

## CHAPTER 1

Greenwood pulled into the parking lot. He inched up to a 20-foot-high chain link fence surrounding the school. It looked more like a prison rather than a place of learning. Greenwood took a deep breath and switched off the engine. He remembered the stack of exams and folders he needed to haul into his first class. He swung around to the back of the car, opened the trunk and heaved the stack up under his arm.

Leaving the bright early morning sun as he walked through the front door – foreboding as it was with its iron façade and sturdy push-bar -- was always disheartening. Greenwood greeted the principal on the way to his first-floor classroom -- Lester Mann. *Les Mann* they called him -- except the gym teacher, who seemed to specialize in caricature and thus fancied exploiting the principal's more effeminate manner. *Les Mann* became *more woman* to the gym teacher.

*More woman is makin' the rounds today* he'd tell Greenwood.

*What the fuck are you talkin' about?* would be his reply. A wry smile would appear on Greenwood's face as he slowly came to grasp the gym teacher's joke.

He continued along the hallway, forging a path amongst students, book bags and boom boxes. The metal clamor of lockers opening and closing could be heard on both sides of the hallway. The stench of moldy towels and sports clothes sickened Greenwood. It led him to mutter one of his customary catch phrases in his customary Brooklynese accent -- *fuck it all*, he bellowed, and one startled Haitian girl stood glancing at this broken middle-aged man as if observing some primordial beast from another time or distant planet. Some aging git who in his heyday probably celebrated the likes of Elvis and James Dean, Marilyn and Bob Hope.

Greenwood had gone whole hog into the education sweepstakes -- after-school tutoring at 20 bucks an hour, night school at 30 bucks. He even tried braving the Yeshiva for all its lucrateness. But those Talmud boys, aspiring scholars of the Jewish faith, had always had it in for the *goyim* teachers. Greenwood would always be on the defensive with those Talmud boys. *I'm a Jew just like you*, he'd shout as he begged for mercy, striving to stave off the insults and sputum directed his way. He'd been warned that one needed to wear a raincoat at the Yeshiva and succumbed after just two months.

Greenwood had become physically compromised by the time he took the Math job at the Pershing High School in Sunset Park. He'd already been worn down by years of slogging through daily lessons in Far Rockaway. More than once he tempted to challenge the treacherous undertow on the beach leading up to the High School. *Fuck it all* had first become his mantra back then and yet he persevered -- now a scrawny figure, grey-haired and disheveled, a hacking cough from years of smoking cigarettes. A pitiful shell of a human being, to be sure.

When he finally got to his classroom it was bedlam. Some Chinese kid newly arrived from the bilingual program was holding court in the far corner -- *Nick*. How does a kid from the Fujian Province get a name like *Nick*, thought Greenwood. The Mexican girls sat patiently and determined to be tasteful in filing their nails and applying some cheap mascara that they'd picked up at the corner drugstore. Greenwood nearly collided with a melee taking place at the front of the room.

"Fuck, Ramos, what 'r you doin'?' We got an exam today."

"You cursin' now, cracker? I'll report ya' to the Board of Ed."

"I'll call your uncle, Ramos!"

Ramos feigned a terror response. The glint off his gold-plated tooth cap seemed to mock Greenwood's half-assed reply.

It took another fifteen minutes -- with some help from the Dean of Studies, an imposing figure who'd spent 10 years in the Marine Corps -- to finally get the class in order for the scheduled examination which the Department Chairman had prescribed for that day. Greenwood spent the next minutes trying to figure how many students would arrive. He became distracted by the sounds of a commotion emanating from the fifth-floor stairwell. *What the fuck now?* He headed halfway down the hall before hesitating then turning back. *Better left to Mr. Marine*, he thought. *Fuck it all!*

## CHAPTER 2

*Tat tat tat* and sinewy pillars of smoke rising into the air. *Tat tat* at the heels of those guiding the dragon as it coursed and curved along 48th Street. Pungent aroma of sweet and sour pork hanging over the spectacle and the Grand Marshall shouting at those high school boys to behave themselves or they'll get a good talking to at the precinct. Xiaoling -- looking slightly less than her 14 years -- attempted to cross over to the far corner. She had been trying to approach the new boy Nick since they first caught sight of each other in the hall between classes.

*Tat tat tat* at her feet and Xiaoling almost leaped out of her slippers and why did she listen to her mother's wish to wear traditional garb anyway. Antiquated customs brought over from some native land now seemed useless to Xiaoling and she usually scoffed at the notion of abiding. The smell of gunpowder started to eat at her nostrils as she neared the group of boys lingering and shouting in a mocking tone. She nevertheless managed to blurt something out to the boy Nick.

"You that new kid from English class."

"So what, I know you too, crossing street every morning over there."

"How you know? Why you wait for me every morning?" asked Xiaoling.

"No wait for you. Wait for my friend Rehan Lin -- live just above restaurant."

The whizz of bottle rockets began to pierce the generalized hum and holler and frightened children then clinging to their parents for the fright of it.

