

## PYRAMID SCHEMES

*Leland Cheuk*

### 1. Dim Sum

The day my father revealed what he had done, we were scheduled for one of our dim sum lunches. For us, dim sum equaled a progress report on how I was doing in school: first year of pre-law at Columbia.

He asked to meet at his office so we could carpool to the restaurant. The sky over South San Francisco was mottled with chromy clouds that so transfixed me I shot through a red light and into an intersection, screeching to a belated halt. Luckily, it was a Saturday, and there were no moving cars within miles of the many office parks in that area. Easing off the brake, I felt pushed forth as if by a strong wind.

The tower was empty of white-collar workers, but the janitors, doormen, and uniformed building security always worked weekends. The superintendent and I exchanged glances as he ascended a ladder to change a recessed

halogen. He had worked in the building since I was a child. We recognized each other, but had never exchanged a word. I didn't know his name.

I told the thick-necked fellow at the front desk that I was here to see my father – the man whose last name was on the side of the building – Eldridge Leong.

“Sure, dude, all the way up,” he said.

I was wearing a t-shirt, khaki shorts, and flip-flops. I did not resemble someone who deserved to be called Sir.

I'd been all the way up to the fifty-fifth floor only a few times. Like a good executive, my father didn't spend many days behind a desk—he was usually out selling. When he was in his office, he seemed simultaneously lost and captive, unable to find pens and papers, spinning and expecting to topple some pricey accessory. The room was decorated by someone with taste (i.e. not my father). The walls were deep mahogany. The floors were glossy parquet, and the hanging light fixtures resembled golden gyroscopes. When I walked into my father's suite, the lights were flashing on and off.

“Not that one,” he muttered. He was searching for the right button.

My father's suit jacket was buttoned up so that he looked corseted around the ribs. Some salesman had convinced him this look – appropriate for a much younger man – was a good idea.

“What are you trying to do?” I asked.

He pointed skyward. “The whiteboard.”

“Want me to try?”

“I've got it.”

I reclined on the low-backed couch, which made all its backrest sitters look lazy and its edge sitters appear hyper-attentive. I kicked off my flip-flops and ran my toes through the pearl-white shaggy rug. It felt good. I was feeling good, hoping to get through the dim sum as quickly as possible, to unload my prepared, expedient lies.

My father finally found the right switch, and the whiteboard lowered. He then shut the blinds and dialed up the lighting. We were closed-off to the outside. With a dry-erase marker, he drew a pyramid on the board. He wrote, “The Company” over the apex, “Real Estate Investment Trust (REIT)” beside one corner, and “The Investor” below the other.

To the right of the pyramid, my father wrote, “Us.”

I don't recall how long he spoke. Felt like only a few minutes. I didn't fully understand everything he told me. I've never been particularly business-smart. But after all the lines were drawn, dotted, and labeled with dollar signs, even I could see that my father was describing conflicts of interest, fraud on a massive scale, undiscovered.

"Have I lost you?" he asked.

"No," I lied.

He erased the board. "Do you understand that you may be asked one day whether I disclosed this to you? And if you say yes, you could be held criminally liable?"

I told him that I understood, though I'm not sure I did at the time.

"Good," he said, "I hope you understand. Otherwise, I'm paying way too much for your law school."

Fine time to quip. "*Pre-law*," I corrected. I was pre-everything, just eighteen.

He explained that he had gone back and forth on whether to tell me. Ultimately he decided that I needed to be in on his big lie, so I could make informed decisions to preserve my future. Informed decisions were a luxury not afforded to my father's hundreds of investors.

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He capped his marker, holding it on both ends, staring at it. “You can also turn me in—if that’s what you wish.” Without the pen in his hands, it looked like he was holding his wrists out to be handcuffed.

I sat up on the couch. “Of course not, Dad.”

