

Name: Wenting Chen
Year: Sophomore

Semester Written: Fall 08
Course: ENGL 122 (Beginning Fiction Workshop)

The Undergraduates

*Here's to you
Mrs. Robinson
Jesus loves you
more than you will know
Whoa whoa whoa
God bless you please
Mrs. Robinson
Heaven holds a place
for those who pray
Hey hey hey
Hey hey hey*

– Simon and Garfunkel

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I.

The first time she met him, they were moving into the building at the beginning of the year. She and her mother, both laden with boxes, were going up the stairs just as he was coming down, and she remembered catching his eye as she shook her hair out of her face the best she could, her bangs glazed to her forehead in the heat. She looked away just as quickly though, as she had never exactly been the friendly type. “He’s attractive,” her mother said casually in mandarin, eyebrows raised, as they continued upwards. “He turned around to look at you.”

She shrugged at this prompting. Her mother was unorthodox in this fashion, but she supposes there must be some pride in there somewhere. She remembers every Chinese New Year party where all the matrons would eye her with a twist in their lipstick and turn around to tell her mother how pretty her daughter is, the undersides of their words slicked in envy.

“That’s nice,” she said, as she propped the cardboard boxes atop the railing, speckled with rust, so she could grasp the door handle. She quite liked the way he looked though, so she’s pleased by his acknowledgement and she keeps in mind to look for him in the future. It’s not so much that she has any interest in the boy herself. She just likes the possibility of being wanted.

II.

There’s a certain restlessness that seizes her sometimes. It makes her tap her toes inside her flats and it makes the soles of her feet itch for pacing, but it’s nothing physical. This feeling gnaws at the inside of her chest the way anticipation does, an unreachable

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sensation buried in the lining of her lungs. Anticipation, however, is justified. This restlessness is comprised of a sense of impatience and the wild hope that something, anything, might happen. Something always does happen, if only because she becomes careless in her restlessness and causes it to do so.

It's this particular feeling that makes her seek him out on occasion. In the beginning she doesn't know him terribly well, but there's little hesitation because he lives in her dormitory on the floor below her, and it's convenient. Besides she's always greeted with his brightly attentive look and easy smile that comprise the holy grail of attention whores everywhere.

Sometimes they sit against the wall outside his room a foot or so apart. His knees are pulled loosely towards his chest while her long pale legs, presently wrapped in gray drainpipes, are sprawled across the hallway. As they pass a pint of chocolate ice cream back and forth, he tells her that he doesn't believe in God. She doesn't either, because her parents grew up under Mao Zedong, and after they moved to the states, she was told at five years old that only believers go to heaven. Considering her parents were rather emphatically atheist, she decided she'd rather be wherever her family was, heaven be damned. She doesn't tell him this though. He tells her that Asian girls are number twelve on the official list of what white people like. She exhales a laugh, her dark eyes crinkling at the corners.

As the semester progresses, they migrate from the hallway into his room. He tells her about the time he took acid. The incident in question occurred not too long ago, on the night before they happened to have breakfast at adjacent tables, each with their respective group of friends. In fact that was the morning she managed to slop an entire

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cup of orange juice down her front, so she's perversely grateful that he wasn't in a state to notice. He tells her about how he saw bright purple dots moving across the walls and how he freaked out a man and woman when he pressed his face against the window of their car. He wasn't sure whether they were real or not.

Apparently, he decided to try acid because he wanted to know if the things people said about it were true. "I'm not going to do it again though," he tells her. "My family has a bad history with drugs." She takes this for what it is.

In the ensuing silence, she taps her fingers against her thigh and glances lazily around. An acoustic guitar propped up in a corner catches her eye. "I used to play," she tells him. He gives her a soft inscrutable look and picks up the guitar.

"Do you mind?" he asks. She shakes her head. He strums a few chords and begins to sing. His voice is rough and a bit breathless but he's earnest enough and she's never been serenaded before. Later she'll wonder if normal people go around trying to seduce other people with that particular Simon and Garfunkel song. However, at the time she doesn't realize that he's trying to seduce her until he puts down his guitar, sidles over to her, and kisses her full on the mouth. She kisses back, if only because his actions are unexpected.

"Not fair," she pouts after he's slipped off her tank top. "How come I'm the only one with my clothes off?" He laughs.

"You're welcome to take off my clothes," he says with a quiet grin. She leans down, propped up on an elbow, to lick the curve of his ear, one hand holding back her long sheet of inky hair, the other reaching down to undo his belt.

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Afterwards he lies with his back to her, and she picks at the peeling paint on the wall, minute flakes of pigment edging themselves beneath her nails. He's cute, she thinks, an epithet awarded to small dogs and pleasant children. She picks at her fingernails in turn, the flecks of pale green clashing against the remnants of her red nail polish. She hates this part. She can't fall asleep with someone else there, especially not in a bed meant for one child, ages twelve and under. However, she's practical enough to know it'd be awkward to attempt to extract herself at the moment, so she waits.

