If what you’re hiding is valuable enough, sooner or later someone will come looking for it. That’s just the way it’s played. Red light, green light. Ready or not, here I come. Hidden treasures only matter if you’re looking, and if you’re in the right place. Sometimes it all comes down to a matter of timing and perception. You notice certain things along the roadside. Some you stop for. Some you take with you. Some you drive by.

If you take the 101 north past Montecito, you get into a semi-hometown of mine. I’ve never come to terms with Santa Barbara as a place to call home because I’ve never gotten away from its image as some kind of beach playground for rich white people who live here and sometimes-rich white people who are just visiting from L.A. to get away from all the smog and all the heat and all the guns. The air is better here, but it’s actually colder than people and postcards let on. We get a few shootings here and there, and a few murders here and there, but it’s not anywhere close to L.A. Then again, you can’t get dim sum or decent Korean food here so there’s a trade-off. Given the choice, you can order me the dim sum with guns any day.

This semihometown north of Santa Barbara, called Goleta, basically revolves around the adjacent university where I teach. I wouldn’t really call it a college town, though, since it doesn’t really cater to the students, even though it depends on them to exist. I wouldn’t call it an old-fashioned town either, since it’s still got a few high-tech firms that every now and then talk of joining the mass industry flight out of California long enough to get their employees nervous and some letters to the editor written. Deep down, though, we all know it’s a farce. I mean, who really wants to move to Arizona? You just end up here on summer vacations anyway, and it’s a longer drive. Sooner or later, to much fanfare and celebration, these engineering firms announce they’ll brave the odds and stick it out here, while a thousand workers pack away their pins and needles and wait for their lives to be teased again. These firms are like a pretty high-school girl—cheerleader, ASB, the works. The type with a constant entourage of admiring lettermen, all lined up waiting for a date that will never happen. Everyone knows it but the guys in line. There’s a Carrows. A Honda dealership. A hardware store that doesn’t carry any lumber. I’d just call it a town.
Teaching here at the university level has always been a little tricky for me. I was lucky enough to get hired at twenty-six, which made me the youngest faculty on the campus. It also put me in the predicament of having to regularly prove I really was who I was, and I really did what I did. A lot of my students assumed I was one of their peers during my first couple years. This still happens occasionally, but not as often. I still have a baby face. I still get carded. And I still don’t look like a professor, which is all fine with me. I’m not quite sure what a professor is supposed to look like, but I know I don’t fit the traditional bill. My skin is dark from both my Cantonese genes and a love of the sun, and my black hair falls to the middle of my back—though I almost always tie it back in a ponytail when teaching. Basically Axl Rose minus the bandanna, hair color, skin color, leather pants, and tenor voice. For better or worse, I’ve spent a lifetime in athletics, and that continues here. In most ways I still do what I do. It’s not uncommon for me to see my students as often in the weight room, pool, or basketball court as I do in lecture. Which means someone somewhere is spending too much time in the gym or too little time in class. Take your pick.

I started living in the married-student housing complex, which is essentially like freshman dorms but instead of seeing who can play their stereo the loudest, we see who can get away with parking in the twenty-minute zone the longest. I figure when you get older your methods of civil disobedience and posturings of independence and rebellion get a little more subtle and a lot more sad. It just sneaks up on you. Everyone’s watching VH1’s “Where Are They Now?” and laughing at random Billy Idols and David Lee Roths without realizing we’re just a DV cam and an interviewed former lover away ourselves. More reasons for me to blast my stereo when I get home. A random grab out of 500 CDs. Power on. Track 1.

You wanted the best and you got the best! The hottest band in the world . . . KISS!

Good enough.

We have a community laundry room and mailbox compartments that you locate by row number and letter. I’m at Row 4, Box F. Good seats at the Staples Center, but bottom corner here. Full bent back and all. Interchangeable kids run around constantly. I play Nerf football with the ones under ten or eleven. I watch single moms go off to night classes leaving their fourteen-year-old girls to dye their hair, smoke, and hang out with horny skateboarding boys with baggy pants under the trees on hot September Fridays. The kids all say “fuck” a lot. I imagine the parents do, too. People say hi to each other for the most part and sometimes decorate their patios with potted plants and holiday

Born and raised Eurasian, Amerasian, and Hapa in dry, inland SoCal, I grow up watching a city called Covina turn from orange groves and cows into condo complexes and mini malls like some silk-worm caterpillar turning into a moth. Someone somewhere makes these decisions, but no one seems to know who and we're all pretty busy. People buy five-gallon baby orange trees from nurseries to plant inside condo dirt patches built over orange-tree graveyards. Someone somewhere's got to think that's funny. We pay $2.79 for carcinogen-filled Enzo mothballs to try and rid ourselves of condo mini mall moths, while cedar chips and Ivory soap are free or nearly free. Real oranges would probably work just as well. I grow up in a suburbia youth of white debutantes and white trash, checking “white” on ethnicity questionnaires because there’s no box for mixed-blood Cantonese, English, Irish, and Welsh. Still isn’t. Peter Frampton look-alikes mutate into urban cowboys, L.L. Beans, punks, rockabillies, Goth freaks, and mod revivalists at the various stages of an L.A. suburban lifetime, with no one, including me, ever worrying about things like oranges or ethnicity questionnaires. Someone somewhere must worry about these things. Maybe it’s God.

