Zodiac Pets

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Eric Giroux

New
SALEM
Books

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For Frank and Ju

If destruction be our lot, we must ourselves be its author and finisher. As a nation of freemen, we must live through all time, or die by suicide.

Abraham Lincoln

PART ONE:
ME

New Town

Like *Tom Sawyer*, this is mainly true. The spring after my father died ("A.D.D.," as I called it then, as opposed to B.D.D. "You guessed it," I'd say), my mother moved us to Pennacook, Massachusetts, where veiled forces had laid siege to the local democracy. My experience confronting those forces—and, up close, one of the self-destructive men behind them—inspired this account. It also set my path here in college, where I have studied not only literature (my first allegiance) but also government (its relevant themes beckon the dutiful citizen. Which I am, or hope to be).

But college is another story. *This* one begins, as many a tale before it, like this: a stranger came to town, and then . . .

Right from the start, I hated nearly everything about Pennacook. Its tiki-themed restaurants, the same ones Mom loved, saying, "It makes me feel like I'm on a tropical vacation." The *fffff*t *ffff*t sound I had to make to scatter wild boars on the path to school. The dank stench drifting from the streets, and the stagnant water that had buried many of them.

Not to mention the Pennies mispronouncing my name.

"Joe," I'd say. "Just say Joe. Can you remember Joe?"

They could not remember Joe. (By the way, my name's Wendy Zhou.)

Not surprisingly, the town had few Asians. For reasons I couldn't fathom (more on this later), nearly all of Pennacook's Asians slotted neatly into a certain narrow idea of what Chinese people do for a living: make American Chinese food. Five of the

nearly all-white town's seven Chinese restaurants were owned by Chinese families who lived elsewhere, and except for the odd Penny drafted in a pinch to tend bar or wait tables, all seven bused in their staffs from Chinatown or Lowell. The Pats—Pat and Coco Feng—were one of the two families who lived in town. They had an apartment above Pat's Café, but they had no kids and their attention centered on turning their buffet. I never once saw them outdoors. Dr. Chong, the principal at the high school, intrigued me as a sort of representative figure of Asian girl power about town. But I was only in middle school, and Dr. Chong was preoccupied with getting in or out of Pennacook, zipping by in her red Mini Cooper SE with its vain white bonnet stripes.

An old yearbook I leafed through at the school library had some friendly Korean faces, all girls. Judging from their names—Lily O'Connor, Lily Palermo, Lily Kaiser—they were adoptees. I wished I knew them. I didn't see any Korean adoptees in Pike Middle in my time. South Korea's economy had turned hot, and the country was holding fast to its Lilys.

Finally, the cloistered Chengs: a real friends prospect, if only for a moment. They lived one block from Wu Doon Mang and homeschooled their kids in a booth they had set up in the restaurant's kitchen, fencing them off from the Penny herd. I saw it only once—the day I failed Mrs. Cheng's playmate inspection. I have to say, it was a really nice booth. Red-leather upholstery, mahogany planks. The Cheng brothers, Leo and Wei, were biological twins and sat diagonally across from one another to maximize their work space. They looked like a couple of mob heavies invited by the don to supper. Block-like, turned inward; ready to strike. After the one visit I would see them here and there in their cute striped tank-tops with piping in the seams. They'd look at me, then head the other way. On Sundays their mother trucked them

off to Lexington for Siberian Math so they could zoom way ahead.

The point of highest friction between my mother and me at that age was my refusal to submit to Siberian Math, an intense after-school program that required three hours of class time, twice per week, plus a bottomless cup o' problem sets. I remember wishing my mother would do Siberian Math. They'd have crushed her with her sloppy habits.

The other thing about Siberian Math was that we could not afford it. We no longer had my father's income from the Massachusetts Transit Division and my mother had quit the bank. We just had life insurance, plus a trickle from my mother's parents. We heard only rarely from Wai Gong and Lao Lao, but from what I gathered, they played some minor role in a highly profitable, Shenzhen-based shower-curtain business. Practical, cheap to make, and state-favored: what the world needs now, as the old tune goes.

Also missing from time-warped Pennacook? LGBTQ clubs in the schools. Of more immediate concern to me, no one at Pike Middle was out.

Guess what I secretly dreamed of in those rare moments when Mom backed off long enough for my ungovernable whims to surface? More friends and a desk at Siberian Math. But I was failing even Pennacook's low standards, in part due to my newfound penchant for violence.

"You punched a boy in the face!" Mom said one day after band practice. "He got a bloody nose! I got a call from the principal today and they've told the police! I've had just about enough of this!"

"I've had just about enough of you."

