



Miracle and Magnificence

J.W. WANG

OUR MOTHER NAMED ME MIRACLE and my younger brother Magnificence, not because she was a flower child or a free spirit or anything like that, but because she was Buddhist, for one, and she didn't know English very well, for another, so she devised names in Chinese and thumbed through a dictionary for their equivalents. According to her, they were good names, names that would guide us like charms, like spiritual guardians. I suppose they're fine names, though they would have been better suited had our family stayed put in Taipei, or if Mag and I had grown up during the sixties and not the eighties. Our father didn't have much of an opinion in the matter. He was jolly—most of the time, anyway, even after he succumbed to alcoholism decades later—and unimaginative, and he thought our names were unique, inspirational. Like most immigrant parents, he was prone to bursts of hot temper. He ate toast without jam or jelly or butter. Saturday mornings he watched *Looney Tunes* with me and Mag, while he drank oolong tea and chewed on roasted watermelon seeds. “Beep beep,” he called it. The Roadrunner segments were his favorite; it wasn't until much later I would realize it was because there was no dialogue for him to puzzle over.

We lived then in a small apartment on a quiet side street in West Hollywood, a block away from a Pussycat adult theater. This was 1986, before the Alpha Beta at Santa Monica and Fairfax became Whole Foods, before developers took the barren fringes of Pan Pacific Park and conjured it into a chic shopping center with a horse-drawn trolley and a fountain that juggled cords of water while music wafted from hidden speakers. Our mother spent her days doing alterations at a

men's clothing store in Hollywood and weekends cleaning rooms at a motel on Sunset. Father worked at a Chinese restaurant called Lotus Inn, filling stock pots with hot-and-sour soup and stir-frying mounds of greasy chow mein for buffet trays. Sundays he brought home sacks of broken almond and fortune cookies and buckets of chicken innards: gizzards, hearts, livers. The chicken parts our mother boiled in soy sauce and ginger and star anise and other spices, then refrigerated in large serving bowls. The cookies we socked away in the tall kitchen cabinet, where they sat and grew stale and more stale next to the rice. Our father had meant for them to be our treats: Look, boys, more cookies! he'd say. The cookies were dry and they crumbled in our mouths.

Mag was born two years after me, and we both followed a path largely unremarkable in the departments of miracles and magnificence. I often spent P.E. sitting alone by the old ash tree on the far side of the playground, leaning against the chain link fence, pulling apart seeds that helicoptered down. In my hands the ash seeds took on the guises of kamikaze warriors, each fighting to their doom, spearing one another apart with their pointed tips. Crows perched on the branches kept me company, cawing and flapping their inky wings. Sometimes one would land nearby and zigzag close enough for me to make out the purple in some of their feathers. If my classmates needed me to balance out a sockball team I would join in, then when it was my turn to sock the big red rubber ball they'd shout, "Give us a miracle, Miracle!" and snicker. A miracle was anything hit outside of the infield. Mag was sickly and suffered from asthma. When he asked to be called by his nickname, the kids took to calling him Maggie.

The short of it was, we didn't want any attention. Our days were easier that way. We didn't run very fast in races, we didn't sing very well in choir. Maybe we could have; we wouldn't have known. Sometimes I didn't sing at all. I mouthed the words, smug in the thought that I was lost in the collective voice, anonymous and safe. We had middling grades and never earned an achievement citation or a trip to the principal's office. We did our best to live like the crows did, minding our own business and blending into the background.

It was during that summer—I was ten and Mag was eight—that Big Aunt came to visit from Taiwan, and she'd brought her sixteen-year-old son with her. Big Brother, we called him. Big Brother was tall, taller than our father, taller than Mag and me stacked together, and his hair was permed into a wave, which I imagine was supposed to lend him a Caucasian look, but mostly it succeeded

in making him appear more sinister and threatening—what Asians had permed hair except hoodlums and oddballs? On his upper lip was a thin mustache he trimmed every morning. From our parents we'd heard he had failed the high school entrance exams and was barely making his grades at a vocational school. Then Mother said to Father: That boy brings girls home and they sleep together, right there in his bed. She hissed and shook her head. Right under his parents' roof! Taiwan is going in a bad way, she said. It's an absolute mess. You can hardly call it a civilization anymore. Father nodded and said, It's a good thing we left when we did.

