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The Literomancer

By Ken Liu

September 18, 1961.

LILLY DYER ANTICIPATED and also dreaded three o'clock in the afternoon, more than any other moment of the day. That was when she returned home from school and checked the kitchen table for new mail.

The table was empty. But Lilly thought she'd ask anyway. "Anything for me?"

"No," Mom said from the living room. She was giving English lessons to Mr. Cotton's new Chinese bride. Mr. Cotton worked with Dad and was important.

A full month had passed since Lilly's family moved to Taiwan, and no one from Clearwell, Texas, where she had been the third-most popular girl in the fourth grade, had written to her, even though all the girls had promised that they would.

Lilly did not like her new school at the American military base. All of the other children's fathers were in the armed forces, but Dad worked

in the city, in a building with the picture of Sun Yat-sen in the lobby and the red, white, and blue flag of the Republic of China flying on top. That meant Lilly was strange, and the other kids did not want to sit with her at lunch. Earlier that morning, Mrs. Wyle finally lectured them about their treatment of Lilly. That made things worse.

Lilly sat at her own table, quietly eating by herself. The other girls chattered at the next table.

"The Chinese whores are crafty, always hanging around the Base," Suzie Randling said. Suzie was the prettiest girl in the class, and she always had the best gossip. "I heard Jennie's mom telling my mom that as soon as one gets her hands on an American soldier, she'll use her nasty tricks to hook him. She wants him to marry her so that she can steal all his money, and if he won't marry her, she'll make him sick."

The girls broke out in laughter.

"When an American man rents a house for his family outside the Base, you can imagine what the husband is really chasing after," Jennie added darkly, trying to impress Suzie. The girls giggled, throwing looks over at Lilly. Lilly pretended not to hear.

"They are unbelievably dirty," Suzie said. "Mrs. Taylor was saying how when she took a car trip to Tainan during the summer, she couldn't eat any of the dishes the Chinese were serving her. One time they tried to give her some fried frog legs. She thought it was chicken and almost ate them. Disgusting!"

"My mom said that it's a real shame that you can't get any decent Chinese food except back in America," Jennie added.

"That's not true," Lilly said. As soon as she spoke up she regretted it. Lilly had brought *kòng-uân* pork balls and rice for lunch. Lin Amah, their Chinese maid, had packed the leftovers from dinner the night before. The pork balls were delicious, but the other girls wrinkled their noses at the smell.

"Lilly is eating smelly Chinaman slops again," Suzie said menacingly. "She really seems to like it."

"Lilly, Lilly, she's gonna have a stinky gook baby," the other girls began to chant.

Lilly tried to not cry; she almost succeeded.

Mom came into the kitchen, and lightly stroked Lilly's hair. "How was school?"

Lilly knew that her parents must never know about what happened at school. They would try to help. That would only make things worse.

"Good," she said. "I'm just getting to know the girls."

Mom nodded and went back into the living room.

She didn't want to go to her room. There was nothing to do there after she had finished all the Nancy Drew books that she brought with her. She also didn't want to stay in the kitchen, where Lin Amah was cooking and would try to talk to her in her broken English. Lilly was mad at Lin Amah and her *kòng-uân* pork balls. She knew it was unfair, but she couldn't help herself. She wanted to get out of the house.

Rain earlier in the day had cooled off the humid subtropical air, and Lilly enjoyed a light breeze as she walked. She shook her red, curly hair out of the ponytail she wore for school, and she felt comfortable in a light blue tank top and a pair of tan shorts. West of the small Chinese-style farmhouse the Dyers were renting, the rice paddies of the village stretched out in neat grids. A few water buffalo lazed about in muddy wallows, gently scratching the rough, dark hide on their backs with their long, curved horns. Unlike the Longhorns that she had been familiar with back home in Texas, whose long, thin horns curved dangerously forward, like a pair of swords, the water buffalos' horns curved backwards, perfect for back scratching.

The largest and oldest one had his eyes closed, and was half-submerged in the water.

Lilly held her breath. She wanted to take a ride on him.

Back when she was a little girl and before Dad got his new job that was so secret that he couldn't even tell her what he did, Lilly had wanted to be a cowgirl. She envied her friends, whose parents were not from back East and thus knew how to ride, drive, and ranch. She was a regular at the county rodeos, and when she was five, by telling the man at the sign-up table that she had her mom's permission, she had entered the mutton-busting competition.

She had held on to the bucking sheep for a full thrilling and terrifying twenty-eight seconds, a record that stunned the whole county. Her picture, showing her in a wide-brimmed cowboy hat with her tight ponytail flapping behind her, had been in all the newspapers. There was no fear on the face of the little girl in the picture, only wild glee and stubbornness.

"You were too stupid to be afraid," Mom had said. "What in the world made you do a thing like that? You could have broken your neck."

Lilly did not answer her. She dreamed about that ride for months afterward. *Just hold on for another second*, she had told herself on the back of the sheep, *just hold on*. For those twenty-eight seconds, she wasn't just a little girl, whose day was filled with copybooks and chores and being told what to do. There was a clear purpose to her life and a clear way to accomplish it.

If she were older, she would have described that feeling as *freedom*.

Now, if she could ride the old water buffalo, maybe she'd get that feeling back and her day would be all right after all.

Lilly began to run toward the shallow wallow, where the old water buffalo was still obliviously chewing cud. Lilly got to the edge of the wallow and leapt toward the buffalo's back.

LILLY LANDED on the back of the buffalo with a soft thud, and the buffalo sank momentarily. She was prepared for bucking and lunging, and she kept her eyes on the long, curved horns, ready to grab them if the buffalo used them to try to pry her off. Adrenaline pumped through her, and she was determined to hold on for dear life.

Instead, the old buffalo, disturbed from his nap, simply opened his eyes and snorted. He turned his head and stared accusingly at Lilly with his left eye. He shook his head in disapproval, got up, and began to amble out of the wallow. The ride on the back of the buffalo was smooth and steady, like the way Dad used to carry Lilly on his shoulders when she was little.

Lilly grinned sheepishly. She patted the back of the buffalo's neck in apology.

She sat lightly, leaving the buffalo to choose his own path and watching the rows of rice stalks pass by her. The buffalo came to the end of the fields, where there was a clump of trees, and turned behind them. Here the ground dipped toward the bank of a river, and the buffalo walked toward it, where several Chinese boys about Lilly's age were playing and washing their families' water buffalo. As Lilly and the old buffalo approached them, the laughter among the boys died down, and one by one they turned to look at her.

Lilly became nervous. She nodded at the boys and waved. They didn't wave back. Lilly knew, in the way that all children know, that she was in trouble.

Suddenly something wet and heavy landed against Lilly's face. One of the boys had thrown a fistful of river mud at her.

"*Adoah, adoah, adoah!*" the boys shouted. And more mud flew at Lilly. Mud hit her face, her arms, her neck, her chest. She didn't understand what they were shouting, but the hostility and glee in their voices needed no translation. The mud stung her eyes, and she couldn't stop the tears that followed. She covered her face with her arms, determined not to give the boys the satisfaction of hearing her cry out.

