

## Less than bones

The tables at Yet Wah were covered in pink plastic tablecloths, the walls in red and gold Chinese decorations. A large fish tank was in the back under a black-lacquered arch. Five goldfish were in the tank – three orange, one red, one white – and a little brown ceramic bridge where a lone Chinese man sat with a fishing rod. Someone once told Richard the goldfish in Chinese restaurants were a mafia thing: the owners of the restaurant sent messages by the size, color and number of fish in the tank. But the story probably wasn't true. Even if it were, he doubted the Chinese mafia was active in Castro Valley.

The waiter came over. A small man with sunken cheeks and thin, slicked back hair, he was the same waiter who had served Richard and Parkman when they used to come in high school. If he recognized them, he never showed it. But that's why they had hung out at Yet Wah. They came after school – sometimes during – to eat egg rolls and smoke, knowing no one would ask if they were under-age. Later, when Richard unwrapped the possibly human bones from the Mexican blanket, he was sure the waiter wouldn't even bat an eye. Maybe the story about the mafia was true. It would explain how Yet Wah managed to stay in business. As far as Richard could tell, he and Parkman were their only customers.

“You ready to order?”

“I'm waiting for someone,” Richard told him. The waiter gave a silent nod and wandered off.

Parkman got there twenty minutes later. “Richard, my man.” He turned and raised his hand to the waiter. “Egg rolls, please. A double order.”

“Sorry I'm late. Dr. Kim is flying in from Seoul on Monday and he already called three times today. Koreans are unbelievable. They just talk and talk without ever really getting anywhere. But he promised to bring me a jar of kimchi so hot it will have me crying

for mama.” The waiter brought a plate with six large egg rolls and a glob of pink, translucent chili sauce in the middle. “Anyway, let’s see those lovely bones of yours.”

At school, Richard had known who Stanley Parkman was years before they were ever friends. Parkman wore a faded black trench coat to school every day, even in summer. On most people the coat would have been long, but it only came to the middle of Parkman’s thigh. He rode a ridiculous, pimped out bike with a banana seat and purple streamers coming out of the handlebars. Richard found out later the bike had belonged to his sister in the eighth grade. Though a true emperor of geekdom, Parkman was too off the charts to be harassed by any of the school bullies. Richard had always assumed he was mildly retarded until they wrote a story about him in the school newspaper: a junior, Parkman was already attending Stanford part-time. On the weekends, he liked to think up complex geometry problems for fun.

One morning, when Richard stood at his locker during break, Parkman walked over to him. On the lapel of his trench coat was a button that read, *I’m not weird, I just get dressed in the dark.*

“Why the linseed oil?”

“What?”

“On your shirt. I’d know that smell anywhere.”

Richard told him he was mixing his own oil paints at home, hoping it would make him go away. But, to his surprise, Parkman knew all about it. They talked about painting together for the rest of the break.

Parkman knew about everything. Nothing was too mundane or obscure for him to talk about. In fact, Parkman never stopped talking, though he could listen when he had to. He and Richard spent three hours at Yet Wah that afternoon talking, smoking and drinking bad instant coffee. Parkman was brilliant and curious; he literally didn’t give a damn what other people

thought of him. Later, at his grandmother's house, Richard realized he was the freest person he had ever met.

Richard soon learned he wasn't the only misfit Parkman had collected. Three other people, Brett, Rina and Brian, also hung out with him. Brett was the editor of the school's literary magazine. At fifteen, he had published his first story in a respected journal. Besides his precocious literary talent, Brett was also flamingly gay. His deepest wish was to sleep with Allen Ginsberg before he died.

Rina was an Indonesian girl with a small, heart-shaped face whose family had moved to Castro Valley four years ago from Jakarta. Though her English wasn't very good when they first moved, she soon excelled. That year, she scored the highest on the SATs not only in the school, but the entire state. But Rina was also extremely shy; when she did talk, which wasn't often, her voice barely rose above a whisper. Although she was only salutatorian of their graduating class, Richard assumed she had done it on purpose so she wouldn't have to give a speech. And then there was Brian. At five foot three, Brian was as absurdly short as Parkman was absurdly tall. He had a pug nose and a blonde, white-boy afro. Practically the only thing Brian ever talked about was his after-school job as a bag boy at Safeway.

None of them fit in. Brett was too introverted and uptight for the drama geeks and too gay for the punks and mods; Rina was too foreign and quiet for the over-achievers; in different ways, both Parkman and Brian were barely from this planet. Together they made up Parkman's Posse of Misfits.

Richard started spending lunch with the Parkman Posse. They sat together on the concrete planters in front of the school, usually just listening to Parkman talk. If anyone had walked past them, they would have assumed they were all just waiting for a ride.