Their first day here Mag offered Big Brother an almond cookie, a rare whole one, thinking it may be just the two of us who didn't like them. "What is this?" Big Brother said. "And why's it that strange color?" He sniffed the cookie and took a nibble before chucking it into the garbage. "What else have you got around here?" While his mother and our parents jabbered over dried squid and tofu jerky we took him around our apartment like a pair of natives leading a new explorer around their little island. We showed him our father's stamp collection, the different buttons Mom brought home for us that we collected and played with like marbles, and our favorite toys: ox tail bones we'd washed and dried, then painted over with water colors. Mag and I pretended they were alien space ships, organic and holey. "This is what you two do for fun?" Big Brother said, frowning. "This is what you came to America for?"

After dinner he took us into our parents' bedroom while the adults chattered in the dining room. Their room was perpetually dark, the curtains always closed, and smelled of old, forgotten laundry. It was a ghostly room, and Mag and I stayed out of it as much as we could. "Let's see what they've got hiding in here," Big Brother said, and went through the dresser drawers, showing off each find: a pack of condoms, a jewelry box with gold rings and necklaces, a peanut canister half-filled with antique coins, a copy of *Penthouse* tucked under a stack of our father's old underwear. Mag and I held our breaths. Then Big Brother pulled out the bottom drawer, one that had held our father's socks and undershirts, and revealed a bundle of bills tied together with a blue rubber band, the kind you found in supermarkets, wrapped around bunches of broccoli.

"Shhhh," he said, pulling out three twenty-dollar bills. Mag sat on the bed, mesmerized by the activity. Big Brother picked out an Eisenhower dollar from the canister of coins and flipped it into my hand. Into Mag's he dropped a bicentennial quarter. The Eisenhower was immense; it was the largest coin I'd

ever seen, four times the size of a quarter, thick as a magazine. My hand drooped with its weight. Then we heard our parents calling us for dessert, and Big Brother quickly returned the dresser drawers back where they were.

Mag and I reemerged from that room as different people. Over our bowls of almond tofu with fruit cocktail we shot knowing looks at each other, fearful, electrified, giddy. Otherwise we kept our heads down, not daring to look at our parents. We'd entered a greater rendition of the world, nested with layers, nooks, and passageways we hadn't ever seen before. I kept a hand in my pocket, gripping the large silver coin, rubbing a thumb across its face. Our mother asked her older sister about their other siblings, even though she had already asked about them hours ago. Our father talked about the moo goo gai pan and chop suey he was cooking up at the restaurant.

It would be illegal to serve that stuff back home! he bellowed.

If that's so, why don't you start your own restaurant? Big Aunt said.

Don't think I won't, he said.

They loved company, our parents did, especially visitors from their old home, so much so I often wondered why they ever left. Big Brother spoke with the adults and laughed loudly. He said we were smart kids, good kids, said he wished we were his own brothers.



Two nights after Big Brother and Big Aunt returned home I was awakened in the midst of a heavy sleep. The world of my dreams fell like a smear of Icarus-thought, and suddenly I was airborne, confused, tired with slumber. My father had pulled me out of bed and lifted me over his shoulder, and was carrying me out to the living room in quick, purposeful strides. Earthquake, was my thought. He set me down by the coffee table and slapped me across the face before I could orient myself.

On the table was the wad of bills we'd seen days earlier. Next to it was a piece of plastic piping. My mother sat on the other end of the couch, her face weary.

What did you do with the money? He spoke calmly, his eyes a pair of frozen fires.

