"Whatever. I'm a good fat boy."

Max Everhart

The Man Who Wore No Pants

Mr. Song, a motivated buyer, completed a third lap around the dying man's house by the lake and walked across the front lawn. His shoes were shined, and he wore a dark suit and a pink tie, which, according to the saleswoman at the department store, paired nicely with his soulful brown eyes and salt-pepper-colored hair. Standing six feet tall and weighing one-hundred-ninety pounds, Mr. Song was large for a native Chinese, particularly one from the Sichuan Province where he helped re-educate many class enemies. But all that—the loudspeakers, labor camps, and atonal songs about loyalty—was behind him now. Now, thirty-seven years later, and seven-thousand-one-hundred-ninety miles from where he started, Mr. Song was a typical American. Twice divorced, he owned a car, a successful Mexican restaurant in midtown Atlanta, and, like his associates at the Better Business Bureau, he longed to get out of the city, to breathe cleaner air and see trees and water.

Conscious of his posture, he moved quickly over the plush green grass, wondering if the dying man was watching through one of the many windows flanked by red shutters. Miss Young, his real estate agent, and Christopher, his twelve-year-old son, waited for Mr. Song in the shade of a Maplewood tree. Wearing a faded green t-shirt and blue jeans, Miss Young was not appropriately dressed for a work day. Mr. Song asked her to explain the dying man's selling conditions once more, as he wanted the boy to learn how to take the upper hand in a business deal.

"The man looking out the window there is Mr. Schiff, the seller. If you want the low listing price, he comes with the house. Temporarily." She waved at the dying man in the window, and then looked at

Mr. Song and the boy. "He is very ill and refuses hospice. I've seen the medical records. They sent him home with enough morphine pills to keep him comfortable."

Mr. Song peered past the waving dying man, past the custom-built home with the low listing price. In the distance motor boats inched by on the blue-green water, the passengers too small and far away to be human. He felt a stab of longing in his chest. "This is it," he said. "We will negotiate."

"He won't live out the month, Mr. Song. I've spoken to Mr. Schiff's doctors." Miss Young checked her clipboard. "FYI: lakefront property in this neighborhood is typically twice what he's asking."

The boy waved at the dying man in the window, and Mr. Song grabbed the boy's wrist and squeezed.

"You said to be polite, sir."

"I said to be respectful. He will be our guest."

The boy stared up at Mr. Song, mouth slightly open. The boy's face was fat, his eyes ice blue; the left one had a triangular blood spot below the pupil. He wore pressed khaki pants, a yellow button-down, and a clip-on tie, but Mr. Song resisted the urge to criticize his abnormal wardrobe. Before the acrimonious divorce, the boy was a C+ student and listened to rap music. He saw a therapist and in between shouting matches with his pretty blonde mother, he played video games in which tattooed men stole cars and beat homeless people over the head with metal trashcans. But now that the boy's mother was remarried and lived in Arizona, the boy was obedient: he completed his homework every night before bed, was on a special diet, and did calisthenics.

"Could you see yourself living here?" Miss Young glanced at her wristwatch.

"Some privacy, please." Mr. Song straightened his tie, bowed, and she walked away. Steeling his insides, Mr. Song put his arm around the boy. "You will have your own bedroom here. I will park in the driveway, not on a busy street. Look at the lake: you will conquer your fear of water."

"I swim fine, sir. I just don't enjoy it."

For a moment, they stared at the house and the lake and the boats inching along. A warm breeze swept through the trees. The boy wiggled free of Mr. Song's grip. "What about Mr. Schiff? I'm curious what the detective said."

Mr. Song did not speak. His eyes moved from the boy's doughy cheeks to the house. The rain gutters appeared to be new, but what about the roof? He thought he spotted a bad shingle near the chimney: something to be checked before signing the papers. Perhaps I will ask the dying man for a credit, he thought.

"Sir?"

"You invaded my privacy."

"You hired a detective to find out about the man who owns this house."

"My father would have punished you for going through my belongings."

"What would your father have done to me?"

