

## Winner, *New Ohio Review* Fiction Contest

selected by Stuart Dybek

### The Best Man

Brian Trapp

Outside the bride's village, I lean against the side of a silver Audi with Mr. Wu, my boss's businessman friend. I thought we were going to his wedding, where I will be his best man, but I guess as per Chinese custom, we are going to the bride's house first. We have traveled twenty-five minutes into the Chinese countryside, where we wait for the rest of the wedding caravan. The second half of the dancing lion is late, and the head walks around with its neon-red body dragging behind, a giant mutant worm.

On the ride over, tall buildings gave way to dingy shops. The road narrowed, going from the usual off-white tiled apartments to the old-timey black-tiled Chinese roofs—the tops curved into crescent moons. Smoke spewed from small factories and then green patches of farms appeared, pieces from two different puzzles jammed into one another's edges.

Ahead of us rode a small marching band in royal blue, packed into the bed of a rickety pickup truck, blowing their battered horns. Their bandleader's snare looked run over by a car; their song broke apart at forty miles an hour, stretched out and lost from city to country.

Now they smoke cigarettes, their instruments abandoned on the ground. It is stifling hot. Mr. Wu doesn't speak English, but as we adjust our damp collars, he occasionally nods and smiles. I want to ask him how to say "awkward" in Mandarin, but I don't speak Chinese.

My pocket rumbles. Lil is not happy. The night before, our boss told her to be at a hair salon at seven-thirty for maid-of-honor duty. At nine a.m. she texted me while I slept: "You are so lucky." At ten: "This is ridiculous." And now, at twelve: "I hope they get a divorce." Mr. Wu is smirking. He has no idea.

I dial her number. "Hurry," she says. "I'm in the hallway. The bride locked me out of her room. Her grandmother is staring at me and poking my skin and the bride is freaking out. She thinks her boobs will pop out. And I hope they

do.”

“All right,” I say. “We’re on our way.” But we are not.

I am used to renting myself out. I basically get paid for being white. For thirty dollars and free beer, I was a cowboy at a disco (hat and dart gun provided; I brought the blue jeans). I played quick-draw with cell phone cameras as couples yelled, “Hello-a Cowboy!” I was a Swiss doctor in an infomercial (some kind of weight-loss cream) for a hundred dollars and free beer. I sang in a rock band at a Chinese bar for forty dollars (in gibberish, no one knew the difference, free beer). But mostly, I teach at a private English school for eight hundred dollars a month.

The best part about getting paid for being white is *getting paid for being white*. Through no special skill of my own, I receive envelopes full of money for a few hours of discomfort. It’s the best racism ever. And if I can’t do much else, at least I can be an excellent white person. Before I met Lil, before I came to China, I was a bit of a fuck-up. I dropped out of high school, got a string of dead-end jobs and DUIs. I joined the Coast Guard to change pace and see the country, and was awarded the National Defense Service Medal for being on active duty during the War on Terror. I didn’t save any lives in New York or end any in Iraq. I pushed paper in Cleveland. If a terrorist was stopped because his information was properly filed, then yeah, I’m your hero.

After I got out, I was an “administrative assistant.” My days were numbing. Coworkers debated the important questions of our day: “What township has the best-tasting tap water?” When I wasn’t working, I dated a nice and pretty grade-school teacher and she started talking about marriage, joking about kids. I felt tightly wrapped until that point, like I contained possibilities and futures that only needed time to unwind. But then, on Sunday trips to see her parents, it became easier to imagine myself growing old, the years unspooling before me in whole cloth, unwrapping nothing. And when she told me she was pregnant, I feigned happiness, but it was obvious. I drank a lot and dropped hints about “options.” She was pregnant, until one day, she wasn’t.

Stuff like that will make you start digging for the other side of the world. Instead, I did a three-week Oxford Teaching English as a Foreign Language Certificate (fewer calluses, much quicker).

