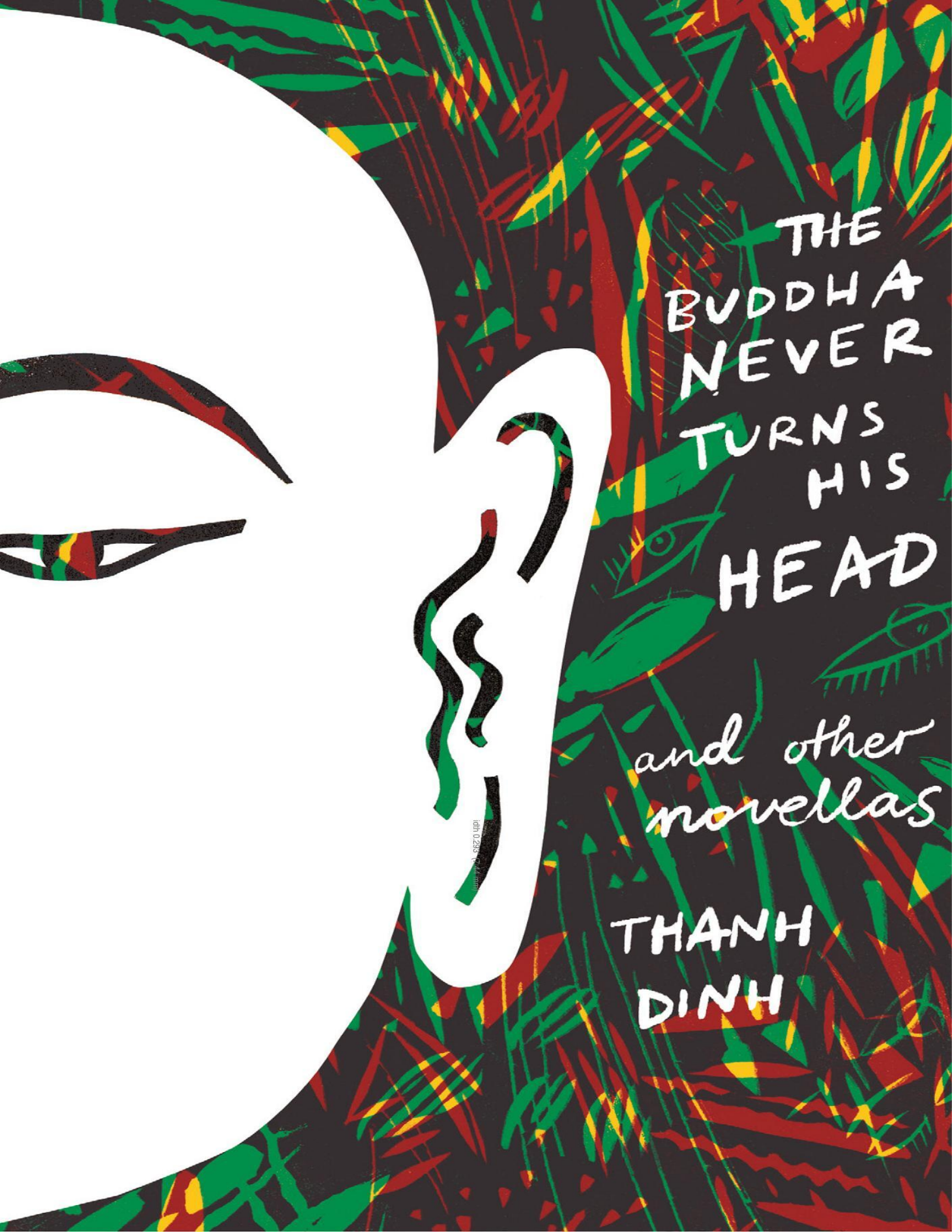


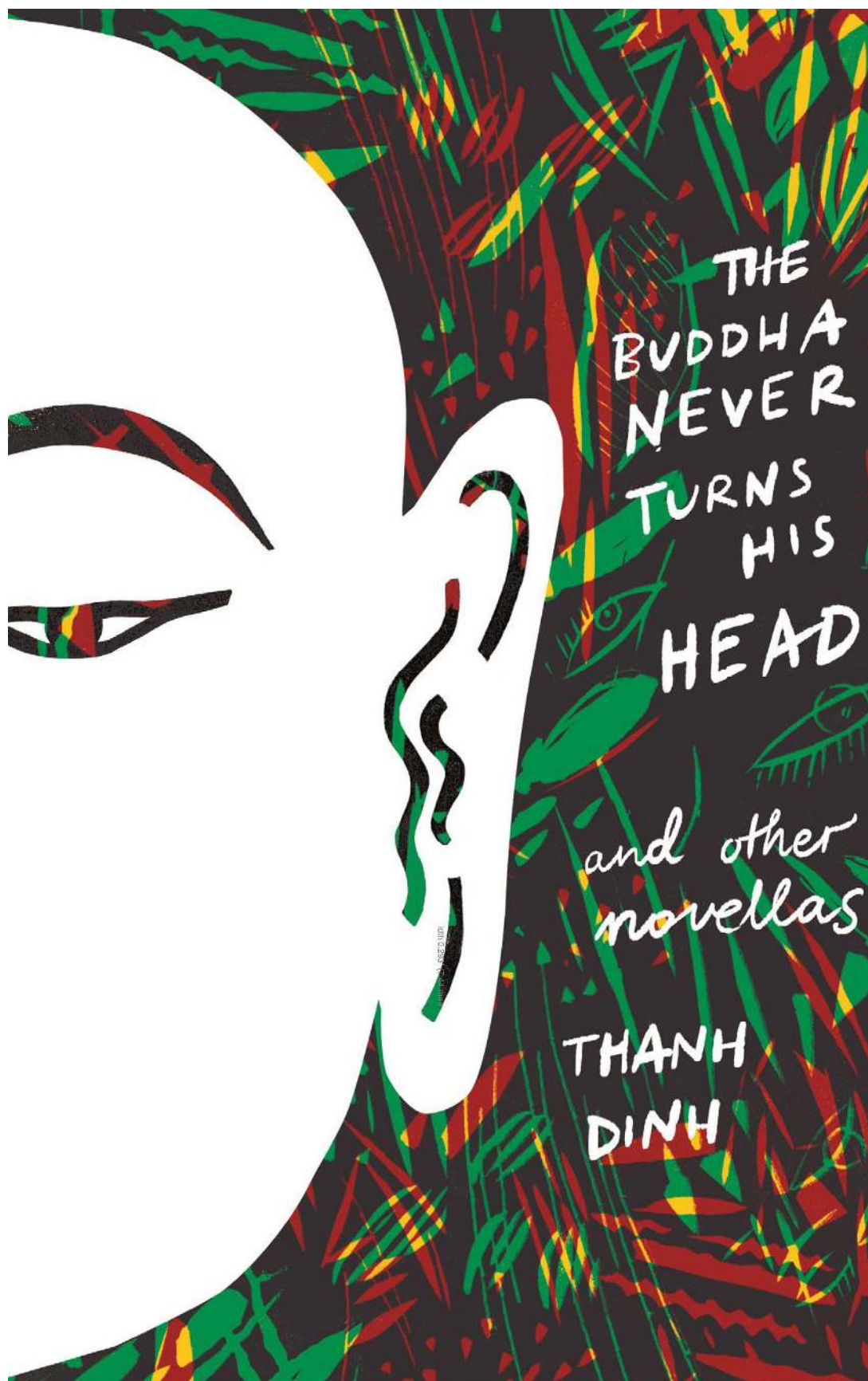


THE
BUDDHA
NEVER
TURNS
HIS
HEAD

*and other
novellas*

THANH
DINH

ISBN 0-230-74444-0



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Thanh Dinh

The Buddha Never Turns His Head and Other Novellas

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I

The Buddha Never Turns His Head

The Buddha Never Turns His Head



THE
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Full Moon in October

By Thanh Dinh

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“At the end of the day, between grief and nothingness, we all return to nothingness. Why bother choosing, then?”

—*Kill My Darling*, Thanh Dinh

The Pilgrim

June 20XX. Somewhere in Asia.

He arrives at Sand City at the stroke of midnight. The caravan where he belongs turns down its light; the gypsy women with multicolored dresses and gilded bangles lay out a feast of dried meat on stoves made of twigs and twine they picked up along the road. He looks at the starry night above, mumbling a prayer, an offering of gratitude for his ancestors, to whom he had entrusted his life on this journey thus far, and lurches toward the city's gate.

The pilgrim doesn't remember his birthplace. From the moment he learns to speak his name, he must also know by heart that he is an outsider. From dust to dust, ashes to ashes, as the leader of his tribe had said; a man without a past would not have a bright future, except the one where his death awaits him like the last and only companion in his journey into the land of solitude. The pilgrim carves the preaching of the village head on each memory muscle in his brain, but he refuses to believe that he was born to acquiesce and settle for a fate of eternal damnation and loneliness. Thus begins his life as a vagabond in the desert.

From the gales of monsoon winds to the sandstorms in the desiccated, unforgiving drought seasons, the pilgrim has slowly forgotten his village. In bitter irony, he consoles himself with the thorny joke: he is the son of all villagers, the brother of all youngsters, and the beloved of none. The caravans

he lived in changed with the seasons. There were times when he was whirled into a circus and took care of the defeated animals, the weirdly shaped ladies, the contortionist men, and the good-hearted ringleader with a blind eye or a sore throat signaling an onset of cancer. Other times, he would be begging on the street with a cult's disciples, preaching peace but never practicing the things he taught. The stories piled up inside him like twittering birds, eager to fly out any moment, but his lips were sealed. Nobody ever asked the pilgrim if he thought a life like the one he chose was happy.

