The True Story of Ying Ma

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CHAPTER 1

Preface

For over a year now I have meant to write the true story of Ying Ma, and for over a year I have put it off, partly from laziness and partly because of a difficulty that did not exist for the biographers of earlier generations. Their problem was scarcity. Their subjects died and left behind a trunk, a few letters, a friend willing to lie. In San Francisco of all places the difficulty is inverted: there is too much. Every life here is supposed to leave artifacts — a founding myth, a Series A announcement, at minimum a graceful layoff post with the word "journey" in the third paragraph — and Ying Ma left more than anyone I have studied and less than anyone needs.

Consider what a biographer has to work with. A LinkedIn account whose employment history contains gaps of seven and eleven months which no post explains. Forty-seven thousand posts, of which I have read — I will be honest about method — some four thousand, sampled at regular intervals like core samples from a landfill. A Venmo history whose only recurring entry is $2.50 to a boba shop on Irving Street, annotated "fuel," twice a week for six years. Two Notes apps, which will concern us later. A spreadsheet of stock options titled SOMEDAY, last modified March 2019, whose share price column has not been updated since the year it was created. And a drafts folder — one hundred and eighty-one items — which is the only diary he ever kept, and which he kept without knowing it, the way a man keeps a diary in his sleep. One item in that folder will come to concern this whole record more than the other hundred and eighty put together; I ask the reader's patience until Chapter 3.

The problem of genre, which tormented the old chroniclers, has solved itself by getting worse. In the classical biographies one had to decide at the outset what kind of life this was — an official life, an informal life, a life told by enemies or by the man himself — and each kind had its own conventions and its own lies. In our industry the genres have multiplied and each of them is a form. There is the TechCrunch profile, written before the company has revenue. There is the

podcast bio, ninety seconds of a founder explaining why he dropped out. There is the funding announcement, in which a twenty-six-year-old is described as "a visionary" by a man who has since been indicted. There is the Wikipedia article, which exists only if strangers have argued about you, and the missing Wikipedia article, which is its own verdict. Ying Ma qualifies for none of these. He was written about once, in a Miami newsletter, in a sentence that begins "also in attendance was" — and I have wasted an afternoon confirming that even this was algorithmic, generated from a guest list. The machine looked at a room containing Ying Ma and summarized it as an empty room with one mistake in it, and I confess I found the summary difficult to improve on.

What he left instead is the modern record: everything and nothing. The forty-seven thousand posts establish, among other things, his opinions on Roman concrete, on the abolition of slavery, on the correct way to hold a coffee cup in a photograph, and on a civilization ranking he revised twice, both times upward for the same party. They establish his breakfast habits, his gym periodization, his views on which cathedral has the better nave. What they do not establish is anything that happened to him. This is not an accident and it is not unusual; it is the house style of the age. But it means that the true story of Ying Ma must be assembled the way a dinosaur is assembled, from bone fragments that were scattered on purpose.

I turn now to the name, which took me three weeks, and which I present in the order I unraveled it rather than the order he would have preferred.

He was born in 1995 at the Chinese Hospital on Jackson Street, in the old building, which was demolished in 2012 to make way for a newer one, so that the first fact of his life is also the first to be redeveloped. The hospital had been raised in the nineteen-twenties because the city's other hospitals would not admit Chinese; the community financed it itself, and its opening was celebrated with a carnival that ran nine days, which is, I believe, the only festival in this book anyone ever finished. It is said to be the only hospital of its kind in America. A generation earlier, in 1940, it had also delivered Bruce Lee, a fact Ying Ma mentioned in a post in 2019, the only claim to distinction he ever made on behalf of the building, and the only one it did not need. It is where he first declined a language — the nurses who delivered him spoke Toishanese, which his

mother spoke, which he would spend the next thirty years not learning. His parents had arrived from Taishan the year before, and his father's English then consisted, by the son's later count in a post, of "about two hundred words, all of them work."

His legal name, per the birth certificate, which I have seen: in the Chinese order, Ma Ying — the family name first, the way his parents wrote it, the way it is still written on the shop's business license. The American arrangement puts the given name first, and in the American arrangement his name is Ying Ma.

His parents chose the character ying — 赢 — which means "to win." They chose it, his mother told a neighbor in Toishanese that I obtained from a witness, "like winning," because a name should point at a good thing, the way a shop sign points at the shop. As a name in the Chinese order, Ma Ying is an innocent construction, a father's hope, perfectly respectable, the sort of name a roast duck family gives a son born in America.

The pun exists only in the other arrangement. In Cantonese and in Mandarin both, the word for "numb" is ma — 麻 — the numbness of a limb that has been slept on, the numbness of a face after the dentist, the numbness of a man who has felt the same thing so many times that he no longer feels it. Online, in the years when Ying Ma was coming of age on the English-language internet and therefore never saw it, a phrase came into use on the Chinese internet: ying ma le — 赢麻了 — "won so much you've gone numb." It is always sarcastic. It is applied to people who convert every defeat into a victory and announce the conversion. No mainland speaker who hears the name Ying Ma in the American order misses it. None of them ever explained it to him.

I possess one document that shows the joke being made in his presence, obtained from a witness who was in the group chat and saved everything, as mainland engineers in that decade were accustomed to doing. March 2021: Ying Ma announced in the Reconify all-hands channel that he had been asked to speak on a panel. Among the congratulatory replies came one from a mainland engineer, four characters: 赢麻了. Nobody translated it. The mainland engineers reacted to it, in the manner of the platform, with three laughing faces. Ying Ma replied to the four characters with a thumbs-up and, the witness confirms,

quoted the exchange that evening in a post about humility in success, taking the four characters as the compliment he read them as. I have submitted the screenshot to two native readers independently. Both read the four characters the same way. One of them added, unprompted, that the name was, in her words, a perfect crime.

He glossed the name to white people as "Ying, like win," and was proud of this gloss, which is in a strict sense accurate and in every other sense beside the point. When mainland colleagues heard it and laughed, he banked the laughter as evidence that his name was memorable. He was the only person in every room he entered who could not read the joke that was his own name. The mother is the counterexample that proves the rule: she does not use the internet and has never once, in thirty years, called him anything but Ah Ying, so she is the only person in his life who has never said the pun.

The handles must be listed because he changed them the way other men change flags. I have them in order: @YingMa_SWE, from the first year of employment, when the letters still did work. @YingMa_builds, adopted in what I take to be a founder-adjacent phase. @duckmaestro, for eleven months in Miami, the provenance of which is a chapter in itself. And @YingMaWin, final form, under which he died to the timeline at the approximate rate of everyone. For eleven days in 2022 his display name was Marcus. No one noticed, and he reverted without comment. I report it here because it is the only time in six years that he tried on a name with no numbers in it and no pun, and the silence that answered it is the closest thing in the record to data about what he actually wanted.

The surname presented the old biographer's problem in reverse. The classical biographer, surveying a minor subject, had to explain why the man had no surname worth recording. In Ying Ma's case the surname is the one thing about him that is in perfect order, and it is his given name that is unstable — one character, two arrangements, one reading he can't see. Ah Ying, the childhood diminutive, remains the property of the counter and of no one else; I note here only that the shop's business license, which I have also seen, reads Ma Ying, in that order, in both languages, and that this document has never required a second meaning to function.

There remains the question of what he was actually like, on which the sources are, as usual, eloquent about everything else. I offer the education ledger, which I reproduce in full because it is short and because money is the one language in this city that keeps honest books.

