GREENER PASTURES

Every single day since arriving in the States, Chau Tran had done his best. He'd been honest in a business where there were endless opportunities—endless reasons even—not to be. He'd raised a child, alone, during the most difficult stages of the boy's development. And he'd raised him right—Chau believed this: he showed his son how a business was run—ethically—while giving him, too, the chance to achieve so much more, reach greater heights than simply inheriting a convenience store in a third-world American neighborhood. It was far from an easy road for Chau. Endless obstacles had come his way, innumerable struggles. And the pain—wave after wave of pain since arriving on this side of that monster of an ocean—the pain was relentless. But so was Chau. Knowing very little of the English language or the customs of the country he was setting sail for, Chau, thirty-three then, thicker-haired and full of grit, arrived in this foreign land of free and brave men, this concrete democracy, with a will, a will to do whatever it took—to catch on to America, to catch up to Americans. Resiliency was ingrained in Chau Tran.

These were some of Chau's thoughts—he was reminding himself of these facts—as the police car, behind him for three or four blocks now, continued on his tail, its sirens blasting, while Chau continued to decide he was not pulling over.

He stayed within the legal limit—there was no reason to speed—and at the first red light he eased in and came to a peaceful stop, the surprised patrol car skidding on a street coated with a glaze of fresh snow, nearly crashing into Chau's back bumper, nearly pile-driving Chau's tiny Mazda into the huge Ford truck stopped in front of him. Chau clicked the doors locked and reached for the handle of the pistol he kept, while driving, holstered to the panel of his door. He knew it was there but felt for it anyway. He pictured the guy in front of him seeing the sirens, sniffing out the situation. A truck like a bus. Like a building. A thin blue line flag, detailed to the rear window, obscured the cab; testicles hung from the trailer hitch. And bumper stickers: *TRUMP '20 . . . JUST ANOTHER REPUBLICAN WORKING HARD, SO YOU DON'T HAVE TO . . . I STAND FOR THE FLAG; I KNEEL FOR THE CROSS . . . WELCOME TO AMERICA—NOW SPEAK ENGLISH! . . .*

Chau assumed it was a guy. He pictured a guy. He pictured your typical American contractor, like one of the many who'd ripped Chau off over the years. He pictured some tattooed lỗ đít peering in his rearview, seeing Chau's Mr. Bean mobile two stories below. *Crazy-ass Asian!* He pictured the truck staying put when the light went green, wedging Chau there between the two vehicles. Police are all the rage in this part of the city, a white-people thing; they even decorate their lawns with pro-police signs, string blue lights on bushes and trees.

Again, Chau clicked the doors locked, checked that all his windows were up. He gripped two hands tight on the wheel. *Go ahead, Mister tough-guy testicles man! Try me.* He'd slam on the gas, floor it. Then reverse—floor! He'd crash and crash forward and back as many times as he had to—*I show you crazy Asian!*—until he had the space to escape, continue on towards his destination at a legal speed.

But there'd be no demolition derby. The road was one lane in each direction and the cop threw his white sedan in reverse, the engine vrooming, then came to an abrupt and violent stop along the shoulder, beside Chau, before activating a new siren—a quick siren, a *yelp* that caused the man in the truck to flinch a bit forward into the intersection, unsure, it seemed, if the sirens were for him or for Chau. Chau turned again to his passenger side. The officer—a white man with a fat red face—was screaming something Chau couldn't decipher. The man's chins sort of hung atop his half open window. He looked like so many other American men—scared little boys posturing as hungry bears—an ironic truth given all the issues Chau's son had had in grade school: kids, teachers too, often calling him by the name of a Korean kid who looked nothing at all like Lahn.

"Pull the fuck over!" Chau could now make out. Chau stared. Then—and Chau did not plan this; lately Chau would make abrupt, out-of-the-ordinary choices—he smiled at the officer. He smiled, showing this bụng lợn buffoon the chipped and missing teeth that Chau couldn't afford to have fixed; keeping his smirk on the officer's snarl, squinting a bit, Chau leaned forward and turned up the radio dial with one hand and waved at the man with the other.

