Jim got up early. He ran some morning chores. He caught the Number 7 train crosstown at around mid-lunch hour, thereby delivering him to the *Barrio de la Concepción*, a quite faceless conundrum of medium-sized apartment buildings and office blocks.

Señorita washing her sidewalk of unwanted debris as the little ones trot on home for lunch. *Comida mediterranea.*

Jim himself was feeling a bit peckish and hoped to get a bite before having to begin his afternoon classes. Strolling into one of those plentiful bars lining the pavement, by now and luckily unable to be dissuaded from his usual repast by some unpleasant smell of week-old cooking fat.

While always asking for the same, he inevitably imagined much more -- two pieces of bread between which some delicate completeness had always to be recalled from some era long gone. Whether it had been at John's Diner, offering some flagrant view of the Metropolitan Opera House or that less flamboyant locale on Grand Ave., Jim would always come away with some latent satisfaction and expectantly of the next.

Delicate completeness.

Some hint of the sublime together with just the right dash of mayonaisse and dijón, over which the gardenest fresh leaf of lettuce were carefully set.

He would delight not only in the variety which had been afforded, but also at the reverence with which the cook had set that top slice of day-fresh pumpernickel over the regal offering, not daring to apply excess pressure to the tender slab for fear of destroying its elegant appeal.

Jim quickly learned to go without such fare at the *cervecería* but could never get used to the so-called *bocadillo*, some loaf of bread offering the barest minimum within, as if it were some understatement of our own lack of resourcefulness or ineptitude of spirit.

Upon finishing his lunch, Jim made his way to the offices of A.C. Nielsen Marketing Inc.

He would never be too keen on entering the building. Its facade was stark and forbidding, some black marble set against square meters of concrete and gratuitous vegetation.

Once inside the revolving doors, one was immediately desensitized by yet more marble, rising in great columns on either side and framing great panes of glass

which seemed to either inspire envy or intimidate the substantial piece of corporate humanity that happened to face it every day.

But places and situations did not always demand as much sacrifice as Jim might have originally expected, and he would often enjoy the short lift to the eighth floor.

He normally arrived just upon most re-entering after lunch hour, so the elevators were usually crowded and Jim would be taken upon to eavesdrop on the immoral tales which presented themselves.

At times he would be thrown into some temporary state of translucent stupor, as if transformed into that poet who spent some considerable time transfixedly upon his own grey sock and under the influence of some strange narcotic taken daily in staunch dose.

Scent of stale tobacco and iridescent shades of the scantily perfumed yawned at him encouragingly, animating him on to the next second, and the next until his upward journey was complete. With brow furrowed as he strained to make sense of that which was not his mother tongue, after all.

Then at once caught up in some disorienting vacuum of fading conversation, some space suddenly gained as the lift emptied. Jim would find new breadth in his role as disinterested observer, and feel having had been completely served by some lukewarm stream of petty revelation which had accompanied him to the eighth floor.

There he would confront some unrelenting daily routine of malaise and malevolence set amid some faceless grid of pre-fabricated office spaces and welded cubicles so opposed to the stone tradition of Castilla.

Alas, ending up here at the Madrid branch of A.C. Nielson Marketing Inc., specializing in the study of habitual processes – soap powder, appliances, silk stockings – all bound together by some public thirst for consumer rendition.

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right hand. A worn brown leather bag leaning precariously against his leg -- notebooks, devices, assorted cables.

It would still be some minutes before the next train arrived and he raised the paperback to just eye level. A train approached in the opposite direction and rattled what was by now a growing number of anxious riders. Some while checking on telephones for messages or photos missed or ignored. Others staring ahead to a kaleidoscopic still-life being produced by the slowing carriages.

He glanced at his wristwatch.

He became distracted by a faraway sound. Some waves in compression approaching at second per second. Creeping recollections of a boarding school in his earliest days of adolescence, one towering Ecclesiastical Figure draped over a dusty chalkboard, arms flailing and bellowing out rules and formulas regarding times and spaces, velocities misconceived. Witness to the yet lingering notion of a saving Christ, eventual apostates to the Holy Order.

The train did finally move into the station and Jim squeezed into the nearest car.

Then settling in opposite some untidier fellow staring blankly at a telephone held barely two inches from his face. And a taller young man surveying this sprawling mass from above.

Some tired-looking women leaning into this man´s embarrassingly jilted frame. The man's coat now rumpled had begun to play tricks on Jim and he imagined some ancient cluster of Roman brides offering themselves in wanton delight to a somewhat lurid but nonetheless abiding Caesar.

The throng listed from side to side in comedic unison as the train proceeded in its course. Then lurching backwards and forwards and threatening to come to some blinding halt.

Stopping. Stopping. Stopped.

This would have been at stations under normal circumstances. Unsuspecting riders were commonly taken advantage of at this time of the day and poor stewardship of the train often resulted in an inordinate number of delays.

The chatter of bewildered voices grew to an annoying din. Some noxious void being created within Jim and slowly replenished with thoughts of confusion and indecision which were more akin to those of his days as a student.

At that time, the Harlem line´s regular morning pause would always be expected as it awaited the motorman´s mandatory green signal to begin its cautious crawl over the 125th Street overpass. Eventually making its way to the City College station, he then climbing north on Amsterdam and arriving to the Gothic arches of

Higher Learning did see Jim as a willing participant in the forging of his own future path.

He would eventually come to bemoan some overabundance of musical formation in his days there, realizing that years in passing were not always true to one's original intent. But language learning also seemed to require some more humanistic skill and this provided some consolation, after all.

The College had long been known for its churning out scientists and engineers, doctors and theoreticians and the musical arts had rather lent some added appendage to the somewhat staid curriculum. Sitting and staring at the clock on the library wall just above the librarian's mantel, stark and unforgiving as its second hand ticked off the spending moments of his youth.

He would sit for hours listening to the dearest voices. Such was the moment to be taken hold of, to listen to the maestros and make them his. Sounds and tones inspiringly of some age long gone -- but still being -- nevertheless encouraging him to overly extend this purely academic exercise. Flutes and rapturous melody rising slowly would endure until the stylus reached the end of that infinite spiral. Then returning it to its outermost edge. Minutes turned into hours and usually rendering it impossible to arrive for the start of his afternoon lecture.

Some garbled loudspeaker reverberated throughout the car. Perplexed stares of riders betraying some inability to discern what was being said and a growing preoccupation with whether they could arrive to their own destinations on time.

The stout gentleman to Jim´s back began to fidget with a folder full of documents. A not-so-well-thought-out distraction, as some metallic rumble of the train´s motor prefaced a sudden jolt onwards.

It eventually rolled into the next station. The doors slid open and Jim became at once caught up in the vacuum which would have turned out to be his saving grace if not for the destination which awaited him further on. He stepped out onto the platform and moved unthinkingly to his next point of departure.

He began to negotiate his usual path from the underground stop to the bus platform. Frantic commuters still darting all about. Someone's seeing-eye dog momentarily blocked his path as he rounded the turn into the main corridor and towards the coffee stall. The poor animal looked up at him as if begging to at last be rid of the lot with which it had been sacked.

