The train pulled out of Changsha in the early evening and headed north and made its way slowly across the fields of Hubei province where gelded cattle waded through the paddies or stood in the water and watched you pass. Tom and Paul had already arrived in Beijing by that point but they had yet to message you as they had promised to let you know where they were staying and although you had been there once before with your Mandarin class in high school you did not know the city well. They had been in Guangzhou for two weeks to attend the region's first international beer festival and from the way it sounded in their e-mails things had gone smoothly. During their absence they had left you in charge of the office—you!—and notwithstanding your hesitancy to assume a managerial role over your peers the time had passed quickly, thanks to Yusheng.

You had the cabin to yourself but for an old man and his grandchildren. They had ensconced themselves in one of the lowermost bunks upon boarding the train in Yueyang, eating and laughing and pointing at things through the window, speaking in a dialect that you did not understand. From where you lay up next to the ceiling their conversation was audible but by no means annoying and from time to time you would put down your e-book to eavesdrop on them, trying to decipher what they said. Nine years of Mandarin and still you were forced to guess. What an impossible fucking language. But it was a challenge to you and one that you viewed as a game and how many foreigners were there anyway who could speak it as well as you? Tom and Paul tended to overstate your proficiency but you had an ear for it, that much was true. For so long you had simply drifted through life with your head down but now you were constantly on display and although you hadn't thought that you would like it, you did. You were talented in China. You had never been that much good at anything, really, back home.

You admired Tom and Paul in the manner of an orphan raised by his brothers, the age difference enough to warrant your respect but insufficient to motivate fear. That your own father had said more or less that he had disowned you certainly played into the bond as well but when it came down to it you just liked them—they were supportive and did not judge you—and for whatever reason they liked you too. They'd flown up from Guangzhou the day before to meet with the owner of a microbrewery in Sanlitun and his Chinese wife who was from Changsha and while the officially stated purpose of the visit was to discuss terms of a distributor's license that would allow your company to bring the couple's beer back to Hunan you suspected Tom of having other reasons for planning the meeting since he had slept with the woman before. What they needed you for were the negotiations later in the week at the General Administration of Customs, not because the cadres there could not speak English but because Tom and Paul were wary of getting fooled. Since boarding the train you had been focused on your book but each time you got to the end of a chapter you would put it down and take out your vocabulary and study it and brainstorm question after question of what you thought they might ask: excise duty, import quota, value added tax—all things you barely understood or had interest for in English but forced yourself to memorize now until you had them down pat. You were in no rush. You had all night. Paul had apologized to you about being unable to afford another plane ticket but you had been fine with it and assured him that you were willing to go by train, just so long as you had a bunk, remembering the years when you and your friends had been enrolled at Hu Da and would take the overnight hard seat to Shanghai on long weekends to party with a guy that your classmate knew who was somehow famous and blow off steam. Having endured that

before you felt as though you'd earned a sleeper by now. You enjoyed the feeling of being in transit, the feeling of being alone.

In Wuhan you stopped to offload passengers and take a host of new ones on and it was not until the young man shinnied up the ladder and started shouting at you over your shoes that you realized his complaints were directed at you. He had some kind of musical instrument over one shoulder and although his hair was blonde at the ends it was starting to grow back dark at the roots and as you looked at him and he showed you his ticket you listened to what he said: he had reserved the top bunk. You inspected his ticket in the dim light of the cabin, everything cast in an orange shadow that effected a worn-out look. The paper was crumpled and barely legible but you were able to use the glow from the screen of your cell phone to make it out. As he tapped at the writing impatiently you followed his finger—thin as a scallion—and there it was:

上

Shang. *Up. Quite possibly the easiest of all Chinese characters, a crude ideogram that had gone unchanged for nearly three thousand years. You referenced your own ticket and there it was,* xia, *the same character pointing down, and as you apologized and made up the bedding he waited in silence. He did not ask you where you were from. Once you'd climbed down and arranged yourself under the window you turned to look over at the old man and his grandchildren. Both of the kids were huddled behind their grandfather like a pair of skittish foals: frightened, yet curious—accustomed to the dark. You smiled at them and raised one hand, then nodded at the man.*

Nimen hao.

