



Ho Lin

National Holiday

The Little Prince was told: Whenever possible, stay in the room. *A supervised tour of the local temple has been approved, dining out is no problem, but we advise you to stay in as much as you can during the weekend, especially on National Day.* The telephone and television had been removed, the hotel wi-fi deactivated. On the bedstand was a tiny electric tray upon which one could burn chemical wafers to keep the mosquitos away. Although the Little Prince hadn't seen the device in years, just the sight of it reinstated memories of its smothering, mentholated scent.

But why a room with *this* view of the golden slice of beach? Maybe just an attempt to pacify the journalist. He would be intoxicated by the view, and he would forget, just a little bit, why he was there and who was with him. But now the sand and ocean shimmied before them, taunting them, and the Little Prince would later blame his restlessness, and everything that happened afterwards, on the sight.

The empty beer can tumbled end over end past the Little Prince's head, hit the wall, and landed straight up on the bed, just for a moment, before tipping over in comical slow motion. *Another*, the journalist belched. They were both taking turns tossing cans, in a competition to see who would land his upright first. The journalist had opened the contest with a bottle, which of

course had splintered on impact. From that point on only cans were allowed, and now they had the hang of it, lofting them like badminton players tossing up a serve. The journalist had just finished his third beer so he was ahead in number of attempts. They hadn't unboxed the whiskey the journalist had insisted the Little Prince purchase from the hotel gift shop—some Scottish name impossible to pronounce based on the spelling. The journalist wanted to save the whiskey for National Day, so local cheap beer for now. Local and cheap—that described this place to the dot.

Drink, drink! the journalist insisted. The man had a reputation with alcohol. The Little Prince had researched him, browsed his Twitter feed (deactivated) along with the relevant message boards. To the Central Committee, he was “problematic,” and to his followers he was the Rock 'n' Roll Blogger. He had the aging rocker look down at least: gaunt like a college student, straggling hair, bristle eternal on his cheeks, skin the texture of sun-worn leather. Roaming through backwater towns and provinces on his BMW knock-off 250cc motorcycle, the journalist would infiltrate hovel and village office alike, ferreting out corresponding inequities or injustices. All it took was some casual conversations and beer. No matter the secrets you hoard in your heart, beer will always pull them out, like the bluntest set of tweezers in the world. Too blunt, by the Central Committee's standards. Rooting out corruption was supposed to happen according to a precise schedule, each infraction and its corrective announced simultaneously, all the better to emphasize the government's responsiveness. The journalist, of course, had no use for drawn-out schedules. Thus: irritant.

The Little Prince passed over the journalist's fourth can of beer. He was nursing only his second, but the journalist seemed to have lost track of where they were in their competition. The air conditioning was on full blast, with no way to turn it off, and the edges of the window panes and sills had been painted shut, as strong as glue. Accident or design? He didn't know. Like two mice under glass. When he was a kid the Little Prince's father had dragged him to a local police station in the capital, not far from the main square, right behind a KFC and Starbucks. Inside, his father had herded him into a cell, and then slammed the door closed on him, just to make a point (the Little Prince had long forgotten what the point was—respecting the power of authority, or some such). For a good half hour the Little Prince sat alone, watching the dust play under the single light bulb high above, and it was almost pleasant listening to his own rapid breaths. When he and his father were driven home afterwards, he asked his father if he himself had been in a cell before, and his father had replied: *Someday I may be.*

The journalist hefted a fresh bottle in his hand. *I could throw this at your head, knock you out, and escape.*

You could try. You wouldn't succeed.

Why did the hotel manager call you Little Prince?

My father used to live here. Big cadre back in the day.

You're a princeling, eh? That's a shame. I thought it might be a Saint-Exupéry reference.

Who?

Forget it. Western decadence. You can't understand.

The young man rolled his eyes. Not much in common. The journalist could have been a chimney, he smoked so much. Didn't act like anyone who had excelled at university, either. Still, his most galling attribute was his smell. Earlier, when the Little Prince had examined the man's luggage as a matter of routine, he had discovered threadbare flannel shirts, one pair of jeans, a few sets of soiled underwear, and nothing that resembled deodorant. Now a smell like rotten eggs was thick in the air—either the man had farted or this was his natural musk. His bare feet were stuffed into the flimsy white cloth slippers the hotel had provided. More stink.

Would you like to take a shower? the Little Prince asked.

The journalist's lips were clamped on the mouth of his bottle. He regarded the Little Prince with something close to a cross-eyed look. He finished his swig, burped loudly. *No*, he said.

What could be done? It wasn't as if the Little Prince could ask his superiors for permission to forcibly wash the journalist. He was supposed to report in after the National Holiday, and not a day before. Any earlier contact meant an emergency, thus failure. Everyone else back at the capital would be busy at parades, waving flags, maybe enjoying an immortal second or two on national TV. This little sojourn with the journalist was intended to be circumspect, and forgotten out of existence almost immediately. It was why they had picked this comatose seaside town, far out of season.

You know this town well? the journalist asked. He was staring out the window at the beach, the tufted waves.

Not really. My father grew up here, but my family moved to the capital before I was born.

Became a bigwig and cashed in, eh? Congratulate him for me.

He's in the hospital. In no condition to receive congratulations.

Really? What happened?

With an effort, the Little Prince said, *If you're hungry, we can order room service.*

Another *bang* as the journalist tossed his bottle at the wall. This time it was a hard throw, and the bottle made it to the bed in two uneven pieces.

You're disqualified, the Little Prince said. His face was wet. Blood? Splinter from the bottle? No, just cheap beer.

I passed through here years ago, the journalist said. *Just after it became a vacation getaway for Great Leaders. Back when all these Soviet-style hotels were new, but they looked old and beat-up even then. And I've met people older than me who remember when this whole place was all coastal forest. That's when you realize you're just an insignificant link in this gigantic chain...*

The Little Prince screwed his eyes shut, hoping that the taste of beer would eradicate the journalist's smell, or at least dull his ears to the man's lecture. It didn't matter whose side you were on—it always came down to lectures. A lot of talk, and what had it gotten the journalist? Labels like “disruptive” and “unpatriotic,” years wasted in house detention and prison. And each time, the journalist would be taken aback by the official response. Such a spectacular lack of understanding about how the world worked. Like a child expecting a different reaction from his parents every time he threw his food on the floor.

Once you take away all the trees, that's when the wind comes in. Stirring up all the loose dust. Erosion. I've seen it happen in the interior. The local authorities don't care about that. We won't be around when there's nothing left but shit, so who cares, right? Funny thing is, just a few weeks ago...

The Little Prince had emphasized the rules during arrival: *We have a decent budget for food, and can eat out anytime. There will be no demands on you during your stay, no struggle sessions. In return, no using other people's phones or computers or tablets, no posting of any content. Absolutely no political discussions with strangers.* Both men knew the journalist was well within parameters by gabbing away like this in private, and the journalist didn't give a damn if the Little Prince reported the subject matter—it was nothing he hadn't posted before.

I visited a factory town once in the central provinces, the journalist went on. They burned coal day and night. When I arrived the sky was black, truly black. Never seen anything like it. So much soot in the air that the moon was red as blood. The people who lived there were black ghosts. Two eyes, white as diamonds, the rest of them black. Black on the outside and on the inside. In the lungs, in the belly. I bribed someone to check the death registries. Do you know, life expectancy in that region is...