When he was disobedient, Mr. Song was forced to fetch water from the Yangtze River two miles away from his family home. He carried a long wooden pole across his narrow shoulders with two full buckets of water on either end. "My father hung himself from a tree," he said. "Every day for seven months little soldiers with red armbands threw rocks at him, called him a Christian Demon Bourgeois Monster. They forced my mother and I to throw rocks at him too." Hand trembling, Mr. Song gave the boy a five-dollar bill and politely asked him to go wait with Miss Young.

Mr. Song removed his dress shoes before entering the dying man's house because he did not want to scuff up the hardwood floors.

The kitchen was brand new and seemingly unused. Every surface gleamed. He pressed buttons on the microwave, turned the stove to 350 degrees, and held his hand over the burner. He rummaged through the dying man's cabinets, but there was nothing to eat: only bottles

of vitamins, spices, herbs, and boxes of tea, all meticulously stacked and neatly arranged.

The window above the sink faced the lake. Gazing out at the water, Mr. Song glimpsed into the future. He will buy a boat with a motor and teach the boy to bait a hook for fishing. Maybe he will find another wife, a brunette perhaps, but this time he will do his homework. And this time he will tell his wife everything, beginning with his real name and how he came to America.

After inspecting the bedrooms and bathrooms on the main floor, he moved down the empty hallway, wondering how a dying man kept such a clean house. He climbed the stairs, bracing himself to face death once more.

He found the dying man in a small bedroom, sitting Indian-style on the rug-less hardwood floor, a cordless telephone cradled between his shoulder and ear. The dying man's face was very white, and he had a full head of chestnut-hair: he could have been thirty or seventy. His t-shirt and pajama pants were clean. There were no bloodied tissues anywhere, no moaning. The room, naturally lit and institutional in color, contained no ceiling fan, no wallpaper, no splashes of color, no bookcases, no pictures or personalized decorations of any kind. Unbuttoning his suit, Mr. Song inhaled deeply: the room had no smell. Carefully, he removed the gift from his pocket, an envelope with three thousand dollars in hundreds inside, and placed it in the dying man's lap.

"I am aware you have other offers, but I want your house." The dying man offered to shake hands, but Mr. Song refused and went on with the speech he had been practicing ever since he first saw a picture of the dying man's house. "We will share this house until your demise. All I ask is that you do not speak to the boy."

The dying man nodded and continued speaking into the phone. Mr. Song stood erect, shoulders back, listening to the conversation. "Inga, an Oriental is talking . . . about his son. Description?" The dying man slurred his words. Drool trickled down his chin. His eyes went

red as he looked up at Mr. Song, head swaying back and forth. "He is tall . . . handsome . . . serious. Yes, bring me some . . . "

Mr. Song recognized the dying man's Brooklyn accent from television.

The dying man dropped the phone mid-sentence and lay down on his back.

Mr. Song glanced around the room, redecorating in his head. He got out a tape measure, which he used to measure the back porch and the patio, and measured the dimensions of the room. A study? A library perhaps? Finished, he rolled up the tape and hovered over the dying man, who struggled to open a bottle of pills. Mr. Song opened the pills and tapped two out in the dying man's palm. The dying man lifted his head up, swallowed the pills with a wince.

"I have never heard of a doctor named Inga."

"No doctor." The dying man smiled, revealing stained teeth and bleeding gums. He took a deep breath and sat up. "Inga is a Swedish love goddess."

Mr. Song placed his hands behind his back and walked over to the windows facing the lake. He opened and shut them, inspected the sills and locks, confident that they will keep the cold air out during winter and the cool air in during summer.

"This is it." Mr. Song turned around just in time to see the boy shaking hands with the dying man.

The dying man accepted Mr. Song's first offer, which was thirty thousand below the already-low asking price. Disappointed with how quickly and smoothly the negotiations went, Mr. Song insisted that his private detective look deeper into the dying man's past. This cost him two-hundred dollars a week.

Meanwhile, Mr. Song signed the papers and he and the boy moved into the house by the lake on a warm day in April.

