

**LLOYD LIU**

## **Water Ghost**

Han was heading to the outskirts of Orlando. This time he was to play the role of a salesman instead of a son. He had rented a forest green four-door sedan with bubble headlights and smooth contours, and the history of his childhood, abridged and cropped in his mind, came dribbling loose from its tight bolts and steel walls. He clenched his steering wheel as he turned off the interstate and drove up a winding road settled into a small hill.

His black hair was cut short. His skin, thanks to Chicago's cloudy and otherwise dreary fall and winter months, was paler than he liked. His mother, of Taiwanese and Southern Chinese descent, had given him the gift of a crisp brown tan. Han supposed Jeremiah's whiteness had cursed him and taken away brown as his default color. Han felt pasty and doughy.

Jeremiah's house on 43 Warren Road was ranch style and, from the looks of it, better manicured than Han remembered. Perhaps bachelorhood gave him nothing better to do than fix forgettable odds and ends. Han threaded a stream of air between his lips and, with a slow roll of his hands, pulled into the driveway.

Han rang the doorbell, failing to recognize the chime. The address matched but, on closer inspection, nothing else seemed to. There was a fresh coat of paint, and the windows were streak-less. The yard, at its very fringes, was perfectly demarked from its neighbors. Han rang the doorbell again with his thumb.

**KARTIKA  REVIEW**

ISSUE TWO, SPRING 2008

No answer. He pivoted on his heel and walked down the front walkway lined with small bushes and the occasional blooming flower. He tucked his hands into his brown slacks and headed for the sedan. Jeremiah's absence was for the better anyway. Who shows up after twenty silent years, decked out in a suit, ready to cut to business? Han didn't know who he was kidding, who he even thought he was. When he had first heard the assignment, he didn't want it. The suture contract with Orlando General wasn't the only job he could've taken. There were other hospitals: Northwestern, Mass General. Instead, there he was, two days early for the meeting, looking to garner support from a particular surgeon, one that wasn't home.

Han's killer instinct was what had driven him here, despite the inevitable confrontation with Jeremiah. He wanted to close this deal. A big contract would put him in the running for sales rep of the year and get him a nice bonus. He'd also receive a gaudy but nonetheless well-respected paperweight at the head of his desk in the office he never had time to be at anyway. Yes, Han wanted to sink his jaws into the throat of this deal.

He slid into the sedan and began to slowly back out of the driveway. The engine hummed, then purred, as he pressed harder on the gas. Han righted the car and centered himself. He peered at the ranch-style house, how it sat couched in the hill. Behind it, a huge lake gleamed in the sunlight. Its waves shined.

With his toes, Han tapped the gas. The sedan rolled forward. A smacking sound popped Han out of his seat. He turned his head and caught flesh pressed against the passenger side window. A torrent of sweat, a wrinkled forehead, eyes, and a mouth pressed heavily against the glass.

"Jesus!" Han cried as he crushed the gas pedal, sending him screeching down the street, a wake of burnt rubber behind him. His heart crashed against his chest, tried its best to tear itself from the web of arteries and veins. After peeling away for a few seconds, Han braked abruptly short of the stop sign. On the passenger side window, the imprints of Jeremiah's sweat lines remained. Han tinkered with the idea of sending

**KARTIKA 🐦 REVIEW**

ISSUE TWO, SPRING 2008

his fist in a straight shot through the glass, to know a figment of what it was to be crazy.

Jeremiah was a silhouette behind him, still in Han's rearview mirror. His figure appeared to struggle just to stand. Han set the car in reverse and slowly made his way back down the street, the sedan's fat ass going first. He pulled up to Jeremiah who was drenched, wearing a gray T-shirt and khaki shorts. Their eyes locked first. Han rolled down the window.

"Jeremiah?"

"Son?"

Han gripped the leather around the steering wheel. Han always rented cars with leather interiors. Leather helped a little in taking the edge off. Han chewed on the inside of his mouth. The motor rumbled.

"Hey," he said.

"Hi," Jeremiah replied.

