

Measured in Minutes

Excerpt by Michael G. Ryan

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When the nurse came to William Andrews's room to tell him that he had a visitor, William didn't understand at first. No one had visited him in the year since he'd sold the last of his personal belongings, signed the house over to his son John, and moved himself into Well-Heart Manors with only a few boxes of possessions. No one, that is, but the nursing home's very young doctors with their impatience to do something more "meaningful" with their skills, the interns with their barely disguised disgust for their charges, and the nurses with their never-ending weariness. The ones who saw William could not understand why he was dying, especially at such a relatively young age. But he was. They talked amongst themselves, but they never asked him if he might know why, and he didn't volunteer it. Only one other person would understand his certainty that he was dying of something the doctors were neither medically qualified to find nor emotionally able to stop. And she was not here.

He followed the nurse from his narrow room with the window too high for him to look out, down the brightly lit hallway, and around the corner. They passed through double doors that were propped open to allow some of the stale air to circulate in the visitors' room, cheerfully christened the

Bright Day Room. Here there were numerous tables for crafts and games, ceiling fans, and windows that overlooked the white-brick patio where he had almost been coaxed into talking about himself many times by the staff... by his fellow residents... by a ghost who sometimes sat across from him and moved her chess pieces on an imaginary board. The room was, indeed, bright from the sunlight streaming off that white patio. It took William's eyes a moment to adjust, and then he saw the young man waiting at the furthest table.

He looks like his mother, William thought.

"Mr. Andrews? Are you all right?" the nurse asked. She was young enough to be his child—most of them were—but she spoke as if he were a boy still himself. "Do you need some help?"

He didn't realize he had stopped walking. William shook his head, half-smiling at her, and began to move again. His throat was dry and his legs felt stretched and loose, as if they were ready to stop carrying the load they'd borne for sixty years. He thought he might collapse on the thin brown polypropylene carpeting, postponing a conversation that he didn't think he could have, maybe delaying it forever if Christopher Chan thought his presence was responsible. Still, he walked, with the nurse

hovering at his elbow, to the scratched wooden table where the young man waited.

He was in his early twenties—twenty-two, William guessed, although he couldn't remember when the boy's birthday was now—with jet-black hair, spiked short on top with bangs in the front, and a round face. That face took William back to the first time he had ever seen the boy, when Christopher was only five or six years old, just a small moon-face with curious eyes in a family portrait of the three of them. Mingmei's slender left hand casually on her son's shoulder thrilled William in ways he can only remember like the taste of strawberries now—though her husband, Christopher's father, was in the portrait as well, William took no notice of the man. He looked only at Mingmei's hand, where there was no wedding ring.

“I'm William Andrews,” he said to Christopher, and Mingmei's voice—

(You have two first names and no last name; you are two people, and I am not even one without you)

—whispered in his mind like someone sharing a private moment in a movie theater just before the film starts.

“Do you know who I am?” Christopher Chan asked.

“No.” Don’t lie, he told himself belatedly. It will cast a shadow over everything else you will say. He already knows. And you want to tell him anyway. Him or anyone. Anyone.

“Are you sure?” Christopher bent sideways and brought up a box that had been concealed on the floor beside him. On the side it read STAR MOVING. Christopher touched the logo on the box with his long artist’s fingers; William had heard those hands bring life from a lifeless piece of wood and metal and ivory when the boy played piano. Only once in person, though. Fifteen months and eleven days ago at Mingmei’s funeral. Playing a song that threatened to shatter his soul like glass. It had been the only time William had ever dared to share his love for her with others, silently, in grief, at the back of a crowded funeral service in Hong Kong, an outsider. He had bowed three times to the beautiful portrait of her at the front of the large chamber, a photo he had taken that they must have found after her death. Each time he came up from a bow to look into her face again, his heart wailed so loudly that the family, seated just behind him, all wearing the traditional white of Chinese mourning, must have heard it even through his exhausted flesh. He was dressed in black so they would not know what was in his heart—only the closest kin wore white to mourn—but under his suit jacket he had wrapped a white scarf around his

shoulders. Her scarf. No one knew—until now. But only if Christopher asked. And he would, if William set his face aside from saving and set aside the rising Alzheimer's act and affirmed the young man's suspicions.

Christopher said then, "I didn't know what they meant by stolen kisses until I couldn't walk away from you at the MTR station. Time was stealing you from me, so I stole one more kiss before it was too late." It was a recitation, something he had memorized, perhaps furious and wounded while he read it from a letter William had written years ago. He glared at the old man now. "Are you sure you don't know me, Mr. Andrews?"

