

Chapter 21

WASTING TIME WITH BITS OF JADE

THERE WERE TWO ways to Cassandra Island: the 401 to Napanee then north on 41; or the Trans-Canada—supposedly a highway, but really little more than stitched-together country roads. I chose the scenic route. I wanted farms and villages and creeks with funny names, not eighteen-wheelers convoyed two abreast.

My game plan, dryly summarized by Byron, was to stay at the retreat and wait. For what we didn't know, and he wasn't taking risks.

“Take your laptop with you,” he instructed. “We'll stay in touch by email. Don't send anything directly. Log onto your computer in Toronto and email me from there. If anybody's monitoring network traffic all they'll see is you connecting to your own domain. Encrypt the data stream—log on with ssh—and use my public key for messages. Oh yeah, I'll need yours, too, for answering. Delete messages both ways when you're done.

“Something else. Get your hands on an old PCMCIA wireless card. If anything should happen and you're asked to cut contact with the outside world, hand your cell phone over—you have one, right? make sure it's obvious—but hang onto your laptop. Volunteer to wreck the onboard wireless if it comes to that. That's where the spare comes in. It should be easy to conceal if anyone goes through your things. They'll be looking for a dongle, not a card.”

I gave silent thanks to Linux and my geek-for-hire. What Byron wanted both made sense and wasn't difficult.

Not much else had been that simple. First, I'd had to deal with my clients. Doctors on sabbatical refer their patients elsewhere. What was I supposed to do? Send my clients off to Madame Selma over the Mac's Milk at Grace and College? Tell them to tune into Jena's *Psychic Nexus*?

Then there was Marion, *in absentia*. I'd agreed to keep an eye on her apartment. The only way to meet the obligation was to find somebody else. Raymond said he'd do it on condition that I let him fine tune things around my place—at my expense. Worse, he'd scouted Marion's with decorator-fever in his eyes.

And poked into her desk.

"Isn't this that place the minions of the government wanted you to spend your own dime checking out?" he asked, holding up a yellowing Cassandra Island flier.

I hadn't told him where I'd be while he was making fast and loose with my apartment.

Not so Ferko, who deserved to know. While the Jaguar skirted lakes and slowed for sleepy villages, I thought about the worried way he'd said goodbye.

"*You must not go seeking more distractions,*" he'd admonished at Kew Beach. "*That tactic now risks turning into crippling neurosis.*"

Yet here I was, going undercover—what else could I call it?—for Canadian Intelligence, tracking down a woman whom I'd scarcely known three months. Small wonder the concern on Ferko's face. In terms of finding *me*, what I was doing screamed avoidance. Intensified avoidance. Crippling neurosis.

The only city on my scenic route was Peterborough. I blasted round it on a nearly-empty bypass, then dropped back down to country speed. The little towns of Norwood, Havelock and Marmora slipped by, and sooner than expected I was turning left at Kaladar and heading north on 41.

Was Ferko right? Was this another tactic to distract me from

my missing years? Part of me said no. Kirin and her daughter had gone missing. The man they'd disappeared with had blown into Kirin's life while she was at Cassandra Island. Six other people—psychics, all—had either vanished after visiting the luxury retreat or drowned themselves. I could hardly be accused of making something out of nothing.

But part of me still wondered. Byron's cloak-and-daggering—encrypted email, dummy cellphones, secret WiFi cards—was right out of the movies. Just the sort of thing a person fleeing from himself would jump on. Why plumb hidden regions of the mind when you can play at being a spy? With the safety of a friend at stake, what better reason could there be to put off staring demons down?

The internal dialogue subsided when I turned at Cloyne. I'd grown tired of the self-analysis and needed to stay sharp for the next part of the drive.



It can't be *déjà-vu* when you relive a real experience, but *déjà-vu* is what it felt like when I reached the town of Paxton. It spoke to me more deeply than a few rounds at the Rainbow Grill accounted for, and further on, the cliffs with cedars clinging to their sides had something of the same *I-know-you* quality.

Cassandra Island's parking lot was fuller than before. Inside the lodge, Debbie at reception chatted me through sign-in, even asking ever-so-politely after Kirin.

"You made quite an impression last time," she said, handing me the sheet with this week's seminars and workshops. "Everyone was hoping you'd come back. Sadly, none of that group happens to be here right now."

