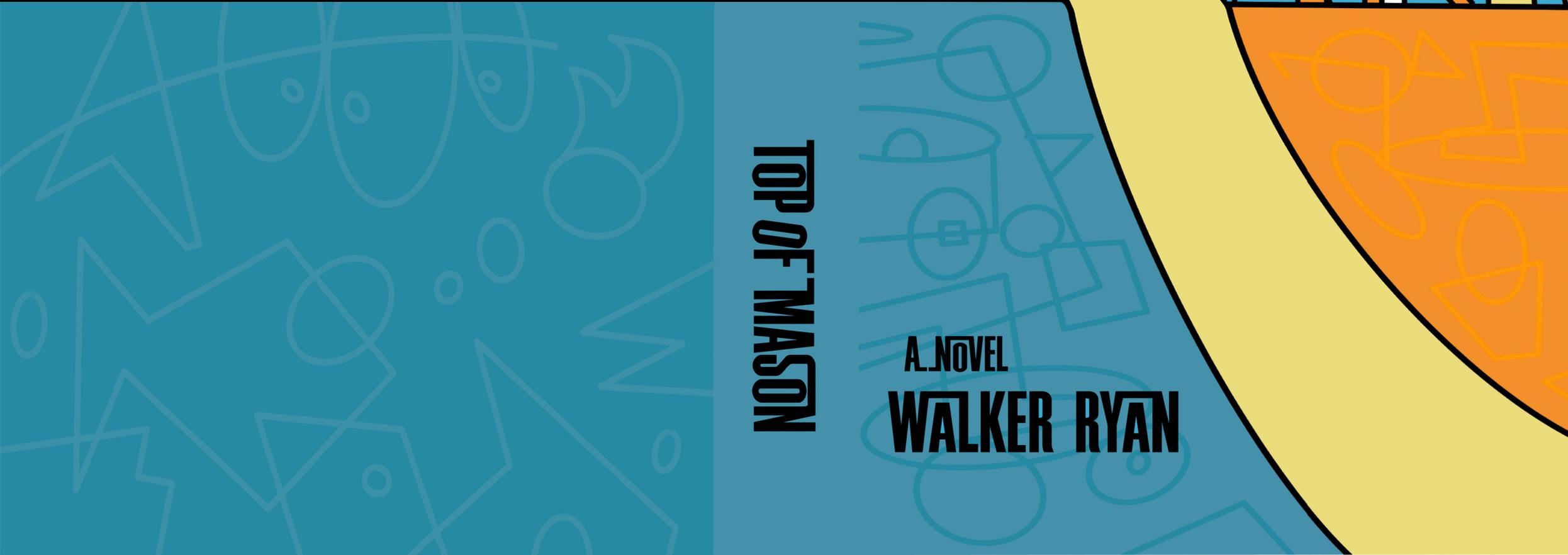




WALKER RYAN

TOP OF MASON



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A NOVEL
WALKER RYAN

Chapter 1

Henry ran through his instructions one more time. While the task seemed simple enough, his new boss struck him as the type who wouldn't tolerate any mistakes. Sitting hunched on a bench under a red, wavy overhang, he waited for the 19 bus to pick him up. The morning sun peeked through the high-rises, hitting his neck, and he could feel the familiar beads of armpit sweat drip down the sides of his T-shirt. It was one of his favorites, a shirt he'd had for years that read **Bomb Hills Not Countries**, but he hated sweating in this shirt, as the oldness exuded a more pungent body odor when, on days like this, he forgot to put on deodorant.

A loud thwack startled him as something hit the side of the bus stop, reverberating through the entire overhang, followed by a rough, gravelly voice shouting, "Get them off! Get them the fuck off me!" Henry stood up to see a white guy wearing raggedy boxer shorts and a long-sleeve button-up shirt, tightly gripping a pair of khaki pants with both hands. Spinning frantically, he smacked the pants against everything around him. His main target was an enclosed advertisement for Socialette, a new startup that had recently taken San Francisco by storm. His shirt was wide open, and he was writhing as he spun. He yelled, this time louder and more panic stricken, "They're everywhere, get them off!"

