

Story Yellers

We empty our voices into glass jars, and they fill with a deeper-sounding version of ourselves. One day, the three of us won't need such instruments, but for now, we each carry a jar around our necks. They clink against our other necklaces of bike chains and house keys as we stomp up and down the concrete slabs of apartment building #34. We aim our jars toward closed doors, yell, "This old man frequents prostitutes! Here lives a fox spirit! May your child be born with hemorrhoids! Here lives a horse-fart spirit!" One whip of a bike chain over a New Year's door banner, and the words *spring comes bird sings flower fragrant* spiral to the ground. We smear dirt over the gold calligraphy, kick the torn, red paper against the door. Families inside try to sleep in. Relatives who haven't yet left Tianjin for their faraway homes linger in bed. Locals splay out on sofas, makeshift cots, chairs. The air warm from last night's steamed dumplings, soot from fireworks collecting on the window ledge: what a pretty scene.

We crush it with our voices.

Six days after the Lunar New Year, we yell extra loud, extra deep for the American. His shut-in grandfather, the only other person in their apartment, tells him from behind the door, "Ignore those boys, hands over ears." So we channel the reserves of not only our fathers but our grandfathers and rattle the glass jars with our cries. "Where's your mother, American?"—to the beat of the metal door knocker—"Where's your mother? It's us, your future fathers!"

It's enough for the screen behind the door to whine open. A sprinkling of dust shakes off the doorknob. We outrun his grandfather's curses, easy—the shut-in won't go beyond the front stoop. In the chilly courtyard, standing over the tubes of used firecrackers, we yell toward the American's seventh floor balcony, "Your mother wants us! She'll take us! Take us!"

We can't see the American, but we know he is watching. The same way every Thursday night at nine p.m., he watches his mother turn down eligible suitors on *Exit with My Love*, China's most popular dating show. As long as she keeps turning down our men, she'll come back on the following week's show, and the American will remain in apartment building #34 with his shut-in grandfather, waiting for his mother to take him home.

Tonight's episode of *Exit with My Love* will mark the American and his mother's one hundredth day in China. To commemorate this occasion, we pitch rocks at the digital billboard above the department store on Friendship Road. The billboard flashes through videos of our overrated eighteen-wrinkled stuffed buns, followed by the new iPhone, followed by the Little Emperor dunking a basketball and wishing us joy and wealth, followed by the American's mother peeling an anti-aging mask off her glowing face. We howl for the American's mother. In the crowd by the mall's entrance, someone howls back. A lady storms toward us with one of our rocks lodged in her fist. A baby bobbles over her shoulder. "Bastards!" she says, as we rake past her inside the department store. "Screw your mothers!"

We tear up the escalator and knock Prada and Lacoste bags out from shoppers' grips. Our sneakers leave skid marks on the newly waxed floors. Mannequins don't deign to turn their heads to us, so we rip their sweaters off and kiss their nippleless breasts. They taste like the American's mother's lips, like a TV screen but less electric. We unscrew plastic hands and worm jangling bracelets into our glass jars. A store manager, too young to be so bald, barks something into his walkie-talkie. He chases us down and up and down the escalator, his voice a distant whimper by the time he's trailed us outside. In the sun, we step over firecracker duds and squeal as if they exploded. We steal three bikes propped against a trash can and wheel past a taxi, a swerving car. Already, the traffic on Friendship Road has blocked out the manager. Riding an arm's length from one another, we look down. Our jewelry is gone.

No matter. The jars don't have caps and were never meant to be containers in the first place. Raising them over our mouths, we yell and yell and yell until our city emerges from its hangover. Time has come for the lingering relatives to board a bus or train home, as ours have done. For the parents to return to work, as ours will do today. The smell of burnt paper money gives way to fried dough and trash piles and the new French bakery. Virtual gunfire erupts from an internet café, and cars and scooters honk their greetings. In a business meeting somewhere, liquor meets lips. Sparrows rain down their shit.

Because we're only human, our stomachs begin to grumble. We follow their grumbling back to apartment building #34, where we plod up the concrete slabs. We are brothers, the three of us, but not by blood. We are one, but live on different floors. On the third floor, one of us hasn't even reached for his key when his door flies open. His mother's palm hovers over his head, itching to drop. She says, "Fancy yourself a little

emperor!” Fifth Floor’s mother says, “Melt you precious snowflake!” Eighth Floor’s mother: “I’ll wring your neck!”