The light was green and Chau was off again, the cop car filing back behind him. The driver in the pickup drove slowly—it was indeed a man—leaning forward into his side-view, his messy American facial hair, his eyes on Chau, beyond Chau maybe, still unsure of who the cop was coming after. At the intersection ahead, a huge junction flanked by fast food and other American dependencies, the truck turned into a Dunkin' Donuts parking lot. Chau and the cop now had the lane to themselves.

Chau knew why the officer was in pursuit. He had made a turn on red before the times on the sign said he was allowed. He was rushing, trying to get to his son before darkness fell; days

were getting shorter and shorter. Every Friday for close to six months he'd been leaving the store early, letting a teen from his church handle things for the last few hours, and heading north on the highway, into Northeast Philly, to visit Lahn. There'd been a jam-up on I-95—a little snow scares the hell out of Americans—and Chau had been trying to make up some time after getting off his exit. When he'd come to the red light in question, an excruciatingly long light he'd missed on many occasion, there were no cars as far to Chau's left as his fifty-two-year-old eyes could see. Unlike many bustling intersections in this part of the city, the corner here had no red-light camera. Chau eased the car forward and took one last glance to his left and saw nothing. "Oh, what the hell does it matter," he uttered as he began to make the illegal right hand turn. The cop was waiting, hiding, Chau could only assume, given how fast the siren sounded and the car came swerving, *flying*, in and out of traffic, no turn signal of course, getting closer and closer in Chau's rearview. "You believe this guy." Chau was talking to a family photo clipped to the rearview mirror—he and his wife, a four- or five-year-old Lahn squinting into the sun, hugging his father's leg. Chau often did this. Directed questions at the photo. Made remarks as if they too were in the car. "This maniac man just triple the number of infractions as the car he's chasing. Chúa Giêsu! Welcome to America!"

Yes, Chau's violation was perfectly clear. He had turned. It wasn't yet six p.m. What was just as clear to Chau were the reasons he refused to heed to the sirens and pull to the side of the road. He did not like the law—the style in which American laws were enforced. Back in Vietnam he had for decades strongly respected and supported the Hanoi police, men whose lives were in danger, imminent danger, on every single shift, brave men with no such luxury of focusing their efforts on what was the least perilous and difficult, as it seems many American officers tend to operate.

Chau had countless reasons that formed his poor opinion of American law. Police did not seem to care about the people who robbed his store or those who begged out front and drove his customers away. Homeless used his alleyway as a toilet. They pissed and they shit. Cops had known this. Chau would flag down cop cars while they circled the neighborhood, circled for hours, slowly, like tanks through an already-bombed-out village. Those hard looks. *We'll keep a look out, my man*. Chau would sometimes see the backs of cops' heads bobbling as they drove away: laughing at that slope, that gook, that zip. Kung fu jokes he bet. He was forced, Chau, to police the criminals himself, one more sad American reality that never found its way across the Pacific. Chau installed cameras that covered every square inch of the store, bullet proof glass around the front counter; he greased-down the back gate to impede the addicts' attempts at making Chau's alleyway, the entrance for his deliveries, into the village squat latrine. Chau did not like guns, had never fired a single shot, but now, every morning before leaving his house, a home getting harder and harder to pay a mortgage for, he holstered a pistol to his hip as if it were 1969 and Chau was his father protecting the family from the Liberation Front.

And things only worsened. Police were shooting people dead what seemed weekly—black men mostly—in all corners of the country. It empowered the desperate and weak. Free rein to loot and destruct. Brazen stealing day after day. A new norm of lawlessness ensued. Robberies became more and more accepted—armed robberies. Chau's store was robbed at gunpoint, twice in two weeks—by the same man—while Chau's son, Mr. Liberal who did not believe in guns, was manning the store, closing up for the night in those music buds that looked like hearing aids but were the absolute opposite. And the drug addicts, too, were even worse than before. The city had opened a "safe injection site" at the next corner over, and those who used it would zombie into Chau's store, mid-high, and crash into aisles, lie there amongst the bread they'd smashed

and smushed or the cookies they'd crumbled, lie there dead? . . . alive? . . . "There is person on my floor!" Chau would yell to 9-1-1. "Green's Market—two-two-nine Tioga Street—come now!" Three times Chau's son used a nasal spray—Narcan—to bring these men and women back from the dead. The "first responders"—police or EMT—would mosey on in after the trouble was over: they came to collect the video evidence that never led to arrests and to scoop the humans from the floor, addicts who endangered themselves and others simply released back into the wild, back to their criminal ways—shooting up drugs and shitting on the streets, fucking in public, committing crime after crime after crime—and no one stopping them.

