once again, Matthew watched Colt spring into action, as he gathered up the used targets and spent brass casings. He moved with a surprising degree of athleticism, despite his blue jeans and cowboy boots. Every move he made was done with purpose, and a sense of urgency. But Matthew felt that it didn’t leave much room for anything else—like feelings.

‘Come on, Jumpy. Let’s go in and watch a video. I know that’s something your generation seems to enjoy doing.’

Matthew looked slightly offended, and Colt read his body language instantly.

‘Ah, cheer up. There will be coffee.’

The video, shown on a projector screen that rolled down from the ceiling of the big room, was an old How to Field Dress a Kill. It looked like it was shot in the 1950s. Matthew sat alone in the dark, sipping at his strong black coffee as he was shown how to gut and skin a deer. The audio crackled with age.

‘Field dressing at the site of the kill is often preferred when conditions allow for it. This approach minimises the time between the kill and the removal of internal organs, reducing the risk of spoilage and contamination. It’s particularly practical in remote or rugged terrain where transporting the whole animal may be challenging ...’

The video had originally been on film, grainy and often soft on focus.

‘... lay the deer on its back with its legs spread apart. If possible, elevate the hindquarters slightly higher than the front to aid in drainage. Make the Incision: Using a sharp knife or field dressing tool, make a shallow incision along the midline of the deer’s belly from the sternum to the pelvic bone. Take care not to puncture the intestines or stomach ...’

Matthew looked at his watch. It wasn’t even 8:00am, and this is how his day was going. He was the sole student beholding this gruesome procedure. He tried to look away, but his eye fell upon the mangled deer head above the fireplace.

He twisted around to look out the windows, and could see the first light of day begin to break behind him.

‘... then remove the organs. Carefully reach into the body cavity and begin removing the internal organs one by one. Start by cutting around the anus to free the rectum, then pull it out gently to expose the pelvic canal. Sever the pelvic bone with a bone saw or knife to open the cavity further ...’

Matthew stared into the blackness of his coffee, as the training video went on for another 30 minutes. ‘What am I doing here?’

When it finally ended, all was quiet in the big room, but Matthew could hear the sound of wood being chopped outside. He investigated and find Colt with his jacket off and his sleeves rolled up, swinging an axe. Every strike cleanly knocked a piece of wood into two, almost no matter how big the log was to begin with.

‘I know it’s late in the season, but is it always so quiet this time of year? Is it just you?’

‘Wife passed away a few years back. And it’s too late in the season to afford to keep the help on.’

‘Oh, I’m so sorry.’

Colt set up another log and kept working with strong smooth swings, and guaranteed outcomes. Yet there was always a hint of anger just below the surface. His gaze shifted to Matthew.

‘You finished the video? Learned what you need to know? Hope it didn’t offend any wokeness you got.’

‘I doubt the video is going to be enough for me to field dress a deer on my own the first time. But maybe I can help. And no, I’m not offended or squeamish. I’m here to hunt. I’m here for the whole experience.’

‘Good. You can start helpin’ now. Grab one of those logs—the smaller one to start with,’ said Colt.

Matthew set it up on the chopping block, and then looked surprised as Colt handed him the axe. He should’ve known this would be another lesson. He took off his jacket and rolled up his sleeves.

With both hands he pulled the axe up over his head and gave it a swing at the log. It hit, but got stuck halfway through the split.

‘Chopping wood is harder than it looks on YouTube, Jumpy. Try again. It’s about combining the weight and momentum of the axe itself, *with* the power of your swing.’

Matthew tried again, and the wood split in two. He tried again, and again, and again. He chopped until he was sweating, and breathing hard. He chopped until they had enough firewood for several days. He chopped until he started to feel a bit angry. Slowly, he had begun to find the technique that Colt had tried to explain. But Colt’s words hadn’t done it justice. It was one of those things you just had to get the feel of.

‘That’ll do,’ said Colt. ‘Let’s have some lunch. You start the fire while I get the stew heated up.’

Matthew knew how to start a fire. Sort of. Again, Hong Kong hadn’t been the sort of place where people had fireplaces, but they did go to the country parks and have barbeques over charcoal in fire pits. He started with some kindling and scrunched up newspaper, and it seemed to start quite easily, but then as he added a slightly larger log, the whole room began to fill with smoke.

