



PAUL YEE

MONEY BOY

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For Mohamed

ONE

English poetry crawls across our super-wide TV in easy words that I understand.

Hey!

I'll learn this ancient play from the movie version.

I'll get high marks on tomorrow's English quiz.

I'll surprise my teachers and my friends, who expect me to score another goose egg. I haven't read the play yet, not even in Chinese. That's how Mila Pei gets good grades. She reads everything in Chinese on the Internet as well as in English from our textbooks.

The movie starts. Men and women flirt at a picnic. One man is shirtless. The women's blouses hang low and wide below the neck. In the trees, birds are chirping. The actress reads more poetry, as slowly as before. She's talking about finding love!

Did our teacher finally pick a play that we immigrant kids can understand?

The actors start talking. At first they speak slowly. Then they speed up. Rot! Mila chuckles at a joke. What was it? She chuckles again. This time Wei Zhang joins her. Those two are lucky. They have English-language tutors since primary school, back in China. Not me.

I lean forward to listen harder. I need to do well tomorrow. Otherwise my report card will cause trouble with Ba.

Mila's cellphone buzzes. She yawns and opens a text. She is sprawled over the sofa, feet on the coffee table. With a giggle, she thrusts her cell at Jenny Wang. Jenny's eyes widen.

"His clothes, where are they?" she squeals in Mandarin.

Scandal! It's Kevin, Mila's boyfriend. We rush to see.

"Personal!" Mila jumps up and grabs her cell. "Private! For my eyes only!"

She skips through the tangle of legs on the floor but Wei springs up and throws his arms around her. He reaches for the cell, squeezing her tightly. Mila screams and twists like a wild animal. Her blonde hair sprays out like a shiny umbrella.

My theory is this. She wears her hair long in order to keep her shoulders and chest warm. Her tight tops always show lots of bare flesh. One look at Wei's face and you know that he's rolling in turned-on heaven.

The cell shoots from one end of our family room to the other. The guys hoot in surprise when Jenny catches it. Sprinting to the foot of the basement stairs, she shouts in triumph. Chubby Kai Ren tackles her to the carpet. Their arms and legs are windmills. His gym socks are blinding white.

Mila rushes to Jenny but my stepbrother Jian loops a long arm around her. They topple backward laughing. If Kevin saw this, he would crush Jian like a potato chip.

"Save me, Ray!" Jenny calls out to me. "Save me!" She curls up, tucking the cell to her chest.

I need to jump in. Otherwise I'll stick out like a maiden aunt at a wedding. I grab her wrists and pull her close. It's easy to play along. Touching and grabbing like this goes on all the time, right under our teachers' noses.

Jenny bites me. I press my lips to her cheeks and inhale her perfume. I hope to get aroused

Nothing.

“You vampire!” I hiss. “Want to drink my blood?”

“Give back my cell!” Mila hollers.

“Quiet!” Jian hisses suddenly. “Quiet down!”

He clicks the mute. The surround sound falls silent while the movie keeps going.

My father is at the foot of the stairs, scowling.

Rot. He shouldn't be home. On weekends, the restaurant is busy so he's needed there. That's why my friends came over. That, plus the fact that no one else owns a TV as super wide as ours.

At least he caught me wrestling Jenny like a horny young man.

My friends greet him as if they are at a funeral. Mila and Jenny adjust their tops. I straighten the sofa cushions. Ba always complains that my friends horse around too much and leave the house in a mess.

With his crew cut and bright red North Wind tracksuit, my father looks like he never left China, the twentieth century. Ba sticks to Chinese labels. He says he's proud of China.

So then why did he quit the army? And the police force? He's still fit from those jobs, which makes my friends afraid of him.

Ba sucks in a breath. His eyes widen. I glance at the TV. My jaw drops. Naked soldiers laugh and toss each other into a giant outdoor tub, then splash and dunk each other. Inside the palace, women rush from bed to bed, undressing and dressing, pulling on skirts and blouses.

Isn't this supposed to be a serious play by Shakespeare?

“That,” Ba thunders, jabbing a finger at the TV. “What is that?”

“English homework,” Kai replies nervously. “We're reading a play by Sha-shi-bi-ya. It's called . . .”

He stops and looks around, but no one knows the play's name in Chinese.

“*Much Ado about Nothing*,” he says in English.

“This play, it uses old-fashioned English,” Wei adds, “so it's very hard to understand.”

Jian clicks the remote to restart the sound. Luckily, all the actors are now fully dressed and talking and bowing formally to each other. And there's western classical music.

“Sha-shi-bi-ya is worth studying!” Ba declares. “He is one writer who is admired by both British and American people! But you should watch a high-quality version of his work, not this!”

This know-it-all kills me! My father never read a serious book in his life.

“This version is high-quality!” Mila retorts. “It was filmed in Italy. Look. The images are very sharp!”

“They are sharp due to my big screen!” Ba snorts.

My mind hears “you stupid egg” at the end of his sentence.

Ba grumbles all the time about kids who talk back to adults, girls who totter on high heels, guys who tint their hair, and teens who return to China because they are too lazy to learn English.

In other words, people like my friends.

“Stay for lunch!” Ba calls, blocking the stairway with one hand. “Your homework, you can do here. There is plenty of food, tasty dishes from the restaurant.”

My friends politely shake their heads. They fish for their notepads and pens and load up their backpacks. Ba's bossy way, shouting as if people are army recruits, caused his fitness studio to fail two months ago. His clients were rich Chinese who wanted to be pampered.

“Look!” Ba hoists a shopping bag. “Special gift for my son, Jian-wen.”

What? Usually Ba calls Jian “my wife’s child.”

My friends shout “Ooh” and “Wow” just from seeing the brand name on the box.

“Net-book!” Jian crows. The glossy silver case is smaller than a textbook.

My father isn’t a generous man, so I know what’s going on. Jian and I are both in grade eleven. He is pressing me about university and then medical school. His tactic is to surround and push from all directions.

