

"Shadow Cure"

A Mary Margaret Park Original

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"Shadow Cure"

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For "*Jessica*" & "*Samuel*"-- and for "*Sekh*", who inspired & taught me to believe again.

Acknowledgement

The following short-story is dedicated in memory of, “Pat Morita”, “Victor Wong”, & “Mako”, whose visions concerning how the world could be dissected & reunified through martial-arts, has inspired us all at one point or another, to become great-masters of ourselves, our lives, and all the choices we make to continue in the spirit of greatness, as we exist throughout the world, regardless of hardships, change, & overall obstacles in our universes.

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Part I

She needs a new heart; Xiu's coughing grew louder as the night progressed, harsh and rattling, like an old radiator. In the next room, her brother Lao felt lost in her failing health. He tossed and turned, burrowing farther underneath the covers, trying to block out her struggling breaths. He heard his Father Lei's footsteps outside the door, and relief washed over him, once his Father was with Xiu she'd be alright.

Their Father goes into her room to check on her; her lips are ashen. Alarmed, he rushes to his daughter and pulls her up into a sitting position, thumping her back to help loosen her clogged breathing. Her chest hitches and as her breathing settles down into a more normal rhythm, he lowers her carefully back on the bed, making sure she is propped up with enough pillows. His heart aches for his daughter and the suffering she is going through, his mind seethes with fury at the futility of innumerable calls to the insurance company for financing a new heart, an impossible feat for this modest family of four, for his precious girl. After seeing to his daughter, he decides to head toward Lao's room. He knocks twice before entering, "Lao, are you sleeping?"

Lao burrows deeper into his covers then looks to his Father, "No. I stay awake, making sure she takes another breath."

"You need to rest; she's peaceful now."

Lei's weary eyes wash over with relief, "She's lucky to have a big brother like you...now go to sleep."

Lao sighs, resigning to his Father's wishes, trying to push thoughts of his sister from his mind. Listening to her rattling cough is like having a death march in the next room. Finally her coughs fall silent, his mind settles and he's soon fast asleep.

The next morning, Lao joins his Mother at their breakfast table. His Father's already left for work and Xiu is in her room drawing. He's having a bowl of cereal to keep his stomach tame before school, "Lao, did you hear back from Mr. Jameson about the filing work?"
"He didn't hire me mom."

Terri narrows her eyes, looking to her son in disbelief, “Why not? You’re perfect for the job.”

“Well...he heard from his son Gary about the trouble I had with Mr. Miller at school....said he didn’t think I was suited, but Mom, I don’t think it has anything to do with skill....more like he doesn’t trust the troubled Asian kid, at least that’s what I think.”

“Your reputation precedes you.” Terri exhaled deeply, “I guess, doesn’t matter, you’ll find another job.”

Lao grabs his book-bag, giving his Mom a kiss on the cheek then heads out the door to catch the school-bus. As he hurries toward the familiar street-corner, he becomes care-free. When he arrives, his friend Johnny-O is there.

“Hey, Chino...what’s up?”

“.....oh, you know, just left your Mom’s house...”

Johnny-O cracks a smile, “Oh yeah...she didn’t mention it.”

The two break into laughter. Johnny grows serious, “How’s Xiu?”

Lao’s face creases with worry, “She had a bad night.”

“Well, but she’s okay though, right?” Johnny nods, “At least for now?”

“Not really.” Lao shakes his head, “but until she gets a new heart, I couldn’t say anyway.”

Johnny pats him on the back, “Hey man, I care about her too, so don’t feel bad that I asked.” He averts his eyes, self conscious; then looks back at Lao. “I just don’t get other chances to ask you about her.”

Lao nods, a faint smile playing over his lips. The bus lumbers up, extending a red stop sign and the boys hop aboard.

Lao sits in his chemistry class, doodling on his notebook. Mr. Walters frowns in his direction, “Lao, is the equation on the board oxidation or reduction?”

“.....Misdirection...?”

The room fills with laughter. Mr. Walters laughs along but quickly grows serious, “Lao, oxidation or reduction?”

Lao pauses thoughtfully, hoping to recall the answer from his jumbled thoughts, “Reduction.”

“Good job.”

Mr. Walters continues with the day’s lesson. The bell cuts sharply into the room, signaling class’s’ end. Mr. Walters calls to Lao,

"You're not paying attention; I know you know what we're doing, but where are you?"

"I dunno." he grins sheepishly.

"Well, I think you do."

"Things are just tough right now." Lao admits, chagrined.

"Hang in there." Mr. Walters concludes, acknowledging Lao's hesitation to discuss his problems, "Things are bound to get better. Until then, know that I'm here if you ever need someone to talk to, okay?" Lao nods gratefully and heads off to his last class for the day.

Johnny and Lao ride shotgun in the back of the bus, heading home, bouncing along as it pitches and yaws over the uneven roadway, "Hey, I've gotta tell you....I was talking to Hector, he said there's a fight tonight, we gotta go."

Lao looks to Johnny incredulous, "Who'd Hector piss off now?"

"Not Hector." Johnny shakes his head, "It's a pit-fight, at that old clothing factory in the barrio."

Lao shrugs his shoulders, "Why the sudden interest?"

Johnny smoothes a strand of blond hair from his forehead, "I dunno, just thought it'd be cool to place a bet, maybe win some money."

"You're crazy." Lao shakes his head, "Besides, the money's in the fighting and you're no fighter."

The bus pulls up to a stop and the boys sway to a stand.

"The fights at seven, are we on?"

Lao scrambles down the steps, hopping onto the sidewalk, "I'll see you at seven." he calls back over his shoulder.

Lao enters the house; the curtains are drawn, giving the room a cave-like feel. He hears Xiu fighting for air in the next room. He places his book-bag by the front door and cuts through the shadows towards her room. His Dad's voice floats out from the shadows. He hadn't noticed him sitting on the couch.

Lei sounded weary. Lao could hear reluctant tears straining at the edges of his Father's voice.

"The appeal has come back from our insurance company. We've lost. They won't pay for Xiu's new heart."

He places his hands on his Father's shoulders, "Then we'll find another way."

A tear slips down Lei's cheek as he sinks further into the couch, suddenly feeling very small, "Your Mama has contacted the church and they have assured us they'll help, but even that won't be enough to raise the money in time. I don't know what to do."

He gulps before resigning to his worst fears, "Oh God Lao, we've got to save her."

Lao sinks into the couch along with his father, "How's she doing....really?"

Lei cast his eyes down, "Not good. Her heart is failing. The doctor said he won't be able to increase her medicine much longer. The fluid filling her lungs happens because her heart isn't functioning properly. Eventually she'll drown. There's little else that they can do short of transplanting a new heart, and time is running out. For now, the best thing you can do is pray."

Lao tenses, balling his hands into fists, "No Dad, I'm not giving up, there's got to be a way to raise more money...there just has to."

As if in answer, Xiu's coughing grows more severe, then rattles to a wheezy stop, Lao runs into her room in time to see her gasping for breath.

Her lips had taken on a dusty purple shade with her eyes glazed in tears.

"Xiu, you okay?"

The tiny girl looked to her brother and her eyes transformed from weary to defiant as she raised herself up on her elbows, "I'm fine, just couldn't catch my breath for a minute. Hey, want to play checkers?"

Lao ruffles her shiny black hair, thinking of how fragile she looks. His heart stutters, attempting to dive into despair, but he stops the feeling short, "Sure kid, you're on."

They could only play one game of checkers because sitting up had become difficult for Xiu.

She captures the last piece triumphantly, "I'm so tired, gotta rest, will you play with me later?" she asks in a wheezy, tired voice.

Lao nods, reaching out to give her a hug. Xiu's tiny frame was all ribs and little else, "Love you. Sweet dreams." he says quietly. Her lashes had already fluttered closed as he eased his way from the room. He's overcome with his love for her, suddenly swept away by profound sadness.

Lao heads over to Johnny's house. They've set out for the fight over at the old clothing factory. There's a pleasant breeze blowing, but as they grow closer to their destination, the brownstones crowding the street stifle it into submission. Soon, the boys are covered in sweat. They walk along the street as only the young or unhurried do. The light dies from the sky; the streetlights pop on with a low unpleasant hum. The sidewalks are bathed in a yellow haze; halo's of bugs flutter around each lamppost. They've crossed over into the old industrial district.

Residences give way to old businesses and run-down factories, many of them boarded up, vouching for unpleasant emptiness. The further they travel...the more desolate and desperate the neighborhood becomes. The streets and sidewalks are increasingly dotted with debris; visual comings and goings of the drug dealers and prostitutes. Lao turns to Johnny, "I don't think this was such a good idea." "Don't worry. When I was a kid, I lived in a neighborhood just like this." Johnny says, attempting to seem more confident than he feels, "Besides, we're almost there."

Ahead, a smattering of cars lines the streets; Lao's first thought is that there must be a party nearby, but the old clothing factory is just one block up. He soon realizes that the cars belong to eager spectators.

The building's entrance is blocked by a burly black-man; his eyes narrow at the sight of the two boys, until Johnny mentions his friend Hector. He reluctantly lets them through.

They're surprised at how spacious it is inside. The interior is bathed in dim lighting with splashes of neon spiraling down onto the raging crowd. In the center of the factory floor lies the pit; simply a large open expanse with a line of chalk drawn around it.

The crowd is gearing up for the fight, so the boys have to shout in order to be heard. With all of the excitement, Lao finds a new spring in his step; he survey's the crowd for Hector. Johnny motions swiftly towards a makeshift bar in the corner, "Odelay...you made it, you guys know the routine?"

"I've heard but I only got twenty bucks...you still let me stay?" Johnny replies.

Hector puffs his chest out like a peacock, "Is it safe to say that you two have 50 between you?"

Johnny looks to Lao, "Yeah, we're good."

"Cool." Hector relaxes, "Just so you guys remember....next time, if you're here to bet, they start at 50, and it's best to get here early if you want a stake." He pops his neck then looks back at them, "So, who do you want to put your money on?"

Lao looks over at the two men preparing to fight. One of them is a short-squat Hispanic man, his upper body thick with muscle, the other is a tall Caucasian; his bulky upper body looks out of place on his thin legs.

Lao stands thoughtful, "Which one of them carries the odds tonight?"

Hector strokes his chin, "Esta Latino aya, he usually fights pretty good, but whitey is a monster in most of his matches, even when he loses, so it's rare but, tonight is kind of up in the air. I say it's a good night for a first bet, so take your pick."

Lao hands a wad of money to Johnny, "I hope we win."
"You pick."

Lao studies the two fighters, pulling his mind into another zone, "I'd bet on the Latino any day of the week."

The PA system screeches on; an old man wearing a bowler hat enters the pit, "Fighting in the green trunks, weighing in at two-hundred, ten pounds, the white fright, Sean O' Grady..."

Applause and boo's erupt as the announcers excitement builds.

"...and his opponent, wearing the white trunks, weighing in at one-hundred, seventy pounds, is this city's very own; change your face with my fist, Pedro Rodriguez."

The crowd swells with renewed cheers and the bout begins.

The white fighter comes out slow and off balance, his gait awkward. The Latino is a flurry of punches and power as he jabs and lands several kicks to Sean's kidneys. O' Grady staggers, then plows forward, slicing Pedro with a lightening quick kick in the guts. The crowd oh's and ahs as Rodriguez falters, gasping for air.

Fast & furious, he lands a solid upper cut upon Sean's jaw.

Johnny and Lao watch the fight, entranced by the raw action.

Blood pours from a cut on Sean's cheek, bathing his front in red; Rodriguez lands each punch that follows. Blood and sweat scatter into the air. Lao can feel a fine mist settling onto his skin. He cheers for Pedro with renewed vigor; Rodriguez lands another disabling

punch. O' Grady falls to his knees; Pedro grabs him, slamming him down onto the floor.

A gout of blood squirts from Sean's nose.

Johnny turns to Lao, taking note of his friends fascination, "He's gonna kill him."

Lao spikes his fist into the air, "Pedro, Pedro, Pedro."

The Latino hammers the white fright's head into the concrete once more and the crowd grows uncertain; a sickening blanket of expectation tethers the air.

O' Grady is no more than a slack-slab of meat; he's lost consciousness.

Pedro pulls up off of his opponent, raising his arms in a victory stance.

Lao goes wild shouting, "We won Johnny; we won." as he jumps up and down.

As the boys make their way over to the pay-out cages, Lao repeatedly slaps Johnny on the back. He collects a huge wad of cash. He waves it ceremoniously under his nose, "Ah...the smell of money," then pistons his arm into the air with a triumphant wave.

"Okay, chill already." Johnny nods, "it's time to go."

Lao looks over to the pit, "Just a minute." disappearing into the sea of people.

The announcer is in an animated conversation with several Mob looking gentlemen. They're all muscle and one of them has a gash that runs from his nose to his jaw; the scar is a fat and twisted mess. Lao waits patiently for a moment with him, finally taking advantage of a lull in the conversation.

"How would I get in on a fight?"

He assesses Lao for a moment, "Fights open to everybody, so when you're ready, go see the handler."

He points to a slab of a man over by the betting cages then goes back to his conversation. Lao asks the handler several questions then works his way back through the crowd towards Johnny. He returns wearing a huge smile. He slaps his friend on the back once more, "Let's go."

Lao can't contain his excitement, "I spoke with the announcer; he told me that the fights are open to anyone who is willing. I asked the handler what the purse runs and he said it varies, but usually between 5 and 10 thousand, with the big fights bringing upwards of 25 thousand. How 'bout that my friend?"

Taken aback Johnny says nothing.

The city's streets had taken on a hushed tone, and the buildings looming on either side made them feel closed in, like they'd entered some strange and sinister maze. Johnny tries telling Lao how creepy it is, but he's oblivious, chattering excitedly the whole journey home. Lao doesn't grow still until he drops Johnny home. As he heads back towards his house, his excitement drains.

By the time he opens the front door, he's draped in a blanket of melancholy quiet. He checks on Xiu. The moonlight falls over her unlined brow. She's sleeping peacefully. He leans down and places a kiss upon her forehead.

Part II

Lao puts on his running shoes and slips out of the house. It's a chilly morning. He runs three miles then cools down by walking the last mile home. He pops through the front door heading to the kitchen. His Mom looks up from her coffee, "What you doing up so early?" "Felt like running."

"You want me to make you something for breakfast?"

