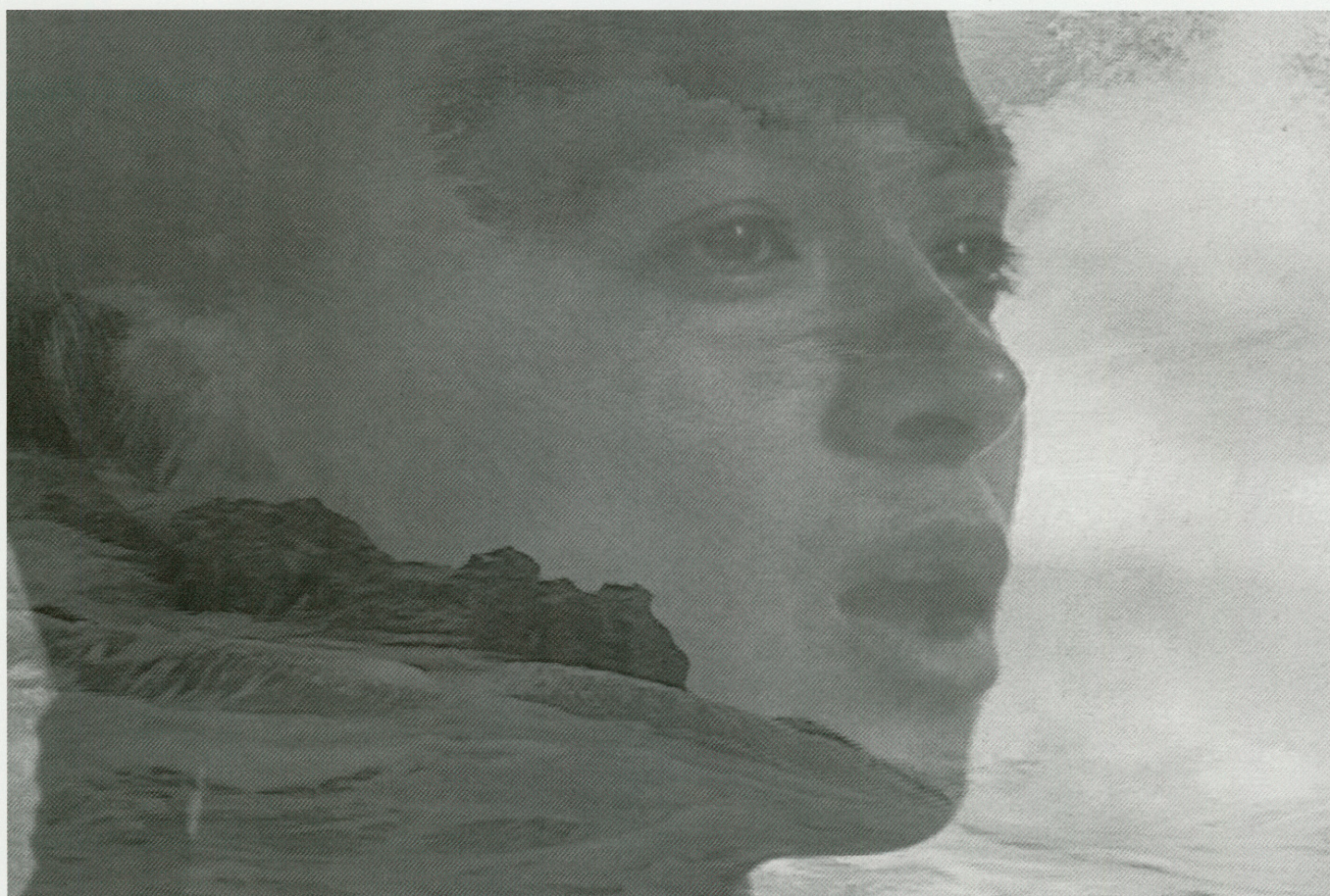


Uphill, Downhill, and the Wretched of the Earth | BY ADRIAN JAMES



Grand Terrace, California, is a city built over large hills, where the elevation of one's home correlates roughly to income and taste. On the lower end of the city, close to the warehouses and State Route 91, is a set of apartments where the view doesn't get much better than the backside of a supermarket parking lot. The houses nearby have small windows and porches decorated with wooden figurines or potted plants that grow wild and parched brown. But things change driving uphill toward the picturesque rocky hillside that turns azure in the morning

light. Two-car garages become three-car garages and well-manicured lawns appear next to rosebushes, hedges, and walkways laid out in exotic stone: the stuff of glossy magazines.