"I'm sure," William said—

(Never lie to me, even if it hurts me to hear the truth. I can live with hurt but not with the fear that you're not the one I've waited for)

—and then, "that you're Christopher. Yes, I'm sure of it."

Christopher sagged, ran one hand under his dark bangs, a familiar gesture to William. William's throat clenched and something primitive and feral that had been dormant since Mingmei's death cried out in his belly. His lip trembled to remember her hair and the exact number of times he had run his hand through it himself. He had counted them all, it seemed, and as

time slipped by, he had begun to count ahead and well as back. He could guess how many more times he might touch her, and it gave breath to that panic-stricken beast living in his stomach's pit.

"I know your face," William said. "I've known it for a long time."

"Yours is new to me," Christopher said, with a tone that made the nurse, seated at the next table, take protective notice. "You've changed from your pictures."

She kept them, William thought. He looked at the STAR MOVING box. Just like I did. In a box I sent her Christmas presents in.

"Things always change, Christopher," he said.

"Sometimes when you don't want them to," Christopher said. He sounded not like the twenty-two-year-old pianist he'd become but like the disinterested adolescent Mingmei had once said "would trade our keyboard for a Nintendo and spite."

"Nothing will change today," William said with more care than he'd spoken to anyone in months, "if you don't ask me any questions. We can shake hands, and you—"

“You were in love with my mother,” Christopher cut him off, not a question, and before William could formulate the least-damaging response, he said, “But that’s not important. What is important is that she was in love with you, too. Since I was six or seven years old.”

There were no words, so William just nodded.

“Did my dad ever know?”

William said, “Does he know now?”

“I haven’t told him.” Christopher gestured at the box the way he might have indicated a piano beneath his skills. “I found this before he did. I think. He doesn’t know anything because of me, despite how hard Mom seemed to be trying to tell him by keeping this around.”

“I don’t believe she ever told him,” William said. “She loved Wen more than—”

“Don’t you say his name.” Christopher slammed his hand down on the moving box for emphasis. William jumped, and the nurse began to rise from her chair at the next table. William waved her back down as

Christopher said, “You haven’t earned that privilege. You don’t have that right.”

“All right.”

Christopher looked away, refusing to meet William’s eye. “If you think that just because you screwed my mom for fifteen years that you—”

Now it was William’s turn to react. Without thinking, he reached across the table, took Christopher by the chin, and whipped his face around to look at him, just as Mingmei had often done to get the boy’s attention. “Stop. You will respect her. Call me whatever you want, but she was too special for you to talk about her that way.”

“She was just another of the dagongmei,” Christopher muttered. “A factory girl who married above her station. She was nobody. She was nothing.”

William felt a tremble in his fingertips, but he caught it as he let go of the boy’s face and put his hands beneath the table. “You don’t know anything. She was your father’s wife. She was your mother. She was Shilin’s mother.” He barely noticed the look of confusion that stole across Christopher’s face at the mention of little Shilin’s name; he had often

suspected that Christopher didn't know about his little sister. William ignored this for now and said, "You will respect her because she was your mother. Where is your culture?"

Before Christopher could answer, he went on. "She was beautiful and intelligent and wise. She was good. She was honorable, no matter what you think you know. And for a while, she was mine."

They sat in silence for a minute, the boy staring petulantly at the moving box of mementos, the old man staring into the past. He closed his eyes, and he could smell the grasses of the Serengeti... the food cooking in the stalls all along the Temple Street night market in Hong Kong... the special soaps she always brought to "their" room at the Hyatt Regency... her hair.

"I didn't know her," Christopher said. The bitterness in his voice made the words sound sharp and clipped.

"No."

"She had a life that was a secret from all of us. She had a life with you." Christopher pointed at the box, the things she had saved. "I didn't even know where to start with this—until I decided to come find you. I want you to tell me everything."

“Why?”

“Because I hate her now.” Christopher didn’t drop his gaze this time; he met William’s surprise defiantly. “She may have been all the things you said she was, but she was a liar as well. So are you. I know you were married. With a son, right? So, I want to know. I don’t care if I hate you in the end, but I can’t live anymore with hating her. I want you to tell me everything.” The boy’s face trembled, his cheeks rising. “I want to love her again.”

William ran his hand over his eyes. The smells were still there, and somewhere nearby, her ghost drifted into his blinded sight. “You should never have stopped.”

Christopher sat silent.