Terri has dark circles of exhaustion rimming her eyes. She'd spent most of the night tending to Xiu.

"Nah..." Lao says, "I'll just get some cereal, you sit down and relax Ma. How's Xiu?"

"She's hanging in there, still fighting."

Tears threaten to spill down her cheeks but she bites them back, changing the subject, "You found a job yet?"

"No Mom, but I got an idea, I'll let you know if it works out."

From the next room, Xiu coughs harsh and rapid, like a machine gun. Terri pulls herself up from the table, "You're a good son." then turns, heading to Xiu's room.

Lao heads out the door to catch the bus. He spies Johnny and hurries up to his friend, "I'm gonna fight, win the purse, and help pay for Xiu's new heart."

Lao's grinning ear to ear as he excitedly tells Johnny his plans.

Johnny looks at his friend incredulous, "You're kidding right? I mean, you're good and everything, but those fighters are monsters."

Lao shrugs his shoulders, "We saw the main event Johnny; I'd have to start out in the preliminary rounds, besides, I'm going to train. I spoke with the handler last night; he said I could start fighting next week, so I told him I was in."

Johnny's face folds, "A week isn't a lot of time."

The bus rolls to a stop. Lao flies down the steps, patting his friend on the back, "I'll be ready, besides, you're gonna help me, right?"

Johnny smiles, "Course I'll help...but you're still crazy to think you're Bruce Lee."

Lao trots off calling back over his shoulder, “Be at the gym at 8 sharp.”

When Lao arrives home, the house is quiet. The living room is draped in shadow; he pokes his head into the kitchen. There’s a half eaten sandwich on the counter, “Mom, you here...?”

The refrigerator cycles in a low hum; the floor creaks as he works his way to Xiu’s room.

He pushes the door open and peers in.

The bed is unmade; her Chester drawers are open; clothes are piled haphazardly on a nearby chair. He rushes back into the kitchen.

There’s a note on the table. His heart picks up to a dull thud.

“Took Xiu to St. Vincent’s hospital; -- Mom...”

He grabs a pair of shorts and a sweat shirt, running straight over to Johnny’s house.

“What’s wrong?” Johnny asks.

“Xiu’s at St. Vincent’s, I need a ride.”

Johnny grabs the car keys off of the hall table and the boy’s dash to the car.

When they arrive at St. Vincent’s, Lao finds his Mom in the Intensive care waiting room; her eyes are puffy and her cheeks are tear-streaked. She looks up at Lao, “Xiu stopped breathing.”

Fresh tears pour down her face. He places his arms around her, “Will she be okay?”

Terri shakes her head, “She’s stable. Dr. Owens wants to keep her a few days, try to get the fluid off of her lungs.”

Lao shifts uncomfortably, “Can I see her?”

“Room 9...” Terry nods, “But only for a few minutes.”

She motions towards the doors. Lao takes a deep breath before heading into the ICU. The hall is packed with medical equipment and a stainless steel gurney; the intercom whirs to life as the doors close behind Lao.

Inside the unit are rows of glass cubicles, each one sporting an array of cardiac and breathing monitors. Lao locates number 9; there’s a pretty nurse injecting medicine into the I-V. She smiles, recognizing him, “Hi Lao, Xiu is going to be just fine.”

His sister's form is lost in the big hospital bed; tubes snake down her throat and over to a breathing machine, the pneumatic hiss; a constant reminder of how sick she's been...

The bed is heaped with white covers. Xiu's shock of black hair is a stark contrast. Lao edges up to the bed and strokes his sister's hand; her tiny fingers become lost in his palm.

"Hey Xiu, how's my girl?"

She flutters her eye lashes, then falls back to sleep.

He sits by her side, a silent prayer on his lips, until his ten minutes are up; he goes back to the waiting room.

"How is she?" Johnny asks, rising from his chair.

"She's tough, she'll be okay," his face straining.

Lao pounds his fists into the chair, "I hate this, I hate seeing her suffer; this is bullshit."

Terri grabs him, pulling him into her arms.

"It'll be okay."

Lao pulls from her embrace, his anger riding just below the surface.

"Come on Johnny, we've got work to do."

Terri looks to Lao confused, "What work?"

"I'll tell you later, take care of Xiu Ma."

With the boys gone, the waiting room seemed larger. Terri's form was lost between the rows of chairs. She settled back into one of them, resigned, awaiting a miracle.

Lao spent day after day training for Monday's fight. He rose early to run before school then after he'd finished with his homework, he went to the gym to lift weights.

He keeps up an exhausting pace, making repeated trips to the hospital to check on his sister. She's slated to be released on Saturday.

Saturday rolls around before they know it.

Lao's family is cloaked in the expectation of Xiu's return. His Mom has rearranged her room and painted one wall purple, Xiu's favorite color; in the center, she's stenciled a huge flower, on each petal is a letter forming Xiu's name.

The room looks like a typical seven year olds, except for the area by the head of her bed, where an I-V and breathing machine stand.

Lei ushers Xiu into her room, "Oh look, I got flowers on my walls." her eyes grow wide, "...can I paint something too?"

"Sure honey." Terri smiles, "But you need to rest first."

Xiu settles into bed; Terri expertly attaches her oxygen mask before tucking her in for a nap.

The family collects in the living room; their happiness is guarded, shadowed by their concern for their little girl. Lao grabs his gym bag, "I'll be at the gym if you need me."

Lei narrows his eyes, "You've been spending an awful lot of time there, why so? You are trying out for sports at school?"

Lao smiles as he edges out the door.

Lei nods at his wife, "He is up to something Terri...you better not be holding back on anything."

Terri merely shrugs.

Lao meets with Johnny at the gym. It's strictly utilitarian, nothing fancy. There are weights of all types and sizes, large punching bags and a couple of boxing areas. Lao stretches then after warming up with a few kicks and punches, he turns to Johnny, "Hit me."

Lao hands his friend a pair of boxing gloves. Johnny steps back, staring down at the gloves, "Okay."

Johnny pulls his arm back, striking hard, dazing Lao for a moment. "You remember Linda? You arrogant, Kung-Fu hero wanna-be...smack-tard?"

Lao shakes it off then standing firm for a moment, "John...that was middle-school..."

"I know but, you said to hit you and I always wanted to hit you for that."

The boys spar until they are soaked in sweat. Lao smiles, "One more thing, before we call it quits." he steps back and points at his jaw, "Give me the best shot you got, don't hold back. Any other reason you've ever wanted to hit me?"

Johnny does an awkward dance then punches Lao on the jaw.

"You can do better than that, hell; your Mom could do better than that, come on."

Frustrated, Johnny throws his body into the punch, this time, landing solid upon his jaw.

Lao rubs his jaw, a red knot forming there, "That was much better."

"Come on, I gotta run a few laps then we'll go."

Johnny falls into place next to his friend.

They jog along before heading home for the evening.

It's Monday; Lao gets up two hours before school starts and runs three miles; after that, he works on his balance and kicking technique. When he's done, he hops in the shower then heads into the kitchen for breakfast. Terri's bent over the morning newspaper, clutching a cup of coffee; she raises her red rimmed eyes up over the paper, "Morning, want some breakfast?"

Lao pats his Mom on the shoulder, "Bad night?"

She sighs, smoothing her hair from her eyes, "No more than usual."

"I could use some bacon and eggs if that's okay."

Terri rises slowly from her chair then shuffles to the stove to turn on the burner. She places several pieces of bacon into a pan, "What are you up to Lao? All this running and boxing?"

Lao grows silent, "I promise, as soon as there's something to tell, I'll let you know." His face grows animated, "I'm gonna go say hi to Xiu, call me when breakfast is ready."

Too tired to push the subject any further, Terri shoos him out of the room.

When Lao pops into Xiu's room, she's propped up in bed reading; her brown eyes light up when he enters.

"Hey Lao.....watcha doin?"

Lao sits next to her, ruffling her hair, "Seeing you, how you feelin?"

She leans close, wrapping her tiny arms around his waist, "I dunno, okay I guess."

She smells of soap and green-apple shampoo; he leans down and places a kiss upon her head. She looks at him with pure adoration, "Hey, Mom said I could paint bugs on my wall if I feel like it, wanna help me when you get home?"

A pained expression passes over his face, "I'd like that, but I gotta be somewhere, can I take a rain-check?"

She frowns, "What's a rain-check?"

"It's sort of like an IOU." He chuckles, "...a promise to paint with you another day."

"Oh, I guess that's okay."

A cough erupts from deep in her chest, followed by several small gasping breathes, like a ripple in a pond, then her breathing quiets, “Lao, do you think there’s really a heaven?”

He fights to keep his voice from cracking, “Yes, I think so. I think that when we die, our spirits float free, all the way up to heaven.” Xiu nods, “I hope you’re right, I’m tired, think I’ll sleep for a little while.”

Lao kisses her on the cheek then heads to the kitchen.

The school day flies by. Lao is psyched about his upcoming fight, carrying an extra spring in his step. After his last class of the day, one of the kids he doesn’t like pushes into him as he scrambles to the bus. Lao looks at the punk then smiles, shaking his head, dismissing him.

“Why didn’t you punch him, tell him off?” Johnny asks.

“He’s not worth it.” Lao shrugs, “Besides, I got bigger fish to fry.”

Johnny’s face creases with worry, “You sure you wanna go through with it?”

Lao squares his shoulders, “Course, anything for my baby sister.”

Johnny and Lao head toward the bus.

“See you at the gym in a couple of hours.”

Lao stops by the house and grabs his stuff. He heads to the gym immediately. The place isn’t too busy, so he’s able to get on the punching bags right away. Tony, the owner’s son, sees him.

“Want me to spot you?”

“Sure, I could use the help; I’ve got a big fight tonight.”

He steadies the punching bag and motions for Lao to come on,

“What fight?”

Lao shuffles in a side to side dance, jabbing upward, “A pit-fight at the old clothing factory...”

“You’s fightin’ there?” Tony’s eyes widen, “You crazy..?”

Lao runs into the bag, trying to push it out of the way with his forward momentum. At the last minute, Tony steps aside and he’s able to plow through, “I gotta help pay for my sister’s new heart, so I’m fighting.”

Tony shakes his head, “Man, that’s harsh, you be sure to get away from those punches. One of those big guys lands solid on you and its lights out.”

Johnny's voice cuts across the gym, "Lao, you ready?"

"Thanks Tony...I know it's kind of crazy..."

Tony winks with an approving grin, "Well, it's noble too."

Lao and Johnny head downtown. The streets are clogged with commuters heading home for the day, the smell of exhaust sharp and unpleasant. The sun cuts further across the sky, ushering afternoon into evening; pulling shadows across the pavement like saltwater taffy. As they get closer to the factory, the streets become more desolate. Most of the buildings are boarded up and strewn with graffiti. **"East Side Crips"** – A spray-painted message declares.

A young girl struts by, her eyes folded in a hard stare, "Whatcha lookin at...?"

"What's her problem?" Johnny sighs.

Lao motions for him to hurry, "Who knows."

They walk along quietly. Lao's thoughtful and faraway. When they pass an old brownstone building, a black guy emerges from the shadows and weaves towards them. He clutches his shorts at the waist; in his other hand, he holds an old vinyl record. He staggers along, only letting go of his pants long enough to spin the record in the air. It wobbles then falls to the ground, "Shit, music be stopped..."

He bends down and picks up the record, his shorts exposing the crack of his ass.

"Come on Lao, let's get outta here."

They pick up their pace, leaving the glassy eyed man to his ramblings. When they've gone another block, the man disappears back into the shadows.

"That's one strange dude."

"You got that right."

Two blocks later, they arrive at the old factory. It is a couple hours before the main event so it isn't very crowded yet. They duck past the bouncer into the shadows, the neon lights distort the interior; Lao thinks of a fun house with clowns hiding razor sharp teeth behind their painted smiles. He shivers, pulling Johnny over to the handler. The handler's a huge white man with a shaved head. His arms are covered in tattoos. He turns to Lao, "You're back. Fight

starts in 30 minutes, better get ready,” he points towards the doors leading into the locker rooms.

“Who is he fighting?” Johnny asks.

The handler gives them an empty toothed smile, pointing to a huge olive skinned man across the room.

They hurry into the locker rooms. Lao puts on what he hopes will become his lucky blue boxing trunks, the ones he wore during his winning wrestling match last month. He does several stretches; Johnny gives him some last minute tips. The crowd noise starts to swell. Johnny sticks his head out of the locker room and surveys the pit. The crowd is much smaller than he expected, but a smattering of serious betters are lining up at the cages, taking their places at the edge of the pit. Johnny goes back to Lao, “It’s almost time; ready?”

He’s interrupted with the harsh call of the announcer calling for Lao and Frankie.

Lao gives Johnny a smile, “For Xiu.”

Johnny nods, “For Xiu.”

Lao steps into the ring.

The man in the bowler hat calls the fighters to the center, “You got three five minute rounds, with two one minute breaks in between, round ends at the sound of the bell. Fighters cannot be saved by the bell, understand me?”

They nod, breaking apart when the bells clang.

Lao dances around the huge Italian, sure and light on his feet, he twists and lands a kick into Frankie’s stomach. With a big rush of air, the Italian lunges forward, grasping Lao’s foot, pushing him backwards. Lao lands on the floor, like a ton of bricks.

The lights seem suddenly over bright, Lao shakes his head, pushing back from Frankie’s repeated kicks. Lao swivels, managing to get back to his feet, but Frankie catches him one last time with a hard kick to the stomach. Lao staggers back, trying to keep his distance from the relentless advances, then darts to the side, managing to land a solid punch on Frankie’s jaw.

By now, Lao's legs felt like jelly and Frankie lands another combination to his face and jaw. Lao staggers, a thin ribbon of blood oozing down his cheek.

The crowd noise swells, Lao is disoriented; he feels like a fish in a barrel. The bell rings and he sways over to Johnny.

"Stay away from him, just stay away."

The roar of the crowd is harsh and unsettling.

Lao nods, putting his mouth piece back into place. The bell sounds and the Italian smashes into Lao like a freight train.

He slides across the floor, the air above him a blur of kicks and punches.

Lao ducks and bounces back up, managing to spin to the right and land a kick to Frankie's side.

The Italian comes after him with renewed vigor, pummeling Lao in the head and chest. The lights blur, and then flash into spotty darkness. Lao tries to focus, but he's swept unconscious.

