

## **A Collective Approach by Adam Soto**

D. held her husband's hand when she said, We're pregnant, and as soon as she said it she felt strange, as if she had made a mistake. She let go of his hand and corrected herself, I mean, I'm going to have a baby.

She told me this at work, more than a year ago, while we inspected a fresh shipment of shoes. The shoes came in boxes of twenty pairs, and it was our job to open the boxes and make sure that there were twenty left shoes and twenty right shoes inside. It was our job to make sure everything made sense, and we did it together, tearing through twenty boxes a minute. Everything appeared to make sense that day, everything except for D.'s phrasing.

I mean, we're pregnant. That sounds strange right? she asked.

I held a pair of running shoes in my hands and watched more boxes file in along the conveyor belt. It's strange how many different professions make you see things in the same way – from factory worker to inspector, airline baggage handler to automobile maker.

I guess it sounds a little strange, but it's a saying, isn't it?

D. held up a defective shoe, separated at the sole, and tossed into a trash can.

I guess so, she said.

I took her out to lunch that day. We sat in Taco Bell at 95<sup>th</sup> and South Ashland watching the cars turn snow to slush. We ate our bean burritos and discussed our work's maternity leave policy.

I think I can take a month off or something, she said.

A whole month? You really want to be away from this place for a whole month? I joked.

D. laughed and wiped the spilled bean from her burrito wrapper and licked it off her fingers. Her wavy, blonde hair fell in her face before she tucked it back behind her ears and let it slope down the back of her shoulders. She was a small woman that possessed a vigor that showed through her skin, where her flesh broke on her worker hands.

Frank says he can take off a couple of weeks, too. Unpaid, but at least he'll be able to spend time with the baby. He's so excited. We're picking out paint for the baby's room tonight.

A car honked at the empty intersection.

You don't even know if it's a boy or a girl. How are you going to be able to pick a color?

I think we'll either pick out two paints, one for if it's a girl, one for if it's a boy, or we'll just go with a neutral color, like a green.

The next day she told me that they had gone with marigold.

Work carried on as usual, the boxes and their shoes on their conveyor belts. Sometimes, when I was bored, I'd think of the strange slinkings that must have gone on behind those conveyor shoots, behind those black rubber flaps that shot up whenever the chute spat out another box. I thought of the goings-ons in the darkness within the sorting machine, of the absurd and twisted tubes that passed the boxes like digestion. Then I'd turn to D. and think of the goings-ons inside her.

Every time I saw her carry a box I remembered that she carried something invisible too, something with mass but without weight.

We were living in Chicago and the winter took a turn for the worse that year. D.'s husband started showing up around punch out time to warm up D.'s car and dig it out of the snow. It was the first time I had ever seen him. He was an enormous man, obese really, and would come by wearing a hunter hat and flannel, stomp his boots at the door, and smoke cigarettes in the cold. D. told me they had met a year after high school and had been together ever since. He worked at a hardware store a couple of miles away, stocking shelves.

My co-worker Lao and I would watch for him in the afternoons, waiting for his body to appear from the snow – a dull shadow, an imperfection in the white that would render itself into a man as he came closer to the door. He'd appear mythically large, and together, Lao and I would cheer as if we'd discovered the missing link, that gentle husband of D.'s.

Fong! he called out. Give me a hand with these jumper cables.

D.'s car wouldn't start that afternoon. I grabbed my coat and joined him outside.

He handed me a jumper cable.

You know how to use these? he asked.

Of course, I said, I used to work in a garage in China.

No shit? I thought you guys just threw em' out and made new ones whenever they broke they're so cheap.

We laughed in the snow and together got D.'s car to start up.

D.'s told me a lot about you, Fong. She says you're the real deal, a true friend.

That's very nice of her to say that, I said, she's a good woman and a hard worker.

D. watched us from the door, disappearing in a cloud of her own breath stained on the glass.

Can you do me a favor, Fong?

What's that?

Can you run D.'s car for me every couple of hours? I mean, it's so damn cold out it won't ever start up on its own after sitting out there for six hours straight. And D.'s really concerned about the baby with all this ice out here. All it takes is one slip.

