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Emerald City and Other Stories

Written by Jennifer Egan

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Emerald City

And Other Stories

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WHY CHINA?

It was him, no question. The same guy. I spotted him from far away, some angle of his head or chin that made my stomach jump before I even realized who I was looking at. I made my way toward him around the acupuncturists, the herbal doctors slapping mustard-colored poultices on bloody wounds, and the vendors of the platform shoes and polyester bell-bottoms everyone in Kunming was mysteriously wearing. I was afraid he'd recognize me. Then it hit me that I'd still been beardless when he'd ripped me off, two years before, and my beard – according to old friends, who were uniformly staggered by the sight of me – had completely transformed (for the better, I kept waiting to hear) my appearance.

We were the only two Westerners at this outdoor market, which was a long bike ride from my hotel and seedy in a way I couldn't pin down. The guy saw me coming. 'Howdy,' he said.

'Hello,' I replied. It was definitely him. I always notice eyes, and his were a funny gray-green – bright, with long lashes like little kids have. He'd been wearing a suit when I met him, and a short ponytail, which at that particular moment signified hip Wall Street. One look and you saw the life: Jeep Wrangler, brand-new skis, fledgling art collection that, if he'd had balls enough to venture beyond Fischl and Schnabel and Basquiat,

might have included a piece by my wife. He'd been the sort of New Yorker we San Franciscans are slightly in awe of. Now his hair was short, unevenly cut, and he wore some kind of woven jacket.

'You been here long?' I asked.

'Here where?'

'China.'

'Eight months,' he said. 'I work for the *China Times*.'

I stuffed my hands in my pockets, feeling weirdly self-conscious, like I was the one with something to hide. 'You working on something now?'

'Drugs,' he said.

'I thought there weren't any over here.'

He leaned toward me, half smiling. 'You're standing in the heroin capital of China.'

'No shit,' I said.

He rolled on the balls of his feet. I knew it was time to bid polite farewell and move on, but I stayed where I was.

'You with a tour?' he finally asked.

'Just my wife and kids. We're trying to get a train to Chengdu, been waiting five days.'

'What's the problem?'

'*Mei you*,' I said, quoting the ubiquitous Chinese term for 'can't be done'. But you never know what, or which factors, if changed, would make that 'no' a 'yes'. 'That's what the hotel people keep saying.'

'Fuck the hotel,' he said.

We stood a moment in silence, then he checked his watch. 'Look, if you want to hang out a couple of minutes, I can probably get you those tickets,' he said.

He wandered off and said a few words to a lame Chinese albino crouched near a building alongside the market. *China Times*, I thought. Like hell. Heroin pusher was more like it.

At the same time, there was an undeniable thrill in being near this guy. He was a crook – I knew it, but he had no idea I knew. I enjoyed having this over him; it almost made up for the twenty-five grand he'd conned out of me.

We set off on our bicycles back toward the center of town. With Caroline and the girls I took taxis, which could mean anything from an automobile to a cart pulled by some thin, sweating guy on a bicycle. It pissed me off that the four of us couldn't ride bikes together like any other Chinese family. ('Since when are we a Chinese family, Sam?' was my wife's reply.) But the girls pleaded terror of falling off the bikes and getting crushed by the thick, clattering columns of riders, all ringing their tinny, useless bells. Secretly, I believed that what really turned my daughters off were the crummy black bikes the Chinese rode – such a far cry from the shiny five- and ten-speeds Melissa and Kylie had been reared on.

In our previous encounter, his name had been Cameron Pierce. Now, as we rode, he introduced himself as Stuart Peale, shouting over the thunderous racket of passing trucks. The names fit him exactly, both times; Cameron had had the impatient, visionary air of a guy who thinks he can make you a shitload of money; Stuart was soft-spoken, a sharp observer – what you'd expect from a reporter. I told him my name – Sam Lafferty – half hoping he'd make the connection, but only when I named the company I traded for did I notice him pause for a second.

'I've taken a leave while they investigate me,' I said, to my own astonishment.

'Investigate you for what?'

'Messing with the numbers.' And unnerved though I was by what I'd revealed, I felt a mad urge to continue. 'It's just internal at this point.'

'Wow,' he said, giving me an odd look. 'Good luck.'

We dismounted in front of a large concrete kiosk teeming with several lines of people all shoving and elbowing one another good-naturedly toward a ticket counter in a manner I'd decided was uniquely Chinese. Stuart spoke to a uniformed official in vehement but (I sensed) broken Chinese, gesturing at me. At last the official led us grudgingly through a side door and down a dimly lit corridor that had the smudged, institutional feel of the public schools I'd attended as a kid and made sure my daughters would never go near.

'Where is it you're headed – Chengdu?' he called.