Eager for a swift transition from city life, Mr. Song hired four of the Mexicans from his restaurant—two line cooks, a waiter, and a

busboy: all very reliable—to help carry in the heavy stuff, beds and furniture and kitchen appliances. As the Mexicans and Mr. Song worked on the ground floor, they conversed in Spanish, while the boy followed them around, asking questions, most of them about the Mexicans' families, their hometowns and why they came to America. The hired men had dark hair and quick smiles. They answered the boy's questions in perfect English, until Mr. Song assigned the boy a task to get rid of him.

"Go unpack your things." The six of them stood on the front lawn drinking bottled water. "Do not go upstairs. Our guest is not well today."

"Mr. Schiff said he used to raise turkeys in the backyard. Do you know what their names were?" Dressed in a red turtleneck and corduroy pants, the boy stared at Mr. Song; the boy's face, sweaty and expressionless, bothered Mr. Song, and the pride of ownership he felt just a few seconds prior vanished.

"Obey me."

"Marco and Polo. Those were their names. Marco weighed twenty-eight pounds. Polo weighed twenty-three. Tell me why I have to stay away from Mr. Schiff."

Chicos, one of the Mexicans said.

"It is a part of the contract we signed: we buy this house, we share it."

"I didn't sign anything, sir. Why won't you call Mr. Schiff by his real name?"

One of the Mexicans, the teenaged busboy, laughed and his countrymen punched him in the chest. In Spanish, Mr. Song begged for his employees' pardon and then looked up at his house: the dying man waved at him through his picture window on the second floor. While the deal was being finalized, Mr. Song heard some awful things from the detective and visited the dying man twice. On the first visit, Mr. Song brought presents: morphine tablets, a box of Earl Grey tea, and four jigsaw puzzles. While the dying man drank the tea, Mr. Song

told him his real name, and he described his first wife. "She was a slim-hipped peasant girl from Shandong," he said. "Her eyes were shaped like almonds. She was my prisoner in the camp. During the day, I made her work. At night we snuck into the woods to be alone." On his second visit, Mr. Song brought the dying man a queen-sized mattress to lie on, and the dying man sent it back, requested that Mr. Song read *The Collected Works of Anton Chekhov* aloud instead, which, of course, he refused.

"I do not know his real name," Mr. Song said to the boy. "I just know he is dying internally."

A few days later, Mr. Song used the kitchen for the first time. He prepared fish head hot pot with Szechwan peppers, garlic, dried chilies, and ginger. He felt relaxed as he strained the noodles, simmered the broth and added pig's brains and coagulated blood to the mix. As he worked, fleeting images of bamboo huts and long-gone family flashed through his mind. Breathing in the heady aromas of the soup, he remembered the first year he spent in America, working as a busboy/waiter/line cook in a shoebox-sized restaurant in lower Manhattan. Mr. Chen, the owner and operator of Chen's Palace #2, was the first real Chinese Mr. Song met in America. Mr. Chen taught Mr. Song to play chess, how to run a restaurant for profit and how to speak Spanish. Mr. Song liked Mr. Chen, liked his wrinkled skin and perfect dentures and the full grammatically correct sentences he spoke. But Mr. Chen found out that his protégé Harold Song, formerly Huan Sheng, worked for the Investigations Department from '70 to '73; he found out that Mr. Song investigated anybody with a middle school education or too many books or too loose a tongue. So Mr. Chen came after Mr. Song with a stainless steel kitchen knife.

But that was behind him now. Now, as he stood in a newly-decorated, lavish symbol of his success, he felt happy to be wearing blue jeans and a t-shirt, not a suit and tie, happy to be cooking for fun, not profit, happy to be authoring the greatest and most prosperous

chapter of His Book.

The soup smelled delightful, and he poured it into bowls, and called for the boy.

But the boy did not come.

Leaving the food on the counter, Mr. Song paced around the ground floor looking for the boy, but he was nowhere to be found. According to the contract he signed, Mr. Song and the boy had to share the kitchen and dining room area on the first floor. Otherwise, the dying man remained upstairs where he belonged. Fortunately, this had not been a problem: the dying man had been too drugged and weak to come downstairs.