Like playing dead, she thinks and rolls towards the wall, stealing another few inches of the covers.

III.

She sees him twice in the recent aftermath. Both times he blushes and shifts uneasily, and she simply stares because it makes no difference to her. After all, it's not her problem if he feels awkward. She doesn't expect to see him much after this, but he surprises her. A few weeks later, her friend tells her that the boy she slept with says hi, not that her friend knows that she did so. She tells her friend to say hi in return. The recipient of the greeting, seeming to get over his discomfiture, texts her one night to ask if she's doing anything. She makes an assumption, and plans upon heading downstairs awhile later.

Her mother calls every night, asking about tests and homework and whether she's been eating. Presently, she responds that there's a biology test next Tuesday and she's working on a paper for her literature class and yes, she's been eating for once. She also reminds her mother that her little brother has a karate tournament on Saturday. "I have to

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go, Ma Ma,” she says as she takes a look at the clock, “I need to go to the library before it closes.”

She doesn't suppose her parents really care what she does as long as she gets good grades, honors the family, and takes care of them in their old age. They don't ask about anything else after all. They also didn't mention a few small facts that white people drum into their daughters, that a boy respects a girl more if she doesn't have sex with him. She doesn't care much for sex, really. It's something that can be done or not done, like laundry. However, she's contrary enough when judged, and she needs to be noticed or she feels that she's wasted, a blank piece of paper crumpled and tossed away.

Although she's hardly blatant in her occasional activities, she doubts that her parents are completely ignorant. She suspects that that they'd simply rather not know, so she does her part to keep the pretense. She mentions her parents' apparent apathy to him, as a theoretical idea, as they sit on his bed, side by side.

“I don't think my mom cares either,” he tells her, “as long I don't get anyone pregnant.” She raises an eyebrow at this. He grins cheekily and reaches over to tickle her. She tries unsuccessfully to squirm away, laughing with an odd combination of hysteria and delight coloring the noise. She discovers, however, that he's ticklish too, and not too much is said after that point.

As they lay sprawled across each other, satiated, she notices the salon hair care products in his shower basket because she's on the side of the bed that isn't against the wall. “Biolage?” she asks, smirking. He shrugs.

“I didn't buy it,” he tells her. She believes him but asks quite seriously if she can borrow his blow dryer sometime because he has a better one than she does. His straw-

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colored hair is always groomed with a certain insouciance and it's long enough to brush the wire frames of his glasses when he's wearing them. Her head's tucked beneath his chin and she has an arm slung over his shoulder so she may reach the strands of hair that curl around his neck. It's an odd color, she thinks as she winds her fingers through it, too pale to be the matte yellow or the gold that characterizes most blondes. She always goes for the guys who are a little skewed of average, the ones who don't reek of wifehood and suburbia in the near future.

She feels a bleary contentment as the clock tower strikes three muffled clangs in the distance. Her lashes brush his skin as she close her eyes, his pulse warm against her cheek. He smells of expensive shampoo and unlit Malboros. They breathe the silence in and out, his hand resting lightly on her lower back.

"My father committed suicide when I was nine," he tells her softly in the dark. "He shot himself in the head." He says this in the same tone in which he conducts mundane pleasantries, but when she shifts backwards to look at him, she sees that his blue eyes are hooded. She's not quite sure how to respond, so she squeezes his shoulder and kisses him on the corner of the mouth.

IV.

A year later she'll remember this when she's scrubbing egg crusts off of the pan she used to fry her breakfast. Without noticing, she'll hold her breath and crease her forehead in a frown. Her hands will still beneath the scalding water, her right grasping the sponge with streams of white froth leaking away between her fingers. She'll realize that it's a secret, what he told her, the type that makes her feel as if there's something

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wedged beneath her ribs, clawing to get out. She'll wonder if he ever told anyone else.

Then she'll wonder why he told her.

V.

It's a good two and a half weeks before she sees him again. She's heading back to the dormitory to change her shoes with her dinner date, a senior, in tow and it's just her luck that the boy she's slept with twice now is heading out. As he passes, she has the impulse and temerity to brush her fingers against his stomach without her date noticing. He stiffens at the contact but doesn't look at her, his face blindly expressionless. She never promised him anything, she reminds herself as she kicks off her stilettos back in her room. This doesn't banish the onset of something approaching pain, like she's been underwater for too long. Stupid girl, she tells herself if only because she is one.

When she's back downstairs with her date, she's silent as they walk. She thinks that what's she's feeling might be guilt, but she's not completely sure. "No offense," she says suddenly, turning to the older boy, "but do you think we could just be friends?" Strangling this nascent relationship isn't much of a sacrifice, considering she doesn't care much for this boy either way. It also doesn't change anything but she does it anyway.