Sometimes, when the caravan he was with stopped at a small cohort by the mountainside, the pilgrim would feel a sudden rush of nostalgia running through his veins, and he would succumb to that primal instinct of every human to find his root. He would wander around the thatched-roof houses, lost with the yearning to find a familiar face amidst the strange children and the aging elders. On those nights, the sky would be spectacularly bright, as if the stars were lit by the flame of longing in his heart and glazed over by a thousand tears in his brief remorse for the life he had forsaken to fight against some silly old man's prediction. The curse the leader of his tribe had bestowed on him like God's present, never once asking for his permission, much less a maternal, "Son, did you like the fate we have given you?" haunted him like a black dog: it was there on his shoulders during the day, and in the night, when he was deep in his solitude, he could hear its howl, piercingly cruel with a thirst for blood. But his mom died giving birth, and his father was beheaded when the revolution happened. People still talked about the scene: the head dripping blood as the rebels paraded it around the village, instilling fear into anyone who thought of opposing, forcing the choice onto them, pressuring the fight into the calloused palms of the men whose knowledge only revolved

around rice fields and the women whose minds focused eternally on raising children and preserving meat.

Though the roads he traveled on were many, and the paths leading him to the world outside were winding and filled with nothing but troubles for his aging heart, the pilgrim was never home. He asked about the village, one too many times, of the gypsy women and the elder bards who carried within their bosoms the origin of this Earth's creation. No answer was sufficient: some told him the village was gone in a flood; others told him his people were starved to death by a long season of drought. The reason was different each time, but the result was the same: his country was no more, and he was the byproduct of an irretrievable losing race that survived on tales and word of mouth alone. He shook his head at every turn, saying with a suffering smile, "That's alright, I bear no root to that Godforsaken land. Dust to dust, ashes to ashes."

And he has walked the long, thorny road of a tormented soul until now, when he finally reaches the point of his eternal beginning and ending, Sand City. He feigns thinking that decades ago, when he was but a teenager, the city was a meadow with spring waters, streams full of fish, fruits, and a bounty of harvest—all there for the taking. The pilgrim steps on a sharp stone hidden underneath the soft, pillowy layer of sand; the sharp edge cuts his foot, but he feels no pain. His skin has long been thickened by his toils under the harsh, cruel sun. His life of longing has prepared him for even the most excruciating agony. How can a mere cut on his calloused foot compare to the vanity he lost? And it is the flimsiest vanity of all—the vanity of memory.

He crushes a pinch of sand between his fingers, listening to the wind's howling, picturing in his mind the cry of his people. Beneath closed eyes, he pricks his ears, carefully picking out each change in tonality, each crack in the rhythm, the duality in voices. Kneeling, he stays still, like a statue of a

Bodhisattva someone erected out of pious need to salvage the last vestige of morality in the Sand City. The gypsy women and the elder bards also think he is praying for the prostitutes and the damned in the dark alleys, leading to the labyrinth of a city without light. Or hope. Or the simple thought of tomorrow.

But the pilgrim is doing neither. He is not a great, selfless soul like the Bodhisattva, and he was never a believer in any earthly faith. In the dark of night, he simply distinguishes the sound of the bellowing gale and the silky sand running through his fingers, and lets his suffering mind run wild, flying across deserts and oceans, sprinting back to the child he once was. Listening to the unrest of his palpitating heart in its wildest desire for a place to belong, he wonders whose souls are still waiting for him, and whose are no longer here.

Even more morbidly, he asks himself whose soul resides within him, the child who ran away to seek another fate or the tired, defeated human whose knees are perpetually kneeling, whose hands are eternally reaching up to heaven, begging to surrender their pain and sufferings to the Lord above.

Looking at the cruelly bright stars, the pilgrim feels his dry eyes sting with a sharp pain, as if someone is gouging them out and washing them with bleach. No one is here waiting for him, except Death.

Sand City

Before there was a Sand City, there had been a country.

As with anything that happened in history, before everything was reduced to an insignificant dot on the map or a period on a page of a book, it had been a canvas of land, an atlas, many pages of stories to be told. The country where Sand City has become right now was what many gypsy people would call a pearl of the bottomless, borderless East Ocean. It was beautiful in its shyness, and in the most timorous way, the country offered its layers of opalescent magnificence to any passerby who ventured to discover the depth of such a wonder in the East End of the world. The gypsies called it a pearl because its beauty transcended the brilliance and cheap depravity of a diamond—it took quiet, dignified pride in its scholarly, elegant, yet ethereal halo. One needed only take a look, and they would be lost forever amongst the many night-wanderers lurching along the country's alleys and corners, finding the meaning to life, the reason and ways to keep on living, and sometimes, when the country was generous, they would see what the foreign settlers called: 華麗(huáli).

華麗(huáli) is a phrase used to describe a place that is beautiful beyond human imagination, a paradise of lights and illumination reserved for the highest

beings, and when someone witnesses a scene like that, they lose the ability to speak; their words fail to compose any other praise than the simple: 華麗 (huáli). Unforgettable magnificence, irretrievable flamboyance, never-before-seen wonders, unrivalled grandeur for a lifetime to come—such is the unspoken descriptive power of the phrase. As time flows by like a lazy, slithering snake, entwining in it both wars and history, the foreign settlers turn into naturalized citizens, and people have long forgotten the true meaning of the word 華麗 (huáli). Instead, they turn the phrase into biting sarcasm—huá (flower) for the rich and lì (tears) for the poor. No one finds the joke tasteless, and people keep on living.