Lil and I have been dating for about seven months now. She’s had her share of gigs too. Most recently, she was a model for Shen Zhou Textile Factory’s 2013 summer catalogue (I am officially dating a model). Buyers from crappy department stores all over the world will see my Lil, with her Aryan good looks and her impish smile, and think: *I would like one thousand of whatever she’s wearing.*

When my boss asked if we would appear in a Chinese wedding for two thousand yuan (\$250) each, I didn't want to ask her. Lil's teaching contract is up. Mine is not. She returns to America tomorrow while I work on going somewhere new, maybe Western China. She's taking it pretty good, considering. I am twenty-eight and Lil is twenty-five. We made no promises, but she started talking about us in the future tense, even floated the possibility of me coming back with her. I said maybe in six months or a year, if we still felt the same, which wasn't what she wanted to hear. So I was hesitant, because she'd have to watch someone else don the dress, someone else walk down that aisle. We'd have to watch from the sidelines, as maid-of-honor and best man, knowing that might never be us.

But I asked and to my surprise, Lil thought it would be funny. "Might be the closest we ever get," she said, and then laughed. That's her way of wrapping unpleasant things.

The lion's lower half pulls up in a minivan, with three other men, who are lugging a squat red drum. The groom barks something and the lower half scurries under the lion's cloth. We start down the dusty road: the lion, the drum, the band, the groom, and then me, the foreigner.

The bride's neighbors crowd the concrete road and the stone bridge that spans a canal. Children run alongside us. A brave few shout "hello" over the band's brass din. It is our own parade. I wave, and the crowd points and cheers. Often in China, I feel like I am a movie star. But I'm not sure if it's for a good movie or a bad one.

Inside the bride's house, we sit around a large circular table, and I am covered in cigarettes. The father of the bride passed around his pack, and the other men countered with their own packs. In China, it's rude not to accept cigarettes and even ruder not to smoke them, so I have one in my mouth, two behind each ear, and one lit in my hand, as if I'm determined to get lung cancer before getting up. Lil texts that she's back in the bride's room.

The groom talks with the men. Mr. Wu is fat, with broad lips and a white rose on his lapel. My boss said he was a businessman but it's hard to read what he's selling.

There's a beggar on the city's main strip. One of my students said a crooked doctor surgically rearranged his legs over his head, like he got stuck in a somersault. He sits on a scooter without a shirt, clawing the sidewalk with shoed hands. Once, I bought him a shirt at the night market. He *xie xie*-ed me and tried to give it back. Humble. But the next day, there he was again, bare-chested. He wasn't just a beggar. He was a businessman, selling pity, and shirts were bad

for business.

This groom seems to be selling the opposite, by turning his wedding into a PR stunt. The best man should be your best friend, or at least your favorite drinking buddy. What I find terrifying is that for the rest of this man's life there will be pictures of us on this most important day, and he will have to make something up. What will he say? Foreign exchange chums? He taught me chopsticks and I taught him basketball?

Mr. Wu rises and we go upstairs, climbing the narrow steps to the door at the end of the hall. I hear women laughing. Mr. Wu knocks, and the women scream. They yell something back. Mr. Wu clears his throat, closes his eyes and breaks into song. His voice is beautiful and operatic, probably a terror on the karaoke mic. The maids yell. In the doorway of an adjacent room, I see the grandma, gray-haired and bug-eyed. We are both confused.

Mr. Wu reaches inside his jacket and pulls out a red envelope. Mao Zedong's pink face peeks out under the flap: one-hundred-yuan bills. Mr. Wu crouches and slides the envelope under the door. "*Bu gou le*," the women call back. Not enough, a haggling phrase I understand. He slides another, fatter envelope. "*Xiao qi*," they call him. Cheap. Then, he raps on the door and says, in a high-pitched voice, what must be the Mandarin equivalent of "Housekeeping." The door cracks open and the girls scream something about more money. But Mr. Wu slams his leather shoe into the opening, and yells what might be the only English phrase he knows: "Come on!"

He hurls himself at the door and I am right behind. This is my kind of culture. He has just tried to buy his wife, and now we are stealing her.

After we shove our way into the room, the women scold Mr. Wu and return to the bride, who is dressed in gauzy white ruffles, her eyes shaded with purple, her face dotted with sparkles. She smiles wanly at her future husband, but then her face tightens as she glances over at Lil.

Lil is in the corner, looking miserable but safe from the shaky grandma. She is packed inside a dress two sizes too small. It's putrid green and makes Lil look like a beautiful, seasick mermaid. Lil is American pretty but Chinese hot. She's lucked into the Chinese standards of beauty: small round face, porcelain skin, large oval eyes, a nose fine and small, like a bump of frosting on a cupcake. Her eyes even have a slight squint. But her body holds the Western line, with big hands, breasts and feet. She can't find shoes. The shoe shop ladies squawk when they see her massive big toe, the red nail gleaming like the eye of some uncaged and dangerous pet.

