

Doctorow, Cory

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#12

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#12

1 Wei-Dong had been to downtown LA once, on a class trip to the Disney
Concert Hall, but then they'd driven in, parked, and marched like
ducklings into the hall and then out again, without spending any
time actually wandering around. He remembered watching the streets go
5 by from the bus window, faded store windows and slow-moving people,
check-cashing places and liquor stores. And Internet cafes. Lots and
lots of Internet cafes, especially in Koreatown, where every strip
mall had a garish sign advertising "PC Baang" -- Korean for net-cafe.

But he didn't know exactly where Koreatown was, and he needed
10 an Internet cafe to google it, and so he caught the LAX bus
to the Disney Concert Hall, thinking he could retrace the bus-
route and find his way to those shops, get online, talk to his homies
in Guangzhou, figure out the next thing.

But Koreatown turned out to be harder to find and farther than he'd
15 thought. He asked the bus-driver for directions, who looked at him
like he was crazy and pointed downhill. And so he started walking,
and walking, and walking for block after dusty block. From the window
of the school-bus, downtown LA had looked slow-moving and faded, like
a photo left too long in a window.

20 On foot, it was frenetic, the movement of the buses, the homeless people walking or wheeling or hobbling past him, asking him for money. He had \$1000 in his front jeans pocket, and it seemed to him that the bulge must be as obvious as a boner at the blackboard in class. He was sweating, and not just from the heat, which seemed
25 ten degrees hotter than it had been in Disneyland.

And now he wasn't anywhere near Koreatown, but had rather found his way to Santee Alley, the huge, open-air pirate market in the middle of LA. He'd heard about the place before, you saw it all the time in news-specials about counterfeit goods busts,
30 pictures of Mexican guys being led away while grimly satisfied cops in suits or uniform baled up mountains of fake shirts, fake DVDs, fake jeans, fake games.

Santee Alley was a welcome relief from the streets around it. He wandered deep into the market, the storefronts all blaring
35 their technobrega and reggaton at him, the hawkers calling out their wares. It was like the real market on which all the hundreds of in-game markets he'd visited had been based upon and he found himself slowing down and looking in at the gangster clothes and the bad souvenir junk and the fake electronics. He bought a big
40 cup of watermelon drink and a couple of empanadas from a stall,

carefully drawing a single twenty from his pocket without bringing out the whole thing.

Then he'd found an Internet cafe, filled with Guatemalans chatting with their families back home, wearing slick and tiny earwigs.

45 The girl behind the counter -- barely older than him -- sold him one that claimed to be a Samsung for \$18, and then rented him a PC to use it with. The fake earwig fit as well as his real one had, though it had a rough seam of plastic running around its length while his had been as smooth as beach-glass.

50 But it didn't matter. He had his network connection, he had his earwig, and he had his game. What more could he need? Well, his posse, for starters. They were nowhere to be found.

He checked his new watch and pressed the button that flipped it to the Chinese timezone. 5AM. Well, that explained it.

55 He checked his inventory, checked the guild-bank. He hadn't been able to do the corpse run after he'd been snatched out of the game by his father and the Ronald Reagan High Thought Police, so he didn't expect to have his vorpal blade still, but he did, which meant that one of the gang had rescued it for him, which was awfully thoughtful. But that was just what guildies did for each other, after all.

It was coming up to dinner-time on the east coast, which meant
that Savage Wonderland was starting to fill up with people getting
home from work. He thought about the black riders who slaughtered
65 them that morning and wondered who they'd been. There were plenty
of people who hunted gold farmers, either because they worked
for the game or for a rival gold-farm clan, or because they were
bored rich players who hated the idea of poor people invading "their"
space and working where they played.

70 He knew he should flip to his email and check for messages
from his parents. He didn't like using email, but his parents were
addicted to it. No doubt they were freaking out by now, calling out
the army and navy and the national guard to find their wayward son.
Well, they could freak out all they wanted. He wasn't going to go
75 back and he didn't need to go back.

He had \$1000 in his pocket, he was nearly 18 years old, and there
were lots of ways to get by in the big city that didn't involve
selling drugs or your body. His guildies had shown him that. All
you needed to earn a living was a connection to the net and a brain
80 in your head. He looked around the cafe at the dozens of Guatemalans
talking to home on their earwigs, many not much older than him.
If they could earn a living -- not speaking the language, not
legal to work, no formal education, hardly any idea of how to use

technology beyond the little bit of knowledge necessary to call
85 home on the cheap -- then surely he could. His grandfather had
come to America and found a job when he was Wei-Dong's age. It was
a family tradition, practically.