Within another week, she learns that the boy she chose not to give up has been caught with pot. Stupid boy, she thinks, but there's indignation in there too after she's told that the cops pinned him to the ground. "What the fuck did they do that for? He's this big around!" she says, making a circle with her hands and waving it in her friend's face. Her friend looks at her blankly. She wonders whether she'll see him again, as she's always been a good child, at least as far as these things go, so she doesn't know what her

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university does to people who've been caught with pot. She's mildly surprised when she happens to see him walking around the quad where they live. He's too far away for her to catch his eye with ease so she doesn't bother trying.

The next day she runs into him in the stairway. There's no one else there so she wraps her arms around him, hiding her face in the crook of his neck. He's startled, but he hugs her back and she relaxes. "Are you mad at me?" she asks anyway, glancing upwards.

"No, I'm not," he responds with a sideways smile, seeming almost surprised at the question. "I have to tell you something," he tells her, sheepishly. "Do you mind if we go to my room?" She resists the urge to roll her eyes as she follows him. As it turns out, her university's policy is lax enough on drug possession that he's not going anywhere, not this time anyway. She's glad because it saves her the trouble of finding someone else.

By now they've established a routine, erratic as it is, as she straddles his hips and he slips his hands beneath her shirt. "You have really nice skin," he tells her appreciatively, his hand splayed across her stomach. She quirks the side of her mouth in a smile. He leans upwards to grace her with brief puckering kisses like a fish, and she turns away, laughing.

They spend the afternoon beneath the dusty light that seeps through the blinds. It's early May, so they've kicked the covers to the foot of the bed and she can see the soft shadows pouring into the dips of his body, from the slant of his shoulders to the line of his narrow hips. "Do you eat?" she murmurs, tracing the faint indents of ribs along his side.

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“I could ask you the same thing,” he retorts gently. His fingers trail lazily up and down her back, occasionally tapping out scales. The warm air feels heavy against her exposed skin. His hand slowly stills and she looks upward to see that his eyes have drifted shut. However, she thinks of looming final examinations, so she drags herself off of the bed, gingerly stretching a limb at a time over him towards the clothing discarded on the ground.

He watches her struggle to hook the straps of her bra into place, the corners of his mouth tilted upwards. She casts him a narrowed eyed look. Once she’s fully hooked and buttoned and zipped, she makes towards the door, but pauses for a single clipped beat, a stone ball rolling down the sloped walls of her stomach in an ambush. She sucks in a soundless breath, turns back two steps and leans over to kiss him briefly on the mouth. Strands of hair slip off one shoulder to tap the edges of his face. One of her hands sinks into the mattress for balance while the other perches itself on his chest. The space between their mouths is shallow. She manages to evade his eyes as she leaves.

Nothing more happens after this.

VI.

She doesn’t receive the final concluding note though until they’re packing printer, laundry basket, and desk lamp into familiar cardboard boxes for the summer. At breakfast one day, her friend mentions that the boy left earlier that morning, guitar case in hand, after saying goodbye to the few hall mates who were somehow already awake. She shrugs as her fingers shred a biscuit, leaving the scraps scattered across her plate. She was still sleeping when he left. Later, she deletes his name and number from her cell

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phone because she doesn't have a use for them anymore. She thinks that he's probably already done the same.

VII.

Half a year later, she meets him on the street as she's heading back to her apartment. She almost hopes they can go their respective ways without acknowledging each other but he stares at her as she walks toward him. She thinks of all the debate tournaments in high school, being up for a round and struck by a feeling at the base of her throat more like terror than she'd admit. He greets her politely once she's close enough. They stop to talk and she's easily just as polite as he is.

"It's nice to see you," he tells her.

"Don't say what you don't mean." She's caught off guard slightly by how brittle her voice comes out. Her functional sense of self-preservation, however, keeps her face impassive. He stares back, brows knitted and his mouth folded into a thin line. She watches things like words and accusations accumulate behind his bright blue eyes, but before he can open his mouth, she turns around and walks steadily away, like she's in no particular hurry. It's not very hard to do so, nor does he call her back.

At the same time she can't help but remember when she ran her tongue down the hollow of his throat and scraped her teeth against pale skin, he hissed and shuddered, the pads of his fingers digging beneath her shoulder blades. She remembers when he slid down for a kiss, his facial hair bristled across her mouth, and he shoved her lightly on the shoulder so she'd know he wanted to be on top, pressing against her, and he sucked on the ridge above her collarbone without ever making a mark. She always looked for one

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in the morning because she's dark eyed and light skinned and she could still feel his mouth on her shoulder. He never seemed careful but nothing was ever there.

And every time, there was relief, followed by the faintest tinge of what she thinks might have been disappointment.