"So why not wait there at restaurant? Why there all the time where I cross?" she asked.

"Not all the time. Sometimes here, sometimes there."

Nick began to blush and quickly moved away, leaving Xiaoling alone within the remnants of a marching band playing on traditional Chinese instruments. Then looking upwards as each successive rocket seemed to reach higher and higher, almost piercing the low hanging clouds.

Xiaoling turned in disappointment. *Maybe see him again tomorrow in Ms. McGrath's English class*, she thought. Or maybe here at the corner or ... Just then a soaking rain started to fall as parade-goers scattered for shelter and Xiaoling smiling at the beautiful irony of it all -- Year of the Fish.

As she scurried around the corner onto 8th Ave., Xiaoling again spied Nick. Mohammed and the Polish boy had by now disappeared and he was alone save for his closest companion, Renhan Lin, to whom he seemed to be explaining something in their native tongue. Xiaoling took it upon herself to interrupt the conversation.

"Why no speak English -- this Brooklyn not Fujian."

"Bitchbitchbitchbitchbitch -- haha, speak English now," shouted Renhan Lin.

She saw no humor in his remark and neither did Nick, who scolded his friend for all the brashness of it. Renhan's demeanor had never appealed too much to Xiaoling. A pitiful soul no doubt, both parents having perished during the long journey from the Province to New York City.

"Why not pay more attention in Ms. McGrath class -- looking at girls all you do," but Xiaoling was unsure of how much Renhan could really understand of what she was saying. She repeated her admonishment in the Fuzhou dialect, although Renhan turned equally abusive.

"Bitchbitchbitchbitchbitch."

The rain started to let up as all three started back to 48th Street then turning back up towards the high school. The parade had by now disintegrated into pockets of dampened revelers moving about aimlessly, silhouettes in a graying fog. Their shouts became faint as the Avenue grew further and further away and Nick could barely contain his delight in knowing that at the very least Mr. Greenwood's Math exam would at this very hour be coming to a close.

"Changed exam to tomorrow because of parade," exclaimed Xiaoling. He could barely conceal his disgust at Xiaoling's comment and kicked at the next puddle he crossed, soaking Renhan's pant leg to the knee and appearing to grow more insistent on his long-held intention to forgo the studies to which he'd been subjected daily.

Year of the Fish -- and Xiaoling considered her fortune warily as she quickened her pace ahead of her two companions.

### CHAPTER 3

When Xiaoling arrived to the schoolyard the next morning she gave a quick glance to the usual cadre of handball devotees who had not yet begun their morning match. She did not see the Vietnamese girls, which gave her some cause for concern.

"Have you seen Kieu Linh or Phuong?" she asked frantically.

She received no reply and it occurred to her that she had not asked anyone in particular -- it had been merely some pleading attempt to reach anyone in earshot of her desperate query.

Immediately in her path were a few younger boys leaning against the chain link fence and Renhan Lin as usual eyeing a circle of ninth-grade girls across the yard. *Looking at girls all you do* was her customary remark but she had no inclination to confront Renhan Lin on this important day and she scurried past the line of boys and into the schoolyard.

Her glance darted in all directions but could not discern her friends amongst the chaotic scene -- a Hopscotch life under this bright blue early morning Brooklyn sky. (Note: Hopscotch is a game which dates to the ancient Romans and was originally designed to hone the footwork of those who would partake in the activity. It has become a common children's pastime and requires nothing for its implementation other than a piece of chalk and a stone or other object suitable for easy toss. It can be played alone or in teams.)

A slight Mexican girl began her run in a most audacious manner, thought Xiaoling -- hop one two double-down on three and four then skip over the marker which had been laid, though Xiaoling refused an attempt to be drawn into the contest, which greatly disappointed the Mexican girl who then grew adamant when she was carelessly impeded from advancing to her next double-down. Xiaoling apologized for unwittingly blocking her run and the girl could only manage to get off some subdued sneer upon foot-faulting on the final pass.

Now with the building's rear entrance in sight, Xiaoling could hope that she would encounter those Vietnamese girls in her climb to the fifth-floor classroom. Mr. Greenwood showed little tolerance for arriving late to his class, let alone to one of his examinations and the thought gave Xiaoling an added urgency in assuring that she and her friends arrived on time.

She was startled by the quickened cadence of approaching steps as she tugged on the horizontal iron bar. Two somewhat weathered girls was a sight for sore eyes and Xiaoling listened with a certain annoyance to their out-of-breath excuses.

"Slept late, bunny-bunny," said Phuong though huffs and puffs.

Xiaoling had come to cherish the affection that Phuong tended to show towards her and many of her classmates. *Have face like bunny-bunny* she would tell Xiaoling when they first met on registration day -- but wasn't one bunny enough, Xiaoling often thought.

The appreciation which Phuong was used to bestowing always seemed to be delivered in large doses and this

seemed incredible to Xiaoling -- what with spending her childhood still having to endure some of the more unpleasant effects of a war-torn past.

