

A Good Fall

Ha Jin

Ha Jin is the pen name of Xuefei Jin, born February 21, 1956, in China's Liaoning Province. He grew up during the turbulent years of the Cultural Revolution, served in the army, and completed bachelor's and master's degrees in his home country before coming to the United States in 1985 to pursue his doctorate in English at Brandeis University. Ha Jin is currently a professor of creative writing at Boston University. He is the author of numerous works, including the poetry volumes *Facing Shadows* (1996) and *Wreckage* (2001), and the short-story collections *Ocean of Words: Army Stories* (1996), *Under the Red Flag* (1997), *The Bridegroom* (2001), and *A Good Earth* (2009). Jin has also published the novels *In the Pond* (1998), *Waiting* (1999), *The Crazy* (2002), *War Trash* (2004), *A Free Life* (2007), and *Nanjing Requiem* (2011). "A Good Fall" is based on a true story of a Chinese monk in Flushing, New York.

AGAIN GANCHIN COLLAPSED in the kung fu class he was teaching. Seated on the floor, he gasped for breath and couldn't get up. A student stepped over to give him a hand, but Ganchin waved to stop him. He forced himself to announce, "Let's call it a day. Please come back tomorrow afternoon." The seventeen boys and girls were collecting their bags in a corner and exiting the exercise hall. Some kept glancing at their teacher's contorted face.

Late that afternoon Master Zong called Ganchin into the small meditation room. They sat down on the floor, and the heavy-jawed master poured a cup of tea for him and said, "Brother, I'm afraid we have to let you go. We've tried but cannot get your visa renewed." He placed Ganchin's passport on the coffee table, beside the teacup.

Stunned, Ganchin opened his mouth, but no words came out. Indeed, he had been sick for weeks and couldn't teach the kung fu classes as well as before, yet never had he imagined that Master Zong would dismiss him before his contract expired. Ganchin said, "Can you pay me the salary the temple owes me?"

"We don't owe you anything," Zong answered, his hooded eyes glued to Ganchin's pale face.

"Our contract says clearly that you'll pay me fifteen hundred dollars a month. So far you haven't paid me a cent."

"Like I said, that was just a formality—we had to put down a figure to get the visa for you."

"Master Zong, I worked for you for more than two years and never made any trouble. Now that you fired me, you should give me at least my salary so I can go back and clear the debts I owe."

"We've provided lodging and board for you. This is New York, where everything's expensive. As a matter of fact, we paid you a lot more than fifteen hundred a month."

"But without some cash in hand I can't go home. I spent a fortune to get this teaching position, bribing the elders in charge of international exchanges at my monastery."

"We have no money for you."

"Then I cannot leave."

Zong picked up Ganchin's passport and inserted it into his robe.

"I can't let you have your papers if you stay on illegally. From now on you're on your own, and you must move out tomorrow. I don't care where you go. Your visa has expired and you're already an illegal alien, a lawbreaker."

Zong got up from the floor and went out to the backyard, where his midnight blue BMW was parked. Ganchin was still sitting cross-legged in the room as the car pulled away. He knew the master was going home to Long Island, where he had recently bought a house in Syosset. Zong and his woman had just had a baby, but they couldn't marry because as the master of the temple he dared not take a wife openly. He'd kept his former residence, a town house in lower Manhattan, where he often put up his friends and the friends of his friends.

The temple felt deserted despite the tiny halos of candles on the rows of small tables in the service hall, at the end of which sat a tall statue of the Buddha smiling serenely, with his hands resting palms up on his knees. Ganchin closed the windows and bolted the front door. Since he had become ill, he had been more afraid of the night, when he felt more desolate and homesick. Originally he'd thought that by the time his three-year stint here was over he could return loaded with gifts and dollars. But now, penniless, he couldn't imagine going back. His father had written that some creditors had shown up to pester his family. The old man urged him not to rush home, not until he made enough money.

Ganchin cooked himself some rice porridge and ate it with two preserved eggs. After the meal he forced himself to drink some boiled water to keep down the acid gastric juice that was surging up into his throat. He decided to call Cindy, who had once learned martial arts from him when she visited Tianjin City, where his monastery and kung fu school were located. She was an "ABC" (American-born Chinese) but could speak Mandarin.