The snow melted on my face. Sure, I can do that for you guys, I said.

I went home that night and thought of China. I thought of the family I had left there: of my son who kept growing in pictures; of my wife who wrote me a letter every other week, which I stacked in order in the corner of my living room. I looked over at her letters from the couch. I thought their vertical phrases made them larger. I thought eventually I would be able to construct my wife from them, that perhaps one day her ink would turn into the ten years we'd been apart, and her paper to flesh.

When I read the letters, I produced my wife's voice in my own head as if she were talking to me or at least dictating her letters to me. I thought this was vital, the permanence of voices. When she mentioned our son I could only make out his cooing and laughter. When she wrote that one day he came home and said, I trust that what dad's done is what's best for all of us, I could only imagine my own voice, myself validating myself.

I left China when they took our second child before it was born, before we knew if we had a daughter or another son.

Let's try a collective approach, D. said over lunch.

Five of us: three women from Mexico, D., and I sat on a caf table. D. picked at my steamed rice. She ballooned at the belly and ate constantly. I fed her moon cakes whenever my box load was easy and brought back frozen graham crackers from her car every time I took a trip to warm it up.

They can't fire us all. We're in a union, right?

The women from Mexico looked discouraged. The company was downsizing, outsourcing domestic inspection, although they wouldn't tell us to where. I couldn't help but wonder, how is it domestic inspection if it doesn't take place in the country?

I don't know, D. I mean, we should stick together, maybe do some research, hire a lawyer or something, but I don't know if any of that is going to do any good. If they can't afford us, they can't afford us. If there isn't work, there isn't work, I said.

That was late December and most of my co-workers were concerned about Christmas. How they were supposed to afford the things they had already promised their kids, husbands and wives. I was concerned about staying alive, keeping my apartment, my heat running, the checks going to China. The snow fell silently outside.

D. fumbled with my chopsticks. It hasn't snowed this much since I was kid, she said.

Whatever happened to global warming?

Do you want some? I asked D., handing her my box of moon cakes.

The baby's going to be a boy, D. said, eating the moon cake.

\*

My first year in America, I shared an apartment with seven other Chinese men. We all worked at a restaurant a block away from our building, a job that had been given to us when we came to the country. We'd shower in pairs to conserve water and slept together on a pile of blankets in the living room because we couldn't afford heat.

But other than the intimacy of bath and sleep, we remained nearly anonymous to one another, quartered ourselves off in our own little worlds. One man read in a cabinet, while another smoked cigarettes constantly on the balcony. I had a spot below a coffee table where I'd write letters to my wife. When someone wept, another began to speak over it. When someone ate, another used the bathroom. We refused to acknowledge our predicament, our poverty, our unity.

I taught myself English through movies. When I was still living in Chinatown, every night I'd walk across the street from my apartment and rent two movies for the price of one. I started off using subtitles, pausing the movies and rewinding them, trying to match the English speech with the Chinese text. It was confusing and slow, most phrases were inverted in English, and later, I'd misuse words until someone corrected me.

Eventually I got rid of the subtitles and watched movies strictly in English. It began to get easier, although the first time I saw *Rocky* I went back to the movie store after fifteen minutes to demand a refund because I couldn't believe Sylvester Stallone was speaking English.

Then I started watching silent films and filling in the dialogue with my own English voice. I felt at home in these movies, implanting my own life into the plots. I was Dr. Caligari and I filled his cabinet of horrors with memories of China. I was the opium addicted Chinaman in *Broken Blossoms*. I narrated them out loud to myself.

When I'd learned enough English I called my wife and said, Hello, darling. I'm an American.

D.'s body changed. Her slender figure, the one I could trace back to the photographs she had shown me of her prom night, had shifted into a kind of vessel, a water jug or something. She worked slower and took bathroom breaks more often. Sometimes I was left alone with the boxes for fifteen minutes at a time. They'd pile up all around me and the only thing I could do was wait for D. to excavate me.

