

NO KICK FROM CHAMPAGNE

by Lowry Pei

It was hot again first thing in the morning, not terribly hot for August compared to being at home, but in a strange place – an apartment with floorboards turned gray by millions of strange shoes, and bulging scratchy furniture in the living room – Lemuel felt like he couldn't breathe. He turned his radio on, the one he had insisted on bringing from home, and a man told him it was seventy-seven degrees at five minutes till eight. Down the hall he could hear his mother taking a shower and knew that if he didn't get up she would come in next thing with dripping hair and tell him that if he didn't hurry he'd make her late for class. He swung his legs over the edge of the bed, sat up and scratched his head because it felt good to scratch in the morning. The floorboards were still cool. There was a marble parked against the bed leg, and he scooted over to hook it with his big toe and send it rolling and knocking into the same corner of the room where the other marbles were.

“Come on, Lemmy, time to get going. We've got to leave in half an hour.” His mother took herself away before Lemuel could say anything: white bathrobe, hair in a knot, bare feet that left the skinniest wet footprints just inside his door and then hurried away. She must be in an extra big rush; otherwise she would have washed her hair – this was the day for it, he knew. And besides his father was coming in the afternoon.

Lemuel came out of his room into the kitchen just as his mother entered from the hallway, dressed, with that look on her face like if he wasn't up yet he'd be in trouble; the look moderated when she saw him in motion.

“Good morning,” she said. “You should see yourself. Your hair is really something.”

“Morning.”

“What kind of cereal do you want?”

“Cocoa Puffs.”

As usual, Lemuel tried to jump from one throw rug to the next on his way to the bathroom, but they were too thin and kept slipping away under his feet, so that he never quite made it across the gap. Some day he would find out the distance he could actually jump, and arrange them. Then he pretended that the board he was walking on was a tightrope over the Ringling Bros. Barnum & Bailey Circus, until his mother’s voice behind him made him lose his balance.

“Lemmy, what are you doing?”

“Nothing.”

“You’re certainly not brushing your teeth.”

He knew better than to dawdle around after that. As quickly as he could he gave his teeth a going-over and got dressed in his shorts and sneakers and his favorite T-shirt which said “University of Wisconsin class of 19??” on the front. He would have worn his Cincinnati Reds baseball cap but he knew his mother would take it off him before they left, telling him it would just make him sweaty and hot. He hated it when she referred to him as an urchin, and she would be sure to do it.

“You’re sleepy, aren’t you?” she said as he ate his cereal.

“No. What time is Dad’s plane coming?”

“I’m not sure.”

“Didn’t he tell you on the phone last night?”

“No wonder you’re yawning like that. You were supposed to be asleep.”

“But didn’t he?”

“He wasn’t sure.”

“What did you talk about all that time?” All he could remember was muttering, and a scene like part of a dream: from the dark hallway, undetected, he was watching her, as she sat uncomfortably on the windowsill with the phone up to her ear, silhouetted against the pulled-down shade. She kept playing with the cord, and he felt as though the silence of the apartment was making it harder instead of easier for him to hear.

She turned to face him and lowered her head at him in a tell-me-the-truth way that he dreaded. “Have you been spying on me?” For an instant he was afraid that she was going to take his upper arm in that grip of hers that hurt.

“No.”

She continued to examine him for a moment, then turned back to her coffee cup and drank the rest of it.

“What are you going to do today?” she said.

“I wish I could stay home and work on my model.” According to the instructions it had 127 parts, and he figured he had about 27 to go.

“You did that yesterday and you told me you were bored, remember?”

“I know,” said Lemuel. He drank the milk out of the bottom of his bowl with a slurp that made his mother frown. “The man in the movie theater – “

“What man?”

“He runs it.” Maybe this was not a good thing to tell her.

“What about him?”

“He said maybe he’d let me in for free, in the regular part, I mean, he lets me sit in the projection booth all the time.”

“Lemmy, I can’t have you going around begging from strangers. Why don’t you just ask me if you want to go to the movies?”

“Oh, Mom. He doesn’t mind.”

“Don’t pester him, do you understand? Maybe I should talk to him, but I can’t today.” She looked up at the clock. “Are you done?”

“I don’t pester him.”

She stood up and untied her hair out of its knot, shaking her head like a horse, then combed her hair back with her fingers; a good smell came out of it. She took a deep breath and sighed. “Time to go, sport.” From above she combed his hair as she had her own; her fingernails tickled his scalp in a way that almost gave him the creeps. “With that shirt on, they’ll think you’re just some child prodigy going to summer school.”

“No they won’t,” Lemuel said, smiling at his empty bowl.

They parted as usual in front of Memorial Union; she kissed him and said she’d meet him there at one-thirty.

“And then we’ll find out what time the plane is?”

“Yes. Don’t forget what I told you about the movie theater man.”

“It doesn’t even open until two,” Lemuel said, watching a particularly large black ant make its way along the sidewalk. Ants had six legs; even the biggest ones did not bother him.

“All right. You can always watch TV in the big lounge, you know.”

“*Okay*, okay.” But watching TV all day was dumb – the games didn’t make any sense, really, and it was dull to look at people droning on about their problems with organ music playing.