"You're rude at school. You're rude at home. Where does it all end? Now it's crossed over to assault and battery!"

"He asked for it."

"What could he possibly do to 'ask for' a punch in the face!"

"The eye thing."

"What 'eye thing'?"

I pushed my index fingers to the loose skin at the corners of my eyes and pulled the skin up and sang, "my father's Chinese," then pulled the fingers down and sang, "my mother's Japanese," then moved one finger back up and shouted, "and I'm in between!"

It had been this little piccolo-playing snot named Delmore Hines who had been looking at me and who I thought might be sweet on me but who had turned out to be a racist cad out of the Middle Ages.

Mom sighed. Americans were good and kind. Only crazy people were racist.

"I don't know what happened. You had so many potentials," she said, before turning her ire on Delmore. "You want me to call them? His parents must know about this!"

"Oh, they know. I took care of it."

She frowned uncertainly. By way of illustration, I stepped back and let one fly at her shoulder.

Our punishments were swift and basically fair. I was suspended for two days and wrote a stiff letter of apology to Delmore. Delmore got three after-school detentions and wrote a stiff letter of apology to me. Eyeball to eyeball, we shook hands before the principal.

When I returned to school, I had weekly art-therapy sessions with a confused Ms. Greene, who seemed to have accidentally acquired a relevant degree from Lesley College and had been drafted into service for kids in my pickle. She set me to finger painting and I merrily regressed to smearing red and blue blotches around butcher's paper while Ms. Greene tinkled her spoon around in her owl's-head coffee mug and watched me. To our mutual surprise,

by the third week a kind of provisional calm welled up. We talked about my life in the plainest and most obvious terms, which I suppose was the therapy part (I've seen other therapists since and it's an apt enough description of the process), until one day Ms. Greene pronounced me cured.

"You're feeling better."

"I am."

"Your giraffe shows it."

"Rhino."

She tilted her head.

Mr. Susco, our Social Studies teacher whom I had classed as a brilliant burnout, ordered Delmore to draft a second letter. This one was from a survivor of the Rock Springs massacre to President Chester A. Arthur objecting to the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. I appreciated Mr. Susco's good intentions but doubt Delmore was able to achieve the desired empathic meld with the middle-aged Han miner with his queue, pick-axe, chisel, and cart who had braved mountain lions and near starvation to return to lament by sperm-oil lamp his long separation from his wife in Canton.

I had my own trouble identifying with the figures in this exercise. We didn't even speak the same Chinese language. Mine was Mandarin, theirs Cantonese. Also, unlike the miner and his wife, I'm only half Chinese. Zhou is my mother's name. My father was Italian. His last name, Fardy—maliciously trimmed from Fardello (bad enough) by some Ellis Island functionary—was one you don't gladly carry into public school. I shed it A.D.D. and we moved to Pennacook. I look more Asian anyway, and almost everyone in Pennacook, like Delmore—and apparently Mr. Susco—assumed I entirely was.

Over in band, Assistant Director Moriarty's response to my clash with Delmore was to demote him to last chair among the

piccolos. After one week's humiliation he'd be entitled to three lightning challenges. The third—should he reach it—would be for the top chair, which he'd recently lost.

I questioned whether Mr. Moriarty's manufactured piccolo-section drama with its bias toward a redemption-arc storyline was fairly included among Delmore's punishments. Completely unprovoked, Mr. Moriarty had crafted similarly wrenching scenarios for other sections (the mooing bass clarinets, the cocky tenor saxes who played the themes to *Peter Gunn* and *Pink Panther* all the time).

School was one thing about Pennacook that I should not have struggled with, if only I'd behave. My mother chose Pennacook precisely because it had low standards, a place where even I, in my current degraded state, could expect smooth sailing on the grades front. She had briefly weighed Acton, which had the safety record and the gold-star schools, but it was far too expensive for the Zhous.

"Also, too many Chinese," she said.

By this she meant too much academic competition. I think she also meant too many nosy fellow immigrants who felt entitled to poke around. At that strange time in our lives, she'd rather be treated like a griffon in Pennacook than welcomed into Acton's Chinese community—any community—and subject to sharp questions.

I wanted to stay in Bedford Corners, the quietly inoffensive Boston-commuter town best known for its TJ Maxx and its Marshalls. As a small child I had crouched in their crammed racks, savoring the hopeful aromas of new shoes and well-mopped floors, perfectly content if I could hear my dad's voice. He was the shopper and the playful one, and he had grown up there. Unlike Pennacook, Bedford Corners had, if not yet "too many Chinese," at least a crucial mass of Asians so that we eluded easy stereotype

and weren't regarded as though we'd beamed down from Saturn. But A.D.D. ("heart attack at breakfast," I wrote in my diary), Mom craved some distance from his ghost and its local associations.

