

Winston Wu, Purveyor of the Future

Winston Wu, Purveyor of the Future, is spinning around in his swiveling chair. It's the usual business; those who work on his floor have long grown accustomed to the occasional vortex in the northwest corner. Several times per day, he rotates like this for many minutes at a time, sloshing his cerebral cortex around in his cranial cavity. The high angular momentum jogs his brain, he wants to believe, gets the sparks flying. By now he's already tried everything else, from journaling to mild, naturally-grown hallucinogenic substances to silent meditation retreats. These sudden and desperate lifestyle changes disturbed Winston's cat and roommate, Doris, who preferred the steady routine to which she had been accustomed in her fourteen years as Winston's companion, causing her to develop indigestion. Winston lay awake at night on his sagging mattress, listening to Doris' stomach grumbling in a sad and betrayed way, on top of the usual clanging of the self-installed air conditioning unit, feeling so guilty that he finally gave it all up and resorted to vigorous swiveling during the work day. It's not like anything had been working anyway. It's hopeless; he can't write one more fortune.

Winston Wu has been writing, *creating*, the future for thirty-two years, converting the nebulous idea of the yet-to-be into the accessible form of printed words on white slips of paper. He holds the esteemed position of the Fortune Writer for San Francisco Noodle Co., the largest fortune cookie producer in the United States, which makes him the only fortune writer for essentially all of America. From the bowels of its factory in the south of the city, San Francisco Noodle Co. churns out 5.2 million fortune cookies every day, born from industrial-sized vats of nefariously yellow batter, oozed out through a series of metal sheets that form, re-form, heat, and re-heat them like a mother's womb. While still warm and impressionable, they're folded by a metallic arm around white slips of paper, becoming vehicles for written messages. They're wrapped in plastic, loaded onto trucks that weave through the web of the highway system, and are distributed to 33,000 of America's Chinese restaurants, where they're unwrapped, broken open, crumbled to pieces, their slips of paper read and chuckled at by forty-year old accountants taking their children out to dinner, left on soy-sauce-stained tablecloths, swept up and taken out with the garbage. Over eighty percent of America's fortune cookies begin their journeys at San

Francisco Noodle Co., and Winston Wu's words are lovingly placed into each one. This makes Winston Wu the undependable, yet omnipresent, oracle of the modern era, distributing his slings and arrows to at least a hundred million people. And he's not only a custodian of the future, but also produces small messages of wisdom, or at least the flaccid wisdom of vagueness. He's America's invisible prophet.

Back when he started this job, thirty-two years ago, he wrote over ten fortunes per day, over three hundred fortunes every month. He liked to picture the future as a great ocean in which he was swimming, where small predictions and bits of wisdom floated, and all he had to do was reach out and grab them. Now, he writes fortunes at the miserably low rate of just one or two per month, and he's still not sure if it's because his brain is getting old and worn, or if it's because he's written close to every fortune that could ever possibly be written. He's feels as if he's bumping up to the edge of what once seemed to him a boundless infinity. Of course there will always be more fortunes to write; the future is endless, he once thought. Now he knows that the human imagination can produce around 100,000 fortunes, a number that looks much smaller when it's already been completed. He's done it all: the empty platitudes ("Lend your money, lose a friend"), the optative blessings ("May you live a long life!"), the vague predictions ("A dream you have will come true"). Of course, he's not given license to write anything negative. No one wants to crack open a fortune cookie at the end of a hearty meal of Mongolian Beef and Lo Mein and read "The person you love will betray you." Although sometimes he wishes he could say exactly that, maybe warn a person or two, but it's not in his job description. He ends every fortune with a ☺. That's his trademark. It's important always to be optimistic. But now he's exhausted the realms of love, happiness, hard work, perseverance, friendship, generosity, life skills, and, of course, the ever-looming, invisible future. Now he simply can't think of another thing to say.