But their palms never land. We’ve already zipped past them and locked ourselves in our respective bathrooms.

Behind each door, we hear for the first time our own breathing. On the eighth floor, one of us holds up his jar and watches the frost thaw. Third Floor’s bike chain kisses the edge of the sink. Fifth Floor soaks his shit-stained hair in water, while the foot shadows of his mother slink by the door’s opening. “Why can’t you and your friends be like the other boys?” she says. “You should be...you should be...” But the faucet shrieks over her voice.

The truth is, we know our mothers never mean to hurt us. Before leaving for the office, hospital, or morning stretches in the courtyard, they sit with us. Third Floor slurps rice soup, as his mother relieves his neck of his house key, bike chain, and glass jar. Eighth Floor wolfs down mantou, while his mother opens the blinds and light warms the table. Fifth Floor tears the leaf wrapping off a sticky rice dumpling, and his mother, plucking strings of shit from his hair, says, “What you really deserve is a chopstick down your throat.”

Still, our mothers smile when we turn over the spit-shined bottoms of our bowls. Though late for work or stretches or whatever it is that they do, our mothers stay a few minutes longer as we yell about the hairless department store man. “He looked like an alien!” “He looked like a mannequin!” “He looked like a baby the size of a man!” Our stories pour out in different forms, with different words, on different floors, but always at the same volume.

We come, after all, from a long line of story yellers. Our fathers and grandfathers yelled. Their fathers and grandfathers yelled. They yelled because their wives had bad hearing. All the men in our families got louder the longer they lived with their wives. That was what our fathers told us—in different forms, with different words, on different floors, but always at the same volume.

In the middle of Third Floor’s story, his mother cups his mouth. “Wait,” she says, and loops his glass jar back around his neck. Though we haven’t told anyone, it was our mothers who furnished us with these jars, knotted straw string around them so they would never disappear. Our voices were loud, they said, but squeaky like old wheelbarrows. Now, when we yell into our instruments, our mothers hear thunder.

In the evening, Third and Fifth Floor’s fathers come home. The day has darkened their faces, sapped Fifth’s father of the strength to lift a spatula, so his mother prepares a dinner of eel and bean sprouts and rice. Third Floor’s father, who teaches at the university, asks him if he

had a good day in class. But this is a story we won't be able to yell for another two weeks, when the holiday ends and the teachers and lambs of middle school will again cower before us.

Because his father is in a business meeting in Beijing, Eighth Floor refuses to eat. "Suit yourself," his mother says, as she digs into her rice. This mother is an eye doctor, busiest during New Year's. No one is supposed to launch fireworks outside of the new six-to-nine-p.m., government-mandated window, but still people stumble in at all hours with blood leaking from their eyes. His mother says something else about work, but Eighth Floor is too hungry to listen.

Two hours later, his father arrives. The smell of sorghum liquor laces the man's breath, and his hair forks in all directions. His presence feels like a gust of wind carried over from his two-hour car ride home: the windows rolled down in defiance of winter, engine rumbling, and dashboard shuddering to the guitar riff in Michael Jackson's "Beat It."

Eighth Floor begs his father to describe a car ride like this. But whatever sputters out of his father's mouth wilts before it becomes words. The man collapses onto a pile of newspapers on the couch. He pulls the sheaves out from under his ass. The boy watches him, trying to imagine this person twenty years earlier: a city man sent to the countryside to shovel coal, married to a village wife—his father yelled this once—a woman not the boy's mother. One afternoon, Eighth's father charged into a jade store in a town adjacent to the village, drunk off yellow wine, demanding to try on jewelry for his homely village wife. He couldn't afford a thing there, but still he snatched pendants from the saleswoman's trembling hands and hooked them around himself. He asked if the pieces would look good on a slimmer neck. He haggled for impossible prices. When he was forced to leave, he yelled back, "Cheats! Swindlers! Whores!"

Now that was a story. And one the boy's father hasn't yelled for years. This father, an older version of the boy's story-father, props his feet over a newspaper stack on the coffee table. In his reflection on the blank TV screen, he melds together with the couch. Eighth Floor hands him the remote.

It is nine p.m., and we all watch *Exit with My Love*.

Twenty-four women strut down a runway toward a circular center stage. One by one, they take their positions behind their respective podiums. The American's mother commands unlucky podium #4. Tonight, she wears a thin white dress better suited for the summer. A daisy is tucked behind her ear. After the women, China's most popular host, a middle-aged man sporting a headset and mic, saunters onto

center stage. “Good evening, Nanjing!” he says. He doesn’t have to yell, on account of the mic.

