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### World Square Medical Centre – George Street, Sydney, Australia

My stomach is doing something weird, something loud – gurgling, frantically digesting that nasty chicken bun I had for breakfast – and I’m feeling uniquely betrayed because it’s very quiet here and people are bound to notice this inner turbulence and, really, what does it say about you if your internal organs can’t even present a united front?

The door opens and out comes Doctor Mok, who waves me into his office.

I shut the door behind me.

‘哪里不舒服?’ he says to his clipboard.

‘Oh,’ I say, because he has made an assumption about the language I speak – my culture, who I am or must be – entirely from my face. ‘I don’t speak Chinese.’

‘Ah, you’re Japanese? Korean?’

‘I’m *Australian*.’

He tsks. ‘No, no! I mean your *race*.’

‘Is there another doctor available? I saw Doctor Collison last time. Maybe I’ll just wait for her.’

‘She’s on leave.’ He scrutinises me, eyes narrowed. ‘*Tell me where your ancestors are from.*’

I sigh. ‘China.’

He slams his desk in joy.

‘Ha! I knew it! You younger generation! Spoiled! What a shame. Lack of language skills. Forgetting all about your culture. You are a bad Chinese! But anyway. What can I do for you today? Stomach trouble?’

‘What? No. Why would you think that?’

‘Your stomach is making a sound. Maybe you’re hungry. Here. Have a cookie.’

‘Thanks.’

‘So,’ he says. ‘Why are you here?’

'My company sent me for an annual check-up last week. I'm just here for the results.'

'Ah, okay, yes, yes. Wait a minute. I will get them.'

Doctor Mok leaves in search of my file and so – I can't help it, all unattended rooms are seductive in this way – I look around at everything. The height chart. The blood pressure pump-thing. The medical qualifications hanging on the far wall. It's not snooping as long as you don't move around or touch anything.

Crayon drawings by the doctor's young son hang proudly on the wall, capturing his father in all his stick-figure portraiture: his stethoscope, his briefcase, the crucial essence of him. The boy's name scrawled in the corner like an artist's seal.

My dad used to have similar emblems of mine in his office. Toddler art, with its suspect lines and colours. He must have found me perfect, at that particular distance – and perhaps vice versa – in the brief era before one can truly disappoint the other.

I don't recall my dad proudly framing anything after I was five years old. My teen years were particularly fallow – I suppose, after a certain age, you outgrow those artistic impulses entirely, or you move on to other forms, other subjects, and, inevitably, you cease to sketch your father.

The desk is full of pharmaceutical swag: pens, calendars, a coffee mug. The mousepad is imprinted with a diseased, smog-ridden cityscape, bearing a clumsy slogan in English: *Port Man Tou, China: The City Where Anything Is Possible!*

Doctor Mok returns. He waves the test results cheerfully. He sits. He reads. The smile drains from his face.

My throat dries out. I set my cookie down on his desk.

'The results indicate that you have Taikophobia.'

'*What-phobia?*'

'Taikophobia,' he confirms. 'The fear of Chinese people.'

'You're kidding,' I say.

His face – a very Chinese face – indicates that he most certainly is not kidding.

'I know a good specialist who deals with strange disorders.' He taps his keyboard, avoiding eye contact. 'Oh. But his office is in the heart of Haymarket. *Chinatown*. Full of Chinese. Might be scary for you.'

But I am not listening. 'This is impossible. I can't be afraid of Chinese people. I *am* Chinese.'

'废话,' he mutters.

'What?'

Doctor Mok's expression softens and he extends his hand across the desk, either to double-check the test results and exonerate me, or to give my hand a sympathetic pat. But he does neither and with a slight grimace, as though he's afraid I might notice, Doctor Mok reaches for my half-eaten cookie and pulls it slowly from my reach.



**En route to the Consulate-General of the  
People's Republic of China – Parramatta Road, Camperdown**

On the bus back to work, my phone pings. I have mail. The bad thing about working at the Consulate-General of the PRC is that all email correspondence is in Chinese.

As always, I copy/paste the original text into my Google Translate app.

**Subject: CAUGHT YOU!**

HR Department <HR.chinaconsulsyd@mfa.gov.cn>

Friday 26/05/2017 3:04 PM

To: Lu, Xiang

Dear Xiang,

At first we thought you were just a fool. Dim-witted and slow. Later, we realised that this is much more than that.

Finally, we must congratulate you on making it to this point. Half a year, a real achievement! Did you know that a typical entry-level translator role such as yours, the average turnover rate of this sector is nine months? How close you are to celebrating this milestone!

Regrettably, we must fire you with immediate effect.

You may look like a Chinese person, but you cannot speak or read Mandarin. You are monolingual! The worst thing in this special context.

We regret the graduate program that secured your employment. We will destroy it. Really, the whole catastrophe is our fault. We made terrible assumptions.

Chinese name? Yes.

Chinese face? Yes.

Arts degree? Must be rich or stupid (we thought the former, but turns out the latter).

And the crucial mistake. Interviewed you in English. Forgot to test your Chinese!

We only have ourselves to blame.

But we caught you in the end. Do you really think we do not see through your silent behaviour? The time you had 'laryngitis'? Your terrible pronunciation, unintuitive syntax?

Do you really think we do not know you just copy and paste into Google Translate to do all your work?

Who do you think we are? We knew from the second day. The third day, at the latest.

At first we thought it was deference. The way you lowered your head passing us in the hall. Then we realised it was a fear of small talk. Fear of being exposed as a bad Chinese.

We bet that as soon as you receive this email message you will copy and paste into Google Translate (remember when the IT department blocked that website for one afternoon? Seeing your panicked face is too funny!). We had secret meetings in your absence (useless to invite monolinguist to bilingual meeting, agreed?). We estimate that you have a perhaps fifty-word Chinese vocabulary. A two-year-old knows more than your words! Are you not ashamed?

We all know you most dread our Monday roundtable meetings. Always quiet, always politely laughing. Remember the big joke Bo Wen Xia told in the meeting last month? It was a test. It was nonsense, a fake joke. You laugh at the absurd joke. The proof is indisputable.

Six months, we have let this farce continue, because we were worried maybe you are somebody's son or nephew. But the private investigator's comprehensive report reveals you are definitely not a spoiled child of diplomats. Just a middle-class idiot.

No such thing as 'half-yearly health check-up'! We sent you to the medical centre last week to hold our secret meeting and sent you again today so we can pack up your desk. Less chance of commotion from disgruntled employees (that's you). Please take your things from reception and go. Your replacement will commence on Monday morning.

By the way, we snooped your hard drive. Found some poetry you wrote. For a joke, we copy and paste it into the auto-translate website. It is bad. It is a bad poetry. And you are a bad Chinese person.

No use to swipe up. Your card is deactivated. If you try, security will embrace you.

Sincerely,

Dou Jin Bo

Human Resources Representative

Consulate-General of the People's Republic of China