

Music as Life: I Want to Be Sedated

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FROM THE MIND OF

RVA

Jie Wong flipped through the records. His fingers danced over the aged cardboard sleeves as he glanced down at the pastel, artistic covers beneath him. Kneeling on the far side of the attic full of music, Jie blinked to see through the dusty, mote-filled air. The records were only part of a wide collection that included CDs, cassettes, 8-tracks, mini-discs, and sheet music.

"Find something?" asked Morgan Brandywyne as he ascended the narrow stairs into the attic. He carried a pair of frosty water bottles, the stubby necks between his fingers.

"I believe so," said Jie in a moderate Mandarin accent. The small Asian man pulled from a blue milk crate a record of 'Pictures at an Exhibition'. "I'm surprised to find such a copy."

"Yeah, it's pretty rare," Morgan observed, trading the record for a bottle of water. The taller white man took the sleeve over to the elaborate stereo system. Set into the shelves next to the stairs that led down to his home, the system held a player for virtually every form of music media. Tall but not huge, Morgan was physical imposing which contrasted with the delicate care he took removing the record from the sleeve. Opposite him, the slight Jie sat in the nearer of the two padded seats, opening the bottle of water. "It's just refilled tap water," Morgan told him as he started the record.

Leaving the sleeve atop the stereo case, Morgan sat in the opposite chair and let the music begin. He had some water himself, the attic a bit stuffy from the heat of the late spring day. "Is it good to have records in this heat?" asked Jie.

Morgan shrugged. "I don't have the A/C on right now. Once it's on, this place can actually get kind of chilly." He looked at the sloped roof over his head. "It's pretty well insulated. Me and a friend took care of that as soon as I bought the place." Jie nodded inconsequentially, appraising the mostly finished but still raw-looking attic. Morgan listened to the horn section at the opening of the record and glanced across at Jie. The academic man sat in the chair, listening placidly to the music, his fingers dancing a bit to the melody. He glanced out of the corner of his eye at Morgan and saw him watching.

"I've always loved classical," Jie told him, as if preempting the coming question. Morgan just nodded. "In China, my family, we lived in the far west when I was young. I listen to classical music all day. Walk to school. Come home. After my homework is done, I play on the piano." He closed his eyes and danced with his hand to the music.

“Interesting that you’d choose a Russian composer like Mussorgsky,” Morgan remarked as he studied Jie, specifically his hand movement.

“China borders Russia,” Jie told him. “I grew up in Urumqi, which is not far from the Russian border. Much of Russia influenced our land historically.” Morgan only nodded, watching Jie and listening to him more than he heard him. “This is the music of my people,” Jie said, his fingers drifting through the air.

Morgan nodded and then asked, “What’s your music?” Jie’s hand stopped as he looked at Morgan, confused. “This is your people’s music,” Morgan said, nodding at the record, at the music in the air. “What’s YOUR music?”

Jie shook his head. “I don’t understand.”

“This class,” Morgan told Jie, gesturing at the two of them in their seats, “is about discovering yourself through music. It’s about figuring out where music fits into your life.” Jie nodded, still not quite following. “I appreciate that this is culturally significant to you,” said Morgan, again acknowledging the music that played on the stereo, “but I want to know about what music is personally significant to you.”

“I play classical music since I’m a child,” Jie tried to explain.

“But I’m betting you didn’t just listen to classical,” Morgan countered. “You say you listened to this going to school, coming home from school, after school,” he recounted, getting a confirming nod from Jie. Morgan began to smile a bit as he shook his head. “I bet by the time you were a teenager, you hated it.”

“When I was a teenager, I fled China,” Jie told him, his tone not changing but his accent intensifying. “Tiananmen Square.” He stated the name and needed to say no more. “My father, he’s terrified that revolution has come. He’s afraid that Russia will invade. With the loss of the Berlin Wall, he’s afraid Russia is going to look east instead of west. Unrest is everywhere, or it seems that way. My father sneaks us into Tajikistan and we get to Pakistan, and then into India. From there, we go to Great Britain, and then we come to America. I spent half a year fleeing.”

“When we get here,” Jie continued, “my father – a doctor – becomes taxi driver for a year. Nurse after that. It takes him a decade to get his medical license in America. My mother, a pianist, can get no work except as tutor for local children.” Morgan just listened. “I cling to this,” he told Morgan, gesturing at the music. “This is home.”