Eventually, the supervisor took notice of the pile ups.

What the hell keeps happening here, Fong? he asked.

I was caught beneath an arch of boxes I had stacked to make room for a new shipment.

Nothing. We'll finish up in time, I said.

He helped me until D. returned.

D., he said, you can't let yourself fall behind on your work. You know how things are now, we're all looking out for our jobs. If the boss catches wind of this he'll have your ass out in no time.

D. reached into a box and pulled out a handful of shoes.

But I'm going to have a baby, she said.

The supervisor looked over at the conveyor belt. Another pair of boxes fell down the chute.

I know, D. I know.

When the supervisor left, I fed D. a moon cake.

These are my wife's favorite, I said, and the other day she wrote me that they're also our son's favorite now. Maybe they can be your son's favorite, too, since you've been feeding him them so much.

D. nibbled on the pastry.

Do you think he'll remember them? Do you think that's how it works?

I don't think people forget these kinds of things, I said, finishing mine.

Two days after Christmas, everyone on first shift lost their job. The boss sent us home early with our week's paycheck and said that further paperwork would be made available through the mail. D. and I spent the afternoon in Taco Bell, eating bean burritos and watching the cars again.

Do you think they'll hire any of us back? In different departments, maybe? she asked.

I don't think so, I said.

D. breathed hard on the glass and created a crystal spread of frozen breath. She took her finger and wrote 'fuck you' in the mark.

Relax, D., something will come up. We'll both start looking for work tomorrow.

But she didn't relax. Instead, she sat up erect and stared out into the intersection as if she had just witnessed a car accident. But there was nothing there, just endless snow.

\*

I've spent years remembering things and experiences that were never mine. One night, I woke up with the sensation that I had just bitten into a hot pepper, a dark and shriveled one, with dry seeds that spilled onto my lips and burned. Then I remembered that it was my wife who had done this, who had bitten into a pepper absentmindedly then stood up shaking her hands and screaming. I took a handful of rice and packed it gently into her mouth until it looked like she had eaten a snowball. I smoothed it across her lips until it turned into a paste, and we let it cake there and dry. Her eyes calmed and she breathed through her nose. I kissed her, and through the mouthful of rice I could feel the faint burn of the pepper, of her pain. Shh, I said, you're going to be all right.

Two weeks into our unemployment, D. and I received a phone call from a former co-worker. She'd fallen at home and broken an arm. She went to the doctor and found that she no longer had insurance. She had to take out a loan to get her arm set. D. called me in hysterics.

They can't do that, can they? she asked.

I think they can, D.

She breathed hard into the phone. It sounded like an explosion.

Babies are really expensive, Fong.

I know they are, D.

Her breath exploded again. I watched the snow come down hard outside of my window.

I'm going over there tomorrow to demand my job back, she said, although she never did.

The snow kept falling, an infinite cascade. I spent hours watching things disappear into the white, buried beneath the snow. My neighbor's car vanished before my very eyes and I decided to bury myself too. I lay down in my living room and pulled the stack of my wife's letters over me until they completely covered my body. Letters folded into my mouth and wedged themselves into my pockets. I fell asleep. When I woke, an entire letter had dissolved in my mouth. I could taste my wife's hand for days.

I was fixing my son's shoes, making them larger for his growing feet when the inspectors appeared over the hill. There were three of them: two men and a woman carrying a leather medical bag. They wore sophisticated clothes and appeared smiling before me while I squatted, stretching leather.

Mr. Chen? they asked.

Yes, I replied, getting to my feet.

The man with glasses spoke, We're from the department of population control. My name is Zhi Peng, and these are my assistants Hao and Shen.

I bowed. They bent their backs. I knew what they had come for.

We've gotten a report of an illegal pregnancy in your household, the man with the glasses said.

I have one son, I said. He's playing in the trees.

A group of field hands whisked by with their hats hung low.

We need to inspect your wife, the woman said. She tightened her grip on her leather bag and began to lead the group towards the house.

My wife isn't home, I said running ahead of them. She's at work. Maybe you should come back tomorrow?

