



Ho Lin

Vanitas

I'd forgotten about Marziak, hadn't heard from him since high school, when he friended me on Facebook. Rather: I allowed him to friend me. We'd never been close even though we grew up a block apart. He had a reputation for being a *troublemaker*, which to my dad was equivalent to suicide bomber. *Don't let him drag you down to his level*, he would tell me. *Your grades and future are too important*. (Yes actual humans sometimes speak these words.) Marziak's dad was my dad's opposite: jolly and roly-poly, whiskey on the breath. He said weird stuff too, but at least it was funny: *Check out that guy and how thin he is. Must be on drugs*. Or: *What's with that guy's tattoos? Must be on drugs*. It was either coincidence or comeuppance that his son grew stalk-thin, tatted up his arms, and got hooked on drugs.

Still, I never minded Marziak. He wasn't really a troublemaker, just someone not meant for school. He did perk up in English class when we read *Catcher in the Rye*. He even told the teacher that Salinger had taught him that it was okay to be unhappy with the world—it takes an anti-phony to know an anti-phony—and when he learned my name was Suzanne Qiu, instead of making the usual Suzie Q joke, he said *It's too bad. If your last name was Su you could be Siouxsie Su*. I couldn't think up anything cute to call him, but his name made me think of TV shows: *Joe Marziak, PI*. So that was how we greeted each other. *How's it goin', Siouxsie Su? Hey, it's Joe Marziak, PI*. And that was pretty much it. I'd gone off to China for a summer and then up north for school, and last I'd heard, Marziak had cleaned up enough to become a motorcycle mechanic, a good one. Keanu Reeves had used him on a custom project or two.

Our first few Facebook messages were understandably awkward. I had nothing to tell except that I was in grad school. His life was all custom jobs and road trips. What I really wanted

to know, what I was too polite to ask right away: *What's it like being on drugs? Are you still on drugs? How's your life? Give me something different, something interesting. I need stories.* (At least I didn't want to ask him what Keanu Reeves was like, because everyone already knew Keanu was a beautiful Zen idiot.) My experience in China had resulted in a published fiction piece that earned me a spot in a master's program for creative writing, but I still felt fake—phony, if you like—about the whole thing. Didn't help that I was the token Asian woman in a class of twelve, along with one Asian man, one Black man, and one Black woman. I mean, *come on*. I had found zero inspiration in grad school; my last fiction workshop had been spent in couched, cautiously civil debate over whether someone should give fair warning before reading material that might be considered triggering. So yeah, I hoped Marziak would trigger me, even though our first few messages gave me doubts. Then he signed off his latest message *Joe Marziak, PI*, I signed off my next message *Siouxsie Su*, and I felt like we could be buddies again, or buddies for the first time. He even told me he'd enjoyed my China story, and you never lose points by stroking the writer's ego.

And then he had a meltdown on his feed. First: *You know who you are. Find the sharpest knife you have and jam it right through your eardrum into your brain, thank you for your service.* Then: *My apartment was broken into last week. Only one thing was stolen: the western digital hard drive that has all the photos and video of the bastards who have been tailing me day and night. BURN IN HELL FOR ETERNITY YOU INBRED FUCKTARDS.* Then a blurry photo of a silver van in a rear-view mirror: *This is the van that followed me for almost an hour on my drive home from Long Beach. As soon as I got behind him, the bald white driver (might have been a disguise) high-tailed it for the first exit. If anyone can garner follow-up info I'll be very thankful. This sort of thing has been happening for a while now, including a POS Chevy with a WAY out of balance right front.* Finally: *You shit eating COWARDS have to look your children in the eyes, knowing that no matter how much you tell them you're good people they know you're SHIT EATING COWARDS.*

I sent him one message—*You OK?* When he didn't respond, I dipped into his post history and learned that this was a pattern, virtually an annual event. Paranoia heaped on top of rage over a few weeks or months, followed up by apologies to anyone he might have confused or alarmed. *I was off my meds, I'm on a new prescription now.* Then repeat. I copied and pasted his rants into a Word doc, for a future story. My fiction workshop would have plenty to say about the ethics of *that*.