I scanned the page.

"That's not quite true. I see Mr. Shen's still giving seminars."

"Oh, Mr. Shen's not a guest. He drives down to give his lectures. They're very popular. We pay him a small stipend."

"He lives around here?"

“He has a cottage up the lake. The only time he books a room is when he needs the library. Or when he doesn’t feel like cooking.”

“Yes, I recall your chef is very talented.”

“Shall I show you to your cabin, then?”

“Just tell me which it is.”

“Number three, on the left, nearest the lake. Do you need help with your stuff?”

“No, thanks. I’ll manage.”

“Enjoy your stay.”

I’d decided on an open-ended rental. Money talks, and with a mortgage-sized deposit, Cassandra Island had been happy to oblige.

The cabin had two bedrooms. I put my luggage in the one that had a window on the lake. The kitchenette was stocked with Lagostina pots and pans. The bathroom had plush towels folded on the sink. The living room contained a TV and a fireplace, in addition to a sofa, armchairs and a glass-topped coffee table.

I set my laptop on the table and verified Cassandra Island’s WiFi by connecting to my home machine. It worked as well as last time. My cellphone went beside it in a way that nobody could miss. The plug-in wireless card was hiding in a brushed-brass nameplate on the laptop’s carrying case. Finding a plaque maker willing and able to turn out the deception on short notice hadn’t been easy.

Back in the bedroom, I started sorting clothes. It was getting close to suppertime. Stuffing underwear and T-shirts in the dresser got me thinking about Axel. I’d have to see what he was up to after dinner.

A burst of rapping sounds came through the window. A woodpecker was dining at a maple tree. Beyond, the lake was doing picture postcard things. Guests had spread out towels on the dock. I supposed I’d have to meet them and go through the rigmarole again. David Ase, wonder psychic. If I were lucky, maybe they’d turn out to be as genial as Irene and her buddies.

Okay, I thought, still looking out the window. Here I am. What now?

Axel didn't stay the night. The cabin's single beds were scarcely big enough to hold just him, let alone the two of us. His enthusiasm, though, ensured that when he left, I fell straight into bone-deep, dreamless sleep. My head had barely hit the pillow, so it seemed, when all at once the birds were chittering and cawing morning songs.

I pulled on sweatpants and a T-shirt, and braved the chilly dew barefoot across the lawn toward the lake. Another early riser was already on the dock. Silhouetted by the sun, the figure's stance seemed odd. I held my hand above my eyes and saw that he was standing on one leg. The other one was crooked against his thigh—a yoga posture called The Tree.

Mr. Shen remained immobile, watching me approach.

“David—I've been expecting you.”

Saying nothing more, he lowered the crooked leg and moved into the Namaste position—hands joined as if praying, elbows out. I copied him and wordlessly we went through twelve full cycles of the Sun Salute: Namaste, back arch, toe touch, Horse, Mountain, push-up, Cobra... Our bodies stayed in perfect synch; it would have looked like dance to an observer.

“You learned that well,” he complimented afterwards. “You had a good instructor. May I know his name?”

“To be honest, Mr. Shen, I don't remember.”

“Ah—perhaps you learned it from the Buddha, then?”

“Sorry, I'm not following you.”

“Come now. I'm sure you know the saying, ‘If you see Buddha on the road, kill him?’”

“Yes.”

“I'm suggesting that your teacher was so good he *was* his lessons, not the person teaching them.”

“For all I know, that might be it. By the way, how did you know I was here? Debbie told me you aren't actually a guest.”

“Word gets around. I'm glad you're back. I was terribly caught

up in work when you were here before. Our conversation was too brief. Do you canoe?"

The change of tack surprised me. "No."

"There's not much to it if you're sitting in the bow. Does crossing water frighten you?"

"Not at all. Why?"

"I was thinking today I might go over to the island. I'd be pleased to have you come along."

Mr. Shen was not a man to fear eye contact. His gaze stayed steady while he waited on my answer.

"The pleasure would be mine," I answered formally.

He touched my arm.

"You have lovely manners, David, but we won't have much to talk about if you treat me so respectfully. Even if you think of me as Mr. Shen, please call me John."

I nodded. "John."

"Will you be having breakfast in the lodge?"

"Yes."

