

Windows

The construction at the edge of Manhattan's Chinatown started at 7:00 AM sharp on Monday morning. New York City was already wide awake with its regular hustle and bustle—crowds of important people rushing to important places, bundled in scarves and holding hot coffee for the winter day ahead. The growing stacks of new steel frames blended right into the cityscape, and no one should have noticed the construction ruckus, indistinguishable through the familiar roar of New York traffic. But today, someone did.

Meng started awake at the pounding of a jackhammer outside. Pushing aside the old beach towels Grandma had fashioned into curtains, she pressed her face to the cloudy, yellowed window by her bed. The fuzzy shape of a neon hard hat across the street bobbed up and down with the noise. She could make out at least a dozen more hard hats moving to and fro where the local Pathmark grocery store should have been. Strangely, instead of the usual brick building with its signature red and blue logo, an unfamiliar white sign suspended on some sort of frame stood in its place. Unable to read it through the hazy glass after a few minutes of squinting, she slowly slid the small window open, careful not to disturb the already cracking plaster around it. The frigid winter air filled her nose as it rushed into her little apartment room, accompanied by a burst of anxiety in her stomach. Meng shivered. *Grandma really, really won't be happy about the cold, but I just need to see what's going on.*

"LUXURY APARTMENTS - COMING SOON", read the new white sign. Behind it towered the gleaming steel framework of the project's beginnings, swarmed by workers—it was already at least four times the height of the little grocery store it replaced, and there wasn't a single brick left in sight. The only trace left of the old store was a clear plastic storage bin missing its lid, pushed to the corner of the sidewalk by the construction. It was crammed with

abandoned Pathmark uniforms and a decade's worth of window posters, all reading "SALE!" plus a Chinese translation of "大减价!", scribbled in sharpie below the printed block letters.

Pushing her head further out of the window, Meng saw a few of her neighbors gathered at the other end of the sidewalk, raising cardboard signs which she could not quite read from where she was. They seemed to be protesting the construction, but the jackhammer drowned out their voices. Still, they stood firmly in the cold, yelling to workers, passersby, and anyone else around. *Do they really think that their small, poor group can convince anyone to stop a construction project for the rich?*

A piercing screech came from the Chinese wooden screen behind her as Grandma stormed in, violently jerking aside the divider which separated Meng's sleeping space from the rest of the apartment. "Meng! You close that window right now!"

Startled, she slammed the window shut, clumsily cracking the wall plaster more and sending little white flakes all over the floorboards.

"Don't you know the heating bill goes up? And what was all that noise?" Grandma let out an exasperated sigh. "You better start acting your age," she spat before Meng could speak, "already in college and still acting like a child. Always daydreaming. Wasting your time. Your father's been sending less and less money, I'm too old to work, and here you are making everything worse! If you don't work harder to pitch in for this family like everyone else has, we'll actually lose everything. Hurry up and do what you should be doing! It's Monday and you have school! I'm going to step outside to see what the evil ruckus is before I head to the streets—can't see anything with these old eyes through our old windows."

Meng blinked back tears as Grandma left as quickly as she had come. The old woman was growing short-tempered with age, her back becoming more and more hunched as each year

passed. The stress to survive sat upon her frail shoulders, plotting to crush her with its pressure as she counted every dollar bill. She slammed the front door as she left the apartment a few minutes later, and coincidentally, the jackhammer stopped. In the sudden silence, Meng began to weep— not for herself, but for Grandma. After Grandma had stopped working, becoming weaker than ever before, paying rent became increasingly more difficult. Meng and Dad's combined few thousand dollars and some measly federal aid they received fell short each month. Living had never been so expensive. That's when Grandma began to sell her things. Her beloved jade bracelets, carved boxes, calligraphy scrolls from her hometown in China, the only things she had left from her family and the only beautiful, meaningful things in their apartment, began to disappear one by one, week by week, into the carts of street vendors and the windows of gift shops in the city. Heirlooms which Meng had been taught to treasure forever became cheap \$20 souvenirs, picked up by wealthy white tourists passing through Chinatown for a day, forgotten and abandoned by their new owners within weeks. Meng herself was trying to do what she could to help out— although she found her new community college classes torturous and her classmates vile, she always stayed out of trouble and never missed school, the one thing they fortunately didn't have to pay for. But this was not at all enough to keep them from slipping further into poverty. She made every weekend trip to the laundromat and always picked up their groceries and newspapers so Grandma could be out selling. Still not enough. Good jobs were hard to come by and even harder to keep, but Meng managed to remain a model janitor at the nearby gas station convenience store, and earning minimum wage was better than earning nothing— but there was still never enough. It seemed that every time they saved up any extra money, something else to pay for always came along and stole it away. Sorrow visited frequently as she watched Grandma come home every day with empty plastic bags, her most valuable

possessions traded for a few wads of cash in her old, trembling fists. Each time, Meng held out hope that it would be the last time Grandma sold something, that somehow, help would come and fate would decide to be in their favor, but there was always a next time.

