

FROM

## *The Leavers*

BY LISA KO



**T**he day before Deming Guo saw his mother for the last time, she surprised him at school. A navy blue hat sat low on her forehead, scarf around her neck like a big brown snake. “What are you waiting for, Kid? It’s cold out.”

He stood in the doorway of PS 33 as she zipped his coat so hard the collar pinched. “Did you get off work early?” It was four thirty, already dark, but she didn’t usually leave the nail salon until six.

They spoke, as always, in Fuzhounese. “Short shift. Michael said you had to stay late to get help on an assignment.” Her eyes narrowed behind her glasses, and he couldn’t tell if she bought it or not. Teachers didn’t call your mom when you got detention, only gave a form you had to return with a signature, which he forged. Michael, who never got detention, had left after eighth period, and Deming wanted to get back home with him, in front of the television, where, in the safety of a laugh track, he didn’t have to worry about letting anyone down.

Snow fell like clots of wet laundry. Deming and his mother walked up Jerome Avenue. In the back of a concrete courtyard three older boys were passing a blunt, coats unzipped, wearing neither backpacks nor hats, sweet smoke and slow laughter warming the thin February air. “I don’t want you to be like that,” she said. “I don’t want you to be like me. I didn’t even finish eighth grade.”

What a sweet idea, not finishing eighth grade. He could barely finish fifth. His teachers said it was an issue of focus, of not applying himself. Yet when he tripped Travis Bhopa in math class Deming had been as shocked as Travis was. “I’ll come to your school tomorrow,” his mother said, “talk to

your teacher about that assignment.” He kept his arm against his mother’s, loved the scratchy sound of their jackets rubbing together. She wasn’t one of those TV moms, always hugging their kids or watching them with bemused smiles, but insisted on holding his hand when they crossed a busy street. Inside her gloves her hands were red and scraped, the skin angry and peeling, and every night before she went to sleep she rubbed a thick lotion onto her fingers and winced. Once he asked if it made them hurt less. She said only for a little while, and he wished there was a special lotion that could make new skin grow, a pair of superpower gloves.

Short and blocky, she wore loose jeans—never had he seen her in a dress—and her voice was so loud that when she called his name dogs would bark and other kids jerked around. When she saw his last report card he thought her shouting would set off the car alarms four stories below. But her laughter was as loud as her shouting, and there was no better, more gratifying sound than when she slapped her knee and cackled at something silly. She laughed at things that weren’t meant to be funny, like TV dramas and the swollen orchestral soundtracks that accompanied them, or, better yet, at things Deming said, like when he nailed the way their neighbor Tommie always went, “Not-bad-not-bad-not-bad” when they passed him in the stairwell, an automatic response to a “Hello-how-are-you” that hadn’t yet been issued. Or the time she’d asked, flipping through TV stations, “*Dancing with the Stars* isn’t on?” and he had excavated Michael’s old paper mobile of the solar system and waltzed with it through the living room as she clapped. It was almost as good as getting cheered on by his friends.

When he had lived in Minjiang with his grandfather, Deming’s mother had explored New York by herself. There was a restlessness to her, an inability to be still or settled. She jiggled her legs, bounced her knees, cracked her knuckles, twirled her thumbs. She hated being cooped up in the apartment on a sunny day, paced the rooms from wall to wall to wall, a cigarette dangling from her mouth. “Who wants to go for a walk?” she would say. Her boyfriend Leon would tell her to relax, sit down. “Sit down? We’ve been sitting all day!” Deming would want to stay on the couch with Michael, but he couldn’t say no to her and they’d go out, no family but each other. He would have her to himself, an ambling walk in the park or along the river, making up stories about who lived in the apartments they saw

from the outside—a family named Smith, five kids, father dead, mother addicted to bagels, he speculated the day they went to the Upper East Side. “To bagels?” she said. “What flavor bagel?” “Everything bagels,” he said, which made her giggle harder, until they were both bent over on Madison Avenue, laughing so hard no sounds were coming out, and his stomach hurt but he couldn’t stop laughing, old white people giving them stink eye for stopping in the middle of the sidewalk. Deming and his mother loved everything bagels, the sheer balls of it, the New York audacity that a bagel could proclaim to be everything, even if it was only topped with sesame seeds and poppy seeds and salt.

A bus lumbered past, spraying slush. The WALK sign flashed on. “You know what I did today?” his mother said. “One lady, she had a callus the size of your nose on her heel. I had to scrape all that dead skin off. It took forever. And her tip was shit. You’ll never do that, if you’re careful.”