Richard lost track of the others after graduation, but Parkman stayed in touch. Brett went on to study at Reed College. He still lived in Portland and was at work on his third novel. Rina was the youngest professor of law they had ever had at the University of Chicago.

Brian went to Chabot Community College in Hayward for a couple of years. Later, he moved to East Oakland and became a heroin addict. As for Parkman, he went into bio-tech. He opened his own company and at twenty-three had already earned his first million. Parkman also married three very attractive women, divorcing two of them. Most people probably assumed the women were gold-diggers, but Richard knew each one had signed an especially stingy pre-nuptial agreement, leaving them with next to nothing after the divorce. For whatever reason, women loved Parkman. He himself called it the Bill Gates complex.

“Os Coxae. Also known as the pelvis or hip bone. The anterior iliac spines are widely separated with a large superior aperture meaning this is the pelvis of a woman in child-bearing years. A femur, or thigh-bone, sex indeterminate.” Parkman dipped an eggroll into the pink sauce. “Yep. They’re human.”

“How old are they do you think?”

“Hard to say. Anywhere between a year to five hundred.” He turned the femur over on the table. “Might be from a murder. A suicide. Might be Native American.”

“Native American?”

“Miwok. Paiute.”

“Should I go to the police?”

“Nah. I know this guy, Rick, teaches forensic anthro down at Stanford. The equipment he has over there is enough to give me a hard-on just thinking about it. I’ll whisk these bones over to him and he’ll date them for us. If it ends up they’re not that old, then we go to the police.”

Parkman got up. “Anyway, I’d love to stay but I’ve got to pick up some feed for Angie’s horses before the place closes. I swear she might make me change my mind about the kid thing.” Parkman had explicitly told each of his wives he didn’t want any kids. Needing something to nurture, his current wife had started breeding miniature horses. “Anything is

better than those damn horses. Maybe even diapers.” He picked up the bones, leaving the Mexican blanket on the table.

“Don’t you want the blanket?”

Parkman shook his head. “I’ll just toss them in the back.” He put a twenty-dollar bill on the table. “Tell old Lee to keep the change.”

If Rachel had been with Richard when he found the bones, she would have rolled her eyes. “Why do you immediately have to assume they’re human?” They could be the bones of a deer, a cow, a large dog. He was getting carried away. But Rachel was one of the reasons he was out running the Canyon mile.

“Parkman confirmed they’re human,” he whispered to an imaginary Rachel while he drove down the boulevard, back to Peet’s Coffee. “So there.”

The other reason was the town’s reaction after Dr. Chen painted his office building orange. All day Richard had served lines of people at Peet’s who were furious someone had had the gall to paint a building such an appalling color in *their* town. People drove past Chen’s Optometry, jeering out of their car windows. Someone even threw a stone at Chen’s red door, which left a mark. Laurel said they should just ignore them. “Who cares? They’re idiots.” But when some idiot complained about that chink weirdo who painted his office traffic cone orange, Richard had had such an intense desire to punch the man over the counter it scared him. The last time he’d been that angry at a stranger, he’d spent a night in jail. So he went to the mile to run off his rage and then he found these bones.

Richard could already see Chen’s building six stop lights down the road. The building was an eyesore, he had to admit it. But the story reminded him of everything small-minded about the town, a village in the Bay Area, where people often bragged about not having been to San Francisco in years even though it was only forty minutes away. “The City is dirty and dangerous. Why would we ever want to go there?”

When he was growing up in Castro Valley, Richard comforted himself by knowing he should have never even lived there. His father had been an assistant professor of English at UC Berkeley and his mother a sculptress, her studio in Oakland near Jack London Square. When Richard was a baby, they lived in a two-bedroom apartment on Walnut Street a few blocks from the Berkeley campus. But then, a few weeks after his second birthday, Richard's parents were killed at a railroad crossing off of Interstate 5 on the way to Los Angeles to visit his mother's sister. Since his mother was estranged from her parents and her sister, an aspiring actress, lived in a cramped studio in Ventura, Richard went to live with his father's parents in Castro Valley. When he was four, his grandfather died, leaving his grandmother to raise him.

When Richard got to Peet's, Laurel was alone behind the counter.

"Maureen already left and you missed the late lunch rush. But we have this." Laurel held up a copy of *The Forum*. On the back page they had asked several people what they thought about Chen's Optometry. "Listen to this one from Sylvia Mayer: *That building ruins the brown and beige unity of our boulevard*. God. Who could be proud of a brown and beige unity? This one shows hope." She showed Richard a quote from a sixty-four-year-old retiree named Clyde Madden. Clyde said he didn't like it himself, but figured Dr. Chen had the right to paint his building any color he wanted. "Way to go Clyde. Good to know there are signs of intelligent life in Castro Valley."