It wasn't that he didn't love his parents. He did. They were good
people. They loved him in their way. But they lived in a bubble
90 of unreality, a bubble called Orange County, where they still had
rows of neat identical houses and neat identical lives, while around
them, everything was collapsing. His father couldn't see it, even
though hardly a day went by that he didn't come home and complain
bitterly about the containers that had fallen off his ship in yet
95 another monster storm, about the price of diesel sailing through
the stratosphere, about the plummeting dollar and the skyrocketing
Renminbi and the ever-tightening belts of Americans whose orders
for goods from South China were clobbering his business.

Wei-Dong had figured all this out because he paid attention and he saw
100 things as they were. Because he talked to China, and China talked
back to him. The fat and comfortable world he'd grown up in was not
permanent; scratched in the sand, not carved in stone. His friends
in China could see it better than anyone else could. Lu had worked as
a security guard in a factory in Shilong New Town, a city that made
105 appliances for sale in Britain. It had taken Wei-Dong some time

to understand this: the entire city, four million people, did nothing but make appliances for sale in Britain, a country with eighty million people.

Then, one day, the factories on either side of Lu's had closed.

110 They had all made goods for a few different companies, employing armies of young women to run the machines and assemble the pieces that came out of them. Young women always got the best jobs. Bosses liked them because they worked hard and didn't argue so much -- at least, that's what everyone said. When Lu left his village
115 in Sichuan province to come to south China, he'd talked to one of the girls who had come home from the factories for the Mid-Autumn Festival, a girl who'd left a few years before and found wealth in Dongguan, who'd bought her parents a fine new two-storey house with her money, who came home every year for the Festival in fine
120 clothes with a new mobile phone in a designer bag, looking like an alien or a model stepped fresh out of a magazine ad.

"If you go to a factory and it's not full of young girls, don't take a job there," was her advice. "Any place that can't attract a lot of young girls, there's something wrong with it." But the factory
125 that Lu worked at -- all the factories in Shilong New Town -- were filled with young girls. The only jobs for men were as drivers, security guards, cleaners and cooks. The factories boomed, each one

a small city itself, with its own kitchens, its own dormitories, its own infirmary and its own customs checkpoint where every vehicle and
130 visitor going in or out of the wall got checked and inspected.

And these indomitable cities had crumbled. The Highest Quality Dishwasher Company factory closed on Monday. The Boundless Energy Enterprises hot-water heater plant went on Wednesday. Every day, Lu saw the bosses come in and out in their cars, waving them through
135 after they'd flicked their IDs at him. One day, he steeled his nerve and leaned in the window, his face only inches from that of the man who paid his wages every month.

"We're doing better than the neighbors, eh, Boss?" He tried for a jovial smile, the best he could muster, but he knew it wasn't
140 very good.

"We do fine," the boss had barked. He had very smooth skin and a smart sport-coat, but his shoulders were dusted with dandruff. "And no one says otherwise!"

"Just as you say, boss," Lu said, and leaned out of the window,
145 trying to keep his smile in place. But he'd seen it in the boss's face -- the factory would close.

The next day, no bus came to the bus-stop. Normally, there would have been fifty or sixty people waiting for the bus, mostly young men, the women mostly lived in the dorms. Security guards and janitors

150 didn't rate dorm rooms. That morning, there were eight people waiting when he arrived at the bus-stop. Ten minutes went by and a few more trickled to the stop, and still no bus came. Thirty minutes passed -- Lu was now officially late for work -- and still no bus came. He canvassed his fellow waiters to see if anyone was going 155 near his factory and might want to share a taxi -- an otherwise unthinkable luxury, but losing his job even was more unthinkable. One other guy, with a Shaanxi accent, was willing, and that's when they noticed that there didn't seem to be any taxis cruising on the road either. So Lu, being Lu, walked to work, fifteen 160 kilometers in the scorching, melting, dripping heat, his security guard's shirt and coat over his arm, his undershirt rolled up to bare his belly, the dust caking up on his shoes. And when he arrived at the Miracle Spirit condenser dryer factory and found himself in a mob of thousands of screeching young women in factory-issue smocks, crowded around the fence and the double-padlocked rattling 165 it and shouting at the factory's darkened doors. Many of the girls had small backpacks or duffel-bags, overstuffed and leaking underwear and makeup on the ground.

"What's going on?" he shouted at one, pulling her out of the mob.

170 "The bastards shut the factory and put us out. They did it at shift-change. Pulled the fire-alarm and screamed ,Fire' and ,Smoke' and when we were all out here, they ran out and padlocked the gate!"

"Who?" He'd always thought that if the factory were going to shut down, they'd use the security guards to do it. He'd always thought 175 that he, at least, would get one last paycheck out of the company.