The man really needed a shower. The Little Prince could force him. He could assume responsibility for that unilateral decision. If the journalist became uncooperative, he could call in the third member of their group, the moon-faced comrade stationed outside the door. They could turn on the water full blast, pin the journalist, and they'd all get soaked, which wasn't such a bad idea on a day like this. Still, there would be a lot of fuss, and the young man wanted to avoid his colleague as much as possible, since he liked him even less than the journalist. Clearly the man was from the sticks, with that vacant stubborn look on his face so many had out there. The Little Prince knew that if he ever fell from favor, he would be under the heel of men just like him. He would be dispatched to a remote region where the summers were brutal and the autumn would last a week or two at the most before winter crashed in. He would shovel manure, or lay scalding blacktop, and the local peasants would be his supervisors. They would stand off to the side, smoking and laughing at him, cajoling and denying, and every once in a while granting, if in the proper mood. It was the unique privilege of intellectuals to be subservient to the peasants in the end. Naturally his colleague and the journalist got on just fine, trading cigarettes as if they were old buddies. The Little Prince didn't smoke himself, not after what he saw it do to his father.

Aloud, the Little Prince said: *If you talked like this in the old days, you would be blindfolded, and hot cooking oil would be poured down your ears.*

The journalist laughed. *Who says that hasn't happened?*

Let's not pretend, the Little Prince said. You don't want to be here and I don't want to be here, smelling your stink. If we go out for a drink, will you stop with the black lungs and deforestation?

The journalist didn't answer, but his feet were already back in his lumpy black boots. Within a few minutes they were seated on the emptied-out hotel veranda, just above the beach, baking in the heat. It had to be some kind of temperature record—this time of year was notorious

for fog and drizzle. Just further torture. Who wanted to be stuck alongside this stinky journalist on a day like this, when the cool blue water was a mere minute in front of them? Even the Little Prince's colleague had the benefit of being stationed a few tables away. Fine, let him stay away. His impassive act was wearisome. It would have been better if the man was hostile, obsequious, anything. The Little Prince let his gaze wander over to the backsides of the other hotels, most of them closed for good, mottled by mildew. At the town's peak a decade or two before, the bustle would have stretched down the beach for miles.

The hotel manager approached, and once again the *How are you, Little Prince?* Hot tea was poured—why did this country insist on drinking hot tea in hot weather, the Little Prince wondered—and menus in wrinkled laminate were passed around.

Popular here, aren't you Little Prince? the journalist said.

Came here a few times when I was a kid, the Little Prince answered. He was just old enough to know that one tends to romanticize youth, but the place really had gone to shit. Same tablecloths as years before, blanched by the sun. Cobwebs upon cobwebs clumped in the corner of the awning, like tiny cities that had disintegrated before achieving critical mass. Off to the side, in the shade, a fox terrier was collapsed on his side. The animal was panting with the ferocity of a choo-choo train. *You and me both,* the Little Prince thought. The hotel manager usually locked the dog in a wire-mesh cage only a few feet high, so being allowed to lounge around, even in this heat, must have been a luxury. More than anything, the Little Prince wanted to find a scooter and buzz around the bend of the shore to the windward side. A nice secluded restaurant somewhere, Christmas lights for decoration, local eats: fried rice, diced ham, miniature shrimp, green onions, eggs cooked halfway between scrambled and over easy. Here the hotel menu was tourist-centric: hamburger (he grimaced at the thought of a patty burned to black, a bun on the verge of collapse) and pizza (he didn't even want to think how that would look).

Look at all that... the journalist was staring across the broad expanse of beach, out to sea. *The time it takes to walk down there, you might run into two people,* he murmured. *Walk the same distance in the city, and you'll bump into hundreds, thousands. Just shows there's a long way to go. So much more we could fuck up.*

The Little Prince cleared his throat.

You seem awfully young to be "traveling," the journalist pressed on. *They run out of bodyguards?*

No, they just deemed you less important than the other activists. The Little Prince was happy to get in that little jab, at least.

I'm honored. You've done this before? Any dissidents try to escape on your watch?

No political discussion. That was the deal.

Just asking. Not like I'm going to write about this.

I know you aren't.

You know the original Greek root of the word "politics" is basically "citizen"? We're simply two citizens, talking.

I know, because “We all have an obligation as citizens to ask questions.” I’ve read your blog. Does your wife ask you questions about your mistress?

Ha! Now you’re talking politics. What’s he thinking about, I wonder?

What? The Little Prince followed the journalist’s gaze over to the other minder. The man had lounged back in his chair, ankle crossed over knee, shirt unbuttoned to mid-chest, affecting an air of indifference. Yet his face was drenched in sweat.

My theory is that he’s observing you, not me, said the journalist. *He’s going to report on your performance.*

If that’s true, then maybe you can make a run for it. It’ll look good when I have you on the ground, with your arm broken.

The journalist laughed, a great stinky laugh, and for the first time the Little Prince noticed that his incisors were as sharp as fangs. *Fuck it! I like you, even if you don’t want me to.*

The manager returned with complimentary cheap beers. The journalist wanted something called “sex on the beach,” and the manager threw up his hands in apology, completely uncomprehending. He did snicker at the name of the drink, though.

How is your father? the manager asked the Little Prince. The man’s jaws were working on gum, smacking up and down, seized with nervousness or excess energy. *Haven’t seen him for a while. Tell him to come back, we’ll make sure we have a banquet ready. On the house, naturally.*

The Little Prince couldn’t look at the man. He didn’t deserve this deference. Was his father truly the manager’s old buddy, or was the manager just presenting this face to the son of the powerful official? This was the basic stratagem for living: Be nice to those who you can’t afford not to be nice to. And what would the manager say if he told him about the current state of the powerful official who was his father?

The Little Prince asked him: *Is your niece around?*

The manager sighed. *A sad story. Who knows where she is these days? She was always a little crazy, you know.* With a final significant look, as if acknowledging that certain things should not even be uttered, he departed.

The journalist regarded the Little Prince with awakening interest. *What’s that all about?*

Old friend, the Little Prince said. Just being on the veranda was bringing back memories. She would sit across the table from him, both their legs too short to reach the ground. She was too thin back when they first met, and she would only grow thinner as she grew taller. Her eyes, though, were big, too big for the rest of her. They had an unreal gleam to them. He kept forgetting her name, so he just called her Little Niece to her face, or Summer Girl inside his head. He was never able to stop staring at the mole at the tip of her nose. Rather than sitting flush with the skin, it rose like a little bulb. Surely she knew how prominent it was. Why didn’t she ever have it removed?

Tell me about her, the journalist pressed on.

Nothing to tell.

Is she the one who’s been sending you texts all day? Don’t think I haven’t noticed.

That’s someone in the capital.

Playing the field, eh? A girl in each town?

That's your technique.

Tell me about the one in the capital, then.

She likes to think I'm her boyfriend.

Oh, aren't we confident.

The Little Prince snorted. *Not me. She sends me bunches of photos from her day. She works at the Convention Center. Same shit all the time. Female presenters in bikinis—*

—With no hips, I bet, the journalist interjected.

—and men in dark suits and greased hair.

The standard Party look? Hair dyed black, everyone wearing the same dark suits?

No sense of style, the Little Prince muttered. You'd think they'd loosen up a bit. And don't even think about telling people I said that, because I'll deny it.

Very careful, aren't you?

And the aggravating thing is, her photos are always blurry. She doesn't know how to take photos but she takes them all the time.

So teach her.

She's not my type. We'll go to a movie, or the theater, and there's a video she'll want to see, and she'll play it right there on her phone, in the middle of a show, full volume. Just obnoxious. Like a lot of people in this country these days.

You're above all that, are you?

I didn't mean that.

So what does your mother do?

She died when I was young.

What's your father up to these days?

How about you shut up, and we'll go for a walk.