Tall and naturally blonde, Laurel's eyes were such an unusually light shade of blue children often stared at her. She told Richard she got her eyes from her mother's side of the family. Her mother had grown up in a Norwegian farming community in Minnesota so isolated her father still spoke English with a Norwegian accent even though he had grown up in America. When she turned seventeen, Laurel's mother ran away to San Francisco where she changed her name from Ingeborg to Summer Rain. Laurel herself was born in a birthing pool at Harbin Hot Springs Retreat Center. She spent her early childhood playing with wicker

dolls on the floor of the restaurant while her mother chopped tofu and organic carrots and her father did Watsu water massage for the tourists.

When Laurel turned five, her parents bought a secluded, broken-down farm on Cull Canyon Road. Richard had driven past the farm many times before he had ever met Laurel. They had hand-painted signs advertising persimmons in the winter, Lab-Shep puppies in the spring and farm-fresh eggs all year round. Laurel was still living at the farm in a cottage where her mother had once given Kundalini workshops while she finished her master's in art history at Mills College.

Though as much of a Castro Valley misfit as Richard, Laurel was almost fond of the town. "Nothing ever changes here. There's still a feed store across from McDonald's. Granted, I'm getting out as soon as I graduate, but Castro Valley is better than some plastic suburb like Pleasanton or San Ramon." Laurel was finishing her degree in June. At the end of August, she was moving to New York to start a six-month internship at MoMa.

Laurel folded *The Forum* and laid it on the counter. "Dr. Sunshine came in today already." Dr. Sunshine was her nickname for Dr. Chen. "He seemed depressed. I mean, he cracked a couple of jokes and laughed like usual, but his heart didn't seem to be in it."

Dr. Chen particularly liked Laurel. He told her about his plans to have his office painted weeks before he'd had it done.

"Orange is the color of his chi," she had told Richard.

"His what?"

"You know, chi. His life force." Though Laurel now looked more East Village than ashram, she was still the one to ask if you needed tips on how to find peyote or which crystal is best for curing gout.

"I guess he never expected people to react the way they did."

Laurel sighed. "Funny how he could have his office in this town for over ten years and still know so little about it."

When the after school rush started, Laurel ran the register while Richard worked as barista for the lines of high school kids and housewives with their children. When she called out an order, Laurel sometimes touched his arm, her fingers lingering there for a moment. Richard knew she had a crush on him. She had practically thrown a fit when she found out he was a painter. For weeks she asked when she could see his work, though he told her he hadn't done any real painting in years. She apologized once it became obvious she was making him feel uncomfortable. It was her pushy, hippie roots.

“Hippies are always acting like they're so relaxed and carefree, but really they want to suck out your soul.”

Richard was also sure his boss, Maureen, was trying to set them up. In the past few weeks Maureen had nearly always scheduled them together, often alone. Of course, he liked Laurel. What wasn't there to like? She was pretty, arty, funny, smart. But he hadn't been with anyone since he and Rachel separated. Laurel was young. She was leaving for New York in a couple of months. Why bother getting involved?

When the rush was over, Laurel took out a text book and started reading it at the counter. After a few minutes, she slammed the book shut and groaned.

“This survey course is really kicking my ass. It's so embarrassing.” Because her bachelor's degree was in English, Laurel had to make up some of the undergraduate course work she had missed. “For god's sake, I'm a graduate student.”

Richard picked up the book and starting flipping through the pages until he came to a chapter on Vermeer.

“Look at this.” He showed her a painting of a young house maid pouring milk into a bowl. “Vermeer and his objects. I've always loved that.”

“What do you mean?”



“What are you instantly drawn to in the painting? The woman’s face? Her hands? The black and white checkered floor? No. You’re drawn to the bowl and the pitcher. Your eyes always come back to it just like the light does from the window on the left.”

“You mean the theory Vermeer used the camera obscura?”

Richard shrugged. “I’m not a theory person. Vermeer’s paintings just always have one object that automatically draws you in.” He traced his fingers across the objects Vermeer had highlighted: a curtain, a red book, a gold bracelet on the table.

“The fold of a curtain, the clasp of a bracelet. That’s the emotion in his paintings.”

“I think I see what you mean. But it’s not going to help me on the exam.”

“Vermeer has always been an inspiration in my work.”

“Your work? You mean you’re finally going to talk to me about your paintings?”

“Would you like me to?”

“Gee, I wonder. I’ve only been harassing you about it since we met.”