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Ever since she'd met him again in Flushing, she had been friendly and often invited him to tea downtown.

They agreed to meet at Lovely Melodies, a bar at the northern end of Alexis Street. It was an out-of-the-way place where few could recognize Ganchin as a monk of Gaolin Temple. On arrival, he didn't go in, but waited for Cindy because he had no money. Within a minute she showed up. Together they entered the bar, found a table in a corner, and ordered their drinks. There were only about a dozen customers, but the music was loud. A young man near the front was belting out a karaoke song as if heartbroken:

What I miss most is your big smile
That still sweetens my dreams.
Although I run into you all the while,
Your face no longer beams...

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"He really meant to get rid of you?" Cindy asked Ganchin about Master Zong, sipping her margarita with a straw.

"No doubt about it. I'll have to move out tomorrow." He gave a feeble sigh and set his glass of Sprite on the table.

"Where are you going to stay?"

"I have a friend, a fellow townsman, who might agree to take me in."

"You know, you can always use my place. I'm on trips most of the time anyway." A small-framed woman of twenty-five with a sunny face, she was a flight attendant and often flew abroad. Sometimes she was away for a whole week.

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"Thanks. I may be able to stay with my friend for the time being. To be honest, never have I felt this low—I can neither stay on nor go back."

"Why can't you live here?"

"Master Zong said I was already an illegal alien. He kept my passport."

"You shouldn't worry so much, sweetie. If worse comes to worst, you should consider marrying a woman, a U.S. citizen." She snickered, gazing at his lean face, her big eyes warm and brave.

He knew she was fond of him, but he said, "I'm a monk and can't think of anything like that."

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"Why not return to this earthly life?"

"Well, I'm already trapped in the web of dust. People say the temple is a place without strife, worry, or greed. It's not true. Master Zong lives like a CEO. I guess he must spend more than ten thousand dollars a month just for his house-hold expenses."

"I know. I saw him drive a brand-new car."

"That's why I am angry with him, for not paying me my salary."

"How much would be enough for you to go back?"

"At least twenty thousand dollars. He owes me forty thousand."

"I'm afraid he might never pay you that much."

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Ganchin sighed. "I know. I'm upset but can't do a thing. He has a lot of pull back home. A cousin of his is the head the municipal police. Sometimes I wish I were an illegal coolie here, so that I could restart my life and wouldn't have to deal with any crook. But I've never worked outside a temple and don't have any skill. I'm useless here."

"Come on—you can teach martial arts."

"For that I'll have to know some English, won't I?"

"You can always learn it."

"Also, I'll need a work permit."

"Don't worry so much. Try to get better. Once you're well, there'll be ways for you to get by here."

He didn't want to talk more, unable to imagine making a living in America.

When they were leaving the bar, she asked him to contact her when-

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ever he needed help. She was going to fly to Tokyo and would be back the next week. The night was slightly hazy and most shops were closed. Some young couples strolled along the sidewalks hand in hand or arm in arm. A car honked about two hundred feet away. At the blast a linden sapling nearby shuddered a little, its leaves rustling. Ganchin had a fit of wheezing coughing and wiped his mouth with a tissue. Cindy patted him on the back and urged him to rest in bed for a few days. He grimaced, his face wry. They said good night, and in no time her sylphlike figure in its orange skirt faded into the dark.

Fanku wasn't really Ganchin's friend. They had come to know each other about six months ago at a celebration of the Spring Festival. Ganchin had been delighted to find the man to be a fellow townsman, from the same county. Fanku worked as a line cook at an eatery. When Ganchin asked to stay with him for a few days, Fanku welcomed him, saying he was proud to help a friend.

His studio apartment was in the basement of a nine-story tenement, close to downtown Flushing. It had a tiny bathroom but no kitchenette, and was furnished with only a cot and a pair of metal chairs standing on either side of a narrow table. When Ganchin had arrived, Fanku pulled a bundle out of the closet and spread the thin sponge mattress on the floor. "Here, you can sleep on this," he told the guest. "I hope this is all right."

"Very good, thanks," Ganchin replied.

