

“Dress in White”

The last time I sat by the pool at Serena Tan’s house in Malibu, I could hear but not see the ocean, though it was only a hedge and a cliff away. When I found out that she had drowned in that pool, I took out the white linen suit that had been hanging in the back of my closet for the last ten years. Usually, I wore dark suits to funerals, and I had been to a few, too many for a man my age. This time, though, I thought that Serena would approve of this white suit. After all, it was a gift from her.

I did not think that her family would have a traditional Asian funeral. Loved ones in white muslin robes. A lacquered hearse, drawn by a team of horses. A band of musicians playing zithers and gongs. Fake money burnt to ashes. Incense smoke. Hired criers. These were the ethnic Chinese funerals I remembered as a child in Vietnam. Serena was born and raised in America. Her Chinese parents still kept some of the old ways, but they would have paled at the thought of doing the unexpected. Serena, if she were alive, would have liked the thought, may be would have gone so far as put down the deposit on the criers, but would have backed out at the last moment. That was just how she was.

The pants were a little tight. I tilted my head back and looked at myself in the mirror. No gray in the black hair yet. Except for the mustache, I looked the way I did ten years ago when I walked into that theme party with Serena, her hand cool in my grasp. The theme was the roaring twenties. We were the only people there who were not white, although I wore the white suit. She wore a flapper dress, black, she'd made herself from a picture she kept in her diary-- a picture of her grandmother, in Shanghai, long before the Communists. "She copied an American dress," Serena said while sketching. She sewed the dress herself. "Some things money can't buy," she said. At the party, heads turned when she walked by.

I took the suit to a tailor I knew in the Tenderloin. Like me, he was a refugee. He liked being a tailor, but dry cleaning paid the bills. The last time I saw him was at the funeral of his father, my patient. He had died from stomach cancer, only six months after coming to America. Before he died, his family called me every day.

The tailor promised to have the suit ready for me that afternoon. I pushed open the door of his small storefront. Two boys, eight or nine years old, stood out front watching a woman at the street corner. She was tall and had an angular face partially hidden by an abundant red wig. High heels made her calves bulge in her

fishnet stockings. She looked at me and smiled. I looked back and then away. Too early in the day, and besides, my taste did not run in that direction. It took me a long time to figure out what I wanted, and I had no time for disguises.

I drove to the Castro district where Spencer Tan lived. Spencer was a poet and also played in a band. I hoped he was still asleep, even though it was early afternoon. His BMW was in the driveway.

"Hey, Michael," Spencer said when he opened the door. He wore a long black kimono, which only made him look even frailer and taller than usual. He had a drink in his left hand. I took off my shoes and tiptoed through the CD boxes, several days' worth of the New York Times, and the take-out Chinese cartons. Spencer swiped at the sofa and several books fell onto the floor. A bottle of rum, half empty, stood on the coffee table.

"I assume you heard about Serena," he said. Spencer took out a pack of Virginia Slims and lit two. He offered one to me and then crushed it when I shook my head. His long, thin fingers caressed the long stem glass as he smoked. "Look at me, I'm drinking rum out of a champagne glass." He laughed, then started to cough.

I sat on the edge of the sofa. To the left, the lacquered black surface of a baby grand reflected blurred parts of the room. On top was a bowl filled with

oranges, cantaloupes, kiwis, and a big pineapple. Next to the bowl was a pack of unopened incense sticks. I wondered if Spencer, in his own way, was preparing to set up a little altar, the sort one saw in every Chinese or Vietnamese household, at least the ones who still kept up the old ways.

"I'm drunk, but not nearly enough," Spencer said.

"I thought maybe we can drive to Los Angeles together for your sister's funeral."

Spencer put out his cigarette and sat down at the piano. He looked up at the ceiling, then down at his hands. His fingers traced out a melody that sounded familiar, like a popular song transposed to a minor key. He added some notes with the left hand, and then sang the melody. "All I know is this, my feet are sorrow here, my words are less than lilies." He paused. I looked past him and at a picture on his wall. It was a portrait of someone who looked like him, done with charcoal. The surroundings were mostly white. The man himself was wearing black, and his face was streaked with black shadows. "My words are clotted now, the ravens kissed my mouth."

"Already composing about her?"

