An Oak for Tao

Anemic sunlight leaked through the clouds, illuminated everything in eerie gray. I joined Tao by the window, sitting as he stood, scared that standing would somehow endanger me, that the winds of the storm would pluck me from the carpet if I stood as tall as him. Our oak convulsed. It was impossible for something so big to move like that. When I was sure it had bent too low, that any second, a thunderous snap would pierce the air and naked, branching roots would face the sky, the oak would pendulum upright. “Isn’t it beautiful?” he said, as he pulled the curtains closed. The light vanished, and he continued, “Dangerous things always are.”

I might have slept through our parents’ fight if it weren’t for the small branches and pinecones that also rattled the roof. Somehow, Tao’s window survived the night. Tao, immune to the storm—and seemingly to our parents, too—snored faithfully. Entering the hallway, I kept to the left floor panels, the ones that didn’t creak. Tao wouldn’t like it, but I cracked the hallway door that led to the den, where they argued, their words washing into the hallway with the patchy light of the kerosene lamp. Just below a shout, they jabbered at each other, not stopping the argument even as they took turns waving a silk hand fan over Jane, the Chen’s baby. I retraced my steps through the hallway.

“You’re louder than an actual hurricane,” Tao said, without opening his eyes. He was laying on his side with a pillow tucked between his knees and another two under his neck. No blankets or sheets covered him. Ever since the power went out four days ago, the August heat and humidity meant we all slept with as little as possible. “They fighting again?” I didn’t answer. “That bad?” he said, his eyes still closed. “In Mandarin?” He kicked off his blankets and tossed them on the floor. “Okay, then.”

Tao flicked the light switch; I laughed when nothing happened. He slugged my shoulder. If we had electricity, a mix of differently colored lights would have illuminated the ragged carpet and peeling blue wallpaper. Over the years, our father had replaced the standard, round incandescent bulbs with spiral fluorescents, stubby LEDs, and one spotlight-shaped halogen. It wasn't until after I graduated college that I realized he just installed whatever he could thrift.

Tao tossed me a handful of clothespins, and we clipped the corners of the blankets to the track lights. I retrieved the winter bed sheets—which were flannel and hadn't been used in four years, the last time Pensacola had gotten snow—from the bathroom cabinet and secured the walls of the fort to the ground. We wedged them into dresser drawers and used our father's old architecture textbooks and Chinese novels as anchors. Before we crawled in, Tao shoved his pillow in the crack beneath the door. The vibrations from the fight, which had evolved into full-tilt yelling, dissipated. I twisted the knob of my plastic, battery-powered Coleman lantern, spreading sluggish light throughout the fort.

"Let's play *Murder in the Dark*," I said.

"That's not a real game."

It is a real game; I read it in Margaret Atwood's book. "Whatever," I said.

"Let's just play Yank," he said, as he tucked his knees to his chest. "You can go first."

"I want to switch my glasses for contacts."

"No way," he said. I sighed. Tao leaned over and ripped a pinch of hair from behind my ear. My eyes trickled, and I forced a cough so I could wipe them. For a moment, I also heard the hurricane, slabs of rain buffeting the roof.

"I got to third base with Sophie Adams last week," he said. I nodded. His laugh, a deep, unfeigned, jet-engine boom that made you feel like you belonged in the world, stretched the tent. "It was second, but that was kind of dirty. I'll go again. I found out where Mom hides the '64 when she's pissed."

"True," I said. Tao answered by jerking another clump of hair, this time from the fuzz at my neckline. I cursed. "I saw a fight in the cafeteria yesterday. Some dude smashed a microwave on the other guy's head."

Tao pulled a third clump, though with less enthusiasm than the previous yanks. "Bro, we go to the same school. I woulda heard."

"I'm taking it easy on you today," I muttered, as I massaged the inflamed flesh on the back of my scalp. I told him I surrender.

"Think it's safe to go out yet?" I said.

"I'm not hurricane-proof."

"I meant in the den."

"I'm not hurricane-proof."

I asked how much longer the storm will last. He said no one knows. A little longer, I hoped. He tugged the blanket, and our sky collapsed.