We had entered a shabby office where a military-looking woman sat behind a desk, seeming thoroughly disgruntled at Stuart's intrusion. 'Yes – for four people,' I reminded him.

Within minutes, I'd handed Stuart a wad of cash and he'd given me the tickets. We re-emerged into the tepid, dusty sunlight. 'You leave tomorrow,' he said. 'Eight-thirty a.m. They'd only sell me first class – hope that's okay.'

'It's fine.' We always rode first class. So had Stuart, I guessed, in his prior incarnation. 'Thank you,' I said. 'Jesus.'

He waved it away. 'They don't want Americans having a lousy time over here,' he said. 'You point out that it's happening, they'll fix it.'

He handed me his card, the address in English and Chinese, the *China Times* logo neatly embossed. Still a pro, I thought.

'You live in Xi'an,' I remarked. 'We may go there, check out that clay army.'

'Look me up,' he said, clearly not meaning it.

'Thanks again.'

'Forget it,' he said, then mounted his bicycle and rode away.

'A total stranger?' my wife said, back in our hotel room, where I'd surprised her with the train tickets. 'He just did this, for no reason?'

'He was American.' I was dying to tell her he was the cocksucker who'd conned me, but how could I explain having hung out with the guy, having accepted a favor from him? I knew how Caroline would see it: one more incident in the string of odd things I'd been doing since the investigation began, the most recent of which was to beg my family to drop everything and come with me to China. It wasn't depression, exactly; more a weird, restless pressure that made me wander the house late at night, opening the best bottles of wine in our cellar and drinking them alone while I channel-surfed along the forgotten byways of cable TV.

'Where are the girls?' I said. 'I got them each a little knife to peel pears with.'

'You bought them knives?'

'Just little ones,' I said. 'Have you noticed how the old ladies are always peeling pears? I've got a feeling there's something on those skins they shouldn't be eating.'

Caroline had washed her bras and underpants and was hanging them on the open dresser drawers to dry. In the late seventies, before we married, we'd spent a year in Kenya with the Peace Corps. Caroline washed her clothes the same way over there, hanging them on strings she tied across our tiny room. I used to watch her through the web of strings and underclothes – her reddish brown hair and deep, peaceful eyes that made me think of amber. I always liked remembering that time, knowing the money and houses and trips we'd gotten our hands on since hadn't washed it all away. We're still those people, I'd tell myself, who helped the Masai to repair their houses made of cow dung.

Caroline opened a window, and instantly the sour, bodily smell of China poured into the room. 'A perfect stranger,' she mused, smiling at me. 'Must've been that sweet face of yours.'

*

My daughters give me away. They are blond, expensive-looking creatures whose soft skin and upturned noses I used to take credit – wrongly, I know – for having procured for them at great cost, as I had their orthodontically perfect smiles. In Kenya the Masai children had dry lips and flies in their eyes. Memories of their deprivation had overwhelmed me in recent months, for reasons unknown. I'd find myself staring at my daughters accusingly, awaiting some acknowledgment from them of the brutal disparity between the Masai kids' lives and their own. Instead, I found in their beauty a righteousness that galled me. The Avenging Angels, I'd started calling them, which perplexed my wife.

Not that my daughters were identical. They were ten and twelve years old, the younger one deeply in awe of the elder, Melissa, whose figure-skating prowess had lent her a kind of celebrity at their private grammar school. Melissa was also, the world seemed to agree, fractionally more lovely. Determined to correct this imbalance, I had lately become the fervid champion of Kylie, my youngest, a campaign my wife deplored and begged me to abandon. 'Picking favorites is awful, Sam,' she told me. 'Melissa thinks you hate her.'

'The world picked. I'm just evening up the balance.'

But there was something heavy-handed in the sudden barrage of affection I lavished on Kylie. She rose to the occasion, gamely enduring our 'special' trips to the zoo and the Exploratorium and Ocean Beach, where we stumped through the damp, heavy sand, both wishing (or I was, at least) that Melissa – whom I'd bluntly excluded, whose skating competitions I often pretended to doze through – were with us.

But now their hatred of China, their deep resentment at having to spend the best part of their summer in a land where people blew their noses without Kleenex, had united Melissa and Kylie in steely mutiny against me. 'Daddy, why?' had been

their refrain from the moment the trip began: the boat from Hong Kong into Canton, the days of waiting for a plane to Kunming that, when it finally arrived, could not have inspired less confidence had we assembled it ourselves. 'Why, Daddy?' With time the object of their query had grown more and more diffuse: Why here? Why any of this? They were asking the wrong man.

