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## Ho Lin Next Gen

At the time the department store blew up, he was shopping for pants he didn't really need. He was thinking of his little girl at home, and her uncontrollable slobber. That was the true reason he was dilly-dallying, because although he loved her—he and his friend used to roll their eyes whenever someone said their little girl was their entire world, but now they were both dads of little girls, and had just talked yesterday about a news story in which a young girl's killer had been arrested, and the two of them had agreed, if something like that happened to their girls the killer would never go to trial because they would kill him themselves, right on the courthouse steps—and although his munchkin of a girl was everything, she was at the developmental stage where she knew her slobber was an irritant, a weapon, and was happy to sling it around the house, on everything, the TV remote, magazines, his keys, and he wasn't quite prepared to go home yet and deal with the fallout, not to mention his wife, who was somehow growing fatter despite Zumba, maybe it was a chronic health condition, something genetic, as her father had passed early, her mother not far behind, and in ordinary circumstances he would be as supportive as can be, but she had defaulted to testiness for weeks now, probably because he was refusing to get her a horse, which seemed such a frivolous expense, but she had grown up on horses, so he could technically blame her father and his ranch, but maybe it was inevitable and she would have

gotten hooked some other way, like watching My Little Pony on TV, it could be she was genetically predisposed to horses and no matter what, he'd be asked to spend tens of thousands of dollars on upkeep for a horse every year, for an animal that was dumb on top of all else, an animal that couldn't even perform tricks unless you got an expert to break him in, and that would be even more money, and all he'd get out of it would be the occasional smiling faces of his wife and daughter as they cantered around, so that would make it all worthwhile, wouldn't it, yet surely there were far more economical routes to happiness, and was it such a crime to be economical, especially when so many others are in need, not that he handed out money to panhandlers, or even looked at them as he passed by, as many of them were mentally ill anyway, and he had inherited from his parents a fear of the mentally ill, as if their insanity was contagious, or maybe it was better to say he had inherited caution, and as an Asian-American, one especially needed caution these days, although with all the reported beatings of Asians, who could say which incidents were racially motivated and which could be chalked up to insanity, not that the two were mutually exclusive, although he tended to think that racism was a thing unto itself, something outside the Venn diagram where behaviors and mental illness met, which was probably unscientific and unreasonable, just as the prices on these pants were unreasonable, so unreasonable that they had to be a surcharge for being allowed to loiter in this store, atop marble floors polished to a mirror shine, touchscreens on every pillar, the "free" cups of latte offered over by the Alfani clothes racks, PA announcements trumpeting sales and exclusivity not found elsewhere, with one even being required to sign a waiver to enter, because physical stores had to compete with their online counterparts somehow, and the thrill of being *admitted* somewhere, like it was a gift, was the sole advantage they had left to offer, which struck him as snobby in the extreme, yet here he was, stalling, staring at pants for over five minutes, unwilling to move.

The explosion came from somewhere on his right: like a child's game, flash, big bang, only the big bang dragged an immense wind with it that knocked him down, flames everywhere at once. After the explosion he lay face-up, the floor cool beneath him, the air a riot of heat. He twisted his head to look at his right arm. It was bent at three angles—Looks like an eight-bamboo mahjong tile, he thought distantly. Charred bits of clothing wafted above as if they were flying from the scene. He tried raising his head, and somewhat succeeded. His legs—what he could see of them—were still there, but then it occurred to him that his feet were missing. It was all clear: the charred bits floating above used to belong to him. His ears were a dull throb with a sharp, stiletto-thin pain right in the center of them. Otherwise, he felt nothing. Better this way. If one has to go.... The PA was in soothing countermeasures mode, assuring patrons that medical help was incoming. Often he had thought about the moment of his own death, and what would run through his mind in that moment—a favorite song? The face of a loved one? A quick prayer to a God he never believed in? But the damned PA was still going, and it occupied his last bit of consciousness: *If you have any legal concerns about our services, please refer to your shopper's rights...*