When Tao turned sixteen, the games stopped. The late-night stories, the forts, the two A.M. marathons of assembling model airplanes. If Tao wasn't skipping tennis practice—to my frustration, his number of state championships and the times he went to practice were both

three—he was out with a girl. If he wasn't out with a girl, he was playing seven-card stud with the baseball team. His curfew left with our mother. She took everything except the porcelain nativity scene that Lao Lao had given her and a sterling silver necklace Tao and I gifted her the year a fungus killed our Christmas tree. I told Tao that she said she really wasn't coming back this time, and he laughed.

Every night at evening tea, I repeated some version of this conversation with our father: You let Tao stay out late, why can't I? Because he's a lost cause. That doesn't give me much incentive not to be a lost cause.

After dinner, I finished my daily hour of assembly on the McDonnell Douglas MD-11, a birthday-Christmas gift from my father, mother, and Lao Lao, who sent a check from Shanghai. I had been working on it since Christmas. After placing the Douglas on my bed, I perched in my nook by the front window, where, to my father's dismay, I read by the light of my Coleman lantern rather than the harsh overhead lights. Though it was February, I cracked the window, and curt air washed over my hoodie and sweatpants. I propped the latest issue of *Aeroplane* on my chest and slouched at a semi-recline, with my back pressed against the window. Occasionally, I pushed my bare feet against the glass, leaving a print, a five-toe deposit of oil in the dust.

I had drifted to sleep when the splash of keys against the front door alerted me to Tao. Only my brother made that much noise unlocking a door. I stuffed a pencil in my magazine to mark my place and sprinted for the foyer. Forcing myself to breathe shallowly, I unlocked the door and swung it open.

"Hey bro."

"You got a few? I could use your help with the Douglas. Why are your ears so red?"

He dropped his keys. I scooped them and tossed the jingling clump of metal directly at Tao's hands; he slapped it away in a botched attempt at a catch. We laughed at his clumsiness.

Tao's desk was covered with textbooks and loose papers, so I set the Douglas between the freshly vacuumed lines of his carpet. Other than his desk, his room was neatly organized. He wanted to see everything and insisted on open organization: removing the closet doors from their hinges, pulling metal shelves from the garage for his clothes, even helping our father build two oak bookcases—cluttering one with tennis medals and the other with contact lens solution, toothbrushes, and other toiletries. A black and white poster of Rod Laver, his only decoration, hung above his headboard. I understood why he wanted to work in his room rather than mine. Every flat surface in my room had airplanes or airplane parts; they were stacked on the dressers, the desk, the tattered futon. I kept some of the bigger planes on my bed during the day, moved them to the carpet at night. Sometimes the pieces, ABS plastic or metal usually, would end up on the floor, stepped on later, in the dark.

"Asians get red when they drink," Tao said, as he entered his room.

"What?"

"You asked earlier."

"That was an hour ago," I said, as he laughed. I picked the Douglas from the floor and placed it in his hands. "Why are your shoes still on? Shit. I left the glue in my room."

As I crossed the threshold from my room into the hallway, I heard the crunch. I grimaced and stepped quickly for Tao's room. On his knees, he grasped at cabin windows, wheels, and propellers, all of which were rolling away from him. He managed to capture two pieces of a shattered wing, pushing them together and squinting when they didn't become whole once more.

"Dae, I'm so sorry." Red flushed his cheeks, which were perfectly smooth except for a few stubbly hairs at his chin.

Our father walked in the room. "Nothing some epoxy won't fix," he said, as he squatted next to Tao. He didn't say anything about Tao's face. Our father picked the wings from my brother's hands and brushed a finger over the scabrous edges.

"How do you do it?" I asked Tao, as our father left to retrieve his beloved epoxy kit. Sparing the Douglas further damage, he deposited it gently on the carpet before standing and ruffling my hair. His fingers stunk.