Matthew began to cough as he stepped back from the fire, trying to get some air. He looked up as the smoke circled the mangled little deer head. It peered out from the haze like a monster in a movie.

‘Open the damn flue, Jumpy,’ barked Colt, moving swiftly to the fireplace and pulling on a metal lever which Matthew had never noticed before. Colt took his hat and waved it in a vigorous arch across the fire to create a draft. Once the air got moving up the chimney, the fire sprang to life. With the flames, the warm air rose up the flue and carried the smoke with it.

Colt caught Matthew staring at him again.

‘You gonna tell me what you’re really doing here, besides trying to burn my house down?’

‘How do you always know what to do and how to do it?’

‘It’s just common sense. Somethin’ they just don’t make much of anymore. But that’s not really what you want is it?’

There was something about the way the sun now shone through the big window into the light smoke still hanging silently in the air of the big room; Matthew stepped from the haze and into the light.

‘I don’t want to be so nervous about everything. I want to be smooth and cool, especially around firearms, but just everything. I want to be a man of action,’ he said as the smoke cleared. ‘I want to be a man.’

‘Yeah. Thought so,’ Colt paused for a minute, looking up at the mangled deer head. ‘I tell you this: You’re not going to find what you’re looking for in the wood pile, or the fireplace. You’re not going to find it in a loaded gun. It’s already in you, Jumpy. You just gotta learn to let it out.’

The men went to the table and ate their stew in silence. Throughout the meal, Matthew imagined the night after the hunt, he and Colt celebrating their success, sharing a meal of venison cooked over an open fire. As they sat together under the starry Montana sky, Matthew would reflect on how far he’d come, and would look forward to future hunting adventures with his mentor by his side.

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Slowly, slowly squeezing the trigger. Tracking the deer to the left. Fighting against the twitches. Holding his breath. Only one old chimney puffing into the air.

The last two days had been spent out in the cold. Colt gave lessons on essential field skills such as tracking deer, reading signs of their presence—like tracks and droppings—and understanding their behaviour. Two days spent scouting for deer in the cold wilderness, observing their trails and trying to predict their movement patterns. But came up empty. Today was the last day of hunting season. Colt seemed to take it all in stride, but Matthew needed this to happen. He needed to be a man, a killer.

And this was his one shot.

The rifle exploded. It kicked into his shoulder and rose up in his hands. The shot echoed through the valley, and up into the Montana mountains.

Matthew opened his eyes. He had only blinked for a split second, but he had lost track of the target. The deer had bolted.

‘Damn it, Jumpy—you just wounded him. He’s on the run. Come on! We gotta get after him,’ commanded the older man. ‘If he runs too much it will ruin the meat.’

Matthew gave no argument. This was exactly the worst outcome. He had only grazed the buck; now it was bleeding out, and running. He had made a mess of becoming a man. It was just like the story he had heard the night before.

After two fruitless days in the biting November wind, the two men sat before the fire, sipping whisky, warming themselves, and, for Matthew, soothing his disappointment.

After the second double Scotch, Matthew finally built up the courage to ask, ‘What’s with the little mangled head above the fireplace?’

Colt took a long drink of his whisky, and stared straight into the fire.

‘It was the hunting trip from hell,’ he began.

‘I was ill prepared for the hunt. I’d gotten cocky, and not taken time to dial in my gear. It was just after I bagged the big 275, and thought myself one of the all-time greatest white-tailed hunters in America. Hell, probably in the known universe.

‘But it’s that sorta overconfidence that can destroy you. You can’t let it get to your head. You gotta keep both feet on the ground. Don’t matter what you’ve done. Only matters what you gonna do next.’

He looked up at the little mangled head.

‘I saw the deer step out from behind a thicket of trees, and I hurried my shot. I didn’t even bother to steady myself. I just flipped the rifle over my shoulder, took a quick look through the scope and pulled the trigger. Yeah, I pulled it. No gentle squeeze, no holding my breath. I was overconfident and in a rush to impress all the guys who had come hunting with me, hoping that my skills would rub off on them.