"De-composing," Spencer said. "The music is mine, the words, Bukowski." He turned and looked at me. "You don't know shit about poetry."

I got up and looked at the picture. "I don't have time for it." The signature at the lower left corner was the same signature she used on the credit card slip for my suit, the vowels narrow, hiding between the broad strokes of the consonants.

"Some of us have to work for a living."

"That was also Serena's premise," Spencer said. "I prefer to think that living doesn't require work."

Either way, it was a bad deal. Surviving a war was like walking away from a car wreck. Some people never stop thinking about it. Me, I didn't like to stand still. I was given a chance at a life that wasn't supposed to be, and I wasn't about to waste it. A lot of people, like Spencer, took for granted what they had. What I liked about Serena was that she didn't settle for less. At least, not in the beginning.

I put on my shoes. "Anyway, I'm driving down tomorrow morning. Call me if you want to come."

Spencer nodded. "Don't wait. You know my parents don't want me there." He walked with me to the door. "You could have just called."

I stopped at the door. "You're not the only one who loved her, Spencer." The door closed behind me. I stood still at the top of the stairs. The bright sunshine made me dizzy.

I met Serena at a showing of an old movie, the first semester of my freshman year. I walked behind her up the long, curving slope of the ramp leading to the entrance. She wore a lavender wool coat. It was the beginning of Christmas break. There were only a few old couples there. Serena sat alone three seats in front of me. I went because it was free. At the end of the film, everyone left except the two of us. I sat there not wanting to go back to my dorm. I did not have enough money for a plane flight home to California.

"Powerful, huh?"

I looked up at her and nodded. The movie was slow. Some people visited an island for an outing. Someone disappeared. Life went on. I got up. She walked ahead of me, and all I could see of her was the little patch of ivory above the collar of her coat. It seemed to me that she walked faster when I started to walk faster, slowed when I slowed. At the end of the ramp, I caught up with her.

"Um, I was just wondering," I stumbled over my words. "Do you have time for a cup of coffee?"

She turned and looked at me. "Why not?"

We went to a cafe in a basement. Through the haze, I watched as she sipped espresso out of a tiny cup. She wore a simple black dress and no make-up. I

admired her high cheekbones and bright unwavering eyes. My father had told me that women with high cheekbones were bad luck, but I couldn't remember why.

I drank my coffee black; the smell made me feel warm. The taste was bitter, but since my mother's death, I did without sugar. The taste of Vietnamese ice coffee, made with condensed milk, made me want to vomit.

"Did you really like the film?" she asked. "Not many people care for that sort of thing anymore."

I looked into her brown eyes. "It was aimless."

She stared at me for a moment and then broke into a smile, her teeth all perfectly aligned. They sparkled even through the haze. She must have thought I understood the movie, so I took advantage of the situation. "An allegory for life and death."

"Some day, I want to make films like that," Serena said. "About things that really matter."

"Really? I wouldn't mind writing." It wasn't a lie, not exactly.

"Like journalism?"

"Novels," I said.

Serena leaned forward. Her chin rested on her hands, the fingers interlaced. "I would have pegged you to be pre-med or an engineer." I didn't tell her that I was planning on being a doctor.

On the way back to her dorm, she walked slowly, as if to crush out the pebbles underneath her shoes. I asked her why she had not gone home yet.

"I'm just flying home a couple of days late. I don't like to spend too much time with my parents," she said. "They're too pushy."

"I think that's a job requirement."

She shook her head. "For them, it's a calling. Let's not talk about it anymore, it's depressing."

The white steeple of Memorial Church stood tall against the dark night sky. The chill of early winter seeped through my light jacket and I shivered.

"Can I ask you something?" Serena stood on one of the steps, her eyes at the same level as mine. "How did you get that little scar above your lips?" she asked without waiting for my permission.

"My mother dropped me when I was five."

"How careless."

"It's not really her fault," I said. "When the Viet Cong attacked our town, she was carrying me in one arm and pulling my older brother along with the other." I

never understood why I couldn't have been running on my own. "I guess I was too heavy."

"Well, I'm sure she's glad that there was no other damage."

"She's dead." It was not natural to think of her as dead, even though I had had years to get used to it. My father had gotten used to it. He had remarried. "She died when we were escaping from Vietnam."