Anywhere else, a half-naked man screaming at his pants might cause interest, or at least a look of bewilderment. But Henry was just outside of the Tenderloin and as long as there was no actual weapon or potential for human-to-human contact, another crazy person yelling at an inanimate object was best ignored. He rolled his eyes and sat back down on the bench, feeling too tired for these high jinks. Between seven and ten in the morning, during what might be commuting hours for the average San Francisco resident, the party for much of the city's transient community was winding down. Henry Philip, who at twenty-nine had been living in San Francisco for just over ten years, no longer

found any entertainment value in crackhead antics. He opted to close his eyes and run back through his instructions: Take the envelope to Mr. Chan at Galves, big brick building, first floor. Then go—

Suddenly, something landed on his feet. Henry opened his eyes and looked down to see a pair of pants sitting on his shoes, then up to the pant-less culprit staring at him.

"Help me stomp them, please. Help me get all the bugs!"

Henry had conditioned himself to an approach of nonresponsiveness, but trapped inside the bus stop canopy, this couldn't be ignored. He kicked the pants off his feet and the man jumped away, into the street behind him. A car slammed on its brakes to avoid hitting him and then drove on, the driver shouting something out of the window as she honked.

The man furrowed his brow and glared at Henry. "Fuck you! There's bugs everywhere, don't you see them? We gotta stomp 'em!"

The man lunged onto the pants, jumping on them repeatedly. In a simultaneous movement, he wriggled out of his button-up and dropped it into the pile of clothing, continuing to stomp. With a crazed expression, the man looked at Henry and asked him, almost politely this time, "Aren't you going to help me?"

Henry avoided the man's gaze as he replied, "There aren't any bugs man, you're cool."

With that the man paused his stomping. He now stood naked, save for his green plaid boxer shorts. His chest and arms were smeared with black smudges, like he'd been rolling around in fresh asphalt the night before. His chicken-scratch tattoos blended with the smudges, as did several scars and scrapes, mostly on his forearms. While the man looked weathered, Henry could now see that they were likely much closer in age than he'd initially presumed. They shared a similar build—lean but toned, as he preferred to think about his skinniness. He's much less pale though, Henry thought, surprised to feel envious of the man's tanned skin.

"Am I hallucinating?" the man asked.

"I don't know, man. There just aren't any bugs."

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah dude, no bugs."

Henry fiddled with his skateboard, readjusting its placement next to him on the bench. He glanced up and then back down quickly, so as not to meet the man's determined stare. When he had looked into his eyes before, it had

been unsettling. There was a glaze to them, along with a slight jitteriness, like it was impossible for them to stay focused. Now, with the man standing so close, he couldn't help but notice that poking out of his boxer shorts was an uncircumcised penis. Seeing this, Henry stood up, grabbed his board, and walked around to the side of the bus stop.

"God dammit," Henry muttered. The last thing he'd wanted to see this early in the morning was some stranger's dick. The man followed him.

"Please, man. Just look at my back," he said, turning around. "Don't you see all the bugs?"

With a more frustrated tone, Henry responded, "No dude, I'm telling you! No bugs."

The man paused, confused. His wandering eyes looked up, then desperately back at Henry.

"Will you just scratch it for me then?" he pleaded, twisting and reaching for the middle of his back with both hands. "I'm itching so bad."

"No, I'm sorry I can't—"

"Please, man. Please. They itch! So. Bad."

Henry saw the 19 bus stopped at a light three streets away. With another minute to go before it arrived, he weighed his options. He could walk away and miss his bus, delaying his day unnecessarily, or he could hold strong his position and continue waiting, risking some kind of physical contact with the man. Shuddering at the thought of an altercation, Henry pondered his third option. He wondered if it was schizophrenia or a drug trip causing this man's insanity. Is it permanent? he thought. Who can help someone like this? He couldn't ignore him any longer. The man moved closer to him, his stench an all-out assault on Henry's nostrils. There was a rancidness that reminded him of an ashtray stuffed with cigarette butts left rotting in water for a few days. He knew the smell well from his time working as a bartender. Sometimes he left the ashtrays out in the back courtyard during a rain, and he would have to carry them to the garbage. One time he tripped and the black, murky water sloshed onto his shirt. The smell had been so resilient that even after he changed his shirt, his manager had asked him to go home and shower.