"I've already eaten. Would you mind asking the cook to make us up a lunch? Sandwiches will do. Meet me here at nine-thirty. It's a good time to go out. The breeze keeps the mosquitoes down."

"Don't you have a lecture?"

"Not today."

Back at cabin number three, I donned some shorts and a polo shirt with a pocket in the front for my cellphone. Then I logged onto my computer in Toronto and arranged for it to call me later in the day.

I didn't skimp on breakfast—scrambled eggs and bacon, home fries with a lot of ketchup, a chunk of sirloin and a stack of toast.

Axel went overboard on lunch. In a cooler left outside my cabin door were egg and tuna sandwiches, cold chicken, pickled beets, raw vegetables and dip, apple pie, cheddar cheese, and a couple of bottles of water.

Mr. Shen was waiting on the dock. He arranged the cooler in the middle of a green canoe then handed me a pair of biking gloves.

“You might want these. Blisters are a problem when your hands aren’t used to managing a paddle.” He held his own out so that I could see the callouses. “And since you’ve never gone canoeing, may I give instruction?”

“Yes. Please do.”

“You’ll be in front. Your only task is locomotion. Kneel on the floor and use the seat to rest your bum. Dig deep with the paddle so the blade’s submerged with every stroke. When I tell you to change sides, first switch the order of your hands, then lever the paddle over the bow.”

“Seems clear enough.”

“We’ll go around the island counterclockwise. There’s a good spot on the other side for pulling up.”

It took only a few minutes to appreciate canoeing’s pull. The senses are at rest. The eyes are mesmerized by eddies from the bow. The ears are lulled by gently plashing paddles. The nose breathes in the soft green smell of open water, which you feel slipping underneath the membrane of the hull.

Cassandra Island, it turned out, was teardrop-shaped. As we circled round, a rocky spit came into view, tapering toward the farther shore. We paddled up the point, around, and down the other side. At a small cove nibbled in the base, Mr. Shen instructed me to get out first, then followed nimbly, hauling the canoe ashore.

“This used to be my island, did you know? At one point, my grandfather had holdings on the lake. He willed them to my father, who divided them among his children. There used to be a cottage but it burned some time ago. The foundations still remain.”

“I had no idea,”

“No? Tell me, David—are you one of those who receives impressions from a place?”

“No more than most people, I don’t think.”

“I was wondering if you picked up anything.”

“Sorry, that isn’t what I do.”

“Shall we take a walk, then? There’s no easy way around the island, but I’m sure you’ll like it. We’ll leave the cooler here and eat

when we return.”

I couldn't see a path, yet Mr. Shen, in front, made his way as if there were. His pace was quick, but not so quick there wasn't time to relish how the loam gave underfoot, or the smell of heat that rose off boulders rusty with dead lichen.

A quarter of the way around, Mr. Shen veered inland to a clearing where the cottage that he'd spoken of had stood. Crumbling masonry surrounded saplings and a mat of purple flowers. Cloudy beer bottles, a firepit and mouldering condoms told a timeless teenage story.

Mr. Shen stood in the middle—quietly, as if he wanted me to comment.

“Debbie at the lodge informs me you still have a place,” I said. “Further up the lake.”

He pointed north. “About there. You can see it from here in winter.”

“Nice location.”

“Indeed. Shall we carry on?”

The island's western face was steep. Several times he sent me on ahead to scale rocks and hoist him up. The teamwork made him beam instead of bringing on apologies. *How old was he?* Normally a person's age is easy to establish. Mr. Shen was over sixty, but by how many years or decades I really couldn't tell.

When we reached the southern shore, whatever breeze there'd been died down. The sun was nearly overhead. Few fish broke the water. Strands of gossamer winked through the pines. A crow cawed from the middle of the island.

We were sweating when we reached the spit again. Mr. Shen stripped to his briefs and waded in the water. The bottom dropped off sharply. He was treading water almost right away. He'd left his glasses on; the lenses flashed each time he faced the sun. I stripped and followed him, diving down to see how deep it really was.

Deep, as it turned out. When I surfaced he was on the shore in shorts again, wringing out his underwear. I stayed in a while longer, then got out and dressed while he inspected Axel's offerings.

“Mmm. Pickled beets. Axel knows I love them. You must have told him I’d be with you.”

“I did.”

