NEVER GO TO SCHOOL WITH A HANGOVER

No more drinking on school nights, I warn myself. Not after last night. My head hurts. The eyes blur. This stomach lurches. These halls aren't wide enough; too many lockers are open. It's an outdoor market of sour lunch smells, the snap and fizzle of soft drinks, girls sitting cross-legged, giggling and eating from dainty boxes. There are too many posters of Hello Kitty, too many Four Fab Kings, too many Japanese and Korean ads. Two guys with greasy hair chase one another, shouting and swearing, their runners squeaking against the floor. *No running in the hall, boys. How many times must I remind you?* This place is stifling, suffocating. I have to get out.

My car, where did I park? Not far, I hope. Thinking hurts. I was late this morning. The lot was full. I ended up on a side street, squinting at the no-parking rules. If I can clear my head, I'll be OK.

I can walk straight. Just watch. I can even run. I used to play basketball for school. First string. At every game, through every quarter, my feet were wings. I'm still good. I'm still great. I'm a razor slicing through the enemy. They trip over their own feet. From the corner of my eye, I see the orange rim, the white net. I have momentum. I fly. I shoot. The ball carves a perfect arc. I rocket up, my fists clenched over my head.

Too bad the team let me go.

The main door clicks. A breeze. Sunshine. I can breathe!

Someone grabs my arm. I ease up and pivot, but the grip is tight, like a vise. It's Vice-Principal McGee. We call him McGay.

"Sir! How are you?" I am always polite. Suddenly my head clears, and everything comes into focus.

"This way, Lincoln Wen."

My last chance for fresh air and freedom vanishes. All the kids watch as I'm led away. They have baby-fat faces with blue eyeliner and lip-gloss. They wear glasses and thin silvery necklaces. Now they think I'm cool. *Thanks, McGay!*

"Sir, it's lunchtime." I want to negotiate, man-to-man, face-to-face, but he shoves me ahead of him down the hallway. His fingers squeeze my arm, but I ignore the pain. McGay is tall and wide. His stomach hangs like a sack of

sand over his belt. He lacks class. He wears short-sleeved shirts. You can see the sweat stains under his armpits. People say he was once a cop. People say he never turned in his gun.

"Sir, what's going on?" I ask loudly. "It's lunchtime. We're allowed to go out to eat."

McGay does not answer.

I pull out my cell. "Sir, I'll call the police. You're assaulting me."

He shakes his head. The bags below his eyes sag into punched-out cheeks. "What the hell happened to you?" he mutters. "You used to be such a nice kid."

Who wants to be a nice kid? I'll be any kind of kid I want. "I'm still a nice guy, Mr. McGee."

He ignores me.

In the new wing, the ceiling is lower, and I feel taller, more powerful. The lockers here are painted bright orange. Oh, there's Simon Yu. He used to be my buddy, when I was a nice kid playing basketball, following all the rules. He looks away and starts talking to Jumbo Joyce Koo. They're both losers. Ah, I know where McGay is going. Snake social workers hide in these ant-hole offices. McGay knocks on the door of Mr. Wong, the senior counsellor.

"Come in." Mr. Wong is in shorts, Polo shirt, Nike socks and runners. He looks young but thinks like an old man.

"Sorry to interrupt, Mr. Wong, but Ms. Hasiuk and I would appreciate it if you could have a chat with Mr. Wen."

Is this screwed, or what? This meeting was set up long ago, before McGay grabbed me. Why pretend that it's unarranged?

Wong motions to me to come in and sit down. Behind his desk, he rocks back and forth in a reclining chair. I look away. I'm seasick watching him bob up and down. Every time I see him, I see more forehead, more glow. He's balding. Pretty soon his head will look like the moon. I run my hand through my hair. It's long. It's thick. It's clean. It needs a cut. Mr. Wong is Chinese. He's supposed to understand us.

"Lincoln," he says. "What happened in Ms. Hasiuk's class today?"

I let out a breath. I still feel hungover. In fact, I feel sick. I need fresh air fast. I want to shut my eyes and prop my head against the wall.

"You already know, sir," I mutter. "Why ask me?"

"Want to get my facts straight."

I give him a look of disbelief. "Sir, you think Ms. Hasiuk is lying?"

Wong rolls his eyes. The office is tiny, but Wong has covered all the walls with stupid posters. A hand holds up a condom in order to *BE ON THE SAFE SIDE*. A blonde wearing black lipstick and a tight, short skirt saunters away from her smoker friends to *LEAVE THE CLOUD, JOIN A NEW CROWD*. An African face twists in pain because *RACISM HURTS*. A soccer player stands with one foot on a garbage can to *SAY NO TO DRUGS*. Posters aren't real life. And they don't get more real when they're translated into Chinese. *What a waste!*

Wong can't read them anyway. He's a banana: yellow on the outside, white inside, born over here. He's useless. He's travelled to Hong Kong, not as a tourist, not in search of his roots, but to paddle in the International Dragon Boat Races. That's the extent of his so-called Chinese experience. In his team photo, he's the only Asian face. He can't even speak Chinese. How can we tell him what's really on our minds? This school is fifty percent Chinese, lots of immigrants. We're all part of "new" Toronto, the so-called world-class city. The principal thinks Wong is one of us. He's supposed to help us. *Is this screwed, or what?*

Wong unwraps a sandwich, apple and tetra pack of cranberry juice. Pink meat, green stuff and tomatoes are squashed between brown bread. He opens his mouth wide and takes a bite. My stomach clenches. I swallow the bile. My mouth dries up.

