

Jung Yun
from *The Strange Genius of American Men*

Alabama is bragging about his peanut fields again. Twice as long as a football field, he says. I don't know what football is yet, but I imagine his fields are very big because Alabama spreads his arms like wings whenever he talks about them. Which is always. His arms are short and thick with muscles, cut sharp like stone. He will never be a good bird, but I smile at him anyway. *Come again soon.*

Great Aunt waits until he leaves, then flings open the curtain that separates us.

“Which one was that?” she asks.

“Alabama.”

“The one with all the peanuts?”

I nod.

She waves her hand in the air, shooing away a bug I can't see. “No farmers,” she says, snapping the curtain shut.

The store is quiet for an hour. Only a convoy passes – twelve trucks long – pelting the windows with gravel as it rumbles down the street. I dust the shelves, waiting for Chungmee to arrive. When she doesn't, I straighten things that are already straight. Jars of freeze-dried coffee, boxes of Air Mail envelopes, cans of soup and SPAM and corned beef hash. Too much time passes like this, waiting for Chungmee, wondering if she'll come late, or not at all. We have plans to see a movie today, an American movie starring Ingrid Bergman. I watch the clock as the ticket line wraps around the corner, past my window, and down the street.

Iowa arrives, as he usually arrives, at half past two every Sunday. He pushes through the crowd outside the store, leans on my counter with one elbow, and asks for his weekly supply of Pall Malls and rubbers.

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“Ten large,” he says, smiling. His teeth are straight and white, neat like a fence. If I didn’t dislike him so much, I might like him a little, if only because he’s so clean. “On second thought,” he says, “make that a dozen.”

I count out twelve rubbers and drop the coin-shaped packages into a paper bag. Iowa watches me, as he always watches me, so I turn my back to him.

“Do you know what a tulip is?” he asks.

“It’s a tree,” I tell him. “The state tree of Indiana.”

Iowa shakes his head. “No, it’s a flower.”

I search my memory and clearly see a tree. Tall, with green and yellow blossoms shaped like bells. I want to correct him as he corrected me, but I know better – responding will only encourage him more.

“It’s a Dutch flower,” he says. “Originally from Holland. It looks like a little cup.”

I nod, but in my head, I still see a tree.

“My hometown in Iowa hosts a big tulip festival every spring. Tulips for miles and miles. Anyway, that dress of yours, it got me thinking about tulips.”

My dress is brown, a shade lighter than bark, nothing at all like flowers except for the dirt they grow in. I hand Iowa his rubbers and a carton of Pall Malls, hoping he has nothing more to say about tulips.

“Six dollars and fifty cents, please.”

Iowa peels off seven bills from a thick roll of money, held together by a dirty rubber band. Twice, he tosses the roll in the air, making a show of it, how much he carries. I give him two quarters in change, which he slides back across the counter for me. Then he closes his left eye, pulling tight the fine wrinkles underneath. *Wink.*

“You keep those,” he says. “Your birthday’s coming up, right?”

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I stare at the quarters, surprised that he remembered something I'd forgotten myself.

"So how old will you be?" he asks.

"Eighteen. Nineteen, if you count the Korean way."

"Oh, right. You count extra here, like dog years."

I hold open the front door to let him pass, certain that my smile looks too fake. *Come again soon.*

After Iowa leaves, I reach for my book under the counter. Indiana begins on page 93. The photo is there, just as I remembered it. A tall, leafy tree with pale open blossoms that look nothing like little cups. The caption under the photo reads: "The majestic Tulip Tree was formally adopted by the Indiana state legislature in 1931." I snap the book shut and put the quarters in my pocket. Iowa is an idiot. A peacock. A joke.

Great Aunt comes out from behind the curtain, shaking her transistor radio. She squeezes past me into the narrow space behind the counter and takes a package of batteries off the shelf.

"The Communists are advancing south," she says, smiling. "Who was that?"

"Iowa," I tell her, dusting things that aren't dusty.

"No good, that one. You see what he buys." Great Aunt leans in close, wrinkling her nose at me. "Cigarettes and... rubbers. What kind of dirty man is that?" She slides four new batteries into the radio and holds it against her ear, pulling out the antenna until a thin, whiny static fills the air.

I know what kind of man Iowa is, what kind of men they all are. I don't need any of her warnings. I inch my stool away, dragging the metal legs across the tile. Great Aunt rarely spends time in the storefront anymore. She says her shriveled face isn't what servicemen want to see. Instead, she keeps to herself in the storage room with her radio, the curtain pulled tight between us. I prefer it that way. Her, back there. Me, up here. The space behind the counter is too small for us both, and her skin always smells rotten, like fruit gone bad in a barrel. As I inch further away, I notice a man

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approaching the store, a uniformed man with three gold stripes on each shoulder. My mouth goes dry as he opens the door and Great Aunt eyes him up and down. Please don't be from New Hampshire, I think. Anywhere but New Hampshire.