Since moving into the house, Mr. Song had established a routine. He made the boy breakfast, gave him lunch money, and put him on the school bus. Then, before heading to the restaurant to begin preparing the mole sauce, Mr. Song took the dying man a cup of potent tea and spent some time listening to him. He learned things this way, things the detective did not know, things he did not enjoy knowing. For instance, he learned the reason why raising turkeys was more rewarding than keeping a cat or dog. He learned about the different types of clouds, and that the dying man was a "non-practicing Jew" and had been married once, two things he mentioned in passing and never brought up again. After a week, Mr. Song had come to a conclusion: the dying man, who had yet to mention death or despair, was the cleanest (and most pliant) patient he had ever cared for. All he had to do was shave his beard or help him to the bathroom or give him a pill with cold water to drink.

Mr. Song yelled for the boy and waited at the bottom of the staircase. Silence. He climbed the stairs reluctantly, already thinking of a suitable punishment for disobedience. Mowing the yard during the hottest part of the day? Cleaning the bathtub with a toothbrush?

Mr. Song found the boy on a step ladder, painting the dying man's walls tangerine orange. In the middle of the room the dying man lay on a futon, which the boy's mother used to sleep on when Mr. Song

came home late, smelling of fryer grease. He waved his arms but no one noticed him. He rapped loudly on the opened door and entered the room: neither the boy nor the dying man paid any attention.

He moved closer to the futon. The dying man's nose whistled, his breaths came in irregular bursts, and his eyes were red and inflamed at the corners. He leaned closer and whispered: "Pain?"

The dying man adjusted his head on the pillow, exhaled. Sour breath: a recognizable stench; more memories.

"Don't disturb him, sir." Mr. Song looked at the boy. His cheeks and button-down shirt were speckled with orange paint. The boy shook the bottle of pills in his hand. "I convinced Mr. Schiff to take his medicine. He'd stopped for a while. I believe he is better."

Mr. Song turned away from the boy. The dying man's face attracted his attention: the sunken cheeks, the inappropriate smile on his bloodless lips. Death, he knew, often came with a smile, and he tried conjuring up his father's face. But all he saw was the tree and the rope and the pile of excrement he stepped in when he and his uncle cut the Demon Monster down. Mr. Song watched the dying man's eyes move rapidly, and something inside him hardened. His blood swam cold in his veins, and he led the boy out into the hallway, shutting the bedroom door behind him.

"I do not enjoy punishing you," he said. "I want to protect you."

"We all die, sir. Mr. Schiff doesn't have to be alone."

"Do not say his name."

"Our guest calls the sex lines to talk to Inga because he has no one else."

"You are intelligent and losing weight so I will speak to you as I would a man." He got down on bended knee so that both he and the boy were the same height. He looked the boy in his ice-blue eyes: the triangular blood spot frightened him, and his insides softened. He wiped away a blob of orange paint from the boy's face and said: "You are mine now. I want you. Your mother did not."

"She didn't want you either."

Looking at the boy's fat face and strange clothing, his stomach turned. He stood up, making sure to be at full height and glaring down at him when he reminded the boy that he must stay away from the dying man.

"I will try to do better, sir."

"I made the special soup you like. It is in the kitchen. Go eat." He snatched the bottle of pills from the boy, and the boy descended the stairs one at a time, one hand on the railing.

Mr. Song entered the bedroom. The dying man was awake and staring slack-jawed at the walls.

"I enjoy the color," he said grimacing. "My stomach hurts."

Mr. Song shook six morphine pills into the dying man's hand. He held the water glass for him to drink.

"Your son is . . . "

"A work in progress. Stay away from him, please."

"Why don't you ever ask me any questions, Harold?" Mr. Song heads towards the door, sickened by the sound of his own name. "Wait. Tell me a joke before you go. I need a laugh."

Mr. Song faced the dying man. Long ago, when his first wife caught malaria, he told her jokes. Even as her fever sky-rocketed and sweat poured down her face, she loved to laugh.

"I can remember but one."

"Go ahead."

"A man finds a shirt in the very back of his closet, puts it on, and goes to work in the factory. He works hard all day, and his co-workers compliment him on the shirt. After work, the man stops to have a beer, and the bartender says the man looks very striking in the shirt and refuses to accept payment for the drink. Then, as the man walks home, motorists honk their horns and wave at him. 'We love the shirt,' they yell from their car windows. The man waves back, yells, 'Thank you very much.' When the man gets home, his wife takes one look at him and starts laughing hysterically. She laughs and laughs for a long time. Eventually, the man calms his wife down and asks her what is

so funny. And do you know what she says?" The dying man shook his head no. "'Husband,' she says, 'you are not wearing any pants.'"

