

September 2022

The first night they meet in some pub, Claudia is doing what she always does, gazing at the crowd around, and thinking to each, who are you. Most on their way to a slurring jolliness, their bodies more fluid, more languorous as they speak. Claudia is still, content in her version of peace.

“Sweetie, if you meet anyone in this city, it has to be James,” Sophia’s voice comes from behind. Ever the social butterfly, she did this all the time.

Claudia turns around, and there he is, a scruffy man with sandy brown hair, his green eyes and feathery lashes hiding behind black square frames. Perhaps he is an expat, coming over for a six-month stint and a fawning social scene that could boost his self-esteem.

Claudia puts her hand out to shake, while he spreads his arms out for an embrace. Her hand digs into him. His face crinkles as he laughs. A warmth tingles on her cheeks. He hugs her anyway.

“You’re both writers, kind of,” Sophia says.

“It’s just a hobby.” Claudia says almost instinctively, “I just dabble here and there.”

“I’m sure it’s not.” His eyes seem to gleam, catching the sparse light. She looks to the side to tell Sophia off, primed for some self-effacing remark, but realises that she has already faded away.

“Well, I actually work in marketing.” Her voice flattens, and she pauses before filling the space. “So I write a lot of emails, I guess. You know, I love capitalism and lying.”

He laughs. “Don’t we all?” he says. “I’d sell my soul for a piece of Hong Kong real estate. In a heartbeat.”

“It is the modern Faustian pact. The dream of property.” she says, “And for us impoverished writers as well?”

“Well I’m actually a reporter.”

“You’re a journalist here?”

“Yeah.”

Claudia had never met a journalist in Hong Kong. From the news, she had assumed they were all tired, old-looking Chinese men with grey hair, who had all fled, or disappeared. She wants to ask more, but all she gives is a quiet “oh”

“Yeah” There is a weariness to his words that she is too scared to touch.

She pauses looking at him, “Perhaps Soph’s definition of writer is a bit skewed.”

“Just a user of words.”

“Romancer of semicolons.”

“Well, good grammar does turn me on,” he says. She feels her cheeks getting hot again.

“Maybe she’s a lot more poetic than we thought.” Claudia says, “Aren’t we all writers in our own way?”

“Yeah?” His voice inflects upwards, seemingly with interest.

“You know, telling ourselves stories in order to live.” As she hears the words materialise, she realises they are hanging, suspended, heavy in the air.

But he takes them, “distracting ourselves from the truth”

“Or making life worth living.”

“Spoken like a true writer.”

She smiles, one that is powered by an unknown effervescent heat fluttering in her stomach. He smiles back, a lopsided one that embraces his whole face, bearing the neat front row of his teeth and his cheeks moulding into deep dimples. She breaks away first, shying away from the intensity of his stare.

“Sorry but I have to go,” she says.

“Now? Why not stay a little longer, this is the city that never sleeps,” he says.

“I just have something tomorrow morning.” His arm has hovered to her forearm, he is warm to the touch.

“Well. let me at least walk you to the station?” he offers.

“Oh no, don’t let me take you away from the party.”

“No,” he says, “please do.”

Outside, they are greeted by neon signs flickering against the deep green-blue sky. An almost fantastical haze. There is something even beautiful about the thick humid air coalescing with tendrils of passing cigarette smoke; it lingers, wafts heavily, softening the kaleidoscope of quickly-moving lights.

“Mesmerising, isn’t it?” James says.

“I feel like it makes me nostalgic for a memory I never had.”

“Well, you know what they say.”

“No?” she replies.

“You can always make your memory much better, right?”

“Hmm, interesting... I’ve never heard that.”

He chuckles. “Or maybe mark that down as something I tell myself, and one you should too.”

“Is that why you stay, even with everything going on?” She says, while tilting her head.

“Yeah, it’s kind of a long story.”

“We’ve still got a little way to walk.”

“Well, my grandpa, he was a journalist too. He came over in the 60s. Worked at one of the first newspapers. To write about the city taking on a new life. He just would have the most incredible stories.”