Tao and I hopped the fence at the Pine Ridge apartments, and I walked as he told me, as though we belonged. No less than 200 tennis balls wobbled in the duffel bag slung over my shoulder, and he carried two uncovered rackets. The sun stripped the court's blue-top to a faded aqua. Grass sprouted from cracks in the concrete; on one half of the court, it was growing in the shape of an italic H. When Tao realized his best chance at a scholarship was tennis, he started to show up for team practice and trained extra at Pine Ridge on the weekends. I dumped the bag, and a collection of balls—worn in various degrees and "collected" on various occasions—rolled across the ground.

He skipped his shoulder circles and static stretching and started slamming serves, cocking back his shoulder and launching his racket-arm in a frictionless motion. On contact with the ball, the strings produced a *thwock*; an especially hard serve echoed the complex. Yellow blurs zoomed over the net. Every fifteen minutes or so, a car would bounce along the potholes of the apartment's parking lot.

We had been there about an hour when an older white gentleman appeared at the fence, the wind causing his billowing khakis to slap against the chain link. His shirt was faded navy; a golden pin with the apartment's crest and his first name, Robert, adorned his left breast. He looked older than the superintendent who normally kicked us out. Tao whispered, "Stop packing." He let his racket clatter against the ground and crossed the court with an ear-to-nose smile. They talked no more than two minutes. The man smiled and began to walk away before twisting back towards us to shout his final words. "I didn't know the Chinese could play tennis," followed by, "Good luck!" He disappeared into the brick office.

"How do you do it?" I asked Tao, after he picked up his racket again.

"Toss me your water."

I flung the bottle at his chest, and he used the racket to flick the bottle to his free hand. I didn't repeat my question. He unscrewed the lid and sucked half the bottle before tossing it back to me. He shifted his weight from foot to foot, the noon sun projecting a stubby shadow on the pavement. His slender silhouette belied his burled shoulders and invisible waist. It was strange to see him nervous to talk to me when he had been so unafraid of the stranger moments ago. "Look," he said, "You know I wouldn't ask if it wasn't serious. But the Seminole Camps are my real shot. Recruiters are there every year, good ones." He scratched his head; beads of sweat flecked the sands. "We both know Dad doesn't have the money to send me."

I picked a fistful of sand and tilted my hand, allowing gritty sediment to stream back to the ground. "Have you asked Mom?"

"Are you going to help me or not?"

I gave him the money he needed. He was heartbroken when the scouts told him that he would never play college tennis. I couldn't believe it when he told me, when he believed them. He would have quit tennis altogether if the head coach from Gateway Military Academy hadn't offered him a scholarship, the only stipulation being that he leave Escambia High for his senior season. Tao accepted. He didn't tell me or our father until April. Like our mother six months ago, he packed his things and left the house on West Garden. Our father resisted initially, his distrust of the Chinese police having hardened him against the military, but he agreed after Tao printed an extensive curriculum outline and career-option packet he found on the school's website. I only called him once during his year there, in the middle of his second semester. He told me the food was half-good; no one with a shred of dignity would let Shaky Sally near their hair; everybody went by last names. "I can't see you going by Yang," I said, as I pressed the phone snug to my ear.

"Well, everybody but me. There's actually another Yang," he said. "I go by Jake." In the background, I heard the muffled roar of an officer. "Gotta go. See you in a couple weeks."

My father parked the Civic in the Chen's yard, behind a veritable caboose of Camrys and minivans. Nearly all the cars were older than me. The hoods and roofs were pocked by patches of missing paint, except Dr. Chen's black Mercedes, which had black paint sprinkled by fountain-mist. Tao asked my father how long we had to stay. From his tone, I could tell it was the last place he wanted to be on his first real break from Gateway. Our father answered with only a frown.

Though it was just a ten-minute drive from our home on West Garden Street, the Chen's house couldn't have been more different than ours. Our yard was a patchwork of withered pine straw, cones disassembled by squirrels, and red dirt. Dr. Chen's grass looked manicured, as if each blade had been cut with cuticle scissors. The summer job I had taken at Crain Lawns had given me a newfound attentiveness to landscaping. Even the Chen's Loropetalum bushes were painstakingly pruned. No plant limbs or weeds lipped over concrete, anywhere. Sago palms of all sizes dotted the mulch around the porch, but no dead needles yellowed the brown straw.