By mid-April, Mr. Song was spending more time at home, redecorating, painting, rearranging furniture, and hanging art work. In the afternoons, after the work was complete, he watched the boy do sit-ups and push-ups in the backyard, made sure he completed his algebra homework. In the evenings, he cooked low-fat dinners and he quizzed the boy on the different kinds of food people ate in other countries.

"France?"

"Snails."

"Thailand?"

"Crickets."

"Ireland?"

"Sheep guts."

"South Africa?"

"Goat."

When the quizzing was over, the boy would ask about the dying man and what the detective found out, but Mr. Song always kept quiet. Until one night when the boy asked why his mother never called. That was when Mr. Song showed the boy the detective's emails and pictures.

"Mr. Schiff is young to have cancer. This is his family? Is that Poland?" The boy reached for the faces on the screen but stopped himself. "Were his grandparents really made into soap?"

"Of course not," Mr. Song said. "You have seen too many movies. They died of disease, just like his parents."

"So Mr. Schiff is an only child."

"You are an only child. So am I."

"Maybe you could do something for him."

"There is nothing to do."

"I hear him singing at night. I've even heard him praying. Why did you hire a detective?"

Mr. Song made the boy delete the emails.

Mr. Song prepared scrambled eggs for the boy, while gazing out the boats on the water. Cumulus clouds floated across the blue sky. The remodeling was complete, and he was happy as he flipped his tie over his right shoulder to avoid stains.

"I love the water," Mr. Song said.

After plating the eggs and sitting down, the dying man shuffled into the kitchen wearing a terrycloth bathrobe and slippers. Mr. Song had not gone upstairs in days. The dying man's beard was thick and dark. His pajamas were dirty. He sat down at the island beside the boy.

"Good morning, Harold. Good morning, Christopher."

The boy and the dying man exchanged glances.

Mr. Song sloshed coffee into a mug and served it.

"I enjoy your tie, Harold. It brings out your eyes."

"Go wait in the car."

"I'm waiting for the bus, sir."

"I will drive you to school. Go."

The boy reached into his book bag, retrieved a book—something by Ray Bradbury, Mr. Song could not see the title clearly—and passed it to the dying man.

"I liked the parts about Martians," the boy said. "If you have anything else like it, I would—"

"Go to the car."

Alone with the dying man, Mr. Song said:

"You broke our agreement."

"Christopher came to see me."

"Do not say his name. The boy talks of nothing but turkeys now."

"They make excellent companions."

"Dying men do not make excellent companions, especially for little boys."

The dying man tightened up his robe. He had a hairy chest with little red bumps on it. He slurped his coffee, wincing in pain. "You stopped visiting. A normal person would be more curious about a

stranger living in the same house."

Mr. Song straightened his tie. As he walked towards the front door, he told the dying man that if he was well enough to get out of bed then he was well enough to shave himself.

"Wait, stay just a few minutes. Please."

Mr. Song stood with his hand on the brass doorknob, thinking about his father's tree. He went back into the kitchen and sat down. For an hour, he listened to the dying man ramble on about the weather and the local real estate market, his former profession. Then they played a board game called Sorry and as Mr. Song shuffled the playing cards and moved his pawn from "start" to "home," he debated whether or not he still possessed the strength to end human suffering.

An abundance of friendly customers forced Mr. Song to leave the restaurant early one afternoon. He needed to see the boy, make sure he was steering clear of the dying man and when he opened the front door, a yeasty smell overwhelmed his senses. He tracked the smell to the kitchen. There, he found the dying man sitting in a chair in front of the oven, the boy's legs dangling off the counter nearby.

"We're baking sourdough bread, sir." The boy was wearing slacks and blazer with brass buttons. "Do you want some?"

Mr. Song drew nearer and discovered that the dying man's face was clean-shaven and very pale. Bits of bloodied toilet paper covered his sunken cheeks.