I have the typical parents of a Hapa kid. And when you’re a kid, everything is typical. By the time I got anything remotely figured out, all I understood was that my father had already done a bunch of things I’ll never ever do. Edit a newspaper. Fly a plane. Play college football. Go hungry. These are never gonna be part of my present life. It’s a different time now, a different place. No one waits for the truth anymore. We’d rather watch real-life reenactments, made-for-TV movies, and syntho-news. Dad’s the complete English professor, quoting a lot of prose, telling a lot of jokes, and sharing very few true stories. And, like anyone else, he turns his head at traffic accidents.

Three gents walk into a bar . . .

Oral history isn’t passed down in my family. It just kind of seeps out. Like a taste for coffee or a widow’s peak. I remember Depression-era stories of a family of five sharing a single potato for dinner, cross-cut like a ham. Ketchup in water becoming tomato soup. Sugar and ice becoming popsicles. Imagination becoming oral fantasy. Dad’s father emigrates from England with a seventh-grade education and takes a job cleaning floors. His Irish mother housekeeping. The stories we’ve heard before stay the same. Wages are drunk, jobs are lost, children are abused. Some stories need to be told. Some you just figure out your-
self. Some get passed down from generation to generation. Aren’t all of our fathers storytellers? Aren’t all of our fathers alcoholics?

My father graduates from his family without commendation. The first to attend college, the first to earn a Ph.D., he leaves for college hearing promises of his father sending him $1 a week “just to help out.” The first time he receives the dollar he’s surprised. He smiles slightly, but doesn’t expect any more, and doesn’t receive any more. It’s that way with him. He says you can spend your life looking forward to things that never come—lottery tickets, gold medals, princes and princesses on galloping white stallions—or you can prepare for the worst. If you prepare for the worst, you’re either ready for it or you’re pleasantly surprised. And sometimes being pleasantly surprised is a nice thing. I find myself checking door locks at night, unlisting my phone number, and viewing introductions with suspicion. Early inheritance from my father.

Dad flies in WWII. Even gets shot. Closer in my real world to a John Wayne rerun or Tora! Tora! Tora! than anything near my own experience. I look at a scar and I hear a story. Basically, you don’t get a Purple Heart if the guy shooting you is your own squadron mate. Small detail. The kind of detail that ruins an otherwise good story. Sorry about that, I guess. Accidents happen. Dad’s squadron visits him in the hospital, and he only has to see their faces walking in the door to know who did it. Four men walk in and one is pale as a ghost.

Three of these things belong together,
Three of these things are kind of the same,

Strafing over the Everglades on a training mission, my father finishes his run, peppers the target, and prepares his climb. Behind him, the next pilot nervously opens fire too soon. There is a slap at my father’s back. Some smoke. No flames. My father looks at himself and his plane, confused. He transmits, “I think I’ve been shot,” and spends a lifetime chuckling over this phrase with each sequential telling of the story. He uses his left hand to compress the bullet’s exit wound and flies the thirty miles to the training airstrip one-handed, because bleeding and flying one-handed is still better than parachuting into the Everglades. You have enough to worry about without thinking about Discovery Channel reptile episodes.

One of these things is doing its own thing,

Thoughts of death, maiming, impotence, and paralysis disappear when he has to land. His left hand leaves its station, wet and warm, and two trembling hands guide the SNJ down to a perfect landing “Painted it on,” as he says. The ambulance is waiting. An orderly pulls him out of the cockpit, pale as a ghost. On a rough dirt road a medic plugs an IV
into him and says, “You’ve used up all your luck, mate.” What is that supposed to mean? Pardon me?

Now it’s time to play our game.

There is an investigation, a court martial, and many apologies. But there is no anger in my father for this. There are other angers, and other places for them. He just says, “Poor guy didn’t mean to . . .” and leaves it at that. For the longest time, I thought everyone in WWII got shot, flew planes, held their pain in, and kissed nurses in Times Square. I’ve been to Times Square, but I’ve never kissed a nurse. The entry and exit wounds have almost healed over half a century, but not quite. You can still see them. We all have our own sets of entry wounds, and some of them haven’t found their exits. We hope they do, and sometimes all you can do is hope. The body naturally repels splinters, passes foreign bodies, and relinquishes tears, but some bullets stay embedded indefinitely. Like my father, I carry them in my organs and gut, occasionally flinching at a physical memory and setting off certain metal detectors. Prepare for the worst, a sense of occasion, control your pain, store your anger. These are things I learn from my father.