Yet, on the night of the mid-autumn's full moon, every corner, alley, street lamp—even the remotest tattered, shabby camps of refugees—the whole country was lit brightly by tiny lanterns shaped like lotus flowers, dancing in the stream of gentle, velveteen darkness. The people moved through the labyrinthine alleys in waves, undulating in multi-colored stripes of silk, chiffon, and organza, woven together into a river of endless, blooming flowers. The young women who were looking for a suitable mate raised their white lotus lanterns, chanting, “Oh wandering knight, if you're worthy to be my husband, come and solve my riddle.” The lanterns danced in the dark irises of the innocent children running like gusts of wind through the stalls of delectable food and sweet treats, making their eyes sparkle like a thousand fireworks at once. It was magical, a beauty beyond words. Somewhere among the stalls of the foreign settlers' medicine storefront and late-night porridge, the old men and women clucked their tongues, speaking in their language with a crack in their voices, “華麗”(huáli). The forgotten memory returns. The phrase is resurrected from six feet of labor and daily worries for bread, for money, for the uncertain future with no guarantee of citizenship. In the still

frame of one moment, as the lanterns light up a small corner, the old, foreign settlers wiped away the useless sadness that wouldn't earn them a meal by tomorrow morning. The unrivaled grandeur of 華麗(huáli) dies when the last lantern's candle is extinguished, leaving behind a trail of vaporized smoke, burned wax, and lost dreams.

Then the war came, followed by much bloodshed and plenty of plagues. Sometimes, when the cascading lavender sky of a faraway land grows too sad, the pilgrim remembers his grandmother's trilling voice as she sang him to sleep: *Pray to the lord, please tell us where did our suffering begin*, and he would hold onto her linen skirt, patched with colorful square badges and flowery patterns, while asking himself that same question, dreaming of a world where every child's first word is "peace." He wasn't born during wartime; that was his blessing and his curse. . His father was enlisted to fight for the revolution, but later, he was used as a scapegoat to demonstrate the rebel faction's power. For a while, his grandmother didn't know which side was the right one and which was the invader. She lamented to her neighbors, "How do I distinguish them? They all look like me, you, my son, and my daughter-in-law." People often told him about his parents' tragic deaths, how they defended the crucial foundation of the current nation till their last breath. But his grandmother would spit on it because she said all that death was unnecessary.

"Why would you want a hero when all of us could have been alive if those stupid, power-hungry rebellion leaders up there just stopped for a second to realize we're not pawns on a chess table; neither are we puppets in a show. We're fucking humans, and humans are dying," she said.

Standing face-to-face in a combat stand with the military officers who came by her house to deliver the pilgrim's parents' ashes, the pilgrim's grandmother's hatred glowered so bright and cruel that the tribe people

could've easily mistaken the officers for the real villains instead. Her feet were wide apart, her shoulders squared and tense, the black mourning bandana on her head turned a sour shade of mockery as she sneered at the authority. She swung her scythe at them; her silent stare harvested their strict posture as their shadows cowered under the sun: *Get lost.*

"Ma'am, it is an honor to die for your country. Many would have done the same." The leader of the men spoke with severity. Yet, he pulled his cap down to cover his eyes, as if there wasn't an ounce of truth in his words. Of course, he was alive. Many weren't.

"Sonny boy, you're telling me that killing is justified because of a difference in ideas. I don't see no 'us versus them.' What I see is my people, and my people include this country's entire citizens—the foreign settlers, the pilgrims, the gypsies, the refugees—they're all my brothers and sisters, daughters and sons. Tell me, what is your country? The land you're standing on, or a fucking ideology twisted to fit the bag of the rich?"

"We fought for freedom."

"At the cost of everyone's lives."

"You don't understand." The leader lowered his head even more; the veins on his temples were pulsing hard. He grew angry, and because he didn't know the cause of his frustration, the anger kept blazing.

"Make me understand, then."

They made the pilgrim's grandmother understand, sure enough. They beat her into submission first, but her scythe was raised higher than their strength. When sheer force failed, they pulled rank and handcuffs, but his grandmother was quicker, and she chased the officers out of her house, throwing knives, pots and pans, and smashing dishes. She rolled on the floor, bellowing to the whole tribe that the authority was killing innocent people, that the officers

were oppressing heroes and turning them into villains for the propaganda's benefit. And the officers, for their part, failed to contain her so spectacularly that the whole fiasco turned them into the laughingstock for the village till the day the pilgrim left for his journey. The leader of the squad stepped forward, announcing that the old lady was under arrest for reactionary behaviors and non-compliant protest. The woman spat into his face, lifted her hand-woven skirt up at him, cursing, "Reactionary my ass. I'm going to fucking protest to your mother." And she lifted her scythe, in a swift moment, and struck down on the leader's head. As the man fell, with blood all over his face, his eyes stared at her, white with fear. She laughed. Yes, they made her understand. But she refused the knowledge.