He got back in touch a few weeks after I messaged him. *Sorry I was dealing with stuff. I'm passing thru next week. Got time to meet up?* Here we go, I thought. We agreed on a Thursday night meetup at Tosca—not my fave hangout, but it was obnoxious in a boisterous Italian way and my last time there I had observed our city's mayor French-kissing a hot blonde who wasn't his wife in a back booth, which to me was an auspicious sign: *Expect the unexpected.* Marziak stank of cigarettes and only ordered seltzer water, but otherwise he seemed all right. He was thin for sure, if not drug-thin, but his arms had bulk, as if all his aggression had piled up in them. We didn't mention high school once; instead we caught up on recent events, building this friendship-or-whatever-it-was from scratch. He told me about his time in Alcoholics Anonymous. *I got out*

*pretty quick. All the higher-power shit was getting too religious for me. And my sponsor was telling me the only way I would ever recover was to give up all mood-altering drugs, including my meds. The fucking guy was drinking coffee and Coke when he said it.* I told Marziak about my next-door neighbor, or at least as much as I could stand to tell him, because she'd been in my head for way too long already. I stuck to the highlights: she blasts music till five in the morning because she's "rehearsing" for *American Idol*; during daylight hours she yells at people over the phone or maybe she's just yelling at air, loud enough to be heard two floors up and down; she accuses everyone of being racist, including me, because I'm an Asian-American lackey of the white racists, don't you know; she's threatened me with a witch curse, because of course she's a practicing witch; she took out a restraining order on me after I told her to back off. At the end of that summation my shoulders were all bunched up, which I'm sure was an extremely unflattering look. Marziak sighed once, a multitude of feeling behind it, and ordered me another drink. "Maybe you'll get lucky and one of your neighbors will kill her," he said.

I got to my third Whiskey and Diet Coke before I asked about his Facebook posts. They looked bad, he admitted it. When I asked why he didn't delete them, he murmured something about the posts helping him remember what he was going through. Does it really help if you keep relapsing, though? I wondered.

He tapped at my glass. "How many drinks have you had tonight?"

"Two."

"Will you remember that three days from now? A year from now?"

"Now that you're harping on it, yes, absolutely."

"Or maybe we'll talk again in ten years, after we've met up hundreds of times in hundreds of bars—"

"Because we've become inseparable pals—"

"—and you won't even remember which bar we went to tonight."

"Well, maybe. I don't have a photographic memory."

"Sometimes I think I do. Or worse."

"Well, come on. Don't stop there."

He lit a cigarette even though smoking wasn't allowed. "Do you remember my mom?"

"Your mom? No. I remember your dad. A drunk Santa Claus."

"He's still drunk, more like Jabba the Hutt these days. But you don't remember my mom at all?"

"No. Don't think I ever met her."

"You don't remember that parent-student night freshman year? How my mom kept telling your mom she was gorgeous, and everything was oriental, *your beautiful oriental makeup, that's such an amazing oriental dress*. You don't remember that?"

"You'd think I would. *Fuck*. I don't remember your mom at all. Is my memory that bad?"

"No," he said. "I don't think that's it."

His eyes were glassy, as if they'd roll back into his head if I said the wrong thing, so I suggested we get air. We stationed ourselves outside the front door, under streetlights that made

us look chrome. Marziak was looking to his left down the street, then his right, then his left again, as if he wanted to cross to the other side, but he wasn't moving.

"Sorry," he said. "Sometimes it's like things are almost normal, then I get thrown off."

"I don't mind."

"You don't mind me? Generally speaking."

"Generally." I gave him a little bop to his shoulder to assure him I was there, we were there.

I don't recall anything specific after that. Like, *anything*. Maybe I had a few too many. I certainly felt like crap the next morning. Which doubly sucked, because a writer who can't hold her liquor is in for a rough life, and if I couldn't recall looks, gestures, meaningful dialogue, then how could I expect to compose prose that was worth a shit? Anyway, Marziak hadn't seemed especially loony. No surprise—people are usually fifty percent less crazy than they appear to be online. Fifty percent less interesting too.

I didn't see him for a while after that, as the winter went by in that annoying northern California way: rain, cold and sun, more rain, a little extra rain, the rain never violent enough to give you the feeling that something important was happening. My neighborly witch was taking me to court, but the date was getting pushed further and further into the future due to one excuse or another, as if she was enjoying this prolonged torture, but I knew she couldn't get her shit together and I was just collateral damage, which just made the whole thing more infuriating. And then there was my thesis advisor, and his *I know this, you don't know that* attitude. "You haven't had a life-changing experience," he had told me, and I didn't want to spend the energy insisting he was wrong, maybe because he was right and I didn't want it empirically proven. He had recommended *Gravity's Rainbow* to me with great solemnity, as if it was meant only for me. Some weeks afterwards, after I'd slept with him, I overheard him recommending the book to another student, with the same exact intensity. He had the wavy hair of a maestro and a diet coke problem. During office hours he guzzled straight from two-liter bottles, absolutely unaware of how that looked. The night we first hooked up, he drank so many Whiskey and Diet Cokes, forcing a near-equal amount on me, that his eyes got soft and his shoulders sagged and he actually looked human, so when he suggested a motel it was like he was admitting fault for something. *Sordid*, that was the word for us, and I had always thought *sordid* was the domain of historical dramas and drawing-room comedies.