"Ow!" Lilly couldn't help herself. A rock hit her shoulder, followed by another against her thigh. She tumbled down from the back of the buffalo and tried to hide behind him by crouching down, but the boys only chanted louder and circled around the buffalo to continue tormenting her. She began to grab fistfuls of mud from around her and threw them back at the boys, blindly, angrily, desperately.

"*Kâu-gín-á, khòai-cháu, khòai-cháu!*" An old man's voice, full of authority, came to her. The rain of mud stopped. Lilly wiped the mud from her face with her sleeves and looked up. The boys were running away. The old man's voice yelled at them some more, and the boys picked up their speed, their water buffalo following them at a more leisurely pace.

Lilly stood up and looked around her old buffalo. An elderly Chinese man stood a few paces away, smiling kindly at her. Beside him stood another boy about Lilly's age. As Lilly watched, the boy threw a pebble after the rapidly diminishing figures of the fleeing boys. His throw was strong, and the pebble arched high into the air, landing just behind the last boy as he rounded a copse of trees and disappeared. The boy grinned at Lilly, revealing two rows of crooked teeth.

"Little miss," the old man said in accented but clear English. "Are you all right?"

Lilly stared at her rescuers, speechless.

"What were you doing with Ah Huang?" the boy asked. The old water buffalo gently walked over to him and the boy reached up to pat him on the nose.

"I...uh...I was riding him." Lilly's throat felt dry. She swallowed. "I'm sorry."

"They are not bad kids," the old man said, "just a little rowdy and suspicious of strangers. As their teacher, it is my fault that I did not teach them better manners. Please accept my apology for them." He bowed to Lilly.

Lilly awkwardly bowed back. As she bent down, she saw that her shirt and pants were covered with mud, and she felt the throbbing in her shoulder and legs, where she had been hit with rocks. She was going to get an earful from Mom; that was for sure. She could just imagine what a sight she must have made, covered in mud from hair to toe.

Lilly had never felt so alone.

"Let me help you clean up a little," the old man offered. They walked to the bank of the river, and the old man used a handkerchief to wipe the mud from Lilly's face and rinsed it out in the clear river water. His touch was gentle.

"I'm Kan Chen-hua, and this is my grandson, Ch'en Chia-feng."

"You can call me Teddy," the boy added. The old man chuckled.

"It's nice to meet you," Lilly said. "I'm Lillian Dyer."

"So what do you teach?"

"Calligraphy. I teach the children how to write Chinese characters with a brush so that they don't frighten everyone, including their ancestors and wandering spirits, with their horrible chicken scratch."

Lilly laughed. Mr. Kan was not like any Chinese she had ever met. But her laugh did not last long. School was never far from her mind, and she knitted her brows as she thought about tomorrow.

Mr. Kan pretended not to notice. "But I also do some magic."

This piqued Lilly's interest. "What kind of magic?"

"I'm a literomancer."

"A *what*?"

"Grandpa tells people's fortunes based on the characters in their names and the characters they pick," Teddy explained.

Lilly felt as though she had walked into a wall of fog. She looked at Mr. Kan, not understanding.

"The Chinese invented writing as an aid to divination, so Chinese

characters always had a deep magic to them. From characters, I can tell what's bothering people and what lies in their past and future. Here, I'll show you. Think of a word, any word."

Lilly looked around her. They were sitting on some rocks by the side of the river, and she could see that the leaves on the trees were starting to turn gold and red, and the rice stalks were heavy with grain, soon to be ready for the harvest.

"Autumn," she said.

Mr. Kan took a stick and wrote a character in the soft mud near their feet.



"You'll have to excuse the ugliness of writing with a stick in mud, but I don't have paper and brush with me. This is the character *ch'iu*, which means 'autumn' in Chinese."

"How do you tell my fortune from that?"

"Well, I have to take the character apart and put it back together. Chinese characters are put together from more Chinese characters, like building blocks. *Ch'iu* is composed of two other characters. The one on the left is the character *he*, which means 'millet' or 'rice' or any grain plant. Now, what you see there is stylized, but in ancient times, the character used to be written this way."

He drew on the mud.



"See how it looks like the drawing of a stalk bent over with the weight of a ripe head of grain on top?"

Lilly nodded, fascinated.

"Now, the right side of *ch'iu* is another character, *huo*, which means fire. See how it looks like a burning flame, with sparks flying up?"



"In the northern part of China, where I'm from, we don't have rice. Instead, we grow millet, wheat, and sorghum. In autumn, after we've harvested and threshed out the grain, we pile the stalks in the fields and burn them so that the ashes will fertilize the fields for the coming year. Golden stalks and red flame, you put them together and you get *ch'iu*, autumn."

Lilly nodded, imagining the sight.

"But what does it tell me that you picked *ch'iu* as your character?" Mr. Kan paused in thought. He drew a few more strokes beneath *ch'iu*.



"Now, I've written the character for heart, *hsin*, under *ch'iu*. It's a drawing of the shape of your heart. Together, they make a new character, *ch'ou*, and it means 'worry' and 'sorrow.'"

Lilly felt her heart squeeze, and suddenly everything looked blurry through her eyes. She held her breath.

"There's a lot of sorrow in your heart, Lilly, a lot of worry. Something is making you very, very sad."

Lilly looked up at his kind and wrinkled face, the neat white hair, and she walked over to him. Mr. Kan opened his arms and Lilly buried her face in his shoulders as he hugged her, lightly, gently.

As she cried, Lilly told Mr. Kan about her day at school, about the other girls and their chant, about the kitchen table empty of mail from friends.

"I'll teach you how to fight," Teddy said, when Lilly had finished her story. "If you punch them hard enough, they won't bother you again."

Lilly shook her head. Boys were simple, and fists could do the talking for them. The magic of words between girls was much more complicated.

"There's a lot of magic in the word *gook*," Mr. Kan said, after Lilly had wiped her tears and calmed down a little. Lilly looked up at him in surprise. She knew that the word was ugly and was afraid that he would be angry at hearing her say it, but Mr. Kan was not angry at all.

"Some people think that the word has a dark magic that can be used to slice into the hearts of the people of Asia and hurt them and those who would befriend them," Mr. Kan said. "But they do not understand its true magic. Do you know where the word comes from?"

"No."

"When American soldiers first went to Korea, they often heard the Korean soldiers say *miguk*. They thought the Koreans were saying 'me, gook.' But really they were talking about the Americans, and *miguk* means America. The Korean word *guk* means 'country.' So when the American soldiers began calling the people of Asia *gooks*, they didn't understand that they were in a way really just speaking about themselves."

"Oh," Lilly said. She wasn't sure how this information helped.

"I'll show you a bit of magic that you can use to protect yourself." Mr. Kan turned to Teddy. "Can I have that mirror that you use to tease the cats with?"