"The bosses, six of them. Mr Dai and five of his supervisors.

They locked the front gate and then they drove off through the back gate, locking it behind them. We're all locked out. All my things are in there! My phone, my money, my clothes --"

180 Her last paycheck. It was only three days to payday, and, of course, the company had kept their first eight weeks' wages when they all started working. You had to ask your boss's permission if you wanted to change jobs and keep the money -- otherwise you'd have to abandon two months' pay.

185 Around Lu, the screams rose in pitch and small, feminine fists flailed at the air. Who were they shouting at? The factory was empty. The factory was empty. If they climbed the fence, cutting the barbed wire at the top, and then broke the locks on the factory doors, they'd have the run of the place. They couldn't carry out a condenser 190 dryer -- not easily, anyway -- but there were plenty of small things: tools, chairs, things from the kitchen, the personal belongings

of the girls who hadn't thought to bring them with when the fire alarm sounded. Lu knew about all the things that could be smuggled out of the factory. He was a security guard. Or had been. Part of his job 195 had been to search the other employees when they left to make sure they weren't stealing. His supervisor, Mr Chu, had searched him at the end of each shift, in turn. He wasn't sure who, if anyone, searched Mr Chu.

He had a small multitool that he clipped to his belt every morning. 200 Having a set of pliers, a knife, and a screwdriver on you all the time changed the way you saw the world -- it became a place to be cut, sliced, pried and unscrewed.

"Is that your only jacket?" he shouted into the ear of the girl he'd been talking to. She was a little shorter than him, with a large mole 205 on her cheek that he rather liked.

"Of course not!" she said. "I have three others inside." "If I get you those three, can I use this one?" He unfolded the pliers on his multitool. They were joined by a set of cogs that compounded the leverage of a squeezing palm, and the jaws 210 of the plier were inset with a pair of wicked-sharp wire-cutters. The girl in his village had worked for a time in the SOG factory in Dongguan and she'd given him a pair and wished him good luck in South China.

The girl with three more jackets looked up at the barbed wire.

215 "You'll be cut to ribbons," she said.

He grinned. "Maybe," he said. "I think I can do it, though."

"Boys," she hollered in his ear. He could smell her breakfast congee on her breath, mixed with toothpaste. It made him homesick. "All right. But be careful!" She shrugged out of the jacket, revealing 220 a set of densely muscled arms, worked to lean strength on the line.

He wrapped it around his left hand, then wrapped his own coat around that, so that his hand looked like a cartoon boxing-glove, trailing sleeves flapping down beneath it.

It wasn't easy to climb the fence with one hand wrapped in a dozen 225 thicknesses of fabric, but he'd always been a great climber, even in the village, a daring boy who'd gotten a reputation for climbing anything that stood still: trees, houses, even factories. He had one good hand, two feet, and one bandaged hand, and that was enough to get up the fifteen feet to the top. Once there, he gingerly wrapped 230 his left hand around the razorwire, careful to pull straight down on it and not to saw from side to side. He had a vision of himself slipping and falling, the razorwire slicing his fingers from his hand so that they fell to the other side of the fence, wriggling like worms in the dust as he clutched his mangled hand and screamed, 235 geysering blood over the girls around him.

Well, you'd better not slip, then, he thought grimly, carefully unfolding the multitool with his other hand, flipping it around like a butterfly knife (a move he'd often practiced, playing gunfighter in his room or when no one else was around at the gate). He gingerly

240 slid it around the first coil of wire and squeezed down, watching the teeth on the gears mesh and strain at one another, turning the leverage of his right hand into hundreds of pounds of pressure bearing down right at the cutting edge of the pliers. They bit into the wire, caught, and then parted it.

245 The coil of wire sprang free with a twoingggg sound, and he ducked away just in time to avoid having his nose -- and maybe his ear and eye -- sliced off by the wire.

But now he could transfer his left hand to the top of the fence, and put more weight on it, and reach for the second coil of wire

250 with the cutters, hanging way out from the fence, as far as he could, to avoid the coil when it sprang free. Which it did, parting just as easily as the other coil had, and flying directly at him, and it was only by releasing his feet and dangling one-handed from the fence, slamming his body into it, that he avoided

255 having his throat cut. As it was, the wire made a long scratch in the back of his scalp, which began to bleed freely down his back. He ignored it. Either it was shallow and would stop on its own, or

it was deep and he'd need medical attention, but either way, he was going to clear the fencetop.