The man continued to plead. Looking at the guy, a sharp pang of sadness hit him. Begrudgingly, Henry said, "All right. Where's it itch?"

The man's eyes lit up. He turned around and pointed to a spot on his lower back. Henry took his skateboard and used the edge of the tail to scratch the man's back. He looked away, hoping to avoid seeing any more of the flakes

flying off the man's skin as he scratched.

"Lower," the crackhead ordered. Henry obliged.

His board had some serious razor tail, the plies worn down so much that they formed a sharp edge, which could slice this guy's back if he didn't scratch carefully. It had been a long time since he'd had a tail like this. When he'd been sponsored, on his way to the professional ranks, he would receive upward of eight free skateboards every month. Back then, he never had to worry about razor tail. He had also never imagined that his battered board could work so effectively as a back scratcher. The bus arrived, exhaling its deep sigh, and the doors opened for him.

"OK," Henry said as he slung his skateboard to his side and walked onto the bus. "I gotta go, man."

"Aw, thanks so much. I think you got most of them."

Henry tapped his Clipper card and looked around to make sure he didn't know anyone on the bus. He first scanned the faces for Ellen, as he did in any crowd, searching for her blond curls and piercing green eyes. Surely one of these days he would see her lovely face in the wild, sitting on a packed bus like this one, playing with her left earring the way she did when she was lost in thought. While disappointed, he was mostly relieved. He wouldn't want her to have seen what he'd just done. He had just stooped to a weird new low, one that, along with everything else that was going on in his life, he'd prefer to keep to himself. As he sat down and wiped the tail of his skateboard on his pants leg, he assured himself that it had been the right thing to do. How else was that guy going to get all those bugs off his back?

Chapter 2

Henry hopped off the bus in Bayview and looked around for Bay Head Supply Depot. After some wandering, he found the brick warehouse with a fading sign on the top. He walked in and found Mr. Chan sitting in the front room, a low-lit office cluttered with paper. Mr. Shin's instructions were ringing in his head. Take the envelope to Mr. Chan. Gray hair. Bald in the middle. No give to any other person. Very Important. Just Mr. Chan. After, say thank you and go.

He slipped Mr. Chan the envelope, dutifully saying "thank you" as he left. Deciding to spice things up, he threw in an unscripted "have a good one." Mr. Chan remained completely motionless as he stared at him, eventually offering a subtle nod that resembled more of a twitch. Henry left without saying anything else.

Back on the bus, barreling through Potrero Hill, Henry watched as the colorful array of houses flew by like a twirling bouquet. He loved watching the colors change: lime green, sea blue, bland yellow, light blue, fiery pink, gray. He wondered why the homeowners in San Francisco chose such eccentric, contrasting colors. Oh, you want to be turquoise? Fine, well I'm going to be pink! There was something almost passive-aggressive about it, if not all-out contentious.

The 19 bus bounced down De Haro Street, one of the steepest in the neighborhood. De Haro was worthy of landing any skateboarder legend status for bombing it from the top. When Henry had first moved to San Francisco, there were nights when he and his friends would comb every street for would-be skate spots, hiking up some of the most treacherous hills, rewarding themselves at the top with a joint, followed by a ride down that would bring them the rush of their lives. There was nothing like flying down the San Francisco mountains, deciding at the top to be unafraid, knowing any hesitation would end in ugliness and pain. Alcohol had always helped numb

Henry's fears, but the weed allowed him to soak up every second of the ride. There were some nights when the hills lead to parties, the parties to more hills. Sometimes in the morning he would hear about the conquests he'd made the night before and not remember any of the action. The blackouts scared him, because it was during the blackouts that he'd championed some megaliths he'd never dream of attempting sober. Riding these hills was like playing Russian roulette, gambling with the intersections that lay at the bottom or littered along the ride, praying that the stop signs would halt an intersecting car, the unlucky bullet to end a skateboarder's life. After all the hills Henry had carelessly bombed, he knew he was lucky to be alive.