Then finding some corner in which to have his customary coffee beverage- in a glass and with none of the foamy veneer which tended to accord it some rather depressing air -- at the stall before heading to the passenger lounge.

Entering had increasingly been becoming more unbearable. Poorly polished wooden benches lined the perimeter. Steel knee-high waste bins were strewn intermittently throughout. He nevertheless managed to navigate the tenuous path

amongst legs, packages and briefcases. He often felt like some marionette being dangled across the art-stage floor, some hollowed-out being pathetically divorced from his own.

"Pardon me, would you know what time the 161 bus leaves?" he was asked in a moment.

The woman had crept up behind Jim. It seemed as if he already knew her from somewhere. She was tall with distinctly gaunt features. Her brown austere shoulder-length hair seemed to be at odds with the light-hearted manner in which she spoke. She wore a long grey shawl tapered at the back of the knee, giving her an air of the dramatic.

"Just in 10 minutes" he replied.

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Nick Story PART 2

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.

He had rarely ever ventured out from the confines of his Brooklyn neighborhood let alone toward that which might have been considered some portlier piece of urban center.

Some sun reflecting off the billboards which were to re- define a blatanter contrast amongst those dwarfed miniatures poking barely above his family´s restaurant and tellingly of some lesser-than-satisfactory remunerative path which his family had been obliged to pursue.

Only fresh dumpling he say.

The wholesale house to which he had been directed could have seemed unattainable to Nick if not for some crumpled piece of paper to which he clung so desperately − not for any pre-determined trepidation consideringly of his journey but rather as indication of the excitement which was his upon finally finding the means to venture into what had in fact represented some promised land inexplicably mirrored within the lakes and riverbeds of Fujian Province.

No-one could have possibly ended up here, within these rising edifices of some bustling island enterprise. And yet some had apparently had, some more tightly

condensed refrain of immigrant anxiety from another era and perhaps prior to any other possibility of abandoning respectably those banks of the Xi Jiang.

Now some crumpled piece of paper had been intended to coddle Nick towards the wholesale venue to which his father had alluded. 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 out of concern for his ailing uncle had his father agreed to permit Nick to cross over on this occasion, and the ridicule which Nick heaped upon himself when emerging from the Houston Street station erroneously would have referred at least obtusely to the disappointment which he and his family had initially professed toward their new found lot.

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 too if not for the sight of some slightlier young bird preening gracefully within the corner space. Some kindlier face reminding him of Xiaoling and with features 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 the Cambodian girls and crossing over with her too on one finer day.

What could she really have understood regarding the motives which her own father had harbored? Some purely remunerative twist of fate cannot have been the only reason for such a harried exodus and this Xiaoling would never be able to determine as clearly as had Nick. Some billboard looming and pressing some newer life into one's own plight did seem a more fitting remedy for the indignities which they had been obliged to endure. Neither textbooks nor those kindlier entreaties so often espoused by the likes of Miss McGrath could change any of that. Miss McGrath say Nick speak good English now -- *shuō jiā Yīng wén.*

He considered heading back down on a southbound train -- but no. 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. 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 went beholding of some step-upon-step and 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 Jim tried once more to make good on the crumpled piece of paper which he continued to cradle in his palm.

~~*¿Nă yī ge tú Mott?*~~ *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.

—*¿Cǐ 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 at that. 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, yes seemingly quite inferior to the roasted duck he´d now been observing. 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.

-- *Yóu tài lěng! Oil too cold!* admonished his father.

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

-- *¿Zěn me yùn zhuǎn rèn xú xú zhè tiān? Too slow!*

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

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

– *¡Tiáo wèi zhī tài duō nián nián! Marinade too sticky. Keep my fingers together. ¡Nián, nián!*

– *Tóng yī rú tong měi tiān. 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 49th street and the dumplings could wait for one more hour after all, he thought.

As he descended, some suddener scarcity of traffic and pedestrians to his back only seemed to reinforce the elegance of his journey. Some suddener 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 a studied 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 predispose.

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.

− *Nà jī shì zhě zhi*, the man replied.

− No-one sit here! Why no! asked Nick annoyedly.

-- *Zhǐ shìyìngshēng.*

Why just for waiters? 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 … .*

But much to his surprise, the man began clearing the table of the condiments and Nick was invited to sit, albeit in a somewhat precarious-looking wooden chair unlike any other in the place.

− *Xing. Yòng bǐ yǐ,* said the man in a more welcoming tone.

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 stillpoorly-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 conundrum 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…shining spoons?* Nick asked the portly 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.

− *Bǐ lù zhèr*.

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 address Nick.

− *¿Nǐ xū cài dān?* asked the waiter.

− *Don't need no menu!* exclaimed Nick.

− *¿Shén nǐ cān?* asked the waiter.

Why he talking like I some foreigner or something? thought Nick.

− *You don´t speak English, man?*

− *Chinese with Chinese customer,* replied the waiter.

− *I'll have bird hanging in window and…*

− *SHUō zhōng wén mǎi zhǔ zhōng guó,* insisted the waiter. *Chinese with Chinese customer!*

Nick could suddenly sense the man tending towards another table just to his left – a younger couple eager to place their order and without any consideration for interrupting Nick´s increasingly unintelligible banter. Some leaning motion away and further away from Nick and he sensed once more that this evening repast might also be drifting out of his reach so he conceded quickly to the man´s request.

− *¡Ǎn yuàn yì yǎn qián!* shouted Nick.
Okay … kěn fù... 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 ...*

− *¿Shén nǐ cān?* asked the waiter.

− *Don´t want nothing else ... I mean ... xū yào wú fēi.*

These people ALL dummies -- make me speak like a foreigner, thought Nick.

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Jim seemed puzzled. He had glanced upwards and peered at the digital screen. It read seven minutes to arrival but then someone oddly stealing his glance toward the right side, some character now faintly recognizable to Jim, distracted.

The woman wore a lengthy dark shawl which tapered as it reached the back of her knee. Jim thought she had been an acquaintance of his. Or maybe just one more ghost from his somewhat uneven past.

The swarm of commuters filling the platform tended to see the woman melt into the throng and thoughts of who she was and why she seemed to have piqued his curiosity ended up fading rather quickly.

His field of vision could now capture some rather large suitcase being led rather torturously along the platform by a somewhat stout gentleman. No doubt some useless exercise brought on by the perceived need to visit old friends or perhaps the promise of some new acquaintance, thought Jim.

An Asian kid, rucksack filled with books and papers, managed to find a space in front of him on the platform, perhaps seventeen or eighteen years of age, the same age as when Jim himself began to venture from his home each day towards those hallowed caverns of Manhattan and beyond in his attempt to make a life for himself in the musical arts. Ancient occurrences. Lost opportunities and telling of those recollections which his therapist had long warned him against. *Let sleeping dogs lie, young man, let sleeping dogs lie.*

He had awoken with some nagging headache. He had missed the first train and sat staring at the platform for some length of time. All the while holding on to some tattered paperback in his right hand. Some worn brown leather bag leaning precariously against his leg. Notebooks, devices, assorted cables. ´

The train rails seemed to converge. Some parallel play seeming to disappear into a darkened tunnel. It would still be five minutes before his train appeared. He raised the paperback to just eye level. A train approached in the opposite direction and seemed to rattle the growing number of commuters to his right and to his left. Meanwhile, the woman, now completely seeming to have disappeared into the crowd and prompting Jim to once again recollect some alarming encounter he had once had to endure, unspoken words but threatening nevertheless.