She looked back up at the towering silhouette of steel through her clouded window and watery eyes. *Imagine if we were rich enough to live in a luxury apartment. Dad would come home from work. Grandma would be so happy. We'd be looking through big, clear windows, behind real curtains, framed in silver, at that nice view from above. We wouldn't have to worry at all.* She gazed up at it for a bit longer. The sun seemed to come out for a second, making the dreary sky look warmer and illuminating the developing apartments from behind. Then the jackhammer started up again and jolted her back to reality. Grandma's words echoed in her head: *"Hurry up and do what you should be doing!"*

Meng shuffled to her little wooden desk, crammed in the corner of the room, and squinted at the digital clock sitting atop her textbooks. 7:40 AM. She gathered her work for the day's classes and promptly got dressed and ready, selecting one of the five shirts she owned and the same pants she wore the day before, paired with her only fleece jacket and only pair of sneakers. She had a slice of bread and some milk for her breakfast, as always. By 8:00, Meng was out the door and on her way to the bus stop, blending into the busy morning sea of people. The chilling city wind bit painful, scaly patches into the skin of her cheeks, and her eyes became red and raw from her morning tears. Time sped up in the streets of New York. Ten minutes later she was riding the M9 line out of Chinatown and towards her Manhattan community college, and twenty minutes later she arrived, on time as always for her usual string of Monday lectures.

Meng's face and fingers stung of the vicious, dry winter throughout the day, and as bizarrely as time sped up in the city, it always dragged on and on in classes. At some points of the day, it felt like the suffering would never end.

The chalkboard would read "ALGEBRA", and Meng would pull out her notes. On a good day, the math on the board would make sense at once, but like all good things, good days were rare. No matter how hard she listened, understanding all the formulas and strategies and properties never came easier, and she frequently found herself blindly copying everything down in hopes that it would all come together later in the breaks between classes. The chalkboard would read "INTRO TO HUMANITIES", and Meng would pull out her copy of whatever book they were reading. This time it was *Stranger in a Strange Land*, which did not make sense to her at all. The chalkboard would cycle through two more classes for Monday, both of which Meng could find little interest in, and by the end of each day professors' words became nonsense. There weren't even windows she could look out of in the classrooms—blinds which the staff kept permanently closed shielded each glass pane, forfeiting all natural light to the artificial glow of fluorescent ceiling panels.

Meng was relieved to go straight home from campus as the last Monday lecture ended, always feeling a twinge of guilt for her mediocre learning ability as she beelined for the bus stop while other students socialized. They sat in large friend groups, chattering and often laughing, and some even held new cell phones, little blocks that flipped open and shut, which were the latest craze. She tried to avoid reminding herself of everything she never had by leaving as quickly as possible. Being on campus was freeing, a place where no money, no real life worries existed; however, the classes were hard for Meng, who would just lose focus no matter how hard she tried to keep up, and worst of all, it was lonely. Although she had never had friends at home

either, Grandma was always there, and she was never out of place in her Chinatown neighborhood of people who looked like her and lived like her. On campus, no one wore the same few shirts every week like she did. No one just stayed sitting alone, never getting food, never participating in clubs, and never going anywhere in between classes like she did. College showed her just how different life was for others and how disconnected she was from it— and all of her classmates seemed to know that. Some always avoided her, some would take quick glances at her as they talked to one another, and some would smile politely, but walk past her as quickly as they could. Meng didn't know anything about the topics they discussed with their backs to her, and certainly did not plan on talking to them anyways. Every part of her life was embarrassing to admit. For them, living in New York City was exciting and hopeful— full of freedom and plans for future lives of glamour after transferring to some big university— while for her, it was living in a run-down apartment building and being confined to poor Chinatown, working at the gas station store, redeeming food stamp benefits, and struggling in college courses she wasn't smart enough for in a desperate attempt to come across some path to a better life. She would try to focus on comforting thoughts— *If I can just survive these classes, hold out a little longer, and have some more hope for change, I'll find some way to make more money. We're in America, where opportunity should be everywhere for everyone! We're bound to get a lucky break soon. I might be a little behind, but at least I'm not failing!* She rode the M9 back home that day with her knees crunched up to her chin for warmth, gazing out of the bus windows at well-off people walking in and out of stores and restaurants along the streets, and wishing more than ever in her life that she could live like them.