Henry got off the bus at Nineteenth Street, deciding he wanted to skate down the rest of the hill. This was also close to where he used to live with Ellen—where she still lived—and he knew there was a good chance he might see her. The intersection at De Haro and Nineteenth was where the super steepness ended, but it was still hilly enough for a fun ride. He jumped on his board and quickly picked up speed. It was remarkable how fast one could get going with such little wheels on such a moderate slant. It didn't take more than ten seconds before the speed made him uneasy, so he took his back foot off and dragged it on the ground to slow down. There are too many cars on the road, he told himself. Cowering to a halt, he picked up his board and walked down the rest of the hill.

Leaving the hills of Potrero behind him, Henry got back on his board and skated toward the hotel. He kept looking for Ellen as he pushed, praying he might run into her. Weaving through the hectic streets, he felt the same energy the hills gave him, only diluted. With the hills, the rush of a twenty-five miles per hour hill bomb incited a high unlike any other Henry had ever experienced. This was the only time when the world moved at a thrilling slow-motion pace and he could remove himself from all of his problems. Skating through traffic was the beginning buzz. Split-second decision-making moments felt like long, drawn-out pauses in time. He carefully assessed every piece of his surroundings, from an approaching manhole to a pile of pebbles in the road. Even on the flatland, stooping his body low and kicking the ground with force that could knock down a door, Henry had a hyperactive ability to process every fast-moving detail he encountered. He saw disasters five steps ahead of them happening. A woman on a bicycle silently crept up from behind him and tried to pass him—he didn't let her. A Toyota station wagon a few feet ahead of him suddenly turned left without using its blinker—he swerved before

running into it. Even though he skated fast, his thoughts moved at a crawl, analyzing everything and saving himself from would-be traffic accidents. In the seconds following such moments of recovery or self-preservation, he couldn't believe those instincts were his own.

Continuing on his path, the traffic came to a gridlocked stop, so Henry swerved from the road and hopped up the curb and onto the sidewalk. He maintained his high-speed sprint, dodging pedestrians, bums, and restaurant signs. It was empowering, being able to shift between pedestrian and vehicle, knowing that if he needed to stop and join the masses of normal civilians, he could simply jump off his skateboard, snap his foot to the tail, and the board would be in his hands. It was something cyclists, scooterers, rollerbladers, and even those hoverboarders lacked, the flash transformation from an obnoxious vehicle into a normal, nondescript citizen, walking down the sidewalk. Henry liked to think of it as a superpower, going from Batman back to Bruce with the tap of his foot. Walking as Bruce, he could instantly turn back into the hero, dashing ferociously down the street. Or, depending on how one felt about skateboarders, he could become the villain, terrorizing his surroundings by scraping the pavement or rolling over cracks in the sidewalk. Or bricks. Bricks were the loudest. Whether he was a villain or a hero, he didn't give a shit. For now, he simply loved this feeling, and he savored the freedom he would lose the moment he stepped back into the hotel.

Henry was out of breath by the time he hiked up Mason Street and opened the door to the Shang Inn's lobby. The hotel occupied an old five-story building resting near the top of one of San Francisco's steepest hills. He rushed through the small lobby, happy to see the front desk empty. While the Shang Inn operated much like a normal hotel, there was one floor designated for single-room occupancy tenants, long-term "guests" who paid a weekly rate. It was downstairs, on the SRO floor, where Henry lived. Upstairs, on the main Inn floors, was where he worked.



Later that day, Henry finally asked Sherry about the top blankets. So far the two of them had made twenty-seven beds, exchanging every set of white sheets and pillowcases with fresh ones, but they had yet to replace or wash a single one of the thin woolen quilts atop each bed.