After Mom died, I’d tried first and foremost to spare my father. He seemed to have aged ten years in five, graying and shrinking and sagging. Most notably, his voice had changed. He sounded like he was forever fighting a cold. My mother was only 42. It took me a very long time (and many sessions in a therapist’s Upper West Side office) to feel the loss. She was the type of mother who always predicted that I’d fail. She felt strongly that I should have majored in business administration because she opined that since she immigrated to America, the government and the people had decided to anoint the institution of the corporation as its new organized religion. “Justice will be a quaint concept by the time you’re old,” she said. “You don’t want to get stuck holding the door of a crumbling house.” She was someone who enjoyed cutting down others, just to watch them heal. But that day, on the fifty-fifth floor, my father was doing the cutting.

“Still want dim sum?” he asked.

I said I was no longer hungry.

## **2. Susan**

I never got to tell my father those prepared, expedient lies. I was going to report that I was on track toward completing my requirements (and not just on track but excelling!), that I wasn't getting distracted by the new freedoms of university life (not even knowing what a bong was!), and that most importantly, I wasn't falling in love (since, as my father had said, love when you're young is a waste of time). The truth, like his Ponzi, was less tidy. I was on the verge of flunking out. After being a virtuous high schooler, I had discovered the anesthetic joys of waking and baking. And of course, I was looking for love as if it was calling my name from an enchanted forest.

Where did I inherit my romantic tendencies from? Certainly not from my parents. They were never particularly affectionate with each other or me. While my mother suffered her hospital treatments, the most affection my father showed was a pat on the back for both of us. He seemed to think his role was to play an ever-optimistic sports coach. When my mother finally passed away at home, my father's eyes were as dry as his jaw was stiff. Only years

later did his front fall away. On that fateful dim sum Saturday, I avoided bringing up Mom because whenever I did, my father's eyes welled.

In college, I sought girls who were Mom's opposite. Sorry, Asian women. Materialistic ladies of suburban affluence? Out of the question. And women who wanted to mold me — need not apply. I had a few lovers that first year. First Sara from my dorm—a Mexican girl who had a chip on her shoulder that rivaled the size of mine. I couldn't make sense of all her rants—initially about national politics, then about the many crimes she extrapolated from my preference for reticence. Then there was Emily and her lustrous Afro. She got me to volunteer as a big brother out in the Bronx. I'd discover that, while I was out at the playground with my Little Brother, the kid's mom was always home, smoking weed. It didn't take me very long to start flaking on the boy, and soon thereafter, on Emily.

Finally, there was Susan. Without her glasses on, she was the most beautiful woman I'd ever seen, with thickly lashed green eyes, perfect teeth (an orthodontic success!), and pale skin bearing an almost invisible layer of down. She was a friend of my roommate and best male friend, Aiden, a tall, affable business major with whom I shared sporting team and alcoholic beverage allegiances. Susan's father was a Nobel Prize-winning chemist. Her older

brother was a mathematician at MIT. The family expected a similar level of achievement from their daughter, who was a chemistry major. Susan was the only person I knew who carried expectations as weighty as mine.

One night, with fake IDs, we sneaked into a crowded bar on West End Avenue. Aiden, because of his height, looked much older than he was. While he tried to wedge his way to the taps, Susan and I waited at the stand-up tables by the window. She plucked the ketchup out of the steel condiment carrier and began rolling the bottle back and forth in her palms. Her mind was often elsewhere; she was not a person who made good eye contact.

I commented on how Aiden was a full head and shoulders taller than the throner at the bar. Susan's smile had flickered like the lights in my father's office. The rolling of the bottle intensified. I began thinking about Susan's breasts, which aside from her emerald eyes were the most profound of her physical gifts.

"Do you think there's a predictive part of our brains?" Susan said. "Like we basically know in the back of our heads how things are going to end? Not in a psychic way, but in an intuitive sense?"

"I don't see how."

"Where do you think you'll be in fifteen years?"



I told her that I imagined myself as a lawyer, miserable, and alone. But I wasn't really telling her everything. I imagined myself being heartbroken by someone like Susan.

She put down the ketchup bottle and rested a hand on my shoulder. "That's so sad. You're not alone now. So what data point gives you the idea that you will be?"

I revised my descriptions of her. She had many physical gifts. Her face was long, her chin narrow. Her hair was shoulder-length, lustrous. I felt ugly in comparison.