Mr. Song and the boy sat on the end of the boat slip. The boy threw pebbles into the lake. Mr. Song, home early again—this time due to the smell of ground beef and flour tortillas—offered the boy some chocolate cake from a plastic bag.

"I'm down to one-fifty, sir."

"A little piece will not harm you. Javier made it for you. It is a treat." The boy shook his head no, and Mr. Song dumped the cake in the water and sat down beside the boy. He removed his suit coat,

folded it, and placed it neatly in his lap. "It is quite hot today. Maybe I will buy us a boat. You could clean it. Do you get sea sick?"

"Boats are expensive and a lot of work."

"I enjoy work. We could fish together." He paused. "My uncle and I caught a Chinese paddlefish once. It had a nose like an elephant's trunk. It was over two meters long and when we got back to the village . . . "

"I've heard this story before. 'When we got back to the village, everyone chanted my name.' It was a good one, sir." The boy stood up, removed his sweater vest and dress shirt and then his khaki pants.

"We need to buy you some regular clothes."

"I dress for success. Like you."

Mr. Song caught a glimpse of the boy's protruding white belly and looked away—at the chocolate cake slowly sinking. He could feel the boy's eyes and said: "I appreciate you not going through my belongings anymore. I appreciate you staying away from our guest."

"Whatever. I'm a good fat boy."

"We can talk about sinology again if you would like."

"Maybe later."

Mr. Song felt the wood creak, heard and felt a splash, and wiped away the water from his shirt and tie. The water rippled and bubbled where the boy leapt in. Could the boy swim? Mr. Song could not recall so he waited, counted to ten, twenty, thirty before diving into the water.

When he emerged, breathless, the boy spat a mouthful of water in his face.

Boys and girls in shorts and t-shirts ran up the steps of the YMCA. Mr. Song shut off the engine. In the passenger seat the boy read a paperback, some type of science fiction novel with yellowed pages and a musty smell.

"I've been doing my exercises." The boy turned the page without looking at Mr. Song. "I've stayed away from our guest. Why do I

have to go to camp?"

"For social practice. I do not want you at home all day." Mr. Song took the book away from the boy, placed it in the glove compartment.

"What about Marco and Polo, sir?"

"I am not discussing the turkeys again."

"When was the last time you visited Mr. Schiff?"

Mr. Song pounded his fist on the steering wheel.

The boy stepped out of the car. He adjusted his shorts in the rear and moved towards the glass doors where a tall black man in a track suit welcomed him by mussing his hair.

Mr. Song's mood lightened after dropping the boy off, even though he was certain that the boy would not make a single shot in basketball or talk to a girl.

Not wanting to go home, he drove to his restaurant and sat in the near empty parking lot. He stared up at the wooden sign above the door marked MEXICO LINDO, reviewing how he got there in the first place. He spoke Spanish and had worked with Mexicans for years and had made good money from this business. He had treated his workers fairly, paid them well, been gracious and charming to his customers, many of whom called him Harold and shook his hand when they walked through the door.

But, like his new house by the lake, this place, once a refuge from his second marriage, had lost its charm. Mr. Song, inexplicably, was ashamed of what he worked so hard to build. Lately he had had to force a smile when husbands and wives and kids came into his place of business, smiling and pretending that they were all friends who drank beer together and barbecued chicken together and watched baseball games together. When he brought hot plates of fajitas or refilled the salsa bowls because the wait staff got overworked, he longed to smack the children's hands as they colored on his nice clean tablecloths. Even his employees, who were always loyal, angered him now. Every face represented some failure of his. Busboys who smoked reminded him of the bribes he had taken while working for

the Chinese government. Cooks who kept clean stations reminded him of the loudspeakers he installed across the countryside. Every hostess's face looked like the boy's mother's face, and as he examined the sign—MEXICO LINDO—he imagined that somewhere the rubble of his failures collected in some secret location: perhaps an endless colorless flattened field where nothing grew, and the wind never blew.