He’ll have to shove hard. I’m an average student. Below average. Very much below average.

“Many models are cheaper,” Ba boasts. “But I want quality. Korean electronics are the world’s best!”

Jian plugs in the power cord. Out chimes the Windows tune.

“My handbag is bigger than that!” Jenny laughs.

“The battery lasts eight hours,” Ba brags. “None of your westerner classmates has this model, that not so?”

“Look at the keyboard,” Wei adds. “Almost full-size.”

Ba pulls out a camera.

Wow! The old fart made plans for this little event.

“Jian, show this to your father and grandparents,” he says loudly. “They will be delighted.”

This isn’t about Jian’s family. Ba will send the photo to my mother in China, to show Ma how hard he pushes his sons at school. He wants to prove that he is a better parent than her.

Ba tells my friends, “I told those two, if they passed summer school, I would reward them!”

“That was months ago,” protests Jian, always the too-nice guy. “No need for this.”

“I keep my word,” Ba declares. “I am an honest man.”

This honest man brags that he runs a restaurant, when in truth my stepmother Niang manages the front, the kitchen and the books.

Ba and Jian smile into the camera flash, holding the open net-book between them like a sports trophy.

I force myself to grin. I cross my arms and clench my fists to my armpits. If I storm out of the room, then my friends get caught in a petty family fight. If I stay, then my mouth must stay shut. If I show even the tiniest bit of envy or interest, I’ll land in Ba’s trap.

“You want a net-book?” he’ll say. “Then study harder.”

I failed summer school. Jian and I took the same course: Chem 11. At the start, I tried really hard. Then the weather got hot and humid. The school had no air-conditioning. The teacher spoke in a high pitched voice. My brain melted. No matter how many times I read the textbook and the workbook, nothing made sense, not even when I found matching terms on a Chinese science website. Bonding over this and displacement that — who cared?

Ba cared, and that made it a big problem. Chemistry is needed for medical school.

At the door, Mila gives me an extra-long hug and looks at my father from the corner of her eye.

“Nothing is the matter, right?” she whispers. Her thinking is this. Friends are more important than family because you choose your pals.

That sounds good in theory. But after four years, my best friends in China aren’t so close, even with email to help us. Grandfather sends me handwritten letters regularly, and I send back hard copy, using Chinese software. He took care of me when I was in primary school and Ma the sales clerk hopped

from one department store job to another.

Grandfather is nothing like Ba, even though they're father and son. Grandfather never asks about my marks at school. Instead, he writes about movie stars and TV award shows that he thinks I'm watching over here.

All of us have nagging parents, but I have it worse. Thanks to China's One Child Policy, I'm the only one with a brother who can make me look bad.

We're eighteen! We're adults! In China, by now we would have finished high school and moved away to live at college. But here we're a year or two behind everyone else because we were forced into ESL classes. And our parents still run our lives as if we are six-year-olds.

Steel has killed many men. Now he's a traitor to Central after leading several of its armies into battle. In a surprise turn, he defected to the Eastern rebels.

Rebel State takes place in China, so I know the landscape from my middle-school geography. The rivers and mountains that protect the rebels are as real as home to me, just like today's cities of tall buildings and traffic jams.

Central sent armies by land and sea against us. Yesterday, when its navy attacked, we catapulted fireballs from the shore and forced them to retreat.

Now smaller teams will get closer to their ships. I (Steel, that is) choose Long Range the archer and Monkey, the lightest warrior in my team, for this mission. Many teams wait for the Go signal.

"Where are you?" Ba yells.

Old fart! Nothing should ever make him wait, certainly nothing as useless as my on-line role-playing games.

"Just a minute!"

Uncle Bei arrived half an hour ago. Grandfather is supposed to come from China for a visit. Ba sent him airfare long ago, but Grandfather keeps delaying the trip. He is terrified of stepping onto an airplane. Toronto has more snow and ice than Beijing, so Ba is building a small bandstand in the backyard. Grandfather can do his daily tai-chi routines there, under a roof.

The project has fallen behind schedule. Ba needs to finish it before the cold weather hits.

My bedroom door pops open.

"Didn't I tell you to quit that game?" Ba shouts. "Rotting waste of time!"

Messages from Rebel Command are coming in swift and thick.

Ba grabs the power cord. "Want me to yank this?"

I jump up, hands and palms up in surrender. Before I can even log off, Ba drags me to the backyard.

I curse to myself. It wasn't easy for Rebel Command to find a time when all the teams could join in. If I don't show up, my Honor will drop.

In the drawings, the bandstand looks like a Chinese-style pavilion. So far it's a birthday-cake frame of eight posts.

But how did Ba manage to pour the concrete and get each post to stand straight? He never built anything in his life. He barreled ahead claiming that D-I-Y was the Canadian way. D-I-Y means do-it-yourself, he bragged.

Too bad Grandfather won't use the bandstand. He says tai-chi must be done in the open air when

nature's energy flows freely. All this is a big waste of time.

When I was small and we visited Grandfather, Ba barely spoke to him. If they talked, they cursed and argued. We left as soon as the meal ended. Then Ba brooded at home in front of the TV with a bottle of liquor. Grandfather didn't drink, and nobody drank in front of him. But Ma needed him to get me to primary school and back, so we visited. I always felt safe with him. It was his idea to start me with gymnastics while my bones were still soft.

Uncle Bei climbs the ladder as Ba ties rope to a long aluminum scaffold. My head screams at him to hurry.

Uncle Bei and Ba met in the army and brawled their way through China, getting drunk at every chance, if you believe their tales. They "served the people," while the people served them beer. Uncle Bei introduced his sister to Ba, a meeting that sent our families sliding downhill toward two divorces.

"That goes on top." Ba points at the scaffold.

"The posts are strong enough?" I ask.

"Today we will finish the roof." He points to a stack of wooden beams, neatly sorted by length and width.

It could take all afternoon!

Ba and I raise one end of the scaffolding to Uncle Bei.

"Push!" Ba shouts. "Not so fast! Pull it back!"

