

The Crowned

The day I met the oracle was my 30th birthday, and an oracle—provider of answers—was what I needed more than anything. I guess that’s why I decided that’s what she was.

I was in my third month as an EFL teacher in a Taipei buxiban (say *boo-shee-bahn*), an after-school school that parents make their kids go to when their real school day is over. In our buxiban, they learned everything they’d learned before, only this time in English, and from people who might just have the bare minimum of teaching qualification (i.e. me.) Most of my students would rather have been home by the time I greeted them for their lessons. This was fair. I would rather have been anywhere else than teaching them.

But there I was.

In the break between my two classes, I found a construction paper crown sitting on my backpack in the teacher’s office. Across the front, in pastel balloon letters, it read “Happy Birthday Brian!” The band was covered in sprawling, spidery signatures. One was compact and adult: “Alice.”

Alice Wu was a kindergarten teacher, and she was kind of cute and really nice. The fact that she had put together this crown for me gave me a rush of tranquil joy. I guess you could say she’d made me feel *special*. I put the crown on and snickered at my reflection in the window— a man who had only ever lived in his mom’s guestroom or his dad’s basement before moving to a hemisphere where girls didn’t think that made you a loser. A man in his best shirt: a dingy, moob-accentuating polo bought for him by his mother in a previous decade. A man tall, fattish, and balding.

But youngish and crowned.

“I’m the king of the world,” I said to the head elementary teacher, a Canadian guy named Levi.

“Of course you are,” he replied, almost smiling. Then, putting on his Boss face, he shuffled and folded the newspaper he was reading. “So hey, buddy,” he sighed, “I’ve got to ask. How’s the new point/demerit system working?” Levi always called me *buddy* or *big guy* when he was trying to help me not suck at my job. He did this so frequently that even my students had started calling me *buddy*.

I hedged. “Eh. To be determined. The kids are still getting used to it.”

Truth was: they’d have had a better chance to get used to it if I employed it more, but it was a black-and-white system that required me to allot points for behavior I deemed *good* and demerits for *bad*, and I had a hard time determining on the fly what was objectively bad and not just healthy, annoying youthful spirit. Was speaking Chinese in English class as bad as pushing in line? Should Timothy Chang get a demerit for bolting full-speed down the hall and running smack-dab into the ass of T.A. Mary when it was either run or get tackled by (not so) little Bruce Li? Would it not show the boys there is no justice in this world if—as Levi had suggested—both Timothy and Bruce receive a demerit for this event? There *is* no justice, but should we not perhaps craft some semblance of it in the microculture of our buxiban—show the kids how things *should* be, so they have something to aim for? Or would that be so contrived as to render a teachable moment null?

“He really hurt me,” was T.A. Mary’s input. She meant emotionally. Upon rebounding from her gluteus, Timothy’s face had lit up like someone plugged him in, and he’d crowed “WOW, you have a BIG butt!”

“Bruce is a bullying asshole,” I’d countered.

“So is Timothy.” She was almost crying.

True enough. It was Timothy who’d started the class calling me *buddy*, but then again, did doing so not indicate he had a tremendous sense of irony and a healthy rebelliousness toward an inept authority figure?

I don’t know what to believe about anything. Never have. Nothing stays still long enough for me to see what it really is and what I ought to do about it. My inability to define and decide extended to everyone in my life, from my students to my girlfriend, Yun. Yesterday, I’d been doing my vacillating in a sample rocking chair in IKEA’s baby section, researching “abortion Taiwan” on my phone with the screen turned away from her. She wanted my opinion on our unborn child’s future bed. The Blåskrika convertible crib-with-changer or the Dröm Sött crib in white?

“It’s important to know what those names mean in English,” I’d told her. I was always saying absurd shit like that to Yun or throwing out words I knew were beyond the level of her basic English. She was my first girlfriend, and being inscrutable was the only way I could think of to make my personality attractive. Yun’s responses only encouraged me; she always pretended to understand. Like me, she had an inferiority complex. She’d never felt pretty, and her family was poor and came from a peasant town. Some people are proud of humble beginnings like that, but not her. She thought intelligence was all she had.