Jim and the others remained expectant as the opposite train pulled into the station. Staring straight ahead to some slowing motion of the retrograde carriages. Checking on telephones for messages or photos missed or ignored.

He glanced at his wristwatch. He became quickly distracted by some faraway sound seeming to reverberate from across the station. Some waves propagating at second per second. Some towering ecclesiastical figure bellowing out rules and formulas regarding times and spaces, velocities misconceived or unpredicted until pen and paper could allow one to abide them properly. Witness to some yet lingering notion of the saving Christ, eventual apostates to the Holy Order they all were. Jim was put into such an environment on the good faith of his beloved mother who assumed he would be educated in some more proper manner.

Jim attempted to mark the time it took for the echo produced by cold steel on steel to reach him but the exercise seemed futile, and moot in the end for the train he had been awaiting began to move into the station and Jim soon squeezed into the nearest car.

The stout gentleman managed to find some refuge in the corner of the car. Then noticing some untidier fellow staring blankly at a telephone. Held barely two inches from his face and a taller young man surveying this sprawling mass from above. Some tired-looking women leaning into this man´s embarrassingly jilted frame. The young

man's coat now rumpled had begun to play tricks on Jim and he imagined some ancient cluster of Roman brides offering themselves in wanton delight to a somewhat lurid but nonetheless abiding Caesar.

Morning ladies tapping on their keyboards did not always reveal some finer intellect. Some played games and some read from tales cherished. Most simply moved a tepid gaze over the words and barely gave thought to the actual message in what was on the page.

The train car's to and fro caused many at times to search frantically for something to grasp on to. Others utilized some unexpected jolt to rouse their half-hearted spirits.

Early morning travel never wholly appealed to Jim. The Head of Studies had posted him to early morning classes at the Royal Guard. He had never asked for the assignment nor would he.

The throng – *la manada* is how they sometimes referred to it – wretched backwards every time the train stopped. Some kaleidoscope suddenly in arrest and in odd unison.

Stopping. Stopping. Stopped.

This would have been at stations under normal circumstances. Unsuspecting riders were commonly taken advantage of at this time of the day and poor stewardship of the train often resulted in some inordinate number of delays. Voices could be heard above the din. Notices of breakdowns and other assorted mishaps annoyed the daily clientele. Conveyance of ideas and scattered details, no matter how insignificant, became cumbersome and more so to Jim who would begin to grow weary of the need to relate in other than his own mother tongue.

Other sounds eventually made their way into Jim's "entorno", some of those higher pitched and recalling of his time at the City College of New York. Stepping off the Broadway Local at 135th Street he might be inundated with the shrills of schoolchildren as they made their way upwards towards a day of careful instruction. Others recalled those more highly tempered sounds encountered and dissected during his daily sessions of music theory. He had eventually come to bemoan some overabundance of musical formation in his days as a student at the City College. He did realize that years in passing were not always true to one's own original intent. But language learning also seemed to require some more humanistic skill and this tended to lend some consolation after all.

The City College had long been known for its churning out scientists and engineers, doctors and theoreticians and the musical arts had rather been some added appendage to the somewhat staid curriculum. Then riding the Lexington Avenue northbound and past one's destination to almost Amsterdam would come round full circle to the place of his supposed endowment. He often sat for hours listening to the dearest voices. It was a time gone by but still being. Flutes and rapturous voice rising slowly would endure until the stylus reached the end of that infinite spiral. Jim would return it to its outermost edge. Minutes turned to hours and he would usually arrive late to his next class. Sitting and staring at the clock on the library wall just above the librarian's mantel. Stark and unforgiving as its second hand ticked off the spending moments of his youth.

Such was the one to take hold of, to listen to the maestros and make them his, strings and voices beneath a thunderous ovation of quiet desperation.

It would take years and then more years and time to bring to fruition all that he had acquired. Jim's teachers had been amongst the finest and it seemed for a period that he may have finally found some proper path. Wary cliffs looking off from the Palisades might be telling of Jim's own dilemma as he approached the completion of that morning journey. Stepping out onto 136th St. and St. Nicholas Ave. would provide him one last chance for redemption. Climbing upwards on 136th St. and past some cheap urban hotel reminding of the opportunities which needed to be gotten hold of. Some scarcity of people and ideas, creativity disappearing and taunting Jim did tease one into the confines of what would become some lifelong embrace. Scholarship adored and universities seeking refuge within some past ideal would liken Jim to the very earthen stone from which Amsterdam had been built. Endless sun-filled cover binding some hardpressed curriculum would comfort Jim more than some young lady who might have complemented a warm spring day. Unable to convince Jim that his was some wayward turn, laying a gentle hand upon his would nonetheless render him speechless, and oblivious to all that the real world would eventually come to deliver. She too did eventually move on. And sounds and tones inspiringly of some other time but now long forgotten could not overly extend this purely academic exercise. The harmonies which Jim had intoned would soon vanish down the cauldrons of some silent abyss. Still he would remain faithful to the proper calling, sound formation providing comfort to the weary.

Jim negotiated his usual path from the underground stop to the bus platform. Frantic commuters darting from the right and left, head on and then some challenging his train of thought continually.

He sat for some minutes at the coffee stall before heading to his usual departure point. Then entering the passenger lounge had increasingly been becoming some more unbearable daily chore. Poorly polished wooden benches lined the perimeter. Steel knee-high waste bins were strewn intermittently throughout. He usually managed to navigate the tenuous path amongst legs, packages and briefcases. He often felt like some marionette being dangled across the art stage, some hollowed-out being terminally content to have and be had.

"Pardon me, would you know what time the 161 bus leaves?" he was asked in a moment.

"Just in 10 minutes" he replied.

It was only after some seconds did he realize that it was indeed the woman in the black shawl who had inquired about the number 161 bus. The shawl itself was now a bit tousled about her shoulders and seemed to give her a somewhat more approachable appearance. He spoke with an assuredness which would have been unheard of some months earlier. Schedules and routines had never been a welcome commodity for Jim. She seemed to be satisfied with Jim's assistance in any case and proceeded to sit at the

corner of a rather large and mahogany table awkwardly placed in a far corner of the lounge. Jim took a place at the end of the opposite side but not far enough from the woman to be unable to observe her somewhat nervous demeanor.

Ten minutes passed. Jim sat and wondered whether the woman across the table had even bothered to glean that her bus was about to leave the platform. His first inclination was to divert some non-threatening remark her way. He ultimately decided that it would be too forward to do so and again buried his face in the novel that he had been reading.

The bus left as scheduled but the woman remained. She seemed to be unconcerned until Jim suddenly looked up and caught her glance unexpectedly. She reared her head back as if to rearrange some errant lock of hair which had crept over her forehead. Surely there was no need for concern nor any reason to feel perturbed by her continued presence. Yet Jim could not help but notice how she fumbled with her purse and shifted in her seat nervously.