The world is changing, too. It's not as easy as writing "You will have a long and instructive journey ahead of you." The people want something more poignant, more specific. Something *relevant*, as the young people say, and every day Winston sees himself slipping further and further away from them. And the company has been giving him a hard time, too. It's not enough to be optimistic, the new CEO told him. Ever since the company changed management nine months ago, they have been giving Winston

quotas: a meager 10 fortunes a month, which thirty years ago, would have been a piece of cake, but now, of course, he cannot meet. He's started borrowing material from other sources, trying to pass it off as his own just to keep up, but every time he's done this, he's received an email from a Teddy Levine from Quality Control, whom he's never actually seen in the building and who signs off with "Cheers" at the end of his e-mails like an Englishman, which Winston is pretty sure he is not.

The emails from Teddy Levine always read:

Ha ha, nice try.

Cheers,

Teddy Levine, Quality Control

The last time he plagiarized, Winston deviously tried to send off a few lines from the Kama Sutra to be printed by the factory. To Winston's horror, Teddy Levine's email was, for once, overwhelmingly positive. It said:

Winston, my man...

I didn't know you were also a follower of the Good Book.

Nice to find another fellow on the same vibration, who understands the poetry of sexual desire.

Cheers,

Teddy Levine, Quality Control

Winston has a hard time believing that Teddy Levine understands the poetry of sexual desire, but since then Winston has never copied material again because he really doesn't want to hear any more about it, but most of all, because he gets a really odd and unpleasant feeling at Teddy Levine's calling the Kama Sutra the Good Book.

Something about plagiarizing the future feels strange, but it's either meeting the quota or losing his job, and America needs him. He thinks about all the families, who pull into the parking lots of Chinese restaurants across the country, who slide into red faux-leather booths, who drink ice-cold water

in plastic glasses, just as they used to in his mother's restaurant. He thinks of the mothers who help their children wipe their faces of orange duck sauce. He thinks of the children who crack open their fortune cookies, scattering crumbs across the table, then take Mom's and Dad's too, laughing to themselves at the messages from a kindly, wise oracle. Who will be there to make them smile at the end of the meal?

Winston considers his job the best thing that has ever happened to him. Thirty-two years ago, Winston was a twenty-five-year-old college dropout working as a waiter in his mother's restaurant on Folsom Street, when his mother's youngest brother, Richard Deng, yes, *the* Richard Deng, a local legend in the Chinese-American community, and founder and CEO of San Francisco Noodle Co., was forced to fire the company's existing Fortune Writer for instigating a physical altercation with the VP of Sales. Richard had always been impressed with Winston's quick wit and bite-sized pieces of wisdom, which he offered whenever he could no longer follow what Richard was trying to teach him about things like profit margins. Winston was the perfect man for the job, Richard exclaimed one day as he sauntered into Winston's mother's restaurant as Winston was wiping down the tables. Before Winston even had time to process the glorious news – a real job? In an office? – Richard offered him a hearty handshake and told him to show up to work on Monday. Winston's mother was thrilled that her son would be joining the fastest-growing company in the industry, one that, under Richard's forty-five years of leadership, would grow from a small fortune cookie supplier for a few local restaurants, to a behemoth that nearly monopolized the U.S. fortune cookie market.

Had Richard Deng not also been Winston's *de facto* father figure, the twenty-five-year-old, verbally gifted waiter would have been overlooked, and would likely have gone on waiting tables for the rest of his life, but an unusual circumstance had brought them together. When Winston was seven years old, his father had a sudden heart attack walking up the stairs from the basement to the kitchen of the family's restaurant. He also happened to be carrying a large vat of cooking oil. When the heart attack hit, his father fell all the way to the bottom of the stairs, but so did the oil, making the steps so slippery that the EMTs kept falling down, scattering their equipment, having to stop and gather it up, inevitably slipping and falling down again. By the time they reached him it was too late, but Richard felt the

responsibility to step up and be the father Winston needed, to show him a good example. Richard was one of those men who held the firm belief that a young boy could not grow up properly in this world without a father figure to guide him. From then on, Richard arranged with Winston's mother fortnightly visitation rights, during which he and Winston would stroll through Dolores Park, Winston with ice cream cone in hand, dripping all over himself, Richard smiling kindly, always impeccably dressed, but always kneeling down to help Winston clean up the corners of his mouth or the collar of his shirt as Winston stared in wide-eyed disbelief that this suited, gel-haired man was *really* his uncle. Even as a child, working for Richard's company was everything Winston had ever wanted.