The house was about the same size as ours, though it was painted brick rather than wood. The terra-cotta roof was uniform, undamaged, and that alone would have been enough to distinguish it, if the Chen's house were to appear in our neighborhood. Our father noted that, architecturally speaking, the Chen's house was a disaster, but I detected a note of admiration, too, as if he wished he had designed something so reckless. We approached the front door and entered without knocking.

Pungent aromas accosted my nostrils, an amalgamation of ginger and spices and Asian foods that only come under the same roof in the States. I was familiar with some: Massaman curry, roasted duck, shrimp congee; however, overwhelming all of those was Dr. Chen's fish soup, one of the only things I knew that excited my father, who couldn't go Monday through Saturday without mentioning it at least once. We added our shoes to the colossal pile behind the front door. Tao's Nikes were the biggest by at least two sizes. We walked into the den, and a fusion of Mandarin, English, Thai—and tongues I didn't know—roared over the box fans. Dr. Chen and her husband waved at us and ambled over, dodging no less than twenty excited Asian parents, most of whom were animatedly eating, paper plate in one hand, chopsticks in the other, not bothering to sit down.

Dr. Chen brushed aside my father's extended hand and embraced him long enough to embarrass Tao and me. They talked about Jane's trip to Beijing. She would return in a few weeks. Dr. Chen's hair was the same ebony as my father's, though her nose was considerably larger and flatter. Tao was polite to the adults, but not his usual charming self. "She's just a professor, not a real doctor," I whispered to Tao as Dr. Chen ushered us into Jane's room, where the rest of the children ate. Through the walls, I heard the adults talking about American politics, the insufferable deficiencies of science and math curriculums, and the poor selection of produce at Walmart. After I married Haley, I understood their gatherings, and why, above all else, they never talked about home.

Tao and I looked around the room. The kids were young as four, and except for Tao, no one was older than fourteen. The other kids said hello to us in English, and then returned to their rapid conversations. We were both disappointed Jane hadn't come back, Tao far more so than me. After a trip to the kitchen, we took our plates to the kids' room and staked-out the corner farthest from the bed. The bamboo mat provided a surprising amount of cushioning. Flecks of dried rice lodged some of the cracks.

"So, this sucks more than usual," I said.

"Yep."

I pushed our plates away, so that I could scoot closer to where Tao was sitting. "You think they can understand us?"

He punched my shoulder, where the deltoids flatten into the upper arm. "You're still a shit whisperer. And yes."

I punched him in the thigh and forced a scowl. Even though I hated those things more than he did, I relished that one. For the first time in months, he wasn't distant; it was just us. We played seven rounds of hangman. He told me about Gateway: how he slept on the concrete floor because making his bunk correctly took too long, how his buddies would literally knock themselves out by locking their knees during the brutally hot hours they stood at salute, and how avoiding officers in uniform was the best advice anyone had ever given him.

"This place sucks," I said.

"Yeah, let's ask Dad if we can go home now."

"Why don't we stay a few more minutes? Maybe get some more food. Or something."

Lina was not Tao's type. That is, she graduated fourth in her class at Gateway—to our father's shame, Tao was only an A and B student—and she participated regularly in rallies on the weekends: waving signs for PETA and wearing t-shirts with Virginia Woolf quotes stamped on the back. Her favorite read, *For most of history, Anonymous was a woman*.

The only piece of jewelry she wore was a gauzy silver locket Tao had given her. It was our mother's. The Chinese symbol for love dangled at her collarbones when she pulled mother's chair, the only one with a seat cushion, to the table and sat in her place. Perhaps it was that. Perhaps it was the fact that I bought Tao eighty liters of ginger ale and lemonade for the party, built the sandwiches, cleared the yard, and lit the bonfire only to have him ask me politely to go inside. I told Lina that Tao got every girl a necklace like that before retreating to the roof.