What if we could shake the host’s hand? Offer the women our hands? But without a car and a ten-hour window to get to Nanjing, tonight we can only watch. A man taller than us, with a voice deeper than ours, descends in a glass capsule onto the lit-up stage. He has twelve minutes to plead his case. If at the end of twelve minutes one woman has kept her podium light on, she exits the stage with him. If multiple lights stay on, he has the luxury of choosing a woman to leave with him. If all the women dim their lights, he walks off alone.

The first man is a financier, followed by an heir, a professor, an acrobat, a doctor, a musician, a sous chef, an engineer. Every twelve minutes, a new suitor stands with the host at the center of the stage and faces the women. “I’m ready for love, financially and emotionally.” “What I’m wearing is not an Armani suit, it’s loneliness.” “With me, you’ll never be a leftover woman.” “I’m not here for fame.” They play videos of themselves gazing out from bridges or padding over fallen leaves. They curry favor with the audience by giving away concert tickets or restaurant vouchers. They dance, sing, read their original poetry. Their parents and exes call in to the show. They trade with the women barbs and compliments. They trade with the women height and weight measurements. They trade with the women stories of ailing grandparents, spiritual conversions, redemptive test scores, Obama sightings.

By the time the last man descends onto the stage, three women have exited with love—but not the American’s mother. Every Thursday, the audience falls more deeply in love with her story: at eighteen years old, she left her hometown of Tianjin. Became a working, single mother. Became an American. Now, she’s come back to China to take one of our men home with her. Or will she? Sometimes, the American’s mother keeps her light on until the last second, but she always extinguishes it in the end. Every time this happens, we roar and thump the ceilings below and whack the sides of our TVs until the picture blurs, but our parents nod, say to each other, “Good move.” “Smart.” “He wasn’t right for her.” And to us: “Quiet. I can’t hear.”

An aspiring actor, the last suitor of the night, arrives on stage with a single bouquet of flowers. He tells the host that his words will be directed toward one person, podium #11. The woman behind it is a schoolteacher who has recently been cast in a Hong Kong soap opera, fueling rumors of her imminent departure from *Exit with My Love*. “I haven’t missed an episode since October, but I may not have another chance,” the man tells her. “I am here for you, only you.”

The camera locks in on podium #11, which still pulses with white light. For a moment, the woman behind it doesn't look up. But then she does, and she smiles.

She asks the man why her.

He says he believes the red thread of destiny connects the two of them. Quotes her from a previous episode—"Love is a sound heard from anywhere in the world"—a belief he shares. Cites nine other moments on *Exit with My Love* that felt like destiny. A string of electricity, he says, has been shooting out from his heart, through his fingertips, and into the TV. He asks her if she heard a crackle in her heart as he descended the stage. Asks her if she hears it now.

By this time, the woman has stepped to the side of the podium. Her feet arch over dagger-like heels. She says, "I can hardly stand."

Seven podiums away, the American's mother turns off her light. In a matter of seconds, every podium but #11 has followed her lead, fading out of the camera shot. The suitor's bouquet of flowers shakes with his arms. The host, who's remained silent, gingerly steps in. "Are you saying that you'd like to leave?" he asks the remaining woman.

#11 nods. "With him."

The crowd erupts, and the music soars, and we jump on couches and chairs and coffee tables while our parents try to pull us down, and all the while we hear a familiar yelling, in another room on another floor—we hear one another. We pick up our glass jars and yell in the hopes that one thousand kilometers away, the people on TV might hear the three worthy suitors from apartment #34. The man and woman, hands clasped together, bow to the crowd and take their final steps off the stage and out of the show into their happy ending, and by the time the credits finish rolling, our heads are nesting in our mothers' laps, eyes closed and breaths ragged with exhaustion. Beside us, our fathers watch us. We know they're watching us, because we hear them. We hear them, even when they don't feel like talking.

The American sleeps without snoring, chews without chomping, and speaks without yelling. At best, he exists. Some mornings, he sits bundled in sweaters on the hip-rotator exercise machine in the courtyard, nosing into his American textbook. A few days after *Exit with My Love's* latest episode, we surround him there. We bang our bike chains against the metal pipes and jingle our house keys. He peeks at us over his book, then looks back down.

"Move!" we yell.