"So when do we wash these?" Henry asked, holding the pale checkered

beige blanket in both hands. Having stayed in many hotels like the one he was now employed to clean, he had always wondered about the cleaning strategy for blankets without a cover.

Sherry, the short and elderly Chinese maid he had been shadowing for the past two days, had not answered a single one of his questions with a full sentence. He wasn't sure if she could even understand English, let alone speak it. Instead, she merely shot back monosyllabic answers even if his question, like the one about the top blankets, warranted a more elaborate response.

"No," she snorted without looking in his direction. She fiddled with the remote control, likely assessing whether someone had stolen the batteries. She had done this in every room.

"Eww," Henry said, disgusted. "I knew hotels like this didn't clean them. That's fucking gross!"

Sherry set the remote control down on the dresser and looked at him. Her face was pale and puffy and the pouches beneath her narrow, glaring eyes spoke of years of sleep deprivation. She walked towards him and took the blanket from his hands.

"Va-ze-yi-ze" she muttered quickly, in what Henry assumed was some Chinese dialect. She had been doing this a lot. She then placed the dirty blanket on top of the clean, freshly changed sheets, just as they had done in every other room.

"What?" Henry asked.

Sherry ignored him as she shuffled to the other side of the bed.

"So . . . do we ever wash them?" he asked again.

"Yes," she answered as she finished making the bed, evening out the sides of the blanket so it rested proportionately on top. She stood up and slid her hands through her thin black hair and readjusted the baby-blue apron tied around her waist. Henry wore the same apron, but hers fit better. He estimated that Sherry stood no taller than five one, and even though he had almost an entire foot on her, she made him feel as if she towered over him.

"When?" Henry asked, still wanting to know about the blankets.

She looked at him blankly.

"So when do we wash them?" he asked again, now irritated.

"No," she said as she turned and walked out of the room.

That settles it, he thought. She definitely doesn't speak English.



In the next room, Sherry directed him to clean the bathroom. He started with the trash can, emptying the small bin after glancing inside, curiously. Seeing only a few used pieces of toilet paper, he looked away. Yuck, he thought. Why didn't they just flush these?

As he stood up, he glanced at himself in the mirror. It was odd, seeing himself with the apron on. It looked more like a T-shirt design, as the white frills of the apron only extended a few inches past the bottom of his white T-shirt. His face looked extra pale under the shitty bathroom light, masked only by the patchy black stubble covering his slightly hollowed cheeks. Am I eating enough? he wondered. He looked skinnier somehow. Moving closer to the mirror and pulling his hair back, it disappointed him to see that the corners of his receding hairline seemed higher than they had been a week ago. Fuck, he thought. I should not be balding. He grazed the top of his head, feeling more skin than he was comfortable with. Dad was right, he thought. He could imagine his father, as if he was still alive, lecturing him. Avoiding baldness had been his dad's obsession, and one time Henry walked in on him pulling on clumps of his dark-brown hair.

"What the hell are you doing?" Henry had asked, mystified by why his kooky dad would do something to himself that looked so painful.

"Strengthening the roots! C'mon, Henry, do it with me. You're gonna go bald with all those damn hats you wear. Just give the roots a pull! C'mon, pull 'em, Henry."

"I'm good," Henry said, rolling his eyes.

His dad looked at him like he was the one who was crazy.

"You're turning eighteen soon, Hen. I don't want to have a balding son. I'm telling you, you gotta pull the roots!"

He died shortly after that birthday. Even then, at fifty-two, his father hadn't been nearly as bald as Henry was now, so maybe there'd been some truth to what he'd always assumed was just a loony paranoia. As he replaced the tiny bodywash, shampoo, and lotion bottles, he decided that he would avoid his reflection for the rest of the day.