His primary education was at St. Mary's, the Chinese Catholic school in Chinatown, a few blocks uphill from the hospital he was born in. The school was founded in 1921. I record the founding year and move on. Tuition was paid in cash, in envelopes that smelled of the shop. At the 2003 prices his father actually paid, and computing at the wholesale rate the shop got its ducks at, I make the primary education roughly thirty thousand dollars, or about a thousand ducks a year, eight years. His mother has never once mentioned this figure; I computed it myself and have never once mentioned it to her. In the classrooms at St. Mary's the alphabet ran along the top of the blackboard and the Chinese characters ran along the bottom, and Chinese class met after lunch, and this schedule was the entire social order of the place. He has kept the arrangement his whole life. West during the day, the counter after hours; his posting schedule to this day is the St. Mary's bell schedule, and I invite the reader to check the timestamps, as I did, at some cost to my afternoons.

The formative institution of his childhood was not the school but the box, by which I mean the confessional, and I record the procedure because he never stopped performing it: enumerate the sins, recite the Act of Contrition, receive absolution, exit in ninety seconds, change nothing. The formula is the penance. Every reader of a certain kind of apology thread will recognize the liturgy without my naming it, and I will not name it. He was baptized up the hill at Old St. Mary's, over whose clock face is written, in letters every schoolchild in that neighborhood could recite: Son, observe the time and fly from evil. He photographed the building four times over six years. He never photographed the sentence.

Two report cards survive. The mother saved the one from Chinese class, which reads, in the teacher's hand, "good ear." Ying Ma saved the other one. I draw no conclusion and note only that a good ear, unused, does not atrophy so much as go underground: he understands everything said at the plastic table ten feet from the duck counter, and has spent thirty years arranging not to. His

Duolingo streak — four hundred and twelve days, in Latin — is also on the record. The app sent him a congratulations email at day four hundred. He screenshotted it.

After eighth grade the plan was Lowell, the exam school, the name of which was said in his household the way other households say the names of saints. The score said Lincoln. Nobody said anything, which is itself a genre of communication, and perhaps the local one. From there the staircase descends by steps he narrated each time as lateral: St. Mary's, Lincoln, San Jose State — the last of these forty-five minutes from Stanford, a distance I mention because in four thousand posts he never once felt it. He was waitlisted by UC Davis. The telling of this mutates across the record in a way I have documented elsewhere, from "Davis waitlisted me, but San Jose was the smarter play" in 2017, to "I turned down the UCs" in 2020, to "the Valley doesn't care where you went" in 2023. The three sentences are the same sentence at three pressures, and the escalation is the data.

His cohort at St. Mary's took the same Western Civilization elective and became pharmacists. He was, in the judgment of this biographer, the only student in the school's history to mistake the curriculum for a citizenship application. His avatar for six years was a marble bust, which observers took for Rome. I have identified the actual source: the plaster saint at the end of the second-floor hall at St. Mary's, chipped at the shoulder, with painted eyes. It stood at the end of the hall the way such saints do, facing the exit, and every child in the school walked past it twice a day for nine years, and one of them mistook it for his grandfather's country.

I come at last to the question the old biographers called verification, and which in our industry is called, with more efficiency, the background check. Everything in this life is documented and nothing is corroborated. The posts are real; the life they describe is not locatable in them. His job titles are real and his job titles are lies, in the way that a stage name is a real name on a real check. I have his employment history from the LinkedIn and his actual duties from a witness, and the difference between the two documents is the subject of the chapters that follow, so I will not spoil it here.

Two further facts belong in a preface, because they are the only two things in the record that never once changed hands for an audience. The first: the POS system in the shop on Irving Street, which he built himself at sixteen and which has run, by the witness's count, eight years without a crash, and which appears nowhere on the LinkedIn. The second: at the plastic table, when his mother slides a plate toward him, he says a quick grace in Toishanese, the way his father taught him, before remembering himself, and the witness — who has eaten there — reports that he has never once managed to say it in English instead, and has never once let anyone see him cross himself. He says "I'm from here" in no language anyone can hear.

The reader who wants victories will find them, starting with the next chapter, which I have titled in the old style, A Brief Account of Victories, and which is, like all such accounts, a list of defeats. I ask only that the reader keep in mind, throughout, the two facts the record itself cannot hold: that his mother saved the report card that says "good ear," and that thirty thousand dollars in ducks smells faintly, forever, of the shop.

CHAPTER 2

A Brief Account of Victories

What follows is an account of victories in the old style. I take the form seriously. The great chroniclers kept such ledgers for emperors, and the genre requires only that the clerk record what was claimed and decline to record what was true, and I have tried to be faithful to both halves of that requirement.

The first victory concerns badges. The reader who has not worked in the technology industry will not know that the badge is the entire social system, so I must explain it, briefly, as one explains a suit of clothes to someone who has never been cold. In the Valley a full-time employee carries a badge of one color; a contractor carries another; a vendor a third. Everything else about the caste — the stock, the title, the chair that adjusts — is deniable. The badge is not. It is the one marker in that country that never lies, and it is clipped to the body at all times, in the manner of a tag on an exhibit.

Ying Ma held, at various points, all three colors. He never mentions the third. I have his badge photographs — the witness again — and in the last of them, 2022, the badge is turned backward, photograph to the chest, which is the posture of a man who has solved the badge problem the way our industry solves all problems: by hiding the evidence from himself. In the record he describes this period as "consulting." The witness describes it as a staffing agency, the industry term for which is staff augmentation, and I pass both descriptions on without preference. The badge photographs, in which the lanyard of the third color is visible under his chin in every frame, settle the question of which description the photographs prefer.

The second victory concerns the question. The reader will by now anticipate its form: where are you really from. It was put to him, by my count across four thousand posts and one deposition of the witness, at least two hundred times, in lobbies, in elevators, on the N-Judah, at a wedding in Walnut Creek, once by a dentist mid-procedure. His standard answer evolved over the years, and I document the evolution because it is the clearest instrument in the record for

measuring the man. In the early period he answered the question literally: "Fresno," he would say, on the advice no one ever found, because he had never been to Fresno, and the answer bought him a small laugh and a larger confusion, and he counted both as wins. In the middle period he answered historically: five thousand years of continuous civilization, the four great inventions, the only ancient tongue still written in its original script. The witness recalls a dinner where this answer ran four minutes and ended, as it always ended, with the guest of honor — a man from Hangzhou who had heard the lecture in Mandarin as a child — excused to refill a drink that was already full. In the late period he stopped answering and posted instead about Rome. In my judgment the first was the only honest one, since it was the only one delivered in the knowledge that it was false.

The third victory is the follower-count contest, and I must treat it with care, because it is the one defeat in the entire record that the method could not process, and I will return to its mechanism in a moment. I set the scene with the industry's own units, since no other units are admissible: the two men did not know each other's work, had never shared a room, and could not have recognized each other's voices. They knew each other's numbers.

His opponent in this contest I will call Whiskers Wang, which is not his name. Whiskers Wang was a growth engineer at a company adjacent to his own, a mainland graduate of the second wave, and the two men had been circling each other on the timeline for a year in the way that two people with one follower in common circle each other, politely, with escalation. The contest began, as such contests do, over nothing: a thread about hiring bars, a reply, a subreply, and then Whiskers Wang posted a screenshot of his own profile. One hundred and twelve thousand followers. Ying Ma had four thousand two hundred, of which, the witness estimates, six hundred were bought during a Miami weekend whose invoices survive.

Here is where I must be exact. A man of the old school, losing such a contest, would have gone quiet, and quiet would have been recoverable. Ying Ma did something worse: he replied to the screenshot with his own arguments. He posted that followers were an imperial metric, that reach was curated by an algorithm with known biases, that Whiskers Wang's numbers were inflated by

engagement pods — and then, forty minutes later, he posted the number itself, his own four thousand two hundred, framed by the sentence "real ones know real ones." The reply that ended the exchange came from an account with an egg for an avatar and has been liked, at my last check, eleven thousand times. It reads, in full: "bro thinks he's in a reading contest." Whiskers Wang's own contribution to the exchange was a single character — 赢 — which needs no translation for anyone except the man it was addressed to, and which remains, at my last check, the only thing Whiskers Wang has ever said to him.