Some large and imposing clock began to chime. Each recurring sound seemed to perpetuate itself sheepishly across the room. Loud and bellowing yet muted and turning downwards towards some more labored solfege. Some labored exercise not unlike those which he would have been called upon to deliver in his student days. Ten or perhaps fifteen other performers who certainly outdid Jim in all that was either studied or improvised then appraising his every note.

"Bravo"

"Bravo, yes, bravo"

The seemingly endless train of meaningless chores which Jim would now have to deal with on a daily basis would eventually turn the memory of such accolades – modest though they were – into his only means for tolerating such a merciless path, for while he had been of even modest value back home, he was made to feel somewhat of a nuisance here and quickly fell prey to many an unscrupulous character´s search for inexpensive employ.

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Jim sat staring at the pavement. He would have liked to go to that breakfast place on Serrano but was loathe to the idea of having to let on to those English boys that he, too, had been caught up in the language school scam. *Vergonzoso* is what the newspapers said – shameful.

He chose instead to go over to the head office in hope of recovering some of the back pay he was due. Upon arriving, he could notice a small angry mob gazing at a rather intimidating chain solidly fastened across the locked glass doors.

Now even more discouraged, he searched for the address of his former employer in a tattered leather bag. It gave him no pleasure to consider returning to either military teaching or

corporate classes but circumstances demanded otherwise. He inched a small piece of paper up from within the bag and on which was scrawled an address -- *219 Paseo de la Castellana, 1oth floor.*

He had left some months ago under rather unpleasant circumstances --- *you´ll receive no salary for the month*. And all for the dubious claim of not having fulfilled one of the companies' pettier regulations regarding hours rendered.

He considered calling first but feared that Sanchez would attempt to use the telephone in a particularly searing way. Some deliberate attempt to shame Jim into some sudden self-awareness, teasing some remorse over having to once again contact the woman and coaxing one more reminder that Jim were to again be in her total control. Strings of dependency might be more easily managed within some more face-to-face encounter and so he set off on his way.

Walking back along the main boulevard, Jim was soon able to nearly taste the smoke and petrol that seemed to provide him a bank along which to organize his thoughts, some thick aromatic track of blackened haze spewed by the stream of vehicles speeding north and south along this corporate thoroughfare —the Paseo de la Castellana -- home to the gilded imaginations of success spurring on some sporadic bands of cowards and thieves, with notions of seldom gracious acts of prostitution being realized every day in those welcoming heights high above.

Jim must have sat for another hour or more on some soiled bench opposite the entrance to Number 219. Peering down at his watch for the umpteenth time only seemed to have produced some recurring angst which he´d been finding increasingly difficult to appease. He was loathe to appear too early, for doing so might also place him in some desperate light.

Glancing downward and once again had only frustrated Jim until realization taking hold, time increasingly moribund. Time in arrest and slowly stopped. Time costingly and at the mercy of some gadgetry purchased offhand. Jim tapped on the watch in hope that something sluggish or misplaced might be revived, but it was useless. It had indeed stopped. And Jim began to feel the wage of his indecision threatening him once again in some puerile way, some headlong fantasy which might have been cherished in the past now winking back playfully at Jim in veiled disparagement.

Jim strained to hear the bell tolling out over Plaza de Castilla, shadows cast by the towering blocks of concrete and metal transforming each vibration into a death knell, kaleidoscopic images challenging his deepening gaze into the lobby of Number 219. One, two, three and more it sounded until Jim was confident that he had indeed waited for some proper time.

He rose from the bench and carefully navigated his way across the street. Having avoided a number of moving vehicles only presented him another obstacle as he neared the curb. Cars and utility vehicles piled randomly in some chaotic conglomeration. Dampened asphalt giving way to puddles of lately fallen rainwater challenged as he gazed downwards. Puddles of lately fallen water framing some tire stained with mud and excrement m o m e n t a r i l y s e t t i n g h i m o n a c o u r s e o t h e r t h a n w h a t h e ' d i n t e n d e d . T h e n h a v i n g t o d o u b l e b a c k t o w a r d s h i s d e s t i n a t i o

n a n d f i n a l l y f i n d i n g h i m s e l f f a c e t o f a c e w i t h s o m e o n e w h o a p p e a r e d t o b e t h e b u i l d i n g p o r t e r .

He inquired as to what Jim wanted, as both moved into the foyer. Jim replied that he would like to visit the Language Consulting on the 10th floor.

-- *¿Le espera la señora?* asked the porter.

— She's expecting me, yes, at five -- *a las cinco.*

He started to move away from the porter's station, slowly enough so as not to betray some mischievous intent yet confidently so and with the conviction that the porter himself would be no more inclined than any of the others to question the comings and goings of such early evening visitors.

Dimness seemed to persist. Dark gray shades along the floor seemed to diminish in relief as he neared the lift. The aroma of month-old humidity emanated from the paint-peeled walls as some tiny flouresnce showed the way and invited him into the shutting of some heavily sprung metal and engulfed Jim in a world at once upwards and unmoving. Slow motion, vertical illusion but for some briefest interlude.

Then stepping out of the lift on the tenth floor gave Jim some wry satisfaction. Facing a large plate glass, he could appreciate the vast visual feast which presented itself from high above the Castellana. Antennas jutting out against some quickly moving sky. Signals reaching out to some distant star while the earth spins its completely regular course of inanimate decision and mockingly of the earnestness with which the traffic seemed to rush from north to south and back again.

At last placing his finger over the doorbell of Beta Language Consultants S.L., he started to feel more confident that this should have been his just response. Gently laying his finger upon the yellowing plastic, then gazing at the wood-finished door until finally it opened and finding himself confronted by a young woman in her late twenties, pretty enough and with some tightly cropped short length of hair. She could have been any of those below, fashion-news devotees made up with the newest line of facial crème.

−*Buenas tardes*, she said.

─*Buenas tardes*. Would it be possible to speak with the director?

─Is she expecting you? she replied in a surprisingly fluent English.

She impressed Jim as having a particularly kind disposition and he wondered if Sanchez had again been been recruiting abroad through one of those illicitly run agencies.

Jim told her that he had not in fact called ahead but used to teach there and had recently found himself in need of some classes.

-- I didn't think she'd mind a visit, he added

—What was your name, then? she asked.

—Jim…Jim Cantrell.

His explanation had not seemed to bother or predispose her in one way or another. She seated him in one of those generic pieces of furniture usually found and telling of some less high-minded aesthetic. He started feeling strangely relaxed. Crossing one leg over the other in gentle recline he glanced uncaringly at the ceiling. He dabbled in some delicate play of tic-tac-toe upon some of its slightlier imperfections. Then the young lady back across the room arrivingly in full portrait, bathed in late afternoon light downwardly directed. Some forty-five degree against a face of rose-colored sensation. Leaning for some documents at arms length and Jim shifting slightly to better appreciate the display being presented. Some silk-screen muse it seemed to Jim and he dared one more inquiry.

—Do you know if she´ll be very long?

The young woman replied that Ms Sanchez was on the telephone and might be some minutes more.