Wrong again, I remember thinking. His ghost, if he had one, was why we should have stayed. Troubled ghosts with unresolved issues were known to require aid from the living.

I Join the *Beat*

One murky spring morning, I tugged on my rain boots and leashed up Arnie, my runt-of-the-litter, curly-haired mutt, and set out for a long walk. I was searching, I suppose, for something about Pennacook that I could *not* hate. In a strange way, I found it—as well as clues to large schemes afoot.

We sloshed around the corner onto Mediterranean Avenue and Chinese gates emerged through the mist, revealing the Tiki Shed restaurant. A block later the mist swirled open once more, and on came more Chinese gates with streaming, swirling mist, followed by the high school (concrete; frosted windows), followed by mist-wrapped Chinese gates (I was not going in a circle). As we pushed along—perhaps one third of the town's "roads" were canals, and sundry Penny watercraft grinded by—Arnie strained to keep his little snout above water. He was getting soaked and for that I pitied him. But Arnie was clear on where he belonged: with me.

Up on Booth Hill, the mall's wreck impressed me. It looked like a sloppily bombed jail. A whole wall was missing, and the parking lot was strewn with rubble. Some banana had spray-painted a purple skull-and-crossbones, together with the message "Excuse Our Mess While We Get a Facelift. Check Back Frequently!" The mist broke to reveal, way up above, a sheer cliff with something glinting, a mystery I was not prepared to probe.

Around a bend, a noxious odor brought Arnie to high alert. It was a mixture of a river's bottom and a pig's. I knew there had been floods. It had something to do with the low price of our ranch house and the numerous submerged roads. The ranch

house was also at the cheap end because it was part of an old and half-empty development near the town's edge. I asked myself: *how long would it smell here?* Decades, was my guess. In second grade in Bedford Corners a teacher had read us yet another picture book about the Great Molasses Flood (1919) in Boston's North End, in which a massive storage tank burst sending a giant molasses wave rolling through the streets, ensnaring all in its path and suffocating or otherwise killing twenty-one people and numerous dogs and horses. On hot days, that one smelled sweetly till the fifties. Maybe Pennacook would still smell, of some less pleasant things, when I was a little old lady and never visited but read of the phenomenon in a distant city's paper and laughed at my escape. (Note to publishers: there are far too many cute Great Molasses Flood books for children. The Bedford Corners school library alone carried four titles. It is not an Adventure story. The topic belongs in Horror.)

The canal-path broke down and I slogged on through knee-high water, heat building in my shins. Arnie mewled in my arms and I heard the distant but familiar sound of grinding machines. The machines ran at irregular hours, day or night. My mother had heard it was the old town dump being turned into apartments, but I wasn't sure. The sounds had populated my dreams as massive boring drills and cartoon-like clawed contraptions with rubber arms that plucked a dozen trees like asparagus and flung them a mile.

Back on dry ground, I turned a dark corner and faced another mystery: a small building set back in a stand of pines. Palm fronds, fat banana leaves, and bamboo shoots—all familiar from my fifth-grade country project on Ecuador—concealed it like a jungle trap. I grabbed a branch and pushed up the canvas covering the sign to reveal the name: Lion Diner.

Why would you hide that? Was a dead body inside? Was it something worse, a toxic-waste dump?

I scanned the perimeter for the black drums with the dread yellow symbol for radioactivity.

"What's in there?" I asked Arnie.

He looked at me intelligently. He seemed always on the verge of breaking his species' rich but wordless communion with the sensory world. Or as I would have put it then, he looked like he wanted to talk, or just had. He licked his snout.

"Oh, baby. You're hungry."

I made him do five puppy push-ups and jackpotted him with six treats.

I looked off to the diner, and my mind drifted to the greasy breakfasts I used to have with my father at Deli King on his late-October birthday, before the pandemic. After Deli King, it was up to Salem, N.H., for a day at Canobie Lake Park. These places had been meaningful to him growing up in Bedford Corners but had no resonance for me apart from what he summoned through the annual jaunt and his repetitive reminiscences throughout the day, the latter a minor toll on my patience.

For similar reasons, I also watched a fair amount of Boston-market late-seventies and early-eighties TV as a child. During my father's Bedford Corners boyhood, both *Creature Double Feature* (Godzilla films and such) and *Kung Fu Theater* ran on Saturdays after the cartoon block in the broadcast area. He shared these films with me, along with *The Nature World of Captain Bob*, in which a white-bearded sea dog teaches how to sketch a horse, a crocodile, and a clam in its habitat. The vintage TV was a way to be together (my father joined me on the floor for *Captain Bob*) but also, I think, another attempt to keep his past alive through me. If so, he partly succeeded. I fondly recall the programming, but it isn't quite mine.