260 All that remained now were three strands of barbed wire, and they were tougher to cut than the razorwire had been, but the barbs were widely spaced and the wire itself was less prone to crazy twanging whipsaws than the coiled razorwire. As each one parted, there was a roar of approval from the girls below him, and even 265 though his scalp was stinging fiercely, he thought this might just be his finest hour, the first time in his life that he'd been something more than a security guard who'd left his backwards town to find insignificance in Guandong province.

And now he was able to unwind the jackets from around his hand 270 and simply hop over the fence and clamber down the other side like a monkey, grinning all the way at the horde of young girls who were coming up the other side in a great wave. It wasn't long before the girl with three more jackets caught him up. He shook out her jacket -- sliced through in four or five places -- like a waiter 275 offering a lady her coat, and she delicately slid those muscular arms into it and then she turned him around and poked at his scalp.

"Shallow," she said. "It'll bleed a lot, but you'll be OK."

She planted a sisterly kiss on his cheek. "You're a good boy,"

she said, and then ran off to join the stream of girls who were
280 entering the factory through a smashed door.

Shortly, he found himself alone in the factory yard, amid
the neat gravel pathways and the trimmed lawns. He let himself
into the factory but he couldn't actually bring himself to take
anything, though they owed him nearly three months' wages. Somehow,
285 it seemed to him that the girls who'd used the tools should have
their pick of the tools, that the men who'd cooked the meals should
have their pick of the things from the kitchens.

Finally, he settled on one of the communal bicycles that were neatly
parked near the factory gates. These were used by all the employees
290 equally, and besides, he needed to get home and walking back
with a scalp wound in the mid-day heat didn't sound like much
of a plan.

On the way home, the world seemed much changed. He'd become
a criminal, for one thing, which seemed to him to be quite a distance
295 from a security guard. But it was more than that: the air seemed
clearer (later, he read that the air was clearer, thanks to all
the factories that had shut down and the buses that had stayed
parked). Most of the shops seemed closed and the remainder were
tended by listless storekeepers who sat on their stoops or played
300 Mah-Jongg on them, though it was the middle of the day. All

the restaurants and cafes were shut. At a train-crossing, he watched an intercity train shoot past, every car jammed with young women and their bags, leaving Shilong New Town to find their way somewhere else where there was still work.

305 Just like that, in the space of just a week or two, this giant city had died. It had all seemed so incredibly powerful when he'd arrived, new paved roads and new stores and new buildings, and the factories soaring against the sky wherever you looked.

By the time he reached home -- dizzy from the aching cut
310 on his scalp, sweaty, hungry -- he knew that the magical city was just a pile of concrete and a mountain of workers' sweat, and that it had all the permanence of a dream. Somewhere, in a distant land he barely knew the name of, people had stopped buying washing machines, and so his city had died.

315 He thought he'd lie down for just the briefest of naps, but by the time he got up and gathered a few things into a duffel-bag and got back on his bike, not bothering to lock the door of his apartment behind him, the train station was barricaded, and there was a long line of refugees slogging down the road to Shenzhen, two days' walk
320 away at least. He was glad he'd taken the bicycle then. Later, he found a working ATM and drew out some cash, which was more reassuring than he'd anticipated. For a while there, it had seemed

like the world had come to an end. It was a relief to find out that it was just his little corner.

325 In Shenzhen, he'd started hanging out in Internet cafes, because they were the cheapest places to sit indoors, out of the heat, and because they were filled with young men like him, scraping by. And because he could talk to his parents from there, telling them made-up stories about his non-existent job-search, promising 330 that he'd start sending money home soon.

And that was where the guild found him, Ping and his friends, and they had this buddy on the other side of the planet, this Wei-Dong character who'd hung rapt on every turn of his tale, who'd told him that he'd written it up for a social studies report at school, 335 which made them all laugh. And he'd found happiness and work, and he'd found a truth, too: the world wasn't built on rock, but rather on sand, and it would shift forever.

Wei-Dong didn't know how much longer his father's business would last. Maybe thirty years -- but he thought it would be a lot less 340 than that. Every day, he woke in his bedroom under his Spongebob sheets and thought about which of these things he could live without, just how basic his life could get.

And here it was, the chance to find out. When his great-grandparents had been his age, they'd been war-refugees, crossing the ocean

345 on a crowded boat, travelling on stolen papers, an infant
in his great-grandmother's arms and another in her belly. If they
could do it, Wei-Dong could do it.

He'd need a place to stay, which meant money, which meant a job.

The guild would cut him in for his share of the money from the raids,
350 but that wasn't enough to survive in America. Or was it? He wondered
how much the Guatemalans around him earned at their illegal
dishwashing and cleaning and gardening jobs.