* * *

The pilgrim's grandmother didn't live long after that incident. But that wasn't a matter then, as it will never be a matter in any history lesson. She fell into the mass grave of the ones who, like her, stood up to prove they were human, only to be struck down as slaves. People's lives are forgettable, yes, but once in a while, the pilgrim could see the grave cleaner standing before the epitaph, his eyes red with fury, his teeth gnashing, his wrinkles pushing onto each other like waves of a tsunami: the anger never disappears; it smolders underneath layers of forced silence, waiting for a time to burst.

But before the time comes, the country, like any joke that goes bad with age, collapses on itself. The first sign of madness appears when the authorities grow hungry for the money that rare resources could bring. Then the desiccated nation of the modern day turns the page of the history book and

becomes envious of the pearlescent city's past wealth. Piling onto the jealousy, fueling the greed of the authority further as the new government is stupefied by the idolatry and foreign ideals of a get-rich-quick scheme where the laziest person could also share the bounty of the poorest toiling refugee. And like any other unlearned lesson, another war ensues. The new power overtakes the old power, grabbing the leftover wealth, sucking the land dry of blood—human blood and the nation's blood. The people are cast aside in a silent cry of destitution. No one cares about the mass grave of the dead, who were the first ones to foresee the consequences of the endless persecution in the name of protecting sovereignty and killing reactionary seeds.

No one ever remembers the grave cleaner whose eyes are the color of fire and vengeance.

The wars go on. The cities are buried underneath layers of bricks and corpses. Someone cleans up the mess in the dead of night, so by the first light of the next morning, another war can begin anew. Gradually, what's left of the once 華麗(huáli) country is just a tiny

hamlet of little huts leaning on each other, with a desiccated river trickling down the path in the rainy season like the final mercy of the gods all the dictators had told the people to abandon and dispose of. Because the land has become so barren and infertile that no greenery or trees can grow, and the only weather forecast is of sandstorms, the city, from its grandiose name of East Ocean's pearl, is now known as Sand City.

The mass grave is long gone. But the grave cleaner, dutifully, in the most sarcastic way, against the ridicule of society's will to conform and obey, still walks to the site and cleans any visible epitaph. His eyes are blind with age, but he still remembers the lanterns, the vibrant mid-autumn festivals, the old wives' tales, and of course, the meaning of the word, 華麗(huáli).

The Journey

The pilgrim stands at the gate to Sand City, dying in his thoughts with every passing moment. His eyes stare in reverence at the name carved onto the stone pillar. Before coming here, he had thought of what he would feel: happiness, nostalgia, perhaps a bit of sadness from the disappearance of the glorious past. But none of those sensations fill his exhausted body now. All he can think of is a longing for eternal rest. He has finally surrendered the last hope: going back to a place where he belongs.

The pilgrim, on his journey to search for the meaning of his solitude, has been to richer countries, poorer countries, places where beauty's praised and others where money is worshipped instead. The road was rocky, and his feet had grown calloused with time. He now comes face to face with the fact that all he ever did was walk in circles and stupidly give up the spring of his life, wandering after his own shadow. When he learns to stand straight like any grown-up should, the pilgrim realizes he is terribly old, and time is an unforgiving bitch.

He tries to remember the people he had grown up with before he began the journey, before his grandmother raised the scythe. Casting his eyes to the side of the street, he smiles in bitterness and tasteless sarcasm as the tears trickle down his wrinkles and are quickly dried by the harsh wind of the desiccated land: "Why, you guys all stayed." The lines of epitaphs and sand

dunes' graves stay silent in their complicit acknowledgment. They stayed, and how much did they learn from staying? Did they, like his grandmother, refuse the knowledge? Perhaps not, because they weren't in any mass grave. They were the lucky ones, or as his grandmother taught him, the accomplices.

"See nothing, hear nothing, say nothing, do nothing. What do you call them?" His grandmother would often riddle him thus.

"I dunno. Monkeys?" he would reply, because he often saw sets of monkeys carved into marble stone in those meanings, as his friend's father had explained to him.

"Wrong!" His grandmother laughed with her lungs, so her laughter boomed and resounded in their little hut. He giggled in her lap because her laugh was always contagious, though it rarely meant happiness or joy.

"Then what is it?" "Fear."

After saying that, his grandmother would look far away into the shadow of the mountains on the horizon. He often asked her what she meant by fear, but she kept her mouth shut. Many years later, the pilgrim finally understood—after the censoring of information and the banning of writing, the changes in so many pages of history books and research, the constant watchdogs dressed as civilians in every theater and public arts show—what fear represented. But he was too late to act on the knowledge, and his grandmother was no more.