What could I have said? *I didn't do it. It was Big Brother. I'd taken only an Eisenhower dollar.* (Which I'd already spent at the Alpha Beta.) Even then I knew,

in my little terror-stricken mind, that a part of my fate had been determined. No matter the effort or choice of words, I couldn't have changed what was going to happen, not by much, and that pointing my finger at Big Brother probably would not have helped me. I stood before my father, putting as much distance as I could between myself and the scared, blubbing boy cradling his swollen face, saying *I'm sorry, I'm sorry.*

I must've been a howling mess after he started hitting me, though what I remember now is thinking Big Brother ought to have been there, in my place. Big Brother with his ridiculous perm and his thin mustache. Would he have kept his cool, would he have kept sneering, if he'd seen my father coming at him, all wrath and fury, waving a pipe? Surely he knew the missing money would be discovered. It was rather irresponsible of him to have walked away from us the way he did.

My father kept up the blows for some time. The pain, after the initial shock, dulled, flatlined, coalesced into a physical white noise. I was dreaming again, a kaleidoscope of surprise and memories and illusions. I saw kids from my class in their peaceful, American homes, watching TV in their own rooms, sipping on Capri Suns and playing Tetris; Big Brother lying in his bed, showing a nameless girl beside him an American twenty, chuckling about the family with their strange cookies; my mother's pale fingers, working a pair of trousers through a sewing machine. My body was no longer a part of me; it was an unlucky stand-in, and I felt sorry for it. Poor Miracle. If only your spiritual guardian would intervene. If only he would effect a tiny portion of your destiny.

Then it was over, and I slid onto the carpet, a spent rag of nerves. In the shadow of the hallway, I could make out Mag crouching, sucking in deep breaths.



The bruises lasted for a week; at school I told Mrs. Goldman I was clumsy and that I fell down the stairs. She considered this for a long while, then jotted something down onto a notepad. Father gave me a hard look when I came home and the matter was never brought up again. Things went on as they did before: our mother sewed buttons and scrubbed toilets, our father served up any number of combinations of meat, vegetables and soy sauce, and Mag and I carried on with

our quiet routines at school. Everything continued on their expected trajectories, except Big Brother had given me the idea, had shown me how it easy it was, if I wanted something, I could just reach out and take hold of it. It was so simple.

I rode my bicycle to the nearby convenience store, the supermarket, and the department store, and walked out with chocolate bars, Matchbox cars, action figures, Lego sets. It was noble, what I was doing; I was a little Robin Hood. I was balancing the scales of justice. Mag was confused at first; he knew there was something wrong with the way these things were popping up out of the blue, without the knowledge of our parents, but by fear or awe or appreciation he kept quiet and went along with it. When we threw away candy wrappers we dug them deep into the garbage, or we threw them directly into the Dumpster. The toys we hid deep under our beds, covered with plastic shopping bags.

At school, each time Mrs. Goldman called my name or looked in my direction I imagined a police officer waiting for me down at the principal's office, a thick file under his arm, cataloguing each of my trips to the stores. Despite this, despite the imminent discovery by some figure of authority—I must've understood its inevitability, just as Big Brother must've understood—I became more brazen with my trips to the stores, taking my backpack with me and daring myself to leave with more than the previous time around: toy guns, board games, model kits for cars and airplanes. On the playground I tucked myself in the far corner and sat behind an equipment shed. I didn't need my classmates. They were all noise. They were brutes. Me, I had adventure.



It would occur to me some years later, sitting in a jail cell waiting for my counsel with the public defender, that though Mag and I both watched Big Brother take money from our parents, I would be alone in my obsession with the idea and transposing it onto the rest of the world. Why hadn't the bug also bitten Mag? He's now a high school teacher over in South Central, working with at-risk students. He tries to prevent them from ending up like I did. "You *can* control your future," he tells them.

"It's because you were the older one," said one of my fellow cellmates. "You had to bear the trauma." They were all full of advice, the newly incarcerated. They knew what was ailing the world.

“I think it’s because you got beat,” said a tranny. “Violence will rot a kid.”

“Maybe your brother was just smarter about not getting caught,” someone else said. They all laughed at this one.

Mag thinks I need to recognize my own involvement, but he doesn’t want me to feel bad about it, either. “Miracle,” he says, “Dad was fucked up. We were poor. You were the identified patient. These things happen.”