Coming back from VJ Day he enrolls at USC in the Comparative Literature Doctoral Program. He T.A.’s a small ESL class where my mother, fresh in from China, is a student. As they say, the rest is history. And as they say, history repeats itself.

But it doesn’t work out that way for either of us. Ma’s English is too good for the class. Dad kicks her out after the first day. Too much the ringer or maybe just too beautiful to deal with. I know what that’s like. A week later she runs into him on campus. Dad’s a complete stud. Tall. Single. Clean-cut. War hero, even if it was friendly fire. He turns heads wherever he goes. Still wearing his hair in a crew cut, Dad sports tight sunglasses like Jack Lord on Hawaii Five-O, black zoot-suit pants, and argyle socks. The locking leather briefcase completes the ensemble.

Ma walks straight up to him and asks if he wants to attend her Methodist church luncheon. That’s pretty gutsy in its own way, but Ma’s never been one lacking for guts. These cute meets are funny, because you’ll bend over backwards to make the situation work. Ma’s Buddhist. Dad’s atheist. A Methodist luncheon. You do the math. Dad looks at my mother — a complete princess — and agrees. I don’t think it was much of a decision, really. Atheist who? They go to the luncheon. She introduces her “niece and nephew,” who become my brother and sister later along the line, once the ties are on. Lock, stock, and two smoking barrels. A woman knows, a man supposes. They date, get
engaged, and marry. Dad prepares for the worst and is occasionally pleasantly surprised along the way. And the rest, as they say, is a new history. I don’t know if new histories repeat themselves or not. I’ll let you know.

People meet my father and respect him. People meet my mother and love her. I’m more hit-and-miss. More love-or-hate.

I get uneasy telling Ma’s story. Because Ma’s story fits too easily into some kind of Joy Luck Club old-school legend, some kind of food staple for white America. But to understand why it is I write, you have to understand some basic and not-so-basic boundaries. You have to believe in fabricated stories. You have to understand how it is I came to be who I am. It’ll all make sense in the end. That’s what they tell me anyway. Relax.

“Hey, Bishop, do the thing with the knife!”

Oh, please.

“Hey . . . what are you doin’, man? What are you doin’? C’mon, quit messin’ around, Drake! C’mon! Bishop? Hey, man! Hey, not me, man! Hey! . . .”

Bishop places his hand over Hudson’s.

Trust me.

Back in rural China, Ma’s first husband works in the salt industry. China isn’t that industrialized yet, so there’s no refrigeration and salt is a crucial commodity. My mother’s first husband is a good man. Honest, she says. One day he discovers a syndicate in the salt mining industry. Some network shaving profits or smuggling or embezzling or stealing. A salt Mafia. He reports the crimes, and several lower-end guys get arrested and punished. This is basic Organized Crime 101. Bosses never do the dirty work, so bosses never do the time. Not then. Not now. Not ever.

My mother and her first husband go for a walk in the village. A woman from down the road approaches them with a plate of fried fish. River fish or king fish or minnows. She begs my mother to buy some, because company just came over and she’s out of rice with no money to buy any. If Ma will buy the fish, she can buy the rice and serve her guests.

Ma doesn’t want any fish. She doesn’t need any. But the woman looks so desperate my mother says she’ll buy the fish to help her out.
The woman thanks her and Ma goes back into her home to get some money. While she is inside, a soldier from the salt mines approaches her husband and salutes him. Then the soldier continues walking past, turns around, and shoots her husband in the back, killing him. My mother and her rice money come running out to find her husband lying face down on a dirt road, and a soldier, who looks back at her once and keeps on walking. This is beyond what I am able to write or feel. This is beyond my present life. It is a different time now, a different place. But this isn't what I remember when Ma tells me the story. I remember Ma telling me she was supposed to be killed also. I remember her telling me she was spared because she had decided to help this woman out of kindness. I remember her telling me everything comes around.

I'm only able to write this because my mother wanted to help out a neighbor. If she doesn't help her, she gets killed. If she is killed, my sister's mentally retarded students never learn, my brother's patients never recover, I never write or speak a word.

Quid pro quo, Agent Starling.

Maybe because Ma chooses to help a woman, my sister can touch a particular student, and this student can visit a nursing home and take an inmate to a movie. My brother can take the extra time to be with a patient's family, and later that afternoon one of these family members can pay for the person behind him on a toll bridge. I can write a text that someone reads before making their parents dinner or sending a friend flowers or smiling at someone on the street or campus or at work. My mother's story operates like a chain letter, except it doesn't make you angry when you get it in the mail or online. It goes back a generation and a generation before that. It remembers favors and kindness and justice.

Months later, investigators lead my mother to a beaten man in shackles, waiting to be executed on her identification. She looks in the man's eyes and sees the man who killed her husband. And even though she recognizes the man, she tells them she has never seen him before and they release him. What's the point, she says. Her husband is already dead. That's the way it is. That's the way it works out.

This is my first exposure to a woman.