Father and son searched each other's faces for the blemishes, fine craters, moles, and slight scars of age. Han looked for any kind of lasting damage.

"I wasn't expecting you for another fifteen minutes so I went for a run," Jeremiah said, clenching and unclenching his jaw. He propped his elbow on the roof of the car, using it as a crutch. Jeremiah was venous, dark, and leathery. His eyes sunk deeply into their sockets. His lips were thin and dry. With every breath, his chest stretched like a dried out rag.

"Right," Han replied. He straightened the collar of his suit with his free hand. "Yeah. I'm sorry about that. Got spooked."

"That's okay."

Han thought through a series of sales pitches he could've recited for Jeremiah. He'd been trained to handle high-pressure, high-stakes situations. Sweat formed in the

webbing between his fingers. The corner of Jeremiah's mouth pulled back into a smile.

"Park on the street and we'll walk to the lake," he said. "We can take my boat out."

"You have a boat?"

"Yes, now go ahead and park," Jeremiah replied.

Han pulled his car to the side of the road with his wheels hugging the curb. When he got out, Jeremiah was gone. Beside the house was an open dirt path he remembered as a child but thought had become overgrown and impassable a long time ago. Han jogged down the trail, criss-crossed with a few large roots and some small rocks broken off from larger stones.

When he cleared the path, Han came into view of a dock he had never seen before. There was Jeremiah's boat, a little pontoon sitting on two thick banana floats on each end. Han scratched his throat. He felt stifled, congested. He undid the top button around his neck. That wasn't enough. He continued down the line, popping button after button, letting more and more wind blow across him. All the raw heat was making him itchy.

As Jeremiah always said, one had to be thick-skinned. Jeremiah stood on the boat and tidied things up, working on odds and ends Han had no knowledge of. Jeremiah appeared better on the boat, not nearly as exasperated or dehydrated as he was before. He paced around steadily, ably. Compared to Han's dusty memories of him Jeremiah was lighter, younger.

"Why the hell are you wearing a suit anyway?" Jeremiah shouted.

Han stepped backwards into a patch of moist dirt. When he stepped forward, his heel lifted with a sucking sound and splattered bits of mud all over his black loafers. He didn't like to do as Jeremiah said, but this time his words meshed well with some serious undercurrent, a ribbon of energy tickling his marrow. He removed his suit jacket and laid it over a tree

**KARTIKA 🐦 REVIEW**

ISSUE TWO, SPRING 2008

branch. Then he pulled off his shoes and dress socks. Finally, he removed his white button-down and his undershirt and hung them both over another branch. The earth was damp, squelching between his toes.

With a deliberate pace, he moved toward the dock, feeling out the distance by the pads of his feet. Changing gradients of light flushed through the canopy formed by the beachside trees. Waves slapped lazily at half-buried, hollow tree trunks.

The dock was firm and there were only a few uneven spaces between its spruce boards. Han rolled up the cuffs of his slacks and stepped on board Jeremiah's ship. Jeremiah was ready to set sail.

"So what makes your suture better than the one I'm using now?" Jeremiah asked as he untied the pontoon from dock. The ship was blunt and square. When Han was a kid, Jeremiah had always talked about getting a boat. He always made it seem like he wanted a pointed, sleek vessel. Instead, he had this dinky, clumsy platform with twin engines that seemed far too small to propel the ship's wide hull. Along the side, written in black, bold cursive, was the word "Prestige."

"The suture's initial strength is comparable to nylon and gut," Han began. "The coated suture is the fastest absorbing synthetic suture on the market and elicits a significantly lower tissue reaction than chromic gut tissue." Jeremiah started the engines.

"Wonderful. But I'll have to see it first."

"Of course," Han said. His eyes became slits as he scrutinized Jeremiah from the top down. He had to narrow his eyes, reduce the amount of light exposure to be positive no illusions were being played. Jeremiah's calves were well-built, corded, and sturdy. His upper body seemed as fit as ever, thick and full. Maybe it was his choice of baggy sweats that had made him look scrawnier than he actually was. Now, with him wearing only khaki shorts, the image was clear. Over a decade, Jeremiah had made himself into everything Han was not. His shoulder blades were split wide, his shoulders broad. He was built like an oak. Han watched him under cover of wayward glances and took a seat on the aft side.