The three of them made their way down to the sand, the Little Prince's colleague maintaining his distance behind them. The Little Prince could imagine that he and the journalist were important Mafia dons in a Hollywood movie, replete with entourage of trailing bodyguards. The Little Prince's slacks were dark, polyester, and now stuck to his legs with sweat. Just as stylish as our great leaders, he thought. Beyond the abandoned hotels and a thicket of tallow trees at the far end of the beach, music was playing, too distant to discern melody or language. Without thinking or discussing it, they headed in that direction. It was that magic time of day in which the light glancing off the waves was brighter than the sun in the sky. The Little Prince was reminded of when he was a kid, splashing in the water, sand under his toenails and salt in his eyes. His father would tow him along, his middle three fingers easily grabbing his tiny hand.

You're a tough one to figure out, said the journalist. You're clearly not a regular official. They're way more formal. Plus they'd take full advantage of that expense account and get us a few seafood banquets. You're a princeling but you haven't taken the bait on my little rants, and you don't seem so corrupted. So who are you?

I'm just trying to do my job.

Spoken like a true proletariat. Or opportunist.

They were leaving the main stretch of hotels behind. Beyond the drooping trees, the beach was laced with random shards of stone and splayed-out seaweed. On a rise just above the sand, a row of small open-air bars fanned out. The structures had been fishing shacks in their previous lives, but cherrywood had replaced particle boards, fish hooks had been stripped out for drink cabinets, and neon signs had been planted. The Little Prince remembered these bars from his summer vacations. Each establishment would blare music through muscled-up DJ speakers. It was a carnival and competition—which bar would overcome through sheer volume? Move a few meters and the ballad of a local chanteuse would sharpen into a Western disco tune.

On this evening, the beach was empty, and all the shacks chained and boarded up, save for one. It didn't even have a name; the only thing that differentiated it from the others was the coat of red paint on the barn-like doors, which had been pulled wide open. The song was originating from inside: Captain and Tennille's "Love Will Keep Us Together."

The Little Prince couldn't help smiling—he knew this particular bar well. He had always had a weakness for it because of the jukebox. Either by design or malfunction, the jukebox could only play three songs. His father would bring him here whenever he had dealings with the local officials, and it would always be an event he could brag about back at school: *I'm the only kid they ever allowed in this bar!* While the Little Prince's father gabbed away over beers (alcohol, the keystone of any successful deal), he would stand sentry at the jukebox, staring at the song selections as they flipped back and forth on their tiny steel hinges.

As they arrived, the solitary woman tending the bar counter didn't give the journalist a second look. Of course no one out here would be familiar with him, reasoned the Little Prince. In this town no one gave a shit about the plight of coal miners, or why the water supply of a small mountain town in a different province where locals spoke an unrecognizable dialect might be getting poisoned. No one cared because there were already enough things that needed to be gotten on with, and one would simply go crazy if one thought about an entire nation's problems.

Sex on the beach for everyone! the journalist belted out, slapping the counter like a sailor fresh off a year-long cruise.

Got it, the woman said. She pulled out three mini-bottles of vodka, like those found in a hotel room minibar.

What's your name? the journalist asked. *Wait. No real names. What's your English name? Do you have one?*

Yes. Maddie.

Oh. He sighed. *That's bad. I used to know a woman with that name. I hated her. That means you'll have to work extra hard to impress me.* He said this very solemnly, as if it was a sacred task not for the faint of heart.

Okay.

You don't have a guitar, do you, Maddie?

Nope, sorry. She drew out the word *sorry* so it became a drawl, an invitation.

That's too fucking bad. I'm pretty good. At least, better than this guy over here. He winked at the Little Prince. Young people, they only do karaoke these days. Me, I can play three chords and the truth.

The truth about what?

Me. How old do you think I am?

She gave him a look, a quick one. *Sixty?*

You flatterer! Fifty next month. I hope I don't make it to sixty. The older you get, the more mistakes you make.

You must be making a lot of mistakes, then.

He laughed—again the fangs came out—and she joined in.

When you reach the point where your mistakes outnumber the things you get right, what's the use of living? Don't answer. Hey, Little Prince, say something. You nervous being around this lovely girl?

"Little Prince"? She laughed. Is he right, Little Prince?

You're a silly old man, the Little Prince said to the journalist. The words just came out, without hesitation or thought.

The journalist beckoned for fresh shots, and Maddie obliged. *I'm silly, and you're the one paying for the drinks,* he said. *But you see, Maddie? He was too shy to tell you. The indecision of youth. Me, I can say that I do exactly what I wanted to do. And for the next five years, that will include hanging out with you.*

Five years with you might be a bit long, she said.

The Little Prince guessed she was about his age. She wore her hair in a simple ponytail, like all the young girls in propaganda posters, the non-city girls. She had the untouched, freckled, natural appearance most women in small towns have before the hard life takes hold, before the premature wrinkles and age spots. An aquamarine tank top hung loose on her shoulders. No breasts to speak of, but he didn't mind that. So much anxiety about how local women's breasts couldn't compete with those in other countries, but then they wouldn't have to worry about old age, and boobs hanging down to their stomachs.

You're right, the journalist said. *A couple of days of me would be enough. What song next? Got any Sade?*

Who?

Sade. "Smooth Operator." If you ask me what sex sounds like, I would say it sounds like her voice.

Oh, she said.

This jukebox plays only three songs, the Little Prince said. *Captain and Tennille, John Denver—*

Okay! No one move. Another round, Maddie, shots this time. Any liquor you like. I'll take care of the jukebox.

A fresh set of glasses was deployed before the Little Prince. In the fading light the drinks had a licorice hue. To black livers, the Little Prince thought, and threw back the drink.

So you've been here before, Maddie said to him.

Been a while. Is the cat still around?

Which cat? A lot of them wander through.

It was a tuxedo. I think her name was Panda. About that big. Kind of had the face of a martial arts master. Shed her fur a lot. The last time I was here she was seven years old.

When was that?

Seven years ago. He thought: Was that cat here? Or some other bar? Maybe it was somewhere else. He didn't care. He just wanted to talk to her.

That's a while. What kept you away?

I live in the capital now. He knew it sounded boastful as soon as he said it, so he added a little shrug, as if to say, *No big deal.*

Nice. She was smiling now. Or at least she seemed to. Jägermeister—that was what the Little Prince had just drank. He knew it from his days over at Embassy row, hanging out with all those foreign students and tourists. He was loath to move his head, or shift his eyes. Right now they were resting on the bar woman's bare shoulder.

You been there? he asked.

The shoulder shrugged. *Vacation. It was okay. I was alone, and it's better to travel with friends.*

Well, you have one now.

Uh-huh, she laughed. She put out a plate of halved bananas. *No, I don't know any cats named Panda. She probably died a while ago.*

Or she moved on. Sought out new territory to conquer.

Founded a new nation, she agreed.

Sired hundreds of citizens already. Starting anew. The younger generation always improves on the old.

And thank Heaven for that, the journalist cut in, sweeping up his shot glass. *Old people always fuck things up. I can't get the jukebox started.*

If you selected the song, it'll start in a minute, the Little Prince said. *It takes its time.*

They were all at the bar now, partaking of the bananas. They ate in silence, the peels wilting on the plate, the air soon fragrant with banana breath. The journalist and the Little Prince's colleague were sharing cigarettes again, and the Little Prince didn't care. He didn't even mind the mosquitos buzzing about their drinks—they were just trying to enjoy their sliver of time before the night breeze blew in. John Denver was on, and they all mouthed the lyrics silently, for somehow it was one of those songs that everyone seemed to know. Then the song hit the first chorus, and as if it had been pre-planned, they were all singing out loud, even the Little Prince's colleague. The journalist had badly accented English (that was to be expected, the older generation didn't have foreign teachers back then), but he gamely kept up as they all warbled about mountain mamas in West Virginia.