Rippling clouds obscured the stars, but I was looking for the blip of planes anyway. Dribbles of languid moonlight created patches of light on the roof. Though Tao told me to wear shoes or else the fiberglass would pierce even my soles, I wiggled my bare toes. I clutched a two-liter of ginger ale to my chest. An acorn bounded off the roof, rolled down the slant into the leaf-infested gutter. Seventy meters away, Tao's friends circled the bonfire. Tao's lawn chair was empty, as was Lina's. The pale oval of his face crested the edge of the roof, and he took a seat next to me. I didn't know it at the time, but he and Lina had just broken up. He wasn't angry at me, then, just sad.

"This slant is brutal. How do you stop from sliding?" he said.

"I pretend I'm a plane." I handed him the ginger ale; the hiss of carbonation spilled into the air. He took one long drink before I dumped the whole soda, watching the fizzy liquid trickle down the slant and into the gutter. I did this instead of yelling at him: Dad was ready to move to Bonifay for you. You never talked to me when Mom left. You left for Gateway without asking me what I thought about any of it.

He nodded. "Your new Douglas is coming in tomorrow," he said, as he stood up. "And I'm enlisting." His sneakers spit crumbs of asphalt and fiberglass as he walked towards the ladder. He descended slowly, his face a white, moonlit oblong slipping beneath the horizon of the roof. The ladder shook as he stepped down, then jumped.

Beneath the awning of the Pensacola Regional Airport, Tao and I kicked at rocks. Except for a few cars queued under the arriving flights sign and the cacophony of cicadas, we were alone. The

moonlight mingled with the buzzing blue floodlights, and in the murkiness, he seemed older. We were at the end of goodbye; we had said everything but the word itself.

"I'm sorry about Lina," I said.

"We were never going to work." I couldn't tell if he was lying. In a quieter voice, he said, "Hell, in a year, you'll be in college building real airplanes—maybe I'll join you at Purdue when my enlistment is up."

I was only a sophomore, so it would be three more years before college, but I didn't say that. "They won't have any fried green tomatoes in Cape May," I said.

He rolled his eyes. "It's only eight weeks." His voice broke on the last word, and he clapped a hand against my shoulder. I brushed a patch of aftershave from beneath his chin. Without another word, he untangled his brawny arm and walked away. He muttered something. The automatic double doors whooshed open, and with a nearly imperceptible limp—the result of ankle sprain that never quite healed—he vanished around the corner.

When I returned to the car, my father asked if I needed anything. He said he was proud of Tao, that the Coast Guard was an incredible career. I told him I'd make the tea tonight. I pulled the latch for the Civic's moon roof and saw a Douglass DC-3 zoom into the stratosphere. It wasn't Tao's plane; he would be on a 707. I pretended it was, nodded when my father expressed amazement at their quick take-off. I told him I was happy for Tao before exhaling on the passenger side window and watching the condensation ghost the glass.

When our mother returned to the house on West Garden, I entered a tacit agreement with our father that any discussion of her time away was off-limits. She was much tanner, and faint sunspots dimpled her cheeks. As Tao predicted so many years ago, she simply walked in the front door, wheeled her extra-large Samsonite suitcase in the den, and hunkered onto the couch as if she was just returning from visiting Lao Lao or coming back from a weekend business trip.

We stopped going to Dr. Chen's every Sunday. Instead, our mother insisted on making crepes, which caused me to imagine her at a cooking school in Paris. Every bite confirmed my daydream was just a reverie, and while the crepes were edible, they weren't good. She talked a lot about how empty the house seemed without Tao, even as she never mentioned the absence she left. She asked how Tao was doing with tennis and if the Coast Guard provided him any opportunity to keep training. I wanted to tell her he gave it up, but I said that his old ankle injury flared up and without healthy joints the scouts wouldn't look at him. She was satisfied with that.

Tao moved so frequently I could barely track what hemisphere he was in. The middle of the Pacific didn't have great service, so I started journaling instead of calling him. I tracked the changes our mother made to the house: new paint for the kitchen cabinets, lamps for the den, Tao's bedroom flipped into an office. Within a month of her return, the house was cluttered again, and decorations slathered the walls.