After finishing the bathroom, he followed Sherry down the hallway toward their eighth room of the day. The hallway was dimly lit, and the multicolored rose pattern on the carpet had long since lost its vibrancy. He figured he was nearing the end of the shift, unless there were some late checkouts in the evening. While he was curious about Sherry, he got the clear impression that she had no interest in him. In fact, she seemed to deeply resent

his presence. But Mr. and Mrs. Shin, the Shanghainese owners and operators of the hotel, had insisted that he follow her for three full work days. One more day? he thought as he waited for Sherry to unlock room 204 with her master key card. I'm not sure if I'm gonna make it.

As the green light illuminated, Sherry swung the door open aggressively, the handle slamming into the wall inside.

"Hey!" A man shouted from inside the room. "We're still in here!"

Sherry shut the door and turned to Henry. She put a hand over her mouth. He could tell from her eyes she was smiling. That was a first for them. She waved her other hand back and forth over her crotch and then snickered. That guy must have been naked, Henry thought. That's amazing.

Henry's question about the top blankets was answered later that afternoon. In the company of two stocky Chinese men, he unloaded a truck filled with plastic-wrapped blankets, all of them duplicates of the ones in the rooms. It turned out that they washed the top blankets somewhere offsite and there were extra sets for every room. They stacked the plastic-wrapped blankets in the basement next to the large washing machines. This made him feel much better about the blankets he and Sherry had left dirtied on the beds earlier. It's fine, he assured himself. There'd just been a delivery delay.

By that evening, Henry felt confident that he could manage the job on his own. He voiced this opinion to Sherry as they walked to the storage room to return the pushcart of cleaning supplies, but she didn't respond. As she opened the door, Mrs. Shin appeared around the corner of the hallway and walked toward them, her back hunched from what looked like untreated scoliosis. It was more of a duck-footed waddle really, her sandals barely leaving the ratty carpet as she hurried towards them.

"Hey-ry," she said, faster than he'd ever heard his name spoken. She pointed at him. "You talk to Mr. Shin."

She then erupted in Chinese at Sherry, who erupted right back.



Henry found Mr. Shin in the lobby working from his computer at the front desk. He approached tentatively and waited to be noticed. A blond couple with a very blond young daughter sat in the only three chairs the small space offered. The walls of the lobby were red with a series of bamboo paintings decorating them. Henry turned back to Mr. Shin and coughed, hoping

to get the old guy's attention. He couldn't put his finger on it, but there was something frightening about the short Chinese man.

"Mr. Shin?" Henry finally asked. The old man, who was probably in his seventies, did not move his head from his computer. Unlike Henry, Mr. Shin had a full head of hair. And unlike his wife, whose head looked like it had been painted white, Mr. Shin's hair was black with only hints of gray.

"Yes?" Mr. Shin replied, moving only his eyes away from the computer.

"You wanted to see me?"

"Ah, right. How did it go?"

"Um, good. Yeah, it was good. All the rooms are clean and—"

"No," Mr. Shin said, interrupting him. He removed the glasses from his head and made terrifying eye contact with Henry. "How'd it go with Mr. Chan?"

"Oh," Henry said, remembering his earlier errand. "Yeah, everything went smoothly. It was chill."

Henry nodded a few too many times, unsure of how to carry himself in front of his new boss. He had moved into the Shang Inn six weeks ago and had worked up a somewhat amiable rapport with the man, during brief encounters when he paid his weekly rent. One time they talked about the weather. But now that Mr. Shin was his landlord and his boss, he didn't know how chatty he should be.

"OK, you go now," Mr. Shin said, looking back at his computer.

"Thanks," Henry said, before turning to walk downstairs. He glanced at the family, wondering who they were and what they were doing there. While on a map the Shang Inn looked like it was in Nob Hill, Henry maintained that the hotel was really in the thick of the "Tendernob," as the hotel didn't escape the Tenderloin's ruffraff. A seediness crept its way in and a majority of the passing guests, Henry assumed, were one-night stands or prostitutes and their johns. This little family appeared wildly out of place. He chuckled and shook his head as he opened the door and bounded down the two flights of stairs to his room.