"My mother passed away a couple of years ago. Cancer. A miserable death." Immediately, I wished I hadn't revealed that. What a fucking downer! Aiden was on his way with our drinks, a stout tree bearing alcoholic fruit, two hands bracketing three glasses. I didn't even want to drink anymore for fear of more honesty spewing forth at Susan, this woman I saw in my future, this woman I'd try to make happy until she found someone she saw in her future—probably someone who looked like Aiden.

"We won't be alone," she said, removing her hand from my shoulder as Aiden approached. "We'll be left with the burdens of our families."

How did she know these things? How did either of us know anything *at all*? We were just children!

Love when you're young is a waste of time, I'd tell my son fifteen years later.

### 3. Going Dutch on Our Daddy Cards

A few weeks after my father revealed his secret, Susan and I were up on the roof deck of the apartment building where she shared a two-bedroom with four girls. It was a clear day; we could see down from Washington Heights to the Freedom Tower. The buildings were like rock formations. In Manhattan, people fooled themselves into thinking that they could own their small piece of this island, when in fact, over time, their mortgage payments went to people like my father who gave it to good-for-nothing children like me to spend on beautiful rich children like Susan. The people who owned Manhattan were really investing in us. They should have been disappointed.

Susan hiked her glasses and sighed. "Why can't we do this all the time?"

"That'd be odd," I said. "Millions of people on rooftops staring."

Susan smiled but then went quiet. "Push comes to shove, that's what we do. Stare. My dad stares at me like he used to look at my mom. Back when he

trusted her.” She then revealed that her mother had been with another man, a married one, for at least a decade.

“She’s a fraud,” she said.

“I know fraud.”

She took off her glasses, and we kissed. Her lips were soft but cold. I kept my eyes open because I didn’t want to forget her face. When we were done, I immediately wished I had kissed her harder, with greater conviction—more heart.

I touched a lock of hair that rested on her shoulder. She wrapped an arm around my waist and laid her head against my chest. She smelled of hair and sun. We looked out at the city as if our future was out there, and we were unafraid.

“I want to take you to an expensive dinner and eat like it’s our last night on Earth,” I said.

“If it’s the last night on Earth, wouldn’t it be because we ate all the food already?”

I made reservations at a Michelin-starred restaurant on Central Park South. I insisted on ordering the tasting menu with the wine pairing. I wore my only suit and tie, the one I’d worn to senior prom. Under a winter coat, she

wore a green strapless dress that looked like it belonged to her mother. It was a little too big, and the hem was a little low on her legs.

“I’ve got my card,” I said. By “my card,” I meant my father’s, which I surfaced for especially costly purposes like textbooks, tuition, and my soon-to-be perjuring soul.

“I’ve got my card too,” Susan said. By her card, she also meant her father’s.

“We can go dutch on our dads.”

“Aiden would call us out,” she said. “One-percenters.”

Aiden’s father was running for City Council. He was spending two nights a week flyering outside supermarkets and subway stations in the Outer Boroughs. Though Aiden had grown up in Manhattan, his parents were from Queens, and his grandfather was a cop. I wished I wasn’t thinking about Aiden, wished Susan hadn’t brought him up.

“His family owns a lot of property here,” I pointed out. “Aiden’s dad is O.G. Manhattan. Old Gold. Pretty funny that he’s now running like he’s Mr. Blue-Collar-From-The-Outer-Boroughs.”

“At least he’s trying,” she said. “You have to do what you can. If you can’t even do that, then you shouldn’t have the right to judge.”

I felt myself coloring. Susan plucked at her napkin and wiped nothing. The *amuse-bouche* came. I couldn't help but apply Susan's words to my situation with my father. Should I blow the whistle? If I didn't have the courage, was I complicit in his crimes?

"I don't know what this is," I said, gesturing at the space between her and me. "I mean, I know what this is to me. I don't know what this is to you."

Susan looked at me like I was dumb. "Why don't you just ask?"

Outside the restaurant later, in front of one of those fancy hotels, we embraced with an urgency many wouldn't attribute to a scientist's daughter and a real estate man's son. Hands over bodies, teeth clicking, tongues searching for truth. We would wake together.