They do. It’s been many years since my last regrettable encounter with the legal system, and much of it is now moot. At the time, though, I was consumed by the impulse. I was a kid out to claim everything that was denied him. I wanted it all. I was a spaz with an itchy hand and a deep hollow that could never be filled, no matter how many, how big, the prizes I brought home. I could only keep trying.



One day a store employee walked by the toy aisle while I was zipping up my bag. Inside were two Transformers and a model kit for a Messerschmitt fighter plane. “Hey,” he said, and I looked up. He pointed a finger at me, his eyes in sharp squints. This is it, I thought. Run for it? Deny everything? What if he comes for me? Do I throw the backpack at his face and kick him in the shins?

“Hey, you can’t bring that in here,” he said. “You need to leave that at the front.” Then he hurried on, his rubber shoes squishing softly against the cold floor.

In spring, while trying to run a race with the other school kids, Mag suffered an asthma attack and fell in a heap by the foursquares court. He’d left his inhaler at home, and his breathing thinned to a whisper while his classmates stood around him, yelling for help. His teacher called for the ambulance and soon he was driven off to the hospital. Both our parents left work and came to the school to pick me up, and we went to see Mag at the hospital. Our mother sobbed quietly in the car, wiping her eyes every few blocks. Father smelled like cashew chicken. He drove stoically, speeding through the intersections.

As it turned out one of Mag’s lungs had collapsed, and the doctor had to stick a needle into his chest to relieve the pressure.

“What’s wrong with his lungs?” Mother wanted to know. “He can’t have defective lungs, can he?”

“He’ll be fine,” the emergency room doctor said. He was young, younger than my parents, and he spoke in rapid fire spurts. “His lung is fine. More or less, in any case. It just means it’s more prone to another collapse in the future. He should be more careful.” Then he left Mag’s bed to go look after a girl who had fallen off of a ladder and broken her elbow.

Mag looked okay in the hospital bed, all things considered. His face was pale, and his breathing was shallow, but his eyes were alert and he smiled at me when I walked up to him.

“Here,” I said, and stuffed a bag of jelly beans into his hand. The pharmacy was looked after by an old lady who was busy watching women’s wrestling on the little television she had set up on the counter. Mag opened his mouth in a silent laugh and pushed the candy into his pocket.

Outside, our father fretted about the bills that would come out of the hospital visit. He’d been saving up to start his own Chinese restaurant. It would be a sure thing, he’d said. Easy. The economy had been slipping downward since the October crash, but that meant good news for cheap fast food, according to him. There was a possible business partner he had been talking to, a Mr. Zhang who operated an assembly factory in Corona del Mar. Our father had this notion that if he were to open up a storefront, hang up a sign, sell spring rolls and fried rice and broccoli and beef, people would line up like ants sniffing out a picnic. Johnny Chen’s, he was going to call it, even though his real name was Kah-Fong. It was going to be like opening a McDonald’s, without the franchise hassle. He was probably right.

“Miracle,” he said when I walked out into the hospital hallway. He had taken his chef’s apron off, and was fumbling with a pack of Parliaments. “You need to work harder in school. Why are you getting so many Bs and Cs?”

“I don’t know,” I said. Our father wasn’t a good student either, we’d heard. He’d graduated from a lower tier university in Taiwan and went directly into construction afterward. Mother often kidded him about it when she thought we weren’t listening. I couldn’t have been doing worse than how he did as a student. “I’m trying,” I said.

“That’s a lie.” He rapped the top of my head with a single knuckle. The pain echoed through my skull. “You’re smarter than that. If you don’t shape up you’ll have to work for me when I open up my restaurant. Is that what you want?”

He put a cigarette in his mouth and went outside to smoke. I walked down

the hall, feigning interest at the fliers on display. Somehow Mag's condition and my stealing were connected, I was sure. The heavens were punishing me for not heeding the first warning, the department store clerk, and since I carried on as before, they took away Mag's lungs for a short while.

Okay, I said silently. I'm done. I'll be good.

We were able to bring Mag home a few hours later, and in two days he was back at school. Our parents went on working their long hours. When they weren't home Mag and I pulled out our treasure trove of toys from under our beds and reenacted galactic battles. "Miracle," Mag said suddenly one afternoon, a Voltron lion teetering midair in his grip. "Aren't you afraid Mom and Dad will find out? What's going to happen then?"