The buildings of Chengdu were newer, and therefore less pleasing, than those of Kunming. I roamed the streets impatiently, my wife and listless daughters in tow. We drank green tea in a moist enclave beside a Buddhist temple. The fog smelled of chemicals. An Asian girl with strange pale-blue eyes kept staring at us. 'Do you think she might be crazy, Dad?' Melissa asked.

'She's admiring your haircut.'

Melissa glanced at me, thinking I might be serious, then recognized the acid sarcasm that had become my preferred mode of speech with her of late.

'Probably had you for a dad,' she muttered.

'Probably wasn't so lucky.'

My wife sighed. 'She's blind,' she said. And instantly I saw that Caroline was right; the girl was drawn by our unrecognizable voices, but her eyes were empty.

'Let's go to Xi'an,' I said. 'It's supposed to be fascinating.'

Melissa opened our guidebook, scanned the pages, and read aloud: 'The Qin Terracotta Warriors are one of the few reasons to visit Xi'an, an urban wasteland of uniform city blocks and Soviet-style apartment buildings, but they are a compelling one.'

'That's not what I heard,' I said, suppressing an urge to knock the book out of her hands.

'Terracotta warriers?' Kylie said.

'Heard from who?' my wife asked.

'The guy who got us the train tickets.'

'They're thousands of clay soldiers as big as real men,' Caroline explained to Kylie. 'A paranoid Chinese emperor had them built underground to protect him after he died.'

'Neat,' Kylie said.

Caroline looked at me. 'Let's go there.'

'Why?' Melissa asked, but no one answered.

Looking downtrodden, Melissa wandered out first from the tea shop. As we followed her, I turned to glance behind me, and sure enough, the Asian girl with the pale-blue eyes was still gazing blindly after us.

I knew – and Caroline knew – that since the investigation began, my status had slipped – or risen – from that of her husband and equal to that of a person she indulged. Gratitude and guilt played a part in this. I'd worked my ass off at the office for years while she puttered away in her sculpture studio. Then, three years ago, Caroline hit the jackpot, landing a piece in the Whitney Biennial. This led to more exhibits, one-person shows in several cities, including New York, and dozens of studio visits from thin, beautiful women and their sleek young husbands who smelled (like me, I suppose) of fresh cash, or from scrawny, perfumed old bats whose doddering mates brought to mind country houses and slobbering retrievers. Everything my wife had yet to sculpt for the next three years was already sold. We'd talked about my quitting, pursuing anthropology or social work like I'd always said I wanted to, or just relaxing, for Christ's sake. But our overhead was so high: the house in Presidio Terrace, the girls in private school heading toward college, skating lessons, riding lessons, piano lessons, tennis camp in the summers – I wanted them to have all of it, all of it and more, for the rest of their lives. Even

Caroline's respectable income could not have begun to sustain it. Then let's change, she'd said. Let's scale back. But the idea filled me with dread; I wasn't a sculptor, I wasn't a painter, I wasn't a person who made things. What I'd busted my chops all these years to create was precisely the life we led now. If we tossed that away, what would have been the point?

We were still chewing on this when I found out about the investigation. Its architect, the aptly named Jeffrey Fox, had been after my scalp for years because his wife, Sheila, was a ball-buster, whereas mine was lovely and terrific. He was always sniffing around Caroline's studio, and had bought three of her pieces the year before. 'That little turd!' Caroline had shrieked when I told her about the investigation, and night after night we'd sat awake long after the girls were in bed, holding whispered conferences on how I should respond: Write a letter to the board proclaiming my innocence? Mount a counteroffensive against Fox? But no, we decided. The best thing to do, for the moment, was nothing. Let the investigation run its course, and when it turned up nada, question the legitimacy of its having been started at all. In the meantime, take a leave, clear my head, get some sleep. Ha-ha.

The unlikely, intangible result of all this was that Caroline owed me. I knew it, she knew it, and I won't lie – this was not a feeling I minded.

My wife and daughters stared morosely from the taxi windows as we sped from the Xi'an airport to the Golden Flower hotel, past block after block of drab apartment buildings and sidewalks lined with limp, dusty trees. The opulent hotel boosted everyone's spirits; nothing like the sight of uniformed doormen, marble floors, and rich Midwesterners patting their billfolds to renew one's faith in the bounty of the universe. To my secret delight, not even Caroline cared to accompany me

into ‘old’ Xi’an, which, according to the Asian woman in a collegiate headband behind the front desk (no doubt she was the product of classes in how to look and act Western), was where I would find Stuart’s address. I left Caroline sprawled on the bed boning up on Qin Shi Huangdi, the maniac emperor who’d built the terracotta warriors – at the cost of many a laborer, she reported; the final masterpiece contained not only the blood and sweat of its sculptors, but occasionally even their flesh.