When I bring back these memories, I try to slow the time down, to recall more than fragments. Sometimes I wonder if I'm making moments up—cooking the books like my father.

#### **4. The Fix**

My father called to tell me he planned to end his pyramid scheme. He had found a way to finance the fix. It involved his associate's connection to the head of one of the leading polysilicon producers in China and the Chinese

government's generous solar energy subsidies. He was off to the Henan Province in the morning.

"We're going to get out of this, I promise," he said. "You can't have it both ways in life. I know. I've tried. Remember my lesson."

I wanted to say that my father had ceded his right to teach me lessons when he involved me in his fraud. I had been doing my homework. There was no mathematical way out of a Ponzi. You could continue to fund the promised returns to your Ponzi investors using a separate legitimate operation, but the whole reason you start the scheme is because you're too lazy to endure the ups and downs of a legitimate business. The only way out was to get caught or vanish.

"I don't know what you want me to say, Dad," I replied.

He was quiet for a long time. I wasn't about to give him the satisfaction of snapping the silence.

"It started small," he said, "just to cover up a bad year. I was over-leveraged on a commercial development. Your mom had her treatments." My father released a sigh, but I could tell he was choking up. I started to think I wouldn't make it another fifteen years. I wouldn't even get to miserable and alone.

"Are you still there?" he said.

“I am.”

“Then wish me luck.”

I did as my dad asked, though we didn’t deserve it.

## **5. Aiden**

Strong male friendships have been rare for me. I didn’t realize how rare until after college. After Aiden.

Few of my memories at Columbia excluded him. We hit it off immediately in the dorms. We came from different places. He was white; I am Chinese. I was a class clown—the kid in the back of the room making snide remarks under his breath. Aiden was a jock, an A.P. scholar in cheerleader-fucking. He brought home some of the tallest, hottest women I had ever seen. I told myself that there was no way Susan was his type. Her weight fluctuated; she carried those small fleshy balloons above the belt. They would have looked like a strange match; Susan was half as tall as Aiden. He was also never friends with the women he slept with.

There are two types of male friendship. The first type is the like-like. Both men connect because they have a lot in common. Subconsciously, they either

fear difference, or they lack curiosity about others. The second type of friendship is the be-like. One of the men wants to be like the other man. I wanted to be like Aiden.

Aiden and I played the latest *Call of Duty* like divorced parents. In separate bedrooms in the same apartment, we were attached to our consoles. We spoke over headsets. He asked how things were going between me and Susan.

“Okay,” I said. “I think she’s happy.”

“You think?”

“How can we ever know?”

“Sometimes she tells you, and other times you ask.”

Aiden liked to game-theory every problem into two or three chewable decision points.

We were chasing some terrorist leader through a series of alleys in a cartoon Beirut. Aiden started blowing me up just for laughs. I started blowing him up just for laughs.

“You’re my desert bitch!” I shouted.

“‘Fuck You’ in Arabic!”

That made me laugh so hard I couldn’t play anymore.

“Come on, dude,” Aiden said, “the terrorists are getting away.”



“Just order an air strike.”

“Lame.”

He ordered an air strike, which magically reduced the number of bad guys to which we had to lay waste.

“Your dad would be very upset at the potential civilian losses of that decision,” I said.

“Fuck you in English.”

“Sorry, I couldn’t resist.”

“My dad is the real deal.”

“He’s never done anything shady?” I said. “He’s a politician. Come on.”

“Look, I don’t know. He’s not Jesus. But he’s an adolescent politician, basically. If he has done anything, he’d cop to it. Because eventually the truth finds a way out.”

The storm clouds of my father’s decisions came over me.

Aiden paused our game. “I’m happy for you and Susan.”

I thanked him. “What do you think of her?”

“She’s gotta be the smartest person I know.”

“What about me, motherfucker?”

“Well, you haven’t told her you love her yet.”

*Susan told Aiden that?*

I un-paused our game and rushed forward into our next map, taking the lead in clearing out terrorists. But I went too fast, leaving Aiden behind. Before he could offer me cover, the bad guys ambushed, and I died.