In the morning he would roll up the mattress and stow it in the closet again. The sleeping arrangement satisfied both of them, but Ganchin's hacking cough troubled Fanku, who asked him several times about the true nature of his illness. Ganchin assured him that it was not tuberculosis, that he must have hurt his lungs during his kung fu practice, and that the

illness had been aggravated by the anger and anguish he'd gone through lately. Even so, Fanku often examined the water in a pickle bottle—into which the monk spat—to see if there was blood. So far he'd found nothing abnormal. Still, Ganchin's constant coughing disturbed him, especially at night.

Fanku let his guest use whatever food he had in the studio for free, while he himself ate at work. There were a few packs of ramen noodles and a half sack of jasmine rice in the cabinets, and he urged Ganchin to eat something more nutritious so that he could recuperate, but the monk had no money. He asked Fanku for a loan of two hundred dollars, but Fanku was almost as broke as Ganchin. He'd overstayed his business visa and had to pay horrendous attorney's fees, as he had been trying to get his illegal status changed. He lent Ganchin sixty dollars instead. Fanku often brought back food for Ganchin, a box of rice mixed with pork roast, or a bag of fish croquettes, or a bunch of egg rolls and sparereibs. By now, Ganchin had started eating meat and seafood; it was hard to remain vegetarian when he had no idea where he would have his next meal. Fanku said he could get those food items at a discount, but Ganchin wondered if they were leftovers. Yet whenever the thought popped into his mind, he'd push it aside and remind himself to be grateful.

Then one morning Fanku said, "Look, Ganchin, I don't mean to pressure you, but I can't continue paying for the food I bring back. My lawyer asked me to give him thirty-five hundred dollars by the end of this month. I'm totally broke."

Lowering his eyes, Genchin said, "Please keep a record of the money you've spent on me. I'll pay it back."

"You misunderstood me, brother. I simply don't have enough cash now. Goodness knows if my lawyer really can help me. A girl at Olivia Salon has spent more than eighty thousand dollars for attorney's fees but still can't get a green card. Sometimes I'm so desperate for cash that I feel like mugging someone. You know, I have to send money to my wife and daughter back home as well."

"Can you help me find work at your restaurant? I can wash dishes and mop floors."

"You're so ill, no place would dare to use you. The best you can do is rest well and try to recover."

Ganchin turned silent for a few seconds, then replied, "I'll try to get some money."

Fanku said no more. He yawned, having slept poorly since Ganchin had been here. Fanku was only forty-one but looked wizened like an old man with a pimpled bald crown. He must have lived in fear and worry all

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the time. He spread his hand towel on a clotheshorse in a corner and left for work.

After breakfast, which was two cold buns stuffed with red-bean paste and a cup of black tea, Ganchin set out for Gaolin Temple. His legs were a little shaky as he walked. A shower had descended the previous night, so the streets were clean and even the air smelled fresher, devoid of the stink of rotten fish and vegetables. He turned onto a side street. On the pavement seven plump sparrows were struggling with spilled popcorn, twittering fretfully and hardly able to break the fluffy kernels. Regardless of humans and automobiles, the birds were all working hard at the food. Approaching the temple, Ganchin heard people shouting and stamping their feet in unison inside the brick building. A new coach was teaching a kung fu class.

At the sight of Ganchin, Master Zong put on a smile and said, "You've gained some color. I hope you're well now." He led him to the back of the building, walking with a slight stoop.

Seated on a bamboo mat in the meditation room, Ganchin said, "Master, I came to see if there's some way you can pay me my salary. I can't stay on illegally—you know that—and neither can I go home without enough cash to clear my debts."

Zong's smile didn't stop, displaying a mouth of gleaming teeth, which had often made Ganchin wonder what kind of toothpaste the master used. Zong said, "Let me repeat, our temple doesn't owe you a thing."

"Master, you've pushed me to the edge of a cliff—I have no way out now and may have to follow Ganping's example." Ganping had been a monk at the temple, who, after three years' work, wouldn't go back on account of the unpaid salary. Master Zong had ordered him to leave, but the monk went to a park and hanged himself instead.