Kieu Linh slipped into the building ahead of the other two girls. The smell of eggs and overcooked bacon permeated the vestibule.

"Maybe have school breakfast today," she said. "No sesame buns left at Menling Bakery this morning -- Phuong arrive too late."

"No time," scolded Xiaoling. "Exam start in 15 minutes."

"Need energy to climb five floor," laughed Kieu Linh.

"Empty-face laugh!" remarked Phoung.

Kieu Linh stood motionless and perplexed as to what it was that Phoung was trying to imply.

"No person behind that laugh. Just empty face!" she continued.

Xiaoling was quickly tiring of her friends' gaiety on such an important day and let this be known by silently beginning to climb the stairway. The others followed but were almost immediately amused by the comic spectacle of one of the new teachers -- a short skinny man -- hastily ascending the stairway carrying a bin full of textbooks which seemed to weigh twice as much as he. His balance was precarious and he struggled to lift one foot after the other.

"Oh, be careful Mr. Chen. We help you!" exclaimed Xiaoling.

But Phoung was unconvinced and expressed her incredulity in a whispering tone.

"Not me, *bunny-bunny*. He go to fifth floor too."

Xiaoling took Phuong's comment in the joking spirit which was hers and nevertheless stopped Mr. Chen on the first landing. The poor man was already breathing heavily, which did not bode well for a safe arrival to the fifth floor. Xiaoling gingerly lifted three books from the stack and apologized for not taking more. Still Mr. Chen thanked her profusely and was even more gratified when Phuong and Kieu Lin each lifted two additional books from the top of his stack.

"Thank you, girls. Move quickly if you need to and leave books at top of stairwell."

"Why no student to help you, Mr. Chen?" asked Xiaoling.

"Student here lazy. Not like in Fujian. Sometimes disrespectful. Not like you girls though, no, no ..." he was quick to clarify, "but don't be late. Move quickly -- don't wait for this old man. Leave books at the top."

The girls followed his advice but left Xiaoling a bit saddened to see Mr. Chen disappearing out of the corner of her eye. The stairwell seemed to be pulling him into some sinking abyss, as if swallowing the poor man whole.

"Let's make bet if he make it without heart attack," laughed Phoung.

Xiaoling felt displeased at Phuong's rude comment and muttered something in Chinese. Disrespect is not something which Xiaoling's parents would have ever tolerated in her, above all when it concerned those to be respected by virtue of profession. As they passed the landing on the second floor, the meshed metal fencing enclosing the stairway began to clang violently -- rattles punctuated by staccato thumps echoed by rhythmic shouts -- *Li-ber-tad! Li-ber-tad!*

"Who making so much noise?" asked a startled Xiaoling.

All three girls strained to look upwards in an attempt to identify the source but the fence itself prevented any

possibility of doing so.

“What they saying anyway?” wondered Phuong, “don’t speak Spanish.”

“Kieu Lin speak Spanish,” joked Xiaoling.

“Don’t speak Spanish either,” replied Kieu, “but easy to understand. They want freedom. They want to be *free*.” She raised her voice on the last word in some self-aggrandizing gesture.

“Why free – this not prison,” said Phuong, “only look like prison. Keep us in these cages. Why fence so high. They think we throw someone over to the ground or something? Why so high?”

“Oh, stupid boys, that’s all. Keep moving or we’ll be late,” urged Xiaoling.

No sooner had they resumed their climb that some mosquito of a girl came flying by.

“Hey, there go Hop Scotch baby, *bunny bunny*.”

The slight Mexican girl had no sooner appeared than disappeared into the upper landings as the three girls marveled at her agility.

“Too fast,” continued Phuong, “Mexican girl *mola* “

Kieu Lin gave Phuong a puzzled glance.

“*Mola* Mexican word. Mean *fast*, mean *cool*,” explained Phuong.

Just then the *clang clang clang* returned and Xiaoling continued to encourage her two friends upwards above the din. As they stepped onto the fourth-floor landing their pass was partially blocked by a rather overweight girl leaning heavily against the wall, some opulent frame slowly descending under her own weight and whose wheezing prompted Xiaoling to stop and inquire as to the girl’s well-being. Phuong and Kieu Lin for their part continued to ascend while having a laugh at the girl’s expense.

“Too fat, too many sesame bun at Meng Lin Bakery” remarked Phuong -- but this time even Kieu Lin was taken aback by Phuong’s mean-spiritedness and told her so.

As the fifth floor landing came into view, Kieu Linh noticed the new boy Nick perched precariously on a metal beam protruding over a metal door which presumably opened to the roof of the building. He seemed to be on a mission, a well thought-out attempt at casual malfeasance meant to open the student body to some high-sighted Brooklyn adventure. Looking down and outwards towards a world which could only be poorly imagined from within these suffocating walls -- and indeed he did. Four or five of his eager comrades accompanied him onto the roof -- as did Kieu Linh and Phuong as they ignored Xiaoling’s entreaties not to succumb to Nick’s misadventure. The bright blue Brooklyn sky that they had enjoyed below only seemed to be bluer and more inviting and the wind in their faces felt like a scalpel penetrating their foreheads and as they looked far off onto the Brooklyn and Manhattan Bridges which now took on the appearance of Lego pieces, and further across the East River to the towering metropolis of Manhattan they sighed in amazement and the cold which nearly froze their reddened faces turned into a waft of hope that one day they too should be able to make the journey into what had inevitably become their parents’ dream of wealth and human dignity, after all.