He swallows and sips his juice. He smacks his lips. He's torturing me.

"Will you talk to me?" he asks. "I have simple rules in here. No talk, no walk. You decide how you want to spend your lunch hour."

Go flush your rules down the toilet. I slump into my chair.

Wong slurps the dregs of his drink through the tiny straw. He tosses the box into the garbage bin at my side. The box drops in perfectly, without touching the sides. *Show-off. I can do the same. From farther away, with my eyes closed and with my back to the bin.*

"What was Lisa Yip talking about in class?" he asks.

I really have to get out, before I throw up again. "History, sir. Building the railway. Anti-immigration laws. Riots against the Chinese. Racism today."

"You know this stuff already?"

"Who doesn't? Sir."

"Where did you learn it?"

"Hong Kong, sir."

"What happened in the classroom?"

"Ms. Hasiuk wanted a discussion, sir." Every time I say sir, Mr. Wong winces. He wants us to call him Rick. But the rules say we shouldn't call teachers by their first names.

"A discussion?"

I nod.

"What kind of a discussion?"

He wants me to say more. But the more I speak, the more ammunition he'll have. He wants to shoot me down. On the wall hang yellow, red and green pennants from the dragon-boat races. Wong is the sponsor of our school's team. In the spring, the team sells hot dogs, pizza, doughnuts and ice cream to raise funds. Every week they beg for money. Every week they head down to Lake Ontario to practise. Half the team is white. They look strange crouched aboard the Chinese dragon boats. The other kids are Asian or of mixed race. They're just looking for a free trip to Hong Kong.

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When Lisa Yip came into Ms. Hasiuk's class, I thought that she was too young and pretty to be a lawyer, a filmmaker and an author—not to mention a human rights activist and university lecturer. Those Chinese who are born here, they have a head start. They know everything except the honest truth about themselves. She looked very stylish: straight hair with highlights, tight shirt, short skirt. She showed photos of Chinese gold miners and cannery workers from a hundred years ago. Everything she told us, we already knew. But she kept trying to get a response from us. The white kids kept quiet, waiting for the Chinese kids to speak.

Lisa Yip glared at me, as if I were to blame. When she had walked into the classroom, kids were gathered around my desk. They wanted to hear all about last night's party. Ms. Hasiuk had to bang her ruler and call for order until the class settled down. That made Lisa Yip think I was a troublemaker.

She wrote on the blackboard. She walked back and forth in front of the class. She used the word *we* over and over. She looked pretty hot. No doubt she could handle tough audiences like us. Finally I put my hand up.

Ms. Hasiuk was so happy she almost clapped her hands. Eagerly she asked, "Yes, Mr. Wen?"

There was a pause. I put on a serious frown and said, "May I be excused?" Then I unfolded myself and stood up.

People snickered.

"No," she said.

Is this screwed, or what? "I really got to go!"

"Well, I really want some student participation."

I couldn't sit down, or she would have won this round. No way I could let that happen. So I turned to Lisa Yip. "What were you saying, Miss?"

She frowned when she heard *Miss*.

"The transcontinental railway," she said.

"Those railway workers were coolies, but you talk about them like they were war heroes."

"They worked hard under horrible conditions."

"Life was worse in China. That's why they left."

"So did they deserve to get less than half the pay of the white workers?" She was toying with me, a beautiful goddess looming over a peasant.

"You told us they did different work from the whites."

"I'm glad you were listening."

"I heard every word. So, if there was no work at home, wasn't it better for them to come here? And the wages here, weren't they better than those in China?" Then I looked to Ms. Hasiuk. "Can I be excused now?"

"Be quick."

It felt good to outwit Ms. Stir-the-Shit and escape the classroom.

In the washroom, I filled the sink with cold water and plunged my face into it several times. Then I lit a cigarette and blew the smoke out the window. But I still felt sick. I thought about sticking my finger down my throat. I didn't want to go back, but I knew if I didn't Ms. Hasiuk would make trouble for me.

When I got back to the classroom, Lisa Yip stopped speaking until I sat down. Then she spoke about redress, about demanding the government refund the head tax collected from early Chinese migrants. "We have to address the wrongs of the past, even if it would be easier to forget them."

Again she embraced the kiss of death by asking the class for questions. "This is a controversial issue. What do you kids think about it?"

No one spoke up, but a couple of kids looked at me. They wanted me to say something. They're all such losers. No guts, no backbone.

She tried again. "Do you think today's taxpayers should pay for the mistakes of earlier generations?"

No takers. She should offer cash. Then people would speak out.

She looked at me. "What about you, Mr. Wen? You have interesting opinions."

I couldn't back down. "If racism is such a big problem, then wouldn't asking the government for money make it worse?"