Morgan let the topic drop. He didn’t push the matter and, instead, they talked about the melodies and pacing of the pianist prodigy’s favorite piece. But all the while, he watched Jie with suspicion.

Jie Wong parked his tiny, two-door car on the street outside his townhouse. He ignored the garage on the first level where his wife's car was parked. He headed up through the front door that was double-locked. Inside, he was greeted with the scent of baked chicken and vegetables. The white house with sparse decorations felt more than clean. It felt sterile.

"Mei?" he called as he took off his suit jacket. He went towards the back of the narrow, two-story townhome where his wife was in the modest kitchen. "It smells nice," he told her.

"<Thank you,>" she remarked absently in Mandarin, stirring the boiled vegetables. She undid her apron and said, "<It'll be ready in a minute,>" as she set about checking the chicken in the stove.

Jie left her in the kitchen and headed upstairs to their bedroom. It was every bit as spacious and sterile as the rest of the house. Clear of distractions and only the most basic and fashionable of decorations, it was pristine as a photograph. Jie looked at the heavy comforter on the bed and felt strangely troubled by its dark purple color. He turned to the sliding closet doors with their mirror surface. He looked at his reflection as he undid his shirt and tugged off the tank top underneath.

Over his right chest was an anarchist symbol sloppily tattooed into his skin.

Jie pulled on a heavy cream-colored T-shirt, covering the antiquated tattoo. He changed into jeans and pulled on slippers before returning downstairs for their sensible dinner.

As the class bell rang, Jie looked back at the wall clock, surprised the class had passed so quickly. "Test tomorrow," he announced to his class that was already packing up their bags. Forty students filed out of his classroom meant for twenty-five and pushed into the already choked hall beyond. Jie put his papers into his briefcase and buttoned the top two buttons on his suit as Mrs. Caker pushed her cart in through the door. "Crazy day today," said the old woman as she rumbled her projector towards the front of Jie's classroom.

"It always is," he told her with a smile and a polite laugh. He didn't even look her in the eye as he headed for the door.

He reached the hallway as students rushed by. Jie checked his watch and contemplated his hunger at the start of his lunch break. He began to

push out into the crowd until a familiar sight caught the corner of his eye. He turned and looked but couldn't see what had grabbed his attention.

Turning to the left instead of the usual right towards the teachers' lounge, Jie chased vaguely after what he was sure he'd seen. He darted ahead of several students. Amid the clatter of steps and the din of conversations, he finally reached the far end of the school's main building. Not sure what he'd seen, he turned around, troubled.

As he turned, he spotted a student just a few steps back. A young black boy with headphones in his ears, he wore a cut-up Ramones T-shirt with the sleeves missing. He glanced at Jie as he kept walking by, leaving the teacher haunted.

Jie Wong parked his tiny, two-door car on the street outside his townhouse. He ignored the garage on the first level where his wife's car was parked. He headed up through the front door that was double-locked. Inside, he was met with the smell of grilled chicken and vegetables. The sterile house was unchanged, as white and calming as ever.

"Mei?" he called as he took off his suit jacket. He headed to the back of his home, where his wife was cooking dinner. "<How was your day?>" he asked her.

"<Good,>" she remarked absently in Mandarin as she turned the vegetables on the indoor grill. "<Dinner will be ready in just a bit,>" as she set about checking the kitchen.

Jie went upstairs, as was his routine. He changed clothes, as was his routine. He watched himself in the mirror of the bedroom closet, as was his routine. As he routinely removed his tank top, he saw the anarchy symbol on his chest. Without warning, his mind returned to the Ramones' t-shirt. His vision centered on the anarchist symbol, the jagged A within a circle. The smell of a dingy alleyway and sharp pain touched the back of his thoughts.

Jie turned away from the memories. He pulled on a dark blue t-shirt and jeans and headed downstairs for his wife's healthy cooking.

The perfect silence of students testing was like a comforting pain for Jie.

He watched the kids in his class as they took the test. Forty students were a lot to keep track of, so Jie paced among the tightly-packed desks.

The space between the students was barely wide enough for his steps. Bookbags and purses were stuffed under the metal desks as students flipped through the math test. All around were sighs of frustration and the occasional muttering of confusion. Jie glanced at students' pages as he walked, spotting wrong answer after wrong answer. Anger welled up in him at the students for not doing better. He stayed quiet and kept walking among the kids, already drawing up new assignments in his mind to better ingrain the lessons.

