

Axiology

There is a man on the corner of Grand and Broadway that holds a sign saying “WE ARE ALL CHILDREN OF THE MEANINGLESS” for a living. He is Cambodian, four-years-in-Vietnam gray and smokes cigarettes upside-down, and so the people that walk by stay in their own little lives.

On days when Bà takes me to the restaurant, we pass by the man, his eyes crazed, his cowlick caustic and untrimmed. Two weeks ago he began to cuss and undress when he saw foreigners, so Bà and I devised a code: *cough* to turn away, *nod* to drop a day’s wage in coins into the McDonald’s cup the man keeps for company. Three weeks later and we finally develop a routine, the three of us. Coughing is repaid with slurs. Nodding is followed up with a *God Bless, God Bless* in broken, two-toothed Vietnamese. If the restaurant has a good day and Bà slides in two extra quarters, the man offers a half-eaten Marlboro, waves goodbye with his feet, urinates on the road instead of the busy sidewalk.

The day the restaurant no longer needed a dishwasher, Bà started to look for apartments in the suburbs, hanging up the phone if the realtor asked him to repeat a sentence. We found a one-bedroom condo with everything we could afford: a kerosene stove, small communal kitchen, thirty first-generation immigrants. There was a piss stain on the wall that reminded us of the man, so we laughed. Bà signed the lease in Chinese. We said goodbye to the old lady that sold fifty-cent bánh mì next to the orphanage and moved in the next Tuesday.

After Bà shivered out his last words and died on our inflatable mattress, I took the cheapest train into the city, looked for jobs that hired workers with expired passports. In the morning I ate at the restaurant, told the owner that Bà had always hated dishwashing, exchanged a twenty for sixty quarters and a fortune cookie. The owner switched on the news on the little black TV. On the screen: a road darkened with taxicab ash, an elderly man facedown. Then, a crowd surrounding the street, photographing his crumpled body, a cardboard sign, faded carpenter pants. The owner switched channels. A reporter announced a weather advisory. I called a waiter and ordered a steamed fish, reminding them to cook the skin until it began to flake under pressure.