They didn't stop. They were professionals. I tossed the shoes into the dirt and darted for the door.

My mother is staying with us right now, she's very ill and can't be disturbed. Will you please just come back tomorrow? I asked standing in the doorway.

Please get out of our way, sir, the man with the glasses said.

The man named Hao pushed me out of the way and led the others inside. My wife was in the kitchen when they entered. She turned and they faced her side profile. Her belly hung low and heavy, and for weeks we'd been convinced that it would be another boy because that's what people said about bellies like that. I wasn't so sure.

Mrs. Chen? the woman asked placing her bag on a table.

My wife stumbled back into the stove and stared blankly at me. She couldn't say a word. Her eyes were scared and animal. She put her hands on her belly and cradled herself. She never took her eyes off of me.

Mrs. Chen, are you pregnant? the woman asked.

No! I shouted. She's fat. She's gotten fat over the years.

Mr. Chen, would you please be quiet and let your wife answer the question? I'm sure she's more than capable of telling us herself, the man with the glasses said.

My wife continued to hold herself. Her mouth opened. I looked around the room for a weapon, something to bludgeon them with or stab them. I'd kill them and we'd run away. But all I could find was a box of my wife's favorite pastries. I picked the box up and shook it around spilling pieces of moon cake everywhere.

It's these! See! She won't stop eating them. I try to make her stop, but she won't. I hide them from her, but she always finds them. Look!

The officials didn't move. They just kept staring at her.

Are you pregnant, Mrs. Chen? the woman asked. We're going to find out anyway, just tell us. Do you have an illegal pregnancy?

She's fat! I shouted again. She's fat and unhealthy, but she isn't pregnant. I swear. Please, just leave her alone.

The man named Hao shoved me into a corner.

I am pregnant, my wife said.

I watched her, cast in a gulf of light that pooled in from the window behind her where a cherry blossom hung low and beat against the glass. One hand on the stove another on her belly. I tried to move but Hao pinned me against the wall.

They took her away and I wept in a pile of crumbled pastries until my son appeared in the doorway.

She returned dressed in a hospital gown. Empty and buried in white.

Four weeks into our unemployment, D., Frank and I agreed to live together in my apartment and share the rent to try to save up money for the upcoming hospital bills. They sublet their apartment to a young couple and moved in.

They sold all of their furniture to the new renters except for a recliner that Frank claimed had been in his family for three generations. We placed it beside the stack of my wife's letters. It smelled of dog and filled my apartment with an odor that was not mine.

Frank and I shared a closet. My garments were dwarfed by his flannels. My shoes looked like children's next to his work boots.

The three of us put our toothbrushes side by side in the bathroom, hung our towels on racks adjacent to one another. I set aside a cabinet for all of D.'s feminine things and shared my shaver with Frank.

We mixed our dishes and detergents, but led parallel domestic lives, and when we slept we never said good night to each other. I slept in my bedroom while they slept on the floor of the living room. I'd lay awake at night listening to their sleep, D.'s hard breathing and Frank's snoring.

The apartment grew smaller with these new things: filled with sounds and smells that weren't there before; artifacts of other people's lives. Sometimes I'd stumble upon something new, a comb or a screwdriver, and I'd feel like I'd unearthed a piece of the past, of some forgotten civilization. It became difficult for us to navigate and differentiate one domain from another and we found ourselves knocking into another constantly, spilling on each other, stepping on each other's sleeping bodies.

D. and I cooked. We coupled fried vegetables with meatloaf, pot stickers with mashed potatoes. We'd separate our foods and divide them down the middle of plates before serving, as if to say, this is yours and this is mine.

When they fought, I lay down in my room. When they wanted to have sex, I went for walks in the snow. When I wrote letters to my wife, they went for drives.

They brought boxes they never unpacked.

Can't unpack everything, Frank said once, otherwise we'd start calling this home.