“So, you’re like continuing his legacy?”

“Yeah. He was the only man I knew to be so sure of his life.”

“Mm,” the sound is all Claudia can give. She can feel her throat strangling, her eyes coated in a damp sheer sheen. She is relieved when little dribbles of rain begin to fall. It muddles the night, obscures it to become an impressionist painting of sorts, the lights and signs distorted in detail, but still compelling. She can’t help a smile tugging at her lips while watching little droplets slowly falling on his shirt. He grazes her waist, directing her to duck into a cramped alleyway where there is a little shelter overhead.

“So, are you here to stay or just to visit?” he asks.

“I’m not sure yet. I feel like I’m coming home in a way.” The humidity is beginning to release a little, the earthy freshness is growing in the air.

They are both quiet, their backs pressing against the concrete wall, the rain glistens on the pavement a little more, before he speaks again, “It’s *jyun fan*, isn’t it?”

“Rice?” she asks, her head now tilted to the side.

He chuckles, “No. It means a fateful return, that over every lifetime, you are destined for this place.” She stares out ahead, watching the neon lights play on the wet surfaces, casting a surreal glow.

Perhaps there is something about autumn when the days are still long and languid but the air no longer bears that titillating heat which wraps around like another body. Autumn days are lonelier. They are full of craving. Full of romantic possibilities.

But autumn is also the season of the maturing sun, of chirps and wails dissipating into nothing, and perhaps that is more fitting. Because then again, Claudia is losing her grandmother. To Alzheimer's and worse things, she does not dare to think or say.

Before returning, Claudia had only one vision of Hong Kong, the city and her grandma coalescing into one vagrant dream. In mildew, muggy air and black hair, her grandma, the junk boat, weaving the waters of life as she pleased. She is uninhibited, winding the distance, embracing the smog settling. She is the bobbing red fire, pulling into docks and typhoon shelters.

The mildew and muggy air are still here, as they walk back from the pub that night. She realises later the duklings are not.

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James meets Claudia again in the laneway between market stalls, illuminated by the orange-red glow of the sky. He knows it is a broody night, where colour will plummet into darkness, a shift in twilight so sudden and foreboding of the thunderous storms imminent. He hurries to her, knowing they won't have long.

"Soph's sent me as reinforcements to help you haggle." he says.

"Oh ok." He thinks he hears her voice deflate.

"So are you looking for anything in particular", James asks, as they begin meandering through the serpentine lanes.

"I don't know" Claudia says, "maybe something interesting. Or something old."

Her eyes are widening in what could be wonder or shock at the garments, statues, bracelets, and all sorts strewn across the plastic tables in every colour.

"Hate to break it to you but these markets might not be the best fit" He gestures to the bags up ahead, "They've gotten a bit mass produced." Both their eyes turn to watch a haggle of women emerge with a plastic bag full of rainbow Louis Vuitton print bags. He rolls his eyes.

"I guess if I'm gonna buy something mass produced, I might as well save on the shipping costs and get an experience out of it." She says with almost a shrug, "I know it's terrible, but all the shops have gotten a lot more expensive than I remember." Throngs of people with their backpacks worn across their chest are weaving in between them, but they remain connected, gazes fixed on each other.

"Yeah, the city isn't what it was." His voice fades.

James had always seen his age as linked with the city. Born in the year when Hong Kong was handed back, 16 when the protests began, 19 when the student protestors were charged.

Ever since the new laws and the pandemic, it felt like the city had come to a standstill, and his life too. The publication he had worked for had collapsed under new security laws. He remembers getting the call on just another Tuesday, and then seeing the photos of his desk behind police tape.

He was fortunate enough to get another job, but every task now felt like a numbing dance, some sort of puppet show. He could see his fingertips hit each key, his hands shake someone else's, his feet move around but he could not truly feel it, every meeting passing a haze. He nods along, pitching the same things, the conspiratorial role he knows he needs to play,

Now when he had tried to write anything of his own, he felt the onset of a confining chest pain and a prickling sensation which made it virtually impossible to move. He waits alone until it passes.