Mr. Song retied his tie, exited the car. He unlocked the restaurant, walked to the bar and sat down. The chair squeaked. The liquor bottles enticed him. He poured himself a whiskey and let it sit on the bar in a spotless shot glass. In the kitchen Javier banged pots and pans. Mr. Song knew precisely what his executive chef was doing: chopping cilantro for salsa, peppers and onions for fajitas, preparing refried beans, working on mole and red sauces. The smell permeated the dining area, and Mr. Song choked.

Javier called out, "Boss man? Is that you?"

Mr. Song rushed for the door, his stomach churning. He sat in his car, wondering where to go and what to do.

Loud jazz music played when Mr. Song entered his house by the lake: bass lines, saxophones and syncopated drum beats. It was late afternoon, and he had had another difficult day at the restaurant, dealing with the Board of Health this time.

Carrying children's Tylenol and an armful of poetry books (including some Chekhov), he climbed the stairs and opened the dying man's bedroom door. A woman wearing a blonde wig sat on the futon with the dying man's head in her lap.

"I'm Inga." Still cradling the dying man's head, Inga leaned over and lowered the volume on the music. "Nice to meet you, Harold. I met your son earlier."

"He said he was sick and could not go to camp today."

"He went to a friend's house down the road."

"The boy has no friends."

"You're mistaken, Harold. The friend's name is Robert. He's very

cute and polite."

Mr. Song stared at Inga for a full minute. Despite the tiny pimples dotting her chin, she was attractive. Her eyes sparkled. She wore a skimpy black dress. "Which of the 25 provinces of Sweden are you from? Smaland? Blekinge? Vasterbotten?" She put a finger to her lips: black nail polish. Mr. Song breathed. "What is that smell?"

"Dope," Inga said. "He was in pain. You should read to him."

Mr. Song dumped the books and Tylenol on the futon. "Why should I read to him?"

"It is the thing to do."

"Why?"

"It would be good for him."

"It would not be good for me."

"Not at first."

"Not ever." Mr. Song spied ashes on the hardwood floor and asked that she clean up the mess when they finished smoking.

Inga gently laid the dying man's head down on the futon, making sure not to wake him and then she stood in front of Mr. Song. "I will dance for you if you ask. It'll make you feel better."

"You are disgusting. I am old."

"I'm not talking about sex." She tossed her blonde wig against the orange walls and moved in closer. Her real hair was black. "I'm talking about intimacy. I'm talking about making someone feel better. Simple. Do you know how to make someone feel better?"

Mr. Song felt the blood moving in his veins, cold and slow. He felt shame, and his suit hung heavy on his body. His feet were cemented in place.

She took his hands and placed them on the thin straps of her dress. She used his hands to roll the straps slowly down, down, down, finally exposing her pale white breasts. Her nipples were pink pencil erasers. She took a step back, covering herself with her hands. "You will read to my friend, Mr. Song."

Dizzy, Mr. Song sat down on the futon. He opened up a book by

Sir Alfred Lord Tennyson and read aloud, stopping occasionally to listen to the dying man's erratic breathing or to watch Inga dance, naked. An overwhelming fear gripped him as he read "Ulysses," and he considered the meaning of the phrases "unequal laws" and "savage race." He shut the book. Watching Inga's slowly gyrating naked body, an erection crept up his leg. He told her to stop and then looked at the orange walls.

"Stop," he said, "Leave. Now."

Mr. Song sat in his luxury sedan outside Toys R Us. Through the shop window he saw the boy in the checkout line, handing a fat woman Mr. Song's credit card. The day before, the boy received a belated birthday card from his pretty blonde mother. Inside the card was a picture of the boy's mother's new family: a curly-headed man with dimples and two little girls with red hair and matching dresses. "Thinking of you," the card read. The boy composed a letter to his mother marked PRIVATE on the envelope, but Mr. Song intercepted it, read it, and edited it for grammar, not content.

"He is really dying," the detective said, and Mr. Song gripped the cell phone tighter. After clearing his throat, the detective continued in a deep baritone voice. "I spoke to his doctors. You know about his family, his finances. I'm finished."

The seat leather was hot on his back, and Mr. Song squinted into the sunlight. The boy, dressed in slacks and a powder-blue dress shirt, carried a white plastic bag across the parking lot. Mr. Song estimated that he had spent one thousand dollars and forty-one days piecing together the dying man's life to date, which was far less time and money than he spent searching for his mother when she came to the United States twenty-one years prior.

