

ANOTHER TIME, ANOTHER PLACE EXAM V.

The sun disappeared below the horizon and the streaks of indigo and crimson were gone. A cold breeze rushed at his face. Bit at him. Made his knees shake. The man looked at the tall buildings around him overshadowed by the blackness of the sky. The buildings were lit up by a sea of lights and under the lampposts the air was thick with dust. He became conscious of the repugnant odour of mildew and mould in the air. He glanced around at the people with yellow hats and huge miter saws in their hands. The noises of metal on metal was his daily Liu Huan. *Ka-chin. Ka-chin.* He wrinkled his brow at the foreign cascade of language being used around him; the words meant nothing to him.

The eight hours inside steel was finally over.

He dropped the angle grinder in his hand, and trudged to the exit on the outskirts of the construction site. He fingered at the jade bracelet on his hand and stood there for a few seconds, staring at it. His dad had given it to him when he was five and now, it followed him wherever he went.

With a heavy sigh, the man reached into his pockets and dug out the photograph. The edges were crumpled and the colours had faded, but the smiling faces of his family greeted him every time. It was a stark contrast to the jeers and looks he got from the people at the construction site. His hands shook as he held onto the photograph. His knuckles were white. He brought his hands to his head and closed his eyes.

He thought about home.

In front of him was the green grass of his front lawn, and a fountain that lay in the middle spurted silvery water, flowing with a musical sound. The sun was mellow, hanging in the crisp air and the warm breeze blew at his face, and the cries of his children echoed through the house as they chased each other into the garden. He always went to the garden to daydream, the sanctuary with the Chinese tallow tree that had branches which fanned out metres into the neighbour's yard. The tree was surrounded with sunflowers that waved their golden heads in the late autumn wind, giving the Shanghai countryside a vibrant feel. Pudong was his roots, and a second Mama, where he knew the people, the hay, the potatoes and the rice harvest. Most importantly, when he said something everybody listened and looked at him for the whole time.

He stifled his yawn as he trudged past the construction site, reaching the row of terrace-houses. They were similar to his first house. A daunting rectangular, white building fit for true Australians. Not people like him. They reminded him of the time when he first moved in with his family and he was wary of the entire neighbourhood. The family next door would always scream at each other while cooking sausages on their BBQ. The Macedonian family to the right shouted and screamed and the sounds of their spitting and washing came as a shock. He had lived most of his life in the Chinese expansive outer suburbs where good neighbours were seldom seen and never heard. It took him four months to realise the neighbours were truly concerned for his family's wellbeing.

As the night grew darker, he quickened his pace. He hurried down the sidewalk, crossed the pedestrian crossing and turned right towards the dollar store. The name, A Dollar for A Bargain, glowed above the store in fluorescent letters and a thin neon light rimmed the glass display. Seeing the glowing lights made him smile. He pushed open the door, a routine which he had performed more than a thousand times. Inside the five aisles overflowed with food packets and drinks. An elderly Chinese woman ran the shop and the fragrance of her perfume lingered about in the air. Every time he entered the shop, he would scan between the lined shelves until he bought enough supplies to last the week.

Today, the store was relatively crowded, his body was shoved and bumped against the others in the narrow space between the aisles like a flock of boat goats scurrying down the hills. His face showed no sign of emotion. He grabbed five big packets of instant noodles and a bulging bag of rice before heading to the registers. There, the Chinese lady at the service-counter scanned his items instinctively. He fumbled with the loose change in his pockets and then conversed with her in Chinese. They spoke about Liu Huan, one of the most coveted singers in mainland China. The conversation went on and on, until the man realised it was getting late. He fidgeted with his jade bracelet and exited the store.

By the time he returned home, the night was pitch black. The house that he lived in with his family was as good as empty. The last time they decorated the house in Australia was ten months ago. His family were long asleep. Pinching his nose, he unlocked the front door and went inside. He was disgusted at the interior of the house. It was a shoebox, colourless and plain with walls thin enough to hear the traffic outside grinding to a stand-still. The rooms were all identical, just like the ones next door, to the left, right and the walls were the same thick grey stone as the dwelling of a prison. In the summer, the air was fresh and it helped alleviate the stench of the festering sewage but in the cold seasons, it let in a wicked draft

and the dank smell of exhaust and urine. With a sigh, he trudged into his bedroom and collapsed onto the bed. His bed was a plank of wood on legs, there was no mattress, no cushioning and only one thin blanket.

It was like a bird cage, confined and shut.

Brang. Brang. As soon as he got to the construction site, he was hit with the same, old sounds of metal on metal. When he arrived, the master in charge was standing right there in front of him. He has an imposing stature, where his toned muscles and physique mirrored the body of an athlete. Those hazel eyes gave him the death stare of a vulture and his narrow face and lips reflected the flamboyant character of the man. He made sure his presence was always known.

"Why are you late? " The master in charge paused, scratching his head as he tried to remember the man's name. "Tom Zhang? Aaron Kwok? Jason Li?"

He could hear the snickering of the other workers behind his back.

The man fiddled with his jade bracelet and bowed his head, "Sorry sir, I had to go to the bafroom earlier on."

The master in charge scrutinised him and the man flushed, embarrassed at his accented English. He stood soaking in the cruel laughter, his head beginning to spin. He suddenly found himself wishing that he could disappear from the construction site. The master in charge looked at him in disgust and trudged off.

He tried to hide his tears, but there was still a saltiness that pecked at his lips. He trudged along the pavement back into the construction site. He took a deep breath and raised his head. The rectangular blocks of metal and the triangular moving machine in the sky were humming as it went. The whole place seemed to roar at him. He composed himself and picked up his yellow hat.