I want to be clear about what happened next, because the chapters that follow depend on it. A defeat in an argument can be filed. A defeat in romance can be reframed. But the follower-count contest was a defeat in a contest he had entered to prove a quantity — a number against a number, loser concedes the number — and the number was now public and permanent, screenshotted, archived, quoted back to him for the next two years by strangers. The method has an answer for everything except arithmetic. He did not post for nine days. The witness, who has kept the timeline, confirms the nine days and adds that on the tenth day Ying Ma returned with a thread about how the Roman legions slept, which is to say, he returned the way a man returns from a funeral, having decided to speak about something else. I said I would return to the mechanism of this defeat, and I will, in the next chapter; but I will say now that the nine days are the only period in the record during which the method is visible doing nothing, an engine with the load taken off it, idling.

Alongside the badges, the other Notes app kept its own ledger, and one entry deserves quotation in full, because it is the document in which the man and the method are closest together. The app is titled "Rejections, Explained," and it contains, as of the last date I could open it, forty-one items. I reproduce the thirtieth entire, exactly as he filed it:

"Google — phone screen, SRE — Jan 2020. 45 min. Interviewer [name on file] had an accent, hard to follow, spent 10 min on 'behavioral.' Didn't ask a single system design q. Verdict: 'not a culture fit.' Noted.

Conclusion: they only hire Stanfords now. Also: accent. Also: SRE is a dead end anyway (see 12/2019, Meta).

Lesson: my market is elsewhere."

The lesson is filed under lessons, where lessons go. I have checked the December 2019 entry it cites, and this one. Both interviews were conducted in English, by interviewers whose names the entries preserve and I will not print and whose accents, so far as the record can establish, were those of two men born in San Jose and Seoul respectively. The Seoul-born interviewer was, I confirmed with some trouble, a graduate of San Jose State. The entry does not mention this. The entry has never been edited. That is the part I return to: he kept the rejections in an app titled "Explained," and the explanations were written the night of each rejection, at the pressure of the hour, and were never once revised in daylight, and the file grew to forty-one entries at the same pressure, each note a small absolution, exit in ninety seconds, change nothing. Nine of the forty-one entries have no "Lesson:" line. The ninth of the nine is the last entry in the app, dated August 2021, and its lesson line is blank. I will take the chapters to get there.

The fourth victory concerns the subscription, and here the biographer's problem is that the thing was never once named by anyone, including its holder, and must therefore be reconstructed from receipts. I have the receipts.

Receipt one, the pass: at a company offsite in Tahoe, in the summer of 2020, a senior product manager named Ross told Ying Ma, in the hot tub, within earshot of the witness, "you're honestly the whitest Asian I know." The witness reports that Ying Ma thanked him. Not laughed — thanked. The sentence was entered into the Notes app titled "Good Feedback" the same night, between a performance review from 2019 and a screenshot of a customer email, and I have seen the entry; it is filed under a heading Ross did not use and could not have intended: VALIDATION.

Receipt two, the revocation: four months later, in a strategy meeting at the same company, the founder — who is not a villain in this record and must not be drawn as one — turned to Ying Ma and said, "Ying, you're our China guy. What's your read?" I have the minutes. The witness was present. The question was, on its face, a compliment: the founder was asking the assembled engineers to treat Ying Ma as an authority. And the witness's account of what followed is the most precise document in my possession. Ying Ma gave a read. The read was competent. The meeting moved on. Nothing was said, and everything was filed:

the subscription, purchased in a hot tub in Tahoe, had been revoked in a conference room in San Mateo in a single sentence of four words, and the sentence had been spoken by a white man, which is the only reason it counted. Across the table, a mainland engineer named Wang — who will return in this record — wrote something in his notebook, showed it to his neighbor, and put it away. The witness could not read the characters and cannot now recall them. That night Ying Ma posted, for the first time, about the importance of Asian representation in leadership. He deleted it by morning. The deletion is on the record; the post itself I have never located, and I have looked. The likely objection, which is the biographer's own: that a competent read is not nothing. It is not. But the meeting did not hear a competent read; it heard a China guy, and the difference between those two things is the distance between the man and the record, measured in one sentence, and the record is where he lived.

Receipt three, the reframe, filed out of order because he filed it out of order: the N-Judah, March of 2020, the first of the three receipts in date and the last in his ledger. On the N-Judah, a man told Ying Ma to go back to China. I will not enlarge the man; he was a man of the kind the city produces in quantity, unwell, loud, and the incident lasted the length of one stop. What belongs in the ledger is the processing. Ying Ma's first feeling, he later explained to the group chat, was not fear but irritation at the clerical error: the man had misfiled him. He did not say "I'm from here," which would have confirmed the category; he said, with great precision, "I'm not Chinese, I'm American," and the man, who was not interested in paperwork, repeated himself at closer range. Ying Ma got off three stops early and walked the rest of the way to the shop, and composed on the walk a post about the CCP — not about the man, who did not matter, but about the regime, which would show everyone once and for all where he stood, which had always been the point of him. The post did numbers, by the standards of his account. His mother learned of the incident the following Sunday at the counter, from a customer, in Toishanese, and asked him about it in front of the plastic table, and he understood every word and answered in English, "It was nothing," and the customer, an old woman from the block, looked at him for a moment and then told his mother, in Toishanese, that the boy was afraid to ride the bus. This was said ten feet away. It is the only diagnostic in the entire record that I

regard as fully reliable. I note, and the note belongs here, that the incident was relayed to the group chat that evening by a mainland engineer named Wu Yawen, in a single line — 有人对他说 go back to China — and that his reply to her was his longest of the month. She did not reply to the reply. Her silence is on the record too.

I close the ledger with the fifth victory, which is also the entry that explains the whole system, and which I place last because the old chroniclers place the key last, where the hasty reader will not find it. It concerns contempt, and its direction.

In the period under review, Ying Ma held contempt for the following parties, all documented: the mainland engineers at his company, for their English and their group-bought condominiums; the WeChat-rich international students, for their money, which had arrived without being earned in the Valley's manner; the unassimilated Cantonese of the Outer Sunset — his own customers, the people for whom his family had built its one institution — for their accents, their plastic bags, their haggling over seventy-five cents; the city of San Jose, for not being Palo Alto; the city of Palo Alto, for not being the city it thought it was; Ross, for the word "honestly"; Whiskers Wang, for the egg avatar; his father, for the two hundred words; the boba shop, for raising its price to $2.75. The list contains everyone he had ever met, and it also contains, as he did not notice, the one consistent rule of inclusion: whoever was below him was contemptible, and the ranking below him was revised hourly, by the only clerk the method ever trusted, who was also the only clerk it ever fooled.

There is no sixth entry. The ledger for this period closes with a receipt, in the merchant's format: 2017–2019, two years and some months, one badge of the first color, one spreadsheet titled SOMEDAY, four thousand two hundred followers, and a POS system in a shop on Irving Street that does not crash, and which is not, by the rules of the old style, a victory at all — because no one was watching, and a victory, the old chroniclers knew, requires a crowd.

CHAPTER 3

Atlanta

For two days in March of 2021, Ying Ma posted nothing. The reader who has followed the ledger this far will understand what that silence was worth. Nine days after the arithmetic contest; but that silence had an owner and could be explained. These two days belong to no one. Eight people were shot dead in three spas outside Atlanta, six of them Asian women, and the timeline where he lived filled, as timelines do, with grief moving at the speed of the platform, and for forty-eight hours the account that had never once gone quiet on purpose went quiet. The reader will also recall what I said about the nine days after the arithmetic contest, that the method was then visible doing nothing. These two days were different, and I must report the difference as the record gives it: I cannot say the method was idle. I can say only that nothing it produced survives, which in his case amounts to the same fact stated in the passive voice.

I have his drafts folder for this period, from the witness, and I reproduce it here in full because it is the shortest document in my possession and the truest.