As he passed Charles Ramirez, a student right on the cusp of being a problem, he heard the strangest sound. Jie slowed but didn't stop, not wanting to let on that he'd heard. He glanced to the boy's desk and saw a tiny spot of water just beneath the test. Ready to chastise him for drinking in class, Jie kept walking, watching the boy out of the corner of his eye. A second drop fell off Charles' chin.

Jie realized his student was crying.

A bench warmer for the school's mediocre baseball team, Charles' face was still. He looked totally placid except for the subtle wet streaks down his face. He wiped his chin and cheek, playing it off as nothing, but the frustration was clear. The alien language of the math was beating him. Beating him down, beating him up, beating him.

Continuing his patrol, Jie felt a deep-seated empathy he had forgotten he had.

Jie left his car on the street and entered his house. White, sterile, bland. He crossed to the back of his house as he smelled baked fish and a vegetable stew. "<Was it a good day?>" Jie asked his wife.

"<Yep, good,>" she said absently as she stirred the stew. "<Dinner's almost ready.>"

Jie went upstairs and changed clothes, then came back downstairs to finish his evening with his wife's dinner.

Wagner played on Morgan's stereo.

Jie listened to the music, shaking his hand through the air, like he was dotting the notes of the piece. He hummed a little and glanced at Morgan who was watching him. "I'm not much of a Wagner fan," Jie told his musical counterpart. "I think his polemic viewpoints were questionable and his music a little sensational, but it's a fun, light fare."

Morgan smirked, almost laughing. "Most people don't call Wagner 'light', but okay." His expression was always tinged with cynicism, as usual.

"People think this is complex?" Jie asked derisively.

"I wouldn't argue complex necessarily, but I've heard Wagner described as the birth of heavy metal, if you can believe that," Morgan remarked. Jie shook his head and turned back to the music. "What do you listen to besides classical?" Morgan asked, for the first time that session but far from the first time ever.

Jie just shrugged. "I'm not sure. Opera, I suppose. I listen to—"

"Opera is just classical with lyrics," Morgan stopped him. "You listen to more than classical. In fact, I don't think you even like classical."

"Why do you say that?" Jie asked, like he'd been insulted.

Morgan bore a hole through Jie with an unblinking stare. "Because you're swaying your hand exactly like you did last week, during Muggorgsky's Pictures at an Exhibition. Pictures has an 11/4 time signature. Gotterdammerung has 6/4 time." He tossed his point at Jie's hand. "You're off." Jie looked angry. "You're not listening to the music," Morgan all but accused him. He smiled cynically, almost defiantly. "Not really." It was a stinging accusation, one Jie wasn't prepared to refute. "That tells me you're not emotionally invested in this," he explained. "That means you're either deliberately wasting my time...or you're hiding something."

Jie felt an anger well up inside of him, but Morgan didn't relent. "Buddy, you are not the first person to be ashamed of your musical tastes," he assured his client. "You're not the first person to say they like what is popular or what they think they're supposed to like, when in fact they can't stand it. People can go their whole lives listening to music they think is boring just because they think they're supposed to. They listen to music because they think they have to grow out of earlier tastes." Morgan paused a beat, just to let that register. "But the thing is, music is more important than some fashion ascribed to people by their age, by their station, by their class. Music is more than entertainment. It's an expression of our identity and some people are in denial about who they are."

Eyes still on Jie, Morgan held up the stereo's remote. With the press of a single button, the attic fell to silence. A billowing tuft of cool air from the vents filled the vacancy of noise. The smell of dusty, stale air and generations of forgotten music grew more poignant in the absence of sound. "So," Morgan challenged, "what do you want to listen to?"

Jie stood up from the chair and made a bit of a show of looking down at the seated Morgan, buttoning his suit jacket. He started to turn away, ready to walk out on the counselor, but something stopped. His heart was

racing and he didn't know why. Not from the insult, but from some long-forgotten moment of which it reminded him. He recalled a circle of people, faces he couldn't remember, chanting 'fight'.

A teenage stubbornness filled his lungs and Jie unbuttoned his suit jacket. Despite his back being to Morgan, he sneered in anger. He went to the far side of the attic and reappraised the music collection. Looking through the vast sea of media, Jie's anger was quickly dissolved. He stared at the array, unsure what he was looking for. He wasn't staring at opera or classical, but genres he knew existed by reputation only.

Reputation, and recollection.