The Little Prince was looking at Maddie. She was drumming her fingers on the bar in an improvised counter-rhythm. He wanted to see under her tanktop. Meanwhile, the journalist had

crossed the line between melody and shouting. It was all okay; they were all a little drunk and a little goofy. And then, just as quickly as this pleasant realization had dawned on them, the song ended. They all sat speechless, staring in different directions, allowing the chattering of the cicadas to fill the lull. The Little Prince blinked lazily. The buzz from the alcohol was radiating through his head in waves.

Somehow they ended up on folding beach chairs. A handful of them had been spread out in front of the bar, on the sand, facing the ocean. Like everything else, they were unraveling a bit. It was difficult to know how much time had passed, and the Little Prince was feeling too languid and satisfied to check the time on his phone, which was buried deep in his slacks, away from prying fingers. Captain and Tennille were on again, and the red sun hung just over the water now, about the length of a thumb above the waves. Next to him was the journalist, holding his empty shot glass, a couple of spent cigarette butts planted there. Miracle of miracles, the man didn't stink any more—the Little Prince could only smell the salt of the sea. The other minder was over by some bushes, his back to them. By the way he was crouched, his hands in front of him, it was clear he was taking a piss. Typical provincial, thought the Little Prince.

Arise, arise! the journalist sang tunelessly. Was he about to sing the national march? Then he coughed. *I mean, Sink! Sink!* He threw his hands towards the sun, as if making an offering.

The bar woman had emerged with some freshly cooked green onion pancakes. For the first time the Little Prince had a view of her legs; they were thinner than her arms. The pancakes had been cooked with eggs, the eggs fried over easy first before being tucked inside the dough.

Disregarding decorum, seized with hunger, they each grabbed a pancake. Soon their fingers were itchy with grease. Napkins were in short supply so they rubbed their hands against the fabric of their chairs, bringing them to a shine. Still tipsy, the Little Prince held back from speaking while the journalist and the bar woman bantered. Where was she originally from? A small town the next province over. Why was she here? Just someplace to be for the summer. But summer was over. Maybe she would stay for the winter too, as she was in no hurry to get home. But how did he know she wasn't a local? It was something in her eyes, something that indicated that this was all new to her. The journalist explained: *Nothing is more inspiring than seeing someone excited about life.*

You think? She frowned. *But it's only temporary. Soon I'll have to move on, and find another place that excites me.*

It's tough, isn't it? We all want to find the right place, so we can be... permanent. But nowhere is completely right, so eventually you settle for something less.

Inspiring words, said the Little Prince.

Ignoring him, the journalist said: *Ever go to an author reading? When an author talks about his book before he reads it, and you get excited by the author's passion... and then the author starts reading, and the book turns out to be pretty bad?*

Yes.

That's what living in this country feels like.

What's that? interrupted the Little Prince. He pointed down towards the water. From their vantage point, higher up on the beach, it looked like a charming little tiled roof, but that seemed unlikely, given the object's proximity to the ocean.

Want to see? Maddie had a look in her eyes, and the Little Prince thought: *Yes, there it is.*

She swung the doors of the bar shut, locking in Captain and Tennille, and led them towards the unidentified object. She toted an LED lamp inside the papery confines of a traditional red lantern, fat and balloon-like, as if yearning to float skyward.

Do you look like your father? the journalist asked the Little Prince.

Why do you want to know? The Little Prince was annoyed anew. It was uncanny how the man could bring up stuff he didn't want to talk about.

They say that when a child is born, he looks like his father. It's a natural survival adaptation. A father is less likely to abandon a baby if it looks like him. But then as you grow, you can start looking more like your mother, or somebody else. Almost like you're choosing to be who you want to be. So who do you look like now?

I liked you better when you were singing badly.

In response, the journalist burped. The Little Prince burped a moment later. Soon they were in a belching contest, the journalist rearing up like a giant beast when it was his turn, marshalling the sound in his chest before unleashing. As they came closer to the water, the surf all but overwhelmed the burping, so they ceased.

What had looked like a roof was the top of a house boat. It was a boxy affair built to accommodate eight to ten people, and manifestly incapable of handling the ocean, even in ideal working condition. It was pointed optimistically towards the ocean, and that was as far as it had ever gotten. Now it was entrenched in the soggy sand a good distance from the water, listing permanently. Someone had hung an oak board over the windows on one side, perhaps for a sign that had never been painted. If there had been glass in the windows, it was long gone, and the slice of hull above the sand had ripened with rust.

Did somebody think they were going to be able to take this thing to sea? the Little Prince said.

Maybe some rich idiot, the woman replied. *Or they wanted to turn it into another bar.* She had brought a bottle of red wine—cheap, French, and good. They kicked off their shoes and settled down on the sand to pass the bottle around, leaning back against the side of the boat. The Little Prince laid himself on his side, opposite the journalist and Maddie. The sand was sticky against his arms, but it felt good to sink into it. As usual, the Little Prince's colleague was content to keep his distance. He squatted at the edge of the water, his shoes still on, and every so often a pure white cloud of cigarette smoke escaped him.

The journalist and Maddie were side by side, both their legs stretched out. In the lantern light, they looked closer in age, like brother and sister. The journalist gave her knee a little poke with his, and she poked back. *So why are you here?* he asked her. *I ask a lot of questions, you see. It's my job.*

Will this be published somewhere?

Nope. Because I'm terrible at my job. Or at least, terrible at being published. But I'm hungry for people's stories.

She took a deep breath, than shrugged. *Got nowhere else to be. No family. I just move from place to place.*

Where's your family?

Father left me and my mom at an early age. Then my mom went a little crazy. She didn't have any jobs, any friends or family who could help. Zero prospects. So she tried to kill me.

The journalist placed his hand on her shoulder. *Damn you,* thought the Little Prince.

She took me out to the woods, Maddie continued, and she tried to slash my wrists. I think her idea was that she would kill me, then kill herself. I was five years old, but I had a sense of what was happening. So I broke away and ran. The police took my mom in after that. For a while I stayed my with my aunt. She was nice, but I hated being there. One of those places where every healthy person goes to the South to work in the factories the whole year, and they only come home for Spring Festival. The rest of us, the old people and ,kids stay at home and farm all day, for barely any money. What I remember about living there is everyone coming home for the festival, a couple weeks of banquets and laughing, and then back to sadness and hunger the other 50 weeks of the year. So I left. Seen so many towns, I can't count them.

She let out another *Hmm*, not on the verge of another thought so much as punctuating the end of the story.

Thanks for telling me that, said the journalist.

You've heard stories like that before? she said.

Similar ones. I've been around a lot too. And I'm being serious here, I have great respect for you. I believe that travelers know more than other people. You will forever be wiser than everyone else your age.

It's nice to think so, she said.

Her head was at a quizzical angle as she leaned back against the hull. The Little Prince thought of the ancient marble vessel at the old Summer Palace in the capital, forever moored in the lake. This ship was nowhere near as grand, and yet both were beached, both had never experienced ocean, and both were smothered in melancholy. He thought: *Even empress dowagers and millionaires disappear, but they leave their clutter in their wake, reminding us that they were here.* Maddie, with her hair down over her shoulder like that, resembled a portrait of a woman sitting by a frosted window, or looking out from a pagoda somewhere amongst surging mountains, awaiting someone's return.

She passed the wine bottle back to the journalist. *Are you married?* she asked him.

He took a short, confident swig. *Yes.*

But no wedding ring.

