

Praise for *Family Trust*

“*Family Trust* reads like a brilliant mashup of *The Nest* and *Crazy Rich Asians* (with a soupçon of *Arrested Development* for good measure). It’s dark and funny and entertaining and thoughtful all at once. The best kind of family drama. I loved every page.”

—Cristina Alger, author of *The Banker’s Wife*

“A globe-trotting, whirlwind, tragi-comic family saga that wrings tears from absurdity and laughter from loss. A joy to read from start to finish.”

—Andrew Sean Greer, author of *Less*, winner of the
2018 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction

“Wang speaks with authority, insight, and irony about the ethnic and socioeconomic realities at business school, in Silicon Valley, in mixed-race relationships and marriages. A strong debut.”

—*Kirkus Reviews*

“All hail Kathy Wang! Not only does *Family Trust* deftly weave together a rich family drama, biting corporate satire, and deeply felt immigrant story, Wang tackles the big questions: Does my life have meaning? Who will remember me when I’m gone? What’s the ROI on a Harvard MBA? A sharp, spirited, and wholly original take on the American Dream.”

—Jillian Medoff, bestselling author of *This Could Hurt*

“A wicked and witty send-up of Asian-American Silicon Valley elite, a delightful debut that Jane Austen would have approved of.”

—Micah Perks, author of *What Becomes Us*

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—*Publishers Weekly* (starred review)

“Funny and compelling.”

—*Southern Living*

“A family’s past and present, as well as their hopes for the future, are thrown into blistering focus after a cancer diagnosis threatens the Huang patriarch. *Family Trust* offers an exquisite rendering of the way relationships evolve and are nurtured over a lifetime, and of the circumstances that either draw individuals closer or drive them apart.”

—Meghan MacLean Weir, author of *The Book of Essie*

FAMILY
TRUST



FAMILY
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A NOVEL

KATHY WANG



WILLIAM MORROW

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FOR MY MOTHER



FAMILY
TRUST



CHAPTER 1

STANLEY

Stanley Huang sat, naked but for the thin cotton dressing gown crumpled against the sterile white paper in the hospital room, and listened to the young doctor describe how he would die.

It had begun six months earlier, the first time he grew concerned about his weight. He'd arrived home to San Jose via shared shuttle bus—the concluding act to his latest vacation, a two-week pleasure cruise through the Mediterranean—and strode straight for the master bathroom upstairs. Followed closely by his wife, Mary Zhu, as she harped on about shoes worn inside the house—a gross violation of the clean room-like conditions she worked so hard to achieve before each trip.

“I don't understand why you can't just do this one thing I ask,”

she complained. “Just kick your sneakers off by the door; you don’t even have to put them away! You always want everything to be spotless, but you have no idea how hard it is to keep a home clean.”

Stanley ignored her, as he could. It was his house, not hers.

He took the stairs two at a time. He was eager to visit his bathroom. The amenities of the lower-tier cabin they’d inhabited for the past two weeks had included a small porthole with a view of the ocean and daily replenished cologne-scented toiletries, but no bathroom scale. Stanley had made a habit of weighing himself each morning after his first urine for the past twelve years, ever since his divorce from his first wife, Linda Liang.

The screen blinked. 145. A four-pound loss.

There was a brief wave of pleasure before the undertow arrived; 145 couldn’t possibly be correct given the events of the past two weeks, where he had willingly and pleurably gorged at every meal on the *Hidden Star*, alternating between the butter garlic shrimp and poached flounder mains each evening. Normally Stanley ate with a moderate interest in health, taking care to consume meat sparingly and forcing himself to order at least one steamed vegetable plate when dining out. The one exception was on holiday, especially an all-inclusive already funded eight months in advance, on a vessel specifically selected for its bounty of complimentary food options and relative absence of hidden fees and surcharges. The Star Grill—the onboard steakhouse—featured a chocolate fondue, which he ordered unique combinations of each night. Dark with almond slivers. Milk with toffee chunks. Add a splash of Amaretto.

Stanley came off the scale, waited for it to reset, and stepped back on. The number still read 145. A year earlier it’d been 170. His weight loss since then had been gradual, pleasing—the result of increased exercise and improved diet, he had thought. Some mornings he skipped the routine with the machine altogether, stringing together days of abstinence until he once again strode on, jubilantly expectant, on each

occasion happily gratified by the result. Another two pounds lost. Three! Controlling one's weight was easy, he crowed to Mary, who struggled with her figure and who, given his aggressive hinting, had ceased eating dinner most days altogether. All you needed was self-discipline. Eat enough vegetables, and you could indulge in anything else you wanted.