Jenny worked her way out of the city's downhill apartments to a comfortable uphill home in 1993. It's been twenty-two years since she entered the United States as a Malaysian immigrant, spending a couple years at Andrews University in Michigan before moving to Southern California to take a well-paying job.


Her mother moved to the United States in 1997. Jenny

moved her into a nearby apartment—not downhill but uphill, in a section of town where homes come with a five-hundred-dollar-a-month landscaping fee.

Jenny's experience reflects a common narrative among Southeast Asian immigrants: entering the United States as a young person with little more than an education—starting the clock at zero in a world of uncertainty, pursuing American prosperity. Perhaps it's the same American dream pursued by other ethnic groups. However, for Asians there is a deep burden of pride and responsibility attached. It is a burden passed on during childhood, on days when report cards are carried home and children are told to double their efforts so that their children and their children's children will not need to be street sweepers.

Jenny's story might be considered a success by some cultural standards. She drove a red BMW convertible for a number of years before trading it in for a more fuel efficient Honda. Once a year, she takes a seven-day cruise to the Virgin Islands. She balances her time between work and taking care of her mother, who has a number of different health complications, including poor eyesight.

But there is a different America outside the world of suburban prosperity that Jenny is accustomed to, even if it's forgotten or ignored.

 One mid-January night, Jenny sorts through her mother's pills, carefully placing them in a green tablet box. Then she lays out her mother's clothes for the next day.

It's 11:10 when Jenny finishes her nightly routine. She steps out the back door of her mother's apartment, past the small garden and into the garage, hitting the open button. Outside is her white Honda Civic. She takes a call on her cell phone as she steps under dim white circles of light from the street lamps around the circular cul-de-sac.

It's her husband, Edward, on the telephone; he's miles away on an auditing assignment. "Hey, call me when you get home, alright?" says Edward.

"Right! I'll call back in a minute," says Jenny.

She has her cell phone and a set of keys in one hand as she opens the backseat door, leaving her handbag on the floor.

A car flashes past—a white Honda Civic, similar to hers. It stops thirty feet away. The street is empty except for the two cars. A door opens and a figure steps out of

the backseat. It's rather unusual. Hoping to be helpful, Jenny leans forward to offer directions: sharp turns around the circular cul-de-sac and the roads leading uphill can be disorienting at night.

But something goes wrong: two other figures step out of the car.

Jenny stops breathing. She sees a small caliber pistol—a man in a dark hood thrusts the gun in her face. Warm urine soaks her thighs. "Oh my God! Oh my God!" is all she can say, in a numb stupor.

The two other hoods in black close in. "We need your keys and your ATM," says one of them, snatching her cell phone away. The gun is inches from her face as Jenny quickly hands over her purse.

The gunman shoves it back toward her, "ATM card! ATM card!" Jenny hands over the keys and digs through the purse. She gives the hoods \$250 in cash and a blank check, as well as the card.

In the dim light, Jenny can see the faces of her assailants: they are young and clean-cut, with their heads shaved bald.

The hoods pop open the trunk of Jenny's car. "Get in," says the gunman.

"No, please, please! I'll sit in the backseat. Please let me sit in the backseat!" Jenny begs.

She's shoved into the backseat. The gunman gets into the front passenger seat and swings around, holding the weapon in her face as one hood takes the driver's seat and another gets into the other white Honda.

Within minutes, the cars come to a stop outside a quiet apartment building. "Get out bitch," says the gunman. "If you yell, scream, or try to flag anybody...you're dead!" As the gunman walks over to the other car, he keeps the pistol trained on her.

Jenny is standing on a curb in the cold. Tears stream down her face. The hoods are having a meeting a few feet away. For a second, a car moves down the street, and there's enough visibility for Jenny to look the driver in the eyes...but the driver simply rolls past.

After what seems like hours, the hoods move over to Jenny. "Alright, do you have your ATM card?" asks one of them.

"I gave it to you," says Jenny.

"No you didn't!" says the hood.

"Yes, I did. You must have dropped it...back there," says Jenny.



"We better find it, or you're dead tonight!" says the gunman.

Once again, they shuffle Jenny into the car. This time, the gunman takes the backseat with Jenny. He cocks the weapon menacingly, then holds the barrel at eye level. Jenny can see his finger on the trigger. Looking into her eyes, the gunman starts to raise his voice, "Didn't you know? I am 666, I am Satan! Jesus sent me to kill you! I don't even care if I die!"

The car moves erratically through the streets. For a second, they turn sharply into a darkened parking lot. Jenny fears for the worst: getting raped before getting killed.

But they arrive at her mother's apartment, where the garage is still open. The hood from the other car goes to retrieve the card.