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Fluorescent lights. Disappointing. If you're to be dead, then you'd hope that fluorescent lights wouldn't be the first thing to greet you. Would pants be available? Not that he was squeamish, but he was always self-conscious about his legs, and the least that could be provided in the afterlife would be a good pair of pants, fitted up decently, between a straight and an athletic cut, because straight pants made him look like a carnival cowboy, all off-angles and bow legs, while athletic ones made him look lumpy, but why worry about such things anymore, because, number one, you're dead, not just number one but number one to infinitum, and he could only hope that he wouldn't spend the rest of eternity fixated on pants, because surely there were more important matters to reflect on, which was rather a gift in itself, who could actually know whether death would grant something so luxurious, so extra, as consciousness, and just like the monkeys being given infinite hours to type all of Shakespeare's plays, surely he now had enough time to figure everything out about everything, which was daunting but also a relief of a sort, because it meant that answers would be found, which meant that he could take his time about it, there was no further need to rush through things, no more pressure, and maybe that was what the Buddhists meant all along, that once you accept the need to not rush, it all comes—wait for it—rushing in, and even though the rushing in hadn't happened yet he was ready to accept it, so why not let one's thoughts wander where they may, to inconsequential stuff like pants, and feet, and now another pleasant surprise arrived, because he had feet, planted in the latest Nike shoes, the 20<sup>th</sup> edition of the Air Jordan Hi FlyEase, the specs of which were completely known to him, which was odd, because he never memorized that kind of stuff, even though this was the kind of shoe that people would literally kill each other for, but he was already dead, so nuts to you would-be murderers, but now he was feeling a bit guilty because he had never bought Nikes in real life due to all the stories about sweatshops in southeast Asia, so the fact that he was wearing them now could either signify that such virtuous thoughts in life didn't matter after all, or that he had secretly wanted to have Nikes all his life and now his wish was being granted, which didn't really make sense because he had thought about Nikes maybe once or twice during his lifetime, and he couldn't accept that he was that shallow, that covetous, so maybe there was another explanation entirely, maybe he wasn't in an afterlife at all, but an ante-life, waiting for extra detritus like Nikes and pants to be cleared out from his soul before he could proceed, like being sat down in the office for a medical appointment, and the air smelling of steel and fluoride and sterility, and it's always too cold, and the sports magazines on the coffee table are from over a year ago but the gossip mags are from last week, though to be fair, to be in this place was far more pleasant than being in a doctor's room, and for the first time he noticed that he was actually in a place, a room with red walls and a single exit through an archway, and there were people there, gesturing at him to come forward, so this was it, just like they always said, a great big light and people you love telling you to come forward, go on, just a bit further, and nobody knows what happens next and now he was getting scared again because maybe this was it, maybe this

was the last moment he would think or be aware or be himself, and yet he was commanded to come forward, so here goes.

He took a single step, shaky as a newborn fawn, admiring the pre-stonewashed texture of his pants, when he saw his bare arm, catching the light reflecting off the red walls so strongly that it appeared to be red as well. In fact, it was red. All by itself. Blood red. No blood, but red, like a terminal case of sunburn, but without any actual burn; in all other respects, his arm was normal.

*Jesus, one of the people in the archway said. What color do you call that?*

*It's like you threw a bunch of crushed bugs into the dye, said another.*

*Wrong, all wrong, said a third.*

*Do it all over, ordered a fourth.*

He opened his mouth to speak, but nothing emerged. With his violently red hand, he reached up to where his lips should be, only to touch a polished, unbroken enamel surface. Just a bad dream, he tried to convince himself, you will wake up, you will get out of this, this is what happens, you get agitated and you tell yourself, *Wake up*, and that happens, and it's all over.

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*Please remember to take your belongings with you, the PA chirped. The store is now closing.*

The walls of the room were a thickly coated blue, with an archway to the south the only means of exit. Or at least he assumed it was south, he had designated that direction as *south* without any supporting evidence, so hold up, don't get too crazy now, don't underthink or overthink, and yet somehow he knew that the archway faced south, and he was already walking towards it, powered by a compulsion that seemed normal but also couldn't be normal because he had never felt compelled to walk in any particular direction any time in his life, but what was his life exactly? Many things eluded his memory. He had recalled pants, and a horse, and a child. What was the child's name? No recollection. He only remembered *munchkin*. Was this how the afterlife ran? Maybe his slate was being wiped in preparation for the next life, and the reincarnation people were right after all, and he could only hope he did all right in his previous go-round and wouldn't come back as a mosquito, as he hated mosquitos, had an unreasonable fear of them, there was that trip to Taiwan he once took in which the mosquitos were everywhere, and he decided to wear long sleeves and pants (back to pants again) just so he'd get bitten less, and he ended up sweating like a motherfucker, and catching what he thought was a cold that actually was a bad case of food poisoning that lost him fifteen pounds, back in the days before he had a wife and kid whose names he now couldn't remember, so maybe this memory erasure thing was proceeding backwards, and soon all memories of Taiwan and mosquitos would also be banished forever, and that would be a relief, because there were new tasks requiring completion, such as updating the Calvin Klein displays with the Wednesday discounts, refolding

the jeans over in the Diesel kiosk, and maybe even replacing the Cuisinart mixers in the kitchenware section with the latest models if he had enough time. Wait—was it correct and appropriate that he was charged with these tasks? Evidently. He was counted on to do things, he knew how to do these things, so why the fuss, why the constant back-and-forth of how and wherefore.