— Oh, I'm in no hurry. I´ll wait, said Jim.

It was some ten minutes before Sanchez did finally appear, agitated or excited, likely due to some leverage which she had just managed to garner over some unsuspecting client. She invited Jim into her office, or at least what was meant to be an office, for it was nothing more than an extension of the same space set off by some inexpensive wooden dividers and rather inefficiently at that. She showed not the slightest surprise at his presence.

He sat down without waiting for an invitation to do so. He inquired as to the state of her enterprise and she told him of some impressive military contracts which had just come her way, as well as one potentially lucrative offer from the multinational firm of A.C. Nielsen Marketing Inc.

-- And how have you been, Jim?

Not all that well he remarked and began to recount the details of the school closure. She interrupted him almost immediately, surprising Jim with a recounting of her own and commenting that it had, after all, been in all the newspapers of late.

She showed no empathy toward Jim´s plight, but nor did she seem to delight in Jim´s misfortune, which in itself was unexpected, for Sanchez had always been a bit of an enigma. Scholarship achieved would present itself in some superficial way, walls covered

with certificates and diplomas at first impressingly but then in outright disrespect of one's better judgement. Cheaply framed photos of her shaking hands with the President of the Texas Association for the Betterment of Small Business International Alliance, she would present some stark cynicism against the discourse wall, smilingly and in fullest awareness of one well-thought-out scheme. Taking the microphone, some cheaper acoustics fed back through some regular course of turkey dinner and bland conversation, put together for the benefit of some long-buried social ideal whose time would never come.

And yet, at times Jim could sense some faintest glimmer of generosity toward her subject matter. Genuine joy in opening up to the seemingly latent formation to which she'd been called, licensing sincere in English philology, after all.

But alas, Sanchez had become a caricature of all she had ever intended to represent. Clawing into every wayward soul she might come upon, seeking some bit of easy gain pretendingly of sound service and intention. Proud of having helped to bridge the gap across to the Texas Association but never consideringly of some higher goal, some higher aim to achieve for achievement's sake.

—The closure can´t´ve been much of a surprise, she continued, it seems to have been run by the *mafiosos*.

Sanchez's sudden comment was jarring to Jim, for his glance had been veering toward the reception area in hope of once again spying the young lady who had greeted him at the outset but she was nowhere to be found and he therefore decided to steer the conversation back to the issue at hand, although he could volunteer only a tepid response.
 Yes, it certainly seemed so – the *mafiosos.*

Sanchez seemed surprisingly receptive to the idea of Jim´s return and commented that she certainly was in a bind and that -- if he were up to the task -- he could actually take on both employment opportunities which she had mentioned. *I am in a bind*, she repeated.

He certainly wasn´t pleased about having to return to either military barracks or company work, but under the circumstances he saw no real alternative.

She told Jim that the military classes would start at the end of the month but the marketing firm was expecting a teacher – for the Director, no less – on the very next day in the early evening. Jim readily accepted and was told to wait a few more minutes while Sanchez looked for some materials that might be of interest. She went on to make one of those determined dashes across the room so in keeping with her guise of didactic fervor and toward a rather large bookcase at the far end of the room.

 Don´t forget to see my receptionist about completing the usual paperwork before you leave, she half-shouted as she leafed through various notes and papers.

 I see you´ve found a new one, he replied.

 A new one, Jim?

 Receptionist.

 Oh yes, Carolina. Not a quick study, I´m afraid, but quite motivated.

Not a quick study, perhaps, but Jim had rarely seen one glide so sweetly over stage work floor unpretendingly of even the slightest show of malcontent which Sanchez might readily direct her way. Her profile seemed to conjure up thoughts of wild and glorious times – *la buena vida.* The grace with which she went about her mundane office chores might have been recognized as downright inspiring given the circumstances. Sleek and daring of anyone whom she might have occasion to greet. Nightly routine of regular time and place amongst friends in search of some slightly tainted adventure. *¿Otro cubata*, *por favor?* Festively and in full pleasure until having to enter at half-past-eight each morning, passing the porter in cheery ascent and expectant of even the smallest demand which Sanchez would quickly lay before her. Requiring employ from head to toe, much like Jim himself, they can´t have been much different in their reluctant surrender to Sanchez and Jim thought that there might come a day when he might approach the young lady in some show of camaraderie or concern.

Sanchez returned with some materials. Jim placed them into his bag and with hardly a thought that they would ever be used at all. He rose quickly. As he began crossing over to the door, he realized that the receptionist was still no longer to be found and Sanchez, spotting his perplexity, immediately addressed his concern.

-- Give no mind to the paperwork, Jim. It can be done tomorrow if you´d drop by in the morning.

Nodding in some non-committal way, smilingly and with renewed intent he reached for the door. Having now stepped back out into the corridor, the lift seemed to be further away than ever. Some gentle reverie which had accompanied him up to the tenth floor had now become moot, and this would always be amongst the most worrisome of circumstances. Time simply casting about at Jim’s expense. Time as nimble warrior unceasingly, and once again luring him into that trancelike state which he so despised.

Moving downwards and toward some supposed new beginning would nevertheless continue pretending to be Jim's sole saving grace, some downstairs light pulling him back out onto that path along which he´d come and without so much as a gesture toward the porter as he did so.

Jim got up early the following day, went to Sanchex´s office to do the paperwork as she had suggested, ran some morning chores and finally caught the Number 7 train crosstown at around mid-lunch hour, thereby delivering him to the Barrio de la Concepción, a quite faceless conundrum of medium-sized apartment buildings and office blocks.

Señorita washing her sidewalk of unwanted debris as the little ones trot on home for lunch.

Comida mediterranea.

Jim himself was feeling a bit peckish and hoped to get a bite before having to begin. Strutting into one of those plentiful bars lining the pavement, impervious to some unpleasant smell of rancid oil which had luckily or unluckily not yet begun to dissuade him from the occasional repast.

While always asking for the same, he inevitably imagined much more -- two pieces of bread between which some delicate completeness had always to be recalled from his earlier days in another place. Whether it had been at John's Diner, a busy eatery offering a flagrant view of the Metropolitan Opera House or that less flamboyant one on Grand Ave., Jim would always come away with some latent satisfaction and expectantly of the next.

Delicate completeness.

Some hint of the sublime together with just the right dash of mayonaisse and *dijón*, over which the gardenest fresh leaf of lettuce were carefully set. He would delight not only in the variety which had been afforded, but also at the reverence with which the cook would set the top slice of day-fresh pumpernickel over the regal offering, not daring to apply excess pressure to the tender slab for fear of destroying its elegant appeal.

Jim would quickly learn to go without such fare at the *cervecería* but could never get used to the s o - c a l l e d *bocadillo*, some loaf of bread offering the barest minimum within, as if it were some understatement of our own lack of resourcefulness or ineptitude of spirit.

Jim finished his meager lunch at any rate and made the brief walk to the offices of A,C, Nielsen Marketing Inc.

Jim would never be too keen on entering the building. Its facade was stark and forbidding, some black marble set against square meters of concrete and gratuitous vegetation.