A shop attendant rattles an oversized keyring in his face, mouthing scattered words in English. He tells her no thank you in Cantonese. In that time, Claudia has crouched to inspect a plastic table, crowded with little jade figurines of elephants, fish, dragons, Buddhas in a gradient of greens.

“Do you believe in Buddhism?” she says while brushing her finger over the Buddha’s beaming face. Her gaze turns upwards to him.

“No, not really. Why’d you ask?”

“The other day you mentioned *jyun fan*. I looked it up. It’s a Buddhist thing, right?” The deep blue of the night is now swathing her in a soft glowing hue.

“Uhh I’m not sure, I suppose it is.” he says, “I guess there are a lot of concepts that really resonate”

“Yeah?”

He pauses, and even with the thumping of a street drummer nearby, and the din of passing cars and motorcycles, he feels that this momentary silence between them is deafening. It is almost like his own heartbeat is reverberating with the pounding.

“Uhh, there’s a lot of wisdom in being your most authentic self and reaching inner peace. I’d like to believe that’s how I want to live my life.”

“Mm” He notices her body slightly twisting back as her eyes linger on a dress rack.

“What about you?” he says

“I don’t know. Well, my grandma’s Buddhist.”

“I guess a lot of the older generation are. For tradition’s sake.”

“She’s also Christian though.”

“Oh, how weird.”

“Yeah, I’m not sure how it works, maybe something about the self-giving and sacrificial parts of them both.” She pauses and she has come almost to a standstill, and he copies her.

“I like the idea of things being circular and bigger than ourselves. but I’m not sure if I could actually get inner peace.” she says, “There are too many unknowns, too uncomfortable truths about our world now.”

James hears a deep rumbling, a sound he knows signals a storm is coming soon, but he tries to continue focusing only on her and the meandering, strange turns of her brain. “Yeah, I wonder what Buddha would say if he lived today.”

“He wouldn’t be here buying a jade version of himself, I can tell you that.” she smirks, and he gives a quiet laugh before her voice wanders again “But I guess things change too quickly now.” Her eyes are meandering too, her gait now slowing again at a store of cheongsams.

“Did you wanna try one on?” he asks

“Um, no” she pauses. “Well would you mind?”

“Yeah, that’s what we’re here for isn’t it?”

“You don’t think it’s like cringe, or like weird in that appropriation kinda way.” she asks.

“No. Of course not.” he says and smiles again.

She enters the makeshift dressing room, and he begins speaking to the store attendant, an old Chinese lady who has had a store for twenty years and used to be a tailor. She began doing it again during the pandemic but couldn’t make a living. He’s heard many stories like these before.

Before he knows it, Claudia is jutting her head out of the dressing room, sandwiching it tightly in between the two sides of the thick plastic sheet. Her voice is quiet, wavering as she says “Uhh I’m not sure.”

“Can I see?” James asks, before immediately second-guessing what he had just said and wondering if he was imposing.

“Really?” she says in a higher pitch, her voice inflecting upwards. He nods, and she emerges.

The cheongsam she wears is red and white with flecks of gold interwoven through. It brings out her eyes, now glossing over a little. She looks taller, longer and more regal, like she has just come out of the 1960s. He can’t help but let the smile overtake his face

“You look good,” James says.

“Thanks.”

The store attendant is now closer and asks Claudia in Mandarin about buying the cheongsam. Her eyes widen in panic, and she tries responding in Cantonese. James jumps in and begins haggling.

“Two hundred” he keeps repeating in Mandarin.

“Two ninety” the woman says. They proceed in a sort of rhythmic waltz, accompanied by a deep rumbling crescendoing. The air is so damp James can almost feel the rain materialising.

Claudia nudges James as a sign to stop before they pay.

“I’m getting a cheongsam for 250 Hong Kong dollars. That’s cheap enough.” Her hand covers her mouth after saying it, before she repeats the word in different intonations.

“Cheongsam, Cheongsum, Cheongsammm, che-onsam,”

He can now hear the rain pounding loudly against the thick plastic tarp and metal scaffolding overhead. White flashes illuminate the shops, the myriad of colours diffused by the cascading sheets of water.