My wife and I have an arrangement. We don't see each other too often, anyway.

Doesn't sound very easy.

Ask him about his mistress, the Little Prince said. He hated bringing it up the moment he said it, but he was in an ornery mood all of a sudden.

Mistress?

Sure, I've got one up the coast. He struck up a cigarette. She has a boy. I support both of them.

Your kid?

Yes. At least, she tells me he's mine. Guess I never thought to confirm it.

Or you just didn't care.

Sure. It's fair to say that, even if it's not true.

One of my friends married early, she said. He and his wife can't stand each other. Arguing with each other day and night. I asked him why he didn't do anything about it. He said, Because it's just easier not to deal with it.

Fuck... The journalist hacked up some smoke. Fuck that. That's what happens when you don't know how to get what you want. You go insane.

What does your wife want? asked the Little Prince.

I said, we have an arrangement. I don't worry about her, she doesn't worry about me. We're okay with it.

Again she made the hmmm sound—this time it sounded like a query. I don't know if you're being mature or inhuman.

The journalist laughed. My brain's got limited capacity. I can only worry about so many things.

I feel like a swim, Maddie said. Anyone want to join?

I can't swim, said the journalist. I get seasick too. I'm more of a mountain man.

Oh yes? she said, her eyes teasing. Too bad.

I'll just relax a bit, and watch you.

Me too, said the Little Prince. I mean, I have to watch him. Make sure he stays out of trouble.

She said Hmmm again. This time it was sardonic. She handed him the lantern and trotted off towards the edge of the shore. For a few moments the Little Prince could see her long limbs as they swayed forward; then she hopped into the water, and within seconds she was beyond the lantern's diameter of light.

Loving that girl is easy acapella, said the journalist, in English.

Huh?

Just a Sade song.

Do you think your Western influences make you cool?

No. I do think about Miles Davis a lot, though.

The trumpet guy?

That and much more, but the specifics aren't important. The point is, he brought up a lot of young musicians. Coltrane, Herbie Hancock, Tony Williams. He started a legacy, he got other people involved. I like that idea.

You better be careful, said the Little Prince. With talk like that, you might get accused of fomenting dissent.

Is that what you think I'm doing?

Fuck! The Little Prince yelled. The accumulated alcohol had done its work, and he needed to shout just to shout, because his body was so antsy. *Who gives a fuck what I think? Have some common sense. How do you think it looks to the Central Committee? I try to give you some fucking advice for once and you pull your interviewer crap. You ever think through the consequences of what you do?*

The journalist laughed. *This isn't a conversation for sober folks. Have more wine.*

I've already had enough. And you're not going to get me to drink so much that I'll say something I'll regret.

Shit, is being careful the hallmark of your generation or what? Sit through too many self-criticism sessions? All you think about is what you're not supposed to say.

It's called being smart. You should try it.

You know what you make me think of? A stone skipping across the water. You'll keep going for a while, you might think you're getting somewhere, but soon you'll disappear for good.

I could say the same for you.

With matching grunts they hauled themselves up. They strolled around to the port side, wine spilling after them like liquid crumbs. Just ahead of the houseboat, a canary-yellow inflatable dinghy lay dormant, tethered to the boat's prow. To the Little Prince, the sight of the small craft hooked up in such a manner, as if it was expected to drag the boat out to sea, was pitiful. The journalist staggered up the abbreviated stairs in the side of the houseboat to the deck, and the Little Prince followed with nary a hitch in his step (*Score one for my generation*, he thought). The cabin was all long shadows and floorboards that crackled underfoot. Save for two benches along each wall, it had been divested of all furnishings. There was a strong odor of something that might have been alive once—probably fish. To the Little Prince, it was preferable to the journalist's scent. The journalist sank down flat on one of the benches with a groan, and soon cigarette smoke was spiraling away from him towards the ceiling, like a cyclone in slow motion. The Little Prince sat upright on the opposite bench, the lantern at his side, casting reaper-like shadows all around.

Maybe we should go back to the hotel, he said.

You wouldn't want that, said the journalist. *I'm a very bad snorer. You wouldn't be able to sleep for one minute. I talk in my sleep too.*

Better and better. Your wife must love that.

One time I was dreaming about being surrounded by spiders. I've seen a lot of spiders in my time. So I started shouting in my sleep: Spiders everywhere! They're on the walls! The floor! Scared the piss out of my wife. She just ran out of the bedroom screaming murder.

I would have done exactly the same. I fucking hate spiders.

Ha! I can imagine you running out of the room, too.

They both had an honest chuckle at that one. The journalist took in another gulp of wine, and gargled it.

The Little Prince asked: *What did you mean, you've seen a lot of spiders?*

In prison, said the journalist.

Oh.

I actually don't mind spiders too much. Rats, on the other hand... I had to raid a rat's nest for food once... but for some reason I don't dream about them. We don't have to talk about it.

I wasn't going to ask.

Not much to tell, anyway. I was one of the lucky ones. Just got a taste of the "reform through labor" bit. The bad part lasted only about two months for me. I didn't have to inform on anyone for favors, I didn't end up with a broken back or anything chronic. Not that it was easy. To be starving, really starving, ready to eat anything that isn't bolted to the floor—I wouldn't recommend it.

And yet you keep getting yourself into trouble.

I don't think about consequences—you said it. I think about the future. A hundred years ago our ancestors were shoveling manure. Now here we are today, drinking sex on the beach. Because the future tends to be better than the past. And the only reason this is true is because people work at making it so. They fucking slave at it.

Or maybe it doesn't matter, said the Little Prince. You can stir things up as much as you want, but all these things you go to prison for will be gone and forgotten someday, and not due to any action you take. With or without us, the world goes on.

Ha! That is some dark shit, young man. Or else it's the most idealistic thing I've ever heard. So it doesn't matter what we do, because we're destined to keep moving forward?

I mean... The Little Prince's words were starting to slur, and he knew it. I'm not talking about karma or religion or even politics. But—forget it.

Look at that. The journalist pointed his finger straight up, towards the heavens. The Little Prince was confused for an instant, but then he saw that he was indicating the porthole, and the moon sliding into view on the other side.

Reminds me of the poem— the Little Prince began.

With the sing-song, smart-aleck attitude of a grade school student, the journalist recited:

The moon outside the window

Lighting the ground

Resembles a touch of frost.

Feh! he grunted. *Why do we spend so much time memorizing rote stuff? Classical poetry, ballroom dance patterns, English vocabulary words for the GRE. No wonder we're in the rut we're in. Give me jazz every time.*

We all have to start somewhere. A common base, so we can relate to each other.

Boring. Like this talk is getting boring.

And yet I bet you can recite what went down in the International Hotel Conference fifty years ago, just before the revolution. You harp on the mistakes, and you dismiss the stuff that's made us great.

Great? Today the emperors have chauffeured rides in Buicks. That's what qualifies as great these days.

You can't enjoy anything for long, can you? Do you know how fucking lucky you are that I even let you come out and drink this much? Can you appreciate even one moment?

You go ahead and appreciate it. This time next week, I'll be in another moment. No relation whatsoever to this one.

Fuck. The Little Prince rubbed at his forehead. *I'm not going to let you make a move on Maddie.*

Ha! Is that where your mind's at? He drummed his heels lightly on the top of the bench, like a little kid. *I'm way too drunk to even think of getting it up right now. What about you? You making a move?*

The Little Prince didn't answer. He wrestled the wine bottle away from the journalist's soft grip and took a swig.

Or maybe you'll go looking for that hotel manager's niece? I want to hear more of that story.