She says between her teeth, "I can't breathe."

"This is hilarious," I say.

“You haven’t been tortured for five hours. With no air conditioning.”

That’s typical Lil. She doesn’t act demure. Once, at a bar, she was hit on via a translator. The man spoke to his friend and then cupped his chest (the international sign for titties). The friend said, “My friend say you are very beautiful.” Lil slapped the man’s face (the international sign for “How dare you”). Perhaps that’s her special talent and curse. She can always see past my interpreter. When I say, “I don’t want to stay in and watch a movie tonight,” she hears “I can’t stand you.”

When we started dating, I’d only been in China a month while she was a one-year vet. She seemed desperately homesick even then, already wanting to relegate her experience to a section of her resume. She moved into my apartment after our first drunken kiss. We formed a routine. We were in China during the day, when we both worked at the language school, but then we retreated to our apartment at night, with our words and our pirated DVDs, and made our own little America.

Even if we were hiding from China, Lil and I had fun. Like DVDs. The DVD manufacturers don’t speak English. It’s all cut and paste and things get mixed up. So the back of the *Forrest Gump* DVD reads: “Only one man can stand up to the Genocide in Rwanda.” *Ace Ventura: Pet Detective* reads: “Who really shot JFK?” We purchased Woody Allen’s *Manhattan*. It was a porn. Some women would freak out, but at the sight of our first dong, Lil said, “Wait . . . that guy’s not Jewish.” I think that’s when I fell in love.

Then maybe everything happened too fast. Maybe we’ve seen each other too clearly these past few months. We do not “complete” each other or make each other “whole.” As a couple, we are just a larger, more misshapen mess of our discrete selves. I still love Lil, but I know in the long run, it won’t work. And even though she asked me to come back with her, she knows, deep down, that she wants too much from me. It’s better to break it off here, blame it on the contracts, and leave open the possibility of a dramatic stateside reunion.

One of the bridesmaids looks over at us and waves. “Josh-eh,” she says, and smiles. Lil nods her head. “*Dui*.”

“Nice meet-ing you,” the bridesmaid says, and then retreats into the huddle of girls around the bride.

“That’s the bride’s cousin. Knows a bit of English,” Lil says, and then whispers, “Nice girl. But the bride’s a bitch and I can’t understand what she says.”

“Come on, Lil,” I say. I poke her stomach. The dress feels like it will pop. “It’s almost over. Ask cousin when’s the wedding.”

She does and then shrugs. “Soon.”

We walk downstairs. People are amassed for some kind of ceremony. We

wait. The band has been playing outside the door. They stand in a semicircle, their director beaming under a huge pair of fighter-pilot sunglasses. He puts his hand above the smudged white disk on his drum, where he's beaten so many people into matrimony. He nods to me, then directs his band, tapping his snare with quick flicks. Tortured, slightly drunk-sounding, but unmistakable: "Jingle Bells."

"That's nice," I say.

"He wish you early Merry Christmas," the cousin says.

"Thank you," I say. It is June.

The music cuts out. The bride's father and mother stand before the couple, two fat red candles flickering behind them. The bride and groom lock hands and bow, and the bride comes up in tears, leaving two purple streaks. She yells "Mamma!" and runs to her mother. They embrace, and she shakes in her mother's arms. Her father is whispering in her ear, while Mr. Wu stands by, his eyes cast down to the floor tiles. It is suddenly not so funny. Her father points her in Mr. Wu's direction. Mr. Wu grabs at her limp hand. She's still crying as we walk back up the road: the lion, the drum, the couple, the foreigners, all cabooseed by the band.

I think we are going to the wedding, but then Lil asks the driver and translates back: According to Chinese custom, we should go to Mr. Wu's parents' house. The bride and groom are in the rose-laden Audi now, and we follow them in a black BMW. The country retreats back into city, as we're serenaded by the wedding band's stretched-out warble. Lil hasn't said a word.

"Why so quiet?"

"I don't know."

"Are you mad at me?"

"Not yet." She looks out onto one of Shaoxing's many rotting canals. Its brown water reflects the houses along the waterway. Shaoxing is one of seventeen cities that claim to be the "Venice of China." I think of the Shaoxing boatmen, who wear Robin Hood hats and row oars with their feet.