Lao awakens to the sound of cheering. Still flat on the floor, he can see the Italian dancing around the pit, his arms raised in a victory stance. Johnny helps him to his feet and the crowd cheers. He crosses the ring to congratulate his opponent. Lao shakes hands with Frankie; his hand disappearing into the huge man's clutch, Frankie nods, "You got a lotta guts kid, good fight."

Lao smiles then staggers back to the locker rooms. Johnny gets an ice pack; Lao's right eye is a swollen mass of blue and pink flesh. Lao turns to his friend smiling, "No pain no gain, right? Besides, we get 250 dollars for making it through the first round, next time I'll do better."

As they pack up their gear to head home, Lao coughs up bile then smiles.

"I liked Frankie."

A cool breeze is blowing and the hubbub of the city has quieted down to a low hum. They meander from streetlight to streetlight in no particular hurry.

"There's another fight on Friday, we'll have to work harder this time," Lao reaches up and feels the new contour of his face with his finger tips and winces.

Johnny stops dead in his tracks, “You serious? You’re gonna get yourself killed.”

Lao paces under a nearby lamppost, “Nah...I’ll be alright, you’ll see.” Johnny starts forward again, “We better hurry; my folks will be worried.”

Lao pushes forward, walking quickly, “You’re right, come on.” They hurry the rest of the way home.

When Lao steps through the front door, the living room is dark except for the light thrown by the TV set. Xiu’s harsh coughs come from the next room, a constant hacking followed by gasps for air. He can hear the low voice of his Mother tending to her. As he heads to the kitchen, his Father’s voice cuts through the shadows.

“What happened to you?”

“I got in a fight.”

Lei shakes his head, his eyes weary, “How many times have I told you that fists aren’t the answer? Will you ever learn?”

Lao approaches Lei, “Dad, you don’t understand, it wasn’t like that; it was a real fight.”

Lei’s face folds in confusion, “What are you talking about? You’re not making any sense.”

Lao motions for his Dad to sit on the couch, “A pit-fight at the old clothing factory, I won 250 dollars. I want to help Xiu.”

A pained expression passes over Lei’s face, “I think it’s noble that you’d sacrifice for Xiu, but I don’t want to lose one child in the name of saving another.” he asserts, “Your face is a swollen mess, next time it could be worse. Are you sure about this?”

“Yes Father.” Lao nods, “I’ve never been more certain about anything.”

Lei leans forward, staring directly into Lao’s eyes, “Your Mother won’t be happy about this. When were you planning to tell her?”

A faint smile creases the corners of his lips, “I’ll have to as soon as she sees me.”

Lei snaps on the lights, “Let me get a better look at you.”

Lao leans back, the skin around his right eye is stretched and swollen, and an angry red and purple bruise rests underneath.

“You’ll live, but Mom may not think so.”

A fresh round of coughing erupts from the other room, followed by the whirl of the breathing machine. Xiu’s coughing winds down then

grows quiet. When Terri steps into the living room, she gasps, "Oh my God, what happened?" She runs over to Lao, her eyes wide with fear.

"He's okay, calm down. He was in a boxing match, won some money for Xiu."

Terry shifts anxiously back and forth, "I don't want you fighting again. Look at your face, you could get killed. I forbid it."

Lei puts a calming hand on her shoulder, "He's committed to this, there's nothing we can do except be supportive."

Terri disappears into the kitchen. She returns with an ice pack, "Put this on your face."

Lao takes the ice and places it gratefully on his swollen face. Terri shakes her head, "I don't like this, but I suppose your Father's right?"

Lao rises up off of the couch, taking the ice with him, "I've got to get up early tomorrow, time for bed."

The next day dawns clear and bright; the sun's golden fingers whisper between buildings and along the sidewalk as Lao heads to the bus stop. He's the first one to arrive. He does a few stretches since he didn't have time after his run, then sits down on the curb. He pulls out a well worn book from his backpack and props it open, then proceeds to immerse himself in the poetry of Henry David Thoreau. The tap of loose gravel alerts him to Johnny's approach, he nods and smiles at his friend. Johnny squats next to him, "How you feelin?"

Lao smoothes a strand of hair behind his ear then runs his finger tips over his bruised eye. "Better, the swelling's already starting to go down."

Johnny reaches out as if to touch Lao's bruise, "That's quite a shiner," he says as Lao pulls back.

The low chug of a diesel engine interrupts as the bus lurches to the stop. Its doors open with a hiss. They scramble up the steps, moving to the back of the bus, "You ready for the chemistry test?"

Johnny looks worried, "Not really, I went to the fights instead of studying."

Lao slaps him playfully on the arm, "Touché; but it's for a good cause, right?"

The bus lurches to a halt, "See you in chemistry Obi-Wan."

By the time chemistry class rolls around, it's pretty much common knowledge that Lao was in a fight, he's been asked what happened so many times that he dreads answering. The students file into Mr. Wilson's class and take their seats. Mr. Wilson hands out the test, pausing at Lao's desk then continues. Lao glances across the room at Johnny, giving him a thumbs-up before sinking his teeth into the test. After class, Mr. Wilson motions Lao over to his desk, "I need to talk to you Lao, meet me by the front steps in ten minutes, okay?" Lao's suddenly worried about his grade, *what could Mr. Wilson want?* On the way out, he catches up with Johnny, "Go on home, Mr. Wilson needs to speak with me, it could be a while."

Johnny nods, heading towards the parking lot. When Lao steps out of the school doors, Mr. Wilson is standing at the top of the steps, "Listen, word is out about the fighting, I don't agree, but I understand. I know someone who might be able to help you, his name is Chin Ho. He operates a dojo in the industrial district, you should talk to him," he hands Lao a card, "Tell him Barry sent you, he'll know."

Lao smiles gratefully, "Thanks Mr. Wilson."

"Don't thank me yet, just go see Chin."

Lao hurries to the parking lot and hops on the bus.

When he gets home, Lao's surprised to see Xiu sitting in the living room. Her dress is covered with an old t-shirt; spotted with paint, "Oh goody...you're here just in time to help me paint." Her face creases, "You got a big boo-boo, what happened?"

Lao shrugs, "I hurt it at the gym, and it's not as bad as it looks."

Xiu motions for him to bend over, "I'll kiss it, make it all better."

A huge grin splits Lao's face. He sweeps her up in his arms and swings her around before setting her down. Xiu giggles, "You gonna help?"

Lao folds her tiny hand into his, "Of course, Can I paint a lady bug?"

Xiu pulls her brother into her room and points to the painting supplies, "I wanna paint the lady bug. You paint the caterpillar, okay?"

It's stuffy in the little room, so Lao throws the window open. A mellow breeze ruffles the curtains. Terri sticks her head in the doorway,

"Looks like you two don't need my help; I'm in the kitchen if you need me."

Xiu's back presses into the fresh paint, "Okay Mom."

Terri's eyes meet Lao's and she nods towards the mess. "Xiu, we're painting the walls, not stamping them with your dress."

"The artful wear paint...?" Lao shrugs.

Xiu steps back exclaiming, "Oops, sorry."

Terri laughs, "Lao, help her clean up when you're done please."

Terri leaves them to their work. The sun sinks, further pulling the shadows along with it; eventually, the room slips in to darkness.

Xiu's movements become weary and slow.

"You better rest, we can finish tomorrow."

"Just one more lady bug, pleeease...."

A cough rattles her chest and she pauses, then biting her lower lip, she raises the paint brush above her head for the final stroke. Satisfied, she turns to Lao, "Now we can stop."

Her chest hitches in and out. Dark circles have formed under her eyes. Lao motions for her to sit down while he cleans up the mess.

Her slim shoulders tremble as another bout of coughing possesses her tiny frame. Lao hugs her, being careful not to squeeze too hard,

"I gotta go to the gym, I'll get Mom."

Xiu smiles, "This is the best day of my life."

He kisses her on the cheek, "Me too," then leaves the room.

Lao grabs his gym clothes and hurries over to Johnny's house. When he arrives he's out of breath.

"Where's the fire?"

Lao shrugs, "Isn't one, but I got good news."

He tells Johnny about the exchange with Mr. Wilson, pulling Chin Ho's card from his pocket.

"We're headed downtown, I gotta see this guy."

"Just a minute..." Johnny ducks inside returning with his gym bag, "Okay, let's go."

Evening has robbed the last of the light from the sky and they walk along with the shadows dancing in the breeze. The streetlights power up, throwing their harsh glare on the pavement, and a low hum tethers the air. Near the industrial district, smack dab in the middle of a row of shops, is "Ho's Dojo". The boys open the doors to

the sound of tinkling and step inside. An old oriental man looks up when they enter, "Welcome."

Lao approaches the man and introduces himself. The little man bows, "Please to meet you."

He has a curious twinkle in his eyes.

"Barry Wilson sent me, said you could help me, I've got pit-fight on Friday and I need to work on my technique."

Chin nods, motioning for Lao to follow him. Johnny takes a seat, "I'll just wait here."

The old man disappears through a doorway. Lao follows him into a cramped room, its only contents a small black table and filing cabinets heaped with books. Chin motions for Lao to take a seat, "I'm Chin, would you like some tea?"

Lao nods, breathing deeply, the room smells of old things and incense. Chin brings the tea to the table and sits down facing Lao, "So tell me, what so important about fight?"

Lao's heart picks up, the adrenaline rushes through his veins and the words come spilling out, excitedly he tells Chin about Xiu and the prize money. Chin nods and pours the tea. As he pours, Lao's tea cup overflows. Lao pretends not to notice, glancing around the room once more. When he turns back, Chin is still pouring the tea and it's spilling everywhere, "That's enough, it's over flowing."

Chin promptly puts the pot down, a faint smile playing at the corners of his lips, "You are like tea just now, excitedly spilling into one cup, pouring more, more, more, afraid to notice you've had enough, even though it was clearly overflowing, thus creating a mess."

Lao pauses, "Will you teach me?"

"That was first lesson, be here tomorrow, 4 O' Clock sharp."

Afterwards, Lao and Johnny head to their regular gym.

Johnny turns to Lao, "Who are you fighting on Friday?"

Lao's face flushes, "Some Russian guy, names Sergy, he's new to the circuit."

"You should ask Tony; find out if he knows anything about the guy."

Lao places a flurry of punches on the bag, "Sergy is dead meat come Friday, but I'll ask."

He pulls away from the bag and motions to Tony. He raises his hand in greeting then cuts across the gym, "Hey guys, what's up?"

Resuming his punching, Lao casually asks Tony about Sergy. "You know anything about a pit-fighter named Sergy, a Russian guy?"

"Matter of fact I do." Tony nods, "He's one of Kosmonov's boys, Russian mafia; lower east side. I've seen him fight, he's slow and awkward, but his punches pack 1000 pounds, the only chance you got is to stay away from him."

"We'll see about that,"

"I'm telling you straight, stay away from him. I gotta go back to work, see ya around,"

Lao heads to the locker room. Johnny leans against a concrete column, his eyes thoughtful, "You should listen to him."

"Given up on me Johnny? Look, ain't no big bad Russian gonna scare me. I'll dance circles around him, knock his cock into his throat, then walk away with a cool couple a thousand smackaroo's."

Johnny shakes his head, "You're crazy, fighting's damaged your brain," he says laughing.

They finish the workout with a run and head home.

Part III

After school, Lao heads to Chin Ho's Dojo. Today, he is on his own as Johnny is busy helping his dad with chores. He strolls along the sidewalk enjoying the afternoon, not in any particular hurry. The sun is hot and bright, baking the concrete in a thousand sparkles, the smell of exhaust and oil hangs thick in the air. He passes a row of brick houses, their entrances surrounded by hulking porches with thick columns. A little black girl peeks over the rail of one and waves. Lao smiles, thinking of Xiu, he lifts his hand and salutes, the little girl's giggles tether the air, resonant and sweet. He holds his head a little higher, feeling fine and smiles. A couple of blocks from the dojo, he passes an old black woman clutching a bible. She points to him, "Are you saved?" she cackles.

Her dark eyes are cold and accusing; swaying to and fro she cries, "Praise the Lord, the Lord Jesus who died for our sins."

As he passes, she stares at him, "You lied boy, they all lied, um hm...ain't no help, bunch a lairs."

He hurries past, leaving her to rant and rave on the street corner. When he reaches Chin Ho's, he ducks inside, happy to be out of the heat. Chin bows low, "Time for lesson."

Lao bows in return, following him into the heart of the dojo.

The rest of the week flies by in a blur of school and training. Friday arrives in the blink of an eye. The day files crisp and clear, with nary a cloud in the sky. Good fortune Lao thinks, as he cools down from his run. Xiu joins him at the table for breakfast. She's pulled her silky black hair into a pony tail. She plops down across from Lao, "How ya doin' Lao?"

Lao smiles and studies his little sister closely, "You look rested today....you're okay, so I'm okay."

Xiu laughs, her tone sweet and carefree, then she grows serious, "I'll be even better when I get my new heart. Is it true that someone has to die for me to get a new one?"

Lao crinkles his brow, "I guess that's one way to look at it, but by donating their heart they are giving life, and that's a good thing."

Xiu thoughtfully stirs her cereal, now mostly soggy, sloshing it back and forth, "But I don't want anyone to die."

Lao furrows his brow, "I don't either. But that's the way it works."

She looks at him, the corners of her lips turned in a frown.

Lao gets up and gives her a hug, patting her on the back, "Don't worry Xiu, it'll be okay. I gotta go to school, but I'll see you later, okay?"

Xiu nods, still looking sad. He hates leaving her this way, but he doesn't want to miss the bus. He heads into the living room and grabs his backpack. Xiu's harsh coughs usher him out the door and into the morning sun.

After school, Lao hurries home for a quick break before heading out to the old factory for the fight. He wants to get there early. He rushes in through the front door and grabs his gym bag, his Mom calls from the next room, "That you Lao?"

He ducks into the kitchen. His Mom is cooking dinner. She looks at him, her eyes serious, "I wish you wouldn't do this."

He shuffles from foot to foot, "Aw Mom, but I gotta, besides, I'm planning to win this fight."

Terri shakes her head, "I know, I just don't want you to get hurt is all. Come give me a hug."

Lao folds her into his arms. She holds him a beat longer than usual before showing him out the door. She pats his arm with a slap, "That's for worrying your mother so."

Lao runs to pick up Johnny and they head down the street.

Johnny sweeps his hair from his eyes, looking directly at Lao, "You ready for this?"

Lao nods, "Yep, I'm gonna kick some butt," then takes several steps ahead, closing the subject.