I tried not to look at her as she ran her fingers over the beds' minimalist Scandinavian contours. Her maternalism repelled me. The doctor said she was only five weeks pregnant. Why was she shopping for a baby bed so early in gestation? She was neurotic, that was why. I didn't need that kind of neurosis in my life for the next eighteen years; I had my own to deal with. Plus, as I reasoned, no woman and child needed a baby daddy as flaky and weak as me.

Baby daddy was as far as I'd gotten in referring to myself by what I was presently going to be. *Father* was too momentous a word, too archetypal for a dithering fuck-up. *Baby daddy*. Like I was some cracker on an afternoon talk show where Yun would scream at me and the audience chant, "Make him PAY! Make him PAY!"

Five weeks pregnant. Yelp said there was an OB-GYN clinic within walking distance of our apartment where a "very nice" doctor could do it for her. I wanted that for Yun—someone nice and gentle to erase me from her—when I disappeared.

Then guess what happened in that IKEA rocking chair: I blinked and wanted to be a father. Realizations—or what felt like them—came pouring in:

- The challenge would motivate me to be a better man. It would save me by making the world's real right answers stand out.
- My kid could tell me what Grandpa, Yun's severe, traditional father, was saying about me. (My guess: "He is asking why the hell you've never bothered to learn Chinese." Answer: "Well, kiddo, it's hard. All the words sound the same.")
- Yun's maternalism? Reassuring. Her neuroticism? My mistake; it was *pragmatism*. *Frugality*. The beds were on sale. Speaking of beds, the Blåskrika two-in-one was advertised as a space-saver, but I didn't like the idea of the poopy

situation being so close to the sleeping situation. But the other bed? According to Google, Dröm Sött meant “Sweet Dreams,” and I thought IKEA could have done better than an easy sleep cliché like that. You’ve got to have principles about where you put your money.

It was the bed problem that threw me. It zapped my confidence. I blinked again and fumbled my desire to father. I juggled this desire, dropped it, lunged for it as it disappeared through the cracks. Aching with its loss, I’d put my phone away and told Yun to leave the beds for another day and let’s go get some meatballs.

Now, in the teacher’s office, Levi was pointing an emphatic finger at me and saying, “Consistency. That’s your ticket, big guy. Lay out the consequences and follow through. Kids make a show of hating consequences, but they hate it more when there aren’t any. They’re the exact opposite of adults like that.”

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Five minutes before my evening class started, I went to the door of Alice Wu’s classroom and looked through the glass. Elementary was only half through, but the kindergarten’s school day was over. Impossibly tiny people wearing even tinier backpacks waited, compliant and smiling, in a line in front of Alice, who stood with her back to the door, ready to lead them downstairs to the pick-up area. I was jealous. How could people be so small and eager to please?

I knocked on the glass. When Alice turned, I pointed to my crown and threw her a thumbs-up. She beamed and waved with both hands. Then she opened the door and, with big, exaggerated gestures, directed the tiny people in chanting, ‘Haaaappy Biiiiirthday, Teacher Briiiiiian!’

This all delayed her by thirty-five seconds. That's accurate. I've replayed it my head a hundred times.

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I was still wearing Alice's crown five minutes after *Happy Birthday, Teacher Brian*, when my evening students opened their phonics books for a lesson on the short-i sound. The sight of a crown on grumpy Teacher Brian's balding pate while he drew a cartoon pig on the board sent them into hysterics. I did look foolish, and I knew I should take it off for the benefit of their education if not my dignity, but its presence over my troubled brain was a novel element to the day that made life somehow less terrible. Nothing like a Zoloft or a few shots of whiskey, but better than nothing.

"Say 'pig,'" I told the kids.

"Peeg," they intoned.

I shook my head. "*Pig.*"

"*Peeg.*"

I nodded. "That's better."

With a magician's flourish, I gave the pig its curly tail. This went over so well that I added a fedora. The kids cracked up. It was their delight at this illustration that saved them from noticing—or maybe finding significant—the crash and thud on the street outside.