‘Well, that’s usually when life comes up and kicks you right in the nuts. I only wounded him, and he began to run. We chased him for miles. I emptied all four shots from my magazine, but only grazed him once more. I let emotions—the need to feel big—make things worse.

‘We tracked blood for another two hours before we got close enough. At this point, the guys decided we couldn’t let this thing keep running, so—stupidly—we decided to all just fire away at the poor creature. I reloaded my magazine and put an extra round in the chamber.

‘Hear me when I say this: never let male mob mentality rule the day. It was a horror show. The poor thing must have taken at least a dozen high power rounds, including a couple from my own rifle. It was all machismo over common decency.’

His voice trailed off, and he sipped at his whisky.

Matthew looked again at the mangled head. He saw it differently now.

‘So why did you keep it, and mount it? It’s not even a very impressive size.’

‘Because every time, and I mean every-god-damn-time, I look at it, it humiliates me. It’s a hard reminder of what I don’t want to be, but what I once was. Maybe what I still am. It screams at me to do better.’

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The two men breathed hard, their breath like plumes from steam trains, as they pursued the wounded buck through the trees, and up the valley. Matthew Leung had flown more than seven thousand miles to be here for this one chance.

Colt led the charge. Matthew stopped for a second to catch his breath; he had brought a lot of unnecessary gear with him, in a big backpack, which was slowing him down.

‘C’mon, my boy. We got a duty to finish,’ said Colt. ‘We gotta make it clean. It’s your responsibility. No quitting on me.’

‘Yeah, I’ve got this, grandpa,’ replied Matthew, beginning to run again.

Matthew had run over the hills in Hong Kong for years. It was a way for him to get away from his troubles for a while, a way to run from responsibilities. Now he found himself running towards his problem. He looked at Colt. Bounding ahead, the man

seemed possessed, manic—but euphoric, like a cat in pursuit of a mouse.

‘When we catch up to him, if you aren’t up to taking the shot,’ called Colt back at Mathew, ‘I’ll finish him for you.’

Matthew just scowled at Colt. He picked up his pace. He couldn’t let the old man get to the deer before him. As he watched Colt scramble up a big rock for a better view, Matthew no longer saw a heroic cowboy. Colt pulled out his rifle and looked through the scope. For a second, Matthew thought he was going to take the shot.

Matthew dropped his backpack, sprinted up to the big rock, and, scrambling up, knocked Colt off balance. Colt tumbled to the ground. What Matthew saw was just a man, flawed like the rest. And like the rest he was trying to do better, but struggling not to keep repeating his same mistakes.

Colt was about to tear Matthew a new one, but Matthew, catching sight of the deer, signalled Colt to be quiet. The old hunter’s reflexes overcame his immediate need to even the score, and he bit his tongue.

The deer had slowed, in a distant clearing. It would be a long shot, and Matthew was breathing hard. He chambered a round, then wrapped the strap tight around his arm. Dropping to one knee, he steadied himself. His only thought was about the deer, about putting it out of its misery.

With a calm squeeze, the shot rang out. The deer dropped to the ground. It would be the last real bullet that Matthew would ever fire.

The men walked quickly to the kill. Colt seemed to have already forgotten about being knocked to the ground. As they stood over the deer, he patted Matthew on the shoulder.

‘Well done, my boy, well done.’

Matthew, looking at the beautiful creature lying dead before him, didn’t want or need the praise. He felt guilt—like a punch to the gut. He felt like he had let out a bit of that manliness Colt said he had inside him, and he hated it. This was not a feeling he ever wanted to feel again. His only small comfort was that he didn’t let himself, or anyone else, make it worse.

‘Time for your first practical lesson in field dressing,’ smiled Colt, pulling out his razor-sharp buck knife and beginning to cut. Matthew, as promised, helped, but it made him feel sick the entire time. He didn’t want the trophy. He wasn’t going to need the reminder.

When they were finished, Matthew insisted they cook and eat some of the deer meat, right there, next to the kill.

‘It’s getting late, my boy. We should start carrying this back.’

But Matthew ignored him, and started building a fire, which he lit with just one match.