They walk along quietly, the heat of the day carried away by a gentle breeze.

They pass several brick row houses, a young mother is yelling at her little boy, she looks frustrated and out of control. They slow as they pass her, and she grows suddenly silent. The residence start to thin, now peppered with vacant lots, evidence of a neighborhood long past its prime. Broken glass litters the walkway, it crunches under

the soles of their shoes as if to say ‘remember when’ -- ‘I too, was young once’. A Plymouth loaded with young black men glides by, rap music pouring out of its windows, the beat thuds into the concrete, and along the block, until they pass long out of sight.

The old clothing factory is less imposing in the day light; it has an abandoned feel, the non-descript bricks fading into the rest of the structures along the street. Lao and Johnny nod to the bouncer, then head straight back to the locker room to change clothes. Lao plans to spend the next hour in quiet meditation followed by a carefully planned set of stretches that Chin taught him. Chin has taught Lao that his biggest enemy is lack of focus, and so he will spend his time meditating to bring his mind under control, concentrating on the fight with complete focus. This will help him take the other fighters kicks and punches, or so he hopes.

As the hour of the fight approaches, Lao switches to stretches. Johnny steps out into the bar, the crowd has grown and people jostle and push for position. Sergy, the mighty Russian is standing by the bar, nonchalant, as if the fight is nothing more than a day’s work, a red satin robe covers his huge shoulders, embroidered on the back is “Bolshevik Bull”. The Russian spies Johnny and nods; evidently he’s done his homework and knows that Johnny is part of Lao’s team. Johnny ducks back into the locker room. Lao and Johnny clutch hands, saying a quick prayer and then in unison, “For Xiu...” The announcer winds to life, and Lao steps out into the pit to the sound of the crowd yelling and jeering.

The man in the bowler hat calls the men to the center of the pit, re-explaining the rules, turning with emphasis to Lao about how a fighter cannot be saved by the bell.

The bell rings.

Lao starts out hard and fast, moving adroitly around the ring. He lands a lightening quick kick in the Russians stomach, but the giant barely stutters. Lao’s mind is in a tunnel, his only concern being the man before him as he approaches and lands several punches on Ser-gov’s head and neck. The crowd oh’s and ahs.

“Lao, Lao, Lao...” a few onlookers chant.

The stocky "Bull" moves with a flat footed gait, he fakes to the right, and as Lao sways to the left he's caught off guard by a devastating punch in the jaw. Lao falters, his legs suddenly weak, willing himself to stand he sways then rights himself dodging the next punch. His mind starts to grow weary, the crowds chanting now intrusive. He fights to regain his composure and the bell sounds for rounds end. Lao heads gratefully to his corner, swishing and spiting to Johnny's yelling, "Focus, stay away from him, just focus."

Lao nods and heads back into the ring. His head is thrumming as he cautiously circles the Russian, finally pushing in; he lands an ineffectual jab, which Sergy counters with a rattling blow. It misses its mark, striking him instead on the right shoulder. The atomic power sends him skidding on his ass, and his arm screams with white hot pain. He pivots and springs back upright, the Russian's fists and legs a blur in the air. The bell rings once more; he is granted one final reprieve.

"Good job, focus, you can do this, for Xiu." Johnny yells.

Lao heads back into the ring, his mind a hot razor of concentration, fighting only for Xiu, for her heart, for her life. He dances expertly around the Russian, dodging the man's clumsy punches, then spins around, landing a super quick kick to the left side of Sergov's cheek. Sergy falters, his look of disbelief quickly drains into confusion and he slides down to the floor. The man in the bowler hat runs out into the pit, starting his count, "One", the Russian rises up on his elbows, "Two", he swims to his feet, "Three", he thumps back down onto the floor.

The crowd goes wild.

Lao raises his arms in victory, dancing round and round to the sound of the crowd screaming and chanting. Lao's chest swells with the excitement and the lust of winning his first fight. He approaches the Russian, "Good fight."

The Russian fixes him with a stare, searing with hatred; mouthing, "You're a dead man."

Johnny and Lao run to the back and grab their belongings, pausing only long enough to collect their winnings from the betting cages. The sound of the crowd takes over the air, and as they push their way to the exit, people repeatedly pat Lao on the back and congratulate him.

Lao doesn't say a word until they are a block from the old factory. He stops under a streetlight and clutching his money, he jumps into the air yelling, "Alllll..rrrrright...I did it, I can't believe I did it..." He jumps up and down several more times in exclamation then stows the three thousand dollars safely out of sight. The boys glide all the way home then part for the evening.

When Lao enters his living room its dark, Xiu's occasional coughing the only sound. A thin sliver of light shines from underneath the door to his parents' bedroom, he hurries down the hall and raps lightly on the door.

"Come in." his mom answers.

"Does Dad have all his clothes on?"

Lei chuckles, "It's okay Lao; we're decent."

Lao practically flings the door open, a huge smile on his face; he holds the fistful of money in the air as he exclaims, "I did it, I did it for Xiu."

Lei and Terri exchange knowing glances, "Congratulations." Lei appraises, but Terri remains quiet, and suddenly, that quietness engulfs the room.

Lao's eyes go from excited to uncertain, "What's wrong?"

Terri shakes her head, "Its Xiu. We've got the results of last week's blood tests. She's had another heart attack. The doctor says she can't take much more." Terri slumps onto the bed, her shoulders hunched and weary.

Lao looks unconvinced, "No way, she's been doing so much better the last few days, it can't be."

Lei takes his son by the shoulder, "It is. If we're lucky, her strength will hold, she's an amazing child."

Lao rushes over and hugs his Mom, then his Dad. He feels suddenly bone weary. "I'm exhausted, gotta get ready for bed." and with that, he heads to the shower.

When he's done, his excitement has faded into total exhaustion. He slides under the covers and falls immediately asleep, but his sleep is uneasy and his dreams are crowded with despair.

In his dream Lao's fighting in a huge arena; the crowd screams and yells in a low rumble. He looks directly beyond the pit. Xiu is sitting

in the first row, face flushed with excitement, she raises a tiny hand to him and waves. The distraction for a crucial second lands him a rocket powered punch, and he crumbles to the floor. He struggles to a stand, taking several swaying steps towards his opponent. The bell signals the end of the round and he heads straight for his corner. When he glances at the first row his sister is gone, replaced by the grinning scythe of a Ninja dressed in black. The bell rings and he's enveloped in the crowds chanting.

"Lao Lao Lao..." they yell.

He is filled with excitement and warmth. He turns, the chair Xiu was sitting in is still empty, and the only evidence of her presence is her favorite stuffed animal "Berry". He dances around the ring, surveying the audience for Xiu. The fight's almost over; he can taste the 25,000 dollars and he thinks she's got to be okay, followed by the grandiose idea that only he can save her. He ducks away from his opponent's meaty fist, pulling his attention once more to the area around Xiu's seat. A figure dressed in black darts from the shadows, he's got Xiu slung over his shoulder and she's screaming, but her voice is lost among the chanting. He's alarmed, but he has to kick this guy's ass and win the money. His opponent grabs Lao by the shoulder and wheels him around. A second later, a huge fist crashes into his face and he knows no more. He's falling, falling down, into the darkness. The Ninja flees before him; his Sister's screaming a fading echo as their distance grows apart.

Lao awakens with a start, heart hammering in his chest. In the next room, Xiu's coughs have become grating and harsh, each one tearing out of her chest, followed by gasps for air. He slides from beneath the covers and steadies himself; the room seems suddenly unfamiliar, its contents eaten up by the inky darkness. He tiptoe's down the hall and peaks into Xiu's room. He can see the giant flower and lady bug she painted in the faint glow of her nightlight. His Mother obscures his view and he calls out, whispering, "Mom, she okay?"

Terri turns, her eyes rimmed and weary, "I don't know. I've increased her oxygen, so now all I can do is wait."

Lao ducks out into the hallway and back to his room. For a long while, he listens to Xiu's coughing, praying for her to settle and

breathe easy. Finally, her coughs come less often and he's lulled into an uneasy sleep.

It's Saturday morning; Lao wakes again before daybreak. He grabs his gym bag and tiptoes out of the house; he's heading downtown to see Chin Ho. When he steps out the door, the sky is still draped in black, the streets are empty. A lone bird sings, breaking the stillness, her song is strangely beautiful, out of place. He feels sad and alone, the weight of the world pressing on his shoulders. Lao leaves his neighborhood behind, heading further into the city. The neighborhoods here are much less forgiving, and as the first rays of sunlight break over the horizon, the night trade along the street closes down. A street walker passes him, her dress stretched tightly across her breasts, the transparent fabric leaving little to the imagination. She walks along on impossibly high heels, "Hey Suga, wanna party?" She offers him a smile, exposing a row of gold. He dismisses her, and her smile turns into a leer. She calls out over her shoulder, "You sho' missin out," she says, snapping her hips back and forth in a suggestive grind.

The sun climbs higher in the sky, sparkling off of the storefronts and the occasional passing car, and Lao's heart feels lighter. He arrives at the Dojo. Chin calls out from the next room and Lao joins him. Chin bows low, "Good Morning Lao, tea?"

Lao shrugs his shoulders, "Sure, but I can get it."

Chin grabs a delicate tray, "I do it, special brew, you sit."

He meticulously lines up the tea pot, cups, and a steeper, his movements careful, as he goes about the ritual. Chin watches Lao; the boy seems happy and carefree this morning. He serves the tea and sits across from Lao, "You won fight?"

Lao grins then tells Chin about the fight, all the while excited. He can hardly contain himself, but then he thinks of Xiu, and sadness captures his face.

Chin's eyes narrow with concern, "You not so happy."

Lao looks down at the table, biting back tears, "Xiu is running out of time, she needs the heart now, not in six months."

Chin nods, "Many complain and do nothing, you not like that."

Lao shakes his head, "I'm racing against time, and I don't know if it's possible to win."

Chin nods, "At least you run race, yes?"

They sit in silence and sip the tea. Chin grows more serious, "When you first came, I did not want to help. Many boys want to be tough, fight for wrong reasons, race against society or themselves. You fight for right reasons, for the greater good of your sister, you have honor. Don't lose sight of that."

Lao smiles, "Will you teach me the new kick combination today?"

Chin rises from his seat, "No, today I teach you skill of tolerance, by hitting you with bamboo stick really hard, come on."

"Is that necessary?"

"You still only won fight mostly by luck more than skill or ability to increase stamina. I hit you with bamboo to fix this so that in your next fights, you can have stamina all the while you are being hit."

Chin hums with a jolliness that seems unbalanced to Lao.

"Come now Lao, we make you real tough cookie as the song say."

Lao winces before submitting. They head into the other room and start the day's lesson.

The following Monday, Lao joins Johnny at the bus stop as usual.

Johnny pats his friend on the back, "Hey Champ, how's Xiu?"

Lao fakes a couple of punches, "She was okay when I left."

Johnny nods, "Next fight's on Wednesday, you gonna be ready?"

The low thrum of the diesel engine announces the bus's arrival. Lao grabs his book bag, "Hope so, I'll be at your house at 6."

The boys hop on the bus.

When they get to school, news of Lao's victory has spread like wild-fire and congratulations pour in as Lao weaves his way to class. By the end of the school day, Lao feels invincible, all of the praise has gone to his head, and he walks with the air of a man who believes he has no limitations.

After school, Lao gets home and heads straight for the kitchen, he's famished and he can hear the cabinets opening and closing as his Mother prepares dinner.

"Hey Mom....." he interrupts, heading to the refrigerator, "What's for din-din?"

Terri stirs several boiling pots on the stovetop, "Spaghetti, but I'm out of noodles. Can you keep an eye on Xiu while I run to the store?"

"Sure Mom, how's she doing?"

Terri smiles, "She had a bad morning. I checked on her a few minutes ago, she's sleeping. I'll turn the stove top off while I'm

gone.” Terri removes her apron and grabs the car keys off of the counter, calling out as she moves to the door, “Be back in a jiffy.” Lao pours a glass of milk, grabs a handful of cookies, and heads into the living room to watch TV. He stops to check on Xiu, she’s fast asleep, her tiny face peaceful and sweet. He burrows into the couch, propping his feet on the coffee table. A few minutes pass and coughing erupts from Xiu’s room, he waits for her to settle, but the coughing becomes more urgent. He hurries into her room, she’s struggling to sit up, her face set in concentration as she tries to catch her breath, “Hi Lao, Gotta....”

She’s interrupted by another coughing spasm, her chest heaves in and out, and her eyes have grown wide with alarm. Lao grabs the breathing machine and places the mask over her face; she takes in a hitching breath, trying to speak through the mask, “I’m okay.” Another round of coughing follows and her face turns ashen. Lao runs into the other room to call the ambulance, when he returns, she’s slumped back on the bed unconscious. Her lips have turned a dusty shade of blue. He grabs her tiny wrist and checks for a pulse. Her heart is beating faintly, galloping along at what seems like a thousand miles a minute.

“Xiu, Xiu, can you hear me, breath, you gotta breath.”

The gay flowers and ladybugs in the room seem suddenly futile, ominous. Razor sharp panic seizes his guts; he can hear the faint wail of the ambulance. He wills it to hurry. Xiu’s face goes from ashen to blue. He grabs her sweet face and stretches her head back to open her airway and begins mouth to mouth resuscitation.

The paramedics arrive, hurrying in through the front door.

“In here, she’s not breathing.”

The men rush into the room, and to the fragile girl’s side. One of them takes over for Lao, as the other speaks urgently on a handset to the hospital. Lao watches, helpless. Xiu looks so fragile, so tiny, swallowed up by the hubbub of the men who are trying to save her. Lao hears one of the men say, “Administering Lidocaine.”

The other paramedic reads out a steady stream of her vital signs, “heart rate, 165, bp 150/60 and falling.”

The frantic pace around Xiu increases, Lao tries to approach, asking if she’ll be alright, but they wave him away.

"Stable for transport," cackles out of a walkie-talkie, and the paramedics sweep the little girl onto a back board with uncanny speed and efficiency. They hurry out of the house, Lao follows. He jumps into the back of the ambulance, and when the doors are shut he feels dread, hopelessness, helplessness. He grabs Xiu's hand and squeezes it but she makes no acknowledgement, and he's pushed out of the way once more by the kind paramedic, "There will be time for that later, now let me do my job."