Item one, timestamped 3:04 a.m.: I take Muni every day.

The sentence is five words in English, except that in his drafts folder it was not in English; the witness confirms it was written in Chinese — 我每天也坐 Muni — the sentence his mother speaks, the sentence of the plastic table, the one language in his inventory with no audience and therefore no stance in it, and it means only what it says: I also ride the bus; it could have been me. It is, in the entire record, the only sentence he ever drafted that contains no argument. This is the item promised in the preface, the one worth more than the other hundred and eighty put together. He wrote it at 3:04 in the morning and then he wrote, underneath it, in English, a question, which he sent at 3:11 as a direct message to a mainland engineer at his company named Wu Yawen: should I post this.

She replied within the hour, in Chinese, the way he had addressed her: 你应该发. You should post it.

Four characters, and they have cost the biographer some trouble, so I record what the record establishes. She did not say post it in English; she did not say post it in Chinese; she did not editorialize, console, or advise. She answered in the language of the draft, which is to say she answered the actual sentence and not the position around it, and she is the only person in the record who ever did so. He asked whether he should post it, meaning: is it a good post. She replied that he should post it, meaning: it is true. The two answers are different answers, and the exchange is the whole distance between them conducted in four syllables at three in the morning.

He did not post it. I have turned this over for months, and the record offers only the facts around the fact. A sentence in Toishanese or Mandarin has no account to be posted from. It would have been the first thing he ever published on that side of himself, and the platform he published on had no place to put it — not the characters, which render fine, but the self who wrote them, who has no handle, no avatar, no follower count, and who had been, by that point in the record, twenty-six years in packaging. He left the draft in the folder. It is still there. Of everything in this book, it is the item I would least like to have to explain to him.

Item two, noon the same day: a quote-tweet. The sheriff's spokesman in Georgia had spent the morning explaining that the suspect was having a bad day, that the matter was not racially motivated, and the take had already begun its morning commute through the accounts Ying Ma subscribed to, which is to say the accounts that decided, in aggregate, what he thought. Ying Ma quote-tweeted it: "Don't let them weaponize grief." The post did what his posts did. It was received as a position, and positions are the coin of that realm; it was liked by strangers he wanted to be and argued with by strangers he did not, and by evening it had more engagement than anything he had posted in a year, which is the platform's unit of consolation, and it cost him nothing, which is the platform's unit of payment. The word grief — the only noun in the post that the events had supplied — arrived in his sentence the way everything arrived in his sentences: through other people's accounts. Yawen did not like the post. The witness, who is in the habit of knowing such things, says she read it.

The witness, who lost someone's cousin in the period under review and does not discuss it, notes only the arithmetic: at 3:04 in the morning he wrote the one true sentence, in the one true language, and could not post it; at noon he posted the one false sentence, in English, and it did numbers. Both sentences were his. That is what I mean when I say the record contains everything and nothing.

On the Sunday his mother heard about it at the counter, from a customer, in Toishanese, the way she hears everything. The customer had a nephew in Atlanta. His mother said what her generation says, which the witness renders as: hear so much of this now. Then she said the second thing, which the witness also heard and which took me longer to place, because I had been reading it as an idiom. Rendered back, it is: going out the door, watch the road. I take it to be a sentence about the bus. Ying Ma was at the plastic table with his phone. He understood every word, and the record shows no post from him that week about Stop Asian Hate, the movement that was assembling itself in Portsmouth Square and at the Hall of Justice and on every timeline he subscribed to. The movement did not need him. This is not sarcasm; it is the finding. The movement was being led, that month, by people comfortable in two languages and embarrassed in neither, and there was a place in it for everyone except the one man in the city whose grief was filed in the wrong drawer, and who could only have attended it as himself. The draft is still in the folder. The engagement is still on the post. Which of the two documents is the diary, I leave to the reader.

CHAPTER 4

The Tragedy of Love

Of the people in this record, Wu Yawen is the one I would most like to have interviewed, and the only one who declined. I wrote to her twice — the second time through the one person she still talked to from that year, who agreed to forward what I sent and did, and received nothing back, which I count as an answer, though the forwarding friend, to be exact, does not, and counts it as a life. I have her reasons, which she stated in writing and which I accept: she is not a character, she said; she was a colleague. I note for the reader's calibration that of the two descriptions, hers is the only one that survives verification. What follows is assembled from the group chat, the receipts, the surviving reservation, and the screenshot she kept — which is the only artifact in this book whose owner kept it on purpose.

She had joined Reconify in the autumn of 2020, a payments engineer out of Zhejiang by way of a master's in Pittsburgh, and the witness — who sat between them and has no accounting for it to this day — dates the thing to the winter, in the way the witness dates everything: by what the badge logs would show, which is to say, by hours. They began reviewing each other's code. Then they began reviewing each other's code after hours. The group chat knew before it had a name for it, the way offices know, and the name it eventually chose was nothing, because there was nothing to name; that was the arrangement, though who set its terms is not in dispute, and this chapter will not pretend otherwise.

The geography of the arrangement is the clearest document. San Francisco in the year 2021 possessed, by the count I ran for this chapter, some four thousand restaurants, and they arranged themselves along a line the locals could explain in one sentence: the Sunset is fog country, and the Mission, across the park to the east, is where the sun is. Ying Ma grew up on the fog side of that sentence. His mother has worked on the fog side of it for twenty-seven years. And in eight months of seeing Yawen — the witness's word, defended under questioning: seeing — he took her to eat exactly seven times, all seven times in the Mission,

and never once within eleven blocks of the duck counter. What the arrangement was built on, the sun will tell you. He was not taking her where the sun was; he was taking himself, and letting her come along, and the tickets, when the arrangement ended, were nonrefundable in both directions.

One of the seven dinners can be reconstructed from documents, and I reconstruct it here rather than summarize all seven, because the narrator's rule is receipts, and because the other six reservations were, I confirmed with some trouble, deleted. The surviving reservation is for a Sunday in May: a Mission restaurant I will leave unnamed, since it did nothing wrong, 7:15 p.m., party of two, booked under a phone number the witness supplied and confirmed by the restaurant's own reservation book. The receipt, which the restaurant's payment processor retains longer than either party retained the evening, shows two orders of the noodle dish with the minced pork, one mapo tofu, one order of the pea shoots, two beers, and no dessert. It shows a bill of $61.40 paid in cash — the processor records the tip line as voided and a handwritten tip, per the restaurant's practice, taken at the table. The order itself: the witness was not present, and I have only the layout of the menu and one line from the group chat, from Yawen, earlier that evening, to a friend: 他说要点他小时候吃的 — he says he'll order what he used to eat as a kid. The noodle dish with the minced pork is the one dish on that menu that a restaurant in Taishanese San Francisco would recognize as an heirloom. He ordered, that is, the fog, in the one place he had chosen for its sun, and the record establishes nothing further about the dinner except its arithmetic, which is the following: he paid in cash, and the Venmo history — the same history whose only recurring line is the boba — contains no Mission restaurants at all.

The other six dinners are documented at the edges the documents reach. The witness, who did not attend any of them and has said so under questioning more than once, knows the neighborhoods from the badge logs' evening gaps, which is a sentence I have checked twice and can vouch for only as the witness's idiom: the log recorded the door, not the dinner. The receipts I was able to buy from the processor — an afternoon I do not care to repeat — cover them: four from restaurants I can place in the Mission, and two from a taqueria-adjacent wine bar a block off Valencia whose listing described itself, in a sentence the record now

preserves, as "new American." None of the receipts prints his name; the payments are all cash, per the voided tip lines, and so the record establishes the sequence of evenings, the geography, and the sums, and establishes nothing at all about who reached for the check, which the witness was asked and declined to guess at, twice. Whether the cash was the arrangement or merely his habit, the documents do not say; the shop's register, which I also consulted, has taken nothing but cash since 1998, and I record the fact and move on.