“I’m afraid of losing her,” I admitted as our map reloaded.

I expected Aiden to ask why I was afraid.

“To whom?” he said instead.

## **6. The Bottom of The Well**

Susan, Aiden, and I pretended like we had no money on Fridays. We’d put our Daddy Cards away, buy groceries and a cheap bottle of *Trader Joe’s* wine, and we’d cook-in.

One night, in Susan’s room, the three of us added a brick of hashish to our plebeian recipe and streamed *The Big Lebowski*. Stoned to the point I hallucinated the floor disappearing, I was sandwiched between Aiden and Susan on the flattened living room futon. I eyed the foothill of her hip and wanted it against my palm, tucked against me. But with Aiden’s long body at my back like an endless log, I didn’t dare. If I made a move, would this friendship end?

John Goodman had just tried to cast his dead friend's ashes to the sea only to have them blown back into his face. Susan and Aiden's laughs had the same rhythm. They practically harmonized with each other. Yes, I was very stoned.

I closed my eyes and thought that if my father failed to finance his way out of his Ponzi, then I'd propose that I change my name to The Dude. The room keeled, and I fell asleep. I dreamed of sitting alone at the bottom of a well, the walls cold, dry, and harsh, like pumice. Only Aiden's raspy machine-gun laughter and Susan's smell reminded me of the world above. I touched the silky surface of the puddle, which turned into the bowling lane from the dream sequence in *The Big Lebowski*. I was on my back, floating down the approach, heading toward a pin deck with no pins. The widening pit. A woman's spread legs appeared. I passed between them and stared up her skirt only to see the triangle of sky at the top of the well. I heard snores buzzing, rhythmic moans making the hair on my arms stand. Was I having a wet dream? With my best friends in the same bed?

I woke, still in Susan's place, frightened I'd be talking dirty or touching myself. It was dark and cold. The flood light outside her ground floor apartment had blown out. A red glow flickered from the alarm clock. It read 3:54 a.m. Susan and Aiden were gone.

## 7. The Spelling of Truth

Aiden was out campaigning again for his father. For a better, more accountable city. For better, more accountable people at “the top of society’s pyramid.” Susan and I were playing Scrabble at our place. By ours, I meant Aiden's and mine. I was in a foul mood. Susan seemed unusually reticent, and her eyes were red. She was probably stoned. I whiffed the stale air around her as I walked past for a beer. She definitely smoked out earlier. Without me. Did Aiden fire up her bong? I led our game by at least 100 points, destroying her. The winner’s prize? The truth, I told myself.

When I sat again, I played the word “ABLE.”

“Now you play Cain,” I joked.

“Cain’s not a word,” she said, sounding annoyed.

“We don’t have to play,” I said.

Susan began to sniffle. I had been wrong. She had been stoned *and* crying. She wiped tears off her chin with her wrist.

“What’s the matter?”

“I can’t,” she kept saying.

“Can’t what?”

She began to cry harder. I got up and put my arms around her. She clasped my forearms like they were protectors on a roller coaster. A tear fell and spread against my sleeve. My chest felt hard. *Tell me you cheated on me. Tell me you're a fraud, too.*

“My mother wants a divorce,” she said. “She wants to marry that other guy. She said she doesn’t love my father anymore.”

“Oh,” I said, unable to sap the many feelings other than empathy from my tone. Relief. Distrust.

Later on, we were in my bed, and instead of initiating a conversation about us, instead of asking her about the future, I unburdened myself about what my father had done and how I was expected to help him cover it up by staying quiet.

Susan was motionless in my arms for a long time. I asked her to face me. The life in her face drained, like she was running low on batteries. I wanted to know what she was thinking, I said, but I wasn’t sure if I really did want to know. She managed to force a laugh that sounded like a tower of building blocks crumbling.

“You shouldn’t have told me that,” she said.

## 8. The Price of Rice in the Henan

My father flew directly from China to New York to visit me. He asked to meet for dim sum in Chinatown. I warned him the Chinese food in Manhattan sucked, but I knew he wasn't visiting to eat. When I asked him how things had gone in China, he chirped "Good!" and left it at that. A portentous response.