“Do you mind if we eat here on the rocks? Fewer ants.”

“Good by me.”

We laid out lunch and sat cross-legged side by side. Mr. Shen unwrapped a sandwich, offering me half. He seemed disinclined to talk while we were eating. His only conversation had to do with food. *Another piece of chicken, David? I like the flavour olives give to eggs. May I finish off those beets?* I remembered from my first trip to Cassandra Island that he always dined apart.

The apple pie was every bit as good as Marion’s. It seemed a shame to wash it down with bottled water afterwards.

Mr. Shen lay back, propped up on his elbows.

“So, David—have you been wondering why I brought you here?”

“Presumably to get me by myself. To see how I react. There’s something here you want me to respond to.”

“Or maybe *not* respond to? What are you sensing from me now? Is that the word you use? Sensing?”

“I call it reading.”

“What are you reading, then?”

“Anticipation. Expectation. Curiosity.”

“These things are not invisible.”

“No. You’re right. Anyone could see them.”

“May I assume, then, you have trouble reading me? Specifics that you normally pick up won’t come?”

“Yes.”

“Why is that, do you think? Asian inscrutability?”

Precisely what I’d thought when we discussed the *I Ching* six weeks earlier.

“Don’t worry,” he laughed. “I’m not offended. The truth is, I’m as Canadian as you. My grandfather came over from Hunan while the railroad was being built. He stayed and did like many of his countrymen—quietly grew rich investing profits made from serving

food and doing laundry. His restaurant was where the Rainbow Grill now stands.”

“Which explains his holdings around Dawe’s Lake.”

“He had vision others lacked.”

Someone else had seized the day for boating. A red canoe slid round the north end of the island. Mr. Shen fell silent, watching.

“If you’d known,” he said at length, “I’d ask what you can read from me, would you have used your Internet Blue Book?”

“As perhaps you’ve done with me?” I answered, hiding my surprise. “I seem—how shall I put this?—not to be unknown to you.”

“I don’t do readings so I have no use for tricks. My interest is in Eastern divination. However, you are right. You are not unknown.”

“Are you psychic, then?”

“Are you?”

He asked so simply that I nearly answered no, but my cellphone beeped as I’d arranged, reminding me I wasn’t there to tell the truth.

“Yes,” I said, checking the display for show, “I am.”

“Why do you do it, then? Why cheat when you don’t have to?”

“Backup. The more I know about my clients, the easier it is to give them what they want.”

“You don’t trust your native talent?”

“I believe in preparation. I never know when someone I can’t read might come along.”

“Someone like me?” he teased. “Do you know why you cannot read me?”

“Because you’ve studied Eastern disciplines, I think. Most aim to bring the body and the mind in harmony. What tells me most about a person is the opposite. Disharmony. Say, for example, somebody who comes across as confident but bites their nails.”

“Interesting,” he said, his eyes twinkling. “Somebody who comes across as confident but isn’t. Like someone claiming they can ‘read’ but having recourse to deception.”

“More like how you didn’t answer when I asked if you were psychic.”

“*Touché.*”

His delight in our exchange was catching, even though it seemed to have been bought at my expense. *You are not unknown*, he'd said. The reverse, I realized, was true as well. No doubt Irene, the specialist in former lives, would have an explanation.

He stood and brushed his shorts off. I sensed him growing serious again. His humour didn't so much fade as sink back to the place where it had come from. He wandered over to the shore and squatted down.

"Psychism," he said, making circles in the water with his finger, "is the word some use for talents of the mind outside the ordinary. Abilities most people wish they had, but at best can only long for. The term, and others of its ilk—psionics, ESP—is imprecise. Like 'creativity', which covers many things, from baking bread to painting chapel ceilings. And as with creativity, many claiming it are wearing borrowed colours.

"And yet—," he turned, "—do you know Tennyson? The verse that starts: *"So runs my dream, but what am I?"*

"An infant crying in the night, an infant crying for the light, and with no language but a cry?"

"That's the one. Yearning as a statement of belief. You say you cannot read me, but I wonder—can you see where this is leading?"

"Shall I quote Tennyson again?"

He cocked his head and looked amused. "No, no need, I think."

There is more faith in honest doubt than half the creeds.