Bit by bit, we thrust the walkway up. Uncle Bei pulls it over a top beam. Ba climbs the other ladder across from Uncle Bei. They slide the scaffold into the middle. Then they come down to read the instructions. Ba has laid out his tools on the bench as tidily as trinkets at an outdoor market. Too bad he doesn't know what half the tools are for.

I head to the house but Ba calls, "Not finished yet!"

I don't always obey Ba, but I never defy him in front of other adults. Nothing makes him madder than losing face, even before family like Uncle Bei.

I wait.

In our neighborhood, people build high fences, so each backyard is private. There, they do whatever they want: tan their bodies into tree bark, barbecue entire goats, or let their dogs use the yard as an outdoor toilet. Some people grow flowers, while others put up playground sets. It's not like the front yard where no fences mar the long slope of lawn. Everyone competes to grow the softest, greenest grass. All this is a farting headache of extra work because I have to cut the lawn and set out the sprinkler. In China, we never paid attention to the outside of our building.

This house is still Ba's new toy, even after we've lived here for two years. Our first two years in Canada were spent in a condo, so Ba came late to house care. He still asks the Chinese radio station for handyman advice. Should the air-conditioner be covered in the winter? How high should lawn grass grow? Can he remove black smudges from a white-painted wall?

I hear a sharp creak and a rasping cracking sound.

Uh-oh. Two bandstand posts are tilting, bending at the foundation. Other posts stay firmly planted. The frame breaks apart in pieces. Looks like the scaffold was too heavy.

Ba runs forward but Uncle Bei shouts, "Back off! Want to die?"

With a dull thud, the scaffold crashes to the ground, along with half of the upper frame.

"I told you, but you didn't listen!" Uncle Bei laughs so hard that his teeth are going to fly out. "You measured wrong for your batch of concrete. Look at my posts! Nothing wrong with them!"

“You should have stopped me!” Ba mutters. “This is blood-and-sweat money wasted.”

Ba’s face falls apart from disbelief. It’s not a look I see often. My father thinks he is close to perfection.

This collapse will enrage him, coming so soon after the failure of his fitness studio. Good.

A car door slams in the driveway. Niang has come home to shower and change from slacks into a dress for the evening. She enters the backyard.

Uncle Bei dances over, laughing all the while.

“Look at that dumb melon husband of yours,” he gloats. “I told him to follow me in mixing the concrete, but he didn’t listen.”

If Niang starts to chuckle, I may join in. Ba will be humiliated. She told him several times to hire real carpenters. She doubted that his English was good enough to read the instructions.

Niang walks around the wrecked bandstand. She tugs at the standing posts, testing their strength.

I am edging away when she says to Ba, “What are you waiting for? We need to move the metal off the wood.”

She hollers for me, and I move quickly. I never give her any reason to scold me. Niang gets things done quickly, which is good for a house of lazy guys. As a teenager, she trekked alone into the city to look for wage work. After several hungry days, she started washing dishes in the laneway behind the restaurant. Then she learned the business by watching.

“Your daughter, Yan, brought friends to the restaurant,” she tells Uncle Bei.

Together, the four of us lift the aluminum off the wood. No one knows which way we should go.

“I told them not to pay,” Niang continues, “but they wouldn’t listen. They left a stack of cash behind.”

“Stupid girl,” Uncle Bei grunts. “You should remind her that she’s spending my money.”

“She needs foreigner friends.”

“She’ll make them at university.”

“She should broaden her circle now.”

Ba orders us to lean the scaffold against the fence in order to prevent damage to his precious lawnmower. Head down, he trudges inside.

“I have to make a phone call,” he mumbles.

He’s trying to save face, that’s all.

“Good thing you’re not building the Beijing Stadium,” Uncle Bei calls. “Otherwise our Olympic Games would have been cancelled this year!”

I get back to the raid just in time. Monkey and Long Range are angry.

Shit Egg, you will regret jerking us around.

You Dog Fart, go play elsewhere if you can’t be on time.

No time to explain. Long Range and I are stronger, so we row the skiff. The sea is calm. It’s so dark that the enemy can’t see us, nor can we see them. We almost crash into the warships.

The signal comes, Monkey strikes the flint, and Long Range shoots flaming arrows at the ships.

We hear loud splashes and then our retreat signal. Enemy Water Warriors are coming!

We’re rowing as fast as we can when a dark figure swings aboard our skiff. I charge forward with my sword. He twists to the side. We both sway.

Long Range has one last arrow, but she can’t see in the dark. If she shoots blindly, then there’s a fifty-fifty chance that she’ll kill me. And Monkey is too far away to help.

TWO

Next day, I rush home after school. Music and graphics are sharper and clearer on the desktop, so I rather play my games there.

This morning, Central's navy sailed into our harbor, using two damaged ships as shields against our fireballs. One ship was the one my team attacked yesterday. We should have sunk it by diving underwater and drilling into it. But once Long Range shot the Water Warrior, we raced back to the shore. Then Rebel Command raised a Red Flag, calling its teams to a beachhead battle this afternoon. It's a good time for me to build up my Honor.

Wei is taking his mother to the doctor, so he drives me home. He loves cruising in his father's new BMW but grumbles about being away from the gang. This afternoon they're going to the mall. I complain about the English exam, which was a disaster for me. Wei doesn't reply, so he must have done okay.

I want my driver's license, too, but Ba won't pay for the course until my grades improve. I hate how everything in my life is tied to school.

While my ancient computer grunts slowly through boot-up, I visit Ba's muscle machine. There's just enough time for two sets of bench presses, chest flies and pullovers. In my head I hear the gym teacher shouting, "Go slow for bulk!" but my counting speeds up as soon as I think of the upcoming battle. At the mirror, I flex my chest. My body looks more and more like Steel's.

Logging onto *Rebel State*, I sense someone watching me. My head jerks up. The house should be empty.

Ba is at the door holding a sheaf of papers and staring at me. His gaze is still and intense. The desktop screen is reflected in his eyes. I wait for his lecture to start. No doubt it'll be the same one about wasting time on this game.