So when Marziak messaged me and suggested we meet up at Vesuvio, I was all yes yes yes. This time we hugged when we saw each other, because it was a hugging kind of day. I ordered a Whiskey and Diet Coke without thinking, and he drank sparkling water. I told him about my thesis advisor, to which he should have responded with appropriate condolences, but instead he grinned: "Siouxsie Su! *La vida loca!*"

I told him I hadn't seen much of him on Facebook, and I hadn't, but I hadn't been on Facebook much either, because Mark Zuckerberg had become a thing, and even though I didn't really care enough about Facebook to be political about it, I could at least stand in solidarity with those who were pissed off, which meant checking it once a day instead of three or four times. Marziak said he didn't use Facebook anymore—in fact, he would no longer use it to message

me. He recommended Zoho mail. More secure. If I got a Zoho email we could connect, Zoho to Zoho, with no fear of surveillance.

“Or you can just, you know, call,” I said.

“The problem is the lasers,” he said.

“Lasers?”

“They’ve got them everywhere. They pick up the vibrations from your voice. Get an RF detector on Amazon, that’s what I tell people.”

“Are you saying you’re being watched?”

“Makes me sound important, huh? And paranoid.” He snorted and finished his water. “That’s the problem. You say nothing and they keep doing it. You say something and people think you’re crazy.”

“Why would you be surveilled?”

“You remember I told you about my mom?”

“Sure. I guess.”

“No, do you actually remember me talking to you about her?”

“Yes. Oriental. You told me she told my mom she was very oriental.”

“But you’ve never met her?”

“Nope.”

“That’s the thing. You have. I have the photos. *Had* the photos. From that parent-teacher day. She died a few years ago. Soon as that happened, everyone forgot about her. My dad, everyone. I go through my photos, I look for evidence she existed. IDs, paperwork, anything. All gone. Like she was never here. Like her existence was *cleaned up after*.”

“I want to tell you something but I don’t want—”

“Fuck it Siouxsie, don’t be gentle.”

“Maybe she passed a while back and this is some kind of delayed—”

“She was *here* until a few years ago. Cancer. I remember. Older, bald. Wrinkled face, bald head. She tried wearing wigs and they were the fakest wigs you’ve ever seen, but it didn’t matter, she was vain and she was going to wear a wig. Then she was gone. Wigs gone. Everything gone.”

“Could your dad have just trashed all her possessions because it’s too painful for him...?”

“It’s not just her. You remember Michael Jackson?”

“Who?”

“Jackson 5. ‘Billie Jean.’ ‘Thriller.’ King of pop music.”

“I’m not that great with music.”

“Or Paul Newman? *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, with Robert Redford?”

“Robert Redford, sure. Never heard of that movie, though.”

“That’s what I mean. They’re *dead*. And everything about them, everything they did, albums, movies, gone, like they never were. I’ve searched on the web, everywhere.”

“So you’re saying you remember all these people and everyone else has forgotten.”

“Yes.”

“And because of that, you’re being watched.”

He mashed his face with his fingers. “*Fuck...Forget it. Forget I said anything.*”

“Hey. It’s okay. We can keep talking. I don’t mind.”

“You don’t mind me?”

“No. Generally speaking.” I gave a theatrical little laugh, just to drive it home: *I remember I said that last time.*

He ordered more water, I ordered a straight shot of whiskey, and we got into it. I even wrote it all out on half a dozen napkins. “I *knew* you were the right person to talk to,” Marziak said when I broke out my pen. “Maybe if you’re the one who writes it all down we can preserve it, somehow.”

