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Backwater

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On the banks of the Yangtze tour boats churn towards sunset. On board the Eastern Star, Western tourists sip vodka and snap photos of mountaintops. The boats' workers, men and women born on failing farms, practice their English in restroom mirrors. They mouth smiles next to leaky sink faucets that drip consistently like metronomes.

In the workers' lounge, black and white television sets rest on Formica countertops. At the top of every hour, a supervisor lectures on common American idioms. Behind him, the televisions run loops of *Die Hard*, *Dirty Dancing*, and *Gone with the Wind*. The supervisor says watching is the best way to learn. Americans can be generous tippers when drunk.

In a room with four bunks, a new worker changes into his uniform. The room has a window that, with a little muscle, opens. Thick river air floats like smog through his window. Carried on this stream, an almost microscopic dobsonfly buzzes onto his window sill. The new worker remembers a letter he once received from his brother who moved to Chengdu, where pollution is low and the waters sparkle in Morse code. Dobsonflies translate these messages, sucking on the sparkles and growing as large as human hands. The worker looks at his hand and suddenly it seems rather small.

Down river, in Sandouping, work has finished on a new manufacturing plant. Fertile soil replaced with concrete, farmlands become slums. Workers march in sync, the stomp of their 2 boots echoing like gunfire. The smell of chemicals from the plant hangs in the air for miles. Toxins seep into townspeople's skin, turning their fingertips a dirty white. Two lovers, holding hands, stop in an alleyway during the warmth of late afternoon. They hold their hands, entwined, up to the sun as rays of light drain through their bleached skin. After the plant stands for ten years, life expectancy in the town decreases by the same amount.

The plant produces a new synthetic material. Scientific journals report that the material, when tested blindly, can only be distinguished from human skin by four out of every twenty people. Vats of acidic cocktails hum while blending. In mechanic valleys of grey and black, oil-marked tarps cover fresh molds of the synthetic, molds made to look like life size women and men. Women with dainty frames and large breasts. Men with chiseled chests and long dicks. Women with curves, men with dimples. Men with blue eyes, some women without any eyes at all. The plant, at full capacity, births over ten thousand dolls a day. After the synthetic is molded, small motherboards are inserted into the bodies. The dolls are then shipped to another plant for a special glaze of paint. It is said, by some workers, that without the paint the dolls appear soulless.