Chau had always kept his cool as best he could. Resisted the urge to sell the business and go to work for one of the men from his church, some of whom were cousins of Chau, with their successful Chinese restaurants in safe white neighborhoods in the Northeast that ended in -hurst and -wood and -crest. He stayed the course, as they say. Mostly his son's doing. Lahn went to college for Business/Commerce, rode the subway to Temple in the morning then managed the store in the afternoon. "*This* is what America is," he would tell his father—"not what you were told it was in Hanoi—we have to change our mentality based on the reality. We make as much money as we can and then—then we relocate—to a better neighborhood—the Northeast. America is about putting the work in, taking your lumps—hanging on!—then—then we climb the ladder. Greener pastures! Get it, Ông già?" (They had purchased the store from Koreans. Green's Market. They kept the name.) Oh, how Lahn could make his father smile. "I get it, college boy." Lahn. A smart boy. A smart *ass*! An American. Chau was very proud. Without him he doubted the business would have lasted.

But Chau could only endure so much abuse.

When two men in golf shirts holding clipboards—the same two men who came to his store just weeks earlier to tell Chau he needed to take down the bullet proof glass surrounding the register, hadn't he been notified that the glass was now against the law?—when these two men came into the store and handed Chau a notice saying that Green's would be shut down, effective immediately, for "mask mandate violations," Chau's fuse finally blew. "You know how much money I lose in last two years? Every day they take off my shelves . . . They fill backpacks. . . And look at my fridge—empty! I can't order drinks. Look! No one buy my drinks no more . . . they drive to outside city since soda tax law. And you—you come to punish me? Take more money? You want me refuse customers who wear no mask? Tell them they must go? What 'bout all the men who take from me . . . Every day! And the man who robbed my store with gun—two time?" Chau was screaming, wagging then slashing two fingers of his right hand repeatedly. "Two! Two time! I give you video . . . and I—I see him—he come in store still with mask on—he take things and walk out. No run. Walk! I dial police. I call and call and call. Nine! One! One! And no one come. I see—I see him everywhere, this man. Driving his motor bike up on sidewalk, through traffic. He is giant. He scream. Steve Wonder can't miss him! But you—you come for this—to shut *me* down?"

"We aren't detectives, sir, we are—"

"*No-no-no-no*, you are—"

It was mid-afternoon and Lahn was there to step between Chau and these dull, chubby men from License and Inspection whose eyes seemed even deader, like sharks, with the masks hiding the rest of their faces. Chau sat on a step stool and watched his son, in a clean and crisp American accent, tell these men, men much older than Lahn, that they must understand that his father was upset, that the pandemic and the riots and the soda tax had been hard on business.

Lahn, walking the men to the other end of the store, let them know that their job, Lahn understood this, was not easy either, in times like these especially. Chau watched on, his face still holding strong to the anger, though watching his boy—what Lahn had grown to be—brought Chau a delight that was far greater than any pain these last few years had handed down. Chau's father had been a gentle man like Lahn. A calm, collected man who looked every man and woman in the eye, who listened intently, a man who understood that everyone's every flawed move came from somewhere, some place of pain he or she was forced to endure. But his father had paid for this peaceful disposition. Chau prayed, every night, his boy's fate would be different. Chau stood and watched his son walk the men to the door, hold the door as he shook hands with these men who were taking—stealing—from Chau and Lahn alike. When Lahn turned back into the store alone, passed the scarcely stocked fridges, lowered his mask and smiled at his father, Chau saw something—this boy and his diplomatic way, the authentic smile and American charm, an ineffable . . . an indescribable *something*, something from the boy's mother, Chau guessed—he saw right then what would one day be Lahn's reality, his beautiful future, a reality that Chau too would revel in, though only through his son: Chau saw a reason—the reason—his purpose—of coming to America.

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"Oh, now I see how this go. Only law and order here when there order." Chau said this calmly, gazing into his rearview. "Back in May, they 'stand down' and watch burn. I see, I see."