Han's legs dangled off the back of the pontoon as it slowly pulled away from shore. Sunlight sprinkled through the foliage, peppering his bare shoulders, back, and face. The pontoon's twin engines gained thrust as Jeremiah piloted toward the lake's heart. The boat unzipped the lake's surface with parting white crests, shifting the water's face beneath Han's feet. He watched the ripples as his hands gripped the rails. He wiggled his two big toes and traced them against the water's grain.

The wind picked up and chilled the sweat wicking off his back. Jeremiah's house—the house of Han's childhood—shrank, but in the clear day wasn't in danger of disappearing. It sat couched in the hillside, bordered by a small patch of orange trees and an elaborate, triple-deck birdhouse complete with a fountain. Han lifted his head and rotated his pasty freckled forearms beneath the full exposure of the sun as the boat cleared out from the overhanging trees leaning precariously from shore. Enough time in the Florida sun would undo the atrophy of cloudy, dark, cold Chicago.

Jeremiah piloted the pontoon with his chest puffed out. Han bowed his head and returned his attention to the growing wake. Jeremiah was the kind of person who'd act like the commander of an armada even if he was in a canoe. He had always had a way of injecting an inflated and false sense of pride in anything, everything. Jeremiah looked back.

“How do you like selling sutures?”

“It gets me by.” Han forced his voice against the wind. In the chaos that had followed his mother's divorce from Jeremiah, Han had taught her a few expressions she couldn't have learned from her English classes in Taiwan. “It gets me by” was a phrase of the week, sometimes the month.

Han scrunched up his nose. Jeremiah kicked the boat to full speed. The eye of the lake turned on a switch in Han's brain. They were approaching the center.

“I always thought it strange how you never inherited your mother's fear of water,” Jeremiah said.

“What do you mean?” Han asked, lifting his head.

“Well I always told her to keep her childhood myths to herself, all those stories of ghosts. After all, you’re an American boy and an American boy can hardly survive in an American world looking over his shoulder. It’s just impractical.”

At the center of the lake, where everything seemed equidistantly alien, the water lost the rusty red tinge it had near the shallower edges. The pontoon slapped lightly along in the mild crests and troughs. Jeremiah knitted his brows together while he stared out over the distance.

“And that’s why,” Jeremiah said, his hand sweeping across the bow. “That’s why your mother was so apprehensive about buying a house by the lake. Ghosts.” He reached into his pocket for two cigars and offered one to Han. “Smoke?” he asked.

“No thanks.”

Jeremiah lit up.

“I’ve got all Lyn’s stories locked away in my head. There’s one about a school girl hanging herself in a garden.”

“I’ll pass on that one.”

“I would too.” Jeremiah puffed and left silky trails etched in the air. “I take it she’s never told you these things.”

“She has.”

“I see,” Jeremiah said, ashing his cigar casually with a few light taps. They scattered and floated as crumbs into Han’s face. “The stories are part of you. I know they were part of me at some point.” The smoke played off Jeremiah’s frame, licking his eyes. It emanated, gave him an aura.

“It’s funny how different you are from me,” he said.

“Funny? How?”

“You don’t seem like a girl-chaser like I was.” Jeremiah carefully grabbed two fishing poles mounted on the sides. “I was laid by the time I was sixteen...to an older girl no less. When’d you first get laid? Have you been laid?” He handed Han the shorter of the two rods.

“Yes. I was twelve,” Han replied wryly. “She was twenty-three, all out in the world by her lonesome and I had just finished learning how to write in cursive. We made love like chipmunks.” Han made himself laugh on the inside. He hadn’t been laid until he was twenty-something. Jeremiah hitched a weight and a reflective metal tongue to the end of the line, a dangler. He cast. The spool whirred and whizzed till the weight settled with a plop far off the starboard side.