The old man encouraged them to answer but they did not. Turning back around to face you he smiled and said in what sounded like an admission of guilt that they were shy. You assured him and the children both that you had been too. Just then a cart rolled by in the hallway and the attendant behind it called out what she was selling and looked in and when her eyes alighted on you she dimpled and asked you in English if you wanted to buy any food. No, thank you, you told her in Mandarin. Xiexie, wo bu yao. *She instructed you to let her know if you ended up changing your mind, still speaking in perfect English, and you replied to her in even better Mandarin that you had eaten a large meal before getting on:* Wo chufa zhiqian yijing chi le yi dun dacan. *The two of you flirted back and forth like this for a while but neither of you was willing to revert to your language first and prior to moving on she asked you where you were planning to detrain and you told her in Beijing. When you asked her if she would be staying in the capital, however, she simply grinned at you and left. The old man commented on your Mandarin:* Ni putonghua shuo de hen liuli. *You pointed after the girl, sighing dramatically: Apparently, not fluent enough.*

Once again the train departed the station but by that point it was night and as you lay back and looked out the window you watched the wires strung up by the trackside rise and fall against the sky. Like heartbeats on a monitor. You placed a palm over your chest to feel the rhythm there, counting each pulse impassively like a physician or a nurse. Now that it was dark and you'd made it outside of the city the stars had begun to shine through and in the distance the hills raced by on the horizon beneath the light of a crescent moon. The countryside bathed in a silver mantle, the firmament boundless above. How come it's

never this beautiful back home? *you remember thinking. But if you were being completely honest with yourself, you knew that it was.*

The old man left you to your reading until you arrived in Xiaogan but once he had tucked the children in he looked up and offered you a tangerine and asked you where you were from. When you told him America he asked you why you had decided to leave and it took you a moment to articulate a response even though you had been asked this question before. He was sitting on the edge of the bunk opposite you with his grandchildren asleep behind him and his neck was bent forward beneath the berth above like that of the farmer he told you he was. You asked him where he planned to sleep since you could not imagine him climbing up to the top but he told you that he was not tired and that in any event they would be getting off soon. You heard the musician shift above you and wondered whether or not he was listening too. The old man rose and held out a cigarette. Ni hui bu hui chou yan? *he asked. Can you smoke?*

You considered the children, breathing peacefully in the dark. Had you been back in the West you wouldn't have even had to think twice but this was China and things were different and, besides, the man appeared to be nice. You wanted to keep things as friendly as possible. A metal ashtray supplied by the train company clattered on the table between you and as a result of its presence there you felt at least partially absolved. It wasn't as if the children were going to avoid the smoke otherwise, you knew. You sat up and accepted the cigarette and thanked the man, then allowed him to light it for you with a match. After shaking it out he looked up and offered one to the musician but the boy turned it down.

What do you think of China? he asked. He had darkly tanned skin from his time in the sun and a large mole under his mouth from which a few hairs sprouted. You could see his reflection in the window, gray smoke pluming in the glass.

Juda, *you said. It's enormous. You knew you were being insipid but you also knew it was a good response. He grinned, nodding in agreement. You asked him the ages of his grandchildren:* Tamen liang ge ji sui?

He held up his fingers to tell you the answers as if you were just another foreigner who did not understand. The boy was seven, the girl three. They were going to visit one of their relatives in Henan. He looked you over, then asked you which country you preferred to live in, China or the U.S.? Ni juede zhu zai zhongguo haishi meiguo hao?