"You're not like Ganping," Zong said calmly, his fleshy face sleek. "He was insane and stupid, couldn't even do a clean job of hanging himself. That's why he is in jail now." People had spotted Ganping the moment he dangled from a piece of cloth tied to a bough of an oak, his legs kicking, and they'd called the police, who brought him back to the temple. Soon afterward he was sent back to China. But he went crazy because his girlfriend had taken a lover during his absence. He strangled the woman, with whom he ought not to have started a romantic relationship in the first place.

Ganchin felt like weeping but took hold of himself. He said, "Don't underestimate me, Master. If life is no longer worth living, one can end it without remorse."

"You have your old parents, who are looking forward to seeing you home. You shouldn't think of such a cowardly way out."

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"If I went back empty-handed, I'd be a great disappointment to them. I'd prefer to die here."

"Don't talk about death. We monks must cherish every life. Life is given us only once, and it's a sin to destroy it. You know all this; no need for me to dwell on it."

"Master, farewell. See you in the next world."

"Stop bluffing. To be honest, according to my agreement with your monastery, I'm responsible for sending you home, but I won't force you. You can choose what to do." The master let out a huge burp.

"I only hope my soul can reach home. Good-bye now." Ganchin got up from the bamboo mat and made for the door. 70

"Pighead," Zong said.

Ganchin stepped out of the temple. Forks of lightning cracked the sky in the south, where dark clouds were billowing, piling on one another. The wind was rising as shop signs along the street were flapping. Pedestrians were rushing back and forth to avoid the thickening rain, a stocky woman running with a newspaper over her head, but Ganchin just strolled back to Fanku's place. Big raindrops pattered on tree leaves and on his face while his robe fluttered.

Cindy came to see him the next afternoon. His cough had turned harsher, thanks to the rain that had drenched him. He was also thinner than the previous week. She took him to Little Pepper, a Sichuan restaurant, and ordered a vegetarian firepot for both of them.

He had no appetite for vegetables and would have preferred meat or seafood. He spoke listlessly while she tried to cheer him up. "Don't think you're down and out," she said. "You're still young and can always restart."

"How do you mean?" He looked at her heart-shaped face blankly. 75

"I mean it's foolish to think you're done for. Lots of people here are illegal aliens. They live a hard life but still can manage. In a couple of years there might be an amnesty that allows them to become legal immigrants." She cut a cube of tofu in two with her chopsticks and put a half into her mouth, chewing it with her lips closed.

"I really don't know what to do. I hope I can go home soon."

"Continue to be a monk?" She gave a pixieish smile.

"I've never been someone else since I grew up."

"You can always change. This is America, where it's never too late to turn over a new page. That's why my parents came here. My mom hated her ex-mother-in-law—that's my grandmother—and wanted to restart her life far away from the old woman." 80

He grimaced again, having no idea what to say. He thought of borrowing money from Cindy to clear the debt of sixty dollars he owed Fanku, but refrained. He would prefer to leave her only good memories of him.

am. "You look better with your crew cut, you know." She pointed at his head, which used to be shaved bald.

"I didn't mean to keep it this way at all."

"You should let your hair grow longer. That will make your face look stronger—more masculine, I mean. Are you okay at your current place?"

He took a bite of a fake meatball made of minced mushroom and soy flour and answered, "It's all right for now. I don't know how long I can stay with Fanku. I might already be a burden to him."

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"Keep in mind you can always use my place, I live on planes and in hotels these days."

"Thank you." His eyes went moist, but he averted his face and squeezed his lids. "If only I had been born here," he sighed.

"Except for the Indians, nobody's really a native in the United States. You mustn't think of yourself as a stranger—this country belongs to you if you live and work here."

"I'm too old to change."

"How can you say that? You're just twenty-eight!"

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"But my heart is very, very old."

"You still have fifty years to go, at least." She giggled and patted his hand. He smiled and shook his head as if to admit he was beyond help.

After talking with Cindy, he realized that Master Zong had kept his passport with an eye to preventing him from changing his status, because illegal aliens had to produce their papers when the U.S. president issued an amnesty. It would be impossible to apply for a green card in good time if you couldn't prove your country of origin and your date of entry into the United States. Zong must be determined to get him back to China.