He told her he always started with a photograph he had taken of a person, usually indoors, as they did some everyday task. Although he had tried using strangers, he preferred working with people he was close to.

“So you’re what? A photorealist? A hyperrealist?”

“I don’t know. I told you I’m not one for theory. In my paintings I just pour everything into one object. Like Vermeer.”

Like Vermeer. God, I sound like a pompous ass, he thought. But Laurel leaned in closer.

“So when do I finally get to see your paintings? This weekend maybe?”

“Can’t. I’m going to Los Angeles tomorrow for a couple of days.”

“Los Angeles? Why would you want to go there?”

“Believe me, I don’t want to.”

Since Laurel left early for an evening class, Richard was alone when Maureen came to pick up the overnight deposit bags.

“How were things today?” She started putting the leftover baked goods into a box for a shelter in San Lorenzo.

Richard shrugged as the register started printing the day’s receipts. “Same old, same old.”

Maureen watched him count the tens and twenties, placing them afterwards into the bag. “Atta boy. You’re getting the hang of it.”

Richard smiled. “There’s nothing to it, right?”

Four years ago, when Maureen's husband Roger left her for another woman, Maureen took out a pair of scissors and started cutting things. She started with any photographs she had of Roger, cutting them into tiny pieces of evil spouse confetti. When the photographs were gone, she started on the presents he had given her over the years: a silk Hermes scarf with a carousel horse print, an embossed Bible with a calfskin cover, a strand of pearls, each one landing with a plop into the toilet. When she finally finished, Maureen realized the only thing left to cut was herself. She checked herself into a clinic.

Richard met Maureen in the anger management support group he had to go to as part of his probation. They hit it off right away. At some point, Maureen asked him if he wanted her to be his anger sponsor.

“We can keep each other from kicking other people’s assess.”

Since Richard was out of a job, Maureen said he could be her assistant manager at Peet’s. When Richard told her he didn’t have any experience, Maureen just shrugged. “I can hire who I want to hire.”

He started the next week and had worked there ever since.

Maureen put the rest of the bundled-up bills and receipts into the overnight deposit bag. “So how are things developing between you and Laurel?”

Richard laughed. “I knew it. You’re trying to set us up.”

“Duh. You two are made for each other.”

“Yeah, right. A twenty-something art history student about to move to New York and a washed-up middle-aged painter still stuck in old C.V.”

“Shut up. You’re not middle-aged.”

“But I am washed up?”

Maureen rolled her eyes. “Look, Laurel likes you.”

“I know.”

“And you like Laurel.”

Richard sighed. “Maureen, it’s complicated.”

She aimed an apple crumble organic muffin at his head. “If I weren’t your anger sponsor, I swear to God I’d start pelting you with these half-stale baked goods.”

“Ouch.”

“Seriously, tell me you’ll at least think about it. Things have been so much better for me since I met Andrew.”

“I’ll think about it.”

“That’s my boy. Go run along home now. I’ll finish this.”

Before he found the bones, Richard had had a fight with Rachel over the phone. He wanted to take Lilly camping at Point Reyes over her birthday, but Rachel insisted he come down to Los Angeles while she and Brendan were away at a conference in Seattle. Though he refused to stay at their house, she managed to talk him into borrowing her car. “Come on Richard, we both know you can’t afford this.” When she said that, he felt like punching the wall. But instead, he got into his car and drove out to the Canyon mile.

He ran under a canopy of California Oaks, a creek to the left of him and the hills to the right. He could hear Rachel's voice in his head the whole time he was running. He lived in a town where people went ballistic if someone painted a building an unusually bright color and she was the one who had dragged him back there. When he saw a rock that looked like a half-buried petrified egg peeking out from under the red earth behind a row of blackberry bushes, he kicked it as hard as he could. *Fuck you, Rachel.*

But it wasn't a rock. It was a bone.

Richard tried calling Parkman when he got home from Peet's. He imagined the bones, tossed into some corner of the garage at Parkman's Blackhawk villa. But Parkman never answered his phone. He hung up without leaving a message.

Maybe he should call Laurel. He could call her and invite her over and she'd look at his paintings and then who knows. Maureen was right. He liked her. Of course he did. But, as ridiculous as it was, some part of him still felt loyal than Rachel. He thought about the morning she bailed him out of jail, her hair unbrushed and her eyes red and swollen. How could he get involved with Laurel when he still had so much baggage?