On the streets of ‘old’ Xi’an I found the lady tea vendors out in force – women whose idea of washing a glass was to sprinkle water on it. I hadn’t let my daughters near these people, convinced that their unwashed glasses harbored all manner of deadly diseases just waiting for the chance to invade my girls’ frail intestines. But I bought myself a glass of tea and sipped it, bought one of those fluffy white buns filled with a suspicious mash of vegetables and scarfed it down, then bought a second. I felt terrific.

I wandered inside a Buddhist temple and heard people chanting to this delicate sound of chimes, and my stomach was fluttery in a way I remembered from childhood, the feeling you had shoplifting, or creeping into the next-door neighbor’s basement. I left the temple, savoring this as I walked to Stuart’s street, when suddenly, from half a block away, I saw him. He was standing right there on the sidewalk, talking with three old Chinese ladies. My heart leapt – there is no other way to put it. The blood rushed to my face the way it used to when I’d just seen a girl I wanted to put the moves on, and then I stopped dead. What in hell was the matter with me? This was a man, after all – a man who’d ripped me off and made me look like an ass. Was I losing my mind? But already I’d started walking again, toward him.

‘Stuart,’ I said. He looked blank, and I felt weirdly crushed. ‘Kunming, remember?’ I said. ‘You got us the tickets.’

'Oh. Right.' He gave a baffled smile. The Chinese ladies moved away.

'We made it,' I said, idiotically.

There was an awkward silence. 'So, you still writing about drugs?' I asked.

'This week it's smuggling.'

'Smuggling what?'

'Antiques. People leaving the country with vases and stuff.'

'You sort of specialize in crime stories?' I asked, my pulse firing like a machine gun.

'It's an area I know pretty well.'

'From experience.' I couldn't stop myself.

Stuart cocked his head. 'You sort of a would-be journalist?'

'Either that or a would-be criminal,' I said, and burst out laughing.

Stuart said nothing. He took a long look at me, and I saw in his face the first sign of real curiosity.

'Anything to see around here besides those clay warriors?' I asked.

'Not much in Xi'an,' he said. 'Tomorrow I'm going to some Buddhist caves outside town that are pretty extraordinary.'

'Is that right?'

'You're welcome, if you can sneak away,' he said. 'But you'd have to stay overnight.'

'Might be doable.'

He named a place at the train station and said he would wait there at ten the next morning. 'If you can make it, great,' he said, turning to go.

'I'll be there,' I said.

Brady bonds, emerging markets: these were much on Cameron Pierce's mind at Harry Meyer's stag party, where I met him the first time. Olive-green suit, ponytail, an air of having more

cowboy in him than the rest of us. How did Harry know him? Harry was tables away, a wet shirt draped over his head, trashed. It wasn't long before the strippers showed up, three of them, each with different-colored hair, and while they went to work on Harry, Cameron told me about the limited partnerships he was setting up to invest in African countries: Nigeria, Ivory Coast, Botswana, Zimbabwe.

'You spend much time over there?' I asked.

He'd pulled a red apple from the centerpiece and was eating it with a fierce pleasure that made me want one, too. 'As much as possible,' he said, grinning.

'I hear you,' I said. And, on impulse, I told him about my stint with the Peace Corps – something I rarely mentioned to people in the business.

Cameron set down his apple core and leaned toward me so that I could hear him over the hoots and catcalls issuing from our colleagues. 'That's what makes all this bullshit worthwhile,' he said. 'Getting out. Seeing what's really there.' We understood each other then; we were separate from – better than – what surrounded us.

The next week, Cameron Pierce's lackey made a presentation at our office. One of our junior traders, Burt Phelps, seemed as interested in the deal as I was but wanted to do more checks on Pierce, or at least wait until Harry Meyer came back from his honeymoon on Bora Bora so we could run it by him. 'Feel free,' I said. 'I'm going in.' I was operating on pure gut, that great, impulsive organ we traders live by. And because he felt like an asshole, I guess, Burt went in, too. Both of us put up the minimum – twenty-five thousand. The lackey came to pick up our certified checks.

Cameron and I talked on the phone a couple of times after that. He was heading for the Far East. 'That's the place,' he said. 'You want to get lost, do it there.' We agreed to have

lunch after he got back. My monthly statements started coming in; with returns at twenty percent, I couldn't complain. Burt was over the moon. Then I guess we sort of forgot about it. I'd got four statements in all when they stopped arriving, but it was two months at least before I noticed, and then only when Burt mentioned it. 'Sam, you heard anything lately from Africo?' he said.