"We should go for a boat ride," I say.

Lil groans. "When? After the party tonight? Before my train tomorrow? I can take my suitcases."

"Oh yeah."

"You'll be fighting a hangover anyway."

"I won't. I won't drink. It's our last night."

"Thanks," she says.

Lil thinks I drink too much, but it's part of our job. We go out with our

students after-hours and speak English at the bar. During the fifth beer, they try to teach me Mandarin, but I'm impossible. Lil has tried to teach me but it's easier just to rely on her, as I've been doing these past few months. At the banks, restaurants, and markets I often feel like a child and Lil saves me. But I also never grow up.

Lil could have any man she wants. She had her pick of ten lonely Western guys and droves of native, moneyed young professionals. I don't know why she chose me. We're both from the Midwest, which might tilt the scale. But I don't know why she pulled me close at that bar seven months ago. I wasn't doing so bad for myself then. There had been other women, Chinese women, but their motives were suspect. I wasn't sure if they liked me or liked what I represented: America. To them, I was exotic, an ambassador of luxury. I represent the same thing to Lil, I guess, but it's different. It's not just that we can have a conversation free from the tyranny of Chinese-English dictionaries. To Lil, I am a deeper satisfaction. I am home. Maybe that's why I don't want to go back with her. I'm afraid she won't need me anymore.

We enter the city with its migraine-inducing neon lights. The driver speeds past a bus and taps his horn defensively, existentially, as if to say, "I am here. We are here."

Lil says, "It's not too late to come with me." She grabs my hand and smiles. "You could teach English to taxi drivers."

I pull away. "Very funny."

Mr. Wu's parents live in one of those ubiquitous off-white tiled apartment buildings. Another crowd is assembled, but this time, there are more people, fewer drab blue Mao suits. We shuffle to the apartment building in the same order: the lion, the band, the couple, the foreigners. The crowd seems to revive Lil. She even grudgingly throws fistfuls of flowers in the bride's wake. The lion breaks off to stand guard outside while the band leads us up the apartment stairs, as if they've gotten very lost on the way to a parade. The band director is still smiling.

A portrait of Mao decorates Mr. Wu's parents' dingy apartment. But they also have a new HDTV, which I assume their son bought. We sit around the table, and again, the men make with the cigarettes. Mr. Wu's dad is old and weatherworn, and his hands are callused, though he wears a new suit. His mother is plump and rosy-cheeked but needs braces badly. Oddly enough, they remind me of my own parents, painfully polite working-class people who feel awkward in nice clothes. My father still wears his work boots to funerals, even though he's been laid off for three years. He was an RV mechanic before gas got too expen-

sive and there stopped being places people wanted to see.

After everyone shakes hands, we sit and smoke. There is a bowl of fresh fruit and candy. Lil and I gobble it down like two movie extras who've found the catering table. The bride fiddles with a candy wrapper, avoiding our eyes and occasionally glaring at her future husband.

Lil asks when the wedding is. The groom answers, but Lil can't make it out.

"I think he said very soon."

"What are we waiting for then?"

The cousin answers and her Mandarin sounds less like quacking. Lil nods.

"They are waiting for the lucky number," Lil says. "There are two lucky numbers in the Chinese marriage tradition. Six means good luck. Eight means you will have money."

"What about this guy?"

"What do you think?"

I look at my cell phone. It's one-thirty. We have thirty-eight minutes to kill.

Mr. Wu asks Lil a question and she turns to me. "He wants to know what you did in America. What should I tell him?"

"A businessman," I say. Lil frowns and then translates in Mandarin. It's a game we play. I invent my past career. Mr. Wu asks her something again. She sighs.

"He wants to know for what company."

"Xerox," I say. That sounds specific enough.

Mr. Wu nods his head. "Uh, Xerox-u."

I nod back. Lil says, "You're ridiculous," which is true. But Lil graduated from Vanderbilt and worked for AmeriCorps. She doesn't have to lie about anything.