But that afternoon, back from the cruise and awash with jet lag and joint pain and the telltale facial bloat of twelve days of gastronomic bacchanalia over international waters, Stanley was worried. The loss simply didn't make sense. Never before had he been so light; were he to continue dropping at the same rate, he'd soon be the same size as his early days in high school, at the number-five-ranked Boys' Institute in Taipei. He decided he needed to schedule a medical appointment, a chore he usually enjoyed. Stanley was seventy-four and took a considerable interest in the medical miseries of his peers; doctors' visits accomplished the dual tasks of both occupying his day and providing reassurance that his health continued to be in top form.

What followed next, a full week later—the earliest Kaiser Permanente could secure an open slot with his general physician—wasn't the quick dismissal Stanley expected. Instead, there came a series of drawn-out diagnoses. First the rather vague gallbladder disease, which the specialists were only able to initially elaborate on in terms of statistics: 50 percent an inflammation, 40 percent a problem with bile flow, 10 percent cancer. After that last horrifying word was set loose, left to hang stinking in the air, the theory then moved on to diabetes, a condition that would have ordinarily terrified Stanley but which, compared to cancer, seemed eminently reasonable, a diagnosis that managed to be lethal only when one was too poor or too stupid to follow basic medical and dietary guidelines. Then diabetes was set aside for a peptic ulcer, which had seemed positively benign in comparison with everything else. And that had been the end of it, until today.

“Pancreatic cancer,” the doctor said, “is something we can’t rule out at this point.”

His name was Neil Patel, a baby-faced Indian man whom Stanley had met once before, back when the presumed issue was still his gallbladder. The CT scan showed something that looked to be a mass near the head of the pancreas, Dr. Patel said, though they couldn’t be certain. Additional tests were needed, likely a biopsy. The doctor was quick to add that this wasn’t a diagnosis but merely a possibility—one of many potential outcomes, and thus no impetus for a panic.

“Please don’t obsess,” he said. “At this point it isn’t necessary or helpful. There’s always the chance it could be nothing serious.” Yet his face betrayed the true nature of his sentiments, the youthful features marred by somberness. The harsh, bright sterility of the room amplified the grim atmosphere. Stanley closed his eyes, though the fluorescent light still rained through.

After he provided initial guidance for what was to follow, Dr. Patel left the room. “I’ll be back in a few minutes,” he said. “Please think of any questions you might have.”

As the door closed, Mary reached for Stanley’s shoulder. “Should we call your family?”

“Fred only,” Stanley said. He patted his lap as he searched for his phone and wallet, before realizing he wasn’t wearing pants. They must be in Mary’s bag, he thought, but didn’t want to make eye contact. He wanted her gone from the room; he wished he were completely alone and had never entered this place. His stomach rumbled. Somewhere inside, nestled deep within secretive cavities, small portions of his body were actively betraying him.

“Fred!” Mary cried. Fred was her least favorite of Stanley’s children. “Don’t you mean Kate? Daughters are always better in these situations, aren’t they?”

When Stanley was silent, she charged on. “Besides, if you’re worried about having to tell people, Kate will handle that for you. She’ll

call Fred, and the rest of them.” *Them* to no doubt include Stanley’s ex-wife, Linda, a source of both mild dislike and eternal fascination. Though Mary liked to ask Stanley about Linda on occasion, he had never once answered any of her questions to her satisfaction.

“Fred,” Stanley said. “Call him now.”

CHAPTER 2

F R E D

At Saks Fifth Avenue in Palo Alto, the premier department store of the increasingly upscale Peninsula Shopping Center, designer handbags were the biggest movers. While for multiple seasons fashion magazines and pundits had proclaimed the death of “the It bag,” in the Bay Area—the land of athleisure and yoga pants, where there existed precious few avenues for distinguishing apparel—the designer bag still reigned supreme. In response, the merchandising powers at Saks had dedicated nearly half of the first floor to the celebration and consumption of said accessory, and it was here that Fred Huang sat, slouched over on a leather padded bench, waiting for his girlfriend to sell a \$62,000 watch.

Erika Varga stood a short distance away, in the relatively diminutive space of the fine jewelry department, gently flirting with the older

man facing her. All around them the lights were dimmer than in the rest of the store, to accentuate the glints of precious stones while softening the sags and jowls they adorned. The soft gray cardigan and black pencil skirt Erika wore were too warm given the weather—come the end of her shift, Fred knew she'd remove the sweater as soon as she walked outside, to better enjoy the balmy heat and sun-soaked palm trees that dotted the open-air shopping center. Though the formal skirt and high heels would still give her away. In this part of Palo Alto, especially in late summer, only retail workers dressed in black and patent leather.