"You believe," I said, "that faith in psychism and trust in a benevolent divinity are similar. That it's not through blind acceptance we discern it in ourselves or discover its true nature. Rather, it's through questioning, through doubt that's real and honest—even by rejecting it—that we approach the truth. You suspect I question my abilities, perhaps reject them outright, but for you this is a sign they're really there. How'm I doing?"

Instead of answering, he started gathering the detritus from lunch.

"How long will you be staying at Cassandra Island?" he enquired.

He had to be aware my visit was indefinite. *Word gets around.*

“Till I find what I came looking for.”

“May I invite you, then, to spend a few days at my cottage? I would be honoured, and perhaps can help with what you seek.”

The gracious shift in language demanded something more than *Yeah, okay, sure.*

“It is I,” I replied formally, “who would be honoured.”



To: david@ase.ca

From: sleemans@pet.csis-scrs.gc.ca

Subject: Re: John Wu Shen

Do you know how many John Wu Shens there are?
Without the Cassandra Island sale we'd still be
trying to guess which one is yours.

John Wu Shen, born 1931. Family rich off rights
granted on mineral-bearing holdings in Northern
Ontario and Québec.

Educated in Montreal, Beijing, Heidleberg, Vienna
and New Delhi. Ph.D.'s in sinology and psychology.
Never joined the family business, which now
includes a small Hong Kong bank.

Appears to be a full-time academic, though he's
never held a university post. Contributor to the
The Gestalt Journal, *The American Journal of
Psychology* and *Cognitive Therapy and Research*.
Author of two books on *The Analects of Confucius*
and one on the fakir tradition in India.
Translations of several Chinese classics into both
English and modern Cantonese.

Associated with the Centre for Interdisciplinary
Studies in Alternative Psychotherapies (CISAP) out
of southwestern Ontario from 1964 to 1973. Major
focus now appears to be comparative translations of
the Chinese *Book of Changes*.

No police record. No troubles with Revenue Canada.
Not a member of any known professional association.

The deed to Cassandra Island was sold to a holding company in the early '90s. The sale included portions of the Dawe's Lake waterfront that now house the Cassandra Island Retreat.

The property was flipped twice before being bought up by the retreat. No evidence Shen maintains any financial or executive interest. The only connection we can find is that one of the owners of the numbered company with stock majority in the Cassandra Island operation provided funding for CISAP in the '60s and '70s. Said owner died in '96.

We'll dig deeper at this end. Continue cultivating Shen.

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JB

I deleted Byron's message, logged off my computer in Toronto, and snapped the laptop shut. It wasn't coming with me. Something told me Mr. Shen was not set up for Internet. If I needed Byron I'd come back.

A Chinese saying has it: House guests are like fish; after three days they start to stink. Three of everything, including jeans, went in a suitcase that I took out to the car before informing Debbie of my plans.

"Oh, so that's where Mr. Shen will be," she said, making a note. "Too bad. I was going to ask if you wanted his spot at ten to do your workshop again. Now, should I get housekeeping to do your cabin while you're away?"

Where do psychics who aren't rich escape to?

Mr. Shen's directions were precise, but the going wasn't easy. The first part was straightforward—the north road round the lake until it turned to gravel. After that the complications started. *There's a little bridge across the ditch past the Road Ends sign...*

Many ruts, some corduroy, several forks and two plank bridges later I pulled up behind his cottage—cedar shingle, stained dark brown and trimmed in green, the same green as the outhouse. A hydro pole fed wires from a line that ended on the property.

I honked and got out. Sunlight on the forest floor released a smell that, bottled, could be sold as Attar of Contentment.

“David!” Mr. Shen came around the side. “Welcome to my slice of paradise. No trouble getting here, I hope?”

“For myself, no. I can’t speak for the undercarriage of the car.”

He approached and bent to have a look as if I’d meant it.

“Where should I park?” I asked.

He straightened up.

“Here is fine. My car’s around the other side. Bring your things inside. I’ll make some coffee.”

He showed me to a small room off the kitchen with a single bed, a dresser and a writing table. The bed—old-fashioned, with a metal frame—wore a tightly-snugged Hudson’s Bay blanket. A second one was folded at the foot. The room had a pleasant, musty smell like the inside of a canvas tent.

“You take your coffee strong with milk, is that correct?” Mr. Shen called out.

I laid my suitcase on the dresser and went to join him in the kitchen.