## Chapter 4

Hongfan Wang always sat in the last seat in the last row. Hongfan had arrived from the shores of Fujian to

this Sunset Park, Brooklyn. Like so many immigrants at the time his English was poor – but improving under the tutelage of the grey-haired teacher called Mrs. MacGrath. The latter was of Scottish heritage. This fact made no impression whatsoever on young Hongfan – *why I should give a shit* he'd mutter to himself -- even after Mrs. MacGrath's generous attempt at trying something to alleviate the boredom which she felt she was inflicting daily -- some investigatory ethnic exercise meant to make them proud of from where they came. Some getting away from the *I am you are he she it is* bullshit that Hongfan and the rest of the class had begun to deplore. Day in and day out – *I am you are he she it is*.

Monotony on top of the added monotony that was his every morning atop his father's restaurant. Fujian roasted chicken culinary delight. Gastronomic traditions handed down through generations of the Wang family and his father determined to bring to the taste buds of those here in the New World. Matinal routine of preparing the marinade necessary for getting on with the day's offering. Being bombarded with commands regarding ingredients and measures and generally trying to fend off his father's barbs regarding one mishap or another. Then finally off to the High School at around nine for what always seemed to Hongfan to simply be more of the same.

Walking into the schoolyard he'd greet and observe his compatriot Renhan Lin. Then trying hard to avoid the sight of those Mexican boys who to Hongfan seemed like a gaze into some broken mirror, some perverse reflection of his own plight -- being commandeered from one's own birthplace and thrown into this cauldron which was Brooklyn, New York. *Que tal chino* they would shout, and Hongfan at a loss to respond until one day figuring it all needs to start with a name -- Hongfan just wouldn't cut it with those *Mexicanos*. He considered something with a Spanish flavor – Pepe or Chico – but the stark visual discord didn't seem to work and he settled on one that he saw one day as it dangled off some torn billboard advertisement on 49th Street. He'd be Nick from now on – *Nick* -- though he would never be able to convince the likes of Mrs. MacGrath and those other squares in the Bilingual Department of his intent.

Hongfan Wang – *Nick* -- always sat in the last seat in the last row. Here he could scope those Vietnamese babes – that's how Nick would put it in now beginning to hone the vulgarities which he would need to survive amidst the toughs here in the *barrio* – scope those Vietnamese babes who dutifully attended to Mrs. MacGrath's lessons. Here he could make deals with his new friend Mohammed – some good-natured wise-guy it appeared to Nick and who was working hard to specialize in the art of getting under teachers' skin at every turn. *Word up bro* -- he would seek to adorn Mohammed's streetspeak and Nick would pick up a few choice words in Farsi along the way. Most of all he could be nearly out of earshot of Mrs. MacGrath's annoying rant. Some high-pitched drone recalling of the tin-whistle which signaled the beginning of the daily harvest back in the rice fields of Fujian. Investigatory ethnic exercise indeed. Some attempt to instill that ethnic pride which might tease out the necessary incentive for succeeding in this bustling melting pot. Nick on many mornings might decide against going to the High School and instead stop on the corner of 46th and 4th Avenue. Here he'd meet Mohammed and Aleks, some new Polish kid from the class who, despite having been born here in the neighborhood, only spoke Polish at home with his now ageing grandparents and whose English was thus severely compromised. So much so that he'd at times become unaware of present company and begin chattering in his native tongue. *Zagrajmy w piłkę nożną* he'd say and Nick and Mohammed would smile politely at Aleks and Aleks would extend a hand in gratitude. Such an unexpected gesture would always confound the other two boys -- it might have brought them both to tears downright if not for the teasing they would have had to endure from the Mexican boys if word ever got out that they had turned *a mariconados*. Nick and Mohammed would simply accept the Polish boy's fondness with a nod and the three would proceed on to their impending though poorly thought-out adventure for the day.

They'd spend the better part of this particular morning scouring the neighborhood for easy distractions– a game of handball against the concrete wall behind the bodega, smoking a few cigarettes and eventually ending up down at the piers, where they'd fantasize about one day stowing away on one of the cargo ships that lined the dock. *Why aren't you boys in school* the hooks would ask (NOTE: *hooks* is a slang term often used for stevedores) and Nick was the first to reply to the uninvited comment and in a tone too vile for even Nick himself to recognize. Perhaps it was due to his usual uneven temperament, made today even more so by his father's early morning admonishment over some sloppy work in the kitchen -- or his impertinent rejection of Xiaoling's earlier appeal to attend Greenwood's Math exam. Time and again she tried to instill in Nick the desire for proper study, trying to convince him of the need to expand his perspectives beyond tending to his father's establishment. Nick would ignore Xiaoling's pleas, while at the same time always welcoming her ongoing affection.