Anyway, he was in the middle of the department store, the space immaculate if one didn't look over towards the far corner, where the area was bare, and a scorchmark fanned out on the wall like an action balloon from a comic strip, *POW!*, but elsewhere there was not a thread out of place amongst the rows of clothes and mannequins, the 3D video displays piling words atop words before him, a mountain of prearranged letters: *18-month financing plan*. The front windows were already shuttered behind an ornate grid of steel, security guards stationed just behind, their backs to him, machine guns clutched loosely at their sides, facing the gates and unseen night beyond them. The PA had downshifted to a Muzak version of "The Girl from Ipanema." He still knew the name of the song, so he must have become acquainted with it at a young age, if his theory about his disappearing memories held true. He could tell you that prices that ended in a number other than 9 meant a sale was on, he could rattle off how much an additional 30 percent off a 60 percent off sale on an item that originally cost \$69.99 would net a customer. Even as he thought this, he was folding pants. Always the pants. Was it his karmic destiny to be linked to pants? And didn't something happen to this department store not too long ago? A fire or something?

A woman was walking towards him. No good, an intruder, how did the security guards miss her, this place was supposed to be on lockdown. But then he saw she was wearing the store-approved vest, with a name tag that read *Jill*. She was Asian, like him, unadorned, blank-faced, or rather, it looked like her face was debating whether to express itself. He wondered if he looked the same.

*Hello Jill*, he said. Yes, he had a mouth, and his words had been heard by her. Was there a time he didn't have a mouth? Must have been a bad dream.

She looked down at his nametag. *Hello Jack*, she said.

Was his name really Jack? He could have sworn it was Chinese. Something that sounded silly in English, that inspired gentle and cruel jokes when he was a kid. Well, neither here nor there. *Sorry, have to get working*, he said. *Only so many hours before the store reopens*. A price checker was in his hand. It must have been there the whole time, but he hadn't noticed it, as if it was another permanent appendage.

*Where are you from?* she said.

*Huh? What's that got to do with anything?*

*You don't remember?*

*It's not that I don't*— He was about to say *It's just that I can't be bothered to remember*. It sounded like something he would ordinarily say, and yet he couldn't escape the feeling that he wouldn't ordinarily say it.

*It's important you remember, she said. It's hard for me too, so I have to keep saying it out loud. Born in Syracuse, parents from China, middle of three kids, standard suburban childhood, dad died of lung cancer when I was fifteen, moved to Portland after college, was taking part in a demonstration when....*

*Um, sorry, what's your point?*

*Why are we here? How did you get here?*

*Something happened, I guess.* It sounded lame coming out like that, but that was the extent of it, the alpha and omega. Did anything more need to be said? Wherever we are, there we are. Very Zen of him. Maybe the afterlife was Buddhist after all.

*Answer me this, she says.* Somehow her face had retained its blankness through all of this. *What makes you angry?*

*Angry?*

*Anger's good for the memory. What's the angriest you've ever been?*

He considered. There was some business about a horse, which seemed strange now, because he had nothing against horses as animals, apart from a healthy fear of getting kicked by one, but that there was definitely something to do with a horse that had maddened him, yet it hadn't been true anger, maybe a nagging irritation (*Nag*, horses, get it? I know, don't quit my day job), but angriest ever, that was a tough one, wasn't there a time in which he had invested in a cryptocurrency, attended one of those seminars, Greatcoin, that was the name, he was assured that Greatcoin was the next generation of Bitcoin, and he received a 500 percent return within the first month, and luck was finally turning his way, and who said that liberal arts majors always finished last, and then he learned he couldn't withdraw any of his mammoth savings because something or other hadn't been verified by someone, and then it came out that Greatcoin didn't even have a blockchain, and all this savings he'd accumulated was imaginary, and the people who came up with the currency disappeared, and even Interpol was involved, but hey, it wasn't real money so why would the FCC do anything beyond issuing some stern warnings, and just like that, a few years' salary gone, and that was the reason he was mad about the horse and the pants, because maybe if the Greatcoin was legit he would have bought the horse and pants without a second thought.