The room is decorated with pictures. Little Mr. Wu is a baby in his cradle. Little Mr. Wu sits on a bicycle with a bloated backpack and a red star on his forehead. Then Mr. Wu becomes more mister, late-teens in a dress shirt, looking dour at the camera. What happened in between those pictures? I imagine he is from a small town, like me, and that his hometown has also been falling apart for years. I imagine that he is happy to be in this city, where they slap up a new street every month, and that he works hard for his pink-faced Maos so his parents can move off the farm to watch Chinese New Year galas in high-def and his wife can have foreigners at her wedding and pout. I think I could be like him if I were born at the beginning of the American century instead of at the end. Suddenly, for him, I want to be a good Caucasian.

The clock is ticking. I try to look at people in small turns, like a scanner, to reduce any one person's awkwardness.

The cousin breaks the silence. "When will you marry?" she asks, and then smiles as though she's posing for a picture.

Lil laughs, and says something in Mandarin I don't catch. She cracks up the whole table.

"What did you say?" I ask.

"I am waiting for a rich Chinese man."

The cousin is still laughing. "But Josh-e, she is so beau-ti-ful."

"Yeah," I say. "But at any moment, she could become ugly." The cousin guffaws and translates for the rest. Mr. Wu and his bride cringe.

The cousin says, "So terrible." I smile at Lil. That is what I usually say when Chinese people ask why I don't marry Lil. They assume that because a girl is beautiful it's grounds for marriage. They always cringe and Lil always thinks it's hilarious. But she's looking at the table now, her mouth drawn down, her eyes filling.

"Lil," I say, grabbing her arm. "Come on."

She brushes my hand away and raises her head. She says something in Mandarin and the table roars.

"What did you say?"

She smiles but doesn't answer, just purses her lips in smug victory. I'm the only one who doesn't understand.

The eight draws near. Mr. Wu's father plugs in a cord. On a table, red electric lights dance in their bulbs. Mr. Wu's parents face their son and bride, who bow quickly and file out. The drummer is waiting for us in the hallway. He raises his eyebrows, as if to say, "More Jingle Bell?"

I think we are going to the wedding but then Lil asks the driver and translates back: We are going to Mr. Wu's apartment. She doesn't say anything about Chinese custom. We are driving out to one of Shaoxing's new suburbs—so new, in fact, that there is hardly any traffic on the freshly paved road. It's only us and a band of ragged people in blue Mao suits. They are spreading piles of rice grain, dragging their bamboo rakes on the road, as if stalks will shoot up from the street.

Lil asks the driver and translates back. "They're farmers," she says. "They need to dry out their rice, and this road has little traffic." I narrate to the audience in my head: In China, there is a road where the only traffic is BMWs and rice rakes. She looks out the back window, watching them become miniature. I grab her hand. She lets me.

Before I met Lil, I was so lonely. This country can swallow you up. I was an alien, watched by a thousand eyes. I felt seasick, like I was in basic training again, but I was thirty miles inland. I felt as if I was the only person like me in the world. But I shouldn't blame the country. I've always felt that way. I don't want the seasickness to come back. I pinch her cheek.

"What?" she says.

"Nothing."

"Do you think they sell the rice to restaurants? You think we've eaten road rice?" Every meal is suspect.

"I thought there was a piece of glass in my Chou Fan last night."

"You'd probably just eat right through it."

"What did you say back there?"

"Nothing. It was a joke."

I stare out at a man balancing three wicker chairs on the back of his bicycle.

"Come on," she says. "Don't sulk."

"We've had good times here, Lil. In six months, a year, who knows?"

"Right."

"I'm gonna miss you."

"I'll miss you too."

"I'm staying for the road rice."

"Shut up."

We pull up to an apartment complex, and it looks like a ghost town that no one has lived in, a stillborn development. Most units are unoccupied, shells waiting for lavish interiors and chubby children. From the corner of my eye, I see a child exit an Audi. A second later, there is a hiss and the child runs. In the middle of the road, firecrackers detonate down a string, exploding with smoke.

We are standing in the corner of their apartment. I'm thinking Mr. Wu overdid it. Glass pillars encase fake fluorescent flowers. Nooks along the back wall hold neon-filled Hennessy and Jack Daniel's bottles. Another wall is a plasma TV. There are bedrooms for the couple, and for the one-child-to-come. The apartment is filled with people. A man holds a cigarette in one hand and in the other, a baby, who is clawing to find air. I feel like that baby.

"When is this wedding?" asks Lil.

"I don't know," I say. "Things have to happen on lucky numbers a lucky number of times."