The rest was straight out of bad TV: calls to the Africo office hitting a disconnected line; a trip to the Kearny Street address on Cameron Pierce's business card revealing that Africo, Ltd., had never been there. Nor was it registered with the SEC or anywhere else; ditto for Cameron Pierce and his lackey, whose name I can't remember now. Harry Meyer, whom we'd forgotten even to consult, had never heard of the guy. 'Cameron who? My party?' he said, perplexed. 'Someone else must have brought him.' In other words, they were con men. We'd been had. Not that unusual in a business like ours, where guys had so much cash to throw around. But the ones it happened to were usually younger, more junior than me. More like Burt: and it was Burt who'd had the reservations.

In the world of lousy investments, twenty-five grand isn't much to lose. But I couldn't get over it. The guy had sat there selling me on his phony deal, and while I was thinking how much I liked him, how good it all sounded, he was thinking, He's nibbling, no question. Peace Corps? – oh shit, I've got him now! The guys at work teased me about the fine example I'd set; Caroline wrung her hands a little over the money; then they all pretty much forgot about it. But not me. I kept thinking of him, Cameron Pierce, wondering how many 'partners' he'd brought in, how many 'deals' he'd pulled off in the past. He was somewhere – lying on a beach, smoking cigars, spending our money. At night, while Caroline slept, I'd find myself wondering who he was, really, at the very bottom.

Was he anyone? If I'd really listened to the guy, I decided, I would've seen it coming. Hadn't he practically told me? I'm from another world, he'd said – a place where this one means nothing. I'd assured him that I was, too. But it wasn't true. I'd played by the rules. And he'd won.

'What kind of bullshit is this?' Caroline said when I'd outlined for her what struck me as a perfectly reasonable plan: while she and the girls visited the Qin terracotta warriors the following day, I would take an overnight trip with a total stranger to another part of China.

'The same guy who got us the tickets?' she said. 'He lives in Xi'an? Why didn't you tell me that before?'

'I wasn't sure how you'd react.'

'Why should I care?'

'You seem to care now.'

'Now that I know you kept it a secret, I care. Now that you've decided to disappear with him, yes, Sam, I care.'

We stared at each other, furious. 'Is this sexual?' Caroline asked in disbelief.

'Oh, Christ in holy heaven!' I thundered.

My wife studied me. After a long while she said, 'We're not doing this, Sam.'

'Not doing what?'

'Whatever it is you're trying to do.'

'I'm going with him.'

'Fine,' she said. 'We'll come, too.'

We stood mournfully in the long, snaking line of Chinese peasants waiting to board the train. Melissa and Kylie were doing their best to sulk, but their utter mystification at our sudden change of plans and the appearance of a stranger in our midst interfered with the purity of their displeasure. I went

with Stuart to buy the tickets – his, too; it seemed the least I could do after he'd so gracefully agreed to bring my entire family with him to the Buddhist caves. He took off to do an errand before the train left.

'Is this a train to the warriors, Daddy?' Kylie asked.

'The warriors are for tourists,' I said.

'But wasn't that the whole point of coming here?' Melissa asked. 'For the terracotta warriors?'

'You're welcome to stay and see them,' I said. 'Personally, the obsessions of some whacked-out king are about the last thing I'm in the mood for.'

'Why don't we wait in the first-class lounge so the girls can sit down?' my wife suggested.

'We're riding hard-seat,' I said. 'It's only eight hours.'

The girls looked aghast. I watched them cast baleful looks their mother's way, and saw, in their silky, seamless faces, the thick patina so many years of privilege had left behind. Suddenly I was enraged – enraged at both of them for not knowing what these privileges had cost.

'You can wait in line with the rest of the world,' I said. 'It won't kill you.'

Crestfallen, they gazed at me – their father, who rarely let them ride a bus for fear of all the germs and scrofulous characters they might encounter.

'Your father's afraid that if we ride first class, his friend will be disappointed in us,' Caroline said acidly.

'He's not my friend,' I said.

'Then whose friend is he?' she asked.

For every square inch of hard-seat, there were roughly twenty-five people anxious to sit down, bringing to mind the phrase 'lousy food and not enough of it'. The majority of passengers were peasant boys, barefoot, their rolled-up pants exposing

those dark round scars they all seemed to have from the knee down. They'd been shopping in Xi'an and now were loaded up with identical cheap zippered bags half bursting with booty. There were no seats for my daughters, and I watched their faces fill with fear at finding themselves caught in the press of sweating, seething humanity I'd taught them to avoid. To my relief, several peasant boys leapt from their seats to make room for the girls, who ended up next to a window, facing each other. Caroline sat near them, still angry, avoiding my eyes. Stuart stood off to one side, already looking weary of us.