The American flips to the next page. "There are three other... things...over...there." He flips to another page, but he can't fool us.

He may look like us and say the tones like we do, but his vocabulary resembles that of a five year old.

“We want *this* machine,” we yell. “We humbly request it.”

Across the courtyard, in the middle of their tai chi, a few of the grandmothers pause, or maybe slow down—it’s hard to tell. They look over at us, scowling.

“*Move*,” we yell to the American, this time into our glass jars.

The American wedges a finger into his book and slides off the seat. He crouches down and picks at scorched firecracker bows that the superintendent forgot to sweep up.

“My mom told me...you guys pretend...to be angry,” he says. “But really...you’re bored.”

We chitter and hoot. Spit in the sky and dodge the drops on their way down. Helicopter our bike chains over our heads. “Do we look bored?”

“She says you don’t know how to be...not bored. It’s not your fault. You never...left.”

From the perch of the hip-rotator machine, we sling our bike chains toward the American. He scurries to the side—metal collides with metal—and loses his place in his book. A grandmother across the courtyard cries something in Shanghainese.

As the American stands up and pats the dust off his Polo jacket, something above his chest catches a glint of sunlight. A house key. Dangling from straw string, circled around his neck. He sees us watching and shelters the key back under his shirt.

“Poor child,” we yell. “Did your mother give you a hug over the phone? When’s the last time you’ve seen your dear mother?”

The American squints up at us. For a moment, it looks as if he might cry. But the American can’t even cry loudly. That’s how quiet America has made him.

He cowers back toward apartment building #34, and we jeer at him on his way in. Before long, the grandmothers have also crawled back into their apartments. Alone in the courtyard, we have only the din of traffic and our stories to keep us company. “How about my father’s village wife?” Eighth Floor yells. “Want to hear the one about him stumbling drunk into a jade store—”

But the rest of us swat his words away. We’ve heard this one already, nine or ten times.

“How about the—”

“Enough.”

“Or the—”

“Boring!”

The three of us perch over the beams of the hip-rotator, the shoulder-presser, and the squat-cruncher, surrounded by the same rows and columns of balconies we've seen all our lives, each with only enough room to hang clothes out to dry. After we run out of balconies to look at, we retire to our respective homes. At night we sleep, but at least we snore.

The next day, we run into the American at Walmart.

"You again?" we yell. We pick up eggplants and gouge their flesh with our house keys. Brandish the purple death sticks into battle.

But the American smiles. His house key necklace hangs proudly in front of his shirt. In his cart, he's deposited, among other things, powdered milk and boxed orange juice. The American and his milk and juice.

"I have to go...home," he says. "My grandpa's...waiting."

"Scram," we yell.

"Want to come over on Thursday? To watch...my mom?"

We lower our eggplants, tilting our heads in suspicion. One of us opens his mouth to yell something, but nothing comes out.

"She sent money," the American says. "We bought a new...TV. Come over! You know...the time." And like that, he disappears into the crowd at the checkout lane.

Back in our apartments, we eat so fast, our chins gleam with gravy and saliva. Our mothers sit by us and wait to hear about our day. "Nothing happened," Fifth Floor yells. "Something always happens," his mother says. "Nothing worth talking about," Third Floor yells. "Everything you say is worth saying," his mother says. But we tuck our chins and focus on the pork, bamboo shoots, or tofu stew until our spoons and chopsticks scrape against the bottoms of our bowls. Eighth Floor's eye doctor mother offers an anecdote—the poor street vendor's eyes are beyond repair, a shame he took it upon himself to light fireworks for his family—and his father yells from the couch, "A shame, a shame." But the bigger shame lies with our fathers. We are only now beginning to realize it: their stories are no longer worth yelling.

"Oh, how I could hold my liquor back in those village days. Belly full of warm yellow wine, I dragged my two feet into a nearby jade shop..."

On Thursday night, we eat so fast our mothers don't have time to get one word in. "Goodbye, Tianjin!" we yell as we dash out our doors, leaving our half-finished bowls on our tables. "Good evening, Nanjing!" We glide up two flights of concrete slabs, or down one flight, or up four flights, until the three of us arrive, necklaces clanging, at the front door of the American's apartment.