*I see you remember, she said.*

*Yes, but who cares?* he blustered. *We've got a sale to prep for.*

*But why? Are we really employees? Why are we here?*

He thought: Clearly one of two explanations here. Number one, this is a test, like a game, and she's role-playing, evaluating my convictions, but in a fun Mario Brothers kind of way, it's the best way to learn, play the game and even if you fall off a cliff you reset and begin again, die and repeat and learn. Number two: She's having difficulty with her current situation and seeking any way out of it, like a tennis player complaining the sun is too bright, or the court's too fast, just like I used to be when trying to learn the guitar, the one thing in my youth that was truly mine and I was an utter failure at it, always complaining about callouses or not having the right



guitar or pedals for the sounds I was trying to make, sounds that never came into being, and yet now, listening to this Muzak, I hear guitar chords peeling like laid-back laughter, and it's closer to the music I once imagined than anything I ever heard before. Anyway: what was she saying?

*Snap out of it!* She slapped him in the face. So they were on intimate terms already. Like a couple after a few too many anniversaries, when all that's left is annoyance, because anger really does survive after all else is gone, she was right about that one, and then anger finally shades into indifference, and clearly he wasn't angry enough about the people in his life if he couldn't remember them now, and he was getting quite angry with Jill, who was keeping him from his work and asking him questions he couldn't rightly answer, and his exasperation was tipping over into passion, as he stared at her lips, which might have seen a collagen injection or two, or might be entirely natural, but either way, nice lips, even as they drew back from her teeth and she said: *Did you read the waiver when you came in here? Do you remember that? Do you understand what rights this store has claimed?*

*You make it sound like the store is a person.*

*Isn't it? Aren't all businesses treated as people? Very successful and privileged people?*

Ah, this was it. The screed. The polemic. Not that he disagreed with her views, in fact if he rooted around in his head long enough he'd probably find things he had said along those same lines. Death to corporations and soulless market capitalism, etcetera. But it never sounded good when expressed in language, never felt as good as it feels when it's in your head and unspoken, because once you say it, what is there left to do but shit or get off the pot, and maybe he wasn't up for either eventuality, and because of his reticence he just came off as pathetic, which begs the question of why he was here in this store in the first place, the answer being that he had nowhere else to go, so in a sense, it was karmic destiny for him to be working here, because aren't we all figuratively working for the store, when you come down to it?

*... brain, body, genetic markers, Jill was saying. They take it all. Every time you sign that form and walk in. If you don't remember anything else, try to remember that.*

She was running from him now, down the aisle, strewing clothes and mannequins behind her as she went. One of the headless mannequins came to a rest on a bent elbow, torso facing him as if to ask him where her own head was, or at least he guessed it was a female, but with such boyish, featureless mounds in place of breasts, who could say for sure, and other people were on the scene now, two of them chasing Jill down the aisle even as she shouted *Born in Syracuse, parents from China, middle of three kids, standard suburban childhood*. She bounded onto the escalator, the conveyance granting her inhuman speed as she sprinted up it and disappeared into the floor above. Someone else was now facing him, a man with a tag just like his, but with dotted code on it in place of a name, the man shaking his sweaty, mop-topped head as he jotted notes with a stencil on an electronic tablet, sighing. *You see what comes of remembering*, the man said.

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*You might not think that white curtains are the way to go, especially with the potential dangers of stains and such, but they're the best option if you plan to stage your condo for a sale. A top-floor condo that receives plenty of light? Yes, an absolute must.* No one was with him as he said this, but he was compelled to say it, because he would no doubt be saying it to a customer today, and it was best to do it hundreds of times beforehand, like an actor with an obsessive-compulsive tick learning lines, think white, white, white, even though the current walls that enclosed him were canary yellow, which were pleasant in their own way, but they were definitely not white, and white, as mentioned, was the way to go, particularly because getting the right shade of white necessitated buying a specific brand of blackout curtains, which would result in a slightly larger profit margin for the store, true only a few tenths of a percentage point perhaps, but it all added up, and the next thing you know, the store can invest in new high-tech floodlights that adjust themselves based on the customer's mood, casting illumination over prime displays at key moments, inspiring more sales and even more profit, and the conglomeration and accumulation continue, and really one can go on forever this way, no matter what others say about resources stretched and the value of the dollar sliding and the planet going to pot, because it's in the nature of living things to multiply, and no one's stopped us yet.