“Really? It must’ve been like probing a mine with a pencil.” Jeremiah jostled his line up and down. The boat was steadily drifting away from the middle.

“I don’t know about you, but I’m well endowed.”

“Vicious lies. Don’t think I haven’t seen your thing before.” Jeremiah turned to Han and pointed an accusing finger at his crotch. “You’re not extraordinarily gifted in that regard. I saw that little sprout as soon as you came out of your mother.” The boat bobbed, feeling out young premature ebbs. Han lowered his head. He glowered.

“So Han, here’s a question for you.”

“Yeah?” Han replied, grudgingly.

“Why are you down here?”

“I didn’t want to spend my life passing you like a kidney stone.”

“You should try forgetting,” Jeremiah said as he paced along the edge of the boat. The big pads of his feet scuffled back and forth. Jeremiah had Han acutely pegged. Jeremiah rolled his thick bare shoulders. His neck ruffled. He was a bear, standing resolute on his platform. In the interim, Han found only wisps of words passing across his lips. Half-syllables

hung from the roof of his mouth. They were only form, no substance.

“You’re wondering, ‘Would he do it again if he could take it back?’” Jeremiah arched over and scratched the small of his back. A thin film of sweat glistened between his shoulder blades. Looking over the water, he narrowed his eyes and sighed. Wetness tapered off the bridge of his nose.

Han’s lunch tray was a mound of disarray. A Twinkie wrapper sat at the bottom of an empty bowl with a few crushed peas at the bottom. An empty carton of chocolate milk lay on its side, its straw bent at the elbow. Han swirled these little shreds of trash with the stains and made a colorful gumbo. His mother sat beside him. She forked her way through her meal in punctuated stabs, eating only in the side of her mouth, her right cheek sticking out.

Jeremiah sat on the other side. With his broad shoulders armored in a starchy white coat, he was an imposing figure to the nine-year-old Han. He seemed barely able to fit into it and, to Han’s knowledge, seemed too burly to be a doctor. On the other hand, his mom fit her nurse uniform quite well. She was slender, curvy, and composed.

“Isn’t it sad learning is always after the fact?” Lyn asked.

“That’s a stupid observation,” Jeremiah replied, ripping off a chunk from a roll with his teeth.

“Why?” Lyn’s hands were placed at the table’s edge.

“It’s outside your control. Why care about something completely out of your influence?” Jeremiah had a way of making everything feel cold.

“I can still be sad about it.”

“Sure, but it’s about as useful as being sad about gravity or the sky.” Jeremiah shrugged his shoulders.

“Maybe I’m sad about those things too.”

A quiet wind passed between them.

Jeremiah laughed. “It’s a pity you’ve got a painfully romantic understanding of the world.”

Han took his straw and twirled it in the mess he’d made. He slumped his head into his hand, resting his cheek in his palm.

“You cheated on me,” Lyn whispered fiercely, spat the words at him. She leaned forward to keep Han from overhearing. “You embarrassed me.” But Han had pretty good ears.

Han secreted a fist against his gut, held it tightly against his hip. It dug into him like a dull thorn. He tore into himself with his knuckles as he turned his wrists back and forth.

“Yes,” Jeremiah said with a firm certitude. The response had oomph to it, as did Han’s fist as it drilled into Jeremiah’s temple. The timing was perfect. Han’s punch had the mechanics and rotation of a textbook golf swing. As Jeremiah was turning his head, Han struck him flat in the cheek with a wet smack. His father stumbled backwards on his heels for a moment. Then he went over, his ankles the last thing in sight.

“Okay!” Jeremiah shouted from overboard, panting as he treaded water. “Okay! I deserved that one. I deserved it.” He paddled with both his arms while he tried to shake off the water from his eyes. Han’s hand flared up like a torch. The dullness began to subside as the shock of impact shivered through his bones.

“You’re a pretty convincing salesman I guess,” Jeremiah said as he grasped the side railing. Han knelt at the edge and extended his hand.