She nodded curtly, as if impressed. "If we show people that we won't walk away from racism, then maybe they'll think twice before they dare to act racist."

I didn't even realize I was shaking my head.

She cocked an eyebrow at me. "You don't agree?"

I looked away. *Oh no. Not me. I wasn't saying anything else.* It would only lead to more trouble.

"Come on, class, speak up," Ms. Hasiuk said. "These are important issues."

Lisa Yip smiled smugly. "If someone treats you badly because you're Chinese, would you just walk away?"

I raised a fist. "I'm ready to fight."

"Oh no," she said quickly. "Fighting doesn't solve anything."

"At Delaney Junior High," I said, "kids were picking on a Chinese boy. He complained to the teacher. But nothing happened. His parents spoke to the principal. Still nothing happened. Finally the kid packed a baseball bat in his backpack. The next time he got harassed by those bullies, he pulled it out and smashed one guy's knee. No one ever picked on him again."

"Is that a true story?" asked Ms. Hasiuk, her arms crossed over her chest.

I shrugged.

She turned to the class. "Anyone else hear this story?"

Several hands went up. I had to stifle a laugh. I made up that story.

Ms. Hasiuk frowned at me. "You have quite an imagination, Mr. Wen. Hearing a story, or telling a story, doesn't make it true."

"You saying I'm a liar?"

"Just a storyteller, a good one."

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Wong comes out from behind his desk and sits on it, facing me. "A friend of mine is vice-principal at Delaney. She would have told me about any violent attacks."

"Sir, teachers don't hear everything." That's the truth. Wong should buzz his hair, military style. His bald head wouldn't stand out so much.

"A smashed kneecap? That's major. The police would have been brought in."

I'm backed into a corner. "What's the problem, sir? Do you want me to apologize to Ms. Hasiuk?"

"No, that's not it. I'm talking about when you vomited in front of Lisa Yip."

"I really was sick, sir. I'm still sick."

"Ms. Hasiuk saw you stick a finger into your mouth."

"I never did! I swear I didn't."

"Then tell me what happened."

"Nothing happened."

"Ms. Hasiuk and Mr. McGee think it's time to call in your parents."

"No!" I try to make sure that school life goes smoothly—attendance, marks, meetings, report cards, permission slips. So far there's been no trouble, nothing that would bring in my parents. "I went to a party last night. It went on until really late. When I woke up this morning, I was sick, really sick."

Mr. Wong looks really mad. He holds his teeth together and hisses, "If you were so sick, you should have stayed home from school today. Have you anything more to say?"

"My parents expect me to go to school every day, sick or not."

He looks exasperated. Now he has to say more. He doesn't want to. He doesn't want to scold.

"That's not good enough," he says.

But what else can I tell him—that my father just flew in from Hong Kong last night, that he's been away four months, that I couldn't face him this morning after coming home drunk?

"What happened in class?" Mr. Wong continued.

"Lisa Yip started handing out petitions, sir. She wanted us to go and collect more signatures for redress. You know about redress, sir?"

"Of course I do!"

"Sir, the only people who took the petitions were white kids. Except for Joyce Koo. So Lisa Yip came down my row, putting petitions on every Chinese desk. When she got to me, she put down a big stack."

I don't tell him that she gave me a smug smile.

"I don't know what happened next, sir. I grabbed a few; I ripped them in half and dumped them on the floor.

Then I threw up. I didn't know it was coming. I would have turned away, sir."

Wong's ten fingers make a tent in front of his face. "You know," he says, "in my high-school days, I was the same as you. I didn't know anything about the history of the Chinese over here."

He talks about himself, trying to build rapport, telling me what an idiot he used to be. He had a chance to learn to speak Chinese, but he turned it down. Now he regrets it. Now it's too late. Telling me all this makes him feel better. He thinks we are somehow *brothers*, but he almost puts me to sleep.

I nod. "Can I go now, sir?"

"I don't want Mr. McGee bringing you here again. Understand?"

"Yes sir."

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Heading out of town, I zip through the traffic and hop onto the 401. If I want, I can drive all the way to Montreal without stopping. The lanes are wide. I step on the gas and soar. Signs with numbers and arrows flash by. I weave through cars and trucks. No one wants to race me. A text message is waiting on my cellphone, but I don't care. Wong was right. I should never have gone to school today. He thinks he knows everything, but he doesn't.

Teachers don't want real discussions. They don't want to hear what kids think. They want us to hear what *they* think, but they don't know anything. They say they want us to have a good time at school, that they want us to feel like we belong. But then they keep bringing in Lisa Yips, who remind us that we're different.

Teachers should say, "Never go to school with a hangover."

Teachers have no idea how hard we try to fit in. We learn English. We dress like everyone else. We eat pizza and hot dogs. We raise money for the United Way. We cheer on the school teams. We can't fight the racism of the past.

The other day while I was walking through the hallway, a white kid called out, "Hey Wen are you going?"

"Where?" I answered.

The kid looked at his friends, and they all burst out laughing. "Stupid, I wasn't talking to you! I was asking my friends about the time!"

Ha ha. Very funny. Would it have helped if I had said, "We built the railway, you know!"

Is this screwed, or what?