“Shall we run for it,” he says before they are sprinting out the door. He can hear a vague “Oh my god” undulating with her running, and the melodic tune of her laughter in the air.

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They are sitting opposite each other at a diner. Their knees are touching under the small wooden table because there is nowhere else for them to go. The closeness feels illicit.

There’s something about running in the rain with someone that strips off all inhibition, Claudia thinks. Is it cleansing or freeing, knowing that there is a futility to the act?

When she had first gotten out of the dressing room in her cheongsam, she couldn’t help but feel a tinge of unease. Perhaps it was the way he was complimenting her, sounding as if he wanted to impress upon her something. Or the dynamic of having someone look at her in cultural dress.

But then she had seen herself in the mirror, and she had gotten this swelling feeling that overcame her whole body and compelled her almost to tears.

She’d been back at her grandma’s every day, helping her shower. She squirms and shouts in protest, but eventually will surrender, standing in the shower, resting sideways on her shoulder blade before Claudia sprays warm water on her, shielding her eyes so the water does not get in. The frail nakedness of her grandma filled her heart with a tenderness she could not explain. She has never conceived of herself as motherly but there is something about the cyclicity of Claudia tending to her grandma’s body with almost maternal hands.

Some days, Claudia lathers up her grandma’s hair to wash it, careful not to get any shampoo into her eyes. She remembers in her early years when her grandma did this for her too. Claudia hated her thick, unwavering black hair and her grandma told her it was the gift of being Chinese. It was thicker and resilient like us as people she’d say before making a black sesame concoction. She hopes she will remember this, even though for her grandma it is already trembling in the distance, far away.

The chair screeches against the floor. James has returned with tea which warms Claudia’s hands.

“When I was a kid, I hated the rain. I always thought that the banyan trees would fall on me.” he says while looking over her shoulder towards the window, “And I’d be that kid in the news.”

“At least you’d make the news,” she jokes, raising an eyebrow. A thought passes through her mind, and she realises she must have a tell.

“What is it?” James asks.

“Oh... Just a random thought.”

“Tell me,” his words are drawn out, teasing and pleading.

“It’s very rogue.”

“Tell me.”

“You know that old riddle, if a tree falls and no one is there to hear it, did it happen?”

James leans closer and his chair creaks a little as he says, "Yeah, I know it. What about it?"

“Well, what do you think?”

“I think it does. You don’t need witnesses for things to exist.”

“Mm, so you’d be happy living alone.”

“No. Doesn’t mean I wouldn’t be real though.”

Claudia gives a quiet almost purring sound as her eyes look down to her tea, “But what is real. People come, people go, we buy things, we see things, we do things. It just feels like a haze. That you don't know where it all begins and ends. "Her voice feels softer amidst the diner's ambient hum, the rain still drumming against the windows. She feels like the roof could fall down any moment now.

“Yeah, I think I get what you mean. Maybe I feel like that too.” he says, as Claudia fixes her gaze towards him again.

He has paused and he gives an audible sigh. If she were a braver woman, she would ask about it more, about whether he too feels the utter abandonment of the everyday, the tragic way life wanes.

But instead, she facetiously chuckles, “Maybe I should just become an influencer. To document my life.”

James gives a small smile, “But there’s a difference between being looked at and being seen.”

Claudia begins to hear the rain subside, and almost blending in, she says “I guess one too between existing and living.” She is not sure if he has heard her, but in that moment, she is revealing herself, like a stained-glass window when light passes through.

They walk home in the city, washed by the rain, and Claudia is looking down to admire the lights reflected in the murky puddles, each neon bulb like a jewel reflected and refracted in a myriad of ways. Occasionally, she begins closing her eyes just for a second to see if she hears his breathing, as if she could atune to it too. She cannot, but when she opens them again and watches him side-on, she thinks she can see his shoulders loosen, his whole demeanour calmer with every exhale. And soon, he says they are nearly at his home.

Perhaps it is the rain, she thinks before she asks what could change nothing and everything. “Can I come in?”