Meng arrived home to hear the jackhammer still operating outside, only much more faintly from a distance. Grandma was sitting on Meng's bed, sorting through a pile of dollar bills

under the light of her little window, which usually was not directly visible from the door. The Chinese wooden screen divider was gone. Her creases darkened and wrinkles illuminated by the harsh winter light, Grandma's face looked a decade older as she counted the money, deep in concentration. Meng set down her schoolwork and quietly boiled an egg for herself.

"300 dollars for the screen," Grandma announced, "meaning we'll be alright for rent this month." Usually Grandma would have rejoiced at being able to pay the rent, but this time she said nothing more and simply rose to store the cash, then wash her hands of the money's filth.

"What's wrong?"

"I'm just worried." She massaged her temples and took a long pause. "We have enough for rent now, but what about later? I'm so tired." She slowly made her way to her own bed across from Meng's, stepping across the line of scratches on the floorboards leftover from years of pushing and pulling the old screen. The apartment seemed much, much emptier without it, and Meng suddenly realized just how many of the various decorative heirlooms they had owned were missing, leaving behind only indents in the cheap flooring or plastered walls of where they once existed. It was silent for a couple of minutes before Grandma spoke again. "On top of that, there are those new luxury apartments outside. As soon as they are built, the rent will increase. I know it. They try to hide it from us, but the devils will move into our space and push us out. I just know it'll happen. The grocery store is already gone, and when we must move, where'll we go? We'll lose everything. I'm too old. I'm too old!" She cried in despair and burst into tears.

Sorrow filled the emptiness of their home and Meng tried to hold back her own tears as Grandma broke down.

"Meng, I'm sorry," she croaked, "I've faced misfortune all my life, you know that. I've tried to stay strong and determined to escape our life, to bring your father and you comfort. But

I've failed. I was strong when your Grandpa died decades ago, strong when I raised your father on my own, strong when I left everything behind for a better future here, strong when your mother died during childbirth, strong when I raised you, strong when your father went away to work, strong every time I have sold away a treasure of my home, but I can no longer be strong now. I am sorry I have not done enough to bring you a better life."

Meng failed to control her own tears from rolling down her face, stinging her dry skin as she peeled her hard-boiled egg. Like how the tough eggshell cracked under the pressure of her hands, Grandma had reached her breaking point. Although poverty was all Meng had ever known, although she knew Grandma's painful story, and although she realized their life had never improved over the years, the real gravity of their hardship now hit her all at once. As Grandma cried, guilt poured over Meng. "No. It is because of me. If I could just be a good student and get a good job like everyone else! I should be sorry, Grandma, because you have always held our family together, always provided for me, always done enough. I have failed to do my part for us all." Meng started sobbing as well. She remembered her neighbors from the morning, protesting on the sidewalk, and how she thought the small group would never be able to stop the new construction. *What's been making me believe that we won't fail either?* Another minute of silence passed.

"It is not your fault, Meng. I think I have been wrong all my life. Maybe sometimes, no matter how hard you work, you can never reach success."

"No! No, I don't believe it. You don't deserve to live this life after everything you've done."

"The world is a very cruel place."

They cried together for a few minutes. Grandma lay down, overwhelmed and still exhausted from a day of lugging the now sold wooden screen around the streets. Meng made her way to her own bed and sat down. For the first time since she was old enough to sleep on her own, there was no divider separating her from Grandma. The jackhammer droned quietly from far away, and Meng looked out at the luxury apartment project. She pictured the cityscape that was printed on every typical New York postcard, full of glamorous lights, life, sometimes even fireworks, and always a warmth of happiness. Buildings were always tall and modern, and there were certainly no dingy Chinatown streets. Sorrow turned into rage. *What does it really take to get there? I've been so naive to hope destiny would just be on our side! I've been so stupid to do so little to help, do just enough to stay afloat rather than improve, and still pretend to myself that everything will work out anyways. Surely there's a real way up, if I just put in the real effort. We need it. Grandma needs it.* She suddenly understood. *The neighbors protest, standing together in the cold no matter what, because they truly believe in themselves to make change rather than just hope for it to happen.*

Meng made a promise. "Starting today, I will work as hard as I possibly can to get us out of this life," she whispered hoarsely. "I swear, if I really, genuinely start trying from this moment on, it's possible." Grandma had already fallen asleep. Meng repeated the vow to herself over and over as she ate her egg, and was soon on her way to the gas station store to clock in, filled with a new determination to take control of her life.