Once inside the revolving doors, one was immediately desensitized by yet more marble, rising in great columns on either side and framing great panes of glass which seemed to e i t h e r inspire envy o r i n t i m i d a t e the substantial piece of corporate humanity that happened to face it every day.

But places and situations did not always demand as much sacrifice as Jim might have originally expected, and he would often enjoy the short lift to the eighth floor. He normally arrived just upon most re-entering after lunch hour, so the elevators were usually crowded and Jim would be taken upon to eavesdrop on the moral tales which presented themselves. At times he would be thrown into some temporary state of translucent stupor, as if transformed into that poet who spent some considerable time transfixedly upon his own grey sock and under the influence of some strange narcotic taken daily in staunch dose. Scent of stale tobacco and iridescent shades of the scantily perfumed yawned at him encouragingly, animating him on to the next second, and the next until his upward journey was complete. With brow furrowed as he strained to make sense of that which was not his mother tongue, after all.

Then at once caught up in some disorienting vacuum of fading conversation, some space suddenly gained as the lift emptied. Jim would find new breadth in his role as disinterested observer, and feel having had been completely served by some lukewarm stream of petty revelation which had accompanied him to the eighth floor. There he would confront some unrelenting daily routine of malaise and malevolence set amid some faceless grid of pre-fabricated offices and welded cubicles so opposed to the stone tradition of Castilla. Ending up here at the Madrid branch of Neilson Marketing Inc., specializing in the study of habitual processes – soap powder, appliances, silk stockings– all bound together by some public thirst for consumer rendition.

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His only student would be Dolores. She took great pride in being department chief. She would never let him into her office too quickly. There were usually a number of items to be addressed before class could begin, and which would be fine with Jim since he was paid strictly by the hour. Waiting outside her office door was nevertheless instructive. Puzzled glances and non- considered, idle office space whom no one might ever think too much of having to be wary of. He would often lose himself momentarily in the eighth-floor essence of his present predicament, looking down against some fulllength window pane, playlike structures on a busy street dedicated to some most rapid transport within the circulatory confines. These were the daily attempts at transcontinental competition moving swiftly north and then back down again. Pale imitation as far as Jim was concerned, reflections of another place trying to apologise for some inescapable thrust into modernity. Awe- inspiring monuments towering out over Rector Street and Wall, showering their worthy inhabitants with some timeless reward cried out for one's just recognition. All the while calming the smoking ruins whose sometime pitying reminder of meaningless squander, nonetheless testament to the noblest ongoing endeavor, choked us to thoughts and tears harking back to that of the hungry masses entering a harbor full of light and sound adamantly. Al-Andalus as civilization committed

once and always to some reasoned consideration of life and love for all who would care to have it, and staring in consternation at some carnage brought about in its name, destructors of tarnished vision and dubious character probably revelling through the holy place onto which Jim would be staring down at that very moment.. Perfectly peaked arches and gently swaying rhythms, kneeling modestly toward Mecca, naked humility converted into blasphemy by those naysayers who would use the corporate misdeed not as signpost, but as some means for bludgeoning the innocent. Jim had probably seen that structure dozens of times, but only in seeing it from above could he appreciate the vivid contrast it forged against some jet black asphalt, and marking off neatly from its surroundings. The irony of its being next to the city morgue was inescapable as far as Jim could see, tyranny of the old wallowing in some splendid homogeneity while writing off all that refused to conform. Some storefront gateway of Moslem engender lining the walkways of Bushwick Avenue had always belied an easy, if not sometimes turbulent, reside. Welcome your tired masses and poor in spirit while with the steeple and the bell calling out to anyone wishing to carve out some place of their own, advancing to beyond the meeting point from which Jim had been unable to proceed.

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Nick began to climb the iron stairwell of the wholesale dumpling shop at 21 Mott St after having enjoyed a repast of Peking duck in the restaurant below -- some honey-glazed delight superior to the marinated chicken which was the common fare in his father's Brooklyn locale. 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 wishes. *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.

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 in his native Fujianese as to the price of four dozen pieces.

Nick´s extravagant lunch had indeed left him unable to afford the amount cited by the attendant. He cocked his head slightly to the side in a mix of disgust and resignation. He attempted to convince the man – this rather pitiful caricature it seemed to Nick– that he could bill him for the difference and recoup 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 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 calmy as the man collapsed under the force of the blow, then restrained himself from looking down at the barbarity he'd inflicted.

*Four dozen pieces, w*as all he could consider now. *Only fresh dumping.* Nick stashed the bags into his backpack and made off down the iron stairwell into the once more soothing bustle of Mott St.

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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.

Undaunted, Nick 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. Nick stashed the bags into his backpack and made off down the iron stairwell.

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.

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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.”

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Xiaoling and her two friends were about to begin the long climb to the fifth-floor classroom where today´s Mathematics exam were to take place when suddenly they became 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 to her friend 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 and Xiaoling gingerly lifted three books from the stack and apologized for not taking more before Mr. Chen showed his gratitude.

“Thank you, young lady. 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, "Don't be late for class. Move more quickly –leave books at the top."

Xiaoling followed his advice but was a bit saddened to see Mr. Chen disappearing out of the corner of her eye, the stairwell seeming 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 Phuong.

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, 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 central shaft of the stairwell began to clang violently -- rattles punctuated by staccato thumps echoed by rhythmic shouts in what Phoung had always referred to as *the Mexican one.* The girls strained to look upwards in an attempt to identify the source but the fence itself prevented them from doing so. The urgency of the language -- though foreign to both girls – was close enough to the English and implied some need for quick liberation from this place.

"Probably want to be *free*," as Xiaoling rolled her eyes on the last word in some sarcastic 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 somethin'? Why so high?"

"Stupid boys, that´s all. Keep moving or we´ll be late," urged Xiaoling.

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 for her 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. This time it was Kieu Lin´s turn to be taken aback by Phuong´s mean-spiritedness and she told her so.

As the fifth floor landing came into view, they noticed the new boy Nick perched precariously on a metal beam which protruded over a metal door that 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 – the chance to look down and outwards towards a world which could only be poorly imagined from within these suffocating walls.

Four or five of his eager mates accompanied him onto the roof –as did Phoung and Kieu Linh as they ignored their friend´s entreaties not to succumb to Nick’s misadventure.

The bright blue Brooklyn sky that they’d enjoyed below now seemed to be bluer and more inviting and the cold January wind felt like a scalpel piercing their foreheads and as they looked 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 become their parents’ dream of wealth and human dignity after all.

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, this time 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.

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When Xiaoling arrived to the schoolyard on the following morning she gave a quick glance to that 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 special 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 Phoung 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 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."

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Jim's bus had arrived. He got up and moved towards the platform. He glanced upwards and peered at the digital screen. It read seven minutes to departure. Though he now seemed perplexed and somewhat confused. Something stealing his glance toward the right side suggested to Jim that he may have been mistaken or had misheard a certain young woman's query. *She* approached the platform, as well.
"Excuse me, ma'am. The 161 bus has already left. This isn't the 161 bus that you inquired about."