Fanku told Ganchin to stay in the next morning, because the superintendent of the tenement would come around eleven to check the smoke detector. Ganchin promised not to go out before the man showed up. He was lying on the cot, thinking about whether he should ask for a smaller amount of cash from Master Zong, say twenty-five thousand, since apparently the temple had never paid any monk a salary. How he regretted having tried so hard to come here! He'd been misled by the people who bragged about the opportunity found in America and wouldn't reveal the hardship they'd gone through here. They all wanted to appear rich and successful in their hometowns' eyes. Silly, how silly. If he went back, he would tell the truth—the American type of success was not for everyone. You must learn how to sell yourself there and must change yourself to live a new life.

As he was musing, someone knocked on the door. He got up to answer it. The instant he opened it a crack two men burst in. One was Master Zong and the other a brawny young fellow Ganchin had never met. They

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grabbed his arms. "Don't resist," Zong hissed. "We won't hurt you. We're just helping you go home, to keep you from deteriorating into a bum."

"Where are you taking me?" Ganchin gasped.

"To the airport," Zong said, as they hauled him away. Ganchin was too weak to struggle and so he obeyed them.

They shoved him into the back of the BMW, buckled him up, and dropped on his lap two paper napkins for his phlegm. Then they got into the front seats, and the car pulled away. In a placid voice Zong explained to him, "Don't be upset. I bought the plane ticket for you and will give you some cash for your travel expenses. When you check in at the counter, I'll let you have your passport."

"You've kidnapped me. This is against the law."

The men both guffawed. The squint-eyed young fellow said, "Please don't accuse us like this. You're a Chinese and soon will board a plane for China."

"Yes, you can grouse as much as you like to the elders of your monastery," Zong told him.

Realizing it was useless to argue, Ganchin clammed up the rest of the way, though he was thinking hard about how to break loose.

They parked in a garage and then took him to Air China. A large uniformed black woman stood at the entrance to the ticketing counter; Ganchin wondered if he should shout to get her attention, but thought better of it. The three of them entered the zigzag cordoned lane filled with people. This wasn't personal, Master Zong kept telling him. They just didn't want to sully China's image by letting an ocher-robed monk roam the streets of New York. That would tarnish the temple's reputation as well.

What should Ganchin do? He could get rid of his robe as he had slacks underneath. Should he go to the men's room and see if he could find a way to escape from there? No, they would see through him. How about calling to the fully armed security guards with the big German shepherd near the checkpoint? No. Master Zong might still be able to get him on the plane, claiming he was mentally ill, dangerous like a terrorist, and must be sent home for treatment.

As he was wondering, a passenger cart with three rows of seats on it was coming up, an old couple sitting in the first row. Ganchin glanced at his kidnappers—both of them were looking at the counter, where two young women were lugging a family's baggage onto the conveyor belt. Ganchin lifted the blue cordon beside him, slunk out of the lane, and leapt upon the last row of seats on the cart, then rolled down into the legroom. He pulled in his feet so his kidnappers couldn't see him. The battery-powered vehicle was running away when he heard Zong shout, "Ganchin, Ganchin, where are you?"

"Come here, Ganchin, you dickhead!" another voice barked.
 "Ganchin, come over, please! We can negotiate," Zong cried.
 Ganchin realized they didn't know he was on the vehicle, which veered off and headed for another terminal. He stayed put, letting it take him as far away as possible.

Finally the cart stopped, and he raised his head to look around. "Hey, this is for disability only," the black driver told him, flashing a smile while helping the old couple off.

Ganchin didn't know what the man meant, and just said, "Thank you." That was all the English he had besides "goodbye." He got off and went into a men's room, where he shed his robe. He dumped it into a trash can and came out wearing black slacks and an off-white sweatshirt.

He managed to get back to Flushing by a hotel shuttle, following the suggestion of a middle-aged Taiwanese woman. Terrified, he could not return to Fanku's place. Evidently that man and Master Zong were in cahoots. Where to go now? Where was a safe place? Never had Ganchin imagined that Zong would resort to force to fly him back. A pain tightened his chest and he coughed again.

He still had a few dollars in his pocket, so he slouched into Teng's Garden, which wasn't far from Gaolin Temple. A trim little man in shirtsleeves, apparently the owner of the restaurant, greeted him and, raising his forefinger, said heartily, "One?" He was about to take him into the interior.