The fingertips of the mind began to thumb through the milk crates of records. Drag along the racks of cassettes and CDs. The music, like the genres, ranged across the ages and across the world. Arabic. English. American. Brazilian. Japanese. Genres from across time. Pop. Dance. Swing. Jazz. Big band. Rock. Metal.

Punk.

Jie's hand reached eagerly for what his mind didn't recall. Couldn't recall. Wouldn't recall. He flipped through a crate of punk records, haunted by what he saw. Before him were covers he'd seen but never knew. Until he reached Rocket to Russia. Joey, Johnny, Dee Dee, and Tommy, were looking right at him. Through him. More than forty years removed, they were seeing him and seeing him with disdain.

"Punk?"

Jie jumped with a start, like he had stepped out of time. Fear clutched his throat and he shivered in terror that he'd been found. Morgan had stood from his chair and was watching Jie as he crouched on the floor before the milk crate. "You like punk music?" Morgan was both surprised and strangely delighted.

Jie let go of the records, letting them slump back into the plastic milk crate. He withdrew his hand, but the sudden absence of the four Ramones was like a gut punch. Suddenly, he wanted nothing more than to see them again. "When I live in China," said the high school teacher very slowly, "I'm...I'm delinquent." He spoke with pauses and distance, like the revelation was as much his own. He returned to his seat in front of Morgan. The air was silent and thick as the student and therapist took their seats. They sat in the absence of distraction, in the pregnant silence of illumination.

Jie stared for a long time into the middle distance, seeing the silence and his life as well. "Some boys, in my village, they're delinquents. Punks." His voice was ghostly. "My parents tell me to stay away from them. I cut

my arm with a beer bottle to prove to them I'm...to prove to them...to prove to them." Jie realized that his eyes held tears, tears of frustration. He remembered the condescending looks of the older boys, their language of rebellion so foreign to him.

"Cultural Revolution ended in 1969, so they say," Jie told Morgan with a voice soft with emotion. He wiped his eyes, returning to some decorum. "But, it wasn't over. Not in the west. The young, we hated it. So backwards. So ridiculous. Mao, he..." Jie shook his head. He suddenly laughed tearfully. "I remember walking along the streets, when I should be in school. I'm looking for coins. Walking the curb, I look into the gutter for anything that shines." His smile turned bittersweet. "I know a guy who can get bootlegs from India. He sells me a cassette of the Ramones."

"Which album?" Morgan asked cautiously, afraid the question would break the memorial trance. He watched the recollection in awe.

"No album, just songs," recalled Jie, like his memories were the real now. "All mixed together." He laughed. "Such poor quality. The feedback, the reverb..." He smiled.

"Sounds terrible," Morgan said, the left side of his mouth curling into a smile.

"Awful," Jie recalled with distant delight. "I could barely tell one song from another." His eyes spaced out with the memory of a piece of heaven. "I had to listen so closely." He drifted into a hazy cloud of remembrance, saying very little after that. Morgan joined him in the silence, pushing him no more for the day.

"The tests were not awful," Jie lied as he handed them back, one by one, laying them before each student. Red Xs denoted missed answers and giant red numbers at the top of the page conveyed the bad news. "I want to make sure," he continued as he handed out the results to the despondent class, "that going forward, we are able to confirm what we have learned while still preparing for the next test."

When Jie reached Charles Ramirez's desk, he laid down the failing test. Beneath the ugly numbers, however was written, 'See me after class, I know you worked hard'. Charles looked at the page and up at Jie as the teacher returned to the front of the class. The instructor began to explain the next chapter, even as his eyes checked back with Charles. To Jie's surprise, he didn't see gratitude or curiosity, but anger.

"I didn't understand," Jie recalled to Morgan as they sat together, listening to Blitzkrieg Bop. "I wanted to help him. I was offering to help him."

"Maybe he didn't see it that way," suggested Morgan, his head propped on one hand as he listened.

"He's going to fail the class," Jie lamented.

"Do you think he cares?" asked Morgan, almost rhetorically. "Best case scenario, he cares about being able to play baseball. And learning math isn't an incentive, just a hurdle to not lose baseball. He's not learning; he's avoiding punishment." Jie was lost in that perspective. "Think about who you were," Morgan suggested, pointing to the stereo as punk music thrashed about in the attic air, "when you first heard this song? How would you have responded to a note like that?"

"Gone to the teacher after class," Jie said certainly. Morgan waited for the complete answer. Then Jie admitted to himself, "and hated him every minute after."