You grinned and drew in on your cigarette and felt the nicotine hit you before you exhaled and you were just about to answer him when suddenly a voice started shouting at him from the hall. It was a middle-aged man in glasses who spoke in perfectly enunciated erhua *and he had this look in his eyes that was venomous, to use the right word. What the hell are you doing? he asked.* Ni tama'er de zai gan sha? *There are little children in here!* Zhe'er you xiaohai'er! *You can't smoke!* Bu ke chouyan! *From where you lay in the back of your bunk he could not see you—or at least you hoped—and as a result of the noise the children both awoke and started crying. By now the old man was shouting too.*

As they argued you stubbed out your cigarette and scootched back farther into the bunk and watched the children watch their grandfather as they continued to wail and sob and cough. The man in the glasses had moved on to deliver a rather lengthy and pedantic speech about the effects of secondhand smoke on the lungs of children and although there was an enormous amount of condescension in his voice you knew that he was right. A few

other men had gathered outside in the hallway. They stood off to the side with their hands behind their backs, listening to the dispute. The criticism went on for some time and there seemed to be no end to the lecture in sight until at last the old man gave in and smothered his cigarette and returned to his bunk. You rode in silence for the next hour, reflecting on what you had done.

The man in the glasses had been assigned to your compartment too and this made for an awkward rest of the ride. He climbed up into the bed across from the musician and took out his computer and fell to work. The only sound in the cabin was that of his typing, that and the banging of the couplings between the cars. You tried to refocus on your book but owing to your conscience and the clatter and the man's silent judgment you could not and after a while you went out and purchased a can of Qingdao *from one of the pushcarts in the hall. You nursed it miserably in the vestibule as the gangway connection bobbed up and down, the beer flat and warm and nearly tasteless compared to what you had become accustomed to since moving to Changsha. As if to spite you there was a man squatting on his heels against the wall, smoking with his eyes closed. When he made it down to the end of his cigarette he opened them up and goggled at you, then offered you his pack. To your surprise they were* Chunghwas*—one of the most expensive brands in the country, favored by the party elite—but this time you said no. You threw out the rest of your beer and went back to your cabin. Thankfully the man was not there.*

The old man and his grandchildren got off at the next stop but the old man did not say anything to you or even so much as turn to look in your direction as he hazed the kids out. You reviewed your vocabulary, dividing the cards into stacks, then reviewed the ones you had missed. Right, wrong. Right, right, wrong. Right, right, right, right, wrong, right,

wrong. Wrong. You reshuffled the deck and reviewed them again. Even though there were a few words and phrases that continued to give you trouble you found the Boolean nature of what you were doing reassuring. You did not mind being told that you were wrong. On the other hand it was frustrating when you missed the ones that you knew. You should've known that*, you said to yourself.* There's no excuse.

The man in the glasses returned a while later dressed in his pajamas and carrying a dopp kit under one arm and when he entered your eyes met and he asked you if you had any more need of the light. You had just started to read again and the plot had just begun to pick up but you were in no position to oppose him and when his arm rose questioningly toward the light switch beside the door you nodded deferentially at him to tell him that he could. He climbed up in the darkness and took off his glasses, eventually settling in. Once it was quiet—but before he could have fallen asleep—you spoke.

Xiexie ni zhiqian ma wo*, you said.*

He did not answer. You listened to the wheels of the rail car as they clattered over the tracks, the train being shunted from one line to the next. He rustled under his sheets—or was that the boy above you? Then he let out his breath.

Bu shi ma ni*, he said. You weren't the one I was scolding.*

Still. I should have known better.

It's OK. It's not your fault. They were his cigarettes. His kids.

You lay there for a moment, considering his logic.

Where are you from? he asked.

America.

Hao guojia. *Good country. What brings you to China?*

I sell beer in Changsha.

Oh. I thought that you were a student.

I used to be, you said. I studied Chinese for several years at Hunan University.

No wonder your Mandarin is so good.

No, it's not, you told him. Wo hai zai xue. *A moment passed in which you felt your humility curry favor with the man and you jumped at the opportunity to take advantage of the situation. Again, you said, I'm sorry about before.*

He grunted in response this time. You waited for him to continue the conversation but despite your silence he did not and after about four or five minutes you reached down and felt through your baggage and fished out your passport from the dark. You wedged it beneath your pillow, then closed your eyes and tried to sleep. There was something about this country that kept you honest—more honest than back home—but whatever it was you could not say. Beyond your window the moon hung perilously over the earth like a scythe above a chair and the wheels of the train continued to rattle as they jumped over the gaps between the rails, providing you a rhythm by which to settle your breathing, clapping like castanets.