And it hit me. I wasn't home either. I grabbed an empty box they had planned to recycle and began putting my things away. The letters, that growing statue that had existed in my living room for years, went first. Then I put away my favorite clothes, movies and books. I packed away my steam cooker and a radio I had brought from China. I put nearly two-thirds of everything I owned into boxes and stacked them in closets. They were haunting and familiar, and every time I opened a door and found a box I felt the sudden urge to disembowel it, to make sure everything had a matching partner. I wondered if D. felt the same.

We sat down for dinner and I said, None of us are home. We're just bearing the elements together.

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Honorable Mention story in the 2009 Nick Adams Short Story Contest

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D. looked down at herself. She was huge. Now her belly stuck out hard and she had the same air of fullness as her husband. The two of them became giants.

D. and I spent our days together while Frank was at work. We'd talk about our pasts and go job hunting whenever Frank could carpool and leave us his car. I showed her the life I lived, the window I watched out of, the snow I called my own, the marks the letters had left on the carpet, the collection of silent films I called home videos. We shared a life.

How many kids do you have again? She asked me one day.

One, I said. A son.

That's right. I knew that. You never wanted to have any others? She asked.

No.

\*

My wife and I mourned one another's sadness as if they were separate and unrelated, because we didn't know how to mourn something that never really existed. She said, I could feel it, I could feel it being alive, but they insisted it wasn't. That it was better this way. And so she accepted that it hadn't been real yet. She cried for me, for my hypothetical loss because she didn't believe she could cry for her own.

I'll go away, I said. I'll go away to America and eventually you and Yi will join me and we'll fill our home with children. She smiled for the first time since the operation when I said that. She looked around the room and imagined it filled with children. With children that looked like us.

In a year I was living with a snakehead in Mexico City. Two months later I was living in Chinatown in Chicago, collecting letters from my wife.

The apartment was empty aside from our bodies. We'd occupy our separate barren corners and watch out the window. We'd sit and wait for the phone to ring, to hear the voices of people offering us jobs, but no one ever called. Our food became mixed and bland, just a mess of flavors. I'd keep buying more moon cakes to feed D.

She sat in a chair in the corner where I used to keep my wife's letters. She held her belly between her legs. Frank sat in his recliner, which he'd moved to the center of the room, watching her.

I scheduled an interview with a couple at the center, Frank, she said.

Frank retracted the leg rest and sat forward.

We're putting him up for adoption then? It's not going to be our a baby anymore? he asked.

It's not going to be my baby anymore, D. said.

There was no way to afford the child. Even if they stayed with me they wouldn't have enough money to feed him or clothe him. The adoptive parents would pay for everything.

You can't do that, I said. You don't want to.

Frank and D. stared at me.

Of course I don't want to, Fong, but I don't have any other option.

I went to stand beside Frank.

Frank, what do you think? You have a say in this too.

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Frank reclined again and let tears pool in his eyes and overflow down the side of his face.

I wanted this baby, he said. I wanted this baby.

I went to the window and watched things disappear again.

I'll take care of it. I'll finance everything, I said.

D. got to her feet.

You're insane, you know that? You barely have enough money left to feed yourself. Are you going to stop sending money home then? You can't help us.

I knew she was right. I had the urge to hold her belly, to take it from her.

You can't do it. It's wrong, D. I said. To just turn your child over to perfect strangers. They could hurt him, raise him wrong.

D. stood beside Frank's recliner.

Who do you think you are? she yelled at me. I've tried my hardest to make this work. You think I haven't already thought of this? What do you think the interview is for? To see who my son's parents are going to be. Fuck you, Fong.

She wept and Frank stood up to hold her. She continued to curse me with her face buried in Frank's enormous chest. It sounded distant. I stood and watched them hang onto to one another until D. fell asleep. They moved out in the morning.

I never told them anything about China except for the cherry blossoms in the mountains, the rice in the fields and the letters from my wife. They asked me about Communism and I told them that I lived in the country, that it had little effect on me.

That doesn't sound half bad, Frank said once, maybe we'll visit when we get back on our feet.

The apartment was barren now. I'd perverted my dreams of having a home full of life by occupying my living space with solitude. I sat and thought about what I had done. How I had managed to make D. more miserable than she already was. How I had pretended something was mine.