When they arrive at the emergency room, Xiu is whisked away, and Lao begins the long wait to hear what Xiu's fate will be. Shortly, his Mother rushes in, "What happened, oh God, my baby."

Lao recaps the events and then his Mom rushes to the nurses' station to inquire after Xiu. Soon the doctor emerges, his eyes grave he says, "That's one sick little girl, but she's tough, I'm admitting her to ICU where they can keep a closer eye on her. She went into total heart failure, but we've been able to restore some of the function, now all we can do is wait."

Lao and his Mom move to the familiar ICU waiting room and take turns looking in on Xiu. The room is institutional and uninviting despite the staffs' efforts to perk it up with a bulletin board full of artwork from the children's wing.

Xiu should be drawing and playing, not lying in there...

Lao stomps his feet, angry, then continues to pace about the room. When his Mother returns, she has good news. They've stabilized Xiu. Lao sighs with relief, but it is only marginal; she needs a new heart more than ever.

"Mom, I told Johnny I'd meet him, can I go, or should I stay here?" Terri offers a weary smile, "Go ahead Lao, I'll keep an eye on Xiu."

Lao stops by the house before meeting Johnny. It's too quiet. He passes Xiu's room, the gay walls and stuffed animals cry out for the little girl who loves them so, and a new wave of sadness settles over him. He shakes it off, now more determined than ever to get ready for Wednesday's fight. He rushes over to Johnny's house and the two head for the gym.

They walk slowly, Johnny glances at Lao, and he looks shell shocked, "Maybe we should skip the gym, you okay?"

Lao gives glances at Johnny sideways, "I'm fine you idiot, it's my sister that isn't."

Johnny steps backward, stopping in the middle of the sidewalk, "Chill damn it, I just thought you could use a break, is all."

Lao shakes his head, "I'm sorry Johnny; you're right...how bout we stop at Izzy's? I could use some shaved ice before my work out."

Johnny nods and they continue down the street. They pass a bald man riding a three wheeled bike; he's wearing silver glasses with a large multi lens jeweler's monocle perched to the side. His t-shirt reads, "Jesus died for our sins, deal with it..."

As he passes, Johnny feels like he's stepped inside the movie "Mad Max: Beyond Thunder Dome." The man continues down the walk.

Johnny shakes his head, "That was weird."

Lao shrugs, then starts laughing; wiping the tears from his eyes, "Uh huh,"

He then breaks out into a fresh gale of laughter. Johnny joins him and suddenly the day feels as it should, carefree and good.

Up ahead is Izzy's Ice Shack.

The boys get green apple flavored ice and continue towards the gym. Lao grows serious, "I don't know what I'll do if I lose her."
"I know."

They meander along quietly until they get to the gym. Lao looks at his friend, his face determined, "Time to go to work."

Johnny nods and they step inside.

Lao practices his kicks and punches to the point of exhaustion, tired and covered in sweat he calls to Johnny, "Time to run, but first I need to talk to Tony, ask him about the Irish bloke I'm fighting on Wednesday."

"Hey Tony; you know anything about an Irish fighter named Fitzgibbons?"

Tony shakes his head, "Never heard of him, sorry kid."

Lao and Johnny start running, "We're on our own with this one, he never heard of the guy."

Lao calls the hospital just as they are leaving the gym. Xiu's condition has been upgraded from critical to serious. His Mom says she'll be at the house when he gets home. Johnny and Lao weave their way down the sidewalk. The last bit of light settles on the horizon in a brilliant red and purple display, and then fades into darkness. The

street lights come on, bathing the street in a sickly glow. The boys work down the block, their figures sashaying in and out of the puddles of light. A late model Cadillac cruises slowly down the street then pulls to the curb; the rap music pouring from its windows vibrates the concrete. Thoughts of Xiu crowd into Lao's mind; he pushes them away, concentrating on the hubbub of the neighborhood instead.

The streets are still busy as the last of the stragglers work their way through rush hour traffic; they jostle for position as they head towards destinations unknown. Lao has grown more confident and the memory of his classmates congratulating him bolsters his ego. He pauses, "You know Johnny, when I first started out with this, I didn't really think I'd have a chance, but I figured money is money, for Xiu, ya know?"

Johnny nods, "I know."

Lao continues, "Thing is, I've got more than just a chance to pay for Xiu's heart, it's also a chance to shine."

Johnny nods and smoothes a strand of hair from his face, "There are lots of ways to shine, grades for instance."

Lao looks incredulous, "Maybe, but nobody cares about that, you know it and I know it."

Pretty soon, they're close to home. The neighborhood is subdued and quiet; a fat yellow moon shines overhead. Lao drops Johnny by his house then heads home for the evening.

The week is busy with Chin Ho's lessons and school. Wednesday arrives, bringing the good news that Xiu is being released from the hospital. Lao heads out of the house for his morning run, energized and excited. He does three miles in record time. He takes a shower then heads to the kitchen for breakfast. His Mom looks more rested than usual, she smiles when he enters, "Morning."

Lao hugs her, "You should let me come to the hospital with you to pick up Xiu."

"No Lao, you have school."

He plops down at the table, "Ah Mom, come on...I want to be here to welcome her home."

Terri places eggs and toast in front of Lao, "Can't fool me kiddo, I know you'd like to be here, but you can welcome her just the same after school."

Lei joins them at the table, "She's right."

His Father has been away more lately, putting in extra hours at the dry cleaners in order to save for Xiu's medical bills. He looks less weary this morning; his joy that Xiu will be home lightens the tired lines around his eyes. Terri serves breakfast then sits down to eat. After Lei is finished, he pushes his plate away and leans forward, looking Lao straight in the eyes, "Lao, I know you're fighting tonight. Good Luck and be careful. Your Mother and I couldn't bear it if something happened to you. It's bad enough worrying about Xiu, understand?"

Lao feels the weight his Father must be carrying on his shoulders and grows solemn. He nods his brown eyes steady, "I know Dad, I'll be careful. The purse is 10 thousand dollars. I'll win it for Xiu."

Lei shakes his head, "Don't disrespect us with talk of money; it's for Xiu's honor, not your personal gain."

Lao grows quiet and looks down at the table.

Terri smiles and ruffles Lao's hair, "Just be careful. We don't want you to get carried away with the fighting."

Lao pushes back from the table, "I won't Mom. Time for school, see ya later."

Lei looks to Terri as Lao leaves for school, "I don't condone any of it for any reason you may be thinking; whether now or when I didn't react the first time. Xiu's troubles are very serious; Lao's determination is a product of all our ailing. This isn't the movies Terri. Lao is fighting something greater than what he believes he's accomplishing. I worry but I recognize the difference between what is happening right now and what can happen tomorrow. It is more like what will happen tomorrow for all of us, the inevitable. Maybe Lao can find comfort in all of this somehow. None of us can tell each other what will happen either way."

Terri slings her coffee from the table, "Then I hope he wins...so it can be over....." a few moments pass and she emits a small laugh, "I don't want to clean the coffee up."

Lei smiles at the corner of his lips, "It's fine, I'll get it. Better the coffee than myself or Lao."

She grabs his hand, "I'm sorry...I just love her so much."

They hold hands and say nothing, easing their tensions.

Lao rushes to the bus stop, the morning air is fresh and clean. A mocking bird sings nearby, and the morning sun rises in the sky, bending warm fingers of light around the trees and houses as Lao and Johnny wait for the bus. A lawnmower whirs to life in the distance; soon, the air is filled with the smell of freshly cut grass. Even sooner, the smell of fresh grass is overpowered by not so fresh diesel fumes as the lumbering bus pulls to the curb. The boys hop on, working their way to the back of the bus, returning several high fives as they go.

As the day wears on, Lao has more spring in his step.

What a day, Sissy comes home and I get to fight, for Xiu...

At the end of the day, Mr. Wilson stops him before he can head into the hall. "Lao, I heard you're fighting later, just wanted to wish you luck."

Lao nods and as he walks away, Mr. Wilson calls out, "How's Xiu? I heard she was in the hospital."

Lao continues walking, calling back over his shoulder, "Fine Mr. Wilson, thanks for asking."

He tosses him a final wave and heads out into the fine afternoon sun. He can't wait to get home to see Xiu.

When he gets home, the house is a flurry of activity. His Mom is making Xiu's favorite dish and trying to clean house at the same time. She's got half the living room torn apart. Somewhere along the way she decided to rearrange the furniture; the couch and a couple of chairs have changed positions. A large banner stretched above the fireplace says, "Welcome Home Xiu."

Lao rushes to Xiu's room. She's sitting at her craft table drawing a picture, she's delighted to see him, "Oh Lao, I been waitin' for you." Her brown eyes are clear and bright. She gestures for him to sit down, then pops up out of her chair, and catches him in a hug. He laughs and twirls her around before setting her back down, "I'm spinning." she giggles.

"No you aren't, not anymore."

She looks serious, "No really, feels like it."

He laughs, "You mean you're dizzy, not spinning."

She crinkles her eyebrows, "What?"

"Never mind Xiu, whatcha drawing?"

Xiu scoots her chair closer to Lao's. They sit shoulder to shoulder, "I'm drawin' the hospital story, see?" She points to a picture featuring a little girl laying in bed, a doctor holding a stethoscope stands nearby. She's drawn the stethoscope extra large.

Lao studies the picture, "I like it but, why is the Stethoscope so big? And the little girl so small...?"

Xiu shrugs, "I dunno, all that stuff seems big is all. People are always bugging you, taking your blood pressure, looking in your ears and up your nose. I don't like it there."

Lao nods, "Can I draw too?"

Xiu giggles, "Draw a pit-fight."

Lao startles, his face pulling into a frown, "I didn't think you knew about that."

Xiu rolls her eyes, "I may be little, but I'm not stupid, I hear things."

Lao smiles, "Okay, you're on, I'll draw a fight."

When he's finished, his picture shows a black haired Lao fighting against a white man with a large shamrock on his chest. Xiu crinkles her nose, "That man has a clover, how come you don't got one?"

"Cause, he's Irish, I'm not."

"Oh, he's a giant leprechaun?"

Lao chuckles, then turns to leave, ".....its leprechaun; see you at dinner, welcome home."

He leaves her sitting in her room, surrounded by painted flowers and stuffed animals. She's smiling. The world seems right he thinks as he gets ready for dinner.

After dinner, Lao heads to Johnny's house. Johnny's Mom answers the door, "Hey Lao, just a minute. Oh, Johnny tells me you're fighting tonight. Good Luck."

Lao nods his thanks smiling. Ms. Ortega is actually quite beautiful; Lao can never get over the fact that she's Johnny's mother. He sits on the front steps until Johnny comes bounding down two at a time. "You're going to kill yourself."

Johnny offers Lao his hand, pulling him up, "No I'm not, let's go."

The boys head downtown for the big event. The old factory is crowded, there's already a preliminary fight going on in the pit. Lao and Johnny duck into the locker room, Lao is up next.

Lao dresses, sits cross-legged on the floor, meditating to clear his mind. The handler ducks into the room, his voice gruff. "You ready?"

Lao nods but continues to focus. The sound of the crowd swells and the announcer calls the fight. Lao claps hands with Johnny, "For Xiu..." and Johnny echoes, "For Xiu....."

Lao makes his way through the sea of people, they part before him chanting and screaming. The other fighter is already at the edge of the pit, he's tall and lanky, but his upper body is tight with muscle. Lao steps into the pit and the man in the bowler hat goes over the rules. The fighters break and the fight begins.

The Irishman comes out aggressive and strong, crowding Lao with punch after punch. He ducks and whirls, managing to land a hard uppercut to Fitzgibbon's chin. Fitzzy's eyes narrow and he charges Lao, pushing him to the pits edge, then landing punch after punch on Lao's cheek and jaw. Stunned, Lao sways, trying to keep away from another flurry of punches; he regains his composure and cuts left, simultaneously landing several punches to the Irish man's stomach. The fighter's circle and pound, circle and pound, both of them worse for wear when the bell rings.

Johnny wipes the blood from Lao's face and applies pressure to a cut, his left cheek is bleeding profusely, "You better slow down, give the guy some room; he's a real brawler."

Lao nods, bouncing back on his feet. He manages to stay away from Fitzgibbon's worst hits, but he doesn't get any effective kicks or punches in either, so he changes his strategy. He pushes into Fitzzy's space, hoping to put the fighter on the defensive. Lao lands two stunning kicks to Irish man's chest, followed by a machine gun rapid volley of punches.

The crowd goes wild, the shouts and bright lights suddenly taking over the ring.

Lao cuts in, shooting a kick to Fitzzy's midsection, surprised when his opponent catches his leg and pushes him backwards onto the mat. The air above Lao is a blur of kicks and punches; his body a stinging field of pain as the Irish man unmercifully hits him again and again. Black spots fade in and out of Lao's vision as he tries to scoot away from his pursuer. He finally manages to stand and the bell rings, saving him for the next round. Lao staggers to the corner.

“He’s killin you, stay away from him.”

Lao nods, but his eyes are set with steely determination as he thinks of Xiu. The round begins and Lao throws himself at his opponent. Fitzgibbon’s lands a rocket powered punch to Lao’s face, but the boy keeps coming, further enraged. Lao pummels Fitzy with a series of kicks, again and again, thinking only of space and time, he is the victor, defeating the Ninja from his dream. The Irish lad is stunned and falls to the mat. Lao descends repeatedly kicking his opponent, until the man in the bowler hat pulls him away. The shouts and chants swell, and Lao feels like he’s in a cube of screaming light. He raises his hands in victory, marching around the ring. Something warm gushes down his front, he reaches to wipe it away, and his hand comes away bloody. He staggers back to the corner and Johnny helps him into the locker room. Lao looks like he’s been in a meat grinder. His face is a bloody mass of cuts and bumps. He sighs, smiling through bloody lips, “I won...I did it.”

Johnny looks worried, “Let me have the ring boss take a look at you, make sure you’re okay, you don’t look so good.”

Johnny leaves and returns almost immediately with a short squat man. The man nods at Lao, “Let me take a look.”

Lao nods and the man carefully examines Lao’s cuts, “You got several here needing stitches, you get some butterflies or super glue; you’ll be fine.” He holds up two fingers, “How many do you see?” Lao blinks, “Two.”

“I wouldn’t sleep for a bit, make sure you don’t have a concussion, and get some ice for the swelling.”

“Thank you.”

The ring boss shrugs, “No problem,” then scurries back to the action.