Teddy took out a small bit of glass from his pocket. It was broken from a larger mirror and the jagged edges had been wrapped in masking tape. Some Chinese characters had been written in ink on the masking tape.

"The Chinese have been using mirrors to ward off harm for millennia," Mr. Kan said. "Don't underestimate this little mirror. It has great magic in it. Next time, when the other girls tease you, bring out this mirror and shine it in their faces."

Lilly took the mirror. She didn't really believe what Mr. Kan was saying. He was kind and nice, but what he was saying sounded preposterous. Still, she needed a friend, and Mr. Kan and Teddy were the closest thing to friends she had on this side of the Pacific Ocean.

"Thank you," she said.

"Miss Lilly." Mr. Kan stood up and solemnly shook her hand. "When there is such a large gap of years between two friends, we Chinese call it *wang nien chih chiao*, a friendship that forgets the years. It's destiny that brings us together. I hope you will always think of me and Teddy as your friends."

Lilly explained her muddy appearance by blaming it all on Ah Huang, the "stubborn water buffalo" that she eventually subdued with her Texan cowgirl skills. Of course Mom was angry, seeing Lilly's ruined clothes. She gave Lilly a long lecture, and even Dad sighed and explained that her days of being a tomboy really needed to come to an end, now that she was a young lady. But on the whole, Lilly thought she had gotten off easy.

Lin Amah made Three-Cup Chicken, which was Dad's favorite. The sweet smell of sesame oil, rice wine, and soy sauce filled the kitchen and living room, and Lin Amah smiled and nodded as Mr. and Mrs. Dyer praised the food. She wrapped the leftovers into two rice balls and put them in the lunch box for Lilly. Lilly was apprehensive about bringing Three-Cup Chicken to lunch, but she fingered the mirror in her pocket and thanked Lin Amah.

"Good night," Lilly said to her parents, and went to her room.

In the hallway Lilly found a couple of sheets of paper lying on the floor. She picked them up and saw that they were filled with dense typescript:

have successfully sabotaged numerous factories, railroads, bridges, and other infrastructure. Agents have also assassinated several local ChiCom cadres. We have captured dozens of ChiCom individuals on these raids, and their interrogation yielded valuable intelligence concerning Red China's internal conditions. The covert program has been conducted with plausible deniability, and so far no elements of the U.S. press have questioned our denials of ChiCom accusations of American involvement. (It should be noted that even if U.S. involvement is revealed, we can legally justify our intervention under the Sino-American

Mutual Defense Treaty as the ROC's sovereignty claims extend over all of the territory of the PRC.)

Interrogations of ChiCom prisoners suggest that this program of harassment and terror, combined with the threat of an ROC invasion of the mainland, has pushed the ChiCom to further intensify internal repression and tighten domestic control. The ChiCom have increased military spending, and this likely has shifted scarce resources away from economic development and increased the suffering of the masses at a time when the PRC is experiencing great famines after the Great Leap Forward. As a result, there is a great deal of dissatisfaction with the regime.

President Kennedy has reoriented us toward a more confrontational stance toward the ChiCom. I suggest that we weaken the PRC by all means short of all-out, general war. In addition to our continued support of ROC interdiction and harassment of PRC shipping and our support and direction of the insurgency in Tibet, we should increase our joint covert operations with the ROC in the PRC. I believe that by intensifying our covert operations against the ChiCom, we can force the ChiCom to curtail its support for North Viet Nam. In the best case, we may even provide the proverbial straw to break the camel's back, and successfully induce a domestic popular revolt to support a ChiNat invasion force from Taiwan and Burma. The Generalissimo is quite eager.

Should the PRC be provoked into a general war with us, it will be necessary to use atomic weapons to ensure the credibility of American resolve to our allies. The President should be prepared to manage popular perception in America and to induce our allies to accept atomic warfare as the means to victory.

At the same time, there is no question that the ChiCom would step up their efforts to infiltrate Taiwan and establish a network of agents and sympathizers within Taiwan. ChiCom propaganda and psywar techniques are not as sophisticated as ours, but appear to have been effective (at least in the past), especially among the native Taiwanese, by exploiting conflicts between the native-born penshengqjen and the Nationalist waishengqjen.

The maintenance of ChiNat morale is vital to our hold on Taiwan, the most vital link in the chain of islands that form the bulwark of American thalassocracy in the Western Pacific and the perimeter defense of the Free World. We must assist the ROC in counterespionage efforts on the island. Current ROC policy suppresses sensitive issues such as the so-called 228 Incident to avoid giving the ChiCom an opportunity to exploit penshengqjen resentment, and we should give this policy our full support. We should also give all possible assistance to root out, suppress, and punish ChiCom agents, sympathizers, and other

They seemed to belong to Dad from work. Lilly stumbled over the many words that she didn't know, and finally stopped at "thalassocracy," whatever that meant. She quietly put the papers back down on the ground. Suzie Randling and tomorrow's lunch were far more pressing and worrisome to Lilly than whatever was typed on those sheets.

As expected, Suzie Randling and her gaggle of loyal lieutenants kept a watchful eye on Lilly as she sat at the other table, with her back to the girls.

Lilly delayed taking out her lunch as long as she could, hoping that the girls would be distracted by their gossip and ignore her. She drank her juice and nibbled on the grapes that she brought for dessert, taking as long as she could, peeling the skin off each grape and carefully chewing the sweet, juicy flesh inside.

But eventually, Lilly finished all of the grapes. She willed her hands not to tremble as she took out the rice balls. She unwrapped the banana

leaves from the first rice ball, and bit into it. The sweet smell of sesame oil and chicken wafted across to the other table, and Suzie perked up right away.

"I smell Chinaman slops again," Suzie said. She sniffed the air exaggeratedly. The corners of her mouth turned up in a nasty grin. She loved the way Lilly seemed to shrink and cower at her voice. She took pleasure in it.

Suzie and the flock of girls around her took up the chant from yesterday again. Laughter was in their voices, the laughter of girls drunk on power. There was desire in their eyes, a lust for blood, a craving to see Lilly cry.

Well, it won't hurt to try, Lilly thought.

She turned around to face the girls, and in her raised right hand was the mirror that Mr. Kan had given her. She turned the mirror to Suzie.

"What's that in your hand?" Suzie laughed, thinking that Lilly was offering something as tribute, a peace offering. Silly girl. What could she offer besides her tears?

Suzie looked into the mirror.

Instead of her beautiful face, she saw a pair of blood-red lips, grinning like a clown, and instead of a tongue, an ugly, wormy mess of tentacles writhed inside the mouth. She saw a pair of blue eyes, opened wide as teacups, filled half with hatred and half with surprise. It was easily the most ugly and frightening sight she had ever seen. She saw a monster.

Suzie screamed and covered her mouth with her hands. The monster in the mirror lifted a pair of hairy paws in front of its bloody lips, and the long, dagger-like claws seemed to reach out of the mirror.