We didn't talk for months. I had no idea where they had went. I assumed that they were well on their way to restoring their lives by now.

I continued watching out the window. I watched the season change, as sunlight came earlier and the snow melted, as all the things that had disappeared reappeared again.

I found a job as a janitor at a high school in the summer, cleaning empty hallways. I managed to keep my apartment and began to send more money home. I never told my wife about the American couple that lived with me for three months.

Then, suddenly, they appeared on my doorstep for dinner. They brought the meatloaf and I had the fried vegetables ready.

D. was back to her regular size and Frank looked like he had lost some weight. They seemed empty but content. At dinner, they weren't hungry.

You eat, Fong. I made it for you mainly, D. said, passing me the meatloaf at the kitchen table.

I thought that maybe you guys had moved away, I said.

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And leave Chicago right when living here starts being worth it again? I don't think so, Frank said.

They looked clean and smiled. D. drank water.

I stared at her for a while and thought of the snow that had disappeared.

After dinner we sat in the living room reminiscing about the months we spent together. The time I had accidentally put on one of Frank's shirts and found that it fell below my knees. The time D. crawled into bed with me out of a habit of crawling into beds. We remembered our time together as being funny.

Do you guys want to watch a movie? I asked.

It was early so they agreed to stay and watch my favorite, *The Battleship Potempkin*.

It started with a quote from Lenin that hung, shaking against the black screen: "Revolution is war. Of all the wars known in history it is the only lawful, rightful, just, and truly great war... In Russia this war has been declared and begun."

Is that your motto too, Fong? Frank joked.

D. shooshed him.

The quote was followed with a shot of the battleship, alone at sea in the brilliance that only black and white can convey. The camera explored the ship and paused in the sailor's living quarters, a room cluttered with hammocks suspended from the walls and ceiling, scything and swaying cocoons for men that live their lives in overlap.

We're saving a lot of money now that we're splitting rent, I said.

D. and Frank looked at me in confusion, but I carried on narrating.

A ranking officer came into the room and hit a man to wake him up.

Time to start shoe inspections! I shouted.

D. smiled at me.

Later, the men complained that their meat rations had gone bad and were covered in maggots.

The food in the cafeteria's vending machines needs to be switched out now.

D. and Frank laughed. Act II began and I asked if they were enjoying it so far.

A lot, Frank replied.

The sailors staged a mutiny against their unjust superiors. As a punishment they are told to kill one of their own.

We refuse! If you're going to fire one of us, you might as well fire all of us.

I looked over at D. and Frank. They were mesmerized by the movie, their faces caught in a flood of cathode rays, black and gray. One man shot the revolutionaries' leader in the chest. He stumbled and fell off the boat onto an anchor suspended over the ocean as the crew watched in horror.

This job was no good, but it was all we had. It's what unified us and we're all going down together, I said as the crew jumped in after him.

I noticed that D. had begun to cry a little.

In Act III the body of the dead leader was brought to the shores of Odessa where the townspeople flooded in to mourn his death. There were hundreds of extras, ordinary Russian citizens pulling at their hair and crying hysterically. I wondered how they got all those extras to

mourn like that. Did they lie to them and tell them that someone in their family had died; that they had lost everything they had ever owned in a fire that occurred while they were all in makeup? Or did they just show up on filming day with their own things to mourn? It was then that I remembered the scene with the woman who is executed while holding her dead son and the scene of the baby carriage that tumbles down the Odessa staircase.

I got up and turned the movie off.

It just goes on like this and besides that revolution never got them anywhere.

D. and Frank looked confused again.

Well, we really enjoyed what we saw, D. said.

I'm glad, I said.

I walked to the kitchen and came back with some moon cakes.

Would you like some dessert? I asked, trying to be a gracious host and to prevent them from asking me to turn the movie back on.

We'd love some, D. said.

I bit into a moon cake and could sense my children, both living and unborn. I handed them the pastries. Frank ate one tenderly while D. devoured the remainder of the box.