Exhausted, Lao struggles to a stand, and he and Johnny edge their way through the crowd to the betting cages. A blond woman, chewing the world’s largest wad of gum hands Lao his winnings, managing to say congratulations between chews. The neon lighting seems suddenly imposing, the thick layer of smoke in the room making it difficult to breath. Lao and Johnny hurry outside.

Lao takes a deep breath of the fresh air, through hurting lips he exults, “We did it.”

The boys walk home in silence. Lao feels used up and tired, he just wants to go home and sleep. When he gets home, the house is quiet and dark. His sister is sleeping and he can hear the low murmur of his parents talking out on the back porch. He hops in the shower, throws on a t-shirt and shorts, inhaling the clean just washed smell and heads outside to tell his parents the good news. When he pokes his head out the door his Mother gasps, "Oh God, Lao, what have you done?"

She rushes to him, smooths his hair back and examines his cuts and bruises. He's got a large cut underneath one eye, and the other is swelled nearly shut.

"Lao, you've got to stop this nonsense, no more fighting."

Lao pulls away, "Mom, I won, I got 10,000 dollars for Xiu."

Lei chimes in, "Lao, you look like someone's taken a baseball bat to you."

Lao drops his eyes and remains quiet, the drone of his parent's objections fades into the background; he listens to the whisper of the wind in the leaves, soaking it up, relaxing and peaceful.

"Do you hear me Lao?" Lei practically shouts.

Lao startles when his Dad slaps at his swollen face, "Like pain, do you?"

Lao's brow grows thunderous, "Why'd you do that for?" he stomps back into the house without hearing his Father's answer. He heads straight into his parents room and tosses the money onto their bed before heading to his room.

Part VI

Lao's alarm clock goes off; he groans and swats at it, hits the snooze, and burrows further under the covers. A quarter after 7, his Mother comes in, "Lao, you better hurry, or you'll be late."

He pulls up out of bed, runs his fingertips over his swollen face, wincing at the needles of pain there. He eases on his t-shirt; it hurts to raise his left hand over his head. Once he's dressed, he grabs a handful of ibuprofen from the medicine cabinet, drinking it down with a glass of water. He grabs a Pop-Tart for breakfast. His mom looks on disapprovingly, "That all?"

He heads towards the door, "No time." then hurries down the block.

The sun cuts up into the cloudless sky, and a light breeze ruffles his hair. He smiles, noticing that it hurts to do so, and then laughs quietly to himself. When he rounds the corner, Johnny is already outside waiting. Johnny's eyes widen, "Wow, you look like shit."

Lao fakes a punch towards him, "I know, pretty cool huh?"

Johnny crinkles his brows, "Yeah, if you owed Al Capone money and lived to tell about it maybe, otherwise, what's cool about it?"

Lao chuckles, "Ouch, it hurts to do that too."

"What hurts?"

"Everything," he starts laughing again.

Johnny joins him, then grows serious, "When you fighting next?"

"I dunno, soon. Hey bus is coming, come on."

The boys bound up the steps and move to the back of the bus. They chatter and joke about mundane things as the bus pitches and bounces along the pavement. When Lao exits the bus, his usual fan club is waiting, this time it's grown by several people. A pretty cheer leader has joined them, and she leads them in playful chant. He acknowledges blushing then heads to class. Later at lunchtime, a boy named Duane approaches him, "Hey, I told my cousin bout you, he say he wanna fight, names Southside Jim. He fights at the pit over in Aurora."

Lao looks thoughtful, "Never heard of him. Why he wanna fight me?"

Duane rolls his eyes, shrugging his shoulders, "How I know, he jus' wanna fight."

Lao starts to walk away.

"He says to tell you the winner takes 25,000. If you're interested, fights next Monday, 7 pm sharp."

"So if I were interested, where would I be going?"

Duane shakes his head, "The old Stardust Theatre in Aurora, you know, on the south side?"

Lao nods, "Tell him I'll be there."

After school, he asks Johnny if he knows anything about the Aurora crowd.

"That's a tough crowd, mostly gang bangers. I've never had any dealings with them myself, just heard through the grapevine, ya know?"

Lao pats his friend on the back, "That'll change on Monday, got a fight at the Stardust, some black guy named Southside Jim."

"Hope you know what you're doing. Guess if you're going, I'm going."

Lao smiles, pinching Johnny's cheeks, "Aw, you're such a sweet friend."

They part ways, agreeing to meet later at the gym.

When Lao gets to his house, he's surprised to see Xiu sitting outside on the front-porch; she waves at him, "I've been waiting forever for you."

Lao bounds up the steps, picks her up, and twirls her around; she starts giggling, "Push me on the swing?"

Lao motions for her to ride piggy back. She steps carefully onto a chair, wraps her tiny arms and legs around him, giggling the whole time. She settles on the swing, "I member when we used to swing all the time."

Lao looks wistful, "Yup, me too."

He pulls the swing high into the air, letting go at the last minute, and Xiu shoots high into the treetops, sheer delight on her face. After a while, he piggy backs her into the house. They sit down at the

kitchen table, “Will you make me a peanut butter and jelly sandwich?”

Lao smiles, “Sure kid, but after that I gotta go do my homework.” Xiu nods, “Thanks Lao. I’ll remember you as the best brother ever.” *She is so precious*, he thinks, and sadness settles over his heart, it hurts to think of the world without her. He slowly reaches for the bread loaf, “Thanks Xiu, You’re the best sister.”

The following day, Lao heads downtown to Chin Ho’s. His face is starting to heal, the bruises have faded to yellow around the edges, and the swelling is all but gone. He whistles a tune as he walks, the temperature is a picture perfect 75 degrees, and the sky a blameless blue. He passes the familiar row of brick houses, their postage stamp lawns a vibrant lime green. A young black boy, no older than 7 flies past him on a bicycle, he has to jump aside to avoid a collision. Traffic is starting to pick up into the hurried fervor of rush hour, the smell of exhaust fumes hangs heavy in the air. Up on his left is a small city park, it’s only claim to fame a ball diamond and a small row of swings. Lao thinks of the park near his house. He and Xiu used to go there all the time, but those days are over. A group of young boys are playing a game of baseball. One of them places a solid hit into left field, stirring up dust and excitement as he slides into third base. Lao stops for a few moments, listening to the boys chatter as the next batter steps up to the plate. He’s a big bruiser white boy, and he cracks the ball over the fence. The screaming and yelling grows louder as the runner scores.

Lao continues down the sidewalk, the sound of the game starting to fade. When he gets to Chin Ho’s, the little man calls him right into his office.

Lao smiles, “Hello, what’s up?”

Chin bows low, “Nothing up, have something to show you, sit.”

Lao sits down at the table, the odor of incense and tea leaves hangs in the air. Chin brings out a package and places it on the table before Lao.

He’s taken aback ...“What’s the occasion?”

Chin nods, his wizened eyes sparkling with mirth, “I believe you had a birthday recently?”

“May I open it?”

Chin nods, watching the boy carefully.

Lao emits a low whistle, "Wow." as he examines the gift.

It's a beautiful hand-carved Bokken made out of Shiro Kashi (Japanese White-Oak), finely trimmed with a heart in the middle and a dragon that's curling around the heart and down the blade.

"You fight for another's heart with your heart, like a mighty dragon, but always remember, the oak of this Bokuto can still be easily broken, as can the heart. Don't forget why you began because at the end, you must remain true in spirit, mind, and focus."

Touched, Lao can only nod.

Chin continues, "You have the heart of a true warrior, Xiu is fortunate that you are her brother." Chin's face alights with mischief, "Did I mention that you look like someone took bat to your face, the other fighter, he looks not so good either?"

Lao chuckles, "It looks worse than it is."

Chin shakes his head unbelieving, pressing his thumb on one of the inflamed edges, "Sure it does."

Lao winces; Chin leads Lao into the other room and the two get to the business of honing Lao's punches, throws, and kicks.

Later as Lao departs, Chin reminds him to, "Never forget first lesson."

Lao nods and steps out in to the darkness for the long walk back home.

When he gets home, he takes a shower then falls into a dreamless sleep.

The rest of the week flies by in a blur of school and training, and by Saturday, Lao figures he's earned a break. He spends the afternoon leisurely. Xiu is sitting in the living room watching her favorite cartoon. She looks up, a smile lighting her face when he enters the room, "Hi Lao, whatcha doin?"

Lao plops down on the couch, propping his feet up on the coffee table, "Sitting here with you."

Xiu crinkles her nose, "Mom won't like that, better take your feet down."

Lao sighs, pulling his feet off of the table. Xiu edges closer to Lao, "You know, I've been reading a book about a kid that needs a heart just like me."

Lao pays close attention, Xiu's brown eyes are thoughtful and calm, wisdom beyond measure rests there, and he's at once sorry for her hardship.

"Aw, don't feel sorry for me, besides, I'm still here, the kid in the book didn't make it, died before he could get a new heart."

Lao shrugs, trying to play it off, "That won't happen to you."

She rests her tiny hands in her lap, worrying them, "Mom says I got a guardian angel, but I don't believe it, she says we all do."

Lao nods, "I'd like to think we do. Besides, you only need them when there isn't anyone from your family to watch over you."

"Oh."

Lao tousles her hair, "Hey, you wanna swing?"

She hops off of the couch, and a short burst of coughs erupt from her chest, "Let's go." she says, frowning from the coughs.

The two walk hand in hand out into the bright sunshine of the afternoon. Pretty soon, she is flying through the air, emitting little whoops of delight.

Later, after dinner, Lao goes for a run. When he returns, the house is quiet. A quick shower later, he heads into the kitchen to get a snack. The door out onto the back porch is open and he can see the glowing ember of his Dad's cigar in the darkness. He grabs his snack and steps out. Lei looks up, "Your face looks better. How are you feeling?"

Lao shrugs, "Fine."

His father looks thoughtful, "Why not join me?"

He hands Lao a cigar. Lao shakes his head, surprised at his Father's gesture, "No really, have one, any man who can take the beatings that you did, should be able to have a cigar with his father, no?"

Lao takes a cigar to be polite and cocks it in his hand without lighting it. He can tell that his Father has something to say, so he stands by waiting, taking deep breaths of the evening air.

A night owl hoots in the distance, its call somehow foreboding.

Lei continues, "You know Lao, when we adopted you and your sister, you were troubled by your existence, but you grew to become a better boy, and hopefully shall grow to become a better man. This thing you do now, fighting, scraping to save your sister, just like working when you're young, it's only temporary. Everything in life is temporary, because you have no control over what will happen."

Lao nods for his Father to go on, "You for instance, do what you feel has to be done and to a lot of us, it's a ridiculous notion, but I don't stop you, because it is what you feel has to be done. Even when you save your sister, will it truly be done?"

"But Dad, I..."

"Don't interrupt me. We love you unconditionally but wonder, if you love yourself the same...and I'll tell you why Lao, you see, while there is desire and passion dancing together with the urge to be consumed, there is never a protection from losing self control. You have just one moment where you make a decision to maintain self control or you will go against all odds hap-hazardously. How you go about making that choice can destroy a moment in time or can destroy an entire existence altogether, regardless of that invincibility you may believe that you possess."

Lao looks doubtful; Lei takes a puff of his cigar, blowing the smoke out, "Well, I guess the only question I can ask you is, do you think this is right for Xiu?"

Lao shuffles from foot to foot, still holding the unlit cigar in his hand. He looks at his Father, he seems to have grown older over the last few months, "Yes Father, it is the only thing I can do."

Lei nods, "That, I understand, more than you know son."

"I gotta get to bed, get some rest, okay?"

Lei nods, and Lao goes back into the house, glancing once more outside. The lonely figure of his Father remains. Lei raises the cigar to his mouth, the hot coal flashing brightly as he takes another puff. Lao leaves the kitchen and the scent of cigar smoke behind, heading off to bed for the night.

Sunday dawns with the rumble of thunder. Lao snuggles under his warm blanket, listening to the slap-tap of rain against the window. The room is painted in the blue gray shadow of the thunderstorm, the walls lighting up with the occasional flash of lightening. Lao is thankful to have a roof over his head. There is a soft tapping at his door, followed by the muffled voice of his Mother, "Lao, time to get up."

"K, Mom," he calls back sleepily...

He stretches, enjoying the feel of the fresh cotton beneath his skin. Sighing, he pulls up out of bed, blinking the last inky motes of sleep from his eyes. The smell of freshly brewed coffee and frying bacon

wafts down the hall and into his room. He walks groggily to the kitchen for breakfast. Xiu is happily slurping up the last of her Lucky Charms from the bowl; she looks up, a white milk ring under her nose and around her chin, "Mornin' Lao."

Lao nods, grabbing several slices of bacon and a piece of toast. His Mom comes into the kitchen, "Oh good, you're up. Better hurry though; we're going to the 9 o'clock service."

A jagged bolt of lightning flashes outside; followed by a clapping boom that shakes the house down to the foundation. The rain blows in sheets and the old oak tree in the backyard sways in an impossible dance. Lao finishes breakfast and shuffles off to get dressed for church. He's not particularly in the mood to attend, but if he tries to bow out his Mother will only insist, so he figures he may as well get it over with.

They make their way to the church on rain slicked streets. The rain continues pouring. The roadway is a blur of gray water and tail lights; his Mother is hunched over the wheel, a look of grim determination on her face. Xiu begins a game of church and steeple, wiggling her fingertips in delight. Lao chuckles at the old nursery rhyme.

Finally they arrive, grabbing their umbrellas to hurry inside.

After church, Lao heads over to Johnny's house. He borrows his Mother's umbrella. The thunderstorm has passed and a gentle rain falls, pattering against the concrete, tapping on the leaves. Lao takes a deep breath of the rain soaked air. A siren winds to life in the distance, followed by the harsh wail of a fire engine. Johnny is waiting and as he arrives, they hop into the car and head for the mall.

They head straight to the Arcade. A row of flashing lights lines the entrance to Diversion's Arcade Room. The air is filled with electronic beeps and bleeps along with the rat-tat-tat sounds of a machine gun; a small boy is playing a war game nearby.

"Wanna play Tekken?"

Johnny nods, smiling, "Sure, it's the only chance I'll have to whip up on you."

Lao laughs, the sound lifting the strain from his voice; he sounds years younger, like a small boy.

The boys made the rounds through the arcade, playing all of their favorite games.

Johnny taps Lao on the shoulder, "Hey, isn't that Duane over there?" he asks, pointing to a black boy by the entrance.