I ask the cousin. "Soon," she says.

"Soon? Or very soon?"

“Very very soon.”

It is four p.m.

“I should be with my friends,” Lil says.

“I’m your friend.”

“You’re my lover,” she says, making it sound like an insult.

Guests interrupt our waiting in halting English. They ask the two basic questions: 1) Do you like China? 2) Where are you from? We give the two basic answers: 1) Yes, so beautiful. 2) America. Do you know Kentucky? Yes, Kentucky Fried Chicken. Next to that, Ohio.

When Lil goes back there, I will miss her laugh, the way she jokes about things she shouldn’t. I will miss holding her in the early morning before the car horns start, feeling her body twitch in her sleep, the way we entwine like snakes warming on a rock and don’t even have to talk, the way she rests her head between my shoulder blades so I feel anchored and at home. I will miss how she glows at the front of a classroom, how she can make everything clear and enunciated: The Big App-le. The Win-dy Ci-ty. I will miss laughing with her at mangled English on T-shirts at the night market, giving us more evidence that the world is absurd and only we make sense.

But there are also things I won’t miss. I won’t miss Lil lapsing into silence, entire days of silence when it seems like we’ve never spoken the same language at all, before I learn what she is mad about: a criticism in the wrong tone, a too-friendly goodbye to a female student, how much I drank the night before. I wonder where she learned to punish like that. And sometimes Lil’s anger at me becomes something else, spills over into a darkness I try to understand. Sometimes she can’t get out of bed, can’t put on her happy, white-person smile, so I have to call in sick for her. She has gone someplace that’s not on the map and I have to wait until she turns around and comes back. She blames these bouts on China, says she’s just tired of being an alien, her body collapsing like she’s been walking around in a different gravity. It will be better, she says, when she’s stateside, when she can talk to someone, truly speak. But I have my doubts, and I don’t know how to help her.

Lil thinks my plans are stupid, and admittedly, they’re difficult to explain. I want to be where there’s a future. I want to be where things are built and born. I will travel west to this country’s more remote regions. I want to get lost in the bumps of the map, like when I was young and used to spin the globe and stab it still with my finger. But even then, I often landed in the middle of the ocean.

I think back to my First Communion, how disappointing it was after I swallowed the cardboard disk and nothing happened: no miracle or transcendence. After the service, my father took us out to eat at a Chinese restaurant, where

a waiter rolled out a silver cart with a semi-cooked bird. He lit a match and swiped the carcass, which burst into flames. I jumped back in my seat. My father said, “Duck” and I watched it burn in blues. Not a miracle, but close. That was my first memory of China. Maybe that’s what I’m chasing.

The lucky number strikes. Mr. Wu follows his bride and his parents into his future bedroom, and people scramble to watch. The bride and groom sit side-by-side on their wedding bed, which is covered by a deep-red bedspread. Mr. Wu’s parents stand over them and hold a ceramic spoon above their mouths. Mr. Wu is gaping like a baby bird, but as the spoon comes closer to the bride’s mouth, she doesn’t open. You can tell her teeth are clenched. People behind us start to whisper, but at the last moment, her lips pop open, and the parents spoon in this silky, sticky goo.

“What is that?” I ask Lil. But the cousin answers.

“*Zao sheng guizi*,” she says. “It mean ‘early good baby.’ Have baby very soon.” Part of me finds that disturbing, the parents hovering over the bridal bed, shoveling early good baby into their kids’ mouths with the implication to start fornicating now. But then another deeper part wishes it was Lil and me on that bed with our mouths wide open, my mom and dad stuffing us with “early good baby,” Lil’s belly swelling with each slurp, the future unspooling. I can’t breathe. I walk into the kitchen. Lil follows.

“What’s wrong?” she says.

“It’s too hot.” I am bent and wheezing. She puts her hand on the small of my back.

“Stand by the air conditioner. Need a drink? You want some ‘early good baby’?”

I look up into her blue eyes. “Do you?”

Her mouth tightens. She looks away.

I think we are going to the wedding. I am sure we are going to the wedding. Everything appears as if we are going to the wedding. We pull into the parking lot of the Heng Sheng Hotel, where people park for the wedding. We walk to the entrance, where people go into the wedding. We are about to walk inside the hotel, where the wedding will take place. I am thinking: banquet. I am thinking: no more waiting. I am thinking: free beer.