The hours drifted past. I kept an eye on my daughters, watching their sullenness give way to a kind of solemnity, acknowledgment of a situation that was obviously bigger than they were. Each time the train eased to a stop at a platform, food vendors swarmed around outside its windows, pushing tiny carts. After the first two hours, Kylie and Melissa were in there with the best of them, dangling fistfuls of limp bills to buy homemade popsicles on toothpicks, plastic bags full of tiny green apples, and squares of coarse yellow cake. Everything they bought, they offered to their neighbors. This broke my heart.

The land got very strange. Gray hills bulged from the earth in such a way that their middles looked wider than their bases. 'It's like Dr Seuss,' I overheard Kylie say. Caroline sketched in her notebook. I stared out the window at the weird hills and told myself that we lived in San Francisco, in a house on Washington Street that I'd bought for a million in cash six years ago, that our house existed right now, the burglar alarm on, automatic sprinklers set to keep the garden alive. It's all still there, I thought. Waiting. But I didn't believe it.

We reached our destination late that afternoon – the sun still high but pouring out thick, stale light. Our presence seemed more of a novelty here than it had anywhere else we'd been,

and as we tottered toward the street, passersby gathered around to stare at us in unabashed amazement.

The *binguan*, or tourist hotel, could easily have doubled as a jail: small rooms each containing two narrow, squeaking beds; dirty concrete floors; communal 'bathrooms' – a row of holes in the concrete – no paper, no doors, big flies drunk on the stench from below. 'My God,' I told Caroline, frantic when I saw the arrangements, 'there's no way we can stay here.'

'I should think you'd be delighted.'

'There's got to be a better hotel in this town!'

'This is a tiny little town, Sam. Why should there be another hotel?'

'Shit.' I was starting to sweat. 'What're we going to do?'

'Relax,' Caroline said. 'It's one night.'

'But the girls. Jesus!'

'We're okay, Daddy,' piped Kylie from the next room.

I rushed over there to find her hunched on her cot, looking out the grimy window at a long outdoor trough lined with faucets – our sink – where Melissa was washing her face. I sat on Kylie's bed and put my arm around her. 'I love you, baby,' I said. 'You know that.' She nodded and slumped against me. Melissa returned to the room, dripping water and shivering.

'It's cold,' she said.

'Get a towel,' I told her.

'There aren't any.'

I looked around. 'How can there not be towels?'

'There's no hot water either, Dad,' Melissa said. 'Or soap.' She threw herself on her cot to a yelp from the rusty springs and stared at the ceiling.

I watched helplessly as her long hair gathered on the grimy floor. Then I felt Kylie shaking beside me and peered at her wet, streaked face. 'Oh, baby, stop,' I said. 'Please, what's wrong? Tell Daddy.'

'I'm scared,' Kylie said through chattering teeth.

'Scared of what? What's scaring you?'

Melissa sighed from her bed.

'What if we never go home?' Kylie asked in a small, strained voice.

'Of course we'll go home,' I said. 'This is just a vacation.'

For a long time no one spoke. I held on to Kylie and stared challengingly at Melissa, my oldest, waiting for her to snort or wince – to betray her scorn in the smallest way. But Melissa lay still, her eyes closed, arms crossed on her chest.

What exactly Stuart made of the bedraggled and downcast group he led to dinner, God only knew. I sensed that we amused him. The city felt like a place the world had forgotten: dusty streets, a department store whose listless, utilitarian window displays reminded me of South Dakota, where I grew up – those yellow sheets of plastic they hung inside store windows to keep out the glare. I remembered kicking stones as I peered through that yellow plastic at outdated transistor radios that I didn't dare even ask my luckless father to buy me, and promising myself I'd have enough money someday to buy the whole fucking store, if I wanted.

At a restaurant bizarrely named Wine Bar, we dined on bowls of scalding broth mixed with soy sauce and two raw eggs, which instantly boiled. The other diners ceased eating and gathered around to more fully enjoy the spectacle of our presence. Soon a modest crowd pushed in from the street through the open door or pressed faces to windows, peering in at us.

Stuart turned to the girls. 'How much do you hate China?' he asked.

They glanced nervously at me. 'Just a little,' Kylie said.

'More than anything.' Melissa, of course.

'What's the worst thing about it?' Stuart asked.

After some consideration, they agreed that the raucous throat-clearing and spitting on the pavement were the worst.

'In India, they spit red,' Stuart said.

'Gross,' said Melissa. 'Why?'

'They chew a red nut, and it makes them spit. So they spit red.'

'Do you hate it here, too?' Melissa asked in a sweet, bantering voice I almost never heard her use anymore.

'Me, I love it,' he said. 'You know every minute how far away you are.'

'Isn't that true anywhere in the Third World?' Caroline said. 'India, say, or Africa?'

'Too much suffering,' Stuart said. 'Unless you're there to help the people, what's the point? But in China, everyone eats.'