The Little Prince stood, scuffled to the front of the boat, the vessel's acute angle a match for the wooziness in his head. With the lantern left behind in the cabin, his eyes were forced to adjust to the stars and the silvery waves. He could see a limb break the surface of the becalmed waters, disappear, then reappear. Maddie was being safe—it couldn't be more than a couple meters deep where she was. The mosquitos were gone and the landward breeze was tumbling forward, right in his face.

It had been seven summers since the Little Prince had been in the ocean. The Little Niece had insisted, *I feel like a swim*. Not that he needed much convincing—doing anything else on that blistering day was unthinkable. So they were both in the water, the sun glaring at them, and she was up against him, very deliberately so, so close that he could see the tiny tufts of hair under her armpits. He was taken aback a bit at the sight—girls in the city shaved from an early age—but he knew that girls like the Little Niece weren't exposed to much style or fashion. They splashed around a while in the dead heat, and soon she had her arms around him and her head on his shoulder. He was just standing there in the water, and her head was next to his, as she stood tippy-toe on his feet and shins, both of them close to floating away, her big eyes not daring to look into his. So he ended all suspense and kissed her, not through any sense of love or chivalry, but only because he felt as if he didn't, then what was supposed to happen next wouldn't happen at all.

The journalist was snoring. The man hadn't lied—he snored like a motherfucker. Distractedly, the Little Prince dipped his hand inside his pants and stroked his penis. Sex with the Little Niece had been disappointing. Of course he didn't know it then, it had all been a new experience for him, but looking back on it, it was not a good fit. There are people you are compatible with on an emotional or intellectual level, but when you're having sex, it can boil down to how well a curve in the other person's body matches a hollow in your own body. The Little Niece had been all knobby knees and elbows. She gasped throughout, as if she was

hyperventilating. It was like trying to pin down an animal. No doubt he had been similarly disappointing to her, but afterwards she laid her head on his chest and kept saying *Thank you*, over and over. He had the impression she wasn't thanking him for the sex, but for everything else.

As he continued masturbating, he thought of Maddie. Her legs really were the legs of a model. Perhaps that was too extreme to say. Models had legs like twigs. Just another symptom of Westernization. The girl back at the capital aspired to have thin legs. She had tried all kinds of cleansing diets and toning exercises. It was no use for her, her ankles were just too thick. It wouldn't look good. Shut up, he told himself. He was losing his erection. Back to the bar woman. She was from the countryside. They would be up for anything. No preconceptions or inhibitions. Good lips too. He could imagine them whispering in his ear. All he had to think about were specific body parts. The length of an arm. Fingers plucking at his chest.

Hey! someone called, from outside the boat. *Hey!*

The Little Prince turned. The cabin was empty. His colleague was the one who had shouted; he was staggering into view, pointing out at the ocean. *There!* he said.

The dinghy had glided out to meet Maddie, and the journalist was laid out flat on it, stomach down, peering over the side, as if looking over the edge of an abyss.

Get back here! the Little Prince yelled. *Right now! Maddie, tell him to come—*

The journalist's head cocked towards the beach for a moment—had he heard? But he stayed where he was, and the dinghy had now floated past Maddie, out towards unencumbered ocean.

Fuck! Come on! The Little Prince took three steps towards the water, toes pushing against sand awkwardly. Then he looked behind him. His colleague was shaking his head.

I can't swim, he said.

The hell you can't!

You were watching him.

Maddie! he shouted once, and then he was in the water, his pants flailing around his legs, struggling into a swimming position even as the ocean floor beneath him refused to dip. It was like moving through syrup. Maddie looked back at him, her face indecipherable. Amused? Confused?

Get him ba—! The rest of the Little Prince's words were lost in guzzled seawater. Hacking, he swam on. With the loss of daylight came the loss of any sense of distance. In the fog of his mind, the Little Prince realized that his cell phone was still in his pants. *Fuck.* He increased his exertions. He stayed focused on the tiny little scrap of the dinghy visible to him. An invisible line was connecting him to it, and pulling him towards it, so hard that it was tearing his consciousness away from his body. Now he was caught up in the back-pull of small waves which were pushing him out, just like the journalist was getting pushed out. He was just about up to Maddie now, except she was pulling ahead, because she had divined what was happening and was swimming towards the dinghy. He couldn't get his head up high enough to get a good view

of what the journalist was doing. Was he passed out? Had he started paddling? What was he thinking?

Come on! Maddie called back to the Little Prince. *I think the boat's sinking!*

He heard something that sounded like a little pop, like a firework that detonates in demure fashion, except instead of sparks, he saw the journalist's arms splashing above the water, stretching up towards a blood-red moon that wasn't there. He was a rock 'n' roller offering a salute before diving off the stage and into the crowd. The Little Prince took a breath and hurled himself towards the journalist in a sloppy jackknife that crashed him into the incoming waves.

Hey you, the woman at the desk said. *Hey.*

The Little Prince had been dreaming. It was one of those dreams in which distance had no meaning, and you stepped out of a familiar place in your neighborhood to find yourself in another place thousands of miles away. He was hanging with his high school friends in the bones of what would become a multi-level parking lot, Dust, cool concrete ground, canvas, protection from curious eyes—just what they wanted. They were passing cigarettes around, not talking intelligently about anything at all. In fact, they were mostly laughing. It was a relief to be inconsequential, to not consider the very real problems of their lives. Then in the next moment he was in Berlin. It had been the only time he had been outside the country, his one free night away from Party Youth convention activities. He had found himself in a beer hall that burned with smoke and electric neon. The floor was sticky with spilled drinks, men and women had tattoos crawling up their necks, the music was concussive techno. He thought at the moment: *This is like a movie happening in real life, right in front of me.* He was looking out a window, but instead of a cityscape he saw moonlit beach before him, and the blankness of the scene terrified him. He wanted to tear himself away from it, and yet he was already beyond the window, as if it had never existed, and rushing headlong into the sand, into nothingness.

Hey! the woman said, again.

He was fully awake. He was back in the capital, in the hospital. He looked for his cell phone to check the time, then remembered that he hadn't replaced it yet. The clock above the receptionist told him that he had been in the waiting room for an hour. Incredible. They needed an hour to verify him to see his own father. But that might have been the point—ever since his father had fallen out of favor, contact with others, even family members, had to be regulated. Or maybe that was paranoia speaking. Nobody had actually told him this was the case. But what else could it be? That was the trick, wasn't it? If you get to the point where you think there might be a reason behind everything, then the reason exists, whether it actually does or not.

Come on, the receptionist said. *You were yelling at me an hour ago to see him, what are you dawdling for?*

He bit his tongue as he approached the desk. She thrust a new set of papers at him.

I already signed—

We just got these.

He stared at the papers. They seemed official enough—some sort of release form. Was he surrendering something by signing them? It didn't matter; he had surrendered everything else. He remembered what the journalist had told him: *I don't have belongings any more. All I have is what I write in the space of a day, and sometimes even that is lost. And that's fine, because you start every day clean.*

The Little Prince said: *I need to borrow a pen.*

The woman at the desk gave him a brief glare, as if to say, *You are more annoying than you'll ever know, but I will muster up a surpassing amount of patience to deal with you at this moment.* Then she tossed a ballpoint onto the desk in front of him. He started signing each page as directed, very methodically, and within a few seconds she was clicking her tongue. *Hurry up, hurry up,* she snapped. She held her hand out for her pen.

Hurry up, what's this hurry up shit? the Little Prince shouted. *I'm not some fucking dog!*

She made a sound that could have been surprise, shock, or maybe even a little amusement, and that only served to infuriate him more. He finished signing, shoved the papers at her, and then threw the pen at the desk. It bounced impressively into the air, then disappeared beyond. He half-expected her to order him to pick it up, but he had had enough and was already walking down the hall, down to the room where his father was, as he had many times in the recent past.