Now, staring at the gate with the paper lantern and a plethora of broken neon lights, he ponders the accomplishments of his godforsaken journey. He's spent half his life searching for a medicine against fear, a solution against fate, and an answer to his grandmother's riddle that would cost a child less than an entire childhood. Yet, he still thinks his grandmother was right, and maybe she is turning in the mass grave, booming with laughter, witnessing what a fool he's been. Fear: he hasn't found a way to counter it. The older he grows, the

deeper he falls into its claws and fangs, ready to be torn up, cowering to avoid blame.

The pilgrim shakes his head; he doesn't want a ghastly image to taint his reunion with the place he was born. There is something sacred in the meaning and the words: the place he was born. Though the pearl city and the country had lost their lustrous appearance—and sure, nothing in this poverty-stricken, sand-covered, wretched town reminds him of the love he holds dear in his heart, the devotion that keeps him strong during those malaria fevers, those hallucinogenic episodes in the rain forests, or those starving days in another desert exploration—it's a beastly, inhuman thing to kill hope. He heaves a sigh, wiping his face fiercely, using the pain to erase reality and stay in his delusion. His grandmother's lullaby echoes through the dark, winding road, filled with trash bags and rotting, leftover food containers at every corner, waiting for the hungry dogs to peruse them as the beasts' luxurious feast. Oh Lord, please tell us, where does our suffering begin?

He follows the voice, walking slowly at first, almost dragging his feet with chains and leashes. Then, as the voice becomes louder through every turn of the corner, his feet grow lighter. The pilgrim jogs, runs, and jumps two steps at once toward the voice, charging full speed ahead. His robe slacks to the side, revealing a head with hair cropped short; in the shadow of the night, his hair is as black as the day he was still laughing in his grandmother's lap. His strength pushes him forward. The wrinkles on his face stretch into a beaming smile, making him decades younger. In a rush to catch the time he had lost, the pilgrim pushes open the back door of a red-brick house. Inside, a girl is lighting up the stove to cook the early morning meals. She wears a red blouse with intricate, embroidered details and black, rare silk pants. Her face is the soft white of the most luxurious porcelain, and her cheeks are roguish from

the heat on the stove. The girl stares in surprise at the sudden intruder; her eyes are an undulating black, reflecting the moon, the stars, and the beauty of the lanterns in the foregone past. The pilgrim falls to his knees, silently shedding streams of tears. He finally understands what the refugees meant by 華麗(huáli). But 華麗(huáli) was no more. It is buried. It is bloodshed. It is what people used to benefit their reason to set one group of people against another group, because whatever the meaning of the word was, or is, it can still be weaponized until it is sharp enough to cause a war.

The pilgrim has waited for a long time for someone to stand up and tell the joke: I'm sorry, all those wars were only a severe misunderstanding.

He laughs at this joke so hard that he temporarily forgets his surroundings and the beautiful girl in front. The girl in the red blouse, after her fear subsides, prods the intruder with a few questions first: "Are you okay, sir?"

"I don't know. I thought I'd come a long way home. But I wasn't at home yet. Tell me, where is this place?" He wipes his eyes. The tears from crying and laughing merge together until the two emotions can hardly be distinguished from each other.

"This? Oh, this is—well, this is the Red Camelia." The girl says, somewhat at a loss to explain.

"What does the Red Camelia sell?" The pilgrim gets up, wiping his pants, ready to get on with his road. "Meals?"

"No! What nonsense are you talking? The Red Camellia sells entertainment, of course. It's in the name."

"Entertainment?" The pilgrim stops short at the door. "You mean a brothel?" "We don't call it that," the girl protests weakly, fidgeting with her blouse.

“Then what do you call it?” The pilgrim feels his hand on the door shake with destitution and despair.

“We listen to the clients’ sorry tales, console them, and bid them a good morrow. That’s all.”

“I’m going.” He waves his hand, staggering away. Consoling the clients; he knows well what it means. And he knows well what stage the girl is at in that entertainment house’s system for her to be cooking meals at this hour.

“Wait, sir. Won’t you come inside if you have no other place to go?”

“Why? You feel pity for me? Or is there any other intention?” He laughs, coarse and crude, but his eyes are losing their last flicker of hope.

“No, it’s just, the storm is coming soon. That’s why everybody’s safe and locked inside their own houses now.” The girl scratches her hair, which is all tangled up and held together by a bamboo chopstick. “You can stay in my room, just beside this kitchen, and I can listen to your story. How about that?” She looks at him. Her eyes are as bright as the lost stars of heaven, as clear as the autumn lake in the poems of yonder years.

The pilgrim wavers. Then, with a weary, defeated nod, he steps inside the kitchen, is led by the girl to her narrow room, stacked from the floor to the cracked ceiling with knickknacks and women’s clothes. The mix of heavy perfumes and cheap cosmetics make him feel strangely calm and serene. He leans on the edge of her bed, groaning as his head hits the soft fabric of the drapery. “What story do you want to hear?” he asks.

“I dunno. What story do you want to tell?” The girl sits opposite him, her knees up to her chin, her eyes quizzical and curious. She is looking forward to a world she will never get to know, except for this one chance from the man who had seen heaven and hell in one lifetime.