In any event, he wouldn't have to find out, because he had something
they didn't have: a Social Security Number. And yes, that meant
355 that eventually his parents would be able to find him, but in another
month, he'd be 18 and it'd be too late for them to do anything about
it if he didn't want to cooperate.

In those hours where he'd planned for the demise of his family's
fortune, he'd settled quickly on the easiest job he could step into:
360 Mechanical Turk.

The Turks were an army of workers in gamespace. All you had to do was
prove that you were a decent player -- the game had the stats to know
it -- and sign up, and then log in whenever you wanted a shift.
The game would ping you any time a player did something the game
365 didn't know how to interpret -- talked too intensely to a non-player
character, stuck a sword where it didn't belong, climbed a tree

that no one had bothered to add any details too -- and you'd have
to play spot-referee. You'd play the non-player character, choose
a behavior for the stabbed object, or make a decision from a menu
370 of possible things you might find in a tree.

It didn't pay much, but it didn't take much time, either. Wei-Dong
had calculated that if he played two computers -- something he was
sure he could keep up -- and did a new job every twenty seconds
on each, he could make as much as the senior managers at his father's
375 company. He'd have to do it for ten hours a day, but he'd spent
plenty of weekends playing for 12 or even 14 hours a day, so hell,
it was practically money in the bank.

So he used the rented PC to sign onto his account and started
filling in the paperwork to apply for the job. All the while, he was
380 conscious of his rarely-used email account and of the messages
from his parents that surely awaited him. The forms were long and
boring, but easy enough, even the little essay questions where
you had to answer a bunch of hypothetical questions about what you'd
do if a player did this or said that. And that email from his parents
385 was lurking, demanding that he download it and read it --

He flipped to a browser and brought up his email. It had been weeks
since he'd last checked it and it was choked with hundreds of spams,
but there, at the top:

RACHEL ROSENBAUM -- WHERE ARE YOU???

390 Of course his mother was the one to send the email. It was always her on email, sending him little encouraging notes through the school day, reminding him of his grandparents' and cousins' and father's birthdays. His father used email when he had to, usually at two in the morning when he couldn't sleep for worry about work
395 and he needed to bawl out his managers without waking them up on the phone. But if the phone was an option, Dad would take it.

WHERE ARE YOU???

The subject-line said it all, didn't it?

Leonard, this is crazy. If you want to be treated like an adult,
400 start acting like one. Don't sneak around behind our backs, playing games in the middle of the night. Don't run off to God-knows-where to sulk.

We can negotiate this like family, like grownups, but first you'll have to COME HOME and stop behaving like a SPOILED BRAT. We love you,
405 Leonard, and we're worried about you, and we want to help you. I know when you're 17 it's easy to feel like you have all the answers --

He stopped reading and blew hot air out his nostrils. He hated it when adults told him he only felt the way he did because he was young. As if being young was like being insane or drunk, like
410 the convictions he held were hallucinations caused by a mental

illness that could only be cured by waiting five years. Why not just stick him in a box and lock it until he turned 22?

He began to hit reply, then realized that he was logged in without going through an anonymizer. His guildies were big into these --

415 they were servers that relayed your traffic, obscuring your identity and the addresses you were trying to avoid. The best ones came from Falun Gong, the weird religious cult that the Chinese government was bent on stamping out. Falun Gong put new relays online every hour or so, staying a hop ahead of the Great Firewall of China, the all-
420 seeing, all-knowing, all-controlling server-farm that was supposed to keep 1.6 billion Chinese people from looking at the wrong kind of information.

No one in the guild had much time for Falun Gong or its quirky beliefs, but everyone agreed that they ran a tight ship when it came
425 to punching holes in the Great Firewall. A quick troll through the ever-rotating index-pages for Falun Gong relays found Wei-Dong a machine that would take his traffic. Then he replied to his Mom. Let her try to run his backtrail -- it would dead-end with a notorious Chinese religious cult. That'd give her something to worry about
430 all right!

Mom, I'm fine. I'm acting like an adult (taking care of myself, making my own decisions). It might have been wrong to lie to you guys about

what I was doing with my time, but kidnapping your son to military school is about as non-adult as you can get. I'll be in touch when

435 I get a chance. I love you two. Don't worry, I'm safe.

Was he, really? As safe as his great-grandparents had been, stepping off the ship in New York. As safe as Lu had been, bicycling the cracked road to Shenzhen.

He'd find a place to stay -- he could google "cheap hotel downtown los angeles" as well as the next kid. He had money. He had a SSN.

He had a job -- two jobs, counting the guild work -- and he had plenty of practice missions he'd have to run before he'd start earning. And it was time to get down to it.