"It's because you have *taste*," Fred could hear Erika say, her laugh ringing softly.

The watch wasn't tasteful. Even from a distance Fred could see the flash from the diamonds circling the elephantine dial, much too ostentatious a look for Silicon Valley. As Erika moved to close the sale, she took care not to alienate the customer's age-appropriate wife, nearby examining an Elizabeth Locke bracelet. Each time Erika mewed a coquettish reply to the man, Fred could see her simultaneously cast a conspiratorial glance at his partner: *These men really are just grown-up boys, aren't they?*

The wife, resplendently casual in an embroidered field jacket and a gold curb chain wound around her neck, smiled pleasantly without bothering to meet Erika's gaze. She appeared to possess ample experience when it came to her husband and the techniques of luxury shop girls; she continued to stoically finger the diamond-encrusted toggle while her other half belched a series of chortles and quips. After a particularly jolting guffaw, she checked her watch and released a sigh of resigned endurance.

"I'm about to make your day," the man announced. "You've sold me! What do you think about that!" His voice echoed out from the small space, an announcement to all nearby that a Very High Value transaction was about to go down. Typical nouveau blowhard, Fred

thought. He made sure to appear as if he hadn't heard anything, in case the man looked over.

"You've made a wonderful selection," Erika replied. "You'll have this piece forever."

She excused herself and parted the curtains toward the back room, adjusting her walk to lend a provocative sway to her ass. A minute later she reappeared, with a half bottle of champagne and two glasses on a silver tray. "Just a little celebration."

The sound of the cork as it popped drew all available eyeballs within a certain radius. When they looked over, they saw Erika—the second button of her cardigan now undone, with the lace camisole underneath peeking through—pouring for the customer and his wife. The man was insisting something; Erika reached smoothly underneath the podium and brought out a third glass, which the customer proceeded to fill. "*Salut!*" he cheered. For a brief, unhinged moment, Fred imagined he had said *slut*. He shook his head, and the vision departed.

This was always when he found Erika most attractive: when she was selling. The first time Fred had been made aware of the importance of selling was when he was at Harvard Business School. He'd been thirty and in a relationship with Charlene Choi, a fellow MBA and spoiled Korean princess who in four years would become his wife and in seven his ex. The student body in those days had still been obsessed with high finance—the heady days of the first tech bubble were safely behind, while the second was still in its early stages of percolation—and in class the professors had all impressed upon them the importance of salesmanship, the massive gift and rare talent it was to be able to convince agents in a free market to willingly part with resources. It wasn't enough to possess an expertise in the emerging markets or the quant ability of a Russian Asperger's: finance was at its heart a rough universe, a *trader's* world, where a good percentage of

the top bosses had grown up poor and hustling. You had to be able to sell, to be a real player.

In the beginning, everyone took the lesson seriously. The Sales Club had a flurry of enrollments, and the lone salesperson in Fred's section, a former GE aeronautics rep, had enjoyed alpha status for nearly a week, at one point speaking for five minutes uninterrupted—an eternity in the classroom—on a case study on Jack Welch. But over the following months, attitudes reverted back to the status quo. The optional early-morning negotiations seminar lost its luster in the face of the raging hangover triggered by the late-night cavortings at the Priscilla Ball—the annual cross-dressing party—the night before, and plus, there were so many other variables that seemed to play a defining role in success. One's parents, for example, and selection of partner. Many assumed that Harvard, with its 70/30 male-to-female ratio, was full of sexual opportunists, and while this wasn't necessarily *untrue*, the excavation went in both directions. For every penniless fortune huntress brandishing an engagement ultimatum, there was a corresponding Adonis attached to a Sternman or Mortimer with lavish stables and a horseface; there were nearly as many famous last names in Fred's class among the women as among the men.

Given his relationship with Charlene, Fred's only attempt at striving had been strictly platonic: a close friendship with Jack Hu, the lone male scion of a billionaire family in Hong Kong. They shared a circle because they were both Asian men, a minority whose numbers at Harvard were carefully and deliberately contained each year by the administration. The fact that Jack was slightly dull, both in mind and wit, was vastly outweighed by his vast wealth, and for two delectable years Fred had imagined himself as part of this gilded orbit, one where bodyguards trailed at a discreet distance and residences were maintained at the Mandarin Oriental downtown, instead of on campus.