He went into his studio and traced his finger across the objects he had highlighted in his paintings like fucking Vermeer: the cheese grater his grandmother held over a chipped blue and white plate she had brought from Portugal, the red plastic bucket Lilly shoveled sand into on the beach, the Chinatown fan a pregnant Rachel held across her stomach as she lay stretched out on the bed. But, in the end, the objects were only objects. The people in his paintings were gone. One was dead and the other two as good as ghosts. If he took his life and wrapped it up in the Mexican blanket, it would weigh far less than the bones.

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They swore the baby wouldn't change things. They could stay in their studio with the beat up chaise lounge and kidney shaped table they bought at the Salvation Army. They would live off of ramen and soak those little dried fish they bought in Chinatown in water and feed them to the baby over rice. Things would only change if they let them and they never would. That's what they said when Rachel peed onto a stick in the communal bathroom and a blue plus showed up.

Two months earlier, they'd had their first show together at Crosswire Gallery in Oakland. Most of the work was from the road trips they'd taken during art school. Rachel's black and white photograph of an oil refinery in Bakersfield next to Richard's painting of her in a baby blue bikini, reading Tolstoy by a motel swimming pool. His favorite painting was the one of his grandmother in front of the bright lights of Las Vegas, holding a teddy bear she won at Circus Circus – it had been Rachel's idea to take her along on the trip. In the painting she looked like the young girl from a village in the Azores, the wartime bride who followed her officer husband back to America and felt lost in what she found there – the person she once had been.

Six weeks before Rachel went into labor, his grandmother had a stroke. When he visited her at the hospital, she held his hand and whispered to him in Portuguese, calling him Arthur. She died a week later, leaving her house to Richard.

“Let's move in for a while. Not for long. Just until the baby's there and we've had time to get things settled,” Rachel told him. She knew how Richard felt about Castro Valley. But living rent free with a newborn did sound good, even if it meant moving back to a town he hated. Later they would sell the house and move somewhere cheap enough to have a family and still focus on their art – Portland, or maybe Grass Valley, where his mother's parents lived if either of them were still alive. Lilly came and Richard got a job at BART and Rachel started working part time at Bank of the West, both of them too tired most days to do anything creative.

But then a while became: “If we fix it up, we’ll get a better price.” Richard retiled the bathroom, put in new cabinets, fixed the fence. A year turned to two, then three, then four, which is when Richard stopped being in denial. Rachel didn’t want to leave.

“We have a house.”

“A house in Castro Valley.”

“Castro Valley has a good school system.”

“What do you know about it? You didn’t grow up here.”

“I just want a stable life for our daughter.”

They started fighting about everything: what cereal to buy, what color to paint the bathroom, when Lilly should go to bed. On bad nights Richard went drinking alone at one of the bars on the boulevard, ignoring anyone he recognized from high school. One night, at the Doucet Saloon, when a man in a Giants hat told him he’d spent enough time at the shuffle board, Richard picked up the puck and threw it at him as hard as he could. The man got a gash across his cheek and Richard was taken out of the bar in handcuffs. Not soon after, Brendan – a friend from school – hired Rachel to do some promotional work for his production company in Los Angeles. She moved in with him two months later, taking Lilly with her.

Richard and Rachel had sex once next to a lawnmower in the gardener’s shed on campus. For years afterward, Richard thought about her anytime he smelled cut grass. But there was no grass when she picked him up from Los Angeles International Airport, only concrete, stone and steel. “Richard,” she said, then grazed a kiss across each cheek. They merged onto I-10 to pick up Lilly from school, sitting most of the way in traffic.

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Disneyland hadn't really changed in the years since Richard had last been there. It had only gotten more expensive. Lilly hadn't really changed either, though she was taller than he remembered. She stumbled around in her hot pink converse, bumping into things as though she had never quite learned she wasn't made of air. She sat on the rides with her hands in her lap, still and unsmiling, like she was patiently waiting for them to end.

They had lunch at the Blue Bayou across from the Pirates of the Caribbean. Lilly ordered shrimp cocktail and Richard the Monte Cristo sandwich. The waitress had just brought their food when he saw Parkman had called without leaving a message. He tried to call him back, but Parkman didn't answer. When he hung up the phone, Richard looked at the pile of nakedly pink shrimp on Lilly's plate, surrounded by a red pool of cocktail sauce.

"I found these bones of a woman out on the Canyon mile. She may have been murdered." Why did he tell her that? It wasn't going to win him any father of the year awards. Something was definitely wrong with him. But Lilly didn't say anything. She just stared at him, her gray eyes so much like his grandmother's.

They glided together through the Haunted Mansion on a round, black chair. Portraits stretched, a raven sat on a tree, ghouls and ghosts swooped overhead while Lilly's hand fluttered in his like a small, fragile bird.

"Dad, I'm scared," she whispered.

"So am I," he said.