The facts, or the facts as far as Marziak could tell: He could remember people that were no longer with us, unlike the rest of humankind. But if we forget everyone who’s died, then *we should believe, or at least be of the belief, that no one has ever died.* To me, that didn’t sound right. Of course I knew people who had died. I couldn’t recall any at that moment but I’d had a few too many drinks, again. But accepting Marziak’s premise, why was he the one who remembered? Some unknown sense that only certain people have? A fluke of genetics? How did the rules of non-existence work? If everyone who has ever flown to the moon dies, do we collectively forget that we’ve gone to the moon? If Harrison Ford dies, do all his movies vanish? Or does history re-shape itself and someone else gets the honors? (At this point I made a note to myself: *Get list of famous actors and movies based on Marziak’s memories.*) And if Marziak was right, how was all evidence of the person’s existence getting erased? Had Michael Jackson’s albums and Paul Newman’s movies simply winked back to nonexistence, or had they been gathered up, destroyed? Marziak leaned towards conspiracy explanations. Intentional efforts, mass cover-up. Thus the lasers and the van tailing him and his missing Western Digital hard drive. Maybe there’s a metaphysical reason, I suggested. I had read that the number of people alive in the present day would never outnumber the total number of dead people throughout human history (there it was, people die, yes we’re all aware), which sounded a little dubious to me. Maybe this was a cosmic balancing of the scales. We had reached a crisis point in which a certain number of people had to be removed on a constant basis, not just removed, *wiped*, the disappeared’s impact and imprint on the rest of us deleted, so our collective buffer of cultural and historical memories wouldn’t overload. The gentlest culling of the herd imaginable, with even the trauma of bereavement excised. A naturally occurring event, a quirk of science that had yet to be explored. This would also explain our knowledge of death. Some had died in the past, back before our numbers had gotten out of hand, so we remember that death can happen. But with the unseen systems of ecology and universal harmony creaking under the strain of so many of us, too many souls thinking and doing and just wearing each other out, this new mode of adaptation had been arrived at, like how fish became amphibians and the furry little critters getting stomped by dinosaurs became humans. Marziak liked this theory. At least, it gave him a reason to be less paranoid for a few minutes. Then he came right back at me with a quote from *Gravity’s Rainbow* (well fuck me, he’d read the book before I did): *If they can get you asking the wrong questions, they don’t have to worry about answers.*



Did I really believe all this? Not really. But Marziak needed to let it all out and I was okay being the one he let it out to. When I had finished scribbling our notes, he had taken photos of each napkin, both vertical and horizontal, and asked *So what's my homework, prof?* I told him to start making lists. People he knew that were gone, people who we should both know. For each person, provide details about their life and accomplishments. We would compare notes. He would also keep a separate list of famous people who had just died, and check with me whenever it happened, to confirm if I remembered anything about the person. Ideally there would be an intermediate list with some overlap: a list of people who were dying, or on the verge of death. If I stated that I knew the person and then couldn't remember after they passed, that would serve as compelling evidence.

Marziak thanked me at least a dozen times that night: a lot of *I knew you could help* and *You were always the smartest one in class*. Just your average model minority kid, I wanted to tell him, but whatever. If the reason he connected with me was because he believed I was something special, something that far outclassed my actuality, I was okay with it. Just like a dog thinks its owner is the best thing on earth and even if the owner is an asshole, the owner is compelled to act like he indeed is the best thing on earth, if only just a little bit, to live up to his dog. So as I added Word docs in my file folder titled *Marziak*, building up material for my future story, I would message him every day, sending reminders, questions, thoughts:

*Got an update?*

*Brittany Murphy died the other week. Know her?*

*Nope*

*How about Oral Roberts?*

*No, sorry. Is that a real name?*

*Problem is, no one really famous is dying*

*Give me a name from your already-dead list*

*David Foster Wallace*

*Never heard of him*

*He wrote Infinite Jest. One of those books you're supposed to read but no one does. I never did. Guess no one ever will. Fucking sucks*

*Don't feel bad about it*

*Can't help it. Feels like I have a responsibility now*

*Give me another one*

*Elvis Presley*

*Nope, nothing*

*Wow. Rock and roll legend. He died fucking forever ago too*

*If you remember his music maybe you can reproduce it, make yourself famous*

*I don't think they would allow it*

*Who's they?*

*Dunno. I just call them they*

*They suck don't they*

*They're a bunch of FUCKTARDS*

*I fucking hate them*

From there it would be funny emojis, more *fucks*, letting off steam, and finally, maybe days later, we'd get back to recollections and cataloging. For a while we tried figuring out the most recent dead person who I could actually remember but it never got far. Over the next few weeks we met at arbitrary bars—Cha Cha Cha, Kilowatt, Bottom of the Hill—all the better to screw up the algorithms *they* were using to track him, and now that we were both on Zoho and he was using random computers with random VPNs and wearing different ball caps every time we met up, the bill of the cap jammed down over his eyebrows, he felt like he was finally getting one over on the fucktards. It was enough to sometimes make me wonder if Marziak was right about everything. Whenever that happened, I would order more drinks. I was getting better at drinks in general; they had become an indispensable adjutant to my day, what with dealing with my neighbor and my thesis advisor. Marziak had gotten me into Moscow Mules, which was fine by me, anything to get me off Whiskey and Diet Cokes, even though my thesis advisor was being needy once again and asking me to join him on a road trip to Denver, because just because, or maybe because to him the prospect of spending every night in a motel just off a lonely highway was romantic and desperate and maybe even tawdry. Or yes, sordid.