His shut-in grandfather greets us with a huff. He turns his back on us but leaves the door open. Inside, the old man slaps at the air, motions

toward a giant jar of White Rabbit candies sitting on the table. Before we can begin to devour them, the American strolls in from the hallway wearing a Lin Shu-Hao jersey. The boy's sandals are worn down to a thin sheet of rubber. He tells us in his slow-speaking American way that the sandals have come from New York City, home of the Knicks, where you can walk from the eastern to the western border in an hour. Did we know that Tianjin is ten times the size of New York City? It's true, the American says, his grandfather told him. We laugh and pelt the American with candy.

Behind us, the old liar grunts. He stoops over to pick up the scattered White Rabbits. Before we were alive, this man had a voice that could shake the pillars of apartment building #34—or at least that's what the tai chi grandmothers in the courtyard claimed. But after his wife died, and his daughters moved away, they said he had lost the need to yell. What this grandfather needed was rest. He now devoted his life to rest.

It's no wonder the American's mother sent money to her father for a state-of-the-art flat screen. Lazy old folks rest by watching TV. Seeing our reflections on the blank screen, we punch the air and sever invisible enemies in half with our arms. The American even swings his house key necklace in circles and nearly lashes one of our cheeks. The reflections on the screen can hardly keep up. For us, there is no rest in watching TV.

At nine p.m., *Exit with My Love* begins. The returning women, along with replacements for those who left with a suitor last episode, strut in a single file line to their respective podiums. The American leans forward at the sight of his mother. We can smell her and the others, the scents of massage parlor lobbies, milky candies, the Chanel booth in the department store. *Our* mothers smell like food, and we've already eaten.

The host wears a suit that looks identical to the one from last week. "Good evening, Nanjing!" he says. When the crowd on TV applauds, we imagine the sofa's cushions vibrating. The first suitor descends in the capsule, and we aim our glass jars at him. "Woo-ahh! Woo-ahh!"

But this time, a fourth voice joins ours—overpowers ours. "Woo-ahh! Woo-ahh!" Even without a glass jar, the American's voice rings from wall to ceiling and past every open door. Behind us, his grandfather laughs. Bellows from the stomach, louder than we could ever produce. We can't even hear the host.

"Thank goodness for those stupid jars," the grandfather says. Between successions of laughter he squeezes in his words, the longest string he's uttered all night. "Don't you boys know what jars do? Ha! They muffle your voices. Ha-ha!"

We wrest our eyes away from the TV and glare at the shut-in. Before we know it, the American is glaring at him too. "Shut up, Grandpa!" he yells, most impressively. And the old man, with a look of dumb surprise on his face, stops laughing.

The American, we note to ourselves, may have some use to us yet.

As expected, the American's mother dims her light for the first man. Then for the second, third, fourth, and fifth. For the sixth man, she shuts off her light at the first sight of him.

We heckle the suitor, and a frown droops across the man's face. It's obvious: he was one of a score of men hopelessly hoping to exit with the American's mother's love. "What do you think?" we yell to the American. "Would he have made for a good father?"

"I don't know," the American yells back. "But he would have been... an ugly one!"

We boo and cheer and whistle and hiss. We do so into our glass jars, because we'll never listen to the shut-in grandfather's nonsense about the muffling. In the dining room, the old man leans back on a chair propped against the refrigerator. If he's not dead, he's pretending to sleep. Together with the American, our howls beat back sleep for the residents of apartment building #34. The phone rings, but we know better than to answer those who beg for silence.

With only two minutes to go in the two-hour episode, the American's mother remains rooted behind dim podium #4. The last suitor strides over to the woman behind podium #6 and offers her his hand. As the two speed-walk away from center stage, the American's mother rolls her bare shoulders and cracks her neck in the background, adjusts the mic clipped above the bust of her dress, lolls her head left and right.

Is it possible she's bored?

If so, all the more reason for us to yell deeper, louder.

"Take us!" we scream into our glass jars. "Take us! Take us!" The American screams with us into his cupped hands: "Take us...away!" When the credits roll, we scream the shut-in grandfather's curses into submission. We scream until we can't hear anyone but ourselves. We scream our way out of the American's apartment, down the concrete slabs, past the front stoop, and into the open screaming area of the courtyard. "Take us away!" we scream to the striking rhythm of our bike chains against the dusty ground, the exercise machines, the bumper of a parked car. Out of the three bikes we stole a week ago, one remains, not yet stolen by another. We unlatch the frigid chain from the bike and present it to the American. He bows, house key necklace dangling, as he receives the grease into his palm. Our bike chains have long dried, but the American's leaves black gashes against the cement. "Take us away!"