We stop at the door. “Are we stopping?” I say. “Why are we stopping?”

Lil asks. “We have to greet the guests,” she says.

“How many guests?”

Lil consults with Mr. Wu. “Jesus God,” she says under her breath, like a soldier facing unspeakable odds. “Five hundred.”

So as per goddamn Chinese custom, we stand at the door behind the bride and groom and greet the guests. Lil holds a giant gold purse. As each guest approaches, the band blasts a booming wedding march. Like musically-activated animatrons, the groom shakes the guest's hand and the bride takes the guest's red envelope of pink Maos, which she then passes to golden-pursed Lil. The dancing lion guards us all the while.

Some non-guests approach and the band starts playing, but then Mr. Wu barks at them. Then the bride barks at Mr. Wu, and they do small barks back and forth. And in a true testament to human will, the band director never not smiles.

After the first hour, Mr. Wu is talking on his cell phone. The bride is saying hard words to Mr. Wu, like she wants to spit but holds it in. Lil lets the bag sag, and then it's touching the concrete. This makes the bride even angrier. She points at us. Mr. Wu flips the phone closed, says it's nothing. "*Mei Shi.*"

"Lil," I say, "Pick up the bag."

"No."

"Don't you want to see what a Chinese wedding is like?"

"She doesn't love him."

"What are you talking about?"

"Haven't you been watching how they talk to each other? How she cried to her mother? How she closed her mouth during 'early good baby'? I can't help them go through with this."

"Lil. It's hot. You're tired. We can talk about this later. Pretend you're teaching a class." I draw a smile on my face with my finger.

"I don't know why you asked me to do this, Josh. It was cruel."

"But you said it would be funny."

Lil smiles. "You want to know what my joke was? You want to know why they were laughing?"

"It doesn't matter."

"I said I would find a better man to please me, like sexually."

"Oh."

"And I said you were a coward."

"Good one, Lil."

"And it's true. You're scared of me. You're afraid of anything permanent."

"Lil, you're on the job. Be a good white person. Pick up the bag."

"What if I stayed?"

"What?"

"What if I stayed with you in China?"

“You’re not happy here.”

“And you are? You’re miserable. But you’d rather run away, from me, from your country. You’ll grow old and alone and exhausted,” she says. “And it’s all because you’re a fucking coward.” She slams down the purse. Red envelopes fly up and scatter over the walkway. She runs inside the hotel. I follow, but she eludes me through the women’s bathroom. I knock on the door. “Lil,” I say. “Lil.” But I only hear her muffled sobs.

I walk toward the entrance again. The bride is yelling. She’s holding her hand out toward the scattered envelopes as Mr. Wu and her cousin scurry to snatch them up. The band members have ditched their instruments and scour the ground for red slips. The dancing lion lies deflated in a heap as its acrobats grasp for Maos under a parked car. Perhaps that is the last indignity. The bride throws down her flowers and runs into the hotel. Mr. Wu, the cousin and I take chase, but she too escapes inside the bathroom, where only the cousin can follow.

Mr. Wu and I are alone. He is holding the gold purse out in front of him, as if it has caused all this trouble, as if it will explode again.

I walk back out to the entrance. The band director is waiting. His band has their instruments at the ready and he gives the nod. Jingle Bells.

“Not now!” I yell. The horns sigh and choke like wounded animals. “*Du-ibuchi*,” I say. I’m sorry. I have made the band director not smile.

Back in the hotel, Mr. Wu is sitting on a couch in the lobby. I sit beside him. The women we love are in the bathroom hating us, and we are alone. His eyes look tired and vacant. He shifts in his chair. I shift in mine. He bends over and puts his elbows on his knees. I find myself doing the same. He mumbles something. It sounds hard and dirty.

I shake my head. “Fuck,” I say.

Mr. Wu looks at me like I’ve uttered a revelation. He sighs. “Shi-teh,” he says.

I smile. I think of a curse in Mandarin. “*Pi Hua*,” I say. Poop Speak. Bullshit. Mr. Wu smiles broadly. I wonder how much face he has lost by not appearing at the entrance.