'Our dad did that,' Melissa said. 'He went to Africa and he fed the kids.'

There was a respectful pause. 'Peace Corps?' Stuart asked.

'We went together,' Caroline said, taking a sip from my bowl.

Outside, the night fell dingy and red. Trailed by a small crowd of spectators, we walked to a market where vendors displayed piles of black grapes on thin cloths spread over the pavement. We hadn't seen grapes in China before, and Melissa and Kylie each bought a bunch. The grapes were hard and sweet. Stuart bought some fresh walnuts, which he carried over to us in his untucked plaid shirt. The girls each took one. 'But how do we break it?' Kylie asked.

'Ah, that's the best part,' Stuart said. He placed a nut on the pavement and split it with the heel of his boot. It made a satisfying, crack. The meat inside was a glistening white. We all got into it, cracking walnut shells with our shoes, pulling the sweet white meat from inside while a crowd of our Chinese

hosts eyed us with bemused perplexity. 'Americans,' I imagined them saying, afterward. 'The poor sons of bitches have everything in the world, but they've never tasted fresh walnuts.'

As we walked back toward our *binguan* in the quiet dark, Melissa stopped, turned suddenly to all of us, and announced, 'This was the most fun day in China.'

Night in that town was heavy and black as the ocean. Caroline and I lay on our separate cots, both wide awake. 'I'm having a disturbing thought,' she said. 'A feeling, really.'

'I'll lie with you,' I said, finding the floor with my feet.

'Wait,' she said. 'Let me say it.'

I lay back down. There was a long silence, during which I discovered that I was afraid – physically afraid – for the first time in as long as I could remember.

'You did it,' Caroline said. 'Isn't that right?'

'Did what?' But I knew.

'Took the money. Or whatever it was.'

'Jeffrey Fox has been whispering in your ear.'

She ignored me. 'I started thinking it a couple of days ago,' she said. 'I don't even know why. Tell me,' she said, and I heard her turning to face me. 'I won't blame you.'

'Yes,' I said.

'Sam. Why?'

'I don't know.' It was the truth.

'Did you feel pressure? Financial pressure?'

'Maybe. I don't know.'

I listened for some sound, some relief from any direction, but there was nothing. We were alone in the middle of nowhere. Of course, I thought – I'd dragged them to a place where they couldn't help but see it.

'Remember that prick who ripped me off?' I said. 'That friend of Harry's who turned out not to be?'

'Yes . . .'

'He was— That was— It started then.'

I heard a rustle of coarse sheets, and Caroline was beside me – her warm, familiar skin, the soft shirt she slept in when we traveled. 'Sam, I'm so sorry,' she said. She held me, her strong warm arms around my neck, and suddenly I was sorry, too, to see, for the first time, what I had become.

It looked like the dead of night when Stuart roused us. Loudspeakers filled the streets, blaring some awful, tinny wake-up music accompanied by saccharine female singing. The street lights were a stark, fluorescent white. We sat on an empty bus, sat and sat, waiting for it to fill. As the first light streaked the sky, we finally started to move.

Caroline and I were in opposite seats, Kylie beside me, Melissa next to her. Stuart sat directly in front of me. By now he felt like family, somehow – enough to eliminate the need for talk at this hour. At last the bus swung out of town. The sun came up. Peasants got on, some carrying chickens, one clutching a pig. Most were folded into sleep the instant they sat down. My girls slept. After a while Stuart slept, too, his head back against the window, mouth open slightly. I got a long, close look at his face in profile, studied his pores and Adam's apple, and found myself wondering who the hell he was. He looked like anyone. I tried to remember Cameron Pierce at Harry's party, but the vision of him that had haunted me these past two years was gone. So then, how did I know this guy was the one? I tried to put myself back in Kunming, where I'd recognized him. Eyes? Chin? But that encounter, too, was murky now. Stuart was a guy sleeping inches away, his expression not much different from my daughters'. And then I was terrified: of having put my family in the hands of a total stranger – not the man who had robbed me.

By the time we hit the wooded hills, the sun was up. The land looked unkempt, trees pushing and shoving against each other like people fighting their way through lines in China. Stuart woke and glanced at me, then turned to the window. 'Almost there,' he said.

We got off near a cluster of flimsy kiosks that marked the beginning of a path into the hills. The kiosks apparently doubled as overnight shelter for their proprietors, who were just beginning to stir. I heard more wake-up music from somewhere, but a powerful wind gushed through the trees and drowned out most of it. I was filled with a sense that something was about to happen. As Stuart led the way uphill, I took Caroline's hand. I saw Kylie reach for Stuart's hand – she's confused, I thought; she thinks he's me. But Stuart took her hand, and they walked together so naturally that I was sure he had a daughter, and a wife, too. He must have all this, somewhere. My legs burned as we climbed.