"I'm sorry," Serena said. She stood in front of me, her lavender coat unbuttoned. "Can I touch your scar?" And without waiting for me to say yes, her fingertip brushed against my upper lip.

Serena and I went out Friday and Saturday nights and slept until the afternoon on Sundays. I met boys who wore blazers to lunch in the cafeterias. Sons of ambassadors and governors. Daughters of wealthy New York bankers. A Kennedy. Serena moved among them like she was born to be there. They talked about their last trip to Europe, the opera the night before, the difficulty of getting good food in Boston.

Once, a boy asked me what I did when I wasn't in school. I didn't know if he wanted to hear about the Christmas bonus I got from the people whose house I cleaned once a week. Later that night, Serena and I lay in bed with the lights out.

She propped herself up with her arm and looked at me. "Your life is a lot more interesting than theirs," she said.

"What are we talking about?"

"I'm talking about how insecure you are."

I laughed. "I've never been to Paris, and I don't have a trust fund."

"Having money is like standing on top of tall buildings," she said. "You think you can have all that you can see, but all you can really get is vertigo." She turned and looked into my eyes. "I want to fall."

"The trouble with the fall is the landing," I said. I thought about the end of the war when my family joined the mass of refugees leaving the Highlands for Saigon. Blown up bridges blocked the way. Abandoned guns littered the highway. Up on the hills, dead paratroopers hung from trees. "I wish I could have grown up with you in Alabama."

"I wish you were there, too."

"What was that like?"

"It wasn't like we were blacks. The white people were always polite. But I knew. The looks, when they thought I wasn't looking."

"Why did your family stay there all that time?"

“My father was a rocket scientist, and Huntsville was one of the places where NASA kept some of their people. He really wanted to go to the moon, like they would have let him go with Neil Armstrong.” She shook her head and smiled. “When it was all over, it was too late to leave. Home isn’t where the heart is; it’s just where inertia sets in. So he went from sending men to the moon to inventing stuff like the bathroom mirror that doesn’t get fogged up.” She reached for a cigarette. “Our family fortune is based on moisture.”

She flicked the lighter. I watched her face, lit briefly by the flame. I could look at her face all day long, with its questioning eyes and smiles that hide. But in that half dark half light, I thought I saw longing, but not the kind that could be fulfilled by the simple act of two people being together. I watched as the light flickered out. In the darkness, I traced the contour of her face with my fingertips. The tip at the end of the cigarette glowed brighter with every breath she inhaled.

“I want to go to the moon,” she whispered.

“Falling, going to the moon, you can’t do both.” I squeezed the tip of the cigarette. The initial pain was replaced by warmth. I took the cigarette out of her mouth and kissed her lips.

“I want to fall up to the moon,” she said in between kisses.

I knew what she meant. It wasn't until later, much later, that I knew what I myself wanted. And what I wanted was that night or something like it, to reach out in the darkness and touch someone.

I left for Los Angeles before dawn. Spencer sat curled up in the passenger seat with his sunglasses on, his legs too long for my Alfa Romeo. He had called me up in the middle of the night sobbing. "I'll go to L.A., but I'm not going to the funeral. Fuck my parents."

I drove with the top up and hoped that the Alfa could make it all the way. I decided to take the Coast Highway despite the fog. As we passed through Half Moon Bay, the cold air seeped through the gaps between the cloth top and the windows. We went past Monterey and Carmel. The sun came out, and I stopped. Spencer woke up, got out of the car to stretch his leg. He looked out into the ocean.

"Robert Louis Stevenson used to live here," he said.

I said nothing as I continued to put down the convertible top. We were staring at a stretch of sand that was deserted.

"What a waste," Spencer said as he flicked his cigarette into the wind. The gray ash floated in the air like pollen.

"Stevenson?" I was thinking, why was this beach deserted and some other beach full of people? Was it the color of the sand? Was it because some beaches were meant to be solitary?

"Serena," Spencer said. "Did you know she was making a film? I mean, on her own, not as part of her job. It's kind of autobiographical." Spencer got back into the car as I started it up again. "You're in it."

I tried to concentrate on my driving. Even as early as college, Serena was filming. She made short films as part of her classwork. "Any good?"

"It was raw, but it could have been all right if she spent more time working on it and not fuck around."

"Literally?"