Mr. Wu cups his forehead with his hand and starts speaking. I can only make out a few words. Her. Foreigner. Love. His voice cracks; his words are heavy and broken. I imagine he says she is never satisfied. I imagine he says he comes from nothing and works so goddamned hard, and still she isn’t satisfied. He plucks her from her poor village, builds her an apartment, tries to marry her and make her respectable, and still she isn’t happy. He is vain, he says. He is selfish. But why can’t we forgive one another’s faults, he says. So what if he wants

to hire foreigners to get a little face, to feel like somebody?

I nod. I tell him I understand. “Lil wants me to be her home. She wants me to be her lover and her best friend. I’m not cut out for it. I’m not enough. I’m a damaged person. She should find someone to make her happy,” I say. “Why can’t she see that?”

He nods and says, “*Wo zhu dao.*” I understand. And then his arms are around me. He breathes into my neck. I close my eyes and squeeze him back. We are breathing together, rocking, and I feel the silk of his hair, the sweat of his neck, and for a moment, we are one thing and I want to be his best man.

I open my eyes. Lil and the bride are staring at us. They hold hands but then let go. Mr. Wu and I break apart and straighten our jackets and ties. We are all strangers again.

The bride has washed the purple makeup from her puffy eyes. Mr. Wu stands and tells her he’s sorry. She takes his hand.

“Lil,” I say. “I’m sorry.” I know she’s right. I am a coward. She can see that. She knows I am afraid I’ll fuck up, that if we went back, I would get restless and ruin things. For a moment, I am brave. I imagine life with Lil. If I went with her, I could live in Columbus and work nine-to-five. I might hear about tap water again and watch my parents lose their house, but then I’d have Lil to come home to, and we could love one another, try not to get fed up, maybe even at night make our own little China. And when she’d get sad, I’d talk to her, I’d call her back. Even then, even if I was brave, would that be enough?

But Lil answers for me, like she always has. “Let’s just get this over with.”

They take a step toward the wedding hall, but I stay put.

“Come on,” she says.

I shake my head.

Mr. Wu says something and Lil smirks.

“What did he say?”

“He says you’re a shitty white person.”

I laugh. She’s making it up. She is punishing again, trying to use Mr. Wu to hurt me. Mr. Wu starts speaking, and Lil interprets. “The way you walk, the way you dress, the way you treat me. And you’re too short. He says he won’t pay you.”

“Stop it, Lil. What did he really say?”

She smiles smugly, like when she made the joke. I look past his interpreter, at Mr. Wu, his face inscrutable, his sweat barely dry on my fingers. Could he really say that? Have I not performed well?

Mr. Wu jerks his head toward the doors, says, “Come on.”

Lil stares hard, but then she swallows and her eyes soften. She has given up.

She says, “When is the wedding?”

“Soon,” I say.

We follow the couple through great double doors, which swing open into a lavish banquet room. Fifty circular glass tables dot the floor and fake flowers hang from the ceiling like a rainforest canopy. Lil and I walk down the center lane close to the couple as dramatic wedding music blasts from the speakers. An old emcee with thick, black glasses shouts into the microphone, then says, “Say hello to our foreign friends-a!” The crowd roars.

On stage, the groom says something. The bride says something. There is a peck on the lips, and that’s it. That’s the wedding. I stand next to Lil, holding her hand, waiting to feel a change inside me. It never comes.

We follow them from table to table as the guests eat chicken and lobster and turtle. Lil holds the bride’s dress as I pass out cigarettes and drinks, and mug for the cameras. Five hundred people. We perform beautifully. We are so white.

After that, we dance. I study Lil, the way she looks under the stage lights. The curvy contours of her body shoved into that tiny dress, her bob of blonde hair, her big boat feet. There is no more malice in her eyes. She smiles slightly, and I brush her apple cheek with the back of my hand. This is the way I want to remember her. She pulls me close, as we sway and bob to the music.

We pose for a picture. When people see it, I know what Mr. Wu will say. My hand is on his shoulder, and he looks sharp in his gray suit. He is holding his wife’s elbow, and she is smiling, her hair in black coils to one side of her shoulder. She is in a vibrant red dress, the traditional Chinese wedding color, no longer posturing in western white. To the left of her is a beautiful girl wearing a pained smile.

He will say I am his best man, the American businessman, peddler of Xerox machines, frequenter of five-star hotels, drinker of great quantities of banquet beer, and that is my lovely wife. He will say he doesn’t talk to us much anymore, that I am living on the other side of the world, but he knows we’re doing well. Last he checked, we were happy.