All this thinking of multiplying led him to consider humans, and younger generations, and children. Didn't he have a child? Or used to? Or will? Time was getting confusing. Didn't another father once tell him *When have a child, it's your whole world*, and he had agreed? Why would he agree if he never had one? He wouldn't be theoretical about something like that. So he once had a child, and he now remembered a nickname, Munchkin, and it wasn't a real munchkin he was referring to, so it had to be a nickname, and she must have been a girl, because the child had long hair, and he was a bit conservative to countenance a boy with long hair, not that he had anything against families who did, it was just that life was hard enough without confusing the issue with long hair and dresses for boys, although if he had a boy and the boy showed a predilection for that sort of thing, he'd probably give in and agree to it, because he was a pushover, all things considered. So his girl with long hair was everything to him, and yet he couldn't remember her real name or much of anything about her, besides the way she clung to his arm, swinging like Tarzan from the vine whenever he swung it forward as they walked, so with every step she rose towards the sky, until eventually she became too heavy for his arm, so she merely took a hop every time he swung her, until even that wasn't possible any more, and she was just walking with him, hand in hand, and then the hand was gone and she was just walking, exhibiting his worst ticks—the way he looked askance at everything, the way she said *All right, all right, all right* in a wheedling tone whenever she had nothing to say, which was what he always did, and already she was saying she didn't want to learn a musical instrument because it was too much work, repeating his failures, passing them down, his foibles and hers as intractable as genetic code, or was he out of date, was it possible that genetic code could be



edited and revised, and if that was true, maybe it wasn't too late for her, moral quandaries about altering people be damned, and with that he had decided: I have to get out of here.

An archway to the west was the only means of exit from the room. He strode through, out into the store, fully aware that he was supposed to be tending to the cashier, that any movements to the contrary would bring reprisal, and already he was thinking about the Louis Vuitton bags—the store was truly upping its game, Patek Philippe reference watches and luxury-line electric cars couldn't be far behind, and there was so much that needed to be done, the POS systems needed updating with prices and products, but that could wait, just a little bit, because he needed to see his girl, and explain the crazy things in his head, and maybe in the process he would unlock something new in their relationship, get past the usual humdrum daddy-daughter stuff, for once he would have a real adventure to talk about. *Did I tell you about the time I got stuck in a department store and forgot everything?*

He was on the main sales floor, customers looking askance at him; well he could do that too, askance was his specialty, don't watch me as I don't watch you, as I walk towards the cashier, dressed in my starched button-down shirt and tie, seeming for all the world to be another sales associate, but the Munchkin awaits me somewhere, who knows how long it's been, whether she's at the same address or if she's much older now, based on the price changes in the head and rates of inflation, it could very well have been a few years, but nevertheless, she's somewhere and it's my job to find her.

Someone was approaching him: another associate. No problem. Smile, offer up a *Wonderful day* or some such, except that the associate approaching him looked familiar, something about the hair, or the way he slumped a bit as he walked, as if burdened by residual guilt over a forgotten act, much like he looked when he gazed at himself in a mirror, except now he was looking into a mirror again, because the associate looked just like him, but of course that was impossible because if he was looking into a mirror he would actually see a mirror, notice the edges, pinpoint where the reflection stopped and the world began, and in this case there was no mirror, no division between real and reflected, and the man *was* him, there were two of them, mouths agape, both tags on their shirts reading *Jack*.

*Dear customers, pardon the inconvenience and the somewhat disturbing sight in front of you,* the PA purred. *The issue will be resolved momentarily.*

*Dammit!* someone said. It was a man with rolled-up shirt sleeves, fingers flying across an electronic tablet. What was left of his sweaty hair was stuck to his head in a way that was reminiscent of someone he once knew, or met, or maybe it was the tablet he was holding, so similar to...

The other Jack said: *What the hell—*

*Schedule glitch?* said another man. This was someone completely new, of that both Jacks were sure of, someone who reeked of Tom Ford cologne (another new lucrative addition to the store inventory), someone who was peering over the shirt-sleeve man's shoulder at the tablet.

*Only one at a time. I keep telling them,* said the shirt-sleeve man. *Dopplegängers always alarm the customers.*

The munchkin. Just think about the munchkin. He was side-stepping, exhibiting a sort of dance move he didn't know he had, backing away from the two men, from the other Jack, towards the front door. The other Jack's mouth remained open, a sound like grinding gears coming from inside it, while the other two men clucked and tsk-tsked.

*Quality standards have slipped, haven't they?* the cologne man murmured.

