



Fame

Ho Lin

A few weeks after he was moved into senior living, the old man left his apartment, determined to never go back. In the lobby, he lingered behind a rubber plant in the lobby, waiting for the impossibly cheerful woman at the check-in desk to step away, wondering if she ever would, worrying that he might die right there on the spot. He deserved such a fate, of that he was sure—how he was sure, he didn't know, he couldn't remember, but the thought seemed appropriate. When she finally left he loped across the cracked tundra of the emptied parking lot, onto the main road and into the night. The smell of jasmine suggested something from his youth, but every step led him further away from memory. Still, he walked on in even strides. Genetics had blessed him with the legs of a sixty-year-old although the rest of him was eighty-five. Some time later he was passing through the cursive wrought gates of a local university, as if he was in retreat and reverse, back to days hauling a backpack stretch-marked with books, hustling under sodium lamps and across campus greens. A memory coalesced: the creative writing workshop taught by a soused pony-tailed grad student, the group sitting cross-legged on the roof of the arts building, taking in the spring breezes, tongues loosened with a shared vodka bottle, all the better to critique without inhibition. Something like that building there. Was it possible this was his university? Would that make sense, for him to end up in a senior home just down the street? Didn't he originate from another town, another coast, and move somewhere else after graduation? It was hard to discern accuracy and truth this late in the day.

On the opposite side of the green, a colonial house was hemmed in between granite administration buildings. A plaque marked the house's celebrated origins, back when the university was just a college and the college was contained in that one house. The bricks and windows held a certain familiarity—but then, so did many colonial houses. Lights burned within and the old man was drawn inside, moth to flame. The ground floor was a lecture hall freshened up with Christmas lights on the walls, and a student was presiding from the lectern to an impressive group of what must have been close to a hundred people. A slideshow was being projected on a pull-down screen pockmarked with holes that from the old man's vantage point were the size of cigarette burns. In one slide, a hole punctured the cheeks of a grandfatherly man standing before the very same colonial house, an impudent cigar jutting from the man's mouth. The audience was young and old, all races, an ideal cross-section of the nation, all laughing as one when the student at the lectern made a joke. It was sometimes difficult to hear the young man as his microphone fizzed in and out of functionality, and people would yell at him to turn it up as if they were jeering at a ref at a basketball game. He just smiled, persevered, dull mike and all, squeaks from the ancient floorboards cutting in and out in musical counterpoint.

A memorial was being held for a professor, and although the student never said the dead man's name, only his nickname—"Professor Dickie," which raised a titter from the crowd each time he said it—it was apparent that Dickie was quite the character. Remember when Dickie pissed off the local mafia? And how they came by to shut Dickie up for good, only to get lost in the student union building? (The crowd chortled knowingly at that one.) Dickie was a genius educator courted by institutions like Stanford and Duke, but he was also a true man of the people, with a predilection for motorcycles and magic tricks. This photo is from his sabbatical, just him and his Harley on the Silk Road for a whole year from Xi'an to Istanbul, delighting the locals with his sleight of hand at every stop, because people will kill each other over religion and culture, but no one can resist a good magic trick. But his greatest trick was when he was kidnapped in New Mexico, by one of those gangs who kidnap people because they look important, and indeed Dickie was important because of his government contracts, and yet when the gang ransomed both his university and the government, they were reluctant to pay because of the recession and all, which should have spelled Dickie's doom, but a few days later he returned home unharmed, with no explanation of what happened. To the end he never revealed how he had escaped, only that it was between him and the gang, and one of the conditions of his release was that he would never tell. But he did change universities after that, because who wants to teach at a place that won't pay your ransom?

And so the eulogy went, people laughing and weeping and applauding, until it ended, as all things must, with Dickie's recent passing, which was as wry and heroic as one would want: a final wink from the deathbed, a quip stolen from Groucho Marx: *Dying is the last thing I'm*

gonna do. After the student concluded, everyone retired to the vaultlike living rooms at the back of the house to drink. Brooklyn Cocktails were being served, as Dickie was originally from New York City, and the old man took hold of one just as two women cornered him, both of them young and bright and open. You look familiar, they said. Weren't you in one of those photos? Were you friends with Dickie? The old man was too flummoxed to tell a lie at that moment, so he told them he was just passing through, which they interpreted to mean he and Dickie had a connection from afar, which maybe meant that he was famous in some way too, because what he had done is the sort of thing famous people do. So they asked if he was famous. To be asked in such a matter-of-fact way triggered a naked need in the old man that had been buried for decades. He told them that maybe he was, to some.

They looked him up on their phones and came upon the old news feature on him, back when he won that poetry prize from the foundation that no longer existed, when the Internet was a sullen teenager and newspapers were enjoying their last ripe age of obsolescence. The girls squinched their eyes as they scrolled the article; the old man could see bemusement creeping in. Finally, one of them said: So you're a writer? She said it in such a way that held out hope, and her desire, her solicitousness, were so overwhelming that the old man was almost ashamed, so he told them he was a writer, and he was even mentioned at the Oscars once. That impressed them, but now they wanted context. Who said it? When? For what? The old man wasn't sure. He could very well have made it up. But it was plausible. He used to have semi-famous friends, like that documentary filmmaker who sat next to Sean Penn during the ceremony and won for that short film about sweatshops in India. Or maybe it was a friend of his who knew the filmmaker and this was a second-hand tale. Or maybe his friend was Sean Penn's friend. Funny how he could remember the documentary and Sean Penn but nothing else. But he was pot-committed now, so to speak, as these two young ladies were looking at him with such regard, or maybe better to say they were being kind, so wishing him to be worthy of regard, that it flustered him even more, so he said that the filmmaker mentioned him in his Oscar acceptance speech.