Once I got them working in groups, I ambled to the window and glanced down, keeping my movements languid and coincidental. Any sign there was something out there more riveting

than phonics, and they'd be out of their seats, noses to the glass, faster than you can say "shitty classroom management." I first looked out toward a nearby construction site, but the action was happening further inward, near the front door of the buxiban. A crowd was running around, motioning to each other to stand back. In the spaces between their bodies, I got a clear look at a scene Biblical in its cruelty: a huge, gray slab broken in pieces on the cement and a woman lying face down between the two biggest chunks in a puddle of blood, her black hair fanned out around her head.

A groan formed in my throat. I turned it into a cough and looked away from the window—the kids must not look out there-- but it was impossible to unsee the image. I could only impersonate the man I was before I'd looked outside, and I kept up the act even when an ashen-faced T.A. Mary rushed in and told the kids break had come early tonight. Just in time. An ambulance siren started to wail just as the last kid swept out.

"Keep them out of this room," she whispered to me.

In the elementary common area, Levi waved me over to a quiet alcove near the elevator. "A tile fell off our building," he whispered, tapping his upper lip, "and it hit Alice." He swallowed and jerked his chin.

"*Our Alice?*" I asked. "*Kindergarten Alice?*"

He nodded and stared out at the kids, his shock and silence an ugly thing next to their joy. It was red bean soup day, their favorite snack. They flashed each other smiles, showed big gaps between new teeth still too big for their faces. I thought of buildings missing tiles, and blood and broken granite under a fan of black hair. Unequivocal things.

When I found my voice, I asked, “Well damn, man. Is she okay?” and Levi turned to me, his eyes bulging like a frog’s and sagging like a bloodhound’s. A man gone animal. I took a step away from that look.

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Police cars and news vans choked the street in front of the buxiban, so the staff and I did a rushed exit out the backdoor like a bunch of sad celebrities. After a few stunned, despairing looks at each other, we parted wordlessly.

Alone in the bright night, I gulped and found my mouth dry and tasting of decay. I stopped at a 7-11 around the corner for a pack of gum. Last minute, I added a bottle of whiskey to the purchase and walked with it through side streets and night markets, ducking through bright lights thrown out by food stalls and lingering in residential shadows.

Suicidal ideation is no stranger to me, but tonight I was acting like Mr. Wants-to-Live. When cars rumbled by, I clutched at the walls of buildings, fingernails scraping grout as if seeking purchase. When there was an overhang, I lunged under it to avoid the edge of facades. You never knew; Alice sure hadn’t. Debris falls off buildings more often than it should in Taiwan. Warnings stuck to the sides of older structures tell you to beware of falling tiles. The signs show a cartoon man-in-danger running from a brick. The man-in-danger has the body shape of a vitamin capsule or a sausage: no neck, no distinguishable human parts besides grimace and briefcase. Weird juxtaposition of caricature and seriousness. They want the message to be clear without making the viewer feel too targeted. *This building is the kind of building that shits bricks, not you’re the kind of person who dies today.*

Alice, I thought. Alice, you were the kind of person who dies today.

A motor scooter trundling along beside me honked once, warning me of its presence, and again, inexplicably, I jumped and leaped to safety. Watching the taillights move away, I realized it wasn't that I wanted to live, I just didn't want to *die slowly*, didn't want time to psyche myself into wanting life.

I squeezed into a narrow alley and snuggled up close to a selfish thought against the wall with the whiskey. *There had been a granite ticket out of my troubles this evening, a guaranteed fast train to death, and I'd missed it. It had hit the wrong person.* Then—less selfish—I asked myself what it would have taken for Alice to have not been present for the tile, to have been somewhere else entirely—already down the street, for instance. Why *Alice Wu*, why *then*?

I pictured her sprawled on the pavement in blood and did a mental rewind on the image. The blood retracted. Alice's head wound closed. She rose to her feet as the granite tile zipped back up the face of the building and snapped into place in the gap beneath the 4th floor AC unit. Alice then glided backwards through the front doors into the pick-up area, said goodbye to her tiny students, walked back up the stairs with them, and had them chant "Happy Birthday Teacher Brian" to *me* as they waited in a line in front of the door, ready to go downstairs.

When I subtracted my part in this history, the tile still dropped, but Alice had already walked away with her life.