It wouldn't be long for the trio to again be on the march seeking their next diversion. Walking briskly down 5<sup>th</sup> Ave, Mohammed decided to take part in the first melee he encountered. Some cracker from the parochial school in the adjoining district had taken it upon himself to try his hand at staring down one of the local boys who happened to be one of Mohammed's confidants. Even Nick marveled at the force with which Mohammed – never one to shy away from defending a mate despite his less-than-imposing stature -- landed one on the parochial school type. Nick and Aleksi decided not to join in the free-for-all which ensued as reinforcements seemed to appear from everywhere, and after yelling something to their brawling friend continued on their journey towards the 5<sup>th</sup> Ave. BMT line to Manhattan.

Nick could now only anticipate the excitement that he and his Polish friend would experience when he let on that his father had sent him off this morning on an errand to purchase five dozen hand-crafted dumplings from a wholesaler in the heart of Chinatown. *Yuppie like dumpling* he'd told Nick, explaining that it was an attempt to better cater to his neighborhood dining clientele. This would be his first jaunt into what those in the outlying burroughs referred to as *the city*. He saw such as somewhat of a pilgrimage and now -- feeling a bit less accompanied -- he relied on his Polish friend to fill the void. He became equally disheartened when Aleksi decided that leaving his grandparents alone in the late evening hours would be tantamount to shirking his sacred charge. Nick watched with a hint of trepidation as his friend disappeared down 53rd Street after having received his heartfelt apologies and promise that he wouldn't forsake Nick's next opportunity. Feeling decidedly disappointed about having to go it alone, he nevertheless reached down into his pocket for a crumpled piece of paper on which was scrawled the name and address of his destination:

### **Hop Kee Wholesale Dumplings**

#### **21 Mott Street**

One more hurried glance saw his Polish friend appearing as an ever more distant point on the Brooklyn horizon, and Nick descended into the 53rd Street Station.

## **Chapter 5**

Some sun reflecting off the billboards on lower Broadway went beholding those jagged levels of ne'er weathered brownstone structure which so adorns these environs, those which Nick's casual glance seemed to at once consume and ridicule. Some earlier twentieth-century art-deco pastel having placed itself squarely and Nick re-thinking as to whether any of this could have been some other city, some other place thought of improperly. Some sun reflecting off the billboards which were to highlight the blatant contrast between those dwarfed miniatures poking barely above his family's locale and these soaring temples lining teeming spaces of trade and enterprise.

*Only fresh dumpling he say.*

The wholesale house could have seemed unattainable if not for that crumpled piece to which he clung so desperately – seemingly lost in this conundrum, some promised land once inexplicably mirrored within the lakes and riverbeds of Fujian Province, Nick persevered nonetheless. How much longer would it be before they could afford to buy their own dumpling press so that they might relinquish the need for this weekly trek?

*Only fresh dumpling he say.*

Some larger-than-life billboard looming, some staring down onto tangles of traffic and human flesh being subdued gently into some mesh of rising subway steam and tried grease which some passing vehicle had been spewing inadvertently.

Nick should have gotten off at Canal Street, and he would have if not for the sight of some

slightlier young bird preening gracefully within the corner space. Some kindlier face reminding him of Xiaoling while seeing well into the capability which he knew he possessed for winning her over some day. Some stealing Xiaoling away from her textbooks and tests and afterschool study sessions with those Vietnamese girls and crossing over with her too on one finer day.

He considered heading back down on a southbound train but now with something newer on his plate, with now some higher sunlight etching out shadowed angles in close relief and deliveringly of one more block-upon-block he continued. Some step-upon-step and one more block upon another and Nick still fondling the crumpled piece of paper which continued taking pains to appear then re-appear in his increasingly moistened palm:

**Hop Kee Wholesale Dumplings  
21 Mott Street**

Some sun reflecting off the billboards on lower Broadway, some earlier twentieth century art-deco pastel endearing Nick as he glanced upward at the ornate structures adorning the overhangs of the flattened rooftops along this lower length of Broadway. Some vaguely perceived Baroque, a sunbeam catching his eye barely and dangling upon his forehead as it pointed its way downtown and weaving a path along some steadfast umbra edging earnestly back down toward Canal Street.

*Then what? No directions to dumpling house from there.*

Some larger crosstown thoroughfare had already begun coming into view and he glanced at the piece of paper once more in hope of concocting some clue or semblance of the whereabouts of his final destination.

Nick's eventual entry into Canal Street felt as if he had been royally received, some expanse of terrain stretching up to the Manhattan Bridge and back down toward the snarl of traffic which funneled through to one of the Hudson River tunnels and beyond. Some sun only promising as he made his way down Broadway now bathed him completely and he tended to savor the orange glow which warmed his adolescent features.