"Who's in the house with you? You got a man?" says the gunman.

"No. It's just my mother. She's sick!" says Jenny.

"Let's take them in the house and shoot both of them," says the gunman.

"No please! Please...she's sick!" says Jenny, sobbing. The idea of what might happen makes Jenny ill.

Just then, the driver turns around. "Listen, I'm not going

to let anything bad happen to you. I love my mother. I won't let anything bad happen to you," says the hood.

"Dang! Whose side are you on? I'ma have to put a bullet in both of you!" says the gunman.

"Why did it have to be her? We should have got a man," says the driver.

The third hood comes to the window. "What's your pin?" Jenny rattles off the numbers.

"Do you know how much we can take out?" says the hood.

"I don't know, I never tried the maximum amount," says Jenny.

"What about five hundred dollars? Can we get five hundred?" says the hood.

"I think so," says Jenny.

They move to the nearest Bank of America in Grand Terrace, but the driver of the other car doesn't attempt to make a cash withdrawal. Coming back to the window, he says, "This isn't going to work. Do you know of anywhere else?"

Jenny's mind works fast. She knows her best chance of surviving is to stay in areas she knows best. "Loma Linda, there's a Bank of America in Loma Linda," says Jenny.

"Where's that?" says the hood. It's obvious the hoods are not from the area.

Jenny gives directions to the driver as the other Honda follows, until they reach Loma Linda.

The cash is retrieved quickly at the nearest ATM. Jenny wonders if she'll ever be seen again. She can identify her assailants, and the hoods know it. The thought of her body rotting in a field somewhere passes through her mind.

The cars return on the same route by which they had come. But the Honda, now in the lead, takes an abrupt turn down a street where a Shell gas station stands, and the other car follows. Jenny's pulse starts racing. She knows they'll soon hit a bad section of San Bernardino: a poorer section of the Inland Empire, where there's less of a chance that she'll come out alive.

"You said you'd let me go! Please, you look like such nice guys," says Jenny.

"Plans changed," says the driver coldly.

"Please, just let me off here. I can get home," says Jenny. She's pleading, louder than before.

The car makes another abrupt turn as the lead car speeds off. They're parked in front of an Arco gas station. "Get out bitch!" says the gunman.

There's a Frito truck refueling and a gas station attendant smokes a cigarette near the convenience store.

Jenny's Honda speeds off behind her. She doesn't look back.

The day after Jenny's abduction, I watch her family hold her tightly, tears in their eyes. I watch her husband arm himself with a Beretta pistol that he carries in a loose-fitting Polo jacket at night. I watch a neighborhood lose whatever innocence it once had. And it's not the America any of us dreamed of.

Jenny doesn't leave home for the next few days. It's days before she learns to feel safe in her own bedroom and weeks before she can drive on the streets alone at night, even though the men were arrested almost a week later.

I know all of the men will receive upwards of twenty-five years in prison. But I think about the madness that drove these men to risk everything for five hundred dollars (to some—the price of a monthly landscaping bill). I think about what it means to be taken from one's home and terrorized, to lose

ones sense of security—for five hundred dollars.

Jenny also thinks about the five hundred dollars. She says to me one day, "five hundred dollars is nothing to me! To go through all that, for five hundred dollars? You gotta be kidding me!"

She also thinks about the seconds before her abduction—the seconds that could have meant the difference between life and death. In a matter of seconds, she could have been in her car, avoiding the hoods as they passed by—if only she hadn't stopped to fumble with her keys. The idea constantly passes through her mind until she begins to see it as act of divine will. But why? She wonders. The thought hurts, like an act of spite or betrayal. To her, it is only the weak and the faithless that need to be tested in this way, not someone like her—who obediently claims "biblical promises," and clings relentlessly to her faith.

The answer for Jenny's puzzle never arrives. But she says she kept her faith because she doesn't know of any other ways to cope. She doesn't know of any other ways to keep her world from caving in.

The newspapers reported later that one of the men involved was recent a deportee from south of the Mexican border. It was a revelation that made me extremely uncomfortable. While Jenny wrestled with her faith, I began to think about how the paths of two different immigrant communities crossed that night. It started to become clear to me that the old narratives for success that we Asian immigrants often aspire to need to change.

There must be new stories of men and women who are willing to cross the racial and social lines, to stand in solidarity with their immigrant brothers and sisters who live in poor communities. There must be new stories that echo the ministry of Jesus as found in the Gospel of Luke, where Jesus is seen among the poor and dispossessed, those whom Frantz Fanon would call "the wretched of the earth." ■

Adrian James is a senior at La Sierra University, Riverside, California, majoring in philosophy and cultural studies.