I possibly cried. I may have said, "I'm so sorry," and if I did say this, I was talking to a lot of *you*'s. No, I *definitely* cried, and I walked more and drank more. Did I fall asleep in an alley or did I just sit there for a while, butt against the wall? Don't know.

I do know I stumbled at last around the edge of a wall and faced the neon lights of a multi-floor McDonald's. *Eat*, I thought. *Smother the guilt*. Very drunk. Very. I entered, spoke,

did something with money, and emerged from the glowing menu to find myself at a table between an old woman with a pile of papers and a flock of teenaged boys in identical blue sweat suits hanging motionless over phones. I took a bite of burger, squeezed a paper napkin, turned on my phone. The screen lit up with text messages: one from my mom (“Happy birrrrrthday, Jelly bean!!!! Miss you!!!! So lonely here without you!!!!”) and two from Yun (“Happy birthday!” “Where r you??”)

Oh God. Yun.

Leave tonight, I thought. *Buy a plane ticket or get yourself on standby*. Luggage was no issue. I would go back to my dad’s place and start over. No. My mom’s. She’d be easier to convince. Convince of what, I didn’t know.

From somewhere to my left, a voice began to speak in Chinese over an intercom. It reminded me of an airport, which reminded me I was leaving, which reminded me why. *I caused the death of a good human being today, and now I’m deserting my pregnant girlfriend.*

No no no. I’d hit an impasse: I couldn’t stay in Taipei, but I also couldn’t leave. Not like this—not as broken as I was. Running away wasn’t starting over; starting over was what you did when you’d finished sealing up your problems. You couldn’t start Round 2 until you’d learned something from Round 1. I had learned nothing. I had only accumulated more questions.

I closed my eyes and addressed all these questions--*literally figuratively* addressed them--and directed them toward their recipients.

- To Alice: Can you hear this? What is it like to be dead? Are you pissed at me?
- To Yun: Who do you imagine me to be? Would you blame yourself if I left?

- To my students: Will you remember me by the animals I draw and not the confusion and frustration I cause?
- To me: Do you have low self-esteem, or are you just honest with yourself? Are you selfish, or are you just making sure you don't screw yourself over in case you DO have low self-esteem?

There was even one

- To my mom: Why did you ask ME whether you should divorce dad? Why would you fucking do that to a nine-year-old?

Too many questions. Too many cracks in me. If I knew the right answers, I would know what actions to take. But the right answers were probably complex and unfixed, subject to the vagaries of human mood. Worse, there were probably a *variety* of them. Still, I couldn't help but feel that the *real* right answers were out there somewhere, hiding at the bottom of some opaque, scorching-hot stew of variables.

The phone fell from my hands; my forehead fell into them. Something tumbled from my head onto the table—the crown! I had forgotten I was wearing it. I had bumbled through town in a tragedy, costumed for comedy.

I should have been the object of attention at that moment, a drunk foreign loser frowning at his paper crown, but the blue-suited teen boys were taking furtive glances at the old woman on the other side of me. She was the intercom. I mean, there *was* no intercom. Do McDonalds even have intercoms?

What I had taken at first glance to be papers spread across her table were in fact squares of cardboard with Chinese written all over in black marker. And what I had taken to be your standard, basic old Taiwanese lady was a one-in-a-million old lady in a long, lace gown with a faded stain down the front.

Her hair spoke of her mental situation even more than her intercom voice and stained dress. It was matted and dreadlocked, and it towered—I shit you not—a foot and a half over her thin, wedge-shaped face, snapping eyes and spine held with military-grade straightness throughout every step in the ritual.

The ritual went like this: she would take a bite of chicken sandwich and lower it back to her table; chew, swallow, and lecture the room in her tinny intercom voice. Then she would pick up one cardboard square of words and hold it up at a 45-degree angle from her eyes with both hands. Meanwhile, she'd peer quizzically at the occupants of the neighboring tables, be ignored, shrug one shoulder (“your loss, not mine?”) and place the cardboard back on the table in a reject pile. Repeat.

Schizophrenic, I thought, but no, that was only in the world that had no home for her to unload the plastic bags at her feet. This lady of the cardboards knew exactly what she was doing in the world inside her head. Whoever she thought she was—an oracle or a queen, a teacher or a priestess—she had authority and answers, and I needed one of her cardboards. In the world on this side of her insanity, on this side of my intoxication, she and I were one glass wall away from each other. She could see me in my entirety, all my variables: my living, my dead and my unborn. I would learn something from her tonight.