The women said Oh; the sound of the *Oh* contained multitudes. All of them, including him, basked in the desire to believe. It would be more convincing if he knew for sure. And yet, he was recalling all the wrong things, such as his brief and forever promising career as a poet. It was that German girl in the writing workshop with him. She had taken a swig of vodka and then passed it on to him, her mouth on the bottle and then his, as if it was fated they would sleep together. She didn't take her writing all that seriously, but she had a burning obsession with equity when it came to paying for meals. He had a bacon burger with extra large fries on the side, while she had the regular burger and fries, which meant that once you add tax and a 15 percent tip, he owed \$4.67 more than she did, and what, he didn't have the right change on hand? They didn't last long after that, and she left behind a notebook that contained her version of a German epic satirical poem, written in German, updated to reflect the terrible times we now lived in, which

weren't all that different from the terrible times during which the poem was written. A year later, just for the hell of it, he translated the poem into English and presented both original and translation in a poetry workshop. From that moment it was like riding a wave without benefit of surfboard, as his professor was flabbergasted by the quality of the submission, but especially the original German version, because the professor happened to be fluent in German, and how rare, how incredible it was that a non-native speaker could produce something with such fluency, such feeling! And then the award from the foundation, which amounted to a framed sheet of paper that he kept for years and years, maintaining its pristine legibility while everything else in his world faded. At first he feared the German girl would find out and retaliate, but she never did. The attention was enough to get him a teaching gig, but that didn't last long as he never wrote anything of consequence afterwards. His not-so-subconscious penance for his deception, perhaps. Or more likely, he was just never that good. Because if he was good, why was he alone in a senior home with no visitors, no books with his name on his shelf? All that was left to say was a pathetic *Sir, I existed*, as Stephen Crane might put it. How could he remember Crane but nothing of his own?

It's all right, one of the girls said. We miss Dickie too. They had their arms around him, their breath warm and soused, one of girl's jackets wet on her shoulder where his tears were soaking in. He would be content to die right there, if they would smother him just a bit more, but alas, he wasn't going to go that easy, and besides, there was another Brooklyn Cocktail to drink. The floor was shaking under their feet, as a Barry White song pounded on the speakers, one of Dickie's favorite songs, someone shouted, proud in their knowledge, as if just by sharing this fact he was as important as Dickie, if only for a moment. The girls were piloting him into the drawing room, where a table had been set up. A burly man with a goatee was performing street games in tribute to Dickie. The man was evidently famous in his own right, as all looked upon him with a rapt attention that could power cities. The magician shuffled customized mah jong tiles, some topped with gold coating, most topped with silver. Who wants to play? the magician asked, throwing his arms open, as if to say, *See, no skulduggery here, even though we all know there will indeed be skulduggery of the best kind*. No one took him up on it. They just wanted to bask in his presence and their shared knowledge that yes, they were all here with him.

The old man sat down at the table, more exhausted than anything else, and the magician grinned. Aha, first victim! he said. So he scrambled the tiles and arranged them in a line, twenty of them, and asked the old man to select four of them. Four, a number of ill portent in Chinese. The old man knew that much. Without understanding the rules or strategy, he picked tiles out at random, three silver, one gold, the tiles ponderous in his fingers, and turned them up. Each had a crude illustration of Dickie on them: Dickie astride his motorcycle, Dickie pontificating before a whiteboard, Dickie and his proud little paunch lounging at the beach. Ha, almost! said the magician, and he turned up the four tiles he himself had selected: four identical Dickie faces,

ruddy with mirth, all in a row. The crowd buzzed with appreciation. The magician had won the hand, though the old man had no idea how or why.

Double or nothing? suggested the magician, and the old man shrugged, his mind clouded up even further by drink, as the magician shuffled the tiles once again. The old man picked out his tiles and this time his were the identical ones. The Barry White song faded out just as he turned them up, and the whole room went dead silent. Then there was a great *Whoa!* from the crowd. How was this possible? Was this the first time in recorded history that the magician had lost at his own game? The magician still smiled, the rictus grin of a corpse, and with a bit more alacrity he shuffled the tiles again. Triple or nothing, he insisted. The old man shrugged. Once again the magician lined up the tiles, and this time he took four gold ones, while the old man settled for silver. The magician turned his tiles up first: three Dickies on a beach, one Dickie at the whiteboard. The old man turned his tiles up: four identical Dickie faces once again. Now the room was anything but silent, as people pressed in, chattering, fixing on the old man, asking out loud who he was, was he famous too? The two girls who had accosted the old man were nodding, as if they knew it all along. *Yes, you can ask us, we saw him first.* The magician was shuffling the tiles again, his shoulders bunched up, no longer hiding his desperation, and the old man had the impression that this game would go on and on until the magician proved his supremacy once again, which might never happen. And indeed, for the third time in a row, the old man won. The crowd was now emitting a sound that was like a rising siren, pressing in on him. He looked at the unfamiliar faces, held his breath to match the baited breaths of all those looking at him, the crowd thirsting to know, the old man himself wanting to know but unable to recall anything apart from German poetry and vodka, unsure what to do next, as if he was lost in the wild, the local creatures staring him down with reverence and fear.

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](#).