Take us away! Take us away! Take us away!” we scream, as the balconies above us go dark.

We skip breakfasts. We duck lunches. We pool our New Year’s red envelopes and pack the four of us into a taxi headed to Nanjing. It is Thursday again, the last Thursday before our New Year’s break expires and school claws us back into its grip—so what better day than today to meet the American’s mother in the flesh?

After twenty minutes in the taxi, however, we tell the driver how much money we have and he kicks us out in a Tianjin business district.

All the better, for hunger beckons. We march through the old Italian concession, where two- and three-story buildings overlook us, and skyscrapers and gray clouds overlook them. Red, cylindrical clay tiles spill to the eaves of the flat roofs. Unlike those of apartment building #34, these balconies are wide enough to waltz on. Wavy awnings hang over windows and their colorful flower boxes.

Along the street, a banner etched with *Pasta Fresca Da Salvatore* hangs over a restaurant’s outdoor seating. We commandeer a checkerboard-clothed table and yell for a waitress. A man shows up instead and asks us if we’re crazy, it’s too cold to be sitting outside, and where are our parents anyway. We yell, “Do you see we have the son of a celebrity in our midst?” The American smiles like an idiot. But when we jump off the chairs, dragging a checkerboard tablecloth with us, he sprints in our direction. Together, we raise the red and white cloth above our heads and it unfurls like the flags of the Beijing Olympians. The waiter caws and the tourists goggle and our necklaces glimmer like medals at our chests.

After we’ve run a healthy distance away from the Italian street, we mosey along the bank of the frozen Hai River and find a good spot to sit. Couples twist their bodies, nearly slipping onto the river, in order to get the perfect photograph of themselves with the Tianjin Eye. In the distance, the massive Ferris wheel, like a prehistoric bird of prey, roosts on a bridge and cars scurry by beneath it. Wrapped in tablecloth, we huddle together and watch the Eye crawl in circles against the colorless sky. It takes thirty minutes to make one rotation. By then, the American’s mother would have rejected two men. After four rotations, another episode of *Exit with My Love* would have ended.

We ask the American to tell us about his mother. Does she speak to him in English or in Mandarin? Does she cook pasta or rice? Did his father leave her or did she leave him? The American fingers the grooves of his bike chain necklace, breathes into his cupped hands. He tries to answer, but it hurts too much with his cracked lips.

Pointing to Third Floor's glass jar, the American asks, "Can I?" After receiving it, he bends forward, teetering over the river. He dips the jar through an open section of the ice. He knocks back the water in one gulp, only to clutch his throat, and then his head. It hurts too much for us to laugh at the American on an empty stomach, so we stay quiet and watch the Tianjin Eye make another rotation.

Soon, the lights along the Eye's rim come to life. We walk back to the main road where cars throw beams against the reflectors of bicyclists. "Over here!" we yell into our jars. Four waves of taxis ignore us before one driver finally lets us in. At the department store on Friendship Road, we slap the back of the driver's headrest, and he pulls up at the curb. Without paying, we burst out toward the mall's entrance where the American's mother now parades anti-wrinkle cream over the billboard. The tablecloth drifts out of our grasp and floats behind us; maybe it smacks into the scrambling driver and slows him down. Inside the store, we hide behind a clothing rack and hold our necklaces still. The driver wheezes by us, stuttering, "Get those crooks!" Maybe he clomps up the escalator and runs into the bald manager, and the two become business partners, drinking buddies, lifelong friends. "Back in the day," they'll yell to their sons, "we chased a band of rascals just like you..."

In any case, our part in their stories ends here. We shuffle out of the department store and jog back to apartment building #34. All four of our balconies are lit up, but we all ascend the concrete slabs toward the American's seventh-floor apartment. With only five minutes until the airing of *Exit with My Love*, our mothers and fathers can wait.

"Have your brains frozen?" the shut-in grandfather says. He hurries us inside with a series of grunts and pours us each a cup of boiled water. We clasp our fingers around the mugs, only we do it too quickly and they swell red and stiff.

The American switches on the TV right in time for the host's entrance: "Good evening, Nanjing!" The women have already taken their places behind their podiums. The American's mother wears a green sequined dress with a plunge neck and a silver chain necklace. She looks like an expensive tree.