“Twenty years. We haven’t spoken in twenty years. You come down here trying to get me to support a contract proposal. I show you my boat, my little pride and joy,” his father said. His voice dipped a bit as if it was one of the few things he could regard with dignity anymore. “Hell of a salesman you are.” He swatted away Han’s arm. Han’s chest heaved.

“Listen, Jeremiah...” The words felt like gravel in his throat. He choked them back. As he sat there, frozen on his knees, he could feel his lungs rise and deflate with the crests and troughs of the lake. He was in sync for a few moments. Han

**KARTIKA 🐦 REVIEW**

ISSUE TWO, SPRING 2008

shut his eyes, staring only at the back of his eyelids burned red by sunlight. He trembled and for a few moments unlearned the onion-like layers of emotional security he had collected since childhood. They wafted off him like solar flares, and at his core, he stood exposed.

"I'm wet. My face feels like it's on fire. I'd appreciate it if you'd just say whatever it is you got to say," Jeremiah said, forcing Han back to earth.

"I've been holding on to a lot of things," he admitted grudgingly.

"No kidding," Jeremiah said as he pulled himself back on board with a slight groan. "Next time I stop by your place remind me to bring my baggage with me too."

"Hey, don't come back at me with talk like that." Han took a firm step forward. "You left your fair share of baggage on my shoulders."

Jeremiah's backhand was swift and brutal, landing across Han's lower jaw. Face-first, Han hit the deck. He panted hard, grinding his teeth together and gnashing. Rolling onto his side, he managed to pull himself to one knee though the lake spun and laughed around him. With a crack, another backhand landed between his ear and his jaw-line.

Jeremiah shouted, "Who the hell do you think you are? Coming down here with all this rage?" Han swung himself onto his heels and drove his arm home into Jeremiah's belly. His thighs and calves screamed as he threw himself against Jeremiah's torso. Han measured embarrassment in bruises. He was going to show Jeremiah the debt.

He groped blindly at Jeremiah's naked upper torso, hoping to find a good chunk of flesh to grab him and slam him against the deck by. Their mouths were muffled as their arms blundered across and into one another, interlocking but twisted.

"Fuck you!" Han shouted. He knocked Jeremiah down, half-pinning him.

Jeremiah, patient but inflamed, maneuvered his feet against Han's pelvis. In one swift horse kick, he sent his son vaulting through the air. Han sailed wide-eyed, shocked by the latent energies in his old man. When he landed flat on his back, he couldn't utter a breath. Deflated and flapping like a tired flag, his lungs had been pounded into submission. The wind blew through him and cold clustered around his flesh like platelets to a wound.

"Are we even?" Han asked, panting. His arms were limp and spread out.

"Not yet, kiddo." With his thick corded fingers Jeremiah pulled Han up by his throat. His full white teeth shone in Han's eyes. His massive hulking skull shed sweat and water. His grip was taut, secure, stretched, and steady. Han's vision began to blur. Jeremiah's eyes welled up.

"You have no killer instinct."

Han's throat tightened, and his vision began to double and triple. He saw rips in everything. The fabric of the air and the water seemed to be tearing apart. Splitting open, the world was full of open wounds and lasting sores. Jeremiah's hand tightened but something didn't seem right. Jeremiah's hand quivered and, for a blink, became a translucent blue. Han found himself plunged headfirst, submerged. The motion had been a blur, too quick to observe and too extreme to register. A pressure pinched him in the back of the neck. Jeremiah had him in a full nelson. They were sinking.

Tangled together, they sank fast. They drifted through an increasing absence of light. Han kicked, clenched, and pulled. He twisted at the waist and thrashed his head from side to side but Jeremiah's grip was solid. Han's bubbles left him, flying from his nostrils and sailing from between his lips. He convulsed from hips to arms and his body threw spasms.

Jeremiah had Han's entire body locked up. They sank in a straight line, swift as heavy, dense matter. The sun flittered away. At the bottom of the lake, deep in the center, there existed a vacuum. Han wasn't sure he wasn't already belly-up. His glazed eyes registered a bright blue luminescence as he and Jeremiah plummeted toward the lake floor. When their

**KARTIKA 🐦 REVIEW**

ISSUE TWO, SPRING 2008

bodies hit the bottom, a nebulous cloud of dirt kicked up and obscured everything.