At the top of the hill, we came upon the base of a towering wall of sheer cliff, red-tinted like clay, pocked with rows of small openings that had to be the caves. A scaffolding of sorts had been erected for scaling this vertical surface, and we mounted a set of stairs and began to climb, Stuart first, still holding Kylie's hand, then Caroline and me. Melissa came last, looking tired and unsteady. I decided then to end my campaign against her.

We got off the stairs at the very top. There, beyond, a series of curved openings in the rock, were the caves, their walls stained with bright, extraordinary colors, massive painted wooden Buddhas and Buddha-like attendants towering within each. 'My Lord,' Caroline said. Kylie and Melissa just stared.

My wife and daughters went ahead. I let them go, stopping before three caves that had been linked to accommodate one massive Buddha lying horizontally. He was half sleeping, it

seemed, his almond-shaped eyes just slightly open, his head wider than the length of me. For a long time I stared at the Buddha. Then I turned to lean over the railing and look back down the mountainside.

Stuart joined me. 'Well, here it is,' he said. 'As promised.'

'You outdid yourself.'

'So. What happens now?'

'Good question,' I said, and laughed. 'Now I go to jail.'

There was a startled pause, then Stuart laughed, too. 'Hell,' he said, 'don't do that.'

'They've got me.'

'I don't think you'll go to jail,' he said.

He was probably right – the publicity would be too damaging. Something quiet and equitable was more like it: pay up, then fuck off. But our lifestyle would suffer, no question.

'Anyway,' Stuart said, looking down the mountain, 'I don't see any SEC here.'

'The world isn't that big.'

'It's big enough.'

The sounds of Caroline and the girls were just scraps, tossed up by the wind, then washed away. I leaned over the railing, feeling the calm weight of the Buddha behind me. 'You ripped me off,' I said. 'Twenty-five grand. In San Francisco,' I was afraid, almost whispering. But I wanted him to know the world wasn't as big as he thought.

'Wasn't it fifty?' he said.

I stared at him, a part of me thinking, Of course. 'You knew? All this time, you knew?'

'Pretty much. Once or twice I started thinking I might be nuts.'

'I don't believe this,' I said. 'Why didn't you run?'

'From what?'

'But I mean – why help me? Why bring us all the way here?'

'Bring you!' he said, and laughed. 'You begged to come. Fucking chased me to Xi'an.'

I said nothing. What a horse's ass I'd been.

'Why?' Stuart asked, and in the silence I felt the prickle of his curiosity. He moved closer. 'Why follow me? What did you want?'

'I was afraid you'd get away.'

Stuart laughed, perplexed. 'I am away.'

And of course this was true, he'd got away two years ago. And ever since, I'd been filled with disgust at the waste of my life.

'It's my daughters,' I said. 'They've done me in. Drained me dry.'

'They're good kids,' Stuart said quietly.

I listened for them, as I'm always half listening for my family. But I couldn't hear them anymore, not a wisp of their voices or laughter.

'How does it feel, doing what you do?' I asked.

Stuart laughed. 'Like everything feels when it's you,' he said. 'Like nothing.'

I turned to him. He looked small – one small man, alone in the middle of China. And I thought I saw in him some diminishment or regret – as if Stuart's fortunes, too, had slipped since our previous meeting. I thought, He has nothing but his freedom.

'Where are they?' I asked, anxious for my family.

'Gone,' he said. 'You drove them away.'

I grinned, uneasy. 'Fuck you.'

'Fuck you, too.'

'I believe you did.'

The wind blew away our laughter.

*

Stuart walked us back to the bus. Then, to our surprise, he said he wasn't going with us.

'Why?' cried the girls, with such keen disappointment that I felt a flicker of jealousy.

'Going to hang out here a little,' he said. 'Do some communing with the Buddhas.'

'Do you ever get to San Francisco?' Caroline asked.

Stuart grinned at me. 'Now and then.'

Kylie clapped her hands. 'Come to our house!'

'I might just do that,' Stuart said, and I saw, to my relief, that he wasn't serious.

'Please,' Melissa said. 'You can watch me skate.'

'All right, all right. Let's get on the bus,' I said.

Stuart waited outside, then waved goodbye as we pulled away. Melissa sat alone. I moved next to her and put my arm around her small, athletic shoulders. But the gesture felt awkward. And I was struck by how long it had been – months and months – since I'd shown the slightest affection toward my oldest daughter. She seemed hardly to notice, twisting to look out the window at Stuart, whose narrow back we could barely see making its way uphill. When finally she turned back around, I stared at her, amazed that a twelve-year-old girl could hold so much sadness in her face. 'He was nice,' Melissa said.