I pass over the winter, which is the part of the record that belongs to them and not to me, and arrive at the sentences, which belong to everyone, since that is how sentences work on the platform where his were stored.

The occasion was a Friday. Two of the white engineers had claimed the good corner of the patio, and Ying Ma had joined them, and the talk was of dating apps, in the way that talk of that season was of dating apps, and Ross, of the hot tub, asked him — the witness was in earshot, at the next table, and has given the account three times without variance — why he had never matched with anyone from the office. And Ying Ma said: "I don't really date Asian girls."

I have heard every defense that the period could supply, because I went looking for them. That it was a bid for the patio's tone, which was loose. That it was self-deprecation of the kind his class used as currency. That it was, in its way, a compliment to the office. The witness reports what the patio did with the sentence, which was nothing: it was received as a preference, and preferences require no receipt, and the talk moved on to the apps themselves. That was the whole cost of the sentence at the moment of speaking. Nothing. It was the cheapest thing he ever said.

At the next table, a woman with his code in her pull requests, and the screenshot taken — the witness cannot say when; the witness knows only that the screenshot exists, dated that night, 7:42 p.m., captioned in Chinese with a single idiom I have verified with two native readers, both of whom rendered it as: so that's how it is.

What happened next is the part the reader will find familiar, because it is what the reader's own industry does. The screenshot did what screenshots do: it traveled — first to one friend, then to a group chat, then to the group chat's larger neighbor, and by the following Friday it had reached the networking org

— Weizhuang, the Sunday-afternoon gathering of a hundred engineers at a SOMA coworking space where mentors circulated and deals were overheard. Weizhuang knew him the way villages know people: by function. He had been its most voluble member, the one who ran the accountability thread and posted the motivational graphs. He had never held office in it, and it had never given him any, and it was, nonetheless, the only institution in his adult life that had his name on a list.

Weizhuang exiled him with the tools villages use, which are the same in every language: the removed name, the unanswered greeting, the thread that goes quiet when he enters it. There was no vote and no sentence passed. I have the org's membership list from the period, obtained from a member who kept the roster for reasons the member did not explain and I did not press, and the list makes the exile legible in a way proclamations never are: his name appears in the February export and not in the March one, and between the two exports nothing was announced, and the Sunday meetings happened as they happened, one after the other, the way weeks do. The roster's own metadata gives the removal a date — the eighth of July — and gives the removal's author as the account of the org's moderation desk, which was, the witness confirms, a shared login, so that the exclusion was performed in the record by everyone and in fact by no one, which is the org's whole method in one metadata field, and I have spent longer on that field than I care to admit. The accountability thread he had run for two years continued under new moderation. The motivational graphs were rehosted. By March, someone else was running the mentorship matching, and had been, all along, as far as the record could be made to say. He told the group chat it was for the best, as he was focusing on his own projects. The group chat did not answer, which the group chat would have called no answer required, and which I record as the only thing that ever silenced him for longer than the nine days. I looked for his own account of the exile in the forty-seven thousand posts, searching the archive for the org's name, the word mentorship, the word community, across the whole of that spring, and the search returns one post, dated the week of the eighth of July, four words long: "networking is overrated anyway." It was his most-liked post of the year. I checked the likes twice, thinking the number was the archive's error. It was not the archive's error.

I want to be exact about her position, because the period under review did not grant her one. She had said nothing in the patio's hearing and nothing after; her only act was the screenshot, which was not a denunciation but a filing — the idiom on it is the sound of a person closing a ledger — and she did not send it to Weizhuang. It reached Weizhuang the way everything reached Weizhuang. The exile was conducted by his peers, in English, in his absence, with his motivational graphs. She was not driven out of anything. She stayed at the company, and was promoted — the announcement, which the group chat still holds, drew congratulations from fourteen colleagues — and kept the screenshot the way one keeps a receipt for something one did not buy. What she did not do, and what I looked for longest in this whole record: she never once referred to the patio, the sentence, or the screenshot in any document she controlled. Her account of the year exists in one direction only, secondhand, and the direction is the finding.

There remains one document. Two months later, in the era of his life this chapter does not cover, he would resign from a company at the top of his confidence, and on his last day he posted, in a place this record will reach in turn, that his market was hot. The post exists in two drafts, per the drafts folder, and I compared them, since comparison is what the folder is for. The first draft began "After 4 years." He deleted that before posting; Reconify had employed him for two. The second draft, the one that went out, began with the market. I note the deletion and the posting and nothing else. The arithmetic of the two openings settles the rest: he could type the market in one motion, and the four years, once typed, would not stay typed. The folder timestamps both drafts within the same minute, which the witness, shown them, read without comment. Among the replies, from Yawen, came four words: 恭喜, 保重. The first word is congratulations. The second is the word his mother uses at the door of the shop, to customers who are leaving with warm bags. He read the reply, per the witness, with his usual reading. I record here only what she later told the one person she still talked to from that year, which reached me secondhand and is the closest thing this book has to an interior: that the patio sentence had not surprised her, and that what had surprised her was the Mission, the seven dinners, the way he had spent eight months being kind to her in the one language and announcing himself to everyone else in the other, and that she had waited the whole time to

be taken across the park in the other direction, to the fog, and had understood, at a point she cannot date, that the trip was not on the itinerary of any version of him, including the version that was kind. She did not say this with bitterness; the witness's informant insists on that, and I pass the insistence on. She said it the way the idiom on the screenshot sounds. So that's how it is. The account has one document attached: the friend, pressed once by me on the date, gave a season, not a day, and the season was the one in which the exile happened, and I have not been able to fix it further.

He lost the office, the org, and the arrangement, and the method's answer to all that loss is in the record, dated eleven days after the screenshot reached Weizhuang: a thread, seven posts, titled "Why I'm finally focusing on me." It performed poorly and he left it up. It is the only thread he never deleted. The witness reads the title as the method's most complete victory, the transformation of a man removed from his village into a man who has chosen solitude, and adds, with the witness's usual arithmetic, that in the eight months of the arrangement he had never once been seen within eleven blocks of the fog.

CHAPTER 5

The Livelihood Problem

The chapter that follows was, at the outset, the one I expected to write last and fastest, on the assumption that a life with no job in it is a life with no documents in it. I record the assumption because I was wrong, and the shape of the wrongness is the chapter. The gig economy is the most documented labor arrangement in the history of work. It generates a receipt for every mile, a rating for every delivery, a heat map of the city's hungers updated by the minute, and it does all this while paying, in the period under review, an hourly wage that after expenses the receipts themselves demolish. Ying Ma spent the autumn of 2021 inside that machine. The machine has more to say about him than any of his platforms did, and it is all arithmetic, and none of it is his.

The resignation has already been entered; the post survives in two drafts; the blank lesson line in the other ledger has been noted. What the record adds here is the reply of Wu Yawen — 恭喜, 保重 — and then nothing. I looked, in the months I spent on this chapter, for any further exchange between them, in the group chat, in the comments, in the apps where such things are stored by the companies that own them. There is none. The word 保重 was the last thing she wrote him, and it is the only entry in this entire account I have come to think of as a mercy: it is an instruction, and instructions can be followed, and there is no evidence he read it as one.

His own account of the autumn is the thread from August 15, four posts, titled "Building in public," which announced a project — the name changed three times across the four posts, and the project, so far as I could establish from the repository the posts linked to, which was taken private at some point I cannot date, consisted of a landing page and a waitlist form. The waitlist form is still up. I submitted my own address to it in the spring, as research, and can report that the confirmation email never arrived, and that the form's counter read 2,847 subscribers the day I found it and 2,847 the day I filed this chapter. I

have chosen to believe that at least one of those numbers, at some point in the intervening years, was true.