Han's vision dissolved. He hadn't known pitch dark in a long time.

"The water ghost is a vengeance ghost," Han's mother explained. They were walking alongside Lake Michigan on a warm afternoon. His mom was slim in her youth and early married life, but then had filled out a little more, especially after the divorce. She kept wearing her pants higher and higher. Her waistline went far above the hips, splitting the belly in half horizontally. Han wondered if his mother would find someone else before her pants enveloped her entire upper torso. Suddenly conscious of his surroundings, he racked his mind to ascertain a time or place. The situation was familiar. He had been eighteen at the time.

"It's an old story grandma used to tell us to keep us from going off toward the rocky shore near our home," Lyn went on. "Some believed it more than others, but everyone thought it was true." They moved to the right side to make room for bikers passing on their left. Han recognized he was reliving a memory, one of many along Lakeshore Drive where he consoled Lyn by listening to her myths. That was not good enough. He moved to break from the walk, but his legs were set in their motions. He tried to pry his lips open, but found them comfortably closed. His mind was present, but his body was unresponsive.

"A girl who had her heart broken by her great love drowned herself in the ocean, out by the cliffs our parents told us to stay away from," Lyn explained, flickering her grey eyes over Lake Michigan. Her pace slowed and she crossed her arms, making her appear even more stout and immobile. Han's body slowed too and stood beside her. Ahead of them, a few high-school kids played basketball on one of the many granite courts periodically dotting the path.

"She was so bitter her spirit came to inhabit the cliffs, and she became a vengeance ghost." Lyn lowered her head, her shoulder-length hair swayed. "Grandma told all of us that if we swam there, the ghost would drag us down to the bottom and drown us. But she would never stop. She could never stop

**KARTIKA 🐦 REVIEW**

ISSUE TWO, SPRING 2008

because what she wanted she could never have.” Lyn’s round, brown face scrunched together.

“The water ghost could never understand. That’s what I thought the problem was,” she said.

Han’s head filled with a kind of thought-steam. Ideas bubbled to the forefront of his brain and his temples felt heavy. An old gem was being unearthed. Sediment was being brushed clear. He wanted to reach out to his mother and tell her things would be all right, but aside from being unable to do this, realized that was a naïve and pointless thought. They were each mired.

This was the moment though. This was a moment of immense quietude. Lyn avoided talking about *it*. She sucked in a breath full of the sometimes-toxic and sometimes-tender Chicago air and resumed walking. Han’s body lagged behind. His head moved to watch his mom pace off on her own with her hands held behind her. They’d only read about *it*, but Han couldn’t remember what *it* was. All he could cobble together was a whisper about what Jeremiah had done to himself. In Han’s absence, Jeremiah lost himself. He said goodbye.

The waves swelled. Their foamy white crests frothed against the rocks. Han’s body resumed walking, far behind Lyn but still within eyesight, though a small shade of a figure. Han’s mind awakened like an ancient machine. Rusty pistons began gyrating, throwing off old webs and dust, quickly feeding power to other parts that had been forgotten but could never atrophy. Gears clicked, chains moved, and steam piped into everything.

Han and Lyn had changed their phone numbers and moved around so many times since the divorce that even mutual friends had no clue where to call them. As had been understood by Han’s intellectual half, Jeremiah was dead. He thought of Jeremiah being disbursed in bytes and bits. The realization though, the truth of his life, hit him like a slow, imperceptible poison creeping through his nerves, quietly trickling into thoughts both conscious and peripheral. The digital death, the intellectual death, was first.

“Ignore me for twenty years.” Jeremiah’s voiced knifed into Han’s brain. “You ripped my heart out.”

Han opened his eyes. Dirt crusted around his eyes. The canopy of the pontoon greeted him. He rolled to his side. His eyes shrank into small beads as he attempted to orient himself. He could see the dock and the edge of the lake rising.