*It's not as simple as a deletion,* the shirt-sleeve man replied. *Eddies and currents and backwash in the brain are common. You just have to keep iterating. Just consider this one...*

Both men were looking at him now, even as he was mere steps from the front entrance. Their gazes were hard, unmoving, as if they were androids. *All right, all right all right,* he said, for lack of anything else to say. He tried to grin, and had no idea how it looked.

*He still thinks about the "munchkin,"* said the shirt-sleeve man. He poked at his tablet. *It's a particularly tough nut to crack. But we'll get there.*

*Jack,* said the cologne man. *Come on back now. We've got work to do.*

Fuck no, he thought, and even tried to say it. *Fuck no and fuck you.* He took another step towards the front entrance. Why was he so slow? It was like a dream, like being in quicksand, his arms and legs out of tune with each other. For once do something right, left foot forward, then right, out through the door, out of the shopping complex, into the casual windswept remains of another day. But where to then? He couldn't remember. In fact, he was having a devil of a time remembering why he was desiring to leave in the first place.

*That's right,* said the cologne man. *Come on back.*

*All right, all right, all right,* he said.

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*Good morning employees!* announced the PA. *Have a great day.*

Green room. Green walls bringing good green energy. Showtime. He said it out loud: *Showtime,* and he could hear a tiny bit of echo off the empty walls. It was as if he was a performer about to hit the stage with his guitar, which was kind of funny, because as far as he knew, he had never played an instrument. What he was about to do was more important than playing guitar, anyway. This was a life of service. Nothing better than easing a customer's path to purchase, inspiring bits of micro-happiness all day long. He hopped up and down in place, taking deep breaths, in through the nose, out through the mouth. His quads were a little tight. That was something he had to work on. Maybe he could use the employee discount on the new portable stair-stepper. If this was to be his new home, the room could use a little gussying up. Thank goodness for the green, he wouldn't know how he would have responded if the walls were a color he didn't like. Place the stair-stepper over there in the southwest corner. Maybe a lounge

in the northeast. Exercise and couch potato-dom on opposite ends of the room. Seemed right. Anyway: to work!

He stepped through the archway to the north and into the children's section. That was always the worst part of his day. For some reason he had an irrational fear of kids. Sometimes if he thought hard enough about it he suspected that he might have once liked kids, but he had no empirical evidence to justify that feeling. Fortunately his duties prescribed him to be in the men's formal fashion section, far from children, and if he should chance across a child, he could always ask a colleague for assistance. He was steady enough to hold himself together for that long, at least. His manager had reassured him that the kid phobia wouldn't be there forever. *The longer you're with us, the better you'll be*, he had been told. *Just trust the process.*

Deep breaths, he told himself, and he executed them. Nose, mouth. Nose, mouth. He walked through the primary-colored toys and frilly dresses and rocking-horse chairs, out into the wonderful atrium that served as the center of the store, where guests could enjoy coffee on park benches and soak in the sunlight from directly above, all the harmful UV radiation filtered out. They had really done a fantastic job renovating the place. Funny how he couldn't recall when the renovation had taken place, or what the store had looked like before. *Before* in general, as a concept, was foggy to him. Other colleagues were already out and about, taking their stations, roaming with efficient long strides, pinpointing wrinkles in linen, wiping them out with their steam guns. Smooth and steady, that was the daily goal. Smooth out the wrinkles, smooth out the furrows, smooth out the knots, whether it be clothes, muscles, minds. A colleague walked past him, long hair and bee-stung lips, her name tag proclaiming her to be *Jill*.

*Lovely morning, Jill*, he greeted her.

*It's a great day, Jack*. She smiled back and continued on her business.

He walked on. Just beyond the perfume counters, the doors to the store were opening, customers milling in, the store's ambient hum joined by the dainty shuffles of feet, the murmurs of people just waking up to the day's possibilities. On cue, the store released a pheromone mist coated with a hint of jasmine, putting all in a better mood, a more receptive mindset. Very Buddhist. Simply accept that we are here and roll with it.

He had taken up his position by the menswear when the giant holographic clock above his head chimed 10 am. And just like that, they were underway. Customers approached, trying not to look too hard or care overmuch, but it was clear that they were interested in the clothes, thirsting for them, only needing some reassurances about fit and style, only requiring only a slight nudge to complete their desires.

*Good morning!* he said. *We've got a great sale on these pants today, want to try them on?*

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*Ho Lin is co-editor of Caveat Lector, and author of [China Girl](http://ChinaGirl.com), published by Regent Press. For more on his work, visit [www.holinauthor.com](http://www.holinauthor.com).*