Suzie turned around and ran, and the chant stopped abruptly, replaced by the screams of the other girls as they, too, saw the monster inside the mirror.

Later, Mrs. Wyle had to send a hysterical Suzie home. Suzie had insisted that Mrs. Wyle take the mirror from Lilly, but after a minute of careful examination, Mrs. Wyle concluded that the mirror was perfectly ordinary and handed it back to Lilly. She sighed as she tried to pen a note to Suzie's parents. She suspected that Suzie had made up the whole episode as a way to get out of school, but the girl was a good actress.

Lilly fingered the mirror in her pocket and smiled to herself as she sat through the afternoon's lessons.

"You are really good at baseball," Lilly said from her perch on top of Ah Huang.

Teddy shrugged. He was walking ahead of Ah Huang, leading him by the nose and carrying a baseball bat over his shoulder. He walked slowly, so that Lilly's ride was smooth.

Teddy was quiet, and Lilly was getting used to that. At first Lilly thought it was because his English wasn't as good as Mr. Kan's. But then she found that he spoke just as little to the other Chinese children.

Teddy had introduced her to the other kids from the village, some of whom had thrown mud at Lilly the day before. The boys nodded at Lilly, but then looked away, embarrassed.

They played a game of baseball. Only Teddy and Lilly knew all the rules, but all the children were familiar with it from watching the American soldiers at the Base nearby. Lilly loved baseball, and one of the things she missed the most about home was playing baseball with Dad and watching games together on TV. But since they moved to Taiwan, there were no more games on TV, and he no longer seemed to be able to find the time.

When it was Lilly's turn to bat, the pitcher, one of the boys from yesterday, lobbed her a soft and slow pitch that Lilly turned into a gentle groundball that rolled into right field. The outfielders ran over and suddenly, all of them seemed to have trouble locating the ball in the grass. Lilly easily circled the bases.

Lilly understood that that was the way the boys apologized. She smiled at them and bowed, showing that all was forgiven. The boys grinned back at her.

"Grandpa would say, '*pu ta pu hsiang shih.*' It means that sometimes you can't become friends until you've fought each other."

Lilly thought that was a very good philosophy, but she doubted that it worked among girls.

Teddy was by far the best player among all the children. He was a good pitcher, but he was a great hitter. Every time he came up to bat, the opposing team fanned out, knowing that he would hit it way out.

"Someday, when I'm older, I'm going to move to America, and I'll play for the Red Sox," Teddy suddenly said, without looking back at Lilly on the water buffalo.

Lilly found the notion of a Chinese boy from Taiwan playing baseball for the Red Sox pretty ridiculous, but she kept herself from laughing because Teddy didn't seem to be joking. She was partial to the Yankees because her mother's family was from New York. "Why Boston?"

"Grandpa went to school in Boston," Teddy said.

"Oh." *That must be how Mr. Kan learned English*, Lilly thought.

"I wish I were older. Then I could have gotten to play with Ted Williams. Now I will never get to see him play in person. He retired last year."

There was such sadness in his voice that neither spoke for a few minutes. Only Ah Huang's loud, even breathing accompanied their silent walk.

Lilly suddenly understood something. "Is that why you call yourself Teddy?"

Teddy didn't answer, but Lilly could see that his face was red. She tried to distract him from his embarrassment. "Maybe he'll come back to coach someday."

"Williams was the best hitter ever. He'll definitely show me how to improve my swing. But the guy they replaced him with, Carl Yaz, is really good too. Me and Yaz, someday we'll beat the Yankees and take the Sox to the World Series."

Well, it is called the World Series, Lilly thought. *Maybe a Chinese boy will really make it.*

"That's a really grand dream," Lilly said. "I hope it happens."

"Thanks," Teddy said. "When I'm successful in America, I'll buy the biggest house in Boston, and Grandpa and I will live there. And I'll marry an American girl, because American girls are the best and prettiest."

"What's she going to look like?"

"Blonde." Teddy looked back at Lilly, riding on Ah Huang, with her loose red curls and hazel eyes. "Or red-haired," he added quickly, and turned his face away, flushed.

Lilly smiled.

As they walked past the other houses in the village, Lilly noticed that many of the houses had slogans painted on their walls and doors. "What do those signs say?"

"That one says, 'Beware of Communist bandit spies. It is everyone's responsibility to keep secrets.' That one over there says, 'Even if we by mistake kill three thousand, we can't let a single Communist spy slip through our fingers.' And that one over there says, 'Study hard and work hard, we must rescue our mainland brothers from the Red bandits.'"

"That's frightening."

"The Communists are scary," Teddy agreed. "Hey, that's my house down there. You want to come in?"

"Am I going to meet your parents?"

Teddy suddenly slumped his shoulders. "It's just Grandpa and me. He's not my real grandpa, you know. My parents died when I was just a baby, and Grandpa took me in as an orphan."

Lilly didn't know what to say. "How...how did your parents die?"

Teddy looked around them to make sure that no one was nearby. "They tried to leave a wreath on an empty lot on February 28, 1952. My uncle and aunt had died there back in 1947." He seemed to think that was all that needed to be said.

Lilly had no idea what he was talking about, but she couldn't probe any further. They had arrived at Teddy's home.

THE COTTAGE was tiny. Teddy opened the door and showed Lilly in while he went to take care of Ah Huang. Lilly found herself standing in the kitchen. Through a doorway she could see a larger room — the only other room in the cottage really — lined with tatami mats. That was evidently where Teddy and Mr. Kan slept.

Mr. Kan showed her to a seat by the small table in the kitchen and gave her a cup of tea. He was cooking something on the stove, and it smelled delicious.

"If you like," Mr. Kan said, "you are welcome to share some stew with us. Teddy likes it, and I think you would too. You'll have a hard time finding Mongolian-style mutton stewed in Shantung-style milkfish soup anywhere else in the world, haha."

Lilly nodded. Her stomach growled as she breathed in the wonderful cooking fumes. She was feeling relaxed and comfortable.

"Thank you for the mirror. It worked." Lilly took out the mirror and put it on the table. "What do the words on the tape mean?"

"It's a quote from the *Analects*. Jesus said something that means exactly the same thing: 'Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.'"

"Oh." Lilly was disappointed. She was hoping that the words were some secret magical chant.

Mr. Kan seemed to know what Lilly was thinking about. "Magic words are often misunderstood. When those girls and you all thought 'gook' was a magic word, it held a kind of power. But it was an empty magic based on ignorance. Other words also hold magic and power, but they require reflection and thought."

Lilly nodded, not sure she really understood.

"Can we do more literomancy?" she asked.

"Sure." Mr. Kan put the lid on the pot and wiped his hands. He retrieved some paper, ink, and a brush. "What word would you like?"

"It would be more impressive if you can do it in English," said Teddy as he came into the kitchen.

"Yes, can you do it in English?" Lilly clapped her hands.

"I can try." Mr. Kan laughed. "This will be a first." He handed the brush to Lilly.