Nine months ago, Richard became too old to run the business and decided to sell it, at which point it was discovered that, despite a steady and predictable cash flow, it had been running with vast inefficiencies for several years, making it a perfect target to get LBO'd by a middling private equity firm. Management was replaced, costs were cut, assets were sold, suppliers they had worked with for the past forty-five years were replaced by newer, and less costly, ones. Entire divisions were fired, others consolidated. People who had dedicated half their lives to San Francisco Noodle Co. left without a warning and were replaced by suit-wearing men and women from the East Coast, who knew nothing about noodles, or wontons, or fortune cookies, or any of the other flour-based Chinese food products in which San Francisco Noodle Co. specialized. All that mattered was that the fund had to keep driving up returns so that San Francisco Noodle Co. could hit the 20% IRR, and the Silverbrook Capital fund managers and limited partners could make their profits off their carried interest arrangement. This is what happens when a company is bought out, in a leveraged way. You have to Answer To Investors.

As Winston sits in his cubicle, spinning wildly in his chair, because it is already June 27th and he hasn't written a single fortune this month, his frenzied rotation is suddenly interrupted by Dennis, the intern, who peers around the side wall of his cubicle. Dennis, the intern, with the long hair that flops over his eyes and dirt under his nails, which are now tapping nervously at the cubicle wall.

"Michelle wants to see you," he mutters as he slinks off.

Winston has visible sweat stains under his armpits, his tie has been flung over his shoulder by intense rotational motion, and his hair sticks up in an astonishing assortment of angles, but the rules of corporate cleanliness and office decorum have no importance for Winston at this point. He knows why Michelle wants to see him.

With a sigh, Winston heaves himself up from his swiveling chair, clangs open the freshly-painted red door to the stairwell. In the cement stairwell, the forlorn sound of his steps echoes down all four stories of the building. He feels melodramatic, like in a movie, like one of those dwarves trudging to work.

“Winston, take a seat,” Michelle says as Winston cracks open the door to her office. She gestures magnanimously to the green faux-leather chair across from her desk with her reading glasses. Winston sits down, now frustratingly eye-level with the gold plaque on her desk that reads *Michelle Nolan, CEO*. She also has a poster on her wall that says, in cursive, turquoise letters *Live, Laugh, Love*. That would never make it into a fortune cookie. Michelle cocks her head to the side, puzzled by Winston’s bedraggled appearance.

“Winston, I think you know why I called you in today.”

He knows, but he waits for her to go on.

“I spoke to the board last week, and we’ve come to the decision that we’re going to have to let you go. I’m sorry.”

Michelle Nolan, CEO. He fixes all of his attention on the plaque because the sight of her at his uncle’s desk makes him too angry. The black paint is chipping on some of the serifs. I’ve been here for thirty-two years, Winston thinks. I’ve written thousands of fortunes. I’ve been a good employee, never caused any trouble. He doesn’t say anything because he’s afraid his voice will fail him.

“We have to keep improving constantly. There can be no weakest links. That’s how it works in business, Winston. The investors are looking for returns, and it’s my job to provide that for them.”

The bottom half of the last *n* in *Nolan* is almost completely worn off, and the shape of the comma doesn’t quite match the rest of the font.

“Unfortunately, your performance just hasn’t been up to our standards for the past several months, and we can’t keep re-using all the old fortunes. We have to be constantly iterating. It’s how we keep up in a competitive environment. We need to be *the* cutting edge in fortune cookies, the *avant-garde*, if you will.”

I won’t, Winston thinks. The letters in *CEO* are marginally bigger than the rest of the letters on the plaque.

“When your uncle owned SF Noodle it was different; he didn’t have investors to answer to.”

His uncle didn’t have a plaque that said *Richard Deng, CEO*.

“Anyway, we can offer you what I think you’ll find is a generous retirement plan. Here.” She pulls open a drawer and hands him a thick manila envelope. “Teddy Levine will be starting as the Interim Fortune Writer next week, so please pack your things and clear out your office by Friday.” She pauses for him to say something. “Do you have any questions for me?”

He takes the envelope and walks out of her office without giving her a second glance.