"They won't," I said. "They're busy."



In summer Mr. Zhang invited the whole family over for dinner. He and Father were looking seriously at starting a restaurant—our father would handle the kitchen and the staff, and Mr. Zhang would take care of the logistics and accounting. Mr. Zhang would also provide much of the capital, so Father would only be a small partner, but it beat working at Lotus Inn, he said. They'd been scouring the city for possible locations, and had their eyes on a piece of fenced-up land on a street corner in San Fernando. Not a very pleasant neighborhood, but it gets a good amount of car traffic, and they figured the demographic was about right: poor working people hungry for cheap meals.

Mr. Zhang lived in Alhambra, in his own house. It was only one story, not exactly luxury, but it was still about double the size of the apartment we lived in. The rug had been a cream color but was stained to a grayish tan in the heavily walked-over areas. A large paper lantern hung in one corner of the living room. Mismatched chairs surrounded a plain pine dining table. For dinner he and Father cooked—they joked about practicing for the actual business, but they didn't serve us General Tso's chicken or egg foo young. We had home-style dishes: tofu stir-fried with tomatoes and green onions, beef with shiitake mushrooms and bamboo shoots, Cantonese style steamed cod, clams stir-fried with ginger and black pepper sauce, and seafood stew. Mag and I ran around the

house, looking for something interesting to play with. There wasn't much: an old stereo system, a wooden brachiosaurus model on top of a cabinet, some power tools lying on the carpet by the wall. Then Mr. Zhang opened a bottle of shao-hsing wine and he and Father started talking louder. Even Mother had a glass, which we hardly ever saw. They began listing the dishes they would have on the menu, and how much additional they should charge for substituting shrimp for chicken.

"Eating healthy is trendy now," Father said and chuckled. "People will even pay more for wheat gluten."

"Not if you call it 'wheat gluten,'" Mr. Zhang said. "But if you were to call it 'kale bone,' they'll pay you fifty cents extra."

There was little to see in the living room, and soon Mag and I wandered over into Mr. Zhang's bedroom—Mag was reluctant at first, but he followed after I went inside. The room was dark and smelled of incense. Mr. Zhang's bedside lamp was on, but the lampshade was so dusty it didn't emit enough light for us to see the rest of the room.

"Miracle," Mag said, "what are we doing here? Let's go outside."

Outside the adults were roaring, our mother's laughter playing melody to the men's deep bass. I could never understand how the older people could find so much enjoyment in talking about the same things again and again. "Hold on," I said. I walked around the room, picking up and putting down small objects: a pair of glasses, a bottle of glue, a paperweight in the shape of a dragon. Sitting on the nightstand, next to an alarm clock, was a thick, bright pen. It was fat like a cigar, sleek, with Chinese characters engraved along the side. "Miracle," Mag hissed. "Come on. Let's go." One of the adult voices was getting louder—no, it was getting closer. Mag and I stared at each other, then both of us dropped to the floor and pushed ourselves under the bed. The door opened and someone came in with thumping footsteps—it was our father. He was whistling, and walked directly into the bathroom. Someone else was using the one outside. "Where are the kids?" we heard our mother say from the dining room. "Kids, where are you hiding?"

Mag and I scrambled out from under the bed and ran outside.

"Where have you been?" our mother asked. She had a rosy glow about her face, and we could see the restaurant—Johnny Chen's—drifting in her eyes. She was going to quit her alternations job and work the front. Then, if things went well enough, she was going to quit the motel job, too. She gave both of us a big hug. I held on to the pen, my hands thrust deep in my pocket. I kept a finger on

its tip, afraid it might poke through and fall to the floor.

“What’s all this dust in your hair?” she said, picking at our heads.

“We were looking under the sofa,” I said. “Mag dropped his piece of orange.”

“I hope you didn’t eat it,” she said, frowning.

Mag shook his head.

We went back to the living room and turned on the television. Mag and I didn’t talk again until the night was long over, until our parents woke us up and told us to get in the car.