Lilly slowly wrote out the first word that came into her head, a word she didn't understand: *thalassocracy*.

Mr. Kan was surprised. "Oh, I don't know that word. This is going to be difficult." Mr. Kan frowned.

Lilly held her breath. *Was the magic not going to work in English?*

Mr. Kan shrugged. "Well, I'll just have to give it a try. Let's see...in the middle of the word is another word: 'lass.' That means you." He tipped the end of the brush toward Lilly. "The lass has an 'o', a circle of rope, trailing after her, and that makes 'lasso.' Hmm, Lilly, do you want to grow up to be a cowgirl?"

Lilly nodded, smiling. "I was born in Texas. We are born knowing how to ride."

"And what letters do we have left after 'lasso'? We have tha-space-cracry. Hmm, if you rearrange them, you can spell 'Cathay,' with a 'c' and an 'r' left over. C is just a way to say 'sea,' and Cathay is an old name for China. But what is 'r'?"

"Ah, I've got it! The way you've written the 'r,' it looks like a bird flying. So, Lilly, this means that you are the lass with a lasso who was destined to fly across the sea and come to China. Haha! It was fate that we should be friends!"

Lilly clapped and laughed with joy and amazement.

Mr. Kan ladled out mutton and fish stew into two bowls for Teddy and Lilly. The stew was good, but very different from anything Lin Amah made. It was savory, smooth, laced with the sharp fresh scent of scallions. Mr. Kan watched the children eat, and happily sipped his tea.

"You've found out a lot about me, Mr. Kan, but I don't know much about you."

"True. Why don't you pick another word? We'll see what the characters want you to know."

Lilly thought about it. "How about the word for America? You lived there, didn't you?"

Mr. Kan nodded. "Good choice." He wrote with his brush.



"This is *mei*. It's the character for 'beauty,' and America, *Meikuo*, is the Beautiful Country. See how it's composed of two characters stacked on top of each other? The one on the top means 'sheep.' Can you see the horns of the ram sticking up? The one on the bottom means 'great,' and it's shaped like a person standing up, legs and arms spread out, feeling like a big man."

Mr. Kan stood up to demonstrate.

"The ancient Chinese were a simple people. If they had a great, big, fat sheep, that meant wealth, stability, comfort, and happiness. They thought that was a beautiful sight. And now, in my old age, I understand

how they felt." Lilly thought about mutton-busting, and she understood too.

Mr. Kan sat down and closed his eyes as he continued.

"I come from a family of salt merchants in Shantung. We were considered wealthy. When I was a boy, people praised me for being clever and good with words, and my father hoped that I would do something great to glorify the Kan name. When I was old enough, he borrowed a large sum of money to send me to study in America. I chose to study law because I liked words and their power."

Mr. Kan wrote another character on the paper. "Let's see what I can tell you with more characters formed from 'sheep.'"

鮮

"The first time I had this stew, I was a law student in Boston. My friend and I, we shared a room together. We had no money, and every meal we ate nothing but bread and water. But this one time, our landlord, the owner of a restaurant in Chinatown, took pity on us. He gave us some rotting fish and mutton scraps that he was going to throw away. I knew how to make a good fish stew, and my friend, who was from Manchuria, knew how to make good Mongolian mutton.

"I thought, since the character for 'savory' is made from 'fish' and 'lamb,' maybe if we put our dishes together, it would taste pretty good. And it worked! I don't think we'd ever been that happy. Literomancy is even useful for cooking." Mr. Kan chuckled like a kid.

Then his face turned more serious.

"Later, in 1931, Japan invaded Manchuria, and my friend left America to defend his home. I heard that he became a Communist guerrilla to fight the Japanese, and the Japanese killed him a year later."

Mr. Kan sipped his tea. His hands trembled.

"I was a coward. I had a job then and a comfortable life in America. I was safe, and I did not want to go to war. I made excuses, telling myself that I could do more to help if I waited for the war to be over.

"But Japan was not content with Manchuria. A few years later, it invaded the rest of China, and one day, I woke up to find that my hometown had been captured, and I stopped getting any letters from my family. I waited and waited, trying to reassure myself that they had escaped south and that everything was all right. But eventually, a letter from my baby sister arrived, bringing with it the news that the Japanese army had killed everyone in our clan, including our parents, when the town fell. My sister was the only one who survived by playing dead. Because I dithered, I had let my parents die.

"I left for China. I asked to sign up for the army as soon as I stepped off the boat. The Nationalist officer couldn't care less that I had gone to school in America. What China needed were men who could shoot, not men who knew how to read and write and could interpret the laws. I was given a gun and ten bullets, and told that if I wanted more bullets, I had to get them from the dead bodies."

Mr. Kan wrote another character on the paper.

"Here's another character also built from sheep. It looks a lot like *mei*. I just changed the 'great' on the bottom a bit. Do you recognize it?"

Lilly thought back to the drawings from a day earlier. "That's the character for fire."

Mr. Kan nodded. "You are a very smart girl."

"So this is a character for roasting mutton over fire?"

"Yes. But when 'fire' is on the bottom of a character, usually we change its shape to show that it's cooking at low heat. Like this."



"Originally, roasted lamb was an offering to the gods, and this character, *kao*, came to mean lamb in general."

"Like a sacrificial lamb?"

Mr. Kan nodded. "I guess so. We had no training and no support, and we lost more than we won. Behind you, officers with machine guns would shoot you if you tried to run. In front of you, the Japanese charged at you with bayonets. When you used up your bullets you looked for more from your dead comrades. I wanted revenge for my dead family, but how could I get my revenge? I didn't even know which Japanese soldiers killed them.

"That was when I began to understand another kind of magic. Men spoke of the glory of *Japan* and the weakness of *China*, that *Japan* wants the best for Asia, and that *China* should accept what *Japan* wants and give up. But what do these words mean? How can *Japan* want something? 'Japan' and 'China' do not exist. They are just words, fiction. An individual Japanese may be glorious, and an individual Chinese may want something, but how can you speak of 'Japan' or 'China' wanting, believing, accepting anything? It is all just empty words, myths. But these myths have powerful magic, and they require sacrifices. They require the slaughter of men like sheep.

"When America finally entered the war, I was so happy. I knew that China was saved. Ah, see how powerful that magic is, that I can speak of these nonexistent things as though they are real. No matter. As soon as the war with Japan was over, I was told that we Nationalists now had to fight the Communists, who were our brothers-in-arms just days earlier against the Japanese. The Communists were evil and had to be stopped."

Mr. Kan wrote another character.

義

“This is the character *yi*, which used to mean ‘righteousness,’ and now also means ‘-ism,’ as in Communism, Nationalism, Imperialism, Capitalism, Liberalism. It’s formed from the character for ‘sheep,’ which you know, on top, and the character for ‘I,’ on the bottom. A man holds up a sheep for sacrifice, and he thinks he has truth, justice, and the magic that will save the world. It’s funny, isn’t it?”