Near the end of winter we met up in a booth at the High Tide, just a few steps from the Pacific, people singing bad karaoke the next room over. Marziak was handing out his latest printouts of people important and average (*Remember that girl from high school? What's-her-name?*). "It's a fucking trip," he said. "It's like the world changes in front of me every day. Someone I don't know seems to know me. Someone I've known forever is gone. Places change. Once I found out my home wasn't my home. Someone else was there. I had to fucking pay for one of those people searches just to find out where I lived. And when I got there, some things I recognized, some things I didn't. Like I have to figure out who I am again. And people ask why I need meds."

I couldn't come up with a reply to that, so I lifted my Moscow Mule and clacked his glass.

"I mean, it's been great working with Keanu," he continued. "It would be a highlight for anyone, right? But what if he dies in a crash tomorrow? Do I lose all that? What would fill in the gap? Nothing? Something better? Can't imagine anything better. But what would it be? It's a fucking trip."

"Keanu will outlive us all," I said. "And maybe it's not all bad. Weren't you telling me that Michael Jackson was accused of molesting young boys? If he was never here, then those boys never got molested. If a genocidal dictator is erased, maybe all the people he killed come back?"

"Come on, Siouxsie. You know how this world works. One tyrant goes, another takes his place. Probably the same number of dead people, just different people get killed."

"Very reassuring."

"Existential is what it is. Am I getting that wrong? Is that existential?"

"Sure. Why not."

"Maybe you're right though. Maybe you gotta be *yin-yang* about it. Lose something, gain something. Who knows what shit you've taken from specific people in the past, and the trauma is now gone because *they're* gone. You're free of it."



The next room over, someone was mangling Creed's "With Arms Wide Open." Which was kind of like driving over roadkill that had already been squashed flat.

"Speaking of freedom, why can't just the bad rock stars go?" I said. "So we don't have to hear their crap over and over."

"Jesus, how fucking amazing would it be to never have heard Creed? What would it take? Do they all have to die? Maybe just one of them?"

"We could get away with it too. As soon as we kill them, they were never there. No memories, no consequences, no repercussions."

He stared at me for a bit. His lips were working, mouthing something a few times before he actually spoke. "What if we took out your neighbor?"

"Why would I take out my neighbor?"

"Because she's a witch and a bitch and she's taking you to court."

"Uh, *no*. He's a very cool old guy named Ed who always gives me primo weed. Writes hipster poetry about North Beach."

"You don't remember the restraining order? Your neighbor yelling and screaming all day? Blasting music at three in the morning? Practicing for *American Idol*?"

"I think I'd remember something like that."

He scrubbed at his head, at the exact center of it. I noticed for the first time that he was missing a patch of hair there.

"Hey," I said. "Maybe we should take a step back here—"

"It worked," he said. "I did it and you don't remember."

"Did what?"

"Your neighbor. The witch. She lived in number 2."

"I told you, Ed lives in number 2. Has for years."

"Now he does. He didn't before. Not until I took the witch out."

My head started throbbing from booze and blood rush. "What the fuck you mean?"

"I went to your apartment building on Cabrillo in the middle of the night—"

"Who told you I live on Cabrillo?"

"—and knocked on the witch's door. She didn't answer, but that's okay, I had my ten-pound sledgehammer. So I took down the door. She didn't even hear me do it, that fucking music was so loud. She was too busy screeching along with her song. I took the sledge hammer to her. Needed a few swings but I did it."

My hand was wet from the side of my glass and I wiped my eyes, my face, with it. "Okay," I said.

"As soon as she was dead, I was out of there. Went straight home. Then came back the next day, knocked on the door. Door was fine. I met your guy Ed. He told me he'd been there for seven years. So you see? It worked."

"I'm not sure how—"

"You don't remember, do you? We talked about this. Last time we met up. At Kilowatt. You were talking about your witch neighbor and how this whole court thing was killing you and you

were saying, *Why not take her out? Do me a solid.* Don't look so guilty, you were just joking. But I thought *Yeah, this will be a good test.* And look what happened. I remember, you don't."

I looked to my left, to my right, back to my left, to see if anyone was listening to this. No, thank fuck. Under the table top, I balled my hands up, ready for I didn't know what, but I was ready.

"I knew it the second I saw you tonight. Like the world's off your shoulders. Because the witch is gone. It worked. And I don't think anyone else knows, even the fucktards who keep watching me, because I was very careful. Are you okay? Just breathe. Breathe."

"I need to go," I said.

"Don't freak out, okay? You believe what I'm telling you, right? Look, you even wrote it down." He unrolled a crumpled-up piece of paper. Maybe there had been writing on it at some point, but it had all faded into unreadable squiggles and sticks, like invisible ink that had never quite made it back from oblivion.