‘Look, it don’t really matter which piece you cook up, it’s been running for a while, the meat won’t be good,’ argued Colt in vain.

Matthew picked up the heart, rinsed it, trimmed it, and diced it into small pieces. He skewered these on a stick, then roasted them over the fire. He let them sizzle and char.

He offered Colt a taste, but the old man pulled back.

‘That’s going to be rank, son. It’s full of adrenaline and stress hormones,’ Colt tried to explain. ‘Let’s go home and I’ll heat you up some of my stew.’

Matthew shrugged and pulled off a piece.

‘I want to remember what this sort of manliness tastes like,’ he said, popping it in his mouth.

‘Yeah. How is it?’ asked Colt, his big moustache curling back.

Burnt, biliary, beyond bad. The sort of thing that you’d only eat in an apocalypse.

‘Terrible,’ Matthew replied, taking another big bite. ‘Needs ketchup.’

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# Authors

**D.J. Hamilton**'s book of poems, *The Hummingbird Sometimes Flies Backwards*, won the *Proverse Prize*. He has also written a chapbook, *Firecrackers #2* (out of print) and has won awards in Washington State and New York for poems, plays and play directing. His poems have appeared in *Tentacle*, *Ofi Press*; *Repentino*; *Dalmoma*, *Firecrackers*, *Bumbershoot Anthology*, *Compages*, and other publications. He has been a featured reader at the Hong Kong Literary Festival and is a frequent MC at the Peel Street Poetry Wednesday night gatherings. Hamilton grew up in Wisconsin and later lived in Seattle and in Port Townsend, Washington. An expat for over 20 years, he has now lived in Hong Kong for over 8 years. (After 12 years in Mexico and one very long year in Mainland China.) He considers himself as a US-Mexico-Hong Kong writer.

**Anne Jiao** is a product manager, consultant and writer based in Hong Kong. She spent her early years in the entertainment industry and never lost her passion for storytelling, and has completed several full-length and TV pilot specs. She primarily writes in the YA, Fantasy, Sci-fi, and Mystery genres and is currently working on her first novel.

**Jay Oatway** came to Hong Kong in 1997, to write about the Handover, and worked in magazines for years before becoming an early influencer in the social media marketing space. With this background, Jay's blend of science fiction, fantasy, suspense, and social commentary often explores the friction of technology on the human condition, delving into the complexities of modern life in the digital age.

**Shivani Sarwal** writes romance and women's fiction. She is a fan of investigative journalism and is fascinated by literary fiction. She has recently completed an undergraduate diploma in

*creative writing from Oxford University and is currently working on an auto-fiction.*

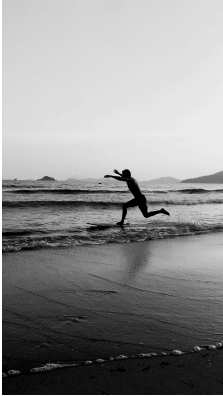
<https://shivanisarwal.substack.com/publish/home>

**Wilfred Wong** is a writer and psychiatrist living in Hong Kong. He has special interests in child and adolescent mental health and psychodynamic psychotherapy and is an Associate Consultant at Queen Mary Hospital. He is a Member of the Royal College of Psychiatrists, and a Fellow of both the HK College of Psychiatrists and the HK Academy of Medicine. Blending his academic interests and stories learned from his clients, he is working on a book about a psychiatric facility and its occupants set in mid-20th-century Hong Kong. Outside of work and writing, he enjoys playing football and training in jiu-jitsu.

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# Artists



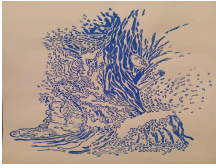
**Poetic Drift** (cover)  
Anthony Roussel



**Sand Warrior**  
Philippe Joly



**Diva**  
Matt Ricardo



**Raging Waters**  
Victoria Mae Martin



**Ethan**  
Raff Degruttola



**Ateno de Nago**  
Ricky Sadosa



**Trunk Call**  
Amy Shroff

**18 Years**  
Shivani Sarwal



**Rainbow Child**  
Charlotte Farhan



**Bullseye**  
Julien Pantz