Days passed by quickly as Meng put in great effort to improve herself, spending sleepless nights studying and, for the first time, looking into what she could really do in college. It was her turn to be strong when Grandma could not. She used to be ashamed to ask for help in her classes, but now pushed herself to visit professors during breaks instead of struggling alone. She avidly

applied for more jobs, searched for aid programs, and even joined the group of activists from her neighborhood working to protest the construction. Days of strenuous work turned into weeks, and it seemed that life really was taking a turn for the better as the winter passed. Meng had stabilized more sources of income and took an interest in business courses, Dad had gotten a raise and been sending more money, and there was no longer a need for Grandma to sell her things. Within a year, paying rent was no longer so difficult, and for the first time in many years, Grandma made a purchase rather than a sale— buying herself a small, jade ring reminiscent of her old cultural jewelry. It seemed that the long, bitter hardship would finally be over.

Soon two years had passed since that day she first made her promise, and Meng had been accepted for an assistant job at a newly launched startup after finishing the Business Administration Program at her college. The workplace was in an area of Manhattan she'd never been to. She awoke at 7:00 AM sharp on her first day, a Monday morning. The city was already awake with traffic as usual. It was a cold, winter day, and Grandma was still asleep as Meng tucked in her scarf and had a cup of coffee. Through her newly installed clear and framed window, she looked up at the luxury apartment project, put on hold the previous year as a result of massive Chinatown protests. Ten minutes later, Meng was on the M12 line out of Chinatown and headed towards the tallest glass skyscrapers and the brightest lights she had ever seen in person. Twenty minutes later, she was entering her new work building.

The first floor elevator doors opened and a crowd of people streamed out while a few stayed inside the elevator. They were all white men and women. One of the women quickly shook her hand and chirped, "You must be the new janitor. I'm Suzy!" Meng simply smiled as she rushed away, brushing what had happened off as a simple mistake.

The day was filled with equally disappointing encounters. She was met with stares and quick whispers of “Are you sure this is your floor?” throughout the introduction meeting, and it was only until she was introduced as an assistant that the whispers stopped— but the stares didn’t.

Meng left her first day of work quite ashamed. It was like college, but ten times worse. She had never felt so out of place and so blatantly excluded, but she was not surprised. What did surprise her was the view she saw from the windows of the workplace. Despite their great size, their polished beauty, and silver frames which screamed luxury, there was no breathtaking cityscape, no shining New York lights below, nothing at all when she looked through them. There was only an empty, dreary sky, and the faint outlines of surrounding buildings buried in gray clouds, extending upwards into nowhere. For the first time in her life, she was glad to see the dingy Chinatown streets come around the corner as she rode the bus home.

Meng arrived home in the evening with takeout food she had picked up for Grandma on the way back, only to be shocked when she opened the door. Sitting on Grandma’s bed, with his head in his hands, was Dad.

For many years, Meng’s father had worked tirelessly as a farm laborer away from home in various states, traveling with other immigrants to make money for the family. His hair shaved and skin dark from life under the beating sun, Meng could barely recognize him as the same pale, lean man who kissed her goodbye so long ago, when she did not even realize he would be gone for all of her teenage years and more. Although Dad sent money almost every month, he never wrote to them except for a few letters around every two years for Grandma, when he would be moving to new regions for work. Sometimes, if he did not send money, Grandma would worry for weeks that something terrible had happened. In an emotional reunion and with

little time for explanation before Meng had to leave for the gas station, she learned that Grandma had had a heart attack in the afternoon, and was in critical condition at a hospital.

In a matter of days, Meng's years of savings vanished to the hospital bills. She left her new job after a week, unable to stand the environment, and unable to leave Grandma alone. Dad had nothing left either after spending everything he had on his flight to New York.

It was 11:00 PM. As Meng mopped the gas station store floor, she gazed out the dirty windows at a dim cityscape. New York's postcard skyscrapers had never seemed so far away. In the far distance, she heard the very faint pounding of a jackhammer.