"So did he come see you?" asked Morgan.

Jie hedged. "I don't think so."

"You don't think so?" asked the counselor, confused. "What happened?"

"Read the chapter and do the questions at the end," Jie told his students as they funneled out. Charles was the last to leave. His head hung low, not in defeat but in a street-worn tactic of deception. His hand was in his pocket and his thumb in his one bookbag strap, looking like an unassuming nobody right before the punches started swinging. He approached Jie as the teacher moved to meet him. Neither got the chance to speak however.

"Mr. Wong?" said an older voice. Jie and Charles were both surprised as Dr. Match, the school principal, let himself into the classroom. He carried with him a manila folder of pages that matched his plaid suit with brown elbow patches. The principal smiled on to the young boy he had no idea the name of and let him find his way out of sight. Charles was happy to take the out.

Once alone, Dr. Match said, "Mr. Wong, it's time for the annual review." The principal produced from the folder a stapled pair of pages and handed them to Jie. "Please fill this out at your earliest convenience and have this back to me tomorrow morning before the first bell." The principal didn't wait

for a response. With a smile, he headed off, leaving Jie to look over the page.

"I hate performance reviews," Morgan lamented sympathetically. "We did them all the time back when I was a teacher."

"We do them quarterly, but each one is for a different oversight," Jie concurred. "The union says only annual reviews, but since each is different..." He shook his head. I Wanna Be Your Boyfriend played on the stereo. "It's so pointless," Jie remarked. "I don't mind doing it exactly, but it's...it's just pointless. There are no raises. I can't be fired for anything that goes on these forms. All it is for is for some bureaucrat to, to..." His anger turned into an exhausted confusion.

Jie parked his car out front of his house. He readied to walk up the driveway but paused. He looked down the street, at all the cars parked facing one way. Across the street, the same line of monotony. SUVs. Compacts. Sedans. All in line, all in order. He heard a sprinkler going in the dusk light. A few birds chirped, but nowhere nearby due to the lack of meaningful trees. Pet plants were the closest the neighborhood had, token reminders of what wild vegetation looked like.

Jie backed up from his car, stepping a few steps into the street. He looked down the road again, then the other way. He was standing in the middle of the street. He looked down at his aged, sensible shoes. He looked again down the street, seeing no traffic at all. Troubled and not sure why, he returned to his property.

Through the front door, he smelled baked fish and soup. He approached the kitchen and saw his wife stirring the soup. "<Good afternoon, Mei,>" said Jie in Mandarin.

"<Dinner will be ready shortly,>" said his wife. Jie smelled olive oil and felt less than enthused.

He headed upstairs and changed his shirt. Rather than change into his afterwork shirt, he sat down on the foot of his bed, topless. The ugly anarchy tattoo on his chest caught his eye. Somehow, that led him to think about the performance evaluation waiting downstairs in his briefcase. Pointless words on a meaningless page for an empty gesture.

Jie looked at his reflection in the bedroom mirror. A man older than he remembered stared back. He saw fragments of his own face, but they were lost within a mask of a middle-aged teacher who drove a sensible car, wore sensible shoes, lived in a sensible house, worked a sensible job, ate a sensible dinner, and lived a sensible life.

With an anarchist tattoo on his chest.

Jie studied his reflection for a long time, seeing not his face but a collection of shapes he'd forgotten weren't him.

"None of it matters," Jie pondered from far away. The stereo was off. The record was over and Jie didn't want to hear anymore. "I love my wife," he whispered sadly, a heavy gaze staring at nothing but his own thoughts and the anguish behind them. "I don't regret our life together, but...but it's...it's so...meaningless?" He looked at Morgan, either to confirm that was the correct word or that was a fair emotion. His counselor only listened and heard. "It isn't a bad life. I don't hate it," said Jie. "It's just so...so sensible." Emotional momentum carried Jie. "I began to do things because it was the best option. It made the most sense. It was sensible."

"There's nothing wrong with that," Morgan assured him. "There's nothing – at all – wrong with driving a sensible car, living in a sensible house, working a sensible job. Making sensible decisions isn't bad."

"Making sensible decisions used to be what I did when my parents watched me," realized Jie. "It was what adults did. It was what responsible people did. But there was a time when what mattered was being irresponsible. Nothing mattered and that was important. That mattered. Now my life is all things that matter and that doesn't matter that they matter." His mental and verbal gymnastics confused him.