The pilgrim closes his weary eyes. He wanders through the deserts of the past and swims to the distant shores where he had left part of himself behind, trying to find a tale magnificent enough to amaze the girl's young, sprouting mind. He reminisces about the wars he had been a part of, or the bloodshed he had tried to stop but failed, weighing them on the scale to judge which one is worth telling, the morbid or the human indifference. He considers telling her how wealthy people lived a life free of consequences, but poor people grovelled on their knees for a stolen piece of bread out of hunger, but he hesitates. Shouldn't he start with something light? Or something that fits the beauty of the old Eastern Pearl, perhaps?

The pilgrim peruses his store of fairy tales and wonders, searching for something that would be worthy of the girl's kindness and the treasure she had first given him on the doorstep.

Something like the word 華麗 (huáli) would describe. He furrows his eyebrows, thinking long and hard, then he asks her: "Do you know about the Buddha's story?"

"A few from the sisters here," the girl scrunches her nose. "Is he a good god?"

"No, he isn't a god per se, but..." The pilgrim gives up his explanation halfway. "Look, do you know why the Buddha's statue always stares straight ahead while the world is in agony and suffering?"

"Why?" The girl, to his thinking, immediately catches on to the intriguing question.

"Well, I'll tell you the story that you can boast to everyone—anyone, even your sisters here or anyplace else—for a lifetime. The story about why the Buddha never turns his head."

Gautama Crosses the Desert

“**W**hy does the Buddha never turn his head?” the girl asks.

Her eyes are as round as the full moon can be. The pilgrim gazes into the unfathomable dark orbs of the beauty in front of him, reminiscing about the time when he was a boy and

the forests were large enough to get lost inside eternally every evening. He thinks about those nights when he sat by the singing streams by the range of weaving canopies, waiting for his grandmother’s voice to find him. The moon shone bright above his head. The cruel, cold light was as unforgiving as any heavenly judgment in his grandmother’s old tales. The year came and went. He lost himself to the trips and the caravans, the deserts and the oceans, but the moon has always been there, silently watching. Just like this girl’s pure eyes, the piercing light of the moon slanting through the slits of the windows sometimes scared him awake and made him face himself with the startling elephant in the room: Is this all his life would ever amount to?

Shaking his head to shove the morbid thought away, the pilgrim takes a sip from the bowl of water the girl offers him with so much of life’s gentleness that the fresh, cool liquid calms his heart before it reaches his tongue. He ignores the disquiet in his tremulous heart and answers her with a question instead:

“How old are you now?”

“Is that relevant to why the Buddha can’t turn his head?” the girl retorts, flipping her nose haughtily as girls who are confident in their beauty are bound to do.

“Words will mean different things depending on how far along you are on your road to Mother Time’s inevitable ending. And sometimes, there are people who come to that ending without understanding much. For example, I told you the Buddha never turns his head, not that he ‘can’t’ turn his head.”

“Is there a difference?” The girl places her chin on her knees, sulking. “I’m eighteen. Well, I’ll be eighteen by the next moon.” She ponders a while in silence, then resumes timidly, “Does that mean I won’t understand, and you won’t tell the story?”

“There is a difference: the first one is an action he commits by choice; the other is by helplessness. And don’t worry, I will tell the story, because you are on the same threshold I was when I did a stupid thing. Others called it youth, but I will call it by the name from my side of the truth: sheer loneliness and idiocy.”

The pilgrim laughs. He has never felt so free, so comfortable, as he does now, in the cramped storage room, which acts as the makeshift bedroom of a soon-to-be flower girl. The rainwater from the bowl is sweet like rice wine on his tongue, and her curious stare makes him feel at home, among people. To belong, the pilgrim thinks in his sudden elevation, doesn’t take much, but oftentimes, the simplest thing is the hardest to find because our eyes are fooled by the grander scheme of life.

The girl keeps on staring, waiting for him to stop his laughing fit. He has been saving this bubbling happiness for a long time. Decade after decade, he’s been walking in shoes, sandals, barefoot, and leaf-woven flip-flops across the scorching desert sand, and now he’s arrived. Looking up at the ceiling, he sees

the wooden planks stay firmly in place, connected by the genius of men and the magic of nature to lift the weight of life on their bodies.

We are here, but we keep searching for a place that was nothing better than a madman's promise; the pilgrim tears up at the thought. He speaks to the girl in a low, cracked voice from repressing the surging storm inside, fearing he will collapse under the burden of what he knows and refuses to understand: "Gautama crosses the desert when the sun is at its highest point..."

* * *

Gautama crosses the desert when the sun is at its highest point, and the heat manifests on his body as a thin film of sweat. He doesn't feel the burn; rather, the scorching gaze of the high-noon heaven makes him more serene. The stabbing pain in the soles of his feet would have made any other ordinary man faint from sheer agony and torturous suffering. But not Gautama. He walks on, slow and deliberate in every step. He is counting each grain of sand with all his five senses as the wind whirls around his strong body, which has been put to the test in all the extreme environments—fasting, waiting, and persevering through all torments to understand life.