Lao nods, "Uh huh, think I should say hi?"

"Doesn't matter; either way, course it couldn't hurt for him to see that you're up for tomorrows fight."

Lao nods and starts across the arcade, calling out, "Hey Duane, what's up?"

Duane nods; his lips pull back into more of a grimace than a smile "Jus' hangin' with my homies, whatcha you doin'?"

Lao smiles, relaxed, "Just takin' it easy."

Duane shoots Lao with intense brown eyes, "Still fightin'?"

For a moment Lao wonders what he's gotten himself into. He nods', adjusting his stance into what he hopes is super cool, "Yeah, see you around."

Johnny and Lao head towards the exit, shooting one last glance over their shoulder. Duane stares after them, his face folded in a hard glare. Lao shrugs, then starts laughing and Johnny joins him.

On their way to the exit, they run into the pretty cheer leader from school, she's standing in front of the Cookie Store.

"Hey Cheryl, how ya doing.....?"

Cheryl smiles a thousand watt smirk at Johnny, then shoots an interested glance at Lao.

"This is Lao...Lao this is Cheryl."

Lao feels suddenly shy, a blush creeps across his cheeks, "I saw you cheering the other day...um."

She giggles, smoothing a loose strand of hair behind her ear, batting her eyelashes, "Well, I haven't yet had the pleasure of seeing you fight. Rumor has it that you're pretty good."

Lao's face turns a deeper shade of red and he looks to Johnny to save him. Johnny gives Lao a knowing glance, "He gets beat up pretty good too. So do you want an autograph or should I just schedule a back yard wrestling match?"

Lao swats at his friend, "Dude...she might hurt me."

Cheryl's cheeks flush, and she laughs, her giggles taper off, "Gotta go, nice to meet you Lao, see you around."

Lao nods, at a loss for words. They spend the rest of the afternoon hanging out then catch a movie before heading home for the evening.

Monday dawns hot and bright, already a humid 85 degrees; Lao heads to catch the bus. Johnny gives him a high five, “Hey Champ, how’s it going?”

Lao smiles, his face almost back to normal, “Good. Hey, are you driving tonight?”

“Sure. You know how to get there?”

“It’s in old town; you know the old part of Aurora?”

“Uh huh...”

The bus pulls up and the boys take their steps two at a time, headed for their accustomed seat.

When they get to school, Cheryl’s waiting for them, along with several other classmates.

“Heard you were fighting in Aurora, wanted to wish you luck.”

“Thanks.” Lao blushes.

Throughout the day, his classmates stop him in the hall, all of them eager to wish him luck on the fight, and he feels confident and strong. When the last bell rings, he’s the first student out the door; he wants to spend time with Xiu before going out for the evening.

The afternoon heat is sweltering, and by the time he gets to his house, he’s covered in sweat.

He enters the cool cocoon of the living room, grateful to be out of the heat.

Xiu pops out of her room; she’s wearing a light cotton sundress with matching socks, “Lao, want to have tea with me?”

She’s clutching a baby doll in one arm; in the other, she’s got an enormous purse. Lao smiles and follows her through the house out to the backyard.

She’s spread a blanket between two Lilac bushes, their limbs arching into a green ceiling; an adjacent fence covered in vines serves as a wall. She pats the spot next to her, “Sit here.”

Lao takes a seat and watches amused as she carefully pours two tiny cups of tea.

She starts coughing, and her tiny hands tremble when she hands Lao his cup. Her breathing normalizes and she pours a cup for her

doll as well. Lao leans back into the fence, admiring the fine day. Xiu has had a wonderful last few days; he wants to believe that the doctors are wrong. As if to disprove the notion, a fresh round of coughs erupts from Xiu's chest, sending her tiny hands to cover her mouth. A shadow passes over Lao's face, "You alright?"

Xiu nods, "Silly brother, I'm fine, 'sides who'd take care of baby?"

Lao laughs softly then reaches up, smoothing Xiu's hair behind her ear.

She giggles, "Do that again, it tickles."

"I gotta go get ready, got a fight tonight."

Xiu's face creases with worry "Don't go. Play with me, please?"

Lao shakes his head, his eyes look pained, "I gotta, but I'll play with you later, I promise."

"Okay, see ya later alligator."

Lao ruffles her hair, "After while crocodile."

She giggles, happy to be playing. He listens to her low voice as she talks to her doll, as he makes his way to the house. Before he can step inside she calls out, "I love you."

Lao smiles "Love you too," then steps into the kitchen.

Part V

Lao grabs his gym bag and heads over to Johnny's house, he's got a good feeling about the fight and there's an extra spring to his step. They hop in Johnny's car and head across town. As they approach Aurora, the neighborhood rapidly deteriorates. Rows of decrepit businesses line the street, their windows boarded and broken. Someone has spray-painted "Jason, R.I.P." on one of the brick storefronts. The row of buildings peters out to a vacant lot surrounded by a chain link fence, its bottom littered with wrappers and broken glass.

The next block houses an old warehouse, a rusted blue awning juts out from its entrance, followed by several loading docks, all of them imposingly quiet. The roadway is jammed with parked cars and they have to park several blocks from the Stardust. They grab their stuff and head down the sidewalk; someone is playing rap music up ahead, its pours down the street, vibrating the concrete. A clutch of

black women look distractedly at Lao when he passes. One of them, dressed in hot pink daisy dukes grinds her hips, the flesh of her ass visible, "What you doin' whitey? You lost?"

Lao's blood is pumping with excitement; he's ready for the fight. He opens his mouth to reply, a sharp retort forming on his lips, but the last bit of restraint wins, and he remains quiet. Lao and Johnny hurry on down the block.

A huge white & silver semi-truck with bluish-yellow striping and an orange logo juts from between two buildings. They have to step out into the street to get around it. They're startled by a voice from its interior. A man with a Harley Davidson Cap cocked on his head steps out, "Hey guys; Jack's the name, you know a good place to eat around here? I've been driving this truck all around the city and I can't seem to find any good grub. Not here, not across the way over there, tell me, there's got to be somewhere good to dine in these parts?"

Lao shakes his head then points back over his shoulder at the group of girls, "Might ask them."

The trucker chuckles, "Nah, they'd just hat-trick ole' Jack here, tell me to get the hell outta' their neighborhood. Thanks, but no thanks."

The man nods, tipping his cap, and climbs back into the cab of his truck.

The Stardust is up ahead; its marquee is missing letters. The ones that are left form a jumble of nonsense.

Green and red neon tubing frames a sign that reads 'Stardust Theatre'; one of the tubes isn't working and the other flashes and buzzes with a low hum.

The sidewalk in front of the place is packed with people waiting to get in.

Lao and Johnny pass them. They can feel the crowd's defiant stares.

Several young black boys form a loose circle at the front of the line, all of them wearing jeans belted around their asses as they pace and jive, giving each other high fives and flashing gold grills. One of them fixes Lao with a smoldering stare, "You dead meat, white boy." Lao and Johnny approach the bouncer, a huge black man with a shaved head, who lets them inside.

This place is a far cry from the old clothing factory. All but a few of the seats have been ripped out, allowing for standing room only. They make their way towards a row of betting cages at the front of the theatre. An old black man anchors the row; his hair is as white as snow.

"Duane here...? We're supposed to fight his cousin tonight."

The old man appraises them, nodding, "Um hmm, he right over there," pointing to a doorway on the left of the stage.

People begin pouring into the theatre, their voices rising to a low rumble as the place fills. Lao's heart is beating like a freight train, picking up speed. Adrenaline pumps through his veins, he is poised on the brink of a fight and he smells victory. They spot Duane near the door, he nods, "You up next, changin' room's right here," he asserts, pointing to an old wooden door; its front is covered in peeling green paint, gouged all the way down to the wood in some areas. They step into a room no bigger than a large closet to change. The crowd noise has grown to a dull roar, and they can hear the voices of people coming and going in the hall. Johnny and Lao say a quick prayer, clasp their hands in the air, and together they chant, "For Xiu," before stepping out into the hallway.

The announcer comes alive as they head towards the pit. On their way, they pass a huge black man, he's dressed in red satin trunks and has a satin robe draped across his shoulders. "You looking familiar there Lao." his eyes glitter, "You don' remember me, do you fool?"

Lao shakes his head as the black man extends a ring covered hand, "I'm Jim, Southside Jim."

A flash of recognition crosses Lao's face and he nods, then he continues towards the pit.

Johnny tugs at Lao's shoulder, "Where do you know him from?"

"We attended the same grade school for a while; I was in class with his little sister. God, he's huge."

The announcer calls the fight and Lao steps out into the pit.

The pit is ringed by a large crowd, all of them pressing in closer for a better view. Lao looks out over the crowd and is met by defiant and angry stares; several people are jeering, "Fuck 'em up Southside, Fuck 'em up."

The fight begins.

Lao comes out strong; he lands an uppercut to his opponents jaw, followed by a kick. Southside Jim barely notices, plowing forward, he hits Lao with several striking blows to the head and chest. Lao is driven backwards, all the way to the edge of the pit. Angry hands push him forward, back out into the center.

Oh shit, I'm in trouble...

He stumbles forward, catching his balance at the last minute. Jim's huge paw connects with the side of his face, rattling his teeth in his head.

Ears ringing, he snaps several lightening quick kicks at his opponent, but his center of gravity is off, and he does little damage.

The crowds' chanting grows to a rage as he's driven once more to the edge of the pit. He's pushed forward by a sea of angry fists; a man shouts, "Gonna kill you, honky mutha fucker."

Lao stumbles back into the ring. Southside dances easily around him, then motions for him to come on, and the crowds taunting grows rabid. Lao drives forward, managing to land a kick to his opponent's stomach. He fakes to the left then shoots a right hook into Southside's jaw. The black man counters with several rapid fire punches to Lao's face. His jaw explodes in a sea of pain, he staggers back, struggling to stand, his vision blurry with sweat. The bell rings and he stumbles to Johnny, who tries in vain to keep the crowd from pawing at Lao. Johnny presses a towel to Lao's jaw; he's got a nasty cut on his chin. Hands reach out hitting and groping and for once, Lao is happy to re-enter the pit.

The crowd grows increasingly frantic, the rows of people moving together like a huge wave chanting, "Kill him, kill him."

Lao pushes forward, trying to find an open spot for a kick, but Southside's defenses are strong.

The fighter's circle and dance, Lao trying to keep his distance from the bigger man's fists.

Someone chucks a beer can into the pit, just missing Lao's head.

The announcer grabs the can lightning-quick, and the fight continues.

Lao's arms and legs feel like rubber, each step is heavy with exhaustion, but he still manages to stay on his feet until the bell rings. He

struggles to Johnny, "One more round, stay away from him, one more round," he says as he wipes more blood from Lao's face.

Lao looks into the sea of faces lining the ring, their screaming and chanting grows louder, demon like.

Southside punches Lao in the shoulder and he reels, almost falling. He comes face to face with the crowd, they pummel his chest, and a young punk with gold teeth spits on him. He flails back into the pit, he can feel blood running from his cuts onto his chest and tries to land a volley of kicks and punches to Jimmy's chest.

Only one of them connects, the rest fall short, and with one sweeping left hook, Southside bashes Lao in the face.

A huge explosion of pain captures Lao's senses, the bright lights and roaring crowd ring in his ears, he tries to focus but his vision doubles and blurs.

Southside Jim lands another crashing blow, knocking Lao off of his feet. He lands hard, flailing into the crowd; they at once push him to a stand. He sways as the crowds chants, "Kill him, Kill him," louder and stronger. He takes two steps forward, black spots fade in and out of his vision, he struggles to stay conscious.

Finally, his body gives up and he folds to the floor, the punches and kicks of his opponent a striking blur above him.

He hears the sharp pop of one of his ribs breaking and a scream of pain clutches his guts. The huge fist of Southside Jim descends once more.

I'm dying...

The crowd's roars grow louder and Lao realizes he's screaming. Southside pulls the punch at the last minute, looking down at Lao, shaking his head. Bleary eyed; Lao watches as Jim raises his hands in victory; the crowd grows wild, screaming and yelling.

Beer cans rain into the pit; a full one strikes Lao on the forehead. He fights unconsciousness. He feels someone grab him by the shoulders and he knows no more.

He wakes up in a puddle of blood; Johnny is pressed down low to his side and is relieved when Lao says, "I'm alive."

“Yeah, don’t celebrate yet, we gotta get outta here in one piece. Southside showed me a back door, come on.”

With that, Johnny helps Lao to his feet, practically carrying him to the back exit.

They sneak down an alleyway, leaving the roar of the crowd behind them. They head down the narrow brick corridor; arms slung around each other’s shoulders, weaving like two drunks.

After the roaring crowd has faded, the relative quiet is a welcome change. They pass a couple of young men, who only give them a cursory glance; in any other neighborhood, they would have attracted attention. After what seems like an eternity, they reach Johnny’s car, and he helps Lao into the passenger seat. Lao winces when he sits down, the motion compressing his broken rib. His face turns a pasty white, and fine beads of sweat dot his forehead, “I’m taking you to the emergency room.”

Lao clenches his fists and through swollen lips he says, “No, I’m not going.”

Johnny starts to protest, but quiets when Lao raises his hand and gives him a look that brooks no arguing. They ride most of the way home in silence, except for the occasional groan from Lao as the car pitches over rough spots in the roadway. A light breeze is blowing, the trees along the road poised in a silver-green wave. As they head further into the city, the stars dim, and the city lights wash out their definition. Lao turns to Johnny, his face miserable, “I failed Xiu.” Johnny shakes his head vehemently, “No, you’ve done all you could and more, don’t be ashamed.”

Soon, they enter their neighborhood. The streets are dark, the giant oak trees lining the road blot out the moonlight. When they turn down Lao’s block, they are at once surprised by the unusual number of cars parked in the street. Johnny pulls to the curb and gets out. He carefully eases Lao up and out of the car, steadying him as they walk up the steps.

“Well, it looks like you got company, see ya later.”

Lao nods and waves to his friend then steps into the living room.

The house is full of people, not just any people, but his Aunts and Uncles. At first, he thinks maybe they’re giving his parents a surprise party or something, until he sees the grave expressions on their faces.

His Aunt Judy had been crying a long time, her mascara streaked down her cheeks like black spiders.