"You're home early," I say, breaking the deadly silence. If I had known he was home, I would have gone to the Milky Way Café to play in peace on my laptop. At this time of the day, Ba usually goes to Uncle Bei's computer store in the Great Lakes Mall. He says he needs a break from the restaurant.

He drops sheets of computer printout onto my keyboard. Each page contains lines that are highlighted with a marker.

A chill cuts through me. The list shows all the websites I visited in the past two weeks. *Rebel State* appears the most. But the sites that stand out in bright green are all the gay Chinese ones — some in North America, some in Taiwan and Hong Kong.

"Why are you snooping through my computer?" I demand. "Privacy is protected in this country. Don't you know?"

"Those sites, did you visit them?" he barks.

Why does he bother to ask? His snoop program gives him plenty of proof. I'm not stupid enough to accuse a computer of making mistakes.

"I was doing research for a school project."

"Show me the document. Which class was it for?"

“Maybe I didn’t save a copy on this machine.” I try to sound annoyed. “I can’t remember.”

“Is it on your laptop?” Ba demands.

I scroll through my desktop as my brain begs some faraway god for a miracle.

Take Ba away, I pray, and I’ll quit the game forever. I won’t waste another penny on this evil habit.

My throat tightens and my stomach clenches.

I want to scream out, I haven’t done anything! I want a girlfriend. I want to get drunk with my

buddies, sing karaoke all night long. All I want is a normal life, passing one day at a time. I don’t want

my friends backing away from me in the shower room or in a row of seats at the theater.

Here’s the file full of gay stuff from the net. Delete, delete, delete.

All the websites say that it’s best if you choose the time and place to talk to people about gay topics, especially your parents. *Every family is different, so only you will know the ideal time. Please be careful.*

Too bad there’s no such time for a father who has actually killed people in the line of duty. In the army, Ba was in charge of training new recruits. His specialty was hand-to-hand combat. Only the drunken fools who had lost all their worldly sense dared to challenge him.

He and I are the same height now. I’m still strong from gymnastics, even though I quit during middle school. But Ba is the one who knows how to fight.

“You know, all my life, I behaved well,” Ba says quietly. “It is important that people respect you.”

Here comes the standard lecture about proper behavior. Serve the people. Strengthen yourself. Stand tall. Don’t wait until the cooked duck has flown. He complains that we young people have no idea how terribly the Chinese people suffered in earlier times.

“I quit school at age fourteen to help your grandfather,” he starts. “Farmers were finally allowed to sell produce on the free market. Everyone rushed to grow crops.”

He turns to my chest of drawers and pulls out the top one. He dumps my socks and underwear on the floor and flings the drawer aside.

Hey! Niang just did the laundry yesterday. Who’s cleaning this up? Not me!

“Farm life was wretched. Your grandfather forced me to join the army, did you know that?”

Ba empties more drawers. I sniff the air. Is he drunk?

“He wanted his son to become a four-star general,” Ba declares sourly. “I served ten years. Then I got discharged. Your grandfather blamed me, called me stupid. He said that so many countries planned to attack China, its leaders would never dare shrink its army!”

I’ve heard this before, whenever Ba drinks. I never saw Ba show respect to Grandfather, not at family gatherings, not at New Year’s. To be called stupid by Grandfather, was that enough to make Ba angry all his life?

Ba walks into my closet, bigger than our living room back in China. He dumps my clothes onto the carpet.

“Ba!” I shout. “What are you doing?”

“Then I joined the police force,” he says, sighing. He scoops up an armful of my clothes and strolls away.

By the time I reach the front door, my fashion choices are front-page news on the lawn.

Luckily, I live by a labels-only motto. Every piece of underwear bears a high-end logo, in case anyone is looking. I run down to grab my jockstrap, even though Ba’s doing a great job of shaming our family all by himself.

It dawns on me that Ba is throwing me out. This is serious!

Can he do that?

Of course he can.

The autumn was dry, and tattered red and yellow leaves lie everywhere. Across the street, Mrs. L is raking her lawn and averting her eyes.

Ba has gone crazy. You don't throw your son out of the house just because he visited a few controversial websites.

Do you?

I run around the pile of clothes, rescuing items. It took me ages to find the perfect graphics on my T-shirts. My gray hoodie is just two weeks old. Which should I grab, old jeans or newer ones? What about my combats? Jenny liked how mine were different from everyone else's. I can wear plain white T-shirts with anything.

Good thing the westerner people live too far down the street to watch us shame ourselves in public. They are friendly enough, always waving and smiling so that no one can accuse them of racism. We take great care never to step on their lawns, and never to park in front of their houses. We must never give them reason to complain about immigrants or to look down at us.

Ba hurries by with my backpacks and gym bags, and then shakes out my shoes. This must give him great pleasure. He has long grumbled about the steep prices of sneakers and how we own far too many pairs.

The red ones are for basketball. I wear the white Nikes for gym class. The black high-tops are good for slave labor at the restaurant. And I wear my Jordans when the gang plans a day at the mall or goes to a movie. I should have thrown out the other pairs long ago, but they're old friends.

Is Ba going to toss gasoline over them and click his lighter? He might be crazy enough.

I dash into the house for my laptop. Should I grab my CDs? I told myself to load them onto my iPod long ago. Now it's too late.

Ba puts an arm around me and walks me toward the front door.

"Canada was to be a new start," he says, "but how many failed businesses have I had? Four. One failed each year —"

"Ba, wait! Let's talk!"

"Now you want to be gay. What should I think?" he says. "Your grandfather was right. I am a failure. I should have used more discipline to raise you. Now it is too late. Get going."

He pushes me out the front door as if he's escorting a drunken customer from the restaurant.

I'm speechless. I'm waiting for him to lose his temper and storm around like he does after parent-teacher meetings. Those times, he hurls dishes to the floor and shatters them. He threatens to cut off high-speed Internet at home, crush my cellphone or put locks on my computer. He shouts until he thinks he has scared me into obeying him.