The camera cuts to the first man descending in the capsule. "Woo-ah! Woo-ah!" we yell. In the kitchen, a spatula whacks against a serving bowl. We grumble for the shut-in grandfather to bring the food over to the living room. "You should have told me they were coming," he mutters to the American, as we converge on the smattering of noodles, cauliflower, and black fungi, enough for only one voracious boy.

After what feels like ten seconds, we've emptied the serving bowl and the American's mother has dimmed her light. The suitor, a twenty-

eight-year-old real estate tycoon from Shenzhen, sighs and adjusts his French cuffs. But eighteen other podiums remain lit. He turns to #15, who has a question for him: "Would you rather laugh on a bicycle, or cry in an Aston Martin?" The crowd "oohs" theatrically, and so do we. "Cry! Cry! Cry! Cry!" we yell. And the suitor, glancing for a moment at the camera, says, "I don't own a bicycle."

We jump on our seats, whooping with the satisfaction of being heard, while spittle and noodle flecks launch out from our mouths. "Woo-ah! Woo-ah!" The woman behind podium #15 gives the suitor a wink. The American's grandfather moans—at the TV or at us, we're not sure—and trudges back to his chair by the refrigerator. Eventually, the real estate tycoon selects, from the two women who kept their lights on, the beautiful, formerly struggling waitress behind podium #24. "What a story!" the host says, as she exits with her suitor's love.

All this drama has only made us hungrier, so we squeeze one hand each past the mouth of the White Rabbit candy jar. When we pull back our fistfuls of candies, our hands jam at the opening. "Me first," the American yells. "Me," yells Eighth Floor. "Me!" "No, me!" Fifth Floor yanks his arm back so hard that the jar bashes against the American's chin. The American drives his nails into our jar-enclosed palms, and soon all four of us are yelping in pain.

Behind us, the shut-in utters, as if in prayer, "May those hands stay stuck forever."

By the time the four of us free ourselves, five women have exited with a man and his love. Maybe hunger has elevated our senses, as tonight, every suitor appears even handsomer than usual, their answers and songs and poetry all the more melodious. Each suitor, among the best our country has to offer, has two or three or even four women to choose from in the end—and one more if the American's mother would stop turning off her light at the last second.

With every one of her rejections, the pain in our stomachs sharpens. We've finished the candies but only feel hungrier. Then the camera zooms in on a new suitor descending from the capsule, and for a moment, we forget about the night's meager dinner. We forget about the taffy stuck to our teeth. As this new suitor descends, the camera cuts to the women's reactions. A hand over the mouth. A giggle. A blush. The American's mother picks at her fingernails instead of watching the man step out of the capsule.

"*Hello, friends!*" the suitor says, his voice ringing deep and sonorous in English. His mouth looks bigger than our heads. He grins the width of a Western landscape. He says in Mandarin, "I love you." He stresses the wrong syllables, utters the wrong tones, but doesn't lower his voice.

Laughter ripples through the audience, followed by applause. The man smooths the lapels of his purple suit jacket and reveals from behind his back, a single red rose. "I have watched... from *Oklahoma!*" he continues in Mandarin. "I love you!"

Starting with podium #23, the man raises the rose to one woman at a time and repeats, "I love you," as if giving a toast to his elders. The audience swells with approval. The suitor charmingly, enthusiastically, yells our language. "I love you! I love you!" The purple-suited man makes his way down the line of women. Finally, he arrives at the American's mother.

"*I love you most of all,*" he says, this time in English. His grin straightens out, and his voice takes on newfound weight. "*I love you so much, I flew across an ocean for you, only you.*"

It takes us a moment to comprehend the man's words. The crowd is either too entranced or too confused to clap, which seems to give the man license to continue talking. We yell for the American to translate the English. With his trademark slowness, the American begins: "He says to think...their story...how perfect...how...right..." The American pauses. He presses back against the sofa and shields his eyes, as if bothered by the TV's glow.

We pull him by his house key and bike-chain necklaces. "Keep talking."

By now, the purple-suited man has fallen to his knees. He faces the American's mother and peers up at her every few seconds. He looks heroic in his humbleness. The hem of his dress pants slides up to reveal the coarse, brown hairs above his ankle. The women behind podiums #1, #2, and #3, who have yet to receive a red rose toast, turn off their lights.

The American picks up the candy jar with both hands and brings his lips toward it. Now empty, the jar appears even bigger. We wonder if he's about to throw up in it. But then he speaks: "The man says she could...be...his wife." Oddly, the American's voice fades inside the jar's glass walls, the way his grandfather claimed our voices would.