Of course, Fred didn't have Jack all to himself. Billionaires were in high demand within the HBS student population, and Fred soon found himself in competition for Jack's favor with a bevy of assorted suitors, a group that included not only the other Asian men but also the predatory women, all of whom seemed to regard Jack's stutter and predilection for playing *Civilization* for hours as simply adorable. And the Asians weren't the only problem! There were also the South Americans, Europeans, Jews, Eastern Europeans, Africans, African Americans, and regular vanilla-white Americans—each bloc eager to make the acquaintance of fascinating personalities whose families' real estate holdings were rumored to include entire acres in Knightsbridge and downtown Sydney. All hungry, though luckily—given the numerous plum targets available—less inclined to devote the focused energy to drawing Jack out of his initial shyness than Fred was. Jack finally venturing to ask, after months of mild conviviality, over steaming bowls of beef pho in Harvard Square, if Fred had ever disappointed his parents. “My dad, he's angry I missed my cousin's wedding in Cap Ferrat.”

Or while sharing a thin-crust pizza at Pinocchio's—pepperoni with extra mushrooms, since it was Jack's favorite—“Have you ever had the feeling that one of your professors was trying to network with you?”

Or at the Indian buffet in Central Square, both hovering over the chicken tikka masala: “I have to fly to Singapore next week. There's drama with the board over succession planning.”

“Oh?” Fred would casually reply each time, taking care never to look up from his food. He had learned that enthusiasm frightened the rich and powerful, as they recalled parental exhortations to never trust the less fortunate, who were unpredictable in their poverty. He pampered Jack in their interactions, but not obviously; feted him, but not ostentatiously. And over time Jack felt comfortable in their camaraderie, and they became friends.

After graduation, they vowed to keep in touch, but Fred was always bad at that sort of relationship maintenance, like remembering to attend others' birthday parties so that when the time came, they in exchange would grace his own. So it was only five years later, at the reunion, that he understood how much reassurance his friendship with Jack had provided, like a long-stowed savings bond one could recall at will. Jack was already married by then, and they'd shared a few minutes of superficial banter before he was spotted and quickly pulled away, his patrician wife tossing back a sympathetic smile as they receded. It was then that Fred knew he had lost it, had abandoned out of sheer carelessness his brief, tenuous connection to the very top of the 1 percent.

Until that morning.

From: Jack888@babamail.com
To: Fred@Lion-Capital.com
Subject: Founders' Retreat

Fred,

It's been a while . . . how long since we last talked?

On my end I'm good, still managing the family business. It's been satisfying to see it grow, though I wish I didn't have to live in Hong Kong. The air is shit. Sherry still gets on me for playing video games, she says I should have more serious pursuits now that I'm past forty and have three kids. Are you on *Dota*?

You may not have heard, but Reagan Kwon (remember him? a year above us) and I have done a few deals together since school, and I've been unofficially advising him on Thailand's economic development fund since the beginning of the year. Your name came up as a

possible partner on the US side. Thoughts? It's a few billion right now, but growing.

Reagan and I will both be at the Founders' Retreat this year in Bali. Hope we can catch up there!

Jack

Jack, back from the beyond. *A few billion* (US dollars, Fred hoped).

And Reagan Kwon.

Reagan Kwon, like Jack, was part of Asia's economic royalty, though considerably more colorful. Unlike Jack's parents, who were notoriously private, the elder Kwons were the sort of wealthy couple who loved to see their names on buildings and charity invitations, and they actively encouraged their cosseted only son to make a similar mark for himself. Reagan had started out at Harvard a social star, flying his entire section of ninety to Vegas on a chartered 747 for his birthday. No one was exactly certain where the Kwon money originated, though there was gossip of precious metals and mining and the old shah of Iran. There was even a kidnapped family member or two in the lineage, as well as rumors of lopped-off pinky toes; whispers of the entire ordeal having been orchestrated by an ex-mistress, a stunning former Miss Hong Kong frozen out by the family after what she still insisted was a perfectly innocent pregnancy scare.