*Mott Street! How can I get to Mott?*

But he asked no-one in particular. Nick was in fact taken in entirely by the experience which presented, some oriental feast all about. Women pushing carts full of lychees nearly knocked him to the ground. The smell of Sichuan pepper salt tantalized his nostrils as Nick started moving eastward but only for some still greater concentration of people and food stalls. Some greater concentration of people and fishmongers pulling him onwards. Sounds and smells of fresh fish bedecking the sidewalk and attempting to avoid the now rancid puddles left by the flailing carps languishing in unsold bins. Bouquets of mandarin orange within some more elegant pose did hum their gentler melody toward anyone who might bother to listen and Nick tried once more to make good on the crumpled piece of paper which he continued to cradle in his palm.

*How can I get to Mott Street?* he repeated in the Chinese dialect but some elderly woman took no notice and he began to doubt as to whether their language was indeed his own.

He caught sight of some grandiose pagoda, upon closer view seeming to be nothing more than a cheap façade decorating some lesser-than-noble lending institution. Some towering structure whose childhood memory had faded fondly and his grandfather



warning him and his friends to desist from playing within for fear of infuriating the spirits for whom it served.

The sight seemed to endear or confuse Nick so that he hardly became aware of having finally arrived to the unassuming byway known as Mott Street. He instinctively set himself upon some newer course, now newly confident, some turning gaily and dodging some resigned old man hawking kaleidoscopes on a lower stoop as Nick set his sights squarely on some smaller cluster of children chasing dragons along the side. He was almost completely certain he had found the street but inquired in any case.

—¿*Ci Mott?* and a small boy looked puzzled until Nick grew somewhat more adamant.

— *Mott? Mott?*

The boy nodded -- but rather equivocally -- and Nick continued to wonder whether some idiom had indeed been vanquished to the pinyin muck which his father had warned him about on so many occasions – *all speak English now* his father would say. *All speak English.*

Finally arriving to entrance of 21 Mott left him a bit bewildered -- one staircase up, one staircase down. *How I know where to get dumpling, anyway?*

The lower storey seemed to be an eatery and, judging from the queue of hungry diners waiting to enter, quite a popular one. Then spying some succulent-looking fowl behind a steamed glass persuaded Nick to begin his descent, for the bird which presented, glazed honey and stiffened at the neck in gentle swirl convinced him that this was undoubtedly superior to the roasted chicken which his father had for so long been trying to teach Nick to prepare for their own neighborhood clientele.

Some Chinese marinated chicken properly roasted had always been his own family specialty. Some roasted chicken delicacy had been theirs to rely upon since arriving here some years ago, and it was to their good fortune that the locale in which they presently presided had gone for the asking and at such a reasonable offer. *Shi xīng cān guǎn* and yes it did turn out to have been a familiar spot amongst the locals.

But the marinade to which his father long dedicated his early mornings had begun to take its own toll on Nick. Some day-to-day monotony of rising at dawn and trying to follow instructions being bellowed out regarding ingredients and measures and spices signaled to Nick a lifetime of wasted initiative and he bristled at the thought that this should be his lot. Some life passing through at a snail's pace and Nick would often try to speed up the process in defiance of his father's wishes.

-- *Oil too cold!* admonished his father.

*Who cares oil cold?* Nick would think. *So many chickens, anyway.*

-- *Work too slow!*

*What he means work slow?* thought Nick. *He think I machine or somethin'?*

But he would at times summon the courage to verbalize his own disapproval.

– *Marinade too sticky. Keep my fingers together. ¡Nián, nián!*

– *Same as every day*, insisted his father.

*Not same as everyday*, thought Nick.

– *¡Nián nián!* he would shout. *¡Nián nián! ¡Nián nián!*

And so it went on every day, day in and day out and Nick's now spying this honey glaze delight easily persuaded him to continue his climb down into the eatery, for years of exasperation had surely given merit to such reward and it had been nearly seven hours since the sesame cake he had heartily devoured at the Meng Ling Bakery on 49<sup>th</sup> street and the dumplings could wait for one more hour after all, he thought.

As he descended, some sudden scarcity of traffic and pedestrians to his back only seemed to reinforce the elegance of his journey. Some sudden scarcity of traffic and pedestrians now being replaced with customers happily moving in and out of the swinging glass doors which gave way to a cramped vestibule filled with hungry diners awaiting an opportunity to enter.

There were no tables to be had and he wondered if such an early evening's rush would frustrate his dinner plans. Having studied a gaze through a second set of glass doors, he noticed a smaller table just off to one side of a rather portly man putting the finishing touches on various utensils, burnishing each methodically – almost religiously -- with a woven white cloth and which seemed to Nick an exercise meant more to appease the customers than any real attempt at added cleanliness. The table in any case was cluttered with assorted accessories – salt and pepper shakers, vials of soy sauce and the like, and which now seemed to Nick a not-so-well-thought-out waste of space for paying customers such as he, unaccompanied and more-than-willing to endure any inconvenience which such a small space might impose.