Has the shut-in been right all along? Do the jars muffle our voices?

If so, why do our mothers insist on hearing us through them?

"Louder!" we yell to the American. "You're using it wrong!"

"And he could be...her husband...a father..."

"Woo-ah! Woo-ah!" The American's mother balls her hands over her lit-up podium, and she too begins to speak in English.

"She...my mom...says, get up. She says, 'Please...get up.'"

"Is she finally in love?" we yell. "Is her heart crackling with electricity? What's he saying? Louder!" We pull the American in opposite direc-

tions by his necklaces. He jostles us back and leans toward the TV. The man remains kneeling in the direction of podium #4.

“He says, ‘We can go... anywhere... New York... California... Kansas...’”

We lick the candy on our teeth and aim our glass jars at the American’s mother. “Take him away!” we yell. “Take him away! Take him away!”

Though younger than our fathers, still we can be selfless. In our hearts, we know the American’s mother cannot afford to wait for our voices to deepen without the aid of instruments. To be in love, as the host once said, is to accept a woman dimming her podium for you, but keeping it lit for a worthy other. *True love exists in the dark*. So in the dark, we yell. In the living room, apartment building #34, our district, our city—we yell. Even if the American’s mother can’t hear us, we yell. We yell for her to take the purple-suited man off the stage, out of the show, and into their new life together, with new stories to yell. The American continues muttering his mother’s words: “Get up... please, get up... please.” We trade our howls of “Take him away!” with the American’s stammering of “Get up.” But the American’s mother latches on to the safety of her podium, while her suitor stays pinned to the ground.

Behind us, the shut-in grandfather’s laughter needles through our voices. For a moment, we hear a flash of a younger man. A man who might go outside and live the kinds of stories worth yelling. His laughter shuts our mouths. We lower our glass jars.

“You’re too late,” he says, between his bouts of laughter. “You’ve always been too late.”

Fifth Floor drops his jar, and the side of the glass cracks against the wood floor. We order the grandfather to explain himself, but he just laughs and laughs.

“Stupid boys,” he says. “The show is *taped*. All this happened months ago. Ha!”

Necklaces rattling, we turn to the American and ask him if it’s possible. Did he know about this? Could it be true? But the American is too focused on the TV. The host crouches next to the kneeling man and coaxes him to stand up. Tells him that some stories aren’t meant to be heard. Some stories, he says, aren’t even meant to be told. Still, the American’s mother has not yet dimmed her podium, and the purple-suited man refuses to give up.

Has it been twelve minutes?

What is twelve minutes anyway, if it happened long ago?

On TV, we see the American’s mother. Then her suitor. Mother. Suitor. The camera cuts back and forth, faster each time, as if to ask, *Will she choose him? Will she finally exit with love?* Yet around us, among the empty spaces of the seventh-floor living room, the answers have already

begun to light up. The poor American clings to the TV, to the hopeless hope that watching can change what has already been written. But his grandfather's laughter confirms the truth. *The American's mother is not here*. Which means at this moment, she must be *there*: one thousand kilometers away, in a city where we've never set foot, ready to take her place behind podium #4 on next week's show, whenever her next week is for us.

We will see her again: on the screen, the magazine covers, the highest of billboards. But will we still be able to imagine her touch, her smell? Picture and hear her as she is? We will stay here, looking up. We will arch our necks to get the most adequate of views. On TV, the American's mother utters words that turn to fuzz by the time they reach us. We can't even make out the purple-suited man's face. He is a pile of clothes at the center of the stage. In the background, the audience garbles compliments and insults, none of them meant for us.

But now something rings outside, in the courtyard. A clearer set of voices. Familiar voices. They remind us of the breakfasts and lunches and dinners we've skipped, and our stomachs begin to ache.

We shut off the TV. Angle our ears toward the window. The voices below us quaver with anger, but soften in their echoes. Sadness, perhaps, is a sound that climbs up.

"Be a man, and come home!" one of our mothers yells.

"I'll beat you half to death!" yells another.

"Come home, Lu Gang!"

"Come home, Wang Jie!"

"Come home, Chen Kun!"

The American swipes at the remote control, and when he can't wrest it away from us, he raises his glass jar. He opens his mouth as if to harness the air around him, as if to inhale that air and spew it out in the form of an unignorable scream. We seal his mouth with our hands. We tell him to listen. "There's more," we whisper, his breath hot between our fingers. "More—"