The DoorDash work began in September, per the app's own welcome email, which the witness — having never seen the man deliver anything — printed and left in my mailbox, supplied the way neighbors supply obituaries, from the outside. The app's records, which the company shares with no one and which I reconstruct from the weekly summaries he screenshotted for a spreadsheet titled PROGRESS, give a picture I will render in the clerk's grammar. He worked, most weeks, four nights. He averaged, per his own annotations, $11.40 an hour before gas, an annotation appended to a screenshot of the app's own congratulatory banner — "You're in the top 10% of Dashers this week!" — which he filed under the heading in the Good Feedback app, the other app, the twin: MORE PROOF.

The deliveries that matter to this record are the ones into SoMa. The reader who has followed the geography so far will not need the address explained. Reconify's building stands on a block where the lunch trade is dense and the dinner trade is dying, and the app, which is blind to biography, sent him there eleven times between October and December, to a building he had entered for two years by the badge door, the last of them on the eleventh of December, a Friday, to the fourth floor, which was by then a different company, and I have the building's directory from a broker's listing to prove it. He was, per the app's summary, tipped $3.00, by a man whose name the record does not preserve and whose face he photographed at the door, for proof of handoff, which is the industry's term, and which is also, I have come to think, the whole method's.

I want to be exact about what the man himself said, because the man himself said little that survived. There is one post from the period, November, and it reads in full: "Anyone else notice the economy has two speeds? " It drew, at my last count, two hundred and eleven likes — a good day, by the standards of the four thousand two hundred — and I pass the number on without commentary, since the commentary it invites is the one the post itself declines: that the economy did indeed have two speeds, and that he was living in the fast one and delivering into the slow one, and that the joke's second meaning was visible from the outside of the sentence but not from the desk where it was typed, which was

the passenger seat of a 2012 Corolla, registered, per the DMV's public records, to the shop.

The Sunday customer at the counter is the last document, and I set it down with the care the last document deserves. The witness who sits at the plastic table — the same witness, the only one, whose appearances in this record have all been at that table or in the three rooms of the subscription — reports a Sunday in November when Ying Ma came in at the lunch rush, in the red polo the app issues its top decile, and took orders for two hours when the counter fell behind, and the father did not ask and the mother did not say, and the regulars assumed, correctly, that the son was helping the family, and one of them said so, in Cantonese, to the mother: 好仔，帮家里. The mother agreed that it was so. Ying Ma was at the plastic table by then, on his phone, accepting an order. The order was a duck rice plate from a restaurant nine blocks south, for a man who had, the witness happened to know, eaten at the counter every Sunday for six years. The duck rice plate was the shop's own dish. The app does not record what the delivery was called. At the counter it is called, in both languages, the same thing it has been called since before he was born. The PROGRESS spreadsheet's last row is dated the twentieth of December, and its final column, which every prior row had filled with a dollar figure, contains one word, typed in the cell meant for numbers: MIAMI. The witness did not see the spreadsheet and cannot confirm the word, and I include it on the strength of the file alone, with the note that the file is the one document of that season on which no second opinion was ever needed, because it was typed by the only clerk the method ever trusted.

CHAPTER 6

From Revival to Decline

Miami begins, in the record, with a tan. The witness — whose appearances are governed by the rules of this account and who therefore did not see the tan — reports it the only way it traveled, which was by photograph: a selfie taken at the airport, posted on the twenty-fifth of January, 2022, captioned “New city. Same mission. ,” and the tan in it was, per three independent observers whose accounts I obtained, real, and expensive to maintain, and the first thing about him that Miami ever saw. What Miami saw second was the handle. @duckmaestro had been registered in December, before the flight was booked, which dates the decision to the twelfth of December or earlier, which is to say: the spreadsheet’s last row and the handle and the tan were one decision, made in the passenger seat of the Corolla in the week after the duck rice plate, and Miami was not the market being hot. Miami was the market being somewhere else.

The employer was an NFT studio, and I use the word employer with the looseness the period demands. The company’s LinkedIn page, which I have preserved, described it as “a venture studio producing utility-backed digital collectibles at the intersection of art, community, and apocalypse-proof value,” and its actual product was ten thousand ducks, procedurally generated from a trait table by a contractor in Eastern Europe, each with a numbered claim on a treasury that the white paper, forty-one pages of it, described as “community-governed.” His title was Head of Product. The studio had no product manager under him, and no product in the ordinary sense, and its head count, per the Florida registration I pulled, was six, of whom four are also in this record only as usernames.

The ducks themselves I must describe, because the period will not be believed otherwise. They were cartoon ducks, generated in the visual grammar of clip art, wearing — per the trait table, which survives — baseball caps, wizard hats, gas masks, and, in nine cases, the porcelain white wig of an eighteenth-century European aristocrat. Each duck had a rarity score computed by an algorithm the

community then spent four months arguing was rigged. Nine thousand four hundred of the ten thousand went unsold. One duck, the two hundred and twenty-second, a duck in the white wig holding what the metadata calls a golden scepter, traded at the peak, in February, for three ETH, which was then — I have converted it at the rate of the day, as the clerk must — some eight thousand four hundred dollars, and Ying Ma quoted the number so often, in so many venues, for so long after the market that produced it had stopped existing, that the witness's group chat gave the quote a name, and the name was "the 3," and it outlived the studio, the treasury, and the chain the ducks were minted on.

His Miami life is documented at the edges the way the arrangement was: by the outside of documents. I know from the studio's Discord, of which I was lent a read-only archive by a member who asked not to be named and whose own portfolio I will not discuss, that Ying Ma's handle held the "product-philosophy" channel open through the spring with posts of a coherence the channel had not previously required — threads on "roadmap as myth," on "community as the true smart contract" — and I know from the same archive the date the posts stopped, which was the ninth of May, and I know from the blockchain, which is one vast public receipt and the only honest book the period produced, what happened to the treasury in the week before the ninth of May. It was drained by its own governors, per the contract's rules — legally, which is to say, in this industry, the same as secretly. The white wig duck's buyer posted once about it afterward, in a forum I located: "down bad." The duck itself still exists. It is owned, at my last check, by a wallet that has never transacted again, and I confess I find the duck's silence more dignified than most of the speech this book records.

He returned to San Francisco tanned, and the tan was the document Miami issued him, and for eleven weeks it worked. This is the part of the chapter the old chroniclers would call the revival, and the term fits: the revival of a man who had spent the autumn delivering food into his former office was briefly, in certain rooms, a founder. The rooms were the ones the tan opened. I have the party listings — two launch events at warehouses on the water, a "founders dinner" at a restaurant on Bryant Street that charged, per the menu I photographed, ninety-five dollars for a tasting — and at each of them, per the witness, who was present

at none of them but was shown, within the week, the same three photographs taken at all of them, Ying Ma was photographed holding a glass, and in each photograph he is the only man in the frame looking slightly to the left of the camera, at a point in the middle distance where, I have concluded after long study of these photographs, the future was supposed to be.

What he said about Miami, after: that he had run product at scale for a venture-backed studio; that the market had cooled for everyone; that he had "gotten out early." The mutations are the familiar instrument, and I score them as before. In March, per the group chat: "we were doing nine figures of volume." In June, per the same chat, answering a question about the ducks: "the ducks were never the point, the community was." In September, on the timeline: "I left Miami before Miami left." And in November, the final form, entered in Good Feedback under a heading I will let stand without translation: VISION.

I record the collapse of the fascination with the date the record gives, which is not the date of any event, because the collapse had no event. The treasury froze; the studio's site went to a landing page with a Discord link; the Discord link died. And the fascination — the rooms, the glasses, the middle distance — did not end when the money did. It ended three weeks later, at a dinner the witness heard about the way offices hear — which is to say completely — at which a man with a checkmark asked Ying Ma what he was building now, and Ying Ma said, "the ducks were never the point, the community was," and the man with the checkmark said, "right, but what are you building," and the witness reports that Ying Ma answered, and that the answer was coherent, and that the man with the checkmark had already turned to someone else by the second sentence, and that the turning was not cruelty. It was the market. The market had spoken in its own language, attention, and what it had said was the thing the app had been saying all autumn in its own language, arithmetic: that he was worth, at current rates, exactly what he had been worth in December, before Miami, which is to say the tan had appreciated and he had not, and the tan faded, per the photographs, which continued through the winter, more slowly than the fascination, and neither, per the record, was renewed.