One weekend our father went up to San Fernando to take a look at the location where his restaurant would be and someone held up the doughnut shop in the same strip mall, three stores down. The robber fired two rounds into the ceiling, but no people were hurt. Father actually tried to run after him to catch a license plate number, but Mr. Zhang grabbed his arm and pulled him back. After a small conference—the Chinese are a superstitious lot, as superstitious as they come—they decided that wasn’t going to be the best place to run a business after all. Father kept looking, however, devoting his off days to his plans for the restaurant. He drove up and down busy streets, pulling into every corner plaza. There was a spot in Santa Monica that might have been available, but rent was going to be double. Plus, our mother noted, people in West L.A. may not have wanted to eat cheap Chinese food. They already had Chin Chin and Panda Express.

Mag was growing quickly, and already nearing my height. When school began in the fall he tried participating in more sports. Kids in his class didn’t pick on him as much as they used to. He got pretty good at tetherball, striking the ball down and down on its trajectory, watching the other kids jump with their hands up, desperate to stop the ball from spinning over them. I spent more time in the shade of the ash tree, reading books and drawing pictures on scrap paper. I was abiding by my promise; besides Mr. Zhang’s pen, I hadn’t taken anything since Mag’s hospital visit. The pen, I was disappointed to discover, had a fountain tip, so that when the ink ran out it became useless. Even so, I kept it safely tucked away under my bed. It was the most gorgeous thing I’d owned.

Despite our father's persistent efforts, Johnny Chen's was going nowhere. He was exasperated with Mr. Zhang, who had cooled off the idea after the San Fernando location was junked, and after a couple of months Mr. Zhang backed off of the proposition entirely. He said he needed to spend more time at his factory, and what with the state of the economy being what it was, it didn't make a whole lot of sense for him to jump into other ventures.

"Need to be careful with where you put your trust these days," Mr. Zhang said in one of their last conversations. "Too many—" He waved his hand around in the air. "—things you can't depend on." Then they shook hands, had another glass of shao-hsing and that was that.

"I don't understand," Father said to Mother. "It's like someone flipped a switch; poof, lights out."

"It's okay," she said quietly. "Nobody's having an easy time of it right now." She'd lost hours at her alterations job and Father was bringing home food left over from the customers at Lotus Inn.

"Don't worry," he said to us. "This stuff is hardly touched. It's like I cooked it up just for us."



One day Mag and I came home from school and opened our front door to a glorious display of every toy I'd ever brought home, laid out neatly on the coffee table and the carpet around it. There were more than I had remembered: a whole army of robots, countless Lego pieces, cars and trucks and airplanes, pots of model paint I never even opened. It was our father's day off; he had decided to do some laundry, and had taken the sheets and bed skirts off of our beds. Mag and I stood in the doorway, dumb with fear. The moment itself was an empty cavern, awaiting the crash and torrent of a violent wave. I felt as if someone had blown out a candle inside of me.

Our father sat in the dining room, drinking from a glass. Next to the glass was a bottle of vodka, its cap missing.

"What I want to know," he said, his words slurring, "is which one of you took Mr. Zhang's pen."

It took me a while to locate the pen amidst the gleaming toys. My eyes rolled

around until I saw it sitting in the middle of the coffee table, next to a G.I. Joe. It occurred to me then the Chinese engraving must've been Mr. Zhang's name.

"Dad," I said.

"Which one of you took Mr. Zhang's pen?" he repeated. "Which one of you wrecked my restaurant?"

"It's just a pen, Dad," Mag said. His voice shook.

"I couldn't understand for the life of me what Mr. Zhang was going on about," Father said, standing up. He gestured around him with the glass. "That talk about trust and faith. What was not to trust? Now, I get it. Close the door. Come here, both of you."

We walked slowly into our home. Mag closed the door behind him. Our mother was still at work, and I prayed for her to come home early. She could find us and call for the ambulance.

"Miracle," he said softly. "I know it was you. Do you know how our lives would be different without you? Do you know how much work your mother and I go through just to see you wreck it for us?"

"Mr. Zhang couldn't have known," I said. "He could've lost his pen anywhere."