Reagan had barely interacted with Fred during school, though of course he knew Jack. While Reagan was more popular, Jack's family had the greater fortune; that equation meant it was the former who doggedly pursued the friendship expected by both families. Reagan invited Jack to all his parties and once went as far as to ship a Japanese blow-up doll to Jack's apartment at the Mandarin in a misguided

attempt at a practical joke. The box had been labeled as a grandfather clock, and Jack, assuming it was an antique sent by his parents, enlisted the help of an assistant concierge to unpack the deceptively heavy carton. He'd been so humiliated once the oversize figure had been revealed, and at such a loss to explain its origin, that he could only think to call Fred, who had hurried over. Jack was paranoid about being photographed or captured on security cameras with the offending object, so after some struggle Fred brought down the doll himself using the service elevator and heaved it into the trash bin headfirst, pausing briefly to admire the lifelike limbs and chest. Noting that even for an occasion such as this, Reagan had purchased the very best.

Fred knew peripherally that since graduation Reagan had calmed somewhat and that in the past few years he and Jack had participated together in multiple investments, mostly Asian copycats of US start-ups. People like Reagan and Jack (or at least their family office advisors) generally didn't bother with less than 20 percent annualized returns, preferably with tacit government backing. Whatever it was they were proposing, it meant serious money.

The rattle of heels. Erika had excused herself from her customer and was striding toward him, shoes pounding in even rhythm. "Do you see?" she asked. She lowered her voice. "Right in front of you."

Fred peered over her shoulder. The wife's untouched champagne sat on top of the glass Cartier display, water pooling around its base. It appeared to have been abandoned in her quest for comfortable seating—she was now sunk into a fat chair in the far corner, the Elizabeth Locke bracelet still wrapped around her hands. Fred noticed the security guard's eyes pass over. One couldn't be too careful these days, no matter how moneyed or white the patron.

"The glass?"

Erika made a grimace. "Disgusting," she hissed. Fred knew she'd have to clean everything when her customers left, rinsing the crystal

in the crude sink in the back and wiping down the counters. She bore a violent animosity toward such tasks, insisting they were beneath her job description.

“Don’t worry about it. Shouldn’t you be getting back to your customer? You made a big sale, right? Congratulations.”

She shrugged. “We’re almost done. Here.” She cut over a business card from her palm. Erika asked all her customers for them, looking up the names after work. She kept only the prime specimens, the companies and titles she thought Fred might be impressed by. “This one’s nothing compared to you. He works in *mortgages*. I should tell him what you do.”

Fred suppressed a groan. “Please don’t bring up my job with your customers.”

“But so many of them are in your industry,” she complained. “It’s ridiculous, this resistance you have. And also don’t you see now, how the wives behave? It makes me so angry that they think they’re better than me, when . . . well, we’re kind of engaged, aren’t we? We basically live together; all my things are at your place. And the men, I’m quite certain a lot of them would be very interested to know I actually understand something of their work! You know my style, I always do better when I’m chatting as a friend, not as *staff*. How do you think I sold this watch? Michael will be thrilled we finally got rid of it. It’s been sitting in the display for almost a year!”

“I know you’re an excellent salesperson. That’s why you don’t need to mention anything about me or Lion Capital.”

“But Amanda talks about her husband all the time, and he’s just a regular *broker* at TD Ameritrade. Amanda says he’s proud that she talks about him. He even jokes that she should give out his card to customers!”

“Good for Amanda’s husband. Not for me.”

“This is so stupid.” Erika’s mouth twisted with displeasure. “I’m just *proud* of you!” And she abruptly swiveled, gliding back.

This was his fault, Fred understood. He had created this problem. From the beginning of their relationship Erika had been so eager for him to be a certain type of man (the finance god, the technologist, the power broker) that over time he'd developed a bad habit of aggrandizing his work, relaxing all the anxieties his ex-wife had worked so hard to instill. Fred Huang, the Venture Capital God! He knew that how he'd represented his particular vantage point in the overwrought matrix that made up Silicon Valley's power structure hadn't been—if one wanted to be brutally fair—particularly accurate. But it had all been so easy, as Erika lacked even a rudimentary understanding of the caste system that ruled his world. Didn't he rate a little fun, after what he'd been through with Charlene? Didn't his ego deserve some time in the sun?

Charlene, a fellow HBS alum, had known implicitly where Fred's job lay in his industry's pecking order: near its swampy bottom. Lion Capital, the investment arm of its larger parent company—Lion Electronics, the technology behemoth headquartered in Taiwan—awarded its employees none of the traditional perks of venture capital, such as carried interest or management fees, where the real fortunes were made. Lion was *corporate* venture capital, which meant it invested cash from its parent's balance sheet and, as it generally went for the industry, paid modestly. While a senior partner at a traditional venture firm like Tata Packer could be expected to take home anywhere between \$2 and \$4 million per annum, Fred—the second-highest-ranked investment professional at Lion—garnered a mere fraction: \$325,000, a pittance in Silicon Valley! Nowhere close to what was needed to buy a house in Hillsborough or responsibly stay any longer than a few days at Post Ranch Inn or Amangiri.