"Just a minute. Can I use your phone?" Ganchin asked.

"There's a pay phone down the street. Why not use that one?" The man waved in the direction of the temple.

"I don't know how to use a pay phone."

"Similar to a regular one—drop in a quarter and dial the number you want to call. We're talking about a local call, right?"

"Actually, I don't have to use a phone. I'm Ganchin, a monk of Gaolin Temple, and I'd like to leave a word for Master Zong there. Can you pass it for me?"

"I don't know you."

"Look, this is me." Ganchin produced a laminated photo and showed it to the man. In it Ganchin, wearing black cloth shoes, struck a pose like an eagle about to hop off; above his shiny shaved head a golden banner was floating in a breeze; he looked like a movie star, a hero, full of spunk.

The little man squinted at the picture and then at him. "Yes, it's you. What do you want me to tell your master?" 120

"Tell him to say prayers and make offerings for my soul tomorrow morning before sunrise."

"What are you talking about? Like you're already a ghost."

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"I'm going to die soon. Tell Master Zong to pray to redeem my soul before six o'clock tomorrow morning, all right?"

"Young brother, you shouldn't think like this. You mustn't give up so easily. Come with me, let's talk and see if this old man can be any help."

Ganchin followed him into an inner room; in its center stood a round dining table with a revolving, two-level tray on it. Apparently this was a place for banquets. The moment they sat down at the immense table, Ganchin said he'd decided to kill himself today. He was sick and penniless, while Master Zong tried to send him back to China without paying him the salary the temple owed him. The little man listened, wordless. The more Ganchin rambled, the more heartbroken he became, until he couldn't continue anymore and collapsed into sobbing.

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The restaurant owner sighed and shook his broad head. He said, "You wait here and I'll be back in a minute."

By now Ganchin had calmed down some, though was still tearful. He believed this was his last day on earth. Thinking about his old parents, he felt his insides writhing. How devastated they would be by his death! And without him, their only son, how miserable their remaining years would become. But he simply had no way out. If he died here, at least some of the creditors might take pity on his parents and forgive the debts. Oh, this was the only way he could help his family!

The little man came back with a large bowl of rice topped with sautéed seafood and vegetables. He said to Ganchin, "Young brother, I can see you're hungry. Eat this and you might think differently afterward. Gosh, I totally forgot you're a monk, a vegetarian! Sorry about this. I'm gonna—"

"I eat seafood," Ganchin said.

"Then eat this. Keep in mind, yours is not the worst sorrow. Life is precious and full of wonderful things in spite of all the bitterness and sufferings."

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"Thank you, Uncle," he mumbled. "I will put in a good word for you when I meet the Buddha in the other world." He broke the connected chopsticks and began eating.

Oh, it tasted so good! This was the most delicious meal he'd had in recent years, and he picked up the shrimp and scallops one after another and swallowed them as if they did not require chewing. The snow peas were crisp, the bamboo shoots crunchy, and the portabella mushrooms succulent, perfectly done. He ate and ate, and in no time finished the whole thing. Then he lifted the bowl, about to drink up the remaining sauce, but caught himself and put it down.

"Uncle," he said, "I know you're kind and generous. You gave ear to a stranger's grievance, you didn't ask me but guessed I was hungry, and you have a compassionate soul. Here's a bit of cash. Please keep this." He

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pulled all the money out of his pants pocket and left it on the table, one five and three singles.

Waving his stubby fingers, the man protested, "I didn't mean to sell you any food. I don't want your money. Just think about all the good things in this life, okay? Don't let your grief crush you."

"Please tell Master Zong to pray for me before sunrise tomorrow morning. Good-bye, Uncle." Ganchin hurried out the door and dragged himself away, feeling the restaurateur's gaze at his back.

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Where should he go? He wanted to find a building out of which he could jump and kill himself. How about the temple? No, it had only two stories. Too low. How about the elementary school? No, his ghost might frighten the children if he died there, and people would condemn him.