We met outside the 6 train Canal Street stop. A wave of pedestrians and street hawkers flowed between us when I came above ground and spotted him. He looked around and swallowed distastefully.

"You took the subway?" he asked.

"People do that here."

He inhaled and buttoned his blazer. I led him in the direction of Chinatown. I felt power in having my father follow me for once. Then he looped the straps of a surgical mask over his ears.

"What?" he said, when he saw me staring at him.

"How was the Henan?" I asked again.

"Amazing," he said. "It's a new frontier out there. Anything is possible. Not like here."

He had to have known I didn't actually care about the price of rice in the Henan.

"I have some important meetings lined up here this week."

That's how I knew that my father's trip had not gone well and that the Ponzi was still going.

"You should cop to it," I said. "Admit what you did."

My father laughed. With his mask on, it looked like he was hunched and coughing.

"You said you couldn't have it both ways."

"You can't be both illegitimate and legitimate," he said.

"You can't do wrong and not take accountability."

"Yes, you can't do that and be free."

*When people said you couldn't have it both ways, what did they mean?*

"Aren't they teaching you anything in law school?" my dad said.

We passed the police precinct on Elizabeth Street. I grabbed my father by the elbow and led him toward the station.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

"We're turning ourselves in."

My father shook free and stopped. “Are you crazy? We don’t have a plan yet.”

“You can’t get out of this!” I said. “There’s no way out.”

“It started small,” my father mumbled. “We had one bad year. And your mom had her treatments.”

“Stop!” I said. “I know what happened. I was there. Don’t blame Mom.”

My father sighed. His mask ballooned. He flipped his gray bangs. “We’re not ready,” he said, backpedaling. “We’re not ready.” He turned and walked briskly away from me and around the corner. I chased after him. By the time I peeked down Canal Street, my father had broken into a full sprint. I started running only to see him vanish into a cab heading uptown.

## **9. Account-A-Billy**

Susan and I volunteered for one of Aiden’s flyering events. Susan’s idea, of course. We stood outside a *Key Food* supermarket in Brooklyn Heights and offered handbills asking residents to Vote For Account-A-Billy. Bill Chambord had been the VP of Finance for three decades at a global bank.

Even though Aiden was stopping every outgoing shopper, he managed to say, “Vote for my Dad” like he meant it each time.



Susan got attention with her smile and her enthusiasm for our friend. She never drifted further than a few steps away from Aiden all morning. I'd never seen her smile as widely for me.

I tried to rise above my messy feelings and campaign for Aiden's dad. I couldn't stop thinking about how I must have looked like a coward in Susan's eyes compared to Aiden. There was Aiden, schilling fearlessly for his father. Then there was me. Chilly. Bottled up. Shedding tears for no one. Not my dead mother. Not my father. Not my father's investors. Not even for the girl with whom I was purportedly in love.

I went for a pee, disappearing into the stock room through two heavy rubber curtains. In the restroom, mopping buckets filled with dark water surrounded the toilet, which didn't have a seat. I deserved such a place.

When I returned outdoors, I saw it. Susan's arm around Aiden's waist and Aiden gazing down into her eyes like a staged wedding photo. They detached before they saw me. One could construe the contact as casual, even innocent. But it was there—the spark of parallel lives intersecting. Even if Aiden did possess the utmost respect for my relationship with Susan, he at least imagined, at least entertained, the notion. And she did too.

That night, a FedEx package waited for me at the dorm. From my father. Alone in the room, I opened it. Instructions to visit a man in Jersey City who would help me forge a new identity. I put the papers on my desk beside a velobound reader for my Criminal Justice 1 class.

## 10. Romantic Tendencies

I waited outside Susan's apartment for thirty-five minutes while she made her way back from campus. I asked her on a grown-up date; this time I'd bought us tickets to the opera at Lincoln Center. The streetlights were flashing reds. There I was, sitting on the stoop of her brownstone, wearing my only suit again, holding a mixed bouquet of dahlias (chosen because they were priciest that time of year). When Susan appeared around the corner, her glasses had slipped down the bridge of her nose. She was rushing with a lean book bag slung over one shoulder; she looked to me like someone running from —not toward — adulthood. We were going to miss the opera.