While with his ex this fact had lain between them, Charlene's sighs as she leafed through *Architectural Digest* a tacit reminder of his ongoing parity with the average corporate chump, with Erika it had been entirely deprived of oxygen from the start. She never saw his pay

stubs and didn't have a loose network of hundreds of classmates as well as a particularly haughty cousin who worked in private equity. The only proof of status Erika had ever required was his title (managing director) and industry (venture capital), and her hearty approval had gushed with full force. Urging him, as she had with each delighted smile, to brag with reckless bravado:

- Why wouldn't I be able to find the wrapping paper at Target? I did a \$250 million IPO last quarter, didn't I?
- Griffin Keeles and I flew on a private plane; it was no big deal.
- Teslas are a dime a dozen. I could buy one whenever I want. Could afford to get you one too!

Exquisite Erika, who was at her most appealing when captivated by his swagger; the loose hazelnut curls and light filtered through green eyes, a thrilling contrast to the plain blacks and dark browns of the Asians he'd mostly dated before. Her youth set off by the classic luxury of her wardrobe, the result of careful utilization of employee sales and double-discount days. Her elegant posture and doe-like features and spectacular breasts; more than adequate compensation for the occasional crudity.

For outside the learned confines of the retail environment, Erika could be unpolished, even crude. She was the only woman Fred knew who regularly flipped the bird at reckless drivers, and given even the most minor of lapses, she regularly barked at service staff. At times, Fred almost liked the crassness. Charlene had possessed perfect manners, relentlessly honed during the course of a childhood spent in a twelve-bedroom turreted monstrosity in Bergen County, while the lone other white woman he'd seriously dated before Erika—Tiffany Cantor, a college volleyball player turned ad sales rep at Google—had

been uniformly sweet to the point of near sickening. Gushing “*thank you so much*” nonstop at restaurants, impressed beyond belief that the food they ordered and would be paying for was actually being delivered to their table. And if the establishment happened to be ethnic, always layering on an extra “And everything tasted *wonderful*.”

Once, when Fred was in a bad mood, he’d informed Tiffany that most of the cheap restaurants they patronized didn’t care what she thought of the food, and he could certainly vouch that the Chinese ones didn’t. As if the Cantonese chefs and Hispanic line cooks had been waiting their entire lives for a pretty Caucasian girl from Huntington Beach to cast her approval over their cuisine! Tiffany had blushed a deep crimson. This was just how she’d learned to behave, she explained, to establish incontrovertibly that she was a nice person before the other party invariably docked her for being attractive and thin and blond. “You wouldn’t be able to understand,” she added, before quickly raising her hands to her mouth in horror. Because a truth had accidentally materialized that until then had always lain between them unspoken: that she as a young white woman was desirable in America, and Fred as an Asian man was not.

Fred of course was already aware of this stereotype, had discussed it ad nauseam with other friends over the years—first with indignation, then with rage, and then with the mild acceptance that turned to pride when he walked into bars and restaurants with Tiffany. He was proud of his outward refutation of it—he was six two, lean but built, and conventionally successful; he had no difficulties attracting women. So he’d been surprised to feel the warmth of inarticulate anger and shame return so quickly in the midst of what had at the time been his greatest romantic triumph to date; he rapidly shifted topics, and they’d proceeded as if it were just a throwaway comment, already left by the wayside. When they arrived back at the apartment, Tiffany went after him with a focused determination that seemed to

prove she'd understood the unexpected candor of her statements; the fact that she went down on him—a service she had rendered only once prior in the three months they had dated—solidified his theory.

None of this was a problem with Erika. Erika didn't like most ethnic restaurants, and in *particular* the cheap authentic ones, an admission that in native Bay Area circles was viewed with the same muted horror as Holocaust denial or the use of trans fats. She'd been twenty-seven when she emigrated from Hungary, and her impression of dating culture in the United States was constructed around entirely different ideals: red roses and lobster entrées and warmed desserts à la mode. She had little excitement for popular peer-reviewed eateries with \$7 tapas and yuzu sangria—to her these were just cheap outings, designed to land her in bed with the least amount of spent resources.