But what do I do when Ba acts like this?

He shuts the door firmly. The lock clicks into place and the chain rattles. The radio station said we needed industrial-strength locks and a steel-plated door to be safe.

Rot him!

I kick the pile of clothes and one blue Converse flies next door.

I haven't done anything!

In China, he bragged about how wonderful Canada was, and how we would enjoy great freedom.

here.

Hah! He never meant for me to enjoy living here.

He told his friends that immigration was stressful and required hard work, but said he would sacrifice everything for my sake. He wanted me to have more choices than were available in China.

This is all his fault. If he hadn't forced me to come to Canada, I would never have logged onto those sites. They're not available in China. Even if they were, I wouldn't risk getting China's Internet police on my back.

Two westerner boys stop on the sidewalk. They sit back on their bicycles, eyeing me as if I am a toddler with a dripping diaper. They are in junior middle school. One runs a hand through his long brown hair and then shakes it loose. He says something that ends with, "... yard sale?"

"Get the hell out of here!" I bark.

Startled, they leave right away. I don't care if the fart-baskets tell their parents that I swore at them.

I grab some clothes and jam them into a backpack. At the last minute, I take socks and underwear. I zip up my down jacket. Winter isn't here yet, but I feel chilled.

"No trouble, is there?" asks Mrs. Lo.

I almost jump. She crossed the street quietly, carrying Ching-ching, the white puffball that was supposed to be a dog.

Ching-ching wriggles in Mrs. Lo's arms, blinking its big brown eyes and batting its paws at me. Mrs. Lo holds it up, and the dog licks my face.

My face crumples.

I back off and take a deep breath.

"Oh, no." I answer her question cheerfully and scratch the dog's ears. "No trouble. No trouble at all."

It's impossible to be rude to her. She moves slowly and gracefully, exactly like my popo in China. She even wears the same half-black, half-transparent eyeglass frames as my grandmother.

"Want to come over and sit for a while?" she asks.

I open my mouth but all that comes out is a strangled croak. I shake my head and shove the rest of the clothes beside the stairs, out of sight.

I'm being kicked out of home by an insane father, yet I'm trying to make sure our house looks good. Go figure.

THREE

When I step onto the bus, I reach for my iPod.

Rot! It's not on me. It's in the other backpack with my school stuff.

I jam my computer buds into my ears but don't connect them. I need to save my battery. Walking around without wires looks pitiful, and even sadder if you're alone.

You look like you don't know music. You look poor.

Ba wants to humiliate me. That's why he kicked me out. He wants me crawling back to him so that he can control my life one hundred percent.

Every time the bus stops, I turn to the window to avoid seeing any familiar faces. I want to smash my fist into the glass.

I hate buses. They pull in at every stop. They never charge through amber lights, even though they have ample power and size. People board slowly. Then the bus waits for a green light. Or the driver sees someone running from a block away. Then the light turns red again. Public transit is for losers. Without my iPod, it's like being entombed alive.

My father is an ignorant turtle. He may be a soldier who can fight, but he never goes downtown. To him, it's full of poor people and drug addicts who carry guns and knives to rob you. Maybe that's why he kicked me out. He wants me to go there and get murdered. He wants a son who will become a doctor. Too bad my grades are low. Now he has an excuse to get rid of me.

I won't lie down and die. I'll survive and make him sorry for this. I'll show him that I'm better than him. Me, I know more than he does about this city. He can't even ride the subway! Me, I've gone downtown many times. The last time was to get a cool gift for Kevin's birthday.

I get off at Wellesley Station. This summer, our Chinese TV reporters came here for the Gay Pride festival. A long escalator lifts me slowly to the street. I don't know this part of the city and don't know where to go. But Ba kicked me out for being gay, so here I am.

I don't care what you think, you old fart. I don't care if you hate me.

First I check the map. Church Street was the site of marching bands, rainbow balloons and half-naked men dancing on floats. We laughed when one nervous reporter dropped his mike while talking to men dressed as glamorous women. Jenny wanted to go down and see, but Mila didn't.

In front of the station, vendors sell hotdogs, flowers and homemade jewelry. The tall buildings, busy stores and masses of people are like my hometown Beijing.

My feet are suddenly rubbery and heavy. I've never come downtown alone. I should have grabbed my penknife from my desk for protection. I reach inside my jacket and touch my wallet. My bankcard and cash will keep me safe, let me do whatever I want. I don't need to be afraid.

Students shuffle past in ragged groups, office workers rush by with shiny leather bags, and senior citizens riding motor chairs scoot through the crowds. Everyone talks on a cell.

I know Yonge Street, which lies in the other direction. Jian's girlfriend, Carla, marched there once in a happy parade of Christian church people. He and I walked beside her, waving little flags telling everyone that "Jesus Loves You." The street's little shops sell kinky is-this-legal stuff. Goth clerks pierce their faces full of metal.

The Yonge Street coffee bar is full of students and workers, but they're cool and hip in the late shoes and jeans. At least one laptop sits on each table. Best of all, the music is a bit edgy.

It feels safe here. But when I buy coffee and a sandwich, my appetite vanishes.

I never eat sandwiches. None of my friends eat sandwiches.

Outside, cars crawl by. A man on a unicycle jerks and zigzags along, legs pumping forward then back, forward then back. Ba would sneer at him. But I like it downtown. Here, customers tap into the coffee bar's electricity for their laptops. It's considered good for business. At the Milky Way, the owner covered the electrical outlets with tape.

I log onto *Rebel State*. Monkey and Long Range complain they couldn't reach me earlier. The beach battle was delayed because not enough teams showed up. Central unveils its new weapons: Reflex Armor for its soldiers and Attack Wolves. Steel pauses to figure out how to handle them. Between skirmishes, I find the rest of my team: Heaven Hand and Trader. Normally I try not to kill enemy soldiers. Instead I injure them so they cannot wage war again. I earn Honor, not Blood.