“But here’s the thing, even though the Communists had even worse equipment than we did, and less training, they kept on winning. I couldn’t understand it until one day, my unit was ambushed by the Communists, and I surrendered and joined them. You see, the Communists really were bandits. They would take the land from the landlords and distribute it to the landless peasants, and this made them very popular. They couldn’t care less about the fiction of laws and property rights. Why should they? The rich and educated had made a mess of things, so why shouldn’t the poor and illiterate have a chance at it? No one before the Communists had ever thought much of the lowly peasants, but when you have nothing, not even shoes for your feet, you are not afraid to die. The world had many more people who were poor and therefore fearless than people who were rich and afraid. I could see the logic of the Communists.

“But I was tired. I had been fighting for almost a decade of my life, and I was alone in the world. My family had been rich, and the Communists would have killed them too. I did not want to fight for the Communists, even if I could understand them. I wanted to stop. A few friends and I slipped away in the middle of the night, and stole a boat. We were going to try to get to Hong Kong and leave all this slaughter behind.

“But we did not know navigation, and the waves took us into the open

sea. We ran out of water and food and waited to die. But a week later, we saw land on the horizon. We rowed with our last bits of strength until we came ashore, and we found ourselves in Taiwan.

"We swore each other to secrecy about our time with the Communists and our desertion. We each went about our own ways, determined to never have to fight again. Because I was good with the abacus and the brush, I was hired by a Taiwanese couple who owned a small general store, and I kept their books and ran the place for them.

"Most of Taiwan had been settled by immigrants from Fukien several centuries earlier, and after Japan took Taiwan from China in 1885, the Japanese tried to Japanize the island, much as they had done in Okinawa, and remake the *penshengjen* into loyal subjects of the Emperor. Many of the men fought in Japan's armies during the war. After Japan lost, Taiwan was to be given back to the Republic of China. The Nationalists came to Taiwan and brought a new wave of immigrants with them, the *waishengjen*. The *penshengjen* hated the Nationalist *waishengjen*, who took away the best jobs, and the Nationalist *waishengjen* hated the *penshengjen*, who had been traitors to their race during the war.

"I was working in the shop one day, when a mob gathered in the streets. They shouted in Fukienese, and so I knew they were *penshengjen*. They stopped everyone they met, and if the person spoke Mandarin, they knew him to be a *waishengjen* and attacked him. There was no reasoning and no hesitation. They wanted blood. I was terrified and tried to hide under the counter."



"The character for 'mob' is formed from the character for 'nobility' on one side and the character for 'sheep' on the other. So that's what a mob

is, a herd of sheep that turns into a pack of wolves because they believe themselves to be serving a noble cause.

"The *penshengjen* couple tried to protect me, saying that I was a good man. Someone in the mob shouted that they were traitors, and attacked all of us and burned the shop down. I managed to crawl out of the fire, but the couple died."

"They were my uncle and aunt," Teddy said. Mr. Kan nodded and put a hand on his shoulder.

"The *penshengjen* rebellion began on February 28, 1947, and lasted for months. Because some of the rebels were led by Communists, the Nationalists were especially brutal. It took the Nationalists a long time to finally put down the rebellion, and thousands were killed.

"In those killings a new kind of magic was born. Now, no one is allowed to talk about the 228 Massacre. The number 228 is taboo.

"I took Teddy in after his parents were executed for trying to commemorate that day. I came here, away from the city, so that I could live in a small cottage and drink my tea in peace. The villagers respect those who have read books, and they come to me to ask my advice on picking names for their children that will bring good fortune. Even after so many men died because of a few magic words, we continue to have faith in the power of words to do good.

"I have not heard from my baby sister for decades. I believe she is still alive on the mainland. Someday, before I die, I hope to see her again."

The three sat around the table, and no one said anything for a while. Mr. Kan wiped his eyes.

"I'm sorry to have told you such a sad story, Lilly. But the Chinese have not had happy stories to tell for a long time."

Lilly looked at the paper before Mr. Kan, filled with characters made from sheep. "Can you look into the future? Will there be good stories then?"

Mr. Kan's eyes brightened. "Good idea. What character should I write?"

"What about the character for China?"

Mr. Kan thought about this. "That's a difficult request, Lilly. 'China' may be a simple word in English, but it is not so easy in Chinese. We have many words for China and the people who call themselves Chinese. Most

of these words are named after ancient dynasties, and the modern words are empty shells, devoid of real magic. What is the People's Republic? What is the Republic? These are not true words. Only more altars for sacrifices."

After thinking some more, he wrote another character.



"This is the character *hua*, and it is the only word for China and for the Chinese that has nothing to do with any Emperor, any Dynasty, anything that demands slaughter and sacrifice. Although both the People's Republic and the Republic put it in their names, it is far older than they and belongs to neither of them. *Hua* originally meant 'flowery' and 'magnificent,' and it is the shape of a bunch of wildflowers coming out of the ground. See?

"The ancient Chinese were called *huajen* by their neighbors because their dress was magnificent, made of silk and fine tulle. But I think that's not the only reason. The Chinese are like wildflowers, and they will survive and make joy wherever they go. A fire may burn away every living thing in a field, but after the rain the wildflowers will reappear as though by magic. Winter may come and kill everything with frost and snow, but when spring comes the wildflowers will blossom again, and they will be magnificent.

"For now, the red flames of revolution may be burning on the mainland, and the white frost of terror may have covered this island. But I know that a day will come when the steel wall of the Seventh Fleet will melt away, and the *penshengjen* and the *waishengjen* and all the other *huajen* back in my home will blossom together in magnificence."

"And I will be a *huajen* in America," Teddy added.

Mr. Kan nodded. "Wildflowers can bloom anywhere."

Lilly didn't have much of an appetite for dinner. She had had too much fish and mutton stew.

"Well, this Mr. Kan is no true friend of yours, if he's going to ruin your appetite with snacks," said Mom.

"It's all right," said Dad. "It's good for Lilly to make some native friends. You should invite them over for dinner sometime. Mom and I should get to know them if you are going to spend a lot of time with this family."

Lilly thought this a splendid idea. She couldn't wait to show Teddy her Nancy Drew books. She knew that he'd like the beautiful pictures on the covers.

"Dad, what does 'thalassocracy' mean?"

Dad paused. "Where did you hear that word?"

Lilly knew that she wasn't supposed to look at things from Dad's work. "I just read it somewhere."

Dad stared at Lilly, but then he relented. "It comes from the Greek word for sea, *thalassa*. It means 'rule by the sea.' You know, like 'Rule, Britannia! Rule the waves.'"

Lilly was disappointed at this. She thought Mr. Kan's explanation was much better, and said so.

"Why were you and Mr. Kan talking about thalassocracy?"

"No reason. I just wanted to see him do some magic."

"Lilly, there's no such thing as magic," Mom said.

Lilly wanted to argue but thought better of it.

"Dad, I don't understand why Taiwan is free if they can't talk about 228."