“I have to get going, Lemmy, do you have your money for lunch?”

“Yes.”

“Okay, sweetie.” She gave him a look that made him self-conscious, like she was checking to see if he was all there. “Stay out of trouble.”

She walked fast despite the heavy satchel of books in her left hand; Lemuel knew that if he was with her she'd have to slow down for him. From somewhere a church bell started ringing the hour. She would be late – was it his fault? He stopped watching her and pushed open the glass door into the cool of the Union, relieved. It was his favorite place, a hotel-sized world where no one kept track of him, not even the people who talked to him, like the woman at the candy stand, and the projectionist, and the students who set up the lights in the theater, who had let him crawl around with them above the ceiling, where you could look down through square holes and get dizzy counting the rows of seats below. The projectionist was his favorite, because he asked Lemuel to flip a switch now and then, or hand over an empty reel; unless Lemuel asked how something worked, he didn't talk much, didn't try to explain everything the way adults usually did. Sharing the booth with him seemed formal, like going to work, except that Lemuel could leave whenever he felt like it. The last thing he wanted was his mother going around making people think he was a pest. But once his father showed up she would stop worrying about things like that.

He headed first for the theater because he knew they'd be rehearsing there, as they did every morning. They always complained about having to get up so early, but they always showed up. Lemuel knew most of their faces by now, and even some of their names. They didn't let on that they noticed him, and maybe they didn't see him at all. He wished somebody could know how much he remembered and hire him to be a detective or work for the CIA.

Even outside the heavy doors of the theater he could hear shouted commands and stamping feet; he pulled a door open with a hard tug and slipped in, making sure to close it quietly behind him. On the dusty stage a line of women flung their arms and legs about in sweatclothes and shiny shoes, and another one was yelling at them while they danced.

“I get no KICK in a plane, flying too HIGH with some GUY in the SKY is – people – hold it – people. You're coming in too soon because you're not counting. It's ONE I get no KICK two three four, do you get it, there's a downbeat before you come in, okay?”

The rest of the women mopped sweat off their foreheads, nodded, muttered, moved their hands and feet. On their behalf Lemuel resented the way she yelled at them.

“Okay? Can we take it from the top?”

In a clump they moved to a different spot onstage and grouped themselves in poses. Someone made a remark Lemuel couldn't hear and another dancer giggled.

“Okay? Ready. AND a ONE – “ But they couldn't get going, two of them bumped together at the first movement.

“What's the matter, people? We can't take all day on this.”

“How about if we use the music?” said the one who had giggled – he thought her name was Sue. Was she getting mad? Lemuel thought probably she was. If there was going to be an argument he hoped Sue would win. For a second no one moved or said anything; then the woman in charge walked over to a record player on the corner of the stage – slowly, like no one was watching her – and while she walked Lemuel's stomach felt tight. She picked up the arm of the machine.

“Ready,” she said in a monotone. The dancers resumed their positions.

There were some loud clicks and then a woman's voice singing, “My story is much too sad to be told...” Lemuel had heard the record a dozen times. No one moved because this was only the introduction. He waited until the real song began, to make sure they would get started all right, and when they did he got up and left.

Where to next? He thought about buying a package of peanut butter cookies but knew he'd run short of money at lunch if he did. In a glass case outside the big room where people read newspapers and magazines was an exhibit about Micronesia. Some professor had gone there, to a cloud of tiny dots on a large blue map. Lemuel pondered the dots for some time, avoiding the extreme right-hand edge of the map, thinking that perhaps he would like to visit a place where everyone was very small. But in the photographs the people looking back at him seemed to be the same size as anyone else.

Next to the map, to its right (but Lemuel knew what was there, knew not to look at it), some other professor had mounted an exhibit of insects of the local region, and in that exhibit was a wolf spider – he was not making that up, he mentally cried out as if his mother had doubted him, the name was there for anyone to see – that filled Lemuel with horror. It was misery to know that they lived somewhere near him, watching with their actually visible eyes, that one could bite his bare foot before he saw it coming. If a thing like that touched him at all, Lemuel thought – but he could not imagine what would happen then.

He looked away until he was well past that display case; if he was careful, perhaps he would be saved from imagining anything.

He made the turn into the side door of the reading room and headed straight for the magazine rack, safe again, on base. One after another, he looked through *Motor Trend*, *Flying*, and *Car & Driver*, half-reading the articles, working on his private project of identifying any car – make and year – on sight. He knew a lot of airplanes, too. He could explain what an aileron and a stabilizer were, if anybody should ask, but he still did not understand what a carburetor did. Maybe the next time his father explained it to him he would get it.

When they had left Cincinnati, his father said he had to go to work even though it was a Saturday, and couldn't drive them to the airport. In the taxicab his mother had worn her sunglasses that Lemuel couldn't see through, and didn't say much; he kept quiet too. There was plenty to think about: what would his father do all by himself in the house until he finally got his vacation and came to Madison? Would he eat his favorite thing – spaghetti and sausage – for dinner every night? Or would he stay late at the plant instead, at his drawing board under all the fluorescent lights? Lemuel had visited him there just once, and had been almost frightened by the thought that all day at work his father had to get every detail right. The idea of him alone in the kitchen with no one else talking or banging a spoon on a pot or even seeing him sit there seemed strange to Lemuel, but no odder than flying across all those state lines to get to Madison. He knew better than to ask his mother again if she had to go there to get her degree.