Well, he’s seen it coming. A man who has written all of America’s fortunes for the past thirty-two years can at least see this one for himself. Three decades have changed a lot; he can see it with his own eyes when he looks out of the third-floor windows. For thirty-two years he’s seen the view from the office change as the city grew. If the future is an ocean, he thinks, then time is like a tide that pulls new, glass buildings out of the ground, washes away the paint on warehouses, breaks windows, rusts iron. A tide that brings all these new people here in waves, newcomers who seek fortune or freedom. And those who can keep up with time’s own pace, those who can swim, well, they’ll be dragged off with the tide into new and undiscovered seas. And some people must be left behind, who, like Winston now, have become too bloated with time itself, too heavy to carry any further. Time has been cruel to Winston, too. At fifty-seven he looks older than his years, pot-bellied, with gray bags under his eyes, and a mouth that droops down at the corners. He looks as if he’s absorbed the incandescent, beige coloring of the office, in the way an octopus blends into its surroundings. He has become heavy with age, easy to leave behind. Funny for a man who tells the future, who has made a home floating on its waves, he thinks. Now he’ll be

left on dry land as the tide retreats away from him, for good and forever. Well, he doesn't know, he's just getting carried away, but he types it out anyways:

Time is like a changing tide ☺

He sends it to print and practically runs across the floor to take it off the printer, while the paper is still warm. The other employees barely glance up; they are used to his strange behavior by now. He runs down the stairwell again and as he reaches the bottom step he crashes headfirst into a man, knocking the monstrously large stack of papers from his arms and across the floor of the stairwell.

“Dude, what are you doing?” the man asks. “It's fine, I got it, no worries, brother,” he says as Winston starts to bend down to help him collect his papers. Winston turns to go. “Wait, don't go anywhere, I'm not done with you, man.” Winston stands stiffly in the corner and watches the man take his time collecting his papers. He looks at his watch. Two minutes. Finally, the man gets up, recomposed stack in one arm, and holds his hand out for Winston to shake. “Teddy Levine.”

“Winston Wu. I'm so sorry about that,” says Winston, sweaty and breathless, grabbing Teddy Levine's hand.

Teddy Levine has a hook for a nose and the scrawniest arms Winston has ever seen. He looks like one of those plucked chickens that used to hang in the window of his mother's restaurant. He wears a large amethyst crystal on a leather cord around his neck, which clashes oddly with his light blue checkered button-down. He can't be older than twenty-four.

“So you're The Winston Wu. Only respect for you, my man. Listen, looks like I got some pretty big shoes to fill. Sorry to hear about, you know, but...I think it'll be good to get some young blood in here. I have some great ideas for my new fortunes, pretty edgy. Michelle loves the new direction I'm gonna take us in...” Teddy winks.

“Uh, ok,” Winston gives him a forced smile and shuffles past him to push open the stairwell door. The last thing he wants to hear is another mention of the “Good Book.” Besides, Winston doubts it's been helping Teddy out all that much. There's only so much you can do to compensate for arms like those.

“Michelle!” he knocks quickly on her door. “I think I have something that you'll like!”

He hands her his sheet of paper, waiting proudly.

“That's pretty good. Thanks, Winston. We'll put this in with the next batch.”

“Well? What about my job--”

“I'm sorry, Winston. The board already voted on this. You may pack your things.”

He doesn't have many things to pack. Just a couple of photographs of his mother and his uncle pinned to the back wall of his cubicle, a few pens and business cards scattered about in his drawers, and the collection of all the fortunes he's ever written, in worn, blue notebooks. He takes these out and stacks them on top of his desk. He unpins the photographs, revealing the original color of the cubicle wall, untouched by the sun. It's a mildly nauseating shade of creamy orange. He checks his email one last time: one message from Teddy Levine. It is addressed to the entire office and reads:

It looks like some people didn't get the memo, but today is CASUAL Friday. That means I wanna see everyone wearing jeans and/or otherwise casual attire. We've been trying to build the culture in this place from the ground up, so it's important that everyone participates (and I promise it'll make work more fun).

Cheers,

Teddy Levine, Quality Control

With a small sigh of relief, Winston Wu, creator and curator of flour-encased, mass produced wisdom stacks his belongings in a cardboard box and leaves behind an empty cubicle on the third floor of San Francisco Noodle Co. and an empty swiveling chair.