Lao's eyes widen with shock. He at once understands what has happened, while the other part of him argues silently that it can't be. His Mother bursts out of the kitchen, her tear streaked face crumples completely when she sees the condition her son is in. She rushes to him, "Oh God Lao, not you too, please tell me you're okay." Lao manages a conciliatory grin and nods, his swollen lips forming the word "Yes," it comes out sounding mushy, more like "yeth."

Lao wants to know why the house is full of all his relatives but he's afraid to ask, afraid that he'll hear what his heart already knows...
Xiu is dead...

Oh God...

A low wailing escapes his lips as his Mother confirms his worst fear. Terri slides down into a nearby chair, her eyes wide with shock, "Xiu's gone. I thought she was taking a nap, just a little rest, but when I went in to wake her, she didn't answer."

She wrings her hands in her lap, looking miserably at Lao as new gout of tears spills down her cheeks, "Oh God, what are we going to do.....?"

His Mother starts rocking back and forth, at first telling Lao what has happened, down to the man that came and took Xiu away, but eventually her words become mostly her garbled thoughts, as if she were thinking aloud. His Father spies him, his sorrow torn face at first angry at the sight of his mangled son, then softening with the realization that at least Lao will be okay. He grabs Lao and hugs him, holding him around the shoulders as he breaks down; big horrible sobs wracking his body, "My little girl, my Xiu, she can't be gone, please no."

Lao hears all of this with a sort of detached presence. His mind had dived into safer waters just as he entered the front door and realized that something was horribly wrong. One by one his Aunts and Uncles approach him, each offering an apology, and after a while, the well meaning adults are starting to piss him off. It's like everyone is torn up but phony at the same time, and who are they to tell him that everything's going to be alright when as far as he is concerned, it assuredly is not. It is not okay, it is not alright. His sister is

dead, he was too late. She's dead and no one, not even God can bring her back.

Lao flees from the house disappearing out into the moonlit night.

He walks for a long while, his strutting is painful and slow, but he barely notices. It's like someone flipped the shock switch, numbing his body along with his mind.

Eventually, he ends up on the interstate. He's walking along the shoulder facing the oncoming traffic. He watches the ebb and flow of headlights and listens to the flat hum of rubber on concrete; it's a lonely sound and it seems appropriate. He stops and watches the traffic headed in the opposite direction, the long trailing headlights flashing to red tracers as the vehicles glide away to destinations unknown.

He is between both somewhere and nowhere in this purgatory where reality vests with pain.

He walks on, keeping his mind 'in between' in order to dull the pain. An oncoming car slows, drifting to the shoulder. Its headlights are blinding. Lao shields his eyes with his hands. He's suddenly bathed in red and blue lights as the car flashes it's cherries in a silent whoop. A police officer approaches him, "Son, it's illegal to walk on the highway, it's dangerous. These streets are full of accidents waiting to happen."

The officer motions for Lao to follow him to a pool of streetlight, "What happened? Trucker roll you...steal your money?"

Lao shakes his head, weary, he doesn't want to answer any questions, but knows he has too. Holding back tears he says, "My sister died tonight."

The officer nods, as if that were the answer he was expecting.

Lao continues, "I got in a fight earlier this evening, but I'll be okay, really."

The officer sighs, shaking his head, "I'm sorry for your loss, but I can't leave you out here on the interstate like this, is there somewhere I can take you?"

A glint of light flashes the name Craven into Lao's eyes, he nods, suddenly so exhausted that he can barely stand. The officer reaches

to steady him, and leads him to his patrol car. Lao watches the interstate recede as they head into town.

Everything seemed surreal, like he'd somehow left another life behind.

He thinks of Xiu now, knowing that he has, he fades into sleep for the rest of the ride home.

Part VI

The next day dawns with the rumble of thunder, the rain drumming watery fingertips against the window. Lao awakens with a groan, his whole body a field of pain; he burrows further under the covers.

Searing pain fishhooks down into his belly, *Xiu is gone...*

Tears slip down his swollen cheeks, and the pain he feels is so desolate and raw that he can't stand it. He tries to think of something else to trick his mind back into sleeping, but as his thoughts circle, they keep coming back to Xiu. He finally gives up and pulls miserably up out of bed. He gets dressed; it takes him an inordinately long time because of how much it hurts to move.

The rooms are draped in the gray and lifeless shadows of the rain-storm. He nods to his Mother; she's sitting at the table, staring at nothing, moving the salt shaker back and forth. He bends down and hugs her. Her arms tighten around him as if she's drowning; a low sob escapes her throat. He helps himself to a bowl of cereal then sits across from her, "Where's Dad?"

She looks at him with swollen eyes, "He couldn't sleep, said he was going to the funeral home to start the arrangements."

Lao doesn't reply, images of Xiu in a casket flash through his mind; he shakes them away, "Oh."

Lao finishes his cereal then heads into the living room to watch TV, but once he gets there, he can't get comfortable. He's uneasy, so he paces from room to room, looking for a distraction. He finally gives up and calls Johnny. He pokes his head into the kitchen, his Mother remains hunched over the kitchen table, "I'm going to Johnny's for a while."

She pulls her eyes away from the saltshakers, looking at him, but not really seeing, "Oh, okay."

He grabs his Mom's umbrella and steps out into the rain splattered day, he inhales the smell of the rain-swept landscape and it soothes him. The wind blows, chasing the raindrops under his umbrella and onto his skin. Halfway to Johnny's house, he pulls the umbrella down and tucks it underneath his arm. He turns his face up to the sky; water droplets coating his cheeks and his shoulders, his salty

tears are washed away, no longer significant, as he remembers how he and Xiu used to run around in the rain; Xiu trying to catch the rain drops with her tongue, and laughing like a loon.

A faint smile plays at the corners of his lips; they had some good times.

When he arrives at Johnny's, the family sweeps him inside, offering their condolences and support. He extracts himself, pulling Johnny after him, "Let's go for a walk, maybe head to Chin's, okay?"

The rain has tapered off. The boys make their way down the sidewalk dodging puddles.

"I can't believe she's gone, she was so little."

Johnny only nods, not sure of what to say. After a while, Lao pulls his mind onto the subject of fighting and that is where it stays until they reach Chin Ho's Dojo.

The bell jingles when they enter.

"Hello." Chin greets them, looking at Lao's wet clothes and hair.

Chin shakes his head, "You not boys, but ducks." He says, laughing softly.

Lao and Johnny's faces remain solemn.

"Fight not go so good." Chin queries.

Lao nods, "My sister is gone."

Chin bows lower than usual, the depth of wisdom in his eyes softening, "I'm so sorry. I make you tea, come." He suggests, motioning them to the back.

When Lao sits down, he winces, and a low moan escapes his throat.

"You are hurt Lao?"

Lao shrugs, "I'm fine, just sore is all."

Johnny pipes up, "No he isn't, and you should see his chest."

Lao gives Johnny an angry look.

"Let me see."

The look on Chins face warns Lao not to argue. Lao picks up his shirt. There's a huge black and blue bruise on his side. He winces as Chin carefully probes the area with his fingertips.

"Just a moment,"

Chin leaves the room, returning with an icepack wrapped in a towel. Chin hands Lao the pack, "Put this on it. I make tea now."

Chin gets the delicate tray, but this time he chooses a different tea set, this one much more intricate in design.

After the tea is done he serves them and sits down.

“We honor Xiu.”

Lao sits quietly, sipping the warm brew. The aroma of incense is overlaid with the glorious smell of the tea leaves. Chin gets up and moves around the little room deliberately as he grabs a dash of this and that from canisters that line the counter. He heaps all of these ingredients into a small saucepan, adds water, and heats the concoction over the stove.

Soon the room is filled with the strong smell of herbs.

“What are you making?”

Chin smiles, “A poultice for your ribs, here,”

He hands Lao a stack of warm cotton soaked with the herbs. “Place it on your bruise, it helps heal, take pain away.”

Lao nods and does as he’s told. His mind flashes back to the beating he took, he looks intensely at Chin, “Next time, I’ll be prepared, next time I’ll win.”

Chin looks troubled, “Xiu is gone, what is the point?”

Lao grows agitated, shifting in his seat, “Look, I said I’d fight on next Wednesday, and I have every intention of doing so.”

Chin only nods.

Johnny looks horrified, “Are you nuts, you’re a beat up mess, you can’t fight anytime soon.”

Lao’s eyes flash with anger; he raises a fist and pounds the table. The little tea cups rattle and quiver against the saucers, “I’m fighting, whether you like it or not, now leave me alone.”

“If you still feel same way in a few days, okay, I help you this one last time,” Chin interjects.

Lao nods then rises, “Come on Johnny, time to go.”

The rain has picked back up to a steady beat. Lao unfurls his umbrella, sharing it with Johnny as they hurry down the sidewalk. The buildings and roadways are washed in the tones of a black and white photograph and water droplets cling to every available surface. Traffic splashes down the street, the sound of wet rubber against concrete a constant whirring hum. The rain has chased most of the

people indoors; they pass several groups gathered in garages and on porches, waiting for the sky to clear. Soon they're back in familiar territory.

Lao drops Johnny at home, "I'll call you later."

Johnny raises his hand in a silent wave then disappears into the house.

When Lao gets home, his Mom and Dad are sitting in the living room. The sound of the TV partially obscuring his parents voices as they speak in low tones.

Lei nods to Lao, "You're back. How're you feeling?"

Lao shrugs his shoulders, "I don't know, I miss Xiu, my body aches and my heart aches too."

Lei placed a hand on Lao's shoulder, motioning for him to sit.

Terri's face is weary, her eyes puffy and red. She leans forward and carefully touches Lao's face, "You sure you're okay?"

He winces, "Don't worry about me, I'm fine."

He can tell that she really wants to believe him. He gets up and moves about, "See, nothing's broken."

My ribs; if she only knew...

He hugs his Mother, "I'll be in my room."

He stops and looks into Xiu's room on the way.

The stuffed animals and ladybugs seem lonely. He's struck by the finality of death.

She's gone, she's really gone...

When he gets to his room, he plops down onto the bed and closes his eyes for a rest. Soon, he's fast asleep. He doesn't wake up until the following morning.

He stays home to help prepare for the funeral to be held the next day. Relatives crowd the small house; they've come from all over. His grandparents from Vietnam arrive that afternoon. He hasn't seen them since he was a small child, but to him they haven't changed. His Grandfather Tai looks just like his biological Father, only his hair is white and sparse like goose down. His Grandmother Chi Lee is a tiny woman, who wears spectacles, it's like she's looking through fish lenses. They magnify her eyes so that she looks strange, like a bug with bulbous eyes, when in fact Grandmother is all things gentle and kind. Lao goes with his Father to do some last

minute errands, plus they have to stop by the funeral home to drop off Xiu's favorite dress, the one she'll be buried in. When they get to the funeral home, they meet with a black man named Thomas, who is in charge of the arrangements. Lao is struck by how kind the man is, and how death seems so natural to him. Instead of being jittery and full of platitudes, the funeral director is direct but delicate at the same time. Before they leave, Lao also gives Thomas Xiu's favorite stuffed animal; it's a little bear she won at the fair when she was only three. "Do you want her bear next to her, or do you think she'd like to hold it?" he gently asks.

"Next to her..." His father says.

Lao shakes his head, "No Dad, she'd want Berry in her arms, to keep her company."

The thought of Xiu being shut in the dark and all alone makes Lao shiver; a fresh film of tears threatens to spill over. His Father finishes his business with Thomas, struggling at the end not to break down. They head back to the house to prepare for the wake.

Later at the wake, Lao feels drained; his spirit sick with sadness. He thought he'd be okay, and he was until he saw Xiu, clutching her bear, laid out in terminal sleep. His tears spilled onto her, and when he thought to wipe them, her skin was hard and cold. He reflexively pulled back, wondering what was wrong with him; she was his sister, alive or dead. He's had so many people tell him they're sorry, and he's grateful for their presence, it offers him a distraction, from the truth of his little sister, dead and laid out at the front of the room. Now there's only about an hour left before the wake is over. His mind has pretty well gone on vacation back to the land of 'in-between'. It's less painful there. He's sitting, minding his own business, when Chin Ho approaches him bowing low. Lao looks deep into Chin's eyes and sees understanding; a deep pain is etched there. Lao wonders who Chin has lost. He's happy to see Chin, and is soon asking about new fighting moves. At first, Chin humors him, answering his questions, but when it becomes apparent that Lao wants to go on and on, Chin raises his hand in a stopping gesture, "Not now, not here, time for this later, now we honor Xiu."

Three Months Later

Lao and Johnny are heading to the old clothing factory. Lao has taken his grief and pushed it down, now it rests inside, hard and cold, buried in the bravado that makes him feel like a king. Since Xiu died, he's fought over a dozen times, his desire for victory has grown with each passing day. Now his mind becomes fevered and hot with adrenaline before each and every fight. He's come to crave the challenge and adulation, like a drug. He's super charged this evening, he's fighting a South African guy who is suppose to be an excellent martial arts fighter. Pausing on the sidewalk, Lao turns to Johnny, "I can win this."

He shoots his fist into the air, gesturing proudly. Johnny only shrugs as he's grown weary of the whole scene. A hooker jiggles past them, all tits and ass wrapped in a sequined see through dress. The hem of the skirt rests just below the crack of her ass. She sashays up to them, "Hey boys, today be your lucky day, I's ready to party, you boys come on." she rolls her hips, "I'll show you a goood time, suga."

"No thanks." Johnny shakes his head.

The woman doesn't pay him any attention, instead she approaches Lao, fluttering her eyelashes, "Come on, sugar...." and reaches out to stroke Lao.

Lightning quick, Lao grabs her by the wrist, "Go away, get outta here bitch."

The hookers face grows thunderous, "Let go of me, you be hurtin' me."

Lao twists her arm, jerking it downward before letting her go.

"Was that necessary?" Johnny asks as they walk away.

Lao shakes his head, "What do you expect, God knows what diseases she's carrying."

They walk the rest of the way to the factory uninterrupted. When they arrive, they head straight back to the locker rooms. Lao dresses then sits Indian style. He utters long low hums as he focuses. The screaming of the crowd intensifies and Lao's blood surges with

adrenaline. The announcer calls the fight, and Lao steps out into the pit, altering the course of his life forever.

The next evening, Lao looks worriedly at the man sitting across the desk from him.

He's Joe Jackson, Attorney at Law.

Lao has just hired him. Mr. Jackson swivels in the big leather chair, "Now one more time, tell me exactly how it happened."

Lao nods and begins *