"Shit," Marziak groaned. "I knew it. The proof always disappears. It had your neighbor's name, address, all the details—witch, curse, restraining order, called you a racist. You can tell it's your handwriting right? Even now."

"I'm trying to decide what's worse," I said. "Whether you're crazy, or right."

I was out the door in record time, the neon letters of HIGH TIDE above me a washed-out blur as I ran down the street. I heard someone calling, and it may or may not have been my name, but I kept going, street after street, recognizing the Safeway there, the Chinese restaurant over here, all the way back to my home on Cabrillo, where everything was in the right place, just as I'd left it, just as it had always been.

Marziak didn't try getting in touch after that. Just as well, I wouldn't have replied. I should have been on edge as it was, seeing that he knew my address, but I was somehow certain he wouldn't press the issue. His Facebook page remained stagnant; just the fact that it existed signified that he was still out there, if one actually believed what he believed. Winter dragged on; my thesis advisor kept inviting me to Denver, where the skiing was excellent and there was a town with a hot spring pool that could fit thousands. I thought about all those pool-goers, destined to be forgotten one way or another. We settled on an overnighter to Tahoe, where the sex was indifferent, the car ride conversation on the way back very dramatic.

This is the time I should have gathered all my Marziak notes and written my story. But I would open up the file folder and browse the documents within for just a few minutes before a profound lack of inspiration would take hold. *He said something interesting about someone,* I would think, but I could never locate details on the specific person he mentioned, and I couldn't even be certain that he was the one telling me about that person. There were pages and pages about what he thought was *going on*, but little in the way of specifics, and specifics, as my thesis advisor would often proclaim, were the lifeblood of fiction. That and a healthy sense of follow-through. I lacked both, story of my life. Either that or all the important information had been deleted by the fucktards.

It was close to spring, the fog hanging low in the mornings, the world outside my window reduced to street and gray, when Marziak messaged me on Zoho. *Hope you're doing ok. Got time to meet at Tosca?* Sure I had time. I'd wondered what had happened to him. Funny guy, Marziak. You would never have suspected that the same guy who wasn't into high school had such a hyperactive inner life, with all his theories about people who used to exist but were now forgotten. He had gone into all of it with me...where was it? Kilowatt? High Tide? I wasn't sure. Life happens fast, even when nothing seems to be happening at all.

Tosca was having one of its better nights: music at a decibel level a bit lower than a jet take-off, lights dimmed enough for everyone to look good, seats for everyone. When I saw Marziak I offered a handshake but he hugged me instead, a tender snuggly kind of hug. He said he missed me. It hasn't been *that* long, I said. I'm just glad you're still around, he told me. His hair hung scraggly and limp to his shoulders, and his eyes were black, doll-like. I was wrong; the lights weren't low enough to make everyone look good. When I ordered a Moscow Mule, I thought he might cry on the spot. Don't get weird on me now, I thought. He hadn't gotten very weird on me before, but I knew his history.

"You remembered," he smiled.

"What? I always order a Moscow Mule."

"Not always."

"Whatever. Am I not allowed to change?"

"Maybe change isn't a choice. Maybe there's always something behind it. Like maybe you drink Whiskey and Diet Coke as a rule, someone else drinks a Moscow Mule, you have one and decide you like it, you forget how you first had one, and you assume it was your preference all along."

"For me, it's always been Moscow Mules. How's life? I don't see you on Facebook anymore."

"I didn't tell you about *them*?"

"Fucktards. Something about fucktards?"

"Yes." He tried a laugh that came out more like a choke. "Always the fucktards. How's Ed? Your neighbor?"

"Ed? I don't know an Ed. Janice and Eric live next door, remember?"

"Ah," he said. "Janice and Eric."

"Yeah. I told you about them. Older couple. They've taken it upon themselves to instill a spirit of community throughout the building. Which, okay, fine, I don't mind, a few wine parties at their place, meet your neighbors. Except Eric groped me at the last one when no one was looking. What is it about me? Pheromones?"

"Janice and Eric," he said again. "Not Ed? Or a witch?"

"No, no Ed. A witch? For a neighbor? I wish. Sounds more fun than getting groped."

"I've been thinking a lot lately."

"Good. *Cogito, ergo sum.*"

"I was thinking of hiccups. You know hiccups?"

"Yeah, I know hiccups."

“What do they say when you hiccup? Just think of something. Come up with a question you don’t know the answer to, or just think about a person or a situation really hard, and before you know it, the hiccup is over.”

“Yeah?”

“I’m thinking life is the hiccup.”

“Well. Okay.”