He dreaded this familiar refrain. His mother could curse, but the one time he’d let *motherfucker* bounce out in front of her, loving the way the syllables got meatbally in his mouth, she had slapped his arm and said he was better than that. Now he silently said the word to himself as he walked, one syllable per footstep.

“Did you think that when I was growing up, a small girl your age, I thought: hey, one day, I’m going to come all the way to New York so I can pick gao gao out of a stranger’s toe? That was not my plan.”

Always be prepared, she liked to say. Never rely on anyone else to give you things you could get yourself. She despised laziness, softness, people who were weak. She had few friends, but was true to the ones she had. She could hold a fierce grudge, would walk an extra three blocks to another grocery store because, two years ago, a cashier at the one around the corner had smirked at her lousy English. It was lousy, Deming agreed.

“Take Leon, for instance. He look okay to you?”

“Leon’s always okay.”

“His back’s screwed up. His shoulders are busted. Men don’t work in nail salons. You don’t finish school, you end up cutting meat like Leon, arthritis by the time you’re thirty-five.”

It seemed disloyal to talk like this about Yi Ba Leon, who was so strong he’d do one-arm push-ups for Deming and Michael and their friends, let them punch him in the gut for kicks, though Deming stopped short of

punching as hard as he could. “Do it again,” Leon would say. “You call that a punch? That’s a handshake. Even if Leon wasn’t his real father—on this topic, his mother was so tightlipped that all he knew about the man was that he’d never been around—he made Deming proud. If he could grow up to be like any man, he wanted to be like Leon, or the guy who played the saxophone in the subway station, surrounded by people as his fingers danced and his chest heaved and the tunnel filled with flashes of purples and oranges. Oh, to be loved like that!

Fordham Road was unusually quiet in the snow. Ice covered the sidewalk in front of an abandoned building, a reddish piece of gum clinging to it like a lonely pepperoni atop a frozen pizza. “This winter is never-ending,” Deming’s mother said, and they gripped each other’s arms for balance as they made their way across the sidewalk. “Don’t you want to get out of here, go somewhere warm?”

“It’s warm at home.” In their apartment, if they could just get there, the heat was blasting. Some days they even wore T-shirts inside.

His mother scowled. “I was the first girl in my village to go to the provincial capital. I made it all the way to New York. I was supposed to travel the world.”

“But then.”

“But then I had you. Then I met Leon. You’re my home now.” They started up the hill on University Avenue. “We’re moving.”

He stopped in a slush puddle. “What? Where?”

“Florida. I got a new job at a restaurant. It’s near this Disney World. I’ll take you there.” She grinned at him like she was expecting a grin back.

“Is Yi Ba Leon coming?”

She pulled him away from the puddle. “Of course.”

“What about Michael and Vivian?”

“They’ll join us later.”

“When?”

“The job starts soon. In a week or two.”

“A week? I have school.”

“Since when do you love school so much?”

“But I have friends.” Travis Bhopa had been calling Michael and Deming cockroaches for months, and the impulse to stick a foot out as he lumbered down the aisle was brilliant, spontaneous, the look on Travis’s face one of

disbelief, the sound of Travis's body going down an oozy plop. Michael and their friends had high-fived him. *Badass, Deming!* Detention had been worth it.

They stood in front of the bodega. "You're going to go to a good school. The new job is going to pay good money. We'll live in a quiet town."

Her voice was a trumpet, her words sharp triangles. Deming remembered the years without her, the silent house on 3 Alley with Yi Gong, and saw a street so quiet he could only hear himself blink. "I'm not going."

"I'm your mother. You have to go with me."

The bodega door slammed shut. Mrs. Johnson, who lived in their building, walked out with two plastic bags.

"You weren't with me when I was in China," he said.

"Yi Gong was with you then. I was working so I could save money to have you here. It's different now."

He removed his hand from hers. "Different how?"

"You'll love Florida. You'll have a big house and your own room."

"I don't want my own room. I want Michael there."

"You've moved before. It wasn't so hard, was it?"

The light had changed, but Mrs. Johnson remained on their side of the street, watching them. University Avenue wasn't Chinatown, where they had lived before moving in with Leon in the Bronx. There were no other Fuzhounese families on their block, and sometimes people looked at them like their language had come out of the drain.

Deming answered in English. "I'm not going. Leave me alone."

She raised her hand. He jolted back as she lunged forward. Then she hugged him, the snowy front of her jacket brushing against his cheek, his nose pressing into her chest. He could hear her heartbeat through the layers of clothing, thumping and determined, and before he could relax he forced himself to wriggle out of her arms and race up the block, backpack bumping against his spine. She clomped after him in her plastic boots, hooting as she slid across the sidewalk.

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