Chau had spent much of these last few miles talking to his family photo, telling his wife and son what he planned to do and why he planned to do it. The situation had intensified. There were six vehicles. Six! Cars and cruisers. The avenue was larger now, two lanes in each

direction. They were in a sort of tactical arrangement, as if Chau was OJ Simpson. A fleet of vehicles. Beside him, behind him. One was way out in front like a pace car. At red lights, a voice, through a megaphone of sorts—from the same car, Chau presumed, the same voice, the original cop—would implore Chau to pull over *immediately*.

Chau now began to pass cross streets blocked by vehicles with flashing sirens. "All for me," Chau said to the photo. "All this for a turn on red."

Back in May, a Friday, a few days after the man was murdered in Minneapolis and North Philadelphia erupted in support of their fallen brother, men fired machine guns into Chau's store—that day no cop cars came. *Zero*. To protect the store from looters, Chau and Lahn had spent the very early morning, the hours before the news- and social media incited the surge like the winds of a Ha Tinh wildfire, boarding up the windows, unscrewing the sign that advertised an ATM inside the store; Lahn had a friend from school print out banners—"We Support BLM," "Justice For George Floyd"—and nailed them to the largest pieces of plywood. They stayed there, Chau and Lahn, locked inside, as the storm of gunshots and exploding bottles and apocalyptic screams made land on Tioga Street. The windows rattled; the banging—sporadic, thunderous banging (baseball bats, Chau assumed)—against the steel security door was too loud for Chau and Lahn to hear each other speak from only feet apart. The two of them were crouched behind the counter, where the bullet proof glass used to be. Chau's pistol was ready for any coward who attempted to trespass. They watched the local news on a small television set that sat on a milk crate; a loop of video showed police cars burning and small fires and looting at places that made no sense to Chau—shoe stores and nail salons, a Pep Boys. "The police are who they hate," Chau said, "and they go after Manny, Moe, and Jack? It make no sense. Go firebomb the police headquarters!"

Chau had been on the line with 9-1-1 a half dozen times in the few hours of a storm that didn't seem to be passing from the streets surrounding Green's Market. It was gaining strength. Every few minutes Lahn would hop the counter and scurry down the aisle and peek out the window, a tiny space between plywood pieces, hoping police had emerged and the crowd was starting to disperse. But nothing. "Just madness," Lahn reported back to his father after the third or fourth time, "absolute chaos—shirtless guys starting fires and holding weapons and screaming and throwing bottles and trashcans into cars and storefronts. This is . . . It's insane!" The pistol, a few steps to Chau's left, waited on a shelf beneath the counter, nestled in an old winter coat, loaded. "It's like a zombie movie!" Lahn said.

When something even louder, much louder—a grenade? a vehicle?—shook the store so hard that cigarettes came pouring from the overhead rack, Lahn again went to check. "*Where are police*?" Chau cried. His son was halfway down an aisle of disheveled shelves when he blew backwards, flew through the air and landed on the last of four faded and torn "Please Keep Social Distance" stickers Chau was "mandated" to tape to his floor, measure six feet between, leading up to checkout counter.

Chau carried his son—he picked him up, surprisingly easily, and carried him, a hand beneath his bottom, a hand across his back, the way he had when Lahn was a boy of one and two and three—the way Chau's father had carried Chau through a hamlet being torched by the communist forces. Through the window blown apart by the rapid rounds of machine-gun fire they went, blood oozing now from Lahn's wound, his chest, his back, slippery red mucus, forcing Chau to tighten and re-adjust his grip. Bullets whizzed past—they pinged and zinged and struck buildings and ricocheted off cars and street signs. Glass shattered. Chau's passenger window had been shot out and Chau sat there on shards and chips as he drove by fires and

through smoke. With fingers full of blood, his boy lying in a bath of blood in the backseat, Chau drove and he prayed and his boy he heard, mumbling, trying, slowly, to pray with him. When they arrived in the parking lot of the university emergency room he spoke to his son, not through God, directly—"My little baby boy," he told him in Vietnamese. "You are my baby now as much as you were when I threw you into the air in the pond in Hanoi and your little laugh made me the biggest man I'd ever dreamed." Chau spoke into the rear-view-mirror, his right hand reaching back blindly to find and caress the hip of his child. Lahn gurgled as if being choked by blood. Chau screamed, "*Lahn*!!!!!" Chau was crying. "Oh I love you, son! . . . Son? Son! Do you remember? . . . Yes? When I tossed you high? *Lahn!* In the pond? The sea you called it. 'Don't drop me in the sea, Dada . . . ' 'No no, my Lahn Lahn. I will never drop you—ever! The greatest storm known to man could shake the earth beneath my feet and I would never let you fall through my—' Lahn! *Do you*? *Do you remember*? *Yes*?"