Dad put down his fork and knife. "What did you say?"

"Mr. Kan said that they can't talk about 228."

Dad pushed his plate away and turned to Lilly. "Now, from the beginning, tell me everything that you talked about with Mr. Kan today."

Lilly waited by the river. She was going to invite Teddy and Mr. Kan to come for dinner.

The village boys showed up, one after another, with their water buffalo. But none of them knew where Teddy was.

Lilly got into the river and joined the boys as they splashed water on each other. But she couldn't help feeling uneasy. Teddy always showed up at the river after school to wash Ah Huang. Where was he?

When the boys started to go back to the village, she went with them. *Maybe Teddy was sick and stayed home?*

Ah Huang was pacing in front of Mr. Kan's cottage, and he snorted at Lilly when he saw her, coming closer to nuzzle her as she petted his forehead.

"Teddy! Mr. Kan!" There was no answer.

Lilly knocked on the door. No one answered. The door was not locked, and Lilly pushed it open.

The cottage had been ransacked. The tatami mats were overturned and slashed apart. Tables and chairs were broken and the pieces scattered around the cottage. Pots, broken dishes, chopsticks littered the floor. There were papers and torn books everywhere. Teddy's baseball bat was carelessly lying on the ground.

Lilly looked down and saw that Mr. Kan's magic mirror had been shattered into a thousand little pieces scattered about her feet.

Did Communist bandits do this?

Lilly ran to the neighboring houses, frantically knocking on their doors and pointing at Mr. Kan's cottage. The neighbors either refused to answer the door or shook their heads, their faces full of fear.

Lilly ran home.

LILLY COULD NOT SLEEP.

Mom had refused to go to the police. Dad was working late, and Mom said if it wasn't just Lilly's imagination and there really were bandits about, then the best thing to do was to stay home and wait for Dad to come back. Eventually, Mom sent Lilly to bed because it was a school night, and she promised that she would tell Dad about Mr. Kan and Teddy. Dad would know what to do.

Lilly heard the front door open and close, and the sound of chairs sliding on the tile floor in the kitchen. Dad was home, and Mom was going to heat up some food for him.

She knelt on her bed and opened the window. A cool, humid breeze

carried the smell of decaying vegetation and night-blooming flowers into the room. Lilly crawled out the window.

Once she landed on the muddy ground, she quietly made her way around the house to the back, where the kitchen was. Inside, Lilly could see Mom and Dad sitting across from each other at the kitchen table. There was no food on the table. In front of Dad was a small glass, and he poured an amber liquid into it from a bottle. He drained the glass in one gulp, and filled it again.

The bright, golden light inside the kitchen cast a trapezoid of illumination upon the ground outside the kitchen window. She stayed beyond its edge, and crouched below the open window to listen.

Amidst the sound of the fluttering wings of moths striking against the screened window, she listened to her father's voice.

In the morning, David Cotton told me that the man I had referred to them had been arrested. If I wanted to, I could go help with the interrogation. I went over to the detention compound with two Chinese interrogators, Chen Pien and Li Hui.

"He's a tough nut to crack," Chen said. "We've tried a few things, but he's very resistant. We still have some heightened interrogation techniques we can try."

"The Communists are very good at psychological manipulation and resistance," I said. "It's not surprising. We need to get him to tell us who his accomplices are. I believe he came to Taiwan with a team of operatives."

We got to the holding cell, and I saw that they had worked him over pretty good. Both of his shoulders had been dislocated, and his face was bloody. His right eye was swollen almost completely shut.

I asked that he be given some medical attention. I wanted to have him understand that I was the kind one, and that I could protect him if he trusted me. They fixed his shoulders and a nurse bandaged his face. I gave him some water.

"I'm not a spy," he said, in English.

"Tell me what your orders were," I said.

"I don't have any orders."

"Tell me who came to Taiwan with you," I said.

"I came to Taiwan alone."

"I know that's a lie."

He shrugged, wincing with the pain.

I nodded to Chen and Li, and they started pushing small, sharpened bamboo sticks under his fingernails. He tried to stay silent. Chen began to hit the base of the bamboo sticks with a small hammer, as though he were hammering nails into a wall. The man screamed like an animal. Eventually he passed out.

Chen hosed him down with cold water until he woke up. I asked him the same questions. He shook his head, refusing to talk.

"We just want to talk to your friends," I said. "If they are innocent, nothing will happen to them. They won't blame you."

He laughed.

"Let's try the Tiger Bench," Li said.

They brought over a narrow long bench and laid one end against a supporting column in the room. They sat him down on the bench so that his back was straight against the column. Bending his arms back and wrapping them around the column, they tied his hands together. Then they strapped his thighs and knees down to the top of the bench with thick leather straps. Finally, they tied his ankles together.

"We'll see if Communists have knees that can bend forward," Chen said to him.

They lifted his feet and placed a brick under his heels, then another one.

Because his thighs and knees were strapped tight to the bench, the bricks forced his feet and lower legs up and began to bend his knees at an impossible angle. Sweat dripped from his face and forehead, mixed with the blood from his wounds. He tried to squirm along the bench to relieve the stress on his knees but there was nowhere to go. He rubbed his arms, moving them up and down helplessly on the column until he broke the skin on his wrists and arms and blood streaked the whitewash on the column.

They put in another two bricks, and I could hear the bones in his knees crack. He began to moan and shout, but said nothing that we wanted to hear.

"I can't stop this if you won't talk," I said to him.

They brought in a long wooden wedge and pushed the thin end under the brick at the bottom. Then they took turns to strike a hammer against the thick end of the wedge. With each strike, the wedge moved in a little under the bricks and lifted his feet higher. He screamed and screamed. They forced a stick into his mouth so he wouldn't bite down on his tongue.

"Just nod if you are ready to talk."

He shook his head.

Suddenly, his knees broke at the next hammer strike, and his feet and lower legs jumped up, the broken bones sticking through the flesh and skin. He fainted again.

I was getting nauseous. If the Communists could train and prepare their agents to this degree, how could we possibly hope to win this war?

"This is not going to work," I said to the Chinese interrogators. "I have an idea. He has a grandson. Do we have him?" They nodded.

We brought the doctor in again to bandage his legs. The doctor gave him an injection so that he would stay awake.

"Kill me, please," he said to me. "Kill me."

We brought him out to the courtyard and sat him in a chair. Li brought in his grandson. He was a small boy, but seemed very bright. He was scared and tried to run to his grandfather. Li pulled him back, stood him against the wall, and pointed a pistol at him.

"We are not going to kill you," I said. "But if you won't confess, we will execute your grandson as an accomplice."

"No, no," he begged. "Please. He doesn't know anything. We don't know anything. I'm not a spy. I swear."

Li stood back and held the pistol with both hands.

"You are making me do this," I said. "You have given me no choice. I don't want to kill your grandson, but you are going to make him die."

"I came here on a boat with four others," he said. He kept his eyes on the boy, and I could see that I was finally getting to him. "They are all good people. None of us are Communist spies."