The young woman appeared to be a bit startled and seemed to wonder why Jim had even bothered to put himself out as such. “Oh, I know it isn’t, sir, thank you” she replied.
She was obviously desperate to avoid any further exchange with Jim when she quickly found and slipped into a space in the queue. He began to consider why she had reconsidered her route and a certain uneasiness began to settle over him. He had a notion that he´d seen her before, and his unease stemmed from such an encounter possibly having occurred during the rather delicate situation in which he´d become embroiled during his last employ.
He tried to distract himself by mentally putting the finishing touches on today´s lesson. Some Capitán de Fregata had told a tale about his great-great-grandfather’s escapades during the Spanish-American War and Jim was intent on incorporating the tale in his next class. The Captain had celebrated the memory of his forbearer´s threading of a sinuous path through the American Naval defences down from the mid-Atlantic and then northward. A talkative and freely giving man was the Captain, and it soothed Jim to consider this as he boarded the bus and took his usual seat at the rear, which he often found to be less invasive into his early morning stupor.
Some minutes passed and he’d forgotten about the young woman entirely, when suddenly she rose from the seat she’d taken near the rear door and opposite some adventurous-looking fellow who’d lifted some odd-looking contraption onto the bus. At first Jim thought it to be a bicycle, but upon further examination decided it was not. Some completely non-descript machine no doubt to be used within the vast swathe of empty space that surrounded the confines of the Royal Guard Headquarters.
The woman staggered her way toward the front of the bus and timidly approached the driver. He was having to struggle between listening to her and attending to his daily journey. Jim couldn’t make out what she was attempting to ask the driver, and once again considered why she may have so abruptly modified her travel plans at the bus station. She nodded her head in understanding at what the driver was saying and

gradually made her way back to her seat.
The man with the contraption was meanwhile having great difficulty in keeping it from falling over with every gaping turn. The bus was making its way along the wooded route and eventually into *El Pardo* – a well-enough-to-do village at the foot of the Guadarrama Mountains – and so reminded him to get up and begin moving toward the exit. The woman also started toward the exit but she hesitated noticeably – and a bit menacingly thought Jim -- so that *he* could leave first.
The bus came to a stop. Now sensing her presence at his back he could feel a slight throbbing in his right temple, as though some ongoing medical condition had resurfaced and perhaps reminding him of the uncertainty and futility of it all.
Jim stepped off the bus and immediately felt the chill which was in keeping with the climate north of Madrid at this time of year. No sooner had he begun to reach into his bag for the security pass did his mobile phone ring. Jim stopped, pulled the mobile from his jacket, and as he did so managed to catch one more glimpse of the young woman as she sped by and towards the main gate. Jim´s obsession was now bordering on paranoia, and he began to wonder if certain events in the past had indeed come around to collect its bill.

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Nick 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 jewellery as he set his sights on the Faux Pagoda which marked the corner of Canal and Mott Street. 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 him that he never actually heard the front door open and close and this sent a momentary shock through Nick. Would the cook have been witness to the entire sickening scene? This barbarity which Nick had just inflicted upon some poor store clerk whose only

misfortune it had been to be working the shop at the exact time that Nick had finished his repast in the eatery below? Some Peking Duck had never tasted so good and what an unlikely prelude to
the deed which Nick had been about to commit.
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 jakes 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 -- some foolish attempt no doubt 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 much so that the spoils in his backpack half fell off his shoulder and he shuddered until he could appreciate the sound´s fading off in the distance . Only fresh dumpling he say … and what would his father think about Nick´s returning to their Brooklyn diner without the produce he´d requested? It pained Nick to think about the manner in which he procured the lot, but he´d never been the beneficiary of much paternal rapport and his actions may simply have signalled some reaffirmation of the demoralizing life situation into which he was descending. He

repositioned the backpack firmly and continued his journey. 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 begin 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 only tended to magnify the confusion that tormented Nick in these final hours.

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Hello, Sharon. I'm Bob Smith.

Sharon couldn't help but wonder at the inexpressive manner with which Bob presented himself. A bit disheveled and with a certain air of deadpan disregard, he displayed a numb **AFF fect**, which could have been interpreted as that of the weary traveler, or post office clerk who'd spent the last twenty years sorting correspondence.

− Nice to meet you, Bob.
− Come downstairs and we can speak, Sharon.

The stairway was narrow. The lighting was dim and paint was peeling off the walls on both sides. She could barely discern the landing at the bottom of the staircase, and the quasi- silhouette of Bob as she followed suggested a certain foreboding.

- Is this where the classrooms are?
- No, Sharon, this is actually the First Circle of Hell. We send the weakest speakers here for fluency workshops.

Sharon thought she´d found a kindred soul, a fellow student of the Classics. She thought to comment on Bob´s little joke but demurred upon observing Bob's still disinterested expression, and began to wonder if it was perhaps unfortunate to have so quickly replied to the first posting she´d come across.

He escorted her to the far side of a large rectangular table. It was littered with empty coffee cups and cigarette ashes and seemed more like the focal point of a gambling den than a language workspace. There was a poorly stocked vending machine against the wall. A smudged whiteboard stood forlornly in the corner on which could still be discerned the remnants of a list of phrasal verbs. Various smaller desks were scattered haphazardly along both sides of the room A low, slightly yellowed fiber ceiling seemed to produce a settling blanket of dust. The smell of the room was reminding of the musty basement where she used to teach after-school grammar at the High School on 48th Street. He eased one of the plastic chairs out from under the table, gestured for Sharon to sit and did the same for himself. He crossed one leg over the other and the chair made a screeching sound as he did so. His hands were now clasped together and rested on the large rectangular table.

- Coffee, Sharon? he offered while pointing to the vending machine.
- No thanks, but you go right ahead, Bob.
- I never drink coffee, he replied.

He began to stare at a letter which he had evidently placed on the table. His light brown beard, well-trimmed and tight against his face together with his blank stare gave Bob the appearance of a train conductor examining one´s ticket for any sort of malfeasance, intended or otherwise. Sharon was puzzled as to from where the document surfaced, as she wasn´t aware that it was with him throughout the journey from the first floor. Only upon his initial queries did she surmise that it was her letter of application.

- How long have you been in Spain, Sharon?
- Oh, just a few weeks.
- And you're interested in some teaching hours?

Bob continued to gaze over her left shoulder as he questioned her motive. *Why else would I be here*, she thought, and Sharon was beginning to feel uneasy at the way his gaze had failed to meet hers since the moment the receptionist introduced the two of them in the foyer.

Her imagination was beginning to run away with her. In Bob she

could now see some strange being who´d endured throughout the ages, doomed to exist within some time warp which always ended up here in this place of pedestrian learning.

- I see you´ve spent 10 years in the New York Public Schools.
- That´s right.
- I *could* tell you were from the city at the outset.
- Oh?
- The accent is distinctly Bronx.
- Brooklyn actually. Have you spent much time there?
- Attended Columbia University back in the eighties.

It was now clear to Sharon that Bob was loathe to sit through yet one more interview for one more expat language teacher. No sooner had he thought to inquire as to her background did the intrusive sounds of footsteps and voices descending the staircase distract them both.

- It´s all shite, Matthew. The head office is bollocks.
- Bollocky bollocky bollocks, Stevenson, you said it -- prepare materials, my arse.