William said, “I owe you nothing. I don’t believe that you’ll be changed for knowing. Maybe you’ll hate her even more. And what we had—” he hesitated. “—or what we never had, these things are only mine now. They’re all I have left of her. If I give them to you...”

He looked down, centering himself. After a moment, he looked up again, weary. “But of course. I’ll tell you. Even if you come to regret it, at least someone else will know what we were after I’m gone. Someone will remember. I’ll tell you because I have to tell somebody before I go. You should know, right from the start—it isn’t such a unique story. It’s just two people who met and fell in love and tried to be happy together. So, it isn’t anything you haven’t heard as someone else’s story. It’s just that this is our story. That’s the only thing that makes it unique. If you really want to hear it.”

But after the promise, they could only sit in another extended silence, Christopher expectantly, William lost on the choppy seas of the past with Mingmei. She had introduced herself as Annie when they first met, but they moved past that misnomer quickly, and after that, she was always Mingmei. His Mingmei. Later, he would believe that she was meant to be his from that night they met on the wild plains in the south of Kenya, where he never expected to meet and fall in love with someone other than his wife, someone from a communist country thousands of miles from what he knew and understood. Finally, William stirred.

“Did you find a necklace in there?” he asked. “A small rhino made of ebony? It would be on a gold chain with—”

“It was cremated with her,” Christopher said.

William’s heart wrenched but soared, and he touched his chest where the rhino had rested, pressed against his skin for so many years. When his heart finally returned to him, he began to speak. And he began with Africa.

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There was something about her that said, I’m broken in here, so if you approach me, please approach gently. He recognized it as something he’d seen in the mirror every morning for months now.

Through the towering flames of the evening campfire, William watched her glide toward the dinner table from the encroaching African blackness where their individual tents were staked out. It was their third night on the vast, wild plains of the Serengeti in southern Kenya. She greeted both of their guides and her fellow tourists with the same cautious smile and slight bow of her head. Her long black hair, tied back in a ponytail tonight, disappeared down her back, blending in with the night. Beneath that dizzying expanse of evening sky—darker than any William had ever seen before in his forty-four years, with stars so diamond-perfect that he imagined they were within his physical reach—she was almost invisible. The others in their group, two bands of strangers to one another, were

loud and boisterous to compensate for their nervousness. There were lions near the camp tonight, their guides had told them; the native Maasai warrior guarding their camp now carried an old bolt-action rifle, just in case. So, the two German brothers hunkered together at the end of the table and drank the Chibuku Shake-Shake beer they had brought from their recent safari in South Africa. The five Americans talked about U.S. politics and the music they were buying on CDs, and they mostly ignored William, who clearly didn't want to be engaged in mindless discussions, and the Chinese woman, who seemed unapproachable. On the second day of the safari, the blonde American woman said she'd read Amy Tan's new *Joy Luck Club* over the summer, but the Chinese woman didn't know the book, and that was the end of that. At dinner that same day, two of the men discussed the long-term repercussions of what had happened in Tiananmen Square in China just a few months ago, but they spoke only to each other—as if the Chinese woman wasn't there, or as if she was to be an appreciative audience for their worldly wisdom. William watched her listen to their opinions that Communism would eventually fall to democracy, that it was what the Chinese people truly wanted, that Chairman Mao's ways had ruined the country beyond salvation. Her face betrayed nothing about what she thought of this exchange. When they finally exhausted their limited knowledge of her world, they returned to wondering how the A's were doing in the World Series back in the States, and she was alone again.

Except for William. He watched her from the first day, and just like her, he kept to himself. It wasn't hard to do. The others seemed curious to know what he was jotting in his notebooks, but when he told one of the men that he was a writer, they all began to withdraw. They clearly worried about how they might be featured in an article in National Geographic or an airline travel magazine piece about Americans abroad. He didn't trouble to correct their misconceptions by telling them that he wrote ad copy for a Los Angeles agency and that his notebooks were actually his personal diaries, not for public consumption. Their foolish pride kept them at bay just the same. And though he was disappointed to be so isolated, it gave him the freedom to watch Mingmei.