“Fuck it, I’m just talking. Most of the time I just talk to myself and come up with all this shit. Doing this in front of someone else, it’s different.”

“Good different?”

“I don’t know. Maybe. Yes.”

“It’s good to get excited about something.”

“Right out of *Catcher in the Rye*,” he smiled. “What’s that quote he has in the museum? *Certain things, they should stay the way they are. You ought to be able to stick them in one of those big glass cases and just leave them alone.*”

“Catcher in the what?”

“J.D. Salinger. Like we learned in English class.”

“Salinger? Don’t know him.”

“What do—*shit*. Right. He died last month. He’s gone. Gone gone.” He stared at the bar. More than that, it looked like his eyes were drilling holes in it.

“You feeling okay?” I said.

“What’s in my head is all that’s left of him. But who the fuck cares? The rate I’m going, I’ll be gone soon. We all will. No one in a thousand years will know or care about any of this. You’re a writer, you want to be fucking immortal, right? But the whole universe will collapse someday, lights out, dunzo.”

It took me a while to say anything. For some reason I was thinking about my summer in China, and lavender lotion, how I’d given my bottle away to Mei, that girl I’d almost forgotten but could never quite seem to, Mei of the pimply face and crinkly smile, who maybe loved someone else but didn’t love me, how I was embarrassed by how smudgy the sides of the lavender lotion bottle were, how Mei’s hands closed around it like a prayer. Why did no one try to explain this one: Why *that* memory, that particular unimportant moment, and would I miss it if I ever lost it?

“The only way I can think about it,” I said, “is that we’re all insignificant and yet we’re all witnesses to things outside our sphere of experience. Maybe we have to find something special about just the act of beholding.”

He shook his head. “Sounds like something Keanu would say.”

“Now if you want to insult me, I’m gonna leave.” I called to the bartender for another seltzer for him, but he was done with seltzers. He ordered us both Moscow Mules and we drank them down in single ravenous gulps.

“You ever want something to last forever?” he said. “Like if you think hard enough about something, it’ll last longer than you do, like you could will it into sticking around?”

“I think we all want that.”

“Not even a memory, just a *feeling*. Like when I was eight and my dad was driving me and my mom home at night, and it was raining, the hardest motherfucking rain you’ve seen, and it was getting a little scary, or it should have been, but I was getting more excited the harder it came down. And Dad was trying to be funny about the whole thing, like we were on a mission against the odds, so he starts quoting *Star Wars*. *All wings report in, Red Leader standing by*. And my mom played along and said *Red Three standing by*. And I was supposed to be Red Five, because of fucking course I’m Luke Skywalker, and they’re waiting for me to say *Red Five standing by* but I’m eight and too cool for them and just embarrassed that they’re doing it, so I’m saying, *Come on Dad, stop it*, and god damn if it wasn’t the happiest I’ve ever been.”

He had the biggest smile. “If that feeling could last, if that feeling could be passed on, then I wouldn’t care about the rest of it.”

We didn’t say it, but I think we both knew that we had said all that we could say about things. Marziak had more drinks, I mirrored him glass for glass, and pretty soon we weren’t saying anything except *Well shit, Siouxsie Su and Well, fuck, Joe Marziak, PI*. Marziak said he was looking forward to my next story. I told him that the story would be about him, which I figured would piss him off, because that’s the usual reaction, but instead he slapped me on the back. Do it, do it, he insisted. *Maybe you’ll get the fucktards on your case instead of mine*. It was well after midnight when we parted. He told me he’d miss these little meet-ups with me. Give me a break, I’m not going anywhere, I told him. He told me to have a good one. You too, I said in return. His hair was slicked down into something near-tidy by the rain as he turned away from me. From behind, he actually looked a lot like Keanu. We all look more famous from behind. He walked away, more like striding, like he was charging into battle. *Red Five, standing by*.

My thesis advisor has graduated from Diet Coke to bottles of Sierra Nevada pale ale, with shots of Diet coke as a chaser. Or maybe it’s the other way around. I half-expect his stomach to sprout holes, with the Coke spewing out every time he guzzles from his two-liter bottle, like one of those fountains that spray water at regular intervals. It’s too bad—I can imagine him a little less portly, a little less ruined, just like you slop Vaseline over a camera lens to make a woman look less wrinkly.