“You’re an observant man if you noticed how I like my coffee from your table in the lodge.”

“Like you, David,” he replied. “Like you. Go have a seat on the deck. I’ll be out in a minute.”

The front half of the cottage was a single room outfitted with a lacquered Chinese desk big enough to double as a banquet board. Like every other building on Dawe’s Lake, or so I’d started thinking, the floor, the ceiling and the walls were wood. Not that that much of the walls was visible behind the books—shelves and shelves of them, eight high from the floor. Even the mantelpiece was full. Two comfy-looking chairs without much leg room faced the picture window.

The porch door creaked, a homey sound that matched the Adirondack chairs outside, the dappled forest shade and the sharp-sweet smell of pine. Dawe’s Lake shimmered fifteen metres down a mossy slope. A staircase made of railroad ties dropped steeply to the

shore.

A hydro cable spool did service as a coffee table. On it were a teapot, a little china cup, and the seven pieces of a tangram set. The tiles were veined like jade, but of a green so rich it verged on emerald. Mr. Shen had placed them in the figure of a cat.



A tangram puzzle starts off as a square made out of triangles, a rhomboid, and a little inner square. It took a bit of thinking, but I had it rearranged when Mr. Shen came out.



“Ah, I see you found my secret vice. A wonderful pastime.” He handed me a thick white mug of coffee. “And yes, they’re jade. Cardboard would do just as well but I like the feel. A pleasure for the mind and a pleasure for the senses.”

He poured himself some tea then took the little square-shaped tile.

“What do you see?”

“A square of jade.”

He turned it forty-five degrees.

“And now?”

“A lozenge.”

He smiled.

I tried the coffee, which was perfect. He didn’t do the fussy thing of asking if I liked it. We sat for several minutes lost in hot caffeine reflection. A seaplane droned past overhead, its pontoons flashing through the trees.

“Did my invitation come as a surprise?” Mr. Shen asked, looking up.

“Did my accepting it?”

“No.” He chuckled. “Of course not. But tell me something, are you trying to read me now?”

“Why would I be?”

“To find out why an almost stranger would invite you to his home.”

“That’s pretty obvious. You like to teach and think you’ve found yourself a pupil.”

“That’s all?”

“You’re already sounding pedagogical.”

He chuckled again. “You’re right. I can’t seem to help it. So tell me, this gift of yours—may I call it that?—is it under your control?”

“It isn’t like a radio that’s permanently on, if that’s what you mean.”

“When do you use it, then?”

“Other than with clients? I can’t really say. Whenever I feel it will serve me, I suppose.”

He poured more tea and stared off at the lake.

“If I asked you to read me now—pre-supposing you didn’t find me difficult, as we discussed—would you be able tell me what I’m thinking?”

“That’s not how it works.”

“No?”

“I’m afraid not. At best I can extrapolate a person’s thoughts. I can’t say exactly what they’re thinking.”

“Yet it must seem to some as if you can.”

“I’ve gotten good at guessing.”

“Read me now.”

“What for? You already know I can’t.”

He turned his face toward me. There was nothing special in it but I got the feeling that I’d let him down somehow.

Whenever clients asked for on-the-spot, *tell-me-what-I’m-thinking* readings, I usually closed my eyes as part of the charade. With Mr. Shen I didn’t bother.

“You have something to show me,” I told him. “A point to

make, perhaps. You're delighted by the prospect but worried by its outcome. You've done this more than once, and know that you'll succeed. Still, you have concerns. You're afraid how I'll react. Some sort of urgency is driving you."

He nodded encouragingly.

"There's something else," I went on. "A fondness. Perhaps indulgence is a better word. Something you feel but can't acknowledge. Not now, at any rate. Not in words."

He sipped his tea. I hadn't made any startling *How did you do that?* revelations. In fact, all of it was guesswork.

After a few moments he set his cup down and slid the tangram pieces equidistant from each other.

"I'm going inside now, David," he announced, getting up. "I have work to do. Study this. I'm setting you a little task: to figure out what it reminds you of." He took his cup and teapot to the door. "We will not speak again until you have an answer."

The door snapped shut. I heard him in the kitchen rinsing up, then the sound of papers being straightened on his desk. The scrape of chair legs on the floor. Silence.