A loud squawk broke my reverie, and I stepped back blinking. I felt my leash go light and loose, then rise and go stiff as my arm flew up and my elbow locked. I whirled to the side and confronted—a plump bird: white-cheeked, with a brown back and little black cap, almost a mask, on top. It had snatched Arnie by the neck and was airborne above me, pulling toward the clouds. I yanked the leash down and back and with my free hand slugged the bird right across the fat middle.

"Leave my doggy alone!"

It fell to the ground and I stomped it with my rain boot and tugged Arnie loose from its beak. I pulled a shaking Arnie into my arms and rubbed his belly and floppy ears. At last, my heart settled, and I lifted my boot and looked down at the broken-open bird. *What had I done?* Unnaturally clean and dry, the bird was still twitching. I picked the poor thing up. Mortal threat to my Arnie, it was also an innocent merely trying to get by like us all. Or so I thought.

I raised my palm for a closer look. A red light blinked in the feathers. I pushed my fingers into its ash-gray chest and felt a small shock as my hand touched wire. Those weren't eyes but flapping metal shutters! The thing was no innocent. *It was an evil robot drone and had gone completely haywire.* I looked left, then right, then stuffed it in my pocket.

On my way out of the lot, I felt something flop on my shoe: a strange round patch. I picked it up. It depicted an odd set of items arranged in a crest. Golf clubs crossed like swords, forming an X, and the four interstices featured: a green, lidded box; a jar of something brown; a glass tower; and a drop of water with happy eyes and a smile. At the top, two golden letters: NP. *NP: national park?* Maybe. It somewhat resembled the patch worn by the National Park Service that I had seen at the Paul Revere House. But

it didn't say National Park Service, and I could think of no national parklands that had yet been put to golf-themed use. I pocketed this, too, and moved on.

In my trip's last leg, I had a final odd encounter.

A squat man whistled as he slogged uphill on a pedal-free bike. A heavy satchel kept sliding back, throwing him off balance. He was sweating profusely and he stamped his feet down for a breather. Suddenly a boar charged from the brush and snapped its jaws over the man's calf as he scrambled for velocity.

"*Eeeek!!*" the man screeched (sounding pig-like himself), then paddle paddle paddle and a heel to the snout.

The boar pulled back, and the man swung his bike the other way. He pressed off and slowly gathered steam down the incline, ankles up before him like a man on a Harley. Crisis seemed to infuse his balance with a new fineness, but it had the air of a trick that you knew couldn't last. Sure enough, he veered off and crashed, and the boar lunged. The man danced free, hopped back on the bike, and tore off—literally, the boar seizing half of a pant leg as its prize. The boar trotted on for a time but then gave up and slipped into the grass.

The man apparently considered himself in the clear because he dropped both feet, hopped off the bike, and doffed his newsboy's cap and bowed. Not here to be patronized with false laurels, the boar launched from the grass—and the man was once again on the roll. They disappeared around the corner. I heard a faint splash as the chase went underwater.

I tiptoed across the street and picked up one of the newspapers that had tumbled from his bag during the melee. I'd heard about this. A daunting after-school activity had kids staffing the town's weekly, the *Pennacook Beat*. This must have been the nut who ran it. I'd already been invited to join their staff, by Ms. Greene, acting

in a sort of probationary-officer capacity, and by Mr. Susco, who said they could use new blood.

I didn't know if I was up for another activity. I was still acclimating to being fourth chair in Pike Middle's alto saxophone section, which despite being strangely competitive had not once played the dour "Navy Hymn" in tune. In addition, I had my absorbing personal reading, the *Nibblers*, a forty-two-volume syndicate-authored series about wall-mouse tribal wars. Homework on top of that, texting back to Bedford Corners through Pennacook's shaky channels, and at least two hours for straight-up moping. I didn't have the mojo I used to have—to the old Wendy, these activities would have seemed middling at best. Yet I was still, in my way, a very busy girl.

That night, I wrote up my walk in my diary, skipping back and forth to my thesaurus to lock down the words I had to reach for. For a long time, I came up dry for the one that described a foul and harmful odor. This accomplished ("noxious"), I typed: "In sum." It was my standard transition to the final paragraph. "In sum" what? I tapped my mouth twice with the pencil.

"In sum, I haven't laughed since Dad's last corn flakes. Hang it, I'm joining the *Beat*."