After a long silence, stained hot by the sunlight coming in through the slanted windows of the rooftop, Jie recalled, "You know, I don't remember what happened to my bootleg Ramones cassette?" He shook his head at the thought of it all. "I don't remember if I lost it, if my parents found it. Just one day I didn't look for it. I didn't notice it was gone. I don't think I gave it any thought until I started coming to you." He laughed at himself. "It was so important to me. I skipped school to search for money to buy it. I listened to it every single day...and I don't remember when I last saw it. I don't remember what happened to it."

"We change," Morgan said, almost as a consolation.

"If it was important then, and it's not important now, it was never important," said Jie.

"That's not true," Morgan said with unusual and rare certainty. "Just because something doesn't matter now, but did once, doesn't mean it wasn't

important then. Or now." He made clear, "Something doesn't have to matter to be important."

Park the car. Up the driveway. Enter the house. Roasted chicken and vegetables.

Jie stopped as he entered the kitchen. He took a moment to take a deep breath, drinking the aroma. Or lack thereof. "Honey?" he asked in English. His wife turned around to him, surprised by the words and his tone. Jie felt possessed. Haunted. In a fog. "Why don't we go out to eat?"

Mei looked confused. Not insulted that he was declining the dinner but like the notion of eating out was even possible. "What?" she asked with a laugh. She turned back to the vegetables. "Don't be silly. Eating out is expensive and we're saving up for a new sofa, remember?"

Jie looked in the direction of the pristine living room. "What's wrong with the one we have?"

"Don't you remember? The spring on the right side pokes through the cushion sometimes," she said.

Jie looked again. "So?" Stunned, his wife turned around to him. "We never sit on it," said Jie with a shrug. "Who cares about replacing it? Besides, eating out doesn't have to be expensive." He walked towards her. "Let's go get some hotdogs." He smiled, not aware of how much he needed those in his life until he said the word.

Wong turned back around to the dinner and resumed preparing it. "<I've got dinner almost ready now,>" she told him in Mandarin.

Dejected, Jie turned to go upstairs and resume his routine. He stopped at the door to the kitchen. "Wong?" he asked. He looked halfway back at her. "What's the difference between things being important, and mattering?"

She looked at him again, thinking over his question. "I don't know. I guess they're the same thing."

More troubled than he had been, Jie excused himself upstairs.

"We've only got a few more minutes," Jie said to his Friday class of bored students. His words passed inattentive students and echoed off the white cement walls at the back of his classroom. "I want to talk about the homework." He picked up the printed page he was about to distribute. "I

think the questions on here will really help drive home the purpose of the..." Words and thoughts dribbled to a standstill.

Jie stopped entirely. Halfway around his desk, he stopped and looked at the page. Numbers and symbols, all without any context. Looking at the page, Jie could see the answer but could barely remember how to do the math. He certainly couldn't remember why. So many questions and none of them providing any answers. Not exercise; merely work. His students perked up, his silence garnering more attention than his words ever had.

Jie looked out the narrow slit of a window by his desk. He couldn't see a tree or the sky but he saw the bright afternoon sun on the wall across the courtyard. It was a lovely Spring day. Jie looked again at the homework he was about to hand out. Staring down at it, he remembered walking along the streets of his hometown, checking the gutter for change to buy a bootleg Ramones tape.

Jie released the pages.

Forty worksheets fell from his grasp and went falling into the floor, flying out from his feet. As his students were afraid of this sudden deviation from the norm, Jie felt his heart rush. He looked up like he'd come out of a decades-long trance. He turned and stepped up onto his chair and then onto his desk. He looked over his class from the new vantage, seeing nothing new but seeing everything in a new way. "This doesn't matter," he whispered, looking at the pages distributed all over the floor by chaotic gravity. "This doesn't matter," he repeated to the class.

"You're ripping off Dead Poets' Society," called somebody from the back.

Jie was momentarily stunned. "I'm what?" he asked.

"Dead Poets' Society," answered a girl in the front row. "It's a movie."

"Oh," he said. "I didn't see it."

"The teacher - Robin Williams - stands up like that to show the students how to see the world or something," she explained.

Jie nodded, then blew her mind. "I'm not standing up here for you." Like her peers, she was stunned. "I'm standing up here for me." He looked into the back, not sure who had spoken up originally and not caring. "And if I'm ripping it off, so what?" Nothing he had said all year made an impact on the class quite like that one statement.