The sudden blare of a car horn jolts me. Night has fallen. I lean back and rub my stiff neck. My scores for both Blood and Honor have both risen. I log off.

I love rolling in the thick blanket of *Rebel State*. Time sails by! You need skill and brains to survive. Steel's problems are real ones. How do you gain Honor while staying true to The Code? Do you keep playing when you lose Blood?

I eat my rock-hard sandwich. On the sound system, a saxophone plays a light, tricky tune.

At home about this time, I'd be in a panic about homework, having spent my time gaming and surfing for music. I'd be waiting for Niang to bring leftovers from the restaurant. She'll switch on the Chinese TV station and ask Ba to massage her feet. That's when I leave the room.

Store windows across the street reflect neon signs. On the road, lines of cars glow red and yellow. Around me, people continue to stare at laptops and sway to their earphones. A café worker clatters by with a tray of dirty dishes.

Up north, it's closing time, too. Head Cook prepares the end-of-day staff meal as Niang clears the cash register. All day she chats with customers young and old, even my friends. She knows people's names, birthdays, dates of first arrival in Canada, and most recent visits to China. People bring her gifts from China. She looks good, even without makeup. She can easily hook a rich man. So why does she stay with Ba?

For sex?

Ugh!

She's the best thing that ever happened to Ba. Graciously, she calls him her business partner when really he is waiter, kitchen help and delivery man. He is happiest when the phone rings with take-out orders and he can go play with his GPS. If Uncle Bei calls for food, then Ba is gone for several hours. That, believe it or not, is good for business. Niang can talk more freely with the male customers.

Jian gets tables with westerners because his English is best among the waiters. Customers give him better tips because he smiles more.

I hate grinning at strangers and hoping that they'll come back to eat again. Niang likes rich Chinese

who order the pricey dishes. She chats them up, flatters them and makes them laugh. They treat me like dirt when I pour water and remove their plates. To them, waiters and busboys are immigrants who have failed. Luckily, Jian and I are called in only once a week now, so that we get time to study.

The coffee bar worker passes by again. This round, he stops and says, “. . . blah-blah-something something-nine.”

Slow down!

My ESL teacher said, “Just say ‘Pardon me?’ and people will repeat themselves. Don’t worry, they don’t mind.”

Huh! The last time I did that, the server at the food court rolled her eyes to the ceiling and then leaned sideways to peer at the line-up behind me.

My laptop is fully charged now, and I scroll through my machine. What I really want is to visit the *Rebel State* forum but there’s no time. The game is in Chinese. When I chat and argue there, that’s the only time I feel I know anything for sure.

When you speak your own language, you can laugh and debate. At school, if you can’t speak, you melt into the wall like paint.

Teachers point at us immigrants and say, “Speak up, the class wants to hear you. We really do!”

One day in English, the class read a play together. Each student had to read aloud as we went through the lines. Everyone was bored. No one paid attention until I reached the word “awry.” I must have said it wrong because the entire class burst out laughing as if it was the funniest thing they had ever heard. I thought they were too bored to care. Even the teacher smiled.

People wait to jump on our mistakes.

I open a new page to make a plan.

1. Hide computer.
2. Find sleeping spot.
3. Brush teeth with Ultrasonic toothbrush. Hah!

I log onto my bank account. There’s \$368.14, enough for several months of *Rebel State*. It’s all good money that I’ve been saving.

I wash my coffee down with cold water. No customers are left. The coffee bar offers five kinds of sugar for people who stay all day and spend money. Big fat easy chairs rest under cones of soft light from living-room lamps.

I glance around, reach between my table and the sofa and slip my laptop into the stand bursting with magazines and newspapers.

Outside at the bus stop, three kids sit on the sidewalk in front of a fancy chocolate store. One calls out, “Spare some change?”

I drop cash into their paper cup and hear, “Thanks, man.”

They seem surprised. I doubt that many Chinese people give them money. They’re so young they could be from my school. The boys have thin beards. The girl wears a shiny stud in her nose. Their jeans are open at the knees for that ragged look that was hot when I first arrived in Canada four years ago. They appear well fed. No doubt their parents’ credit cards are tucked into their back pockets.

On their blackened feet, the two boys wear cheap flip-flops. I would never sink so low. Those are for bath houses and swimming pools, and for peasants working illegally in the cities.

In China, Ma always gave money to beggars: children, men, women, young and old alike.

“Stop it!” Ba grumbled. “They’re an organized ring! Those beggars are richer than you and me.”

“It makes me feel good,” Ma said. She clung to a simple thought. If you did good deeds, then good things happened to you.

Ba labeled her a fool. My friends take Ba’s side. Downtown, when they see me stopping at vagrant they grab me by the collar and pull me away. It’s a joke to them. They have to save me from myself.

Two police officers stroll by in armored vests. Their billy clubs and leather holsters glow from streetlamps.

I step onto the road and peer into the distance, as if I am waiting for the streetcar. That will explain why a clean-cut kid like me is out here so late.

The lights in the coffee bar flicker and go off. Mr. Blah-blah-something-something-nine hurries out, turns the key and yanks the door to test the lock.

Thank you, sir. Keep my machine safe, all right?

He’s not carrying anything, and he had no time to tidy the place. I know the routine. At our restaurant, the workers who leave right at closing time escape having to mop and disinfect the washrooms. Niang gets someone else to do it the next morning.

My cell has a stack of texts. Mila is giddy about a new MV from Faye Wong. Wei forwards a link to a sexy upload from Korea. Kai rates it Hot-hot-hot-hot. Earlier, Jenny invited people to go for sushi. Carla tells people (again) about her Bible study group’s next meeting. Kevin’s family ate at a new restaurant on Highway 7, but he says the food sucked. Clinton heard about a house party over the weekend where someone pulled a knife. No one got hurt. Now he’s asking to copy someone’s biology homework.

Jian wants to know where I am. Probably Niang told him to ask.