"That's another lie," I said. "Tell me who they are."

Just then the boy jumped and grabbed Li's hands, and the boy tried to bite him. "Let my grandfather go," he yelled as he struggled with Li.

There were two gunshots, and the boy fell in a heap. Li dropped his

gun and I rushed over. The boy had bitten his finger to the bone, and he was howling with pain. I picked up the gun.

I looked up and saw that the old man had fallen out of his chair. He was crawling to us, to the body of his grandson. He was crying, and I couldn't tell what language he was crying in.

Chen went to help Li while I watched the man crawl to the boy. He turned his body until he was sitting and lifted the boy's body into his lap, hugging the dead child to his chest. "Why, why?" he said to me. "He was just a boy. He didn't know anything. Kill me, please kill me."

I looked into his eyes: dark, glistening, like mirrors. In them I saw the reflections of my own face, and it was such a strange face, so full of crazed fury that I did not recognize myself.

Many things went through my head at that moment. I thought back to when I was a little boy in Maine, and the mornings when my grandfather would take me hunting. I thought about my sinology professor, and the stories he told of his boyhood in Shanghai and his Chinese friends and servants. I thought about yesterday morning, when David and I taught the class on counterintelligence to the Nationalist agents. I thought about Lilly, who is about the boy's age. What does she know about Communism and freedom? Somewhere, the world had gone horribly wrong.

"Please kill me, please kill me."

I pointed the pistol at the man and squeezed the trigger. I kept on squeezing the trigger, again and again, after the gun was empty.

"He was resisting," Chen said, later. "Trying to escape." It wasn't a question.

I nodded anyway.

"You had no choice," Mrs. Dyer said. "He forced you to do it. Freedom isn't without its price. You were trying to do the right thing."

He did not respond to this. After a while, he drained the glass again.

"You've told me how hardened these Communist agents are, and we've all heard the tales from Korea. But only now do I really understand. They must have really brainwashed him and made him without human feeling, without remorse. The blood of his grandson is on him. Just think what he could have done to Lilly."

He did not respond to this either. He looked across the table at her, and it seemed that there was a gulf between them, as wide as the Taiwan Strait.

"I don't know," he said, finally. "I don't really know anything anymore."

DAD WALKED with Lilly next to the river, their feet sinking into the soft mud. Both stopped and took off their shoes, continuing barefoot. They did not speak to each other. Ah Huang followed behind them, and every once in a while Lilly stopped to pet him on the nose as he snorted into her palm.

"Lilly," Dad broke the silence. "Mom and I have decided to move back to Texas. I've gotten a transfer for work."

Lilly nodded without speaking. Autumn had settled over her heart. The trees along the river waved at their own reflections in the moving, rippling water, and Lilly wished she still had Mr. Kan's magic mirror.

"We have to find a new home for your water buffalo. We can't take him back to Texas."

Lilly stopped. She refused to look at him.

"It's too dry back there," Dad tried. "He won't be happy. He won't have a river to bathe in and rice paddies to wallow in. He won't be free."

Lilly wanted to tell him that she was no longer a little girl, and he did not need to speak to her that way. But instead she just stroked Ah Huang some more.

"Sometimes, Lilly, adults have to do things that they don't want to do, because it's the right thing to do. Sometimes we do things that seem wrong, but are really right."

Lilly thought about Mr. Kan's arms, and the way he held her the first time they met. She thought about the way his voice had sounded when he scared the boys away. She thought about the way the tip of his brush moved on paper, writing the character for "beautiful." She wished that she knew how to write his name. She wished she knew more about the magic of words and characters.

Even though it was a pleasant autumn afternoon, Lilly felt cold. She imagined the fields around her covered in white, a frost of terror that had come to freeze over the subtropical island.

The word "freeze" seemed to call for her attention. She closed her eyes and pictured the word in her head, examining it carefully the way she thought Mr. Kan would have. The letters jiggled and nudged against each other. The 'z' took on the shape of a kneeling, supplicating man, the 'e' the fetal curl of a dead child. And then the 'z' and 'e' disappeared, leaving *free* in its place.

It's okay, Lilly. Teddy and I are free now. Lilly tried to concentrate, to hold onto the fading smile and warm voice of Mr. Kan in her mind. *You are a very smart girl. You are destined to become a literomancer too, in America.*

Lilly squeezed her eyes tight so that no tears would fall out.

"Lilly, are you all right?" Dad's voice brought her back.

She nodded. She felt a little warmer.

They continued to walk, looking at the hunched-over figures of the women in the rice paddies, harvesting the heavy grain with sickles.

"It's difficult to know how the future will turn out," Dad continued. "Things have a way of working themselves out to the surprise of everyone. Sometimes the most ugly things can turn out to be the cause for something wonderful. I know you haven't had a good time here, Lilly, and it's unfortunate. But this is a beautiful island. Formosa means 'most beautiful' in Latin."

Like America, Meikuo, the Beautiful Country, Lilly thought. *The wildflowers will bloom again when it is spring.*

In the distance, they could see the children from the village playing a game of baseball.

"Some day you'll see that our sacrifices here were worth it. This place will be free, and you'll see its beauty and remember your time here fondly. Anything is possible. Maybe one day we'll even see a boy from here playing baseball in America. Now wouldn't that be something, Lilly, a Chinese boy from Formosa playing at Yankee Stadium?"

Lilly focused on the scene in her head.

Teddy steps up to the plate in a Red Sox helmet, his calm eyes staring at the pitcher on the mound, the N crossed with a Y on the pitcher's cap. He swings at the first pitch, and there is a crisp, loud thwack. It's a hit. The ball floats high into the cold October air, into the dark sky and the bright lights, an arc that will end somewhere in the grandstands beyond

right field. The crowd stands. Teddy begins to trot along the baselines, his face breaking into a wide grin, searching the crowd for Mr. Kan and Lilly. And the wild cheers shake the stadium as the pennant is clinched. The Red Sox are going to the World Series.

"I've been thinking," Dad continued. "Maybe we should take a vacation before we go back to Clearwell. I was thinking that we can stop by New York to visit Grandma. The Yankees are playing the Reds in the World Series. I'll try to get tickets, and we can go see them and cheer them on."

Lilly shook her head and looked up at him. "I don't like the Yankees anymore."

Author's Notes: For a variety of reasons, this text does not use pinyin to romanize Chinese. Instead, Mandarin phrases and words are generally romanized using the Wade-Giles system, and Taiwanese Minnan (Fukienese) phrases and words are romanized using either the Pe'h-ōe-jī system or English phonetic spelling.

*An introductory account of the history of joint American-ROC covert operations against the PRC during the Cold War may be found in John W. Garver's *The Sino-American Alliance: Nationalist China and American Cold War Strategy in Asia*.*

The art of literomancy is greatly simplified in this story. In addition, the folk etymologies and decompositions used here are understood to have little relationship with academic conclusions.