I don’t know how we got into it, but he’s talking about a woman he’s dating. He refers to her as *this woman* but I know it’s one of the students in my fiction workshop. I’ve seen her leave his office, her limbs all loose and free, and I’m sure it must have been quite a workout. When he calls out to her as she’s leaving, that’s a giveaway too: his voice so pin-precise and in the moment, so different than the thoughtful slur he breaks out for me, as he says, *Don’t forget, Gravity’s Rainbow*. She smokes so much that her arms are skinny and her hands are enormous and I can tell she’s one of those who leaves destruction in her wake, like Godzilla wading through Tokyo, entirely innocent of any wrongdoing because it’s true, she actually is innocent, and her only fault is her talent of inspiring terrible decisions by others. My thesis advisor is telling me about their recent road trip to Denver and how fraught the experience was, with yelling and crying and guilt and anger and demands and devastation both ways down route 70. I know, pretty amazing and stupid for him to tell me all this, but he thinks we’re friends, or at least

confidantes. Maybe he thinks my reticence is proof that I can keep a secret. I'm keeping notes in my head, of course, for when I can use this in a story, so I'm okay with all of this. Better to be treated as a friend than as a potential lay. Maybe he thought of me that way at one point, but one thing or another changed and he never took action. I can't imagine what it would be like to be with him. Or actually, I can, for some reason. I've had a dream or two in which we've slept together, which is crazy, because hello, Diet Coke addict and unfulfilled writer who teaches at a second-rate writing program and crushes on young women because of their limitless potential? No thank you.

But those dreams led to a thought that has brought me to his office. I have this weird idea for a story that involves people completely forgetting other people after they're dead, and how the world changes each time it happens. I can't even explain it very well, because it doesn't even feel like something I made up, more like I was told about it once, but I have no clue who or when or why. The harder I try to remember the details of the thing, the further away it gets. I just know that the story is about memory and forgetting, which sounds like a Kundera book, which only serves to further intimidate me, because in no way am I Kundera, nor will I ever be.

"Let me stop you right there," my advisor says. Then he stops himself with a swig of Diet Coke before he goes on. "When I was learning guitar I would beat myself up every day because I knew I would never play as well as Jeff Beck or Dweezil Zappa. It took me years to realize that the *only* way you can play, the only way you'll get anywhere, is to play as *yourself*."

That actually makes some sense—maybe the first time he's made sense to me. But I have to bite my lip to avoid asking the follow-up: *So if you never got anywhere as a guitar player, did playing as yourself just mean that you sucked?* But fine, moving on, no more of Suzanne Qiu and Milan Kundera in the same sentence. I tell him about something stuck in my head: a memory of being a kid in a car driving through a rainstorm, the kid's dad pretending to be Red Leader from *Star Wars*, the moment serving as the happiest moment in the kid's life, maybe the happiest anyone in history has ever been or will be, and the memory surviving past the kid, past all of us.

"Hmm," says my advisor, going marble-mouthed as he always does when pretending to think hard on something when he's already made up his mind about it. "I like the premise, but the memory itself...seems to me it's a little...?"

"Banal?" I finish.

"Well, I was thinking *trite*, but let's not belabor it. Not that banality isn't a valid way to go, but why not take it further? A memory that stops the heart or stops time, something tragic and beautiful and cataclysmic? Something with more *finality*, more *juice*. Pynchon wrote that history is an aggregate of last moments, why not make the memory a last moment, a cosmic happening? Or go the other way, make it so utterly banal, so devoid of any sort of feeling, gesture or statement. This is how we end, this is what we're remembered for: a random memory that means nothing to anyone, including the person who had it."

I nod but I didn't really listen all the way through. As soon as he mentioned Pynchon, he sidetracked me. Probably a quote from *Gravity's Rainbow*. A book that I haven't read, will probably never read because I can never get past the first fifty pages, and if I never read it, wouldn't it be as if the book never existed?



My thesis advisor suggests we discuss my ideas further at the local bar, where he will no doubt line up Whiskey and Diet Cokes and the evening will wind down with more tales of *this woman*. I tell him I'll meet him there, and he accepts this proposition without question. I step out into the darkening skies of late winter, or early spring, depending on how you look at the world, and walk on and on, trying to conjure something out of the damp streets and passersby who walk with far more intention than I do, trying to draw out faces that I know, or maybe used to know, fighting to hold onto the image of someone who seems to know me, or knew me, someone from high school days...That feels right, someone from way back who I forgot and now have forgotten again, something to do with Keanu Reeves, which is as banal as you can get, but as I walk past the Great American Music Hall, I see that Keanu's band Dogstar is playing there that night, and even though I know nothing about his music, even though I will in all likelihood make no sense of it, I walk in.

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Ho Lin is the co-editor of *Caveat Lector*. He is a writer and musician who resides in San Francisco. His work has appeared in *Foreword Reviews*, *The New York Journal of Books*, *Your Impossible Voice* and *The Adirondack Review*. His books include [China Girl and Other Stories](#) and [Bond Movies: A Retrospective](#).