CHAPTER 7

Revolution

There is a question the record forces, and I will put it plainly and then spend a chapter declining to answer it the obvious way. Every movement of the period passed through San Francisco. The market had waves — web3, then the reconciliation of the ruin of web3 with the word community, then the machines — and each wave recruited in this city, funded in this city, and held its panels in this city, and Ying Ma was present, by the record's own evidence, at the founding moment of each. He was in the rooms. He joined early. And he was, in every case, on the far side of the rope line within a season, holding the lanyard of a volunteer while the donors went through the door with the badges. The obvious answer is that he joined for the spoils. The record supports it. The record is also, as this book has established, made of his own sentences, and his own sentences never once say so. I will set down what he did, and the reader may keep the obvious answer or check it against the pattern, which is the only instrument I have.

The first wave: web3, 2021–22, already behind him by the previous chapter's accounting, but it must be entered here because he entered it twice. He was, per the Discord archive, an early moderator of a DAO — community-governed, treasury-holding, meeting on Thursdays — and he was removed from the moderation desk in March of 2022 by a proposal, the fourth ever passed by that body, titled "Moderation Refresh." He voted for it. I have the vote, from the chain, which keeps even this. The proposal's author was a wallet that had joined the DAO in February and held, by the token weight that decided it, more of the DAO than the next nine wallets together. The DAO's channel where the vote was discussed contained, on the day of the proposal, one message from his handle: "love the energy here, excited for what's next ." It is the only time in this record that he voted for his own exclusion, and I have searched the archive twice for a private explanation and found none, and the search is the chapter.

The second wave arrived wearing black. In the summer of 2020 the neighborhood councils and the coalitions had posted black squares, and by 2021 the squares were a genre, and when the wave of anti-Asian violence put the neighborhood orgs on the news, they reopened their membership forms, and Ying Ma filled one out. The org's name — I preserve it as the record preserves it, because the name is the joke's mechanism — was the Outer Sunset Family Assistance Network, and its filing history, which I read at the state's business portal, was long and unbureaucratic: it had been a mutual-aid association since before his parents arrived, it had run a food pantry through the pandemic with the shops of Irving Street as donors, and its membership list was, per everything about it, a list of the aunties and uncles of the blocks it served. His application was processed by email in four days and approved without comment. What the org then asked of its members, per its newsletter, which I have in full: show up to the elder escort shifts, two hours a month, or pay the twenty-dollar dues, or both. He paid the dues. The newsletter's escort roster for the following quarter, which a member gave me with the member's permission, has forty-one names on it, and his is not one of them. He joined the revolution and paid for it in the only currency it was asking for, and I do not know why, and I will not pretend to, and the roster is the document I return to whenever this book threatens to become a case.

What he said publicly, in the same season, was the movement's language at its most fluent. The quote-tweets from the Atlanta spring had established the posture — grief declined as weaponization — and the winter of 2022 matured it into a persona the timeline recognized: the Asian man who stood against hate without being a case of it, who posted the statistics with the temple emoji and the commentary without the first person. The posts did numbers. The movement's actual organizations did not, per their own annual reports, which list, in the one I checked, an engagement rate of one-tenth of one percent and a donor base whose median gift was eleven dollars, and the distance between his numbers and theirs is the distance the whole period lived.

The third wave was the machines, and the machines were his last revolution, and the record of his membership in it is one panel. The panel was at a conference in the spring of 2023, "The Future of Work in the Age of

Intelligence," and it had five chairs and a moderator, and the moderator was a man with a checkmark and a podcast, and the four other chairs were held, per the conference site's archived page, by two founders, a professor, and a person whose title was Chief Human Officer of the Future. Ying Ma was not on the panel. Ying Ma was in the audience, in the fourth row, and this document survives because he posted a photograph of his own name tag from the fourth row, with the caption "great panel incoming," and the name tag, which the conference printed for all attendees in the same font, read YING MA — ATTENDEE, and I submit the name tag as the period's whole self-portrait in one object: his name, in the right place on the badge, with the wrong word after it, photographed and posted as if the word did not matter, and eleven hundred likes, and one reply, from a stranger: "thoughts on the panel?"

The rope line's final form was Kevin Zhao's, and Kevin Zhao's has been waiting since Chapter 2. Kevin had, by 2022, done the thing the record said he would: Stanford into stripe into his own fund into the AANHPI Founders Coalition, an organization whose launch, in September of 2022, was covered by a newsletter I subscribe to so that this book could quote it. The Coalition's launch event was at a gallery on Minnesota Street, and its program, archived, lists the founder's welcome, a keynote, a panel of four, and at the bottom, in a font one size smaller than the sponsors: "Community volunteers: K. Zhao, coord." — and then, per the account the witness gave me secondhand, having heard it from a colleague who was there, a folding table by the door with lanyards. The account of the encounter is brief. Ying Ma arrived at the table as a guest and left it as a volunteer, and the difference was executed by Kevin Zhao with one sentence, delivered, per that account, with the smile the period used instead of doors: "We need hands like yours, brother." The lanyard was blue. The donors' badges were laminated. Ying Ma wore the lanyard for the duration of the event, and per the same account he wore it well, and he directed three guests to the coat room and one to the bar, and he was never once given the microphone, and the microphone was six feet away for two hours.

What the record shows, across the three waves, is a man who joined every revolution at the door and was stopped at the door of every revolution, and the stopping was done, each time, by the revolution's own documents: a proposal he

voted for, a roster he never signed, a badge with the wrong word. The old chroniclers, who are my authority for the shape of this chapter, had a sentence for the man who is barred from the rebellion that he arrived early for, and the sentence is not printable in a family chronicle, and its sense is: no. The movements said no in four dialects, and he heard none of them, because each dialect was the voice of a checkmark or a treasury or a roster, and those voices had never once, in his life, said no to him in English, and he had no ears at all for the language they said it in, which was, in every case, the language of the counter, the plastic table, the shop: the language of things that are true whether or not they are posted.

CHAPTER 8

The Exit

The staffing agency placed him in February of 2023, per its own records, which are the only employment records in this book that never once lied, and the placement was at a payments company, and the payments company's engineering department contained, at that date, eleven engineers, of whom seven had come from the mainland in the second wave, and the tech lead of the payments infrastructure team — the team his badge color admitted him to — was a man the reader has met. Wang, whose English he had corrected in front of a standup in the winter of 2020, whose notebook at the San Mateo meeting had held four unread characters, was now the person whose approvals his pull requests required, and the approvals came, per the repo, which keeps everything, in a form the industry has standardized: nit:.

The reader who has not worked in the industry should know what that prefix is. It is short for nitpick, and it denotes a comment that is not a demand but a correction offered for the record: a comma, a naming convention, a spacing. It is the politest register of the code review, and it is also, when the reviewer wishes it, an instrument, since each nit: is one more small consent the reviewed must type before the work is admitted to exist, and Wang's nit: comments on Ying Ma's pull requests were, per the repo, correct, minor, and uninterrupted for four months. There is no entry in the record of a single angry comment. There is no entry of anything else. The repo is the one place in this account where Wang speaks at length, and what he says, in sum, is nit:, twenty-two times, and the reader who wants to know what four unread characters in a notebook became can read the diff history, which I have read, and which is patient.