I doubt that Ba told them the truth about kicking me out. Instead he’ll say something stupid like “That idiot son of mine yelled and cursed me, so I told him to get out. I didn’t think he would, but he did. He was glad to leave.”

Jian and Niang will know that Ba is lying, but they won’t challenge him. They’ll let him save face. Niang will get nervous about me but Ba will tell her, “Don’t worry. I took care of myself when I was his age.”

How do I explain this? There’s no good gossip to share. I haven’t had gay sex. I don’t have a boyfriend. I didn’t get drunk and pass out at a gay bar. I’m not like Tyson Somers, the vice-president of the student council who started the year by telling the whole world he’s gay. He’s handsome and on the football team. His father runs a Winners store and his mother is a lawyer. They stand behind him one hundred percent.

But hooligans kicked in Tyson’s locker and emptied a can of paint over his stuff. Then, after a late afternoon football game, he got beat up so badly that he spent a night in hospital. He never named his attackers. Everyone at school thinks they were his former teammates on the football team.

That’s the real world. Life is unfair. Some kids get everything while others have nothing. All my friends struggle with English but I’m the slowest. Mila’s parents are divorced, too, but she’s happy living with cousins and grandparents. Half my friends are virgins (even though they say they’re not) but none of them are gay. Wei’s parents run a restaurant, too, but they don’t demand slave labor from him.

I shut my cell and breathe in the cool air. Freedom! I stroll with my back straight and arms loose but by my side. It is Steel’s warrior walk. No hoodlum will hassle me.

The office towers are bright, their lights perched high up in airplane zone. Condo windows are

fogged by the blurry colors of TV screens. Homeless people bed down in bus shelters and squat bank-machine rooms, guarding their shopping carts. Those tiny spaces must stink. At 24-hour coffee shops, teens with rumpled hair and layers of clothes hang around tables. I won't go in there and have those kids snicker at me. How do such places make money?

I turn the corner and stop in my tracks. I stand still for only a half a second because I'm not a country bumpkin.

Western movies and TV all show hookers selling sex on streets just like this. I never thought I'd go so close. Real chickens strutting around! And on my first night on my own!

I watch from a bus stop. The women's short skirts and tight tops reveal bare skin and fleshy curves. They totter back and forth inside little borders of pavement. Even on high heels, they look mean enough to cause serious pain with a quick kick. Their noses leak cigarette smoke across painted faces. Cars slow down while dark windows protect the men inside.

The women give me a passing glance and stay away.

Last year, You-peng told me in an excited email that Beijing police arrested my former classmate Fan Min at a massage parlor. No wonder she could afford the high-end messaging service!

"She's a public bus," You-peng wrote. "Everyone gets on." He said the boys at school started to follow her around. She laughed and told them, "Come back when you can pay my prices."

I walk away. Maybe I should go to Church Street to watch young men do the same business. In China, boys who sell sex to men are called money boys, while those who offer services to women are called ducks.

I saw one such woman interviewed on China's national news. Her face was hidden. Sex with her husband was boring, she chirped, so she invited ducks to her home when her husband was at work. She declared that she wasn't cheating on him.

"Sex and love are separate things," she said. "I bring home ducks. We go to bed. No emotions are involved. But with my husband, there are feelings. I love him and he loves me. We have known each other all our lives!"

I shudder. If I don't go home, then money boy work may be *my* future.

In the alley behind the coffee bar, high lamps spread a spooky orange glow over the smells of restaurant garbage. Traffic sounds creep between the buildings. One loading bay has a deep platform with protective shadows.

I climb up and drop my backpack. Sitting down, I picture myself at the Milky Way Café with Kai and Wei, Mila and Jenny, sipping ice coffees. Mine is black, no cream and no sugar. A tough guy's drink.

"Ba tells me to get out, so I curse him and leave," I will say. "I go downtown, hang around and then bed down behind the coffee shop. No trouble at all, as long as you don't mind peeing outside."

"Why didn't you call us?" they'll ask.

"I ran out of the house so fast I didn't grab my cell."

I take my cell and stare at it. Kai will let me stay at his place if I ask. His father is working in China now, and his mother enjoys having another male around the house. But she's a nervous busybody. She'll want to talk to Ba or Stepmother to make sure they know where I am.

If Ba doesn't know where I am, he'll worry about me. And then he'll be sorry for what he did.

The cold floor sucks away my body heat. Can I sneak into the garage at home and sleep there? I know the code. For sure it's warmer than this place. But if Ba finds me there, he'll have won. No way will that happen.

A strong light pokes into my eyes. I block it out with my hands. Cops?

"Sir, are you okay?" someone shouts.

Am I being arrested? I turn my head away. Will I end up in jail?

"I'm not a cop," a man calls out, coming closer. "I'm with Street Outreach."

I smell coffee.

"Sir, you want something hot to drink?" he asks.

I pull my baseball cap down over my face. The man mustn't see that I'm a kid. I push back my shoulders to look bigger.

"Sir, this isn't a safe place."

I can take care of myself!

Finally he says, "Okay, I'm going. Here's my card, all right? If you change your mind and need a place to stay, come look us up. We're not far away. Have a good night, eh?"

I can't go with him. Immigrants take care of themselves. If we come and use the welfare system, then other Chinese will have a harder time getting into Canada. That's what Niang says.

You can't get angry at Canadians for being helpful. They truly care about the old and the weak, the homeless, the refugees. They help all needy people. High-paid lawyers speak out for them! I'll gladly pay taxes, if Stepmother would only pay me regular wages. I hate asking Ba for money, but I do.

I'll be Steel and make my way through these downtown canyons the same way he slides along steep cliffs using only ropes and muscle.

When teachers get frustrated, they shake their heads and say, "You young people, take a walk in the real world. See how tough life really is!"

Now I am.

I awake to pitch black. Pain jabs me, but where, exactly? My head? My knee?

My senses spring alert. I hear heavy breathing. The back of my neck chafes at cold concrete.

Ow! My head bangs the wall. My arms are paralyzed. What happened to them? My lips move but no sound comes out.