Unlike past girlfriends, Erika never offered to pay for meals or activities, which Fred thought he'd mind more than he did. Each time he treated, she was graciously thankful though not gratuitously so, which he found he preferred to the usual tedious routine of wallet fumbling. The check lingering awkwardly on the table at the end of the night, his date reaching into her bag after a precisely timed delay; the halfhearted attempt to offer a credit card before it was tucked away. The woman sheepishly thanking him after it was all over with a small undertone of resentment, as if Fred were personally responsible for making her violate some bullshit tenet of female equality she didn't really believe in the first place.

Erika simply sat, watched him pay, and said thank you. She wasn't complicated about these things, she said. American women complicated too much.

In the parking lot, as they walked toward his car, Erika once again brought up her father's upcoming birthday. "Are you going to send him

a present?” she asked. “And maybe something small for my mother?” When he was quiet, she hounded on. “Because there’s only so much time left, to ship economy. Of course if you still want to buy something next week you can, but then you’ll have to use FedEx, pay for overnight. It’s a waste of money, no? Better to spend on the actual gift.”

They entered the BMW—a decade-old 3 Series Fred was determined to drive until he had enough in his house fund to justify an auxiliary splurge on a Big Swinging Dick vehicle—and instead of answering he turned up the volume on NPR. Even before they’d met, Fred had never liked the sound of György and Anna Varga, two supposed Budapest intellectuals who, despite regularly espousing the superior merits of Socialism, made it clear they fully expected to spend their retirement in spacious comfort in sunny California. The elder Vargas regarded their two adult children as the primary means of attaining said goal, and they had practically shoved Nora—Erika’s older sister—into the arms of a distant American friend of a friend thirty years her senior who had been visiting Budapest on a hall pass. The fact that Nora had subsequently become impregnated by Dominik—who then divorced his wife and moved Nora to Northern California, only to freak out and repeat the entire scenario anew three years later—had been disappointing only in that Nora had merely managed to wrest a studio apartment in Fremont for herself and baby Zoltan out of the deal.

When György and Anna booked their first visit to the Bay Area, Nora and Erika had obsessed for weeks prior to their arrival, going as far as to rent a black Cadillac Escalade to transport them in lavish comfort. Eager to impress, Fred had invited the group to Seasons, a Michelin two star serving upscale French-Californian in Los Gatos, where he’d ordered the tasting menu with full wine pairings for the table. When the bill arrived, Fred had fully expected to pay—had already estimated in his mind the exact hit in terms of tax and tip—but it still galled to not even have György make an attempt for the leather

folder, especially as he and Anna had been the only two to opt for the caviar and black truffle supplements.

“Hello?” Erika poked him between the ribs. “Did you hear what I said?”

The light outside was undergoing the rapid shift from warm to cool as they approached San Francisco; there was a chill in the car, and goose bumps rose along his arm. Fred raised the window to buy a few seconds of time.

“Your father,” he said finally, “is an idiot.”

Erika sighed, as if she’d anticipated this. “I told you already, you misunderstood what he meant about the Jews. It’s *cool* in Hungary to be Jewish. The most successful Hungarians are all Jewish.”

“And the Chinese—excuse me, I mean, *Oriental*s—are all criminals.”

“He didn’t say that. He just isn’t used to them. Fred, please.”

When their group had first entered Seasons, Fred had assumed György’s gaping to be directed at the opulent yet modern decor—the broad redwood beams and pressed gold leaf ceiling, the wine cellar made entirely of glass and visible from the dining room—and felt proud of his choice. The restaurant was a reflection on him, after all: proof to Erika’s parents that he had the culture and resources to look after their daughter in a splendid fashion. Until then, he’d made a deliberate point of ignoring certain particulars regarding their interactions, such as a habit of communicating with him as if he were an exotic animal of unknown provenance, enunciating at a louder decibel; classifying their confusion over certain adjectives as his language deficiency, not theirs. It was only after overhearing Erika’s gently worded explanations during the sea bream appetizer course that Fred realized György assumed they’d been taken to some sort of lower-class establishment. That György had expected the best restaurants in California to be filled with Caucasian faces, not yellow and brown.

“In Hungary, you have to understand that most of the Chinese,

they are not so rich. And there are barely any Indians. He was just confused, Fred. He didn't know."

"Uh-huh. And just how *confused* is György over you dating someone Chinese?"

"He understands . . ." Erika hesitated. "He understands that in America things are different."

"In America? What if you were back in Budapest?"

"In Hungary, of course it would never happen."

"That's an insane statement to make." He jammed angrily at the nearest button on the dashboard, which unfortunately turned the air-conditioning on full blast. "Don't you understand how racist that makes you sound?"