Nick inched his way past three or four persons engaged in animated conversation and managed to open the second set of glass doors just enough to squeeze through and into the main room. The noise level seemed to increase to a deafening pitch. Waiters darted back and forth, some piping hot tray of black bean aubergine barely beneath his chin and Nick quickly approached the rather portly man.

– Can I sit here? he asked.

The man smiled sheepishly and replied with a slow lilting drawl reminiscent of some of those less educated who tended to reside in some of the more remote regions back along the Xi Jiang. His reply surprised Nick and he responded in kind.

“No-one sit here?”

“Why no!”

“Only for waiter,” replied the man.

*Why only for waiter? he thought. And more empty tables over there. No-one using this one. Maybe big dummy don't understand English. Miss McGrath say my English good now. Maybe I say to this big dummy in other language..*

But much to his surprise, the man began clearing the table of the condiments and gestured to Nick to sit, albeit in a somewhat precarious-looking wooden chair unlike any other in the place. Nick was unsure of why the man changed his mind but readily accepted the offer. Perhaps it was due to Nick's unexpected impertinence. Or Nick's speaking in a still poorly-understood foreign tongue which continued to intimidate when encountered in a native son. In any case, he indeed readily accepted and prepared for what was pretending to become some urban feast in his mind. Some honey-glaze aroma managing to still find its way even through the quandry of other scents and flavors inundating the room.

"I'll have ...."

"No take order," replied the man tersely.

"Why no take order?" Nick asked impatiently.

"No take order now," the man insisted, " *he* take order."

The man nodded to one of the other waiters, some thinnish looking man quite at odds with the portlier appearance of his colleague.

"What you do all day...shine spoons?" Nick asked the man.

"Change jobs. Sometime fork, sometime spoon, sometime knife. All day change. Sometime take order. Always change job. All day change. All day change" considered Nick.

"So what I supposed to do? Starve?"

*Big dummy think I got nothing else to do. What he think? Dumplings can't wait. Have to be back by six. What he think?*

With that the man directed a comment to the second waiter.

This man did not take the comment with grace and it was only after a brief exchange – rather terse it seemed to Nick – did he finally and rather reluctantly addressed Nick.

“Don’t need no menu!” exclaimed Nick.

“*Shén nǐ cān?*” asked the waiter.

*Why he talking like I some foreigner?* thought Nick.

“You don’t speak English, man?” shouted Nick.

“Chinese with Chinese customer,” replied the waiter.

“I’ll have bird hanging in window and...”

“Chinese with Chinese customer!” insisted the waiter

Nick could suddenly sense the man tending towards another table just to his left—a younger couple eager to place their order amidst some romantic banter and Nick realized he needed to react quickly to the waiter’s remarks.

“*Ān yuàn yì yǎn qián!*” shouted Nick.

“Okay ... *kěnn fū?*... happy now? Chinese with Chinese customer!”

*These people all dummies, he thought. Make me speak like foreigner or something, just to get bird hanging in window. Miss McGrath say I speak good English now. She say ...*

The waiter asked Nick if he wanted anything else.

“Don’t want nothing else,” he emphatically replied but repeated the reply in Chinese when he sensed the waiter’s impatience.

*These people ALL dummies -- make me speak like a foreigner.*

## Chapter 6

Nick’s repast had been even more impressive than he could have imagined. The bird was as evenly manicured as any he’d had the pleasure to enjoy either here or in his home country. The elegant crisp of the bird was delectable and the flesh’s tenderness belied a marinade far more elegant than the one his father had for years employed.

Now again within the bustle of Mott St., he began to climb the iron stairwell of the wholesale

dumpling shop situated above the eatery. He worried the bill had exhausted a good part of the money his father had given him and was concerned that he could only partly fulfill his father's wish for five dozen. Four dozen pieces, he was told. Only fresh dumpling. Only fresh dumpling.

He entered the shop a bit timidly. The place was poorly lit by a single metal lamp off to the side of an attendant carefully filling bags with the bread- battered gems. The smell of the place reminded him of the backstreet kitchens one used to find along the banks of the Jinjiang River -- the scent of simmering pork jowl and searing scallions wafted through the room, then mixed with that of mildew poking its way through the paint peeling off the ceiling providing some earthier aroma.

Nick winced as the shop attendant quoted the amount he needed to pay for the batch of pork dumplings his father had asked him to procure for his father's Brooklyn locale. Four dozen freshly crafted pork dumplings -- 50 bucks -- though he'd spent the better part of what he'd been sent off with on some Sichuan feast in the eatery below. It had left him unable to pay the attendant and so once more left him prey to his father's wrath upon returning home empty- handed.