"Keep looking for something," Mr. Song said.

"The guy is not an enemy of the state. He's nobody. What is this?"

"The slow death of a bad habit," Mr. Song said and turned the phone off and blew the car horn. The boy slung his bag through the

open window on the passenger side and climbed into the car. The boy asked who was on the phone and why, and Mr. Song told him the truth.

"Mr. Schiff is very pale now, sir. His hair is turning gray. The singing has stopped." The boy handed the American Express card back to Mr. Song and thanked him. He said, "Aren't you mad at me for seeing him?"

"Yes, and you will be punished for it." Mr. Song started the car. "Why did you buy Legos?"

"I'm trying to build something, sir." The boy put down the box of Legos and stuck his nose in a paperback.

"Christopher."

"Yes, sir."

"To hell with her."

"I caused her a lot of problems. Police. Guidance counselors. That thing with our neighbor's cat."

"I said to hell with her."

Over the next few weeks, Mr. Song became an insomniac. He stayed up late, repainting, hanging different wallpaper, cleaning the oven, and reconfiguring the furniture arrangement in the den. He was determined to get the house right. Determined. But everything smelled like sourdough bread.

Meanwhile, the boy continued losing weight. He ran around the neighborhood in sweat pants, practiced diving off the boat slip, and one night Mr. Song caught him sprinkling ground-up laxative tablets over his broiled chicken and rice.

"I'm still fat," the boy said, which were the first words he had spoken to Mr. Song in days.

Midnight. Noises from upstairs—talking, humming, singing. Mr. Song was in the den, pushing the couch from one corner of the room to the other. Earlier that day, while the boy was jogging around the neighborhood, Mr. Song prepared the dying man breakfast: corned

beef hash and eggs. When he carried the dishes back to the sink, he broke the plate and cut his wrist, requiring five stitches. The doctor, an Indian man with swarthy skin, sewed up the wound and said Mr. Song would have a scar.

Mr. Song dropped the ottoman he was holding. The singing grated on his nerves. The noises could wake up the boy. Mr. Song put on his slippers, went into the kitchen and boiled some water. He made a cup of very potent tea and walked to the foot of the stairs. Anxious but resigned, he climbed the stairs once more, cupping the tea cup with both hands, the steam rising, ticking his nose.

When he opened the door, the dying man stopped humming and rolled over on the futon. His hair, now gray and unwashed, spilled over the side of the pillow. They stared at each other for a moment. Mr. Song asked if the dying man wanted strong tea and the dying man nodded and Mr. Song shut the bedroom door behind him.

Holding the tea cup with both hands, the dying man asked Mr. Song to tell another joke. Mr. Song thought for a moment and said: "A man buys a house by the lake . . . "

The next day Mr. Song drove to the funeral home where he and the boy sat in a dimly-lit office. An ancient map of Israel hung on the wall beside a framed black and white photograph of a man in a baseball uniform. The funeral director, a man wearing black, sat behind a large oak desk, explaining what shmirah meant.

"It's about dignifying the dead. The body cannot be left alone prior to burial. A family member usually—"

"He had no family left." Mr. Song adjusted his tie, put his arm around the boy. "We are responsible now."

"Is the boy Jewish?"

"Of course not."

"Do you believe in God?"

"That is irrelevant. We respect your traditions."

The funeral director consulted with a rabbi, said the bill had been

paid in advance by the deceased. He said that Mr. Song and the boy have been granted special permission to guard the body and then he led the two of them to a viewing room where the dead man lay in a clean white coffin. A man in a black suit sat beside the body, reading the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*. The funeral director and the man in the black suit shook Mr. Song's hand and then the boy's. They left, heads bowed, muttering to one another.

Mr. Song glanced at the dead man and then at the boy. He removed his suit coat, folded it, laid it across the clean white coffin, frowned, and then laid the folded coat on the carpet. The boy removed his clip-on tie, stared up at Mr. Song, mouth slightly open. The blood spot on the boy's left eye had shrunk, and it was no longer triangular in shape. The boy asked what this was that they were doing, and Mr. Song said: "This is punishment." ■