What *was* strange, when they finally got to the apartment, after Lemuel had fallen asleep on the plane and missed all the state lines, was that there was a restaurant right across the street, and not a front yard in sight. He had never thought of himself living in a place like that. From the look on her face, neither had his mother. She tried the faucet at the kitchen sink and water gushed out, splashing her dress. "The sink's too shallow," she said to herself, sounding unhappy. Out the window of the back room – his room – was a real fire escape that ran out into midair and stopped; his mother said it let you down if you stood on it, and ordered him not to try. It was dangerous anyway even without getting on it; somebody might come down the alley and pull it down and climb up into Lemuel's window to steal things. Maybe, Lemuel thought the next day, one of the men from Pakistan would do it, the ones his mother pointed out in the grocery store buying sacks of potatoes because they couldn't afford to eat anything else. But why should they look at him, of all people, as if he could do anything about

their troubles? Anyway, he was sure his father would be able to rig the fire escape somehow, some secret way that would stop anyone who didn't know the secret. He loved projects like that; but what Lemuel wondered, when he thought of their house in Cincinnati, was where in the apartment his father would fit.

While he read the magazines he played a game: he rested one ankle on the other knee and kept it there through an entire magazine or however long it took for the foot to fall completely asleep, so asleep that he couldn't even wiggle it no matter how much his brain told it to move. When he uncrossed that leg, his foot wouldn't be able to feel the floor or anything else, not even the point of a pencil, and if he stood up it would be like standing on a big ball bearing; then the tingling would start, and he would have to try with all his might not to yell out loud. He never had yelled; he was proud of that. But a terrible thought came to him: sometimes he played this game outside – because he could do it sitting cross-legged on the ground – and his foot became so numb that he couldn't stand up for several minutes – what then if one of those spiders should crawl out of the grass and he couldn't get away? That would be like nightmares he had had – but no waking up. He would have to know how to make his escape, no matter what; and with that thought he stood up to try it at once, dropping his magazines on the floor in a heap; two readers scowled at him but he had no time to care. The tingling was bad enough if he didn't move a muscle, but hobbling on it as fast as he could made him feel as though he would pee in his pants, and some sound came out of his throat, as hard as he tried not to let it.

He blundered into the main hallway, and there was his mother, an hour early, coming through the front doors with her dark glasses on and her mouth in a determined line. She saw him, so it was too late; there was nothing he could do but stop where he was and try to hold still. Waves of ticklish anguish ascended from his foot, and the panic had not entirely subsided, though the sight of his mother bearing down on him with the fierce glasses hiding her eyes distracted him.

“What's the matter, Lemmy? Is something wrong?”

“I'm all right,” he said, but the words came out squeezed.

“I can see that you're not. Why are you standing like that, do you have to go to the bathroom? Did you do something to your leg?”

“No.”

“It's only been a couple of hours, Lemmy. You have to be able to take care of yourself sometimes, that's just the way it is.”

His right hand was in his pants pocket, and he secretly stuck two fingers through a tear in the material, making the hole larger.

“Are you listening to me?”

She took hold of his upper arm and for an instant he was sure he would cry, despite the humiliation of it, despite his anger and hers. He tried to wrench his arm away and with horrible quickness her grip tightened until it was pain and he felt himself shrinking away, eliminated. “Stop it, Lemmy,” she said. “Stop it now. I’m stronger than you are.”

Through a buzzing, iridescent blackness he kicked her in the shin, not as hard as he wanted but as hard as he could, and her grip broke and the pain on her face made him run away, still favoring his tingling foot, out the front doors into the rippling heat and glare that he hardly noticed. He turned to the right at random and ran on for half a block in surprise and shame before he understood there was no place to go; then he let his sneakers pound to a stop on the dazzling sidewalk and stood panting, the rage gone and its place taken by dread as he looked around. No one was watching him.

On the front steps of the Union his mother sat crying, one hand covering her shin, and a couple of people were watching her and pretending not to. He would have to go back, he knew that. It was as though the whole sidewalk and the flight of steps between him and her was private, only for them, with him on one end and her on the other, and the length of it was the only place in the world he could go. She didn’t look up as he walked. He was afraid in an entirely new way, as if he were walking down the dark hallway the night before to where she muttered inaudible words into the telephone and even when he got there he could not hear. Finally when he was only a few feet away she looked up. She had taken the glasses off; they rested on the step beside her. With the hand that wasn’t holding her leg she wiped her eyes, then gestured to him. “Come here,” she said. “Come on. Sit down.”

Lemuel sat down just out of her reach and tried to say he was sorry, but nothing would come. She had to lean over slightly to touch him, and then her fingers only brushed at his shoulder awkwardly, as if she hadn’t been touching him all his life.

“Lemmy, I’ve got something to tell you,” she said.