Having crossed Northern Boulevard, he saw a brick building to his right, partly boarded up. He took a brief measure of it—it was high enough, five stories. Also, this was a deserted spot and his death might not disturb many people in the neighborhood. So he decided to use this building, which must once have been a factory and still had metal ventilators on its roof.

As he was laboring up the sagging stairs, a flock of pigeons took off, their wings flickering explosively, and a few bats flitted about, catching mosquitoes while emitting tinny squeaks in the glow of the sinking sun. The distant houses and the spires of the churches were obscured, half hidden in the golden smog. At a landing the floor was strewn with needleless syringes, takeout containers, cigarette butts, beer cans. He wondered if some people lived in here at night. Well, if they did, they shouldn't continue using this place when it got cold. On the top floor he leaned over a few unboarded windows to survey the base of the building. Down there in the empty parking lot a lone seagull with black wing tips was wrestling with a paper bag, dragging out balled-up napkins and plastic cups and plates to pick up bits of fries. Ganchin decided to use the backyard to avoid the traffic on the front street. He propped two thick boards on a window sill that had lost its wood and was just lined with bricks. He pictured himself running all the way up the boards and springing out of the building head-first. That would do the job for sure. He backed up a dozen steps, ready to dash.

Suddenly his stomach churned and sent up a chunk of scallop and a few rice grains that he hadn't chewed thoroughly. Oh, they still tasted good! He swallowed the morsel while tears were trickling down his cheeks. He started running, up and up, until he hurtled himself into the air. As he was falling facedown, somehow all the years of training in martial arts at once possessed him. His body instinctively adjusted itself, and even his arms spread out, swinging to ensure that he wouldn't hurt himself fatally. With a

thump his feet landed on the ground. "Ow!" he yelled, thunderstruck that he had just cheated death. A tearing pain shot up from his left thigh while his right leg twitched.

"Ow, help me! Help!" he hollered.

How ludicrous this whole thing turned out! He kept yelling, and some people came over, most of them high school students playing basketball nearby. A man dialed 911 and another comforted him, saying, "Don't move. Everything's cool, man. I know this hurts, must hurt like hell, but help's on the way."

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"Oh, let me die, let me finish myself!" Eyes shut, Ganchin was screaming and shaking his head, but nobody understood his Mandarin.

In addition to a broken leg, the doctors found, he also suffered from tracheitis. No wonder he was running a temperature and coughing non-stop. They kept him in the hospital for three days until his fever was gone. Meanwhile, his attempted suicide had become news in the Chinese communities across North America, reported by numerous small newspapers; a charitable organization offered to pick up his medical bills; and even the owner of Teng's Garden got famous for a week, having appeared twice on local TV. Everyone knew that the master of Gaolin Temple had exploited young monks and pocketed their salaries. Many declared that they would never donate anything to the temple again. A pretty thirty-something named Amy Lok, running for a seat in the state senate, paid Ganchin a visit and told him to contact her office if he needed any assistance. Several lawyers called, eager to represent him in a lawsuit against the temple. All the notoriety befuddled and unnerved Ganchin.

Cindy took him in after he was released from the hospital with a pair of crutches, and she persuaded him to let her speak with the attorneys on his behalf so that they might not take advantage of him. She urged him to use Jon Mah, an older man who spoke both Mandarin and Korean and was known for handling this kind of case. Ganchin was worried about the legal fee, but Mr. Mah told him, "You don't need to pay before you get the damages from the defendant."

Cindy said to Ganchin, "They'll get a third of the money the court awards you." 145

"This is America," Mr. Mah resumed, "a land ruled by law, and nobody is entitled to abuse others with impunity. Rest assured, you're in safe hands."

After the attorney left, Ganchin was still antsy. He asked Cindy, "What will the INS do to me? If they deport me, can I get enough money for the debts back home?"

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"Now there'll be ways for you to avoid deportation—you can apply for political asylum, or marry a citizen or a legal resident. You know, you'll be rich, but not filthy rich like a millionaire who doesn't have to work."

Amazed, Ganchin thought about her words, then sighed. "I guess I'm not a monk anymore, and no temple will ever take me in."

"That also means you're free to date a girl." She giggled, rubbing her nose with a knuckle. 150

"Well, I hope that's something I can learn." He gazed at her and smiled.