He set his drink on the table and gestured for me to come closer.

"But Miracle," he said, "that's not what happened. You took it."

I took a step closer. He picked up the wooden chair he had been sitting in and swung it around in a great big arc. One of the legs caught me on the left cheek, shattering the world into darkness. Then everything glittered, sparkled, and for an instant everything was glamorous, even the pain that had enveloped my face. I was on the floor, and I became aware of shouting—Mag was shouting at our father to stop. Father was shouting louder, something about duties and responsibilities. There were more blows from his hands, but I didn't feel them; they were feather touches compared to the chair. I saw visions of our supposed destinies: Mag and I, strong and tall as anyone, peaceful and proud. Was this just another blip, another hiccup, and I'd go on to do a half-respectable job living up to my name? Perhaps my spiritual guardian was satisfied, floating up by the ceiling with Mag's and our parents' guardians, watching it all like we watched Wile E. Coyote and saying, "See, he's okay. He's just learning, is all."

Suddenly everything was quiet, except for a scratchy rasp. Mag was crumpled against the wall, his breathing shallow and his chest barely heaving. Our father stood over him, saying, "Mag? Mag?"

Father picked up Mag in one motion and went to the door. He paused and turned around. "Hurry," he said. "Your brother needs you."

The hospital was fifteen minutes away, but that time it took us just a few blinks to get there. I cupped my face with my hand, feeling a hot pulse where the chair had connected. The air smelled of dirt and alcohol. Mag lay in the backseat, strapped in with two seatbelts, wheezing slowly. Our mother would be home soon, her eyes sore from squinting all day, and she'd be welcomed home by a roomful of action figures and other toystuff, and a toppled chair in the midst of it. She'd call our names out in confusion, and hear no answer. Meanwhile our father was turning down side streets and alleys and gunning the gas pedal. I pictured Mr. Zhang in his factory, looking over shiny gadgets and gizmos, a new pen in his hands. This one would be silver. Something different.

My punishment was not over yet, would not be over for quite some time. But for that short while, sitting in our speeding, swaying car, I was safe, nestled in my own thoughts.

At the hospital Father looked at me and said, "Never mind. Stay here." Then he rushed off to the emergency room with Mag in his arms.

I pulled down the sun visor mirror. One side of my face was swollen and already turning a light purple. The skin stung when I touched it.

Outside, the parking lot was cooling down in the lazy afternoon sun. I stepped out of the car and traced my steps around the perimeter. A couple of kids were out, running on the street, shouting back and forth. From a distance, any call sounds like your name. An old woman sat on a bench on the far side of the parking lot, feeding pigeons. I kept walking, keeping my head down and one hand cupped over my left cheek.

A crow landed ten feet ahead of me and tucked in its wings. I softened my step. Inside the hospital, a doctor was working to expand Mag's lungs again. Our father was beside him, his alcoholic buzz fading like a lost love. His mother had wished for him to raise a family with many children, a whole clan, but Mag and I would be all the kids he would have. Our mother was home, putting each toy into a plastic bag. Her own mother had wished for her to marry someone with a large house and great wealth. She chose a poorly-educated line chef instead. Many years later, after our father died from heart disease, after I finally settled down with a job as an electrician, after Mag married and began raising his own two kids, our mother would move back to Taiwan to live with her mother. "What

has happened to this place?” she would say then. “It’s a good thing we raised Miracle and Magnificence in America.”

Why do parents insist on prescribing destinies for their children, when they can’t live up to their own? I walked closer to the crow, taking slow, tiny steps. A jet flew overhead, tracing a steamy line in the brilliant sky. The crow paused in its herky-jerky walk and opened its beak. A foot away, I leaned down and reached out, and then, with a quick grab, surprising myself and the crow, caught it with my hands. It turned its head, looking from side to side, its flinty eyes the same color as its feathers. The faint warmth of it reminded me of the times I held one of Father’s pork buns. Down the street a mother called out for one of her boys. “Miracle! Miracle!” it sounded like she was saying.

“You’re beautiful,” I said to the crow. “You’re a beautiful, beautiful thing.”