A sharp tip pricks my throat. Something smooth and cold slides across my chin. I flinch.

"Money!" hisses a voice. "Where's your money?"

I shake my head and try to shout, "No money," but someone with a monstrous hand grips my head like a bowling ball. Then he grabs my throat. I inhale cigarettes and liquor and shit. I thrash about, but my attacker is big and solid as a bear.

"Money!" hisses the voice.

I tear madly at my clothes. My wallet is next to my skin, at my belt. I fumble it like a hot potato. A second later, the attacker and my wallet are gone.

My entire body is shaking. I can't stop it. I rub my hands together. Finally I force myself to get up and walk back and forth.

Stop shaking, I shout at myself. Some warrior.

~~All the self-defense that Ba taught me long ago comes flooding into my head. I should have twist~~

and rolled. I should have kicked out.

Ba should have drilled me harder.

The shrill wail of sirens rises in the distance.

Fire engine? Ambulance?

I hope they're coming for me.

I don't want to be out here anymore.

FOUR

I stay awake all night. I need to be ready to fight off a second attacker. In truth, the moment I let my eyelids drop, I feel a cold blade at my neck and my eyes fly open.

I jump up and think to go find a safer, brighter place. How about that 24-hour coffee shop?

Why bother?

The danger is gone. Why defend a fortress after the enemy has driven your soldiers into the forest?

I grope around for my cell. I can't find it.

Was I stupid or what? Sleeping outside. I want to punch and kick myself. But my body already aches all over.

A year ago I was at the cash register when someone came into the restaurant. His brown leather jacket was low-grade material, stiff and cracking. The red baseball cap had seen too much sun. He didn't belong in our neighborhood. He had that nervous smile of westerners who don't know if we Chinese speak any English.

Instead he propped one elbow on the counter to cradle a gleaming gun and pointed it straight at me. He slid a paper bag over the glass.

"Give . . . me . . . the . . . money." His words rolled out slowly.

I was so surprised to have understood him that I froze. But he didn't praise my English skills. He leaned forward, shoved the gun into my gut and muttered, "Money! Now!"

He smelled of cheap hair gel. I yanked out bills and filled his bag. He started to back away, still pointing his gun at me. I put my hands up even though he hadn't said to do that.

Ba silently slid in behind him. He was barefoot. In one move he seized the robber's wrist, twisted it and yanked it high behind him. The gun clattered to the floor. Ba kicked it away and grabbed the paper bag. The robber broke away and sprinted out the door. Ba dashed after him but limped back a second later. Niang came running with his shoes and socks.

"Someone was waiting in a car," he reported. "Rotting hooligans!"

The police warned Ba never to do this again. Stopping an armed robbery and chasing the robber was far too dangerous.

"What if he had opened fire?" they said over and over. "The boy might have gotten shot. Or your customers."

Ba explained that he was an army man and a former police officer who knew exactly what he was doing. The cops didn't try to understand Ba's English. They didn't respect China's army or police. He cursed them as they left, calling them sissies.

I remember thinking that being shot and killed would be the perfect escape for me. I hated living here. People would think of me forever as an innocent young man, cut down at the prime of life. All that fine education wasted. All those advantages lost. Ba would regret forcing me to move to Canada. He'd admit he was wrong to bully me about studying. He'd wish he hadn't put such strict rules on my life, and finally confess, "My son and I, we both could have been happier, had I only been a better father."

Then he would break down sobbing.

Ma would travel from China for my funeral. She would shriek with grief, throw herself onto my coffin and refuse to let go. Grandfather would wail about the family line coming to an end.

One by one my friends would drop long-stemmed roses into my grave while my hard-hearted teachers hid their tears at failing to understand me. Maybe some westerner kids would show up. My school would honor me with a minute of silence.

In reality, I sat on the toilet in the restaurant men's room, arms wrapped tight around my sides. Tears streamed down my face. I couldn't let anyone see. I couldn't blow my nose in case someone heard me.

Why was I blubbering like a baby? No one blamed me. The police said I had done the right thing. No one was hurt. Our money was safe. Ba's quick thinking had saved us all.

Wasn't that how the universe was supposed to unfold?

I don't move until the rectangle of sky over the alley brightens from black to gray and then to white. A delivery van roars by, skids and sprays gravel against my wall. Crazy driver. My stomach is knotted and my back aches.

A flash of red catches my eye. My backpack sits in an oily, greenish puddle. My clothes are scattered across the alley.

First they were strewn across our lawn, and now this. Heaven intended them to get lots of fresh air.

I run and gather my wet, gritty clothes. My watch isn't on my wrist. I check the loading bay. Nothing.

My cellphone is gone, too.

How will my family track me down if I don't have a cell? How will Ba beg me to come home?

For half a second I smile grimly. What if Ba phones me and winds up talking to the mugger? They can't understand each other. They scream back and forth, swearing in two languages.

They deserve each other. They can drive each other crazy.

I dust off my jacket, but last night's scuffle sanded down the sheen of the nylon. Now I look grubby.

Around the corner, a rush of warm traffic air hits my face. The coffee bar is open. Pot-lamp brighten the window despite plenty of natural light. Office workers block the counter. I hold the door open for a woman wearing a pencil-thin suit and fruity perfume. She doesn't bother to thank me.

The space between my table and the big fat easy chair is empty. The magazine stand is gone! I spin around. My backpack crashes into people. They frown and fall back as if I'm diseased.

The stand is in the corner, by the other window. I rush across the room. More newspapers have been stuffed in. They stick out in a lopsided fan.

I dig in. I pull out my laptop and clutch it to my chest. The saxophone music from yesterday suddenly comes on.

Maybe heaven is watching out for me after all, like that three-eyed god at the temple we invaded in *Rebel State*.

In the washroom, I thrust my hands under the hot water and swallow several mouthfuls, hoping the warmth will soothe my stomach. In the mirror, my face is pale and dirty. No new pimples, lucky me. My short hair sticks up like a brush while dark rings hang beneath my eyes. My lips need cream.

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