When it came my turn for the oracle's offer, I put my hand out. She said something in Chinese through the intercom in her mouth. I took it as, *What will you give me in return for my wisdom?* I gave her my paper crown. She stared down at this offering and said something else, something I needed to mean, *This'll do. Tell me what you want to know.* I answered with the only sentence I knew how to say well: “我不知道怎么说:” *I don't know how to say it.*

But as I spoke these words, a question rang out clear in my mind, a ludicrous question, a terrible question to be focusing on when consulting an oracle.

No matter. The oracle knew what I really wanted. That was an oracle's job.

She grunted and thumbed through her stack of cardboard sheets, peering into the depths of her wisdom. She pulled out a cardboard slab, glared at it, and passed it to me.

With this cardboard in my hand, I walked through other alleys and parks and night markets, and I drank more whiskey. In each new environment, I'd stop, take out my phone, and hold it up to the words the oracle had written. Yun had once installed a free translation app for me. You point your camera at Chinese words, and, like magic, they shift to English on your screen. She'd said the sentences would come out gibberish, but a few relevant words would give me a clue as to overall meaning. She was right about the gibberish, but she hadn't known that nearly *all* the words—shoved into a computer as Chinese and regurgitated as English—would come out nonsense. And she hadn't known that, with every twitch of the hand, the shitty app shifts all the words into other words. I'm talking *pepper goblet dichotomy* morphs into *spittle recess blanket*. If you don't know the context, you can't even know which words are the relevant ones.

The oracle's answer was unreadable. *Yun*, I thought. *I need you.*

Selfish man. So selfish. Or was I only desperate? Isn't it impossible to truly be both in the same moment?

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I came home just after dawn and crawled into bed beside Yun. She sniffed and frowned but then smiled with her eyes closed and patted my head. It made me sad for her that she wasn't going to put up a fight about her future baby daddy staying out all night and coming home stinking of alcohol.

Talking too fast, I told her I'd lived through a night of hell and needed her to translate a message I'd received from a homeless schizophrenic woman who had seen through my soul.

A pause. Then Yun turned, saw the cardboard, and held out her hand. "What is that?" she asked.

It made me sad for both of us that I wasn't trying to learn her language and that I was still talking to her in mine at speeds she couldn't follow and in words she couldn't yet recognize. My fear of being understood and found stupid and disappointing was suddenly wafting from me like a booze stench. She sensed it, I thought, but what made her pretend she didn't? Pity? Sympathy? Hopelessness? Or was it—surely it couldn't be—hope?

I explained the oracle's cardboard more appropriately, and Yun held it close to her face, half-blind without her glasses. At last, she said, "She say she no house and money, and this is very....uh*difficult life*...so please reading story about she bad luck." She lowered the cardboard and explained, "I think she cannot inside the restaurant begging for the money, so she do like this."

I thought of the way the oracle had held each cardboard up in McDonald's and how no one had looked at her. Sad. But she wasn't an oracle. She'd been begging. *Begging*. I had been begging, too. And for some reason, I had received.

I stood up. "I have to go back out."

Yun's eyes suddenly showed their whites. In the moment before she forced her face back into its usual expression of composure, I glimpsed how much effort it must have taken her to wear this calmness on a daily basis.

"It's okay," I told her. I kissed her head. "I'll be back."

I walked along the road in front of our apartment, cars zooming past, and thought about the woman with the cardboards. I had believed her to be magic, so how stupid that a question as mundane as *What crib should we get?* had jumped into my mind when prompted.

On second thought, not stupid: *boring*.

No, not boring: Responsible. Practical.

There they are, buddy, I thought. Good adjectives for you. You want them to be yours, and you need them, so just take them and put them on your head and accept the consequences.

I went to IKEA and found the baby section. I ran my hands over the Dröm Sött crib. I was warming to it. "Sweet dreams," it meant. Blåskrika meant "blue jay." A relevant cliché was luckier than a non sequitur. No child should dream their first dreams in a bird.