Erika remained calm. To her *racist* wasn't such a bad word, unless used in conjunction with *uneducated*, which she found far more insulting. "It is the truth," she said. "How can someone be so angry over the truth?"

"Because it's ignorant. And based on the worst stereotypes I've had to battle against my entire life, that Asian men are less desirable than every other race, because we're passive, and small, and not worthy of female attention."

"But I don't have those thoughts," she protested. "It's just that I never knew any Chinese before I moved here. And I'm sorry, but it is true, that in Budapest they do crime. Though they mostly keep it between themselves," she added charitably. "In Hungary, if you bring a gift to someone's house, the first thing they will check for when they are alone is whether it was made in China. Because then they know whether you paid a lot or a little."

"Oh really? So everything made in China is cheap? So your father wouldn't like it if I bought him an iPhone?" That had been the ongoing hint for Christmas the year before, with Erika laying the groundwork in September and campaigning through mid-December. Fred had shipped György and Anna the joint present of an iPad mini

and a \$100 iTunes gift card instead. Collectively the two had cost less than one smartphone, and that wasn't even including the continuing overhead of a data plan.

"Well no," Erika said. "Everyone knows the iPhone is very top."

"How can you say all that then, about Made in China being cheap, when your whole family worships Apple products? Which are *made in China*? Don't you see how stupid, how uneducated, it makes you seem?"

"Let's not say such things." Erika placed a soft hand on his shoulder, ignoring the salvo, unusual for her. "Besides, the only thing that matters is you and me. And you are mine. My successful venture capitalist, for whom I am so grateful."

THAT EVENING FRED LAY IN BED, BLINKING THE SLOW ACKNOWLEDGMENT of late-night wakefulness. Insomnia had been descending often lately, a worrisome development as he thought it possibly a symptom of low testosterone. Was he having a midlife crisis? He considered a rededication to one of his interests, before realizing he no longer had any. He used to be passionate about so many things—photography, basketball, traveling. Now the ardor was gone. The disturbing thought flickered that perhaps this was the natural course of life events, that at some point vigor and vitality were supposed to be replaced by marriage and children.

"Erika," he whispered. He cleared his throat, first softly, and then louder. "Erika." He nudged her with his foot, enough to shift her leg. She lay still, prettily snoring.

Fuck it—he was going to watch porn. Fred tiptoed to the laptop on his desk. Dare he bring it back to bed? No, she might wake, and then he'd be in for it; Erika was surprisingly puritanical about such matters. He decided to stay in the chair.

When he opened the browser, he discovered that Erika had started

a Twitter account. Why hadn't she told him? Though Fred himself didn't use Twitter, had never bothered to even register a username. The stars of his industry tweeted habitually, racking up audiences ranging from hundreds of thousands to tens of millions; he knew whatever paltry following he'd manage to attract would only serve as a humiliating comparison.

He examined the page. A quick scroll revealed Erika was largely sharing articles with mentions of Lion Capital, and reposting general Silicon Valley news: "Tech IPOs Predicted to Surge in 2016," one announced. "The Bubble That Wasn't a Bubble!" Innocuous enough, until he unearthed several alarming interactions between Erika and what looked to be complete strangers.

"Untrue," she'd tweeted, at some random pundit who had commented that a certain managing partner at Sequoia dressed too casually for industry standards. "My VC fiancé wears jeans everyday. He is too busy to be bothered with fussy dress. He thinks big picture, only."

Fred moaned and slammed shut the lid, as waves of secondhand embarrassment gathered and pooled. How many more of his thoughts were out there, being parroted into written evidence? Privately claiming to a girlfriend—over a second bottle of Opus One at Bistro Jeanty—that one was a so-called rainmaker in Silicon Valley was very different from having the same convictions bullhorned for the general public. What else had she been writing? And more important, *where*? The whole incident reminded him of when he'd told his mother he was the most popular freshman at Claremont High, only to overhear her boasting of it verbatim on the phone to friends with children the year above him at the same school weeks later. "My Fred is so well liked," she'd crowed. "So many birthday invitations! And he goes to all the dances!"

When he woke again it was late morning. Erika was already awake and out of bed preparing breakfast, the routine she always reverted

to when she knew she'd annoyed him. The unnerving sensation he'd felt late in the night still lurked, and he was struck by an acute desire to reread Jack's email. As soon as he reconfirmed its existence, Fred thought, he'd feel better. *Reagan Kwon. A few billion.* He repeated it like a mantra. Beneath the blanket, there began the early rumblings of an erection. As he reached for his phone, to bring himself to climax, the screen lit with a call from his father.