A month after I received my acceptance letter from Purdue, Tao called from Hawaii and said he was re-enlisting, but he could come home for a few weeks during his two-month leave. That was as much warning as we got before he showed up one night in July with a wife. Her name was

Kai, and her hair was ebony, even darker than mine or Tao's. She had a mole on the side of her nose shaped like a guitar pick and a swollen belly.

"Dae," he cried, as his embrace elicited multiple pops from my upper spine. If anything, his muscles, particularly in the forearms, seemed to have shrunk since Christmas. "I told Kai I wasn't going to say this, but damn, you've gotten big." My mother scowled at his language, but I pointed at his side cap and reminded her that he was literally a sailor. Our parents were thrilled at the prospect of becoming grandparents. I offered Kai and Tao my room, as Tao's room still had one wall yet to be painted.

My father ushered everyone to the den, where we circled around the coffee table and continued talking long after the tea had gone cold. If Kai had any difficulty understanding our parents' English, she didn't show it. Around the time everyone's eyelids began to droop, Tao seized my attention with a side eye and patted his jacket pocket just below his breast. I nodded.

We walked out the front door past the brick steps, the mess of shredded pine cones and weeds and squatted on the street curb in our spot, where our live oak concealed us from the front window, where Tao used to bring girls before he brought them inside the house. He pulled two cigars. They were Hawaiian, he said, but, admittedly, they were also shit because he bought them from a street vendor at the night market after one too many Manhattans. We didn't light the cigars.

"I boxed up some of your old stuff from the room—just the good stuff, if you want to look through it," I said.

"Keep it all here; you can have whatever you want." Tao cleared his throat and swatted at a leaping cricket. "Mom and Dad keeping an eye on Hurricane Kyle?"

"You know they're not." I laughed, a shallow noise that ricocheted against the pavement before being consumed by the night. I told him about Purdue's cafeteria, how mother and father decided that divorce was just too expensive, and an architecture student I'd met, a girl named Haley. For the first time, he waited until I finished before he offered his advice. He stood up and extended his hand.

"Let's go rescue my wife."

"Go ahead. I'll be one minute."

If there was a moment to tell him that I was failing three of my aeronautical engineering courses—that for all the times I mocked our father, I skipped class to witness the architecture of downtown West Lafayette, to hear Haley spout aimless facts—it was before the front door shut. Chattering bugs swarmed the streetlight, and I was alone. I plucked the cigar from my pocket and rolled it between my palms. Before I went inside, I sailed it through the air—around my face, my shoulders, behind my back. I looked at the stars, waiting for a plane to pass overhead. I tucked the cigar behind my ear.

Tao stayed in the Coast Guard for another thirty years. He and Kai had five children. They lived in every South American country except for Chile. The last time I saw him (not counting the holidays), he took me into his attic. He asked, "How does it feel to be a big-shot architect in D.C." and "why couldn't Haley and the kids make it?"

Hundreds of Mason jars full of dirt from all the countries they lived lined the shelves he built. Most sediments were red or gray; the most beautiful were a combination of swirling layers trapped inside the glass, tiny microcosms of immigrant earth. White strips of paper were taped to

the lids of the jars, Kai's neat cursive indicating where the dirt had come from. Hunching to avoid the nails protruding from the slanting roof, I picked up several of the jars and shook them, as if they might grant me a wish. I cradled the Venezuela jar, thumbed dust from the smooth, warm glass.

Sam, Tao's oldest son, dashed past his father and into the attic. The light from the single incandescent bulb yellowed his skin. Two moles dotted his cheek; he waved to me, as if, like his father, he preferred to say things with movement rather than words. He grabbed two tennis rackets before rushing down, ignoring his father's admonitions to slow down.

Tao's head and stooping shoulders poked through the trapdoor after Sam disappeared. He made no move to enter the attic or to return to the ground. I placed the Venezuela jar in its nook on the bottom shelf. His crow's feet sharpened as he grinned. I looked for evidence of his dream to win the U.S. Open, the times he sailed the world.

"Let's go downstairs," he said, "and get a beer."