Sharon was taken aback by the bombastic spectacle. The taller gentlemen, a robust and handsome young man with wide shoulders and platinum blonde hair was thought by Sharon to be in his late twenties or early thirties. He spoke with a British accent (she would later learn that he was born in, raised and educated in the Music School at Cambridge University) but more resembled one of those Nordic Vikings who she´d read about in her uncle's Norse Myths volumes as a child.

Bob's annoyance at the duo's interruption was evident but he nonetheless continued to rattle off to Sharon the joys of computer learning, of which this Opening School was a self-proclaimed pioneer.

- Once having finished a computer unit, they need to have a group class with a live teacher before…

− …a *live* teacher?

− You know, Sharon, flesh and blood.

Sharon nodded but continued to feel uneasy at Bob's unchanging expression.

− You are flesh and blood, aren't you Sharon?

− *OOOOOh yes*, she replied coyly.
Sharon's come-hither tone occasioned an instinctive glance from Matthew. Peering at her over the top of a newspaper with which he´d settled in at a corner desk, one leg perched nonchalantly over the other in a relaxed pose, he was suddenly reminded of those travelling tourist teachers he´d come upon last summer giggling about all those Spanish boys they'd meet as they set out on a life of didactic prostitution. Sipping coffee martinis, listening to Bossa Nova Beach in a Jersey bar, he'd nevertheless relish the few days of holiday he could manage to squeeze out of Bob's pressing curriculum. It was a time for reflection about the past and fear for the future.

Matthew had always regretted his inability to savor the present, what with his university days having been burdened by endless recitals and rehearsal halls. Daily routines masking the self-doubt about whether he could ever truly succeed. Staring at the clock on the library wall just above the librarian's mantel, stark and unforgiving as its second hand ticked off the spending moments of his youth.

Bells tolling out over the Cambridge Field as he languished in front of the turntable, watching as the vinyl gave over its infinite spiral. He'd return the stylus to its outermost edge as minutes turned to hours and usually arrived late to his next class. He inevitably began to view Art as an expendable commodity, while a profound sense of despondency gradually started to beckon him to alternative pursuits on distant shores.

-- How long are you planning on staying in Madrid, Sharon?

- Oh, probably for the near future. My original intention was to make it a temporary stopover on my way to Saint Petersburg.

- Saint Petersburg?

- It´s in Russia, Bob, murmured Stevenson from across the room .

Bob was now beyond being annoyed at anything either she or Matthew would now have to say while expressing a keen interest in Sharon´s comment.

- Tourism, Sharon?

- That and some amateur genealogy. I´ve discovered my great grandparents were from there and thought it´d be fun to see exactly where they spent their lives. Unfortunately, things have become a little complicated and I´m not sure I´ll ever make it over,

Sharon began to feel self-conscious about Stevenson´s eavesdropping on their conversation. The look on Stevenson´s face seemed to betray some sort of empathy to what Sharon was saying, perhaps a reminder of the wider scope which she too had once envisioned for herself, now finding her trapped in this stifling environment of daily lessons and such.

+ It was now clear to Sharon that Bob was loathe to sit through yet one more interview for one more expat language teacher. No sooner had he thought to inquire as to her background did the intrusive sounds of footsteps and voices descending the staircase distract them both.

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+ It was now clear to Sharon that the Head of Studies was loathe to sit through yet one more interview for one more expat language teacher. She convinced herself that if she´d thought to lead the conversation to anything other than the issue at hand, Bob would be delighted. No sooner had he thought to inquire as to her university studies did the intrusive sounds of footsteps and voices descending the staircase distract them both.

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- Bollocky bollocky bollocks, Stevenson, you said it -- prepare materials, my arse.

  Sharon was momentarily taken aback by the bombastic spectacle. The pair couldn´t have been more dissimilar in appearance. The taller gentlemen, a robust and handsome young man with wide shoulders and platinum blonde hair was thought by Sharon to be in his late twenties or early thirties. He spoke with a decidedly British accent (she would later learn that he was born in, raised and educated

in Cambridge) but more resembled one of those Nordic Vikings who she´d read about in her uncle's Norse Myths volumes as a child.

Stevenson, on the other hand, was a short, petite woman who spoke with an extraordinarily thick Irish brogue. While Matthew´s protestations were clearly of a professional bent, one got the sense from Stevenson´s tone that some personal vendetta had been perpetuated against her. The way her brow wrinkled as she spoke and the defensive posture in her body language reminded Sharon of how she herself felt when her Aunt Rachel used to scold her for arriving late to Passover Seder.

- New warm bodies for the computer-weary, Bob?

Mathew's remark baffled Sharon until she later heard Bob's description of the learning method being employed at this Opening English School, *Sociedad Anónima.*

- What does *that* mean? Warm bodies?
- He means you´re a human being as opposed to our online learning platform, Sharon.
- Tell 'er about the Opening method – so called, Bob.

But Stevenson then realized how her impertinence was being disruptive and was quick to apologize.

- I´m sorry, ma'am. This is Matthew Collings and I´m Shannon Stevenson.
- Nice to meet you, said Matthew as he unexpectedly offered a hand not to Sharon but to Bob himself.

Bob´s long stare seemed to last a lifetime before he finally managed a retort to Matthew´s ill-timed attempt at levity.

- Don´t you have something to do, Matthew? Can´t you see I´m busy with this patient lady?
- No takers, Bob. Everyone´s suckling the clunky beast.
- What´s he talking about Bob? I´m confused here. Maybe I should leave and …

- No, Sharon. Maybe we should get to talking about how we do things around here -- if we could keep these two at bay.

By then Stevenson had settled into one of the smaller desks, seemingly becoming busy with a task of her own, while Matthew was quietly navigating some means of teasing a cup of coffee from the vending machine.

- It's basically a computer programmed language method, completely registered in the school's name and …
- …one of a kind if he might say so himself, interrupted Matthew in a low sarcastic tone while gingerly stirring his beverage.
- Sorry Bob, no more interruptions…hand to God, or whomever.

Mathew's remarks did not seem rude to Sharon. His imposing figure seemed to bestow on him some universal right to omniscient oversee, some inarguable entitlement to commentary at will.

Matthew began to walk over to the opposite side of the room. Sharon was disappointed. She would have much preferred spending the time with him instead of this bland used-car-salesman type, although she was enlivened by the thought that she could soon end up being a colleague of the tall blonde Viking.

- As I was saying, continued Bob, all grammar is done on the computer, as well as specially designed interactive speaking exercises. The software was developed specifically for this company.

- So what do teachers do, Bob, sweep the floors?

Sharon immediately regretted the flippancy of her comment, while Bob was quick to render one of his own.

- No, that's Mathew's job, Sharon.

  The remark earned Bob the Viking's glare before Matthew settled back behind his newspaper.

■ Once having finished a computer unit, they need to have a group class with a live teacher before…

− …a *live* teacher?

− You know, Sharon, flesh and blood, replied Bob.

Sharon nodded but continued to feel uneasy at Bob's unchanging expression.

− You are flesh and blood, aren't you Sharon?

− OOOOOh yes, she replied coyly.

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