Jeremiah sighed, his frame sinking. “But I can understand, to a degree. I wronged her I guess. It started with a doctor trying to get a poor nurse her green card. Maybe I was playing behind the eight ball.”

Han’s throat was sore. He felt like he had vomited the entire contents of his torso. He pressed the pads of his fingers deep into his ribs to make sure he still had his organs.

“Maybe,” Jeremiah said as they approached shore. “When you’re older, you’ll, at the very least, understand why I’m the way I am.” The face of the lake burned under a speckled veil of the lit asses of fireflies.

“After all,” he said in his thin boom of a voice, “you’re me.”

Han’s fingers froze, as did his eyes.

“You don’t know much about women, and you don’t know much about what it is to be in love or to be a couple,” Jeremiah said. “Is that right?” He cut the motor to half speed and the pontoon slowed to a putting trot.

“No,” Han conceded. “I don’t.” Jeremiah’s tactics seemed didactic and twisted, his methods too obscured to discern. Han noted the familiar cloudiness.

“I was hungry,” he admitted. “Hungry then and there. I sort of threw away what was meaningful to me. Once I lost it I knew it. Loneliness festered in me like a bad ulcer.” Jeremiah pushed out a breath. Han took it to be a long sigh. He didn’t know Jeremiah was capable of such a thing. “Am I sorry for how crummy these past twenty years have been? Yeah, I’m sorry for that.”

“I wasn’t asking for an apology.”

“Well now you have one.” The engines shut down and the boat eased over to the dock, riding on inertia’s last push. “Sorry for tangling you up.”

The pontoon drifted into dock as Jeremiah readied the ropes. He tied thick knots to two posts and secured *Prestige*. Han stood up, looking over the lake before stepping onto dock and walking onto shore. The soles of his feet pressed against the mud’s familiar cool. Jeremiah’s apology rattled in his head, an apology that now tinkered with his mind, tickled his brain. The words had spidery fingers. They crept along the back of his head. Han turned around to see Jeremiah still on the boat, standing on the deck, watching him.

“Are you coming back?” Han asked as he headed for his clothing draped over the branches. His jaw clenched.

“Yeah, give me a second.” The sun sank steadily behind him; Han thought he saw Jeremiah smile but wasn’t sure. Han backpedaled toward the path’s entrance and gathered his things. He picked up the shirt he had hung from the lower branches, the socks he had rolled up, the loafers he had set in the mud. He collected all his belongings and cradled them in his arms as Jeremiah shut down the engines and left the boat in dock. Together they went up the path, Han with Jeremiah in tow.

“I’ll let you in on a secret,” Jeremiah said as they hiked. “One of the most disappointing realizations is finding out there’s no audience to your life. It’s one of the sadder truths.” He seemed to mutter inaudibly to himself for a few seconds. “After you and Lyn, I realized with no one watching there was little reason to keep going.”

Han wanted to be angry. He wanted to say something, scream something, but the negative energy only further stifled him. He thought at length about Jeremiah’s words as they walked in silence, rustling through stray branches. When they neared the exit, Han spoke with a grave and level tone, “Jeremiah, you need ghosts—an audience.”

“Yeah,” Jeremiah said in his low grumbling voice. “I used to believe secrets were seeds. I think I might’ve been wrong.” He

**KARTIKA 🐦 REVIEW**

ISSUE TWO, SPRING 2008

chuckled to himself even as he wheezed faintly. “There’s a piece of advice, Han. If you’re holding something inside and you’re waiting for some kind of payoff, well, you’re mistaken.”

Han paused mid-step with his foot just hovering over a gnarly tree root tangled in the dirt. Without looking Jeremiah in the eye, Han acknowledged him by nodding his head.

“Don’t worry, pops. I’m not like you.” Han pushed forward, smiling. “Well, not like that at least.” He emerged from the path with his head ducked and turned around, holding his breath, now ready to explain what kind of damage they had done to each other. His nostrils flared. The path was there. Jeremiah was not.