A man wearing a stained apron suddenly appeared from behind a wall on which was hanging a cheesy calendar, one like those you might observe in gas stations and barber shops, along with chaotically pinned handwritten orders scrawled with telephone numbers and addresses. The man was thought by Nick to be the cook, who flung off his apron and spoke a few words in Chinese to the attendant before storming out of the locale and Nick thought he must've been glad to have completed one more day of drudgery of kneading and folding and making sure the oil was properly heated and wondering why he'd bothered to make the journey in the first place. Why he would forsake the mountains and rivers of Fujian for the tedium of toiling within some ghetto, some broken promise and languishing in this New World with few prospects for the future.

Nick became momentarily distracted by the buzz of a fly trapped in the space within the yellowed lampshade. The incessant noise it made as it buffeted the shade became jolts of awareness in Nick's mind as to why any of them had indeed felt the need to arrive. Attracted to the glow of something new perhaps, something better which ultimately resulted in little but harm and confusion and Nick suddenly felt a dizzying panic enveloping him but ultimately managed to inquire again -- this time in his native Fujianese dialect -- as to the price of four dozen pieces and with the thought that he might haggle a bit over the man's original quoted price. He attempted to convince the man -- this rather pitiful caricature it seemed to Nick-- that he could be billed for the difference and thus repay the balance the following month but the attendant was adamant. The man's voice rose to a denigrating pitch and now Nick began to truly curse the cards he'd been dealt. The daily fending-off of barbs and insults at the High School heightened by the angst he felt at home, his father imposing on him at every turn and whose immigrant fervor had long ago relegated Nick to some sort of collateral damage.

Now the noise in the lampshade became louder -- or so it seemed as Nick was told that the shop was about to close. He glanced at the bags on the counter, sensed that the shop was deserted except for him and the attendant and the metal lamp within Nick's grasp seemed to be calling him to commit some glaring act of malfeasance. Nick would in years to come scarcely recall grasping the laden brass object and he watched calmly as the man collapsed under the force of the blow, then restrained himself from looking down at the barbarity he'd inflicted. Still, the buzzing insect refused to submit to the loss of its territorial diversion and instead descended onto the crumpled figure at the base of the counter. Four dozen pieces, was all Nick could consider now. *Only fresh dumping*. He stashed the bags into his backpack and made off down the iron stairwell into the once more soothing bustle of Mott St.

## Chapter 7

He moved swiftly back towards Canal Street, some unforgiving tide of people frustrating his need to get ahead. He almost tripped over a vendor hawking counterfeit jewelry as he set his sights on the faux Pagoda which marked the corner of Canal and Mott. A sudden sense of disbelief overcame Nick and he stopped abruptly, thinking back over the room he'd just left – the smell, the poor lighting and the cheesy calendar that covered the wall behind which the cook appeared before finally leaving the shop. It occurred to Nick that he never actually heard the front door open and close and this sent a momentary shock through his adolescent frame. Would the cook have been witness to the entire sickening scene? Some omniscient observer so taken aback that he could hardly move or muster the slightest bit of initiative?

Nick's stride began to become labored, dragging his feet as if the push in his limbs were deserting him. Some blackening sky now appeared to be descending as he veered off towards the Bowery. He was unsure as to whether some late summer storm was coming out of the west or if dusk were merely falling upon this Manhattan Island. A late hour perhaps and Nick considered how long he'd been in the shop -- would there have been time for the cook to notify the police? He took a quick glance behind -- as if some pair of dicks would be thrashing through the crowds in hot pursuit, overturning pushcarts and sending bales of bokchoy flying through the air. He scoffed at the notion and plodded on.

Houston Street came into view -- but where to from there? In his haste, he'd walked north instead of west and had no idea where the nearest subway station would be. Panic ensued. He stopped in his tracks and stared down at the raindrops beginning to fall into growing puddles at his feet. He became increasingly taunted by recurring thoughts of wanting to turn back to observe the scene he must've created outside the locale – which would after all have only been some foolish attempt to satisfy some sophomoric curiosity. He instead made a sudden leftward turn and soon found himself on 6th Ave.

The sound of an approaching siren jolted Nick so that the backpack half fell off his shoulder and he shuddered until becoming cognizant of the sound's declining pitch.

He could only now think back to those words of hers some months ago. A warning perhaps, but sound enough advice about not letting one's so-called guardians blind us to the need for more modern courses of action. Menial labors in servitude of others might've been their lot, but ours demanded the rigor of study and scholarship. Xiaoling had implored him to be convincing in explaining that today's Math exam was more important than obtaining treats for his father's restaurant -- and what would she say if she could see him now? Meandering through this conundrum of streets and avenues in flight from some impetuous act of cruelty.

What had been a light rain was quickly turning into a deluge and he quickened his pace toward the nearest place at which to take some shelter. He stopped amidst a crowd of people huddled beneath the overhang of a shop window. As he continued to stare down onto the wetted pavement Nick felt himself falling deeper and deeper into some whirlpool of self-loathing -- and doubting as to whether he could ever truly find his way back.

As the rain started to let up, the crowd began to disperse. Nick knew it was time to move on, as well, but where to? The glow from the streetlamps went reflecting off what had now become a hazy mist which tended to magnify the confusion that tormented Nick in these final hours, and ...