His father and the room had been exactly how he had left him a few weeks before, except for the bouquet of flowers by the window that had rotted entirely since the last time. His father's face and chin were above the sheet; under the sheet, his limbs were stalk-like, faint. They hadn't shaved his father's chin for a few days at least, and the gray gristle there made him look even older than he was.

Good morning, Dad, he said. His father's eyes were open, his chest was atremble with breath, but he didn't respond, same as every other time he had come to visit since the last stroke.

I never thought I looked like you, and I don't look like you now, thought the Little Prince. He sat down by his father's side and gave him a pat on the shoulder. It was like there was no shoulder there, just an arm that ended abruptly. The ventilation system in the room was rattling—there was a screw loose somewhere. The air had the smell of rubbing alcohol. *Better air than that beach hotel,* thought the Little Prince.

Dad, I have to take you home today. Just saying those words was difficult. It was as if he was invoking something. He envisioned his father lying in bed at home, staring at the ceiling, unresponsive, whilst relatives squabbled and debated in the next room, smoking their cigarettes. Ever so slowly, all the smoke and carcinogens would work their way under the bedroom door, through the walls, and swamp his father, accelerating his decline. It would be like that for a while, and then finally all bodily movement would cease and his father's stare would lock onto the ceiling for good, or at least until somebody came to remove the body. What was happening today was merely a step in the chain. All he was doing was moving the corpse to another place so it could become what it was always meant to be.

I'm sorry, he said. I fucked up. I fucked it all up. Because of that, they won't take care of you anymore. It would be much easier if his father could just look at him. Even if his father wasn't aware of him, just looking at him would be enough for him to dissimulate, and imagine that he was paying attention. Or if he knew his father would rouse himself from his coma, he could write this all down, leave it by his bedside, and when he awoke he would read about what had happened instead of having someone else explain it to him. He had to throw those flowers out. Even though they were leaving the room anyway, he couldn't bear the sight of them. A hospital should be honest, and keep its rooms completely bare. They belong to no one, for no one stays there for long.

The hospital back at the beach had it right: just white walls, blinds, bed frames of metal and canary bedsheets, and just outside the journalist's window, a friendly grouping of trees that made the sound of the surf when the wind blew through them. The Little Prince had told the staff, *The moment this man wakes up, let me know. And please do not engage in conversation, no photos, no phones.* The staff had nodded agreeably. Even they seemed to understand: *This place is merely a way station, so why get snippy or irritated about anything?* When the Little Prince was ushered in, the journalist had already been propped up in a seated position, looking hearty indeed after a fresh shave, his hair shampooed and combed back. The TV was on, and for a moment the Little Prince realized: *Shit, today is National Day*—but the journalist wasn't watching any parades or speeches. Instead he had tuned into a game show rerun, someone hitting someone else on the head with a rubber mallet. He was too busy wolfing down congee, eggs and smelly durian anyway. *No matter what happens to you, you must eat. That is an incontrovertible fact,* he told the Little Prince.

You're lucky I'm not going to report what you did, the Little Prince said.

Oh? Why not?

Because I would be in deep shit.

But the hospital has a record.

They have a record of your stay, but the Party doesn't need to know.

What about your buddy? Isn't he going to say something?

I talked to him. "Talk" was a strong word. Rather, they communicated without speaking too much. The Little Prince bought a pack of cigarettes and lit one up for the first time in years. His colleague smoked as well, the both of them standing outside the hospital, awaiting word on the journalist's condition, butts scattered at their feet.

We should have both been more attentive, the Little Prince said, finally.

You were watching him, his colleague said.

We were both watching him.

You decided to take him out.

And you came along.

Neither said anything for a period. Finally, the Little Prince's colleague scratched at the back of his ear, as if he was embarrassed. *I need money for getting back home,* he said.

But you were given a stipend to cover that. That was what the Little Prince was about to say, and then he understood. He almost asked him: *How much do you need?* But that was too bald-faced, much too unsubtle. So he dug out all the cash he had in his wallet, good enough for at least one vacation somewhere else, he reckoned, and offered it to him. *Here, this should cover it,* he said.

Oh, no, his colleague said. *I couldn't.* He pushed the Little Prince's money-stuffed hand away. This was the game: one makes an offer, the other couldn't possibly, but yes, the one making the offer is beneficence itself, like Buddha come down from Heaven, and the one accepting the offer must finally accept this token with the appropriate respect befitting such a gift. So his colleague took the money in the end, as stone-faced as ever, and the Little Prince hated the man because he only made him realize how much he hated himself for having to do this, but at least that part was over and the rest would be formalities.

I hate hospitals, the journalist said. *I don't know why. I don't spend much time in them, why should I have an opinion?*

If you hate them, said the Little Prince, *then you shouldn't have nearly gotten drowned. I say what I'm not supposed to say, why wouldn't I do what I'm not supposed to do? Were you trying to escape?*

Ha! I'm not that dramatic. I don't know. I guess I just wanted to see where the waves would take me.

You said you hated the water.

Yep. But you gotta try shit occasionally. You know what my favorite place is?

No. The Little Prince was past minding the journalist's meanderings at this point. The crisis had been averted, he would stay here in the hospital with him for the duration, and everything would be all right. The bastard could say anything he wanted to.

Out west, near the desert, you have these small towns, said the journalist. *Nothing to do but play dice all night. Do people from your generation still play dice? I'd hate to think that habit is going extinct. But it used to be so peaceful in those towns. Camels sleep in the streets. You think I'm smelly, you should get a load of the camels. But it's a warm kind of smelly. That's the word for everything out there. Warm. The people, the land. You help your neighbor out because you might need help from him tomorrow. That's just the way it is. Or the way it was, because it's all changing.*

Don't forget, I helped you out last night. It would have been a lot easier to let you drown.

That was more Maddie than you. Besides, you didn't want to let the Party down. You princelings have to look good against the Youth League newcomers. Factions against factions until the end of itme. So how far along are you? Are you still a probational member? Part of a study group? Is this your final test?

It's a test, said the Little Prince.

Oh? How's that?

I'm here to prove my worth. My father is out of favor, but he's tried to keep me safe. Used what was left of his influence to get me this far. If I can prove I'm reliable, then I have a fresh start.

That's very unusual. Once the head of the family is out, the rest of the family...How did you manage it?

I proved I was ideologically pure.

The Little Prince stared at the TV. The game show was in full swing, one of the female contestants hiding her face in her hands after an egregious error, the host of the show mugging in disbelief at her *faux pas* before the camera, as if his life depended on it.

It's okay, the journalist said. I know you can't tell me. You got secrets.

I turned in the niece. The hotel manager's niece.

What?

It was anonymous, but I turned her in. She went crazy. We slept together once, and then she got it into her head that we'd be spending the rest of our lives together. Move to Hawaii or something. She thought my family was that powerful. So I tried to tell her we should just be friends, and she flipped. Started calling me around the clock. One minute she would be reasonable, the next minute she was screaming that I belonged to her.

Breakfast at Tiffany's, the journalist said.

Huh?

The big flaw with the end of the movie. When George Peppard says to Audrey Hepburn that she belongs to him. Just out of character, not romantic at all. Never mind, go on.

When I was accepted as a probationary member of the Party, I sent an email to all my friends letting them know the good news. She was on the email list, and she replied with just one sentence: GO TO HELL. She sent the reply to everyone. I was mad about that. Embarrassed. My father was falling out of favor at the time. I knew people were already doubtful about me. So I showed her email to the leaders of my local cell, and made the implication that her "Go to Hell" was referring to the Party.