Every morning, they rode in open-top Land Rovers out onto the plains in search of wildlife—zebras, giraffes, lions, hyenas, cheetahs, rhinos, dozens of others—and they were divided into two trucks by virtue of their relationships. The five Americans who had come together went in one; the German brothers, William, and Mingmei in the other. The Germans were often hung over, and their English was difficult enough to comprehend when they were sober and agreeable, so they all rode in relative silence each morning. By the time the African sun had reached its blistering zenith, the Germans were usually recovered enough to come out of their torpor with cameras clicking. But Mingmei took nearly no photographs

when they jolted off-road up to an elephant herd moving across the dusty, shade-less grasslands. To William, who took obligatory pictures of the animals so he would remember later on why he came to Africa, she was as out of place as a rose that grows in the crack of a sidewalk. She stared out the windows of the Land Rover with her chin resting in one hand, her bangs stuck to her forehead from sweat in the midday heat, her arms bare in the sundress she wore, no hat to shield her jet-black hair from the sun. She stared, but William thought she didn't actually see anything. Her body was here, but her mind was somewhere far, far away. I'm broken in here, so if you approach me, please approach gently. William could read this in her; he knew it intimately. He had felt that same way for many, many weeks after learning he had cancer.

With her permission, he took her photo on the second day. She flashed him the peace sign, her middle and index finger, almost as if by reflex.

When she came to the dinner table that third night of the ten-day safari, he decided to approach her, as gently as he knew how. As she sat down across the table from him, it was painfully clear that she had been crying. Her face was flushed and puffy, and though she smiled for him as she took her place on the bench, there was no concealing the sadness behind her eyes or how her mouth begged to turn down again after that forced smile. She politely refused most of the unfamiliar foods their hosts served,

contenting herself with a bowl of pumpkin soup and a small hunk of bread. The hedonistic Germans helped themselves to her unwanted portions of the salad and meat.

“The Brothers Grimm are glad you’re not hungry,” William said.

“Yes,” she said, then, puzzled, she added, “You mean Christian and Oliver.”

The Germans glanced up at the mention of their names, nodding to her with crooked grins that reinforced their sibling resemblance. William said, “You know their names?”

“Yes. And you are William. From California in the United States.”

“Right. Ni hao, Mingmei.” He smiled, slightly embarrassed, when she raised both eyebrows at the Chinese words. Or perhaps it was because he knew her name when he didn’t know those of the Germans. “It’s all I know how to say. I hope I’m saying it correctly.”

“Mandarin is a difficult language,” she said.

He said, "Not so good, then, I take it. I should have settled for 'jambo.' Swahili is easier, I think."

"Oh yes. I think so, too." She lowered her eyes and concentrated on her soup. William gave her back her silent space as one of the Americans at the other end of the table, the burly unofficial leader of the group, announced that he had devised Swahili nicknames for everyone on the safari. The other Americans urged him on with their laughter and clapping; even the Germans seemed engaged, pounding the table in amusement when their African guides corrected the American leader's pronunciation. William nodded politely when they dubbed him katibu ("the writer"), and he watched her face when they determined unanimously that Mingmei was "the quiet one."

"Kimia," he said to her later that night as he came up to her as she sat on a folding chair outside her tent. A gas lantern on a pole nearby was the sole source of light beyond the stars above. In the darkness he could see other lanterns outside the tents of some of the others. The night had become chilly, and he could barely see that Mingmei was wearing a dark sweater with a high collar. It looked hand-knit.

"Oh, yes," she said, and he could hear faint amusement in her voice. "I should not answer you if I am really the quiet one."

“You know, Daniel told me while we were out looking for the leopard yesterday that he’s never had an Asian woman on one of his safaris before. He asked me if all Asian women are so quiet.”

“Our driver is David,” she said, covering her smile with one hand. “Daniel is the guide with the other group.”

William said, “I guess I should be the quiet one, eh?”

“And how did you answer him?”

William crouched down next to her chair, the wind pulling his hair across his forehead, his legs sore but in a good, tired way. Tomorrow, they would depart at dawn to join a clan of bushmen for their morning hunt; Daniel—David, he corrected himself—had said it would be difficult. The bushmen were fast on their feet, and they had no patience for dawdling white people who did not appreciate that the clan’s breakfast was on the line. To keep up, David had suggested, it would be best to leave behind much of their bulkier equipment like video camera tripods, backpacks with water and snacks and lotion. William was already traveling light, just one camera, really. He would leave the bulk of his lenses in the truck while he hunted with the bushmen. David had also told them that they were free to hunt

berries with the clan's women, if the hunting—and the inevitable killing—was not to their tastes. William had wondered which group Mingmei would join. The thought that he might choose whichever one she chose came to him for the first time now, looking at her eyes above her hand, part of her smile peeking from behind her fingertips.