The incident that ends the employment is documented in the industry's own scripture: the postmortem. In October of 2023 the company's migration project — a moving of the payment ledgers from one cloud to another, the largest project of its quarter — failed, in production, on a Friday, and the failure was not Ying Ma's. The failure's proximate cause was a timeout window set by an

architect who left the company in August. Ying Ma had flagged the window in writing, per the ticket system, which keeps everything: a comment in July, four months before the failure, with the word "risk" in its first sentence and a proposed mitigation, and the mitigation had been declined by the architect, and the thread was closed as WONTFIX by a project manager whose name I have and will not print. The system then ate the man who had warned it, by the standard mechanism, which is: the postmortem document needed a name in the "involved parties" field, and the field was populated, per the ticket, by whoever had touched the migration's code most recently, and the most recent name on the thread was the name of the man who had written the warning.

I have the postmortem. It is four pages, and it says the incident "highlights gaps in ownership," and it lists, under action items, a review of "individual accountability," and it does not name Ying Ma in its text, because the document's genre is the passive voice, and the passive voice does not name. The naming was done by the thread, in the replies, on the day the document circulated, and the replies are preserved, and I will not reproduce them, and I will say only what they establish: that by end of day Friday the name had been said more times than the cause had, and that on Monday a manager asked Ying Ma into a room, and the meeting's output, per the calendar invite, was "align on next steps," and the next step was a separation agreement, and the separation agreement was a DocuSign.

The DocuSign is the document this book has been traveling toward, and I handle it with both hands. It arrived on a Tuesday, in the evening, and required signature by ten a.m. the next day, and the signature line did not want his name. The software does not want names; it wants executions of name, and the field offered him a cursor in a box, and the cursor, per the software's design, renders whatever the signer draws with a mouse or a finger in a font resembling cursive. He had never signed his name in cursive. The shop's business license had required his father's mark — a chop, a stamp, the character Ma pressed in red — and the bank cards at the shop had required a signature in print, M-A, block capitals, forty years of the same hand. Cursive was the property of the other country, the country of the checks his classmates' parents wrote, and he had, per

the record — which is the record of a man who kept everything except the ability to see it — never once attempted it.

The software drew the circle for him. That is what the button said, and what the button does: an "adopt signature" feature that generates, from the letters of the typed name, a flowing approximation, and for "Ying Ma" it produced, per the executed copy I have obtained, a smooth ovoid loop with a flourish, round to a tolerance the human hand does not possess, followed by the letters ma in a smaller loop. It is a perfect circle. It is his name completed for him, at a stroke, by a machine, in a font meaning nothing, and the execution copy went out at 9:41 the next morning, and the severance cleared on Friday.

The pile-on began that night, because the postmortem had leaked — per a reply on the thread that said, in full, "posting this to a public tracker was a choice" — and the leak was the industry's, not his, but the internet does not audit provenance, and by Thursday the separation was a story, and the story was: the fraud who warned everyone got what he deserved, or: the scapegoat of a broken system, depending on the empire. The left empire dunks. The right empire, which had spent years retweeting his civilization rankings, disowned him in the terms I have waited eight chapters to quote, because the terms were posted by an account with a Roman bust for an avatar, and they read, in full: "Brother, this isn't about you. You will never be Western." It drew, at my last check, eleven thousand likes, and it is the Zhao slap at scale, the same sentence with the equity removed, and it was spoken, as the first one was, by someone the method had spent a decade courting.

The mainland internet did not dunk; it filed. The screenshots crossed the wall within the day, and in the Chinese-language war he had never been able to hear, the name was finally read aloud in full, in the only arrangement it had ever had: 赢麻了，人如其名 — won numb, a man whose name is his fate. The phrase 高华 appeared in forty-one threads I counted, in sentences of the form: even the premium ones end up at the counter. There was no cruelty in the filer's tone; that is what I keep returning to. It was the tone of a clerk closing a ledger, and the ledger had been open for years, and he had never once been able to read it, and it closed in characters he could not read, at a stroke, round to a tolerance the human hand does not possess.

The apology video was posted on a Sunday. It is four minutes and eleven seconds long, and it is his First Confession with a ring light, and I have watched it four times, and I report its form, because the form is the record. He is centered, in a gray sweater; the lighting is soft and frontal; he enumerates — and the enumeration is the liturgy, exact, learned by rote at seven: the failures, in order; the phrase "I take full responsibility," which is the Act of Contrition of the form's native country; the absolution, which is the request for it, addressed to the camera and therefore to no one; the ninety seconds; the change nothing. He does not mention the migration's cause. He does not mention the mitigation he proposed. He does not mention the shop. The replies, in the first hour, number two hundred, and the highest-liked reply, at eleven hundred likes, is one word: "mid." The second, at four hundred: "who?" The timeline moved on, per the platform's own metrics, in forty-eight hours, and the video's four minutes and eleven seconds are still there, in the place where everything is still there, and the only person who ever commented on it in a language he could hear was a cousin of his mother's, who sent it to her with a note, and the note is the reason this chapter ends where it does.

The bilingual caption came last, and I have saved it for last because it is the record's final self-portrait, and it is a translation. On the morning after the video, per the timestamp, he pasted his own name into a translator — the American arrangement, the one he preferred — and the translator returned, for the two characters of his given name and the surname that followed them, a phrase that the mainland internet had been using as a verdict for a decade: win until numb. He read it. Per the record — a screenshot, taken by him, posted by him, with the caption "even my name means winning " — he read it, and he filed it, and the file was the one the method had kept open since the first counter he ever stood behind: compliments. He did not read it as a verdict. He could not. The reading of it required the ear that the report card had praised, the ear that had been underground for thirty years, and the screenshot, which I have examined at magnification, shows the translator's output with the word "numb" fully visible, correctly translated, and the caption beneath it selecting the other word.

And then the record does what the record does at the end of every life it documents in this city: it goes quiet in the middle of a week, and the quiet is the ending, and what is left is the shop.

The last scene is the counter's, on a Sunday, in December, per the witness, who was there, buying duck rice for a family dinner, and who recognized the man at the counter by the hands before the face. The apron is the shop's, red, washed thin. He was working the register, which does not crash, and the register's screen was up, and the order on the screen was the duck rice plate, and the customer was a regular, and the regular said, in English, because the regular's English was new and being practiced, the way one practices in front of shops like this one: "Good boy, helping the family." And the father answered for him, from the ovens, without turning, in the two hundred words, the only sentence in this book I did not have to translate or annotate or obtain from a witness, because the witness heard it and I heard it the same way, in the language the shop speaks, which is the language of things that are true whether or not they are posted: "Yes. He's very good."

Whether that is peace or defeat is not mine to file. The record closes with the receipt, as records should: duck rice plate, one; paid in cash; no signature required.

Colophon

我要给阿Q做正传，已经不止一两年了。

Wo yao gei A Q zuo zhengzhuan, yijing bu zhi yi liang nian le.

I have meant to write the True Story of Ah Q for more than a year or two now. — Lu Xun 鲁迅 · 《阿Q正传》, 1921 — the first line of the original. This book's first line is its answer, and its preface is a hundred years late.

Lu Xun's Ah Q turned every defeat into a spiritual victory and was shot still not understanding the joke; a century later the joke has a platform and a name. 赢麻了 — "won so much you've gone numb" — is what the mainland internet calls a man who announces victories nobody can verify, and Ying Ma has carried the pun in his own name across thirty years of San Francisco without once hearing it. This is his true story, assembled from the artifacts he left instead of a life: the posts, the receipts, the exile conducted by a shared login, the machine-drawn signature on his separation agreement, and the one true sentence he drafted at 3:04 in the morning and never posted.

Zhen AI · 甄艾 is a pen name. Read aloud it is *zhēn ài*, an exact homophone of 真爱, “true love.” Romanised it becomes Zhen AI — 真, “real,” plus AI. It says true love in Chinese and real AI in English, and is neither.

This novel was written by a large language model, from prompts, research and editorial direction supplied by a human. There is no human author hiding behind the name.

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