When she saw me, she pouted her lips. "I am so sorry," she said, kissing me on the cheek.

I told her it was okay. These days I would feel a twinge about the \$200 I'd spent on those tickets. But back then, I was just my Daddy Card. I was, in fact,

the card he played to make him feel like a good person. I handed her the flowers and relieved her of the weight she carried.

She stared at the dahlias and rolled the bouquet back and forth in her hands. The bulbs jiggled like baby's flesh. I would think about them when my son was born. Susan closed her eyes and sniffed them, even though, as I've since discovered, dahlias don't smell.

"What do you want to do?" she said. "Get dinner? Grab a drink? Stay in?"

"Whatever you want to do."

"Want to call Aiden?"

I felt like I would stand there on this Washington Heights sidewalk, in front of this apartment, forever, carrying other people's things, holding the door of crumbling houses, watching people pass me by.

"I love you," I said.

She adjusted her glasses. Her eyes, magnified, moistened. There was something in the way her lips flattened and jaw stiffened that made me regret what I'd said.

We kissed, and she thanked me "for everything," like she'd never receive anything else from me again.

## 11. With Conviction

My father turned himself in shortly after Susan left me and started dating Aiden. By the time the snow began to fall on Manhattan, he had been sentenced to twenty-five years in federal prison for defrauding over 200 investors of \$52 million. Before he turned himself in, he sent me a postcard of San Francisco without a message. That was the agreed-upon signal in his instructions to go to his man in Jersey City. I dropped out of Columbia, changed my name, and moved back to San Francisco. Ned Leong became Ed Chang, who would enroll at a community college. Ed is just Ned with a shaved head. Ed transferred to UC Berkeley and majored in Political Science. Ed is now a paralegal at a law firm in downtown San Francisco.

In his plea allocution, my father apologized to the victims of his crimes, but he apologized to me first, for leaving me “a legacy of shame.” He made clear that, though the company was a family business that he intended me to inherit, I never knew about his Ponzi. My father had spared me.

I was in a relationship with a woman I met in community college. We were together for seven years, lived together, had a son, who is now nine. She left me last year because every day was the same. I never surprised her, rarely

took her on dates, was emotionally secretive. She once said I didn't have a romantic bone in my body.

## 12. The Chambords

I learned about Aiden and Susan's marriage online. Their wedding pictures looked beautiful. I'd come up with more descriptive words, but the effort would hurt too much. They seem happy. But everyone seems happy on social media. Some experts say Aiden's next political step is to run for mayor. Susan is a professor at Columbia. They have two children.

I'm tempted to add them as friends. Who's this Ed Chang guy, they'd ask? Then they'd recognize my profile picture. Then they'd send a message.

"Is that you, Ned?" *What the fuck happened to us?*

I'd reply that, in the back of my brain, way back when my father first told me about his pyramid scheme, way back when the three of us began our triangle in that Washington Heights apartment, deep down, my intuition predicted how we would end.

**Leland Cheuk**'s novel *The Misadventures of Sulliver Pong* is forthcoming in 2015 (CCLaP Publishing). The book has been a finalist for the James Jones First Novel Fellowship and a semi-finalist for the Big Moose Prize from Black Lawrence Press. Cheuk has been awarded fellowships and artist residencies at the MacDowell Colony, I-Park Foundation, and Brush Creek Foundation for the Arts. Cheuk's writing has also appeared or is forthcoming in publications such as *The Rumpus*, *Necessary Fiction*, *Tahoma Literary Review*, *Lunch Ticket*, and *Pif Magazine*. His short fiction has been a finalist for the Salamander Fiction Prize (judged by Edith Pearlman) and the national Washington Square Review fiction contest (judged by Darin Strauss). He has an MFA in Creative Writing from Lesley University. He lives in Brooklyn and is always at work on a novel and a collection of stories.