“I told him that my experience with Asian women was limited to a nurse I had while I was sick. I don't believe in generalizing. Generally speaking.”

He could not tell if she understood his play on words. She said, “You were sick. Why?”

“Do you mean, what was wrong with me, or why did I get sick in the first place?”

“What was wrong.”

“I had leukemia.” She turned her head quizzically, so he said, “Cancer. I was going to come on this safari years ago, but when I went to my doctor for a physical, they found it in my blood test. I just thought they were going to tell me I had high cholesterol. But when you hear the word ‘cancer,’ everything changes.”

“Of course. But you are very lucky,” she said.

“I don’t know. I used to think so.”

“You are alive. That is lucky.” She said it with such force and certainty that he could hear the echo of Connie, the nurse overseeing his chemotherapy, when she asked him why he’d come alone once more to treatment, with no one to drive him home again.

“Yes. I’m still here. And I’m here,” he conceded, gesturing at the landscape. As if cued, a lion grunted in the distance; Mingmei quickly sat up straighter in her chair, and impulsively, William touched her knee with his hand. “Don’t worry. It’s just calling to its mate. She’s out hunting for both of them. Besides, it’s a ways off.”

“I see. Okay. Thank you.”

He took his hand away again. “Sorry.”

“You know about the animals.” she said without acknowledging his gesture again. When he agreed, she said, “You must be writing about Africa. You know so much already.”

“I’m not that kind of writer,” William said. “Not yet, anyway. I just write ads. Nothing you would know, I guess. ‘Get Going Every Morning with Go-Gos.’ It’s a cereal. Well, see, I can tell by that look—nothing you would know.”

“I have never had American cereal. I’m sure I would like it.”

“Maybe not. It has a lot of sugar in it.”

Out in the thick blackness, the lion sounded again, a short burst of staccato grunts. Mingmei and William were silent, just listening, William watching her eyes in the flicker of the lantern’s fire. They were as round as he had seen them in three days, and she looked left and right as if she might spot the great beast as it emerged from the darkness into their small, vulnerable camp. When she met his stare unexpectedly, he looked down at the red dust beneath his feet, colorless in the night.

“You were dying?” she asked then.

“Yes.”

“Your nurse, she was Asian. Chinese?”

“Yes. Connie.”

“Chinese women are good nurses. She did a good job of curing your cancer if you are well enough to come to Africa. When you go back, you should marry her.”

William smiled. “I’m already married.”

“Is your wife Chinese?”

“No. She’s American. From a town outside of Chicago. Rockford. I don’t know if you know where that is.” He shifted on his haunches. It surprised to him to feel uncomfortable talking about Bridget right now; in fact, there was no reason for it, except guilt. Guilt that he had been angry at her for withdrawing during his chemotherapy. Guilt that he had come on safari despite her firm certainty that he wasn’t well enough. Guilt that, for some foolish reason, he worried Mingmei would stop speaking to him if his devotion already belonged to someone else. It seemed important that they speak, urgent, like answering a ringing phone or looking for the moon over and over again because it’s full and beckoning. “We’ve been married for eight years. We have a seven-year-old son.”

“I have a son, too. Do you want to see him?”

When he said yes, she disappeared briefly into her tent, returning a moment later with a worn photograph, off-size, bigger than a wallet photo but not quite a four-by-six. The edges were frayed, and he tipped it toward the lantern to see it better. There were three of them in the photo—a boy with a round face of baby fat like a little Buddha, a man with angular features, glasses, and a thick tangle of black hair, and Mingmei, dressed in a red dress with a high collar, her head lowered slightly as she looked fixedly into the camera. Her left hand on her son's shoulder bore no ring, and for reasons he could not understand, this pleased him. The man, whom she identified as her husband Wen, seemed scholarly and reserved; he was not smiling in the photo.

“Where are they now?” William asked as he handed the photo back to her.

“Shenzhen. Do you know where that is? No? But I know where Chicago is. Is that funny? Shenzhen is in the south on the mainland, in Guangdong Province across from Hong Kong.” She looked down at her family in her hands. “Wen is in the government. He is not important. But he supported the students in Tiananmen Square. I told him many times, ‘You are too loud. You are bringing trouble to us.’ The summer was very long for us when it was over and the students were gone. Deng Xiaoping and Li Peng said they would punish anyone who spoke out against what had happened,

and we—” She seemed to hear the intensity that had been building in her voice because she stopped suddenly and smiled tiredly. “I do not know if I can tell you this.”

William said, “You can tell me anything you want to. I want to know.”