Lahn did not answer.

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As Chau turned into the entrance of the cemetery, continued along the winding road, there were too many vehicles behind him to count. Cars and SUVs, motor cycles lighting the tree-lined path that dusk was beginning to invade. Their flashing reds and blues reflected off the mausoleums and the monument headstones and brightened the big American flag that Chau could not remember what, this time, had it flying at half-staff. Twenty . . . Thirty vehicles! And a helicopter! It hovered there above the distant tress, beyond the open fields of graves, branches shaking, the falling leaves, yellow and orange and red, mixing with the last of the lingering flurries of snow. Chau had seen funerals of fallen policemen, processions on the TV, that looked

like this—a convoy of police cars escorting the hearse with the fallen officer inside, all captured by a copter above. Parades! Lahn deserved a display like this—a parade: he didn't get one, though. Lahn had a hurried service in heat near one-hundred degrees, family and friends in masks, elderly relatives too afraid of the virus to come at all. There was no customary food and drink to follow, to celebrate a boy who'd have one day saved lives and healed hearts and given hope to the lost and wounded and the scared. Not a single glass was raised in Lahn Tran's honor; it was still against the law to dine indoors.

He was buried, Lahn, in the back, on the top of a hill. There was a dead-end on the road below and Chau took the curve that looped back in the opposite direction, reminding him, once again, of the cart path that semi-circled beside tee boxes of the public golf course he and Lahn would spend both of their birthdays, every year, the sign on the store's door letting the customers know why Green's was closed that day: *Closed for family celebration*.

He pulled along the edge of the little road, his right tires crunching up onto the snow that had landed on the grass. He unclipped the photo and placed it in his pants' pocket then holstered his weapon to his waist. Every Friday he did this. Each Friday the same as the last, the car parked there beside a dead man named Sam. Samuel Stanger. 1918-2009. Uncle Sam, Chau had called him—"Hello, Uncle Sam," he'd say as he approached him on foot, nodding as he grazed his fingers across the hip-high headstone and began his trek up the hill. Every Friday. Through every kind of weather. Through wind and rain. The snow today was new to Chau's visits—the fields accumulating with an inch of slippery slush or more that wouldn't be easy on Chau's bad back and aching knees—but nothing would stop him, nothing made by nature or made by man would ever stop Chau Tran from scaling the hill and seeing his son. *The greatest storm known to man could shake the earth beneath my feet and I would never* . . . Even his number of strides to his

son's resting place was near or exact one week to the next. Somewhere, always, between one hundred fifty-eight and one hundred sixty-six steps. And each Friday, always, in the same way, Chau would kneel and bow his head there in front of his forever twenty-one-year-old son. The same way each time. With a hand atop the stone, Chau would catch his breath, close his eyes, and continue a talk that had begun in the boy's hospital room, just Chau and Lahn, the doctors having told him his boy was gone, the rage at last behind him, the gasps and the howls and the wails finally silent, praying and praying softly beside his boy, trying to contact a loved one, a decedent—his mother, his father, *his wife*—or his God—any god—who could find a way to explain—explain how a life without Lahn was a part of some greater plan, a greater *good*, and how he, Chau Tran, could continue to live in a world like this, a world where his little boy was gone, taken, *stolen*. Every time, every single time, every Friday, squinting into the setting sun, he'd ask and ask and ask; he'd kneel there, the tears now falling down his face—he'd kneel there and take a hand and pull the photo from his pocket, raise his family to the sky, raise both his arms to the heavens, and beg and beg and beg, he'd beg whomever it was that put him here, whomever his maker might be, to strike him dead and deliver him *now* to a place where the pain will die.