He hadn't made a figure of the tangram, merely pushed the tiles apart. What did they remind me of? The jade glowed softly on the spool's weathered wood. Green—my eyes? No, the colour of my eyes was clear, like light refracting through a mineral, not bouncing off it. Stuck on green, I thought of other things. Leaves? Grass? Yesterday's canoe? Nothing fit. The green reminded me of green, like gazing up at clouds and seeing only clouds.

I tried instead to focus on the table, not the tiles, hoping that the switch of fore- and background might reveal something. The Nuclear Hazard symbol flitted through my mind, the result of how the triangles were accidentally placed. Adding in the rhomboid made me think of Mitsubishi Motors. The company logo and the scary black-and-yellow trefoil were a lot alike. I hadn't noticed it before.

I free-associated long enough for Mr. Shen to silently refresh my coffee. Twice. My eyes began to group the tiles into partial figures.

The neck and two humps of a camel. The Pause/Play button on a stereo.

The sun rose high. The scent of pine grew heady. A chipmunk scampered on the deck, caught sight of me and fled.

By lunch—tomato soup and crackers brought out by Mr. Shen—the tangram still refused to speak.

What was I supposed to be reminded of?

I took a tile at random. The jade felt more like silk than, say, a piece of glass. I rubbed my fingers over it. No *Eureka!* moment.

I could sit and study it all day, but the tangram was a puzzle after all, a game. I might as well start playing. Staring at it bug-eyed wasn't coughing up results. From memory, I reproduced the sitting cat Mr. Shen had made, squinting so the lines between the tiles disappeared. Seen this way, the head appeared to be the small square tile with triangles for ears.



In fact, it was the rhomboid laid down vertically, with triangles placed back-to-back to form a mirror rhomboid of exactly the same size.



I spread the tiles apart and tried to make a standing cat. I'd only read about the tangram, never played with it. My standing cat looked like a Schnauzer with a tumour, not a tail. When I tried to fix the Schnauzer it became a sailboat with legs. Attempts to make the sailboat a galleon gave me something like Godzilla on his back.

The trick appeared to be not thinking of the tiles as discrete, polygons to be arranged until they fit some pre-conceived idea, but rather as a set of shapes with meaning that emerged depending on their context.

I started toying randomly. This triangle *beside* the square: a goose's head. The same triangle *above*: a child's foursquare outline

of a house. With the square rotated forty-five degrees: a face topped by a wide-brimmed hat.

A pastime, Mr. Shen had said. More like a time accelerator. Once I got the hang of it, making figures using all the tiles was easy. All my life I'd let the clues that people drop arrange themselves as maps inside my head. The tangram was a 2D version of exactly the same process, and I lost myself completely in the narcissism of it.

The freshness of the day matured. The light turned orange-gold. The pine scent softened. Mr. Shen came out and watched me for a while, then went inside and started making supper. The smell of beans and wieners drifted through the door.

I felt a little guilty. The pleasures of the tangram had distracted me. Mr. Shen had set a task but all I'd done was play. More sobering, I'd utterly forgotten I was there because of Kirin. Was there some charm over the place? Kirin had gone missing after hooking up with Roy Calhoun. Roy and Mr. Shen were friends; Roy had told me so himself. Yet here I was, a guest of Mr. Shen's, wasting time with little bits of jade. For all I knew he'd had a hand in Kirin's disappearance.

I ducked inside to see how far along the dinner preparations were, then climbed the railway sleepers to the shore. The sun had swung well west and hung in limbo between afternoon and evening. The sky was nearly colourless, the surface of the lake like liquid silver.

... or a mirror with no world to reflect... or the puzzle pieces in my head that told me who a person was... personal geometries whose meaning came from context...

No. That couldn't be what Mr. Shen was after. He couldn't see inside my mind. He wanted something else. Something I was missing.

I climbed back up the steps. Mr. Shen was on the deck. I shook my head. No answer yet. We'd be dining silently. I made to go inside.

"David, wait."

I turned around. Mr. Shen was tapping his left temple, grinning

impishly.

“What’s up here,” he said. “The tangram puzzle. That’s what it reminds you of. What you feel—what you read—from other people. How your brain interprets the impressions. Don’t look so surprised. I may not have the power to see what’s in your mind, but I know what’s in my own. Now, shall we go in?”