Spencer looked out to the ocean. "The whole Hollywood thing. Pills and booze. Sex and money."

"Sounds like somebody else I know," I smiled.

Spencer laughed. "Yeah, but I'm doing that for the experience. I think she was doing it because it was the thing to do." He shook his head. "She liked the money and the glamour too much to get anything done."

"We all only get one ride on the merry-go-round," I said.

"Live every day like it's your last."

I knew he was making fun of me, so I played along. “Don’t forget to wear clean underwear.”

“Got any booze in here?” he said as he opened my glove compartment. “Michael! I have underestimated you.” He took a drink from the flask he’d discovered. “Live fast, die young.”

“And leave a beautiful corpse,” we both said.

Serena was always shooting something or another during our time together. Once I told her that it was the sort of thing her parents did, Asian people with their cameras. She said that even though the action was the same, the goal was different. I myself was no stranger in front of cameras. In my training, we videotaped ourselves during patient interviews. Later, one of my patients videotaped me. It was shown at his wake, a part of the story of his life. I was saddened by how much of his life I didn't know. I sat between his boyfriend and his mother. She patted my hand. "You look too young to be a doctor," she said. "Wear a white coat and people will have more confidence in you."

When I told Serena this anecdote the last time I visited her in Malibu, she smiled. "You do look good in white," she said as she took a gulp of her sake. "You always did." She'd made sushi, flaying the pink flesh of tuna and placing it

carefully on top of the rolled white rice. She was thinner now than she was in college. I stood next to her and looked out the window. Beyond the pool and the hedge, the ocean lay blue and flat, occasionally disturbed only by a whitecap. I was reminded of a Vietnamese song that said that our lives were like white froth on top of the waves. I had the urge to put my arms around her waist, but I did not turn to look at her.

"You with anybody, these days?" Serena asked.

"No," I said. "I just tend my garden and wait until they reopen the bath houses."

"Yes, I can see you engaging in debauchery. At least a boy toy now and again."

"What else am I going to spend my money on?"

She took a piece of seaweed and made a handroll and handed it to me.

"What the hell happened to us?"

"Evolution," I said. "A tiny change here, a tiny change there, and next thing you know, you're not a monkey anymore." I wasn't sure if she meant us, individually, or us as a couple. The break-up was so long ago. It happened after we graduated. She went to L.A. to seek her fame, and I went to San Francisco to figure things out.

“Are you with anyone?”

I hadn't been with anyone, man or woman, for a couple of years.

"Sleeping with anyone?" I saw her face in the glass window. It wasn't sad, exactly, more like the face of someone who just walked away from a car wreck.

"No, I just fuck them and leave them."

I finished the handroll. "I hope you're using protection."

"Always." She put her knife down, turned to look at me and smiled.

“Emotionally.”

I sighed. "Why do you put up with all of this? Go and make your film."

"How many Asian women directors do you know, Michael?"

"Ann Hui. Clara Law. I just saw 'Temptations of a Monk!'"

"They are Chinese in China, Michael."

"People are making movies by borrowing on their credit cards."

Serena opened the trashcan and started to throw in the pile of skin and bones. "Didn't you want to be a writer, once?"

“I can't do my stories justice,” I said. “I take care of my patients every day, and I commit their stories, my stories, to memory because words are not enough.”

“Your words are not enough, you mean.” She shook her head. “You had the courage to leave me to go find yourself, but not to write.”

I watched as she started to cry. She had only cried one other time, when I told her I was leaving L.A. for good. I put my arm around her shoulder and she leaned back, the weight of her body pressing against the left side of my chest. "I'm afraid," she said.

"We all are," I said. We stood side by side and watched the sunset, an angry red before the nightfall.

Spencer and I stayed at Serena's house, him in the guest bedroom, me downstairs in the maid's room. Neither of us wanted the master bedroom. I could not sleep and went into the backyard. The pool had been drained, the white porcelain tiles, which had seemed so pretty through the sunlit water, now took on a tinge of yellow. The smell of chlorine persisted. I sat on the edge of the pool and dangled my feet into the emptiness.