You took care of two problems at once.

Yes.

Back in the Party's good graces, crazy girlfriend out of the picture.

She wasn't my girlfriend. I know they interrogated her. I don't know what happened after that. I just know she's alive, somewhere.

But she stopped communicating with you.

Yes. Probably ordered to cut off contact.

And here you are. Very ruthless.

I didn't think about it. I just did it.

Like I said.

A thermos of warm water had been laid out for the journalist, and the Little Prince grabbed it. He drank it all down.

The question is, said the journalist, do you want to be in the Party?

I told you, you have to be smart. The Party opens doors, and closes them.

Can I be honest? You haven't been very smart this weekend.

Yeah, no shit.

I mean, maybe it's because you're not into this.

Are you trying to draft me to your side?

I wouldn't presume. Just trying to get a read on you. It's important.

Nothing is important about me. If anything, you're important. And don't argue. That might be the only compliment I give you.

I won't. Don't worry. Your secret goes with me to my grave.

The Little Prince allowed himself a smile. I thought you were the type that lives forever.

No, I've got no illusions about that. But I know exactly how I want to go. After I'm dead, I want my body mummified inside a large pottery jar, in a sitting position. After a few months, you crack open the jar, you wash the body with alcohol, then you cover it in gauze, lacquer, and gold leaf. Then put me in a display case.

Are you serious?

They do it with monks. The belief is that your body only stays together through the mummification process if you're virtuous. If I could make it through that, it would be the highest honor for me. A good way to go.

You're crazy.

You have to make plans for the end in advance. You don't want to deal with it while you're going through it.

Why are you talking like you're dead? You have a fatal disease I don't know about?

Depends on your point of view. Maybe I should write up a final statement while I'm at it. You can be the witness. I'll wish the Great Leaders health for 10,000 years, and go back on everything I ever said. Then they'll definitely paint me in gold and throw me in a display case. What do you think?

I think, the Little Prince said, we should have some whiskey. He brought out the bottle with the unpronounceable Scottish name.

Save it for yourself. You'll need it more than me.

And that was it for meaningful conversation; the two of them sat in the room for the rest of the day watching game shows and action movie reruns. The actor who dubbed Arnold Schwarzenegger had gravel in his voice, like a wizened old master. The next morning, the Little Prince and his colleague escorted the journalist to the train station, where he was turned over to a fresh group of minders for the journalist's next destination, wherever that was. The new minders were the Little Prince's age, and a much more sober group. The journalist made as if to shake the Little Prince's hand, then thought the better of it given the present assembly, and instead tossed a jaunty salute. And that was the last the Little Prince saw of him.

But it wasn't the last of the story—as he sat by his father in the hospital room, he started laughing, for several reasons. For one, since he had no cell phone, his girlfriend in the capital couldn't get in touch with him, which was just fine with him. And because he had no cell phone,

he didn't get the news until he returned to the capital, when he was informed that an anonymous Twitter account had been set up on National Day, with a single tweet: *How I spent my #NationalDay with an illustrious Party member*. The journalist had signed the post with another hashtag: his name. Accompanying the tweet was a photo of the journalist and the Little Prince, both of them on those beach chairs in front of the bar, the journalist with the grin of a wolf as he held up two beer bottles, one of them clanking against the Little Prince's drink, which sat in the Little Prince's near-comatose hand. The Little Prince's face was facing the camera phone, lids heavy, mouth dumbly open.

The bastard, thought the Little Prince when he saw the tweet for the first time. So simple: he chose the right moment, with the Little Prince all but passed out, and his colleague taking a piss. He had Maddie take the photo with her phone, then she posted the tweet later. Did she know him after all? Did he get in touch with her before he arrived, and they somehow engineered all of it? He would never know the answer—she disappeared shortly after he returned to the capital. The owner of the beach bar only knew her by her English name, and she had never shown him her resident identity card (she was only temporary help after all). Of course it could also mean that she was used to drifting around, and as promised, she had moved on.

And so that was where matters now stood, both he and his father heading home in disgrace. His father's finish was preordained: it might take a few weeks, or a few months, but he would remain in their apartment until the end. Disciplinary action for the Little Prince would require some time to formulate. In the meantime, no Party activities, no contact with people outside the Party. On the other hand, stepping out into the street would now bring a pang of thrilling anxiety—was someone watching him? Making sure he wasn't in communication with dissidents or irritants? He was suddenly important, like the journalist. The journalist would never be seen again. A few fellow activists would point out this fact, and a woman would step forward to demand his whereabouts—whether she was his wife or his mistress, the Little Prince never paid enough attention to confirm. Soon there would be more prominent dissidents to campaign about, and changes in leadership and economic plans to discuss.

After his father's death, the Little Prince would walk aimlessly around the capital, the smog rendering the streets as impressionist paintings. Sometimes a passerby would look at him for a second longer than necessary, and the Little Prince would wonder: *Does he recognize me from the Twitter photo?* Of course the Twitter account had been deleted, but not until the day after the original post. Surely a sizable number of people had saved the photo, passed it on along their own networks. Electrons firing fast as light, unstoppable. He would settle for something a little slower, like a motorcycle, a BMW knockoff like the one the journalist had. The thought would remind him of something the journalist said during their last night in the hospital, as they watched Arnold Schwarzenegger on TV, the muscleman darting on his motorcycle along Los Angeles streets, a sawed-off shotgun like a toy in his hands. *The only thing you need in this world is a motorcycle*, the journalist murmured. *You can load a motorcycle with anything. Clothes, cookies, milk powder, even televisions. You can ride hundreds of kilometers on those suckers without so much as a hiccup. That's all you need out in the hinterlands. Distances are*

vast and the roads are horrible, but the motorcycle can handle it. Break free from your terrible job, head for the mountains, head anywhere else. All possible with a motorcycle. It should be a law: Need to get away from it all? You must get yourself a motorcycle. And standing in the streets of the capital months later, the Little Prince would remember those words, and come to realize that the journalist knew that all this would happen, and was offering him one last piece of advice.

But smoggy streets and travel and motorcycles would all be in the future. For now, he laughed at his father's bedside, in front of a man who betrayed not a trace of cognizance, who was never given to laughing. *We were both stupid*, said the Little Prince. *That's all I needed to say, but now you can't hear me say it.* With a tenderness that was a surprise to him, he bent down to stroke the older man's head. It was probably the first time he had touched him in years. *That bar on the beach is still there*, he said.

He had gone to the bar straight from the train station after dropping off the journalist, to find Maddie there. A tuxedo cat had wandered over, and it was snug and purring in her lap. Was it the old cat from his younger days? Impossible, but he called it Panda anyway. Captain and Tennille were back on the jukebox, preserved in their recurrent loop. He and Maddie cracked open the bottle of whiskey the journalist had been so keen on buying, and sat in the tattered beach chairs a final time. It wasn't the greatest whiskey, in the Little Prince's view—a bit too much peat taste for his liking.

Is he all right? Maddie asked of the journalist, and the Little Prince said he was fine, just fine. *Good*, she said, serene as always, and let out a sigh that seemed to draw all the air around them into it. She really was beautiful, but somehow he knew even at that moment that this was as far as the relationship would go. Not that he dared to think she would be an easy mark for him—he was just feeling magnanimous. *You will be spared from all my shit.* So all he said was: *I still can't believe we're getting this weather at this time of year.* The tallow trees rocked with the wind, casting shadows on the ground that swayed and grasped, and they sat there with shots in hand, looking out at the sea and the faint formations of what might have been incoming clouds.

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