Jie shook his head. "It's amazing," he told his students from atop his desk, scoffing cynically. "This doesn't matter," he said, gesturing to the homework on the floor. "It's important," he emphasized with total certainty. "But it doesn't matter. I've just—" The desk began to wobble as his weight

shifted. "Yeah, okay," he said, getting down. There were some chuckles from his class.

"I've...I've been giving the distinction some thought. What matters and what's important," he told his students. He looked distantly at his thoughts in order to gain perspective, like stepping back from an optical illusion to gain insight. "What's important doesn't change. What matters does." It hit him so hard to say it aloud. "What matters is important, even when it stops mattering."

"Did you have a stroke?" asked somebody in the class.

Jie smiled. "Everything you're doing right now isn't important," he told the kids. "Who you're dating, what you're into, what sports you're playing," he said with a glance at Charles Ramirez. "These things matter, but they aren't important. And they'll stop mattering when you graduate. In four years, nothing that matters now will matter then. But that doesn't make them matter any less right..." He froze mid-thought, realizing in real-time. "A thing doesn't have to matter to be important, nor does something that does matter have to be important. But by virtue of it mattering is a thing made important." He looked at his students, his intellectual sounding board. "Just because something will matter in twenty years, but not now, doesn't make it less important."

He walked to the front of his students' desks, speaking almost in a trance. "Nothing will ever matter more, or less, than what matters now. But it will change." His students all stared, not quite following but most recognizing that he was on to something.

Jie realized he wasn't making complete sense and felt compelled to not care. "Your homework this weekend isn't that," he said, gesturing to the scattered pages on the floor. "It's going to be...I want to know what you really want to know. What do you really want, whether it's from math or not."

"What does that have to do with math?" asked a girl in the second row.

"Nothing," Jie said. He then laughed. "Everything?" He chuckled to himself, as if it was all some private joke. "Nothing in high school is important, but it's no more or less important than the future." He saw the confusion on everyone's face. He only smiled wider. "You'll see what I mean," he promised them with an honesty they were unprepared to handle. The bell rang and he looked defiantly at them, challenging them to bring their best questions on Monday.

As the students filed out, talking in hushed and awed tones, unsure what to think, Jie fished his cell phone from his pocket and texted his wife.

"Let's get hotdogs tonight." He put away his phone, his mouth watering at the very thought.

Jie pulled halfway into the driveway, the rear of his car hanging out on the street. He hopped out, knowing he wouldn't be long and not caring if he was. He headed inside and called, "Mei?"

His wife appeared from the kitchen, as if unsure what to do with her afternoon without having dinner to cook. "What's going on?" she asked her husband.

"Nothing," he told her. He took off his jacket and hung it from the door handle of the coat closet. He began to unbutton his shirt. His wife watched him with growing confusion. He stripped off his shirt and, in just his undershirt, with his tattoo easily noticeable, he took her hand. "Let's go." He added with a grin, "Hey ho."

His wife, laughing, tore her hand from his. "You can't go out like that!" She laughed as she backed away from him. "You look like a...a..."

"A what?" asked Jie.

"An old man," his wife said before giggling at her own candor. "Like those lazy old men who play mahjong all day."

"I am an old man," Jie accepted without fear. He reached again for her hand.

"What will people think?" his wife laughed as she let him pull her to the door.

"Who cares what people think," Jie dismissed. They got halfway to the door and Mei stopped him. "Honey, if you don't want to—" He was stopped when he saw his wife pull off her blouse. She beamed with the sudden rush of teenage exuberance. In her undershirt, she grabbed his hand and, together, they rushed out for hotdogs.

"I traded fun for accomplishment," Jie told Morgan, thinking aloud with a proud smile. "I had given away what I wanted in the moment for what I wanted long-term. I don't dislike who I am, but I only ever thought about who I am over time, in the long run. I had forgotten who I am today. I forgotten how to be a person, and instead was a person."

"What's the difference?" Morgan asked, like he was quizzing his client.

"To be is present tense. Maybe even future tense, I don't know," he shrugged it off, clearly not caring. "Was is past tense. Constant tense if there is such a thing. This is who I was, me from here to here," he said, holding his hands wide. "I had forgotten how to be me here, right here." he held two fingers together. "This is what I needed to remember. This is what punk made me feel. This is what the Ramones gave me. Me, right here." He sat back in his chair and smiled, an unguarded, unprotected smile.

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