I tried to remember Serena's face, but what I remembered was this. I remembered going to my tailor's house to visit his father. The old man lay on a mattress on the floor with a blanket over him. In the same bedroom was another mattress where the youngest son slept. The old man had propped himself up with a pillow. I looked into his jaundiced eyes and saw the faint flicker of a smile. "Thank you for coming," he said, his voice hoarse. I took his blood pressure and

listened to his lungs, as a formality. It seemed to make him feel better. We talked about nothing for a few minutes. He fell asleep. In the closet, I saw several faded white shirts, some pants, and a brown suit. Hanging on a hook on the closet door, a brown fedora. I tried to imagine him with a fedora on, but I couldn't. The hat he wore in my mind was shaped like a cone, like the kind they wear in the rice paddies. And then I thought, what else was I wrong about? Why didn't I know that Serena was going to die?

I went to Serena's funeral by myself.

Spencer kept his word. When he saw my white suit, he said "Nice touch." He was plastered.

The funeral was held at one of the nicest mortuaries in California. I drove up the long winding driveway and parked behind a long line of limousines, Mercedes, and BMWs. I walked up the fine white pebble lined path, each pebble seemingly perfectly round and uniform. They made crunching noises beneath my shoes.

I sat down in the last row. Everyone else was dressed in black. The coffin seemed very small. The lid was open. There was no incense. An old man delivered the eulogy. I couldn't hear much of what he said. Then the mourners lined up to pay their last respect. I stood in line and felt that people were looking

at me. The jacket on my white suit felt tighter than it did when I tried it on before, and the sleeves were too short. People were asked to say things on their way back. Very nice things were said, the sort of things only said when people are dead.

I stood in front of the casket. Serena lay with her hands across her breasts. She wore a simple white dress. Her face was heavily made up with lipstick and powder. Her eyes and mouth were closed. Her lips curved downward a little. I bowed.

On my way back, the door opened, and Spencer stood in the doorway. He was wearing white slacks and a white T-shirt. On his head, he wore a white hood made out of a pillowcase. As he walked to the casket, he passed by his mother who was sitting in a chair, weeping.

Spencer stood in front of the casket, closed his eyes, leaned over and kissed Serena gently on the lips. Then he walked over toward me and took my hand. "Let's go," he said. His hand was damp and frail. People stared at us.

As we stepped outside the door, a tall Asian man blocked our way. The glare of the light bouncing off his glasses hid his eyes. Spencer tensed up next to me.

"You could at least not get drunk on a day like today," the tall man said.

"Au contraire," Spencer said. "It's a perfect day for getting drunk."

I watched his father get more rigid, if that were possible. “You are lost to me,” he said, shaking his head. “Why couldn’t you have been more like your sister?”

“You mean me dead instead of her? Or more obedient and successful?” Spencer turned and walked down the pebbled path. He stopped in front of the hearse and turned around. “She wanted to fly because she was your daughter, but you only wanted her to stay on the ground. Now you’ve got what you want.”

I watched as Serena’s father’s shoulders sagged a little. I wanted to touch him and say that no one really knew what happened, that it was never anybody’s fault when these things happened. But I only extended my hand. “I’m sorry.”

He looked at me. “Are you his lover?”

I thought to myself, this is a man who looked in the mirror one morning and decided that what he really needed to do was make sure it didn’t get steamed up. And I even bought one of those mirrors for my house. “I will drive Spencer home,” I said. It was the least I could do for the old man, even if he didn’t recognize me after all these years.

Spencer curled up in my car and wept. I drove down Sunset Boulevard and out to the ocean.

“She was an excellent swimmer, you know,” Spencer said.

“I know,” I said. “It could have been the booze.” But as a doctor, I wondered if she was depressed, if I should have known that.

“I think she fell trying to touch the moon’s reflection in the pool, like that Chinese poet,” he said.

Back at Serena's house, I took him up the stairs.

"Let me sleep in the master bedroom," he said.

I undressed Spencer slowly before I put him into bed. He was so thin. I pulled the cover over his body.

There was a bookshelf full of videotapes. I found one labeled “Michael in White” and put it into the VCR. I sat on the edge of the bed and looked out the window facing the ocean. I saw my reflection, a balding man in a tight white suit with a mustache covering the scar above his lip. Then the picture came on the TV, and I turned to face it. Serena's laughter filled the sound, and I watched myself, a long time ago, in the same white suit, a white fedora on my head, a drink in my hand like a famous writer in the 1920's.