Gautama knows that in each grain of sand, there is a life waiting to be awakened. That every grain yearns to be alive, to be something bigger than it is, to survive the test of Mother Time.

And isn't the reason the desert becomes so large, when the Earth grows mature with wisdom, to contain every grain of sand, to give each one a place to belong?

But the grains keep struggling to be free. The desert is never big enough, and the grains will move farther and farther away from their birthplace. Across the desert, over the ocean, into the forest, the grains take and conquer. Never once will the grains realize that no matter where they end up, they will be one with the sand again.

Is Gautama troubled by this thought? If he were, he doesn't show it on his face. With downcast eyes and a smile so benevolent yet so indifferent at the same time that onlookers don't know whether he is gentle or simply a cruel observer, he walks the path of isolation. He understands, but he never tries to solve the questions. He sees agony, but still perseveres through the pain. He hears the prayers, the begging, the cries for salvation, but he accepts everything because who can bestow salvation when everyone is bearing the same suffering? So Gautama waits, fasts, and continues on his thorny path with bare, bleeding feet.

Gautama counts his steps until he reaches the battleground of a tribal war. He stands there, at the edge of the first man's blood on the blazing sand that is burning his soles; his head stays high, his eyes never move from the barbaric scene, and his ears are filled with the wails and cries of widows and orphaned children from both tribes. Someone bows before him, begging him to bestow a miracle on the dead soldiers. "Resurrect them," that person says. In Gautama's eyes, he sees the beggar as an all-black figure with white tears dripping from hollow eyes.

"Resurrect them and let them go through the same suffering again," Gautama says, a mythical smile gracing his pale, smooth face. His voice is as gentle as the wind blowing on the autumn lake.

"Resurrect only one of them, then." "That is vanity."

“Resurrect all of them. We will not go to war anymore, I promise.” “That is also vanity.”

Gautama attempts to walk, but the beggar holds him in place. The white tears are tainting his robes. The desert wind is billowing through his sleeves. He is tied to this Earth by the inevitability of suffering, and alone in his solitude of hurt, Gautama pats the beggar on his head, saying, “Let go, for I never promised salvation.”

“Then why did we go to war? Wasn’t the cause to honour peace for you?” the beggar shouts in frustration, punching the sand beneath him.

“You have to find out the reason for yourself. That is your lesson, the one I can’t teach. And no, I never ask for anything to be honoured in my name, young man. I am merely passing through, like you and many others. Peace, as you said, is the shelter, and you hide many things inside it. Disturbing things, ugly and gruesome things, deadly and poisonous things, even, but my fellow sufferer, you have to look at the shelter to see how patiently peace is tolerating the greed you keep feeding it in the guise of love and justice. Look at the ceiling; your brute force is breaking peace everywhere, and the beams are cracking in between.”

“No. We want to learn that lesson, which was why we fought. And we don’t want a war. We want to end all wars.”

“If you said so, then haven’t you found the answer?” Gautama asks, the smile calm and peaceful on his face still.

“We haven’t, and the children are dying.” “What will you do now to find the answer?”

“We’ll keep on fighting until one side emerges as the victor.”

“Then you haven’t learned your lesson,” Gautama replies simply, his eyes staring at the mountain of dead ahead, unwavering.

The beggar's tears turn to black, until his whole figure in Gautama's eyes no longer cries, because no whiteness distinguishes his pain and empathy from the rest of his rage.

Gautama knows he has done all he can and leaves the battleground. The soles of his feet are red from the dried-up blood of the soldiers who died for a lesson no one understood. A child tugs at the hem of his robe: "Will you return here?"

Gautama looks straight ahead and replies to the child, somewhat gentler than the tone he used with the beggar: "We all return here."

"I pray the war will end by then," the child says, reverent in his innocence. He has just lost his father, and his mother is weeping by the cold corpse, too busy in her grief to take care of his need for consolation. "I don't want to be alone."

"My child, the war never chooses us. We choose the war. And in suffering, you will find that solitude is as perfect a companion as another stranger."

"Why?" The child keeps tugging on Gautama's robe, hoping he will turn back and face him. But Gautama never turns his head. He stands there, allowing the child to do as he will with his robe, speaking with a breeze of laughter:

"Because we are born into suffering as a gift, and we will depart it with lessons as an afterthought."

Gautama then walks away as the child stands there, pondering his last phrase. Behind him, the beggar, who is still kneeling and bowing respectfully under Gautama's feet, is raising a flag of war, shouting: "Do not believe in false faith. Open your eyes. He isn't the god of salvation."

The boy turns around to face another war, which begins not of its own choosing, but of people's vanity, thinking they can masquerade their greed

with peace, only to be filled with disillusionment when the final agreement is signed by a river of blood and a mountain of corpses. In a brief moment, watching the boy's thin figure, Gautama thinks whether this is how things must be, eternally. But he continues counting his steps; the cycle runs on repeat, and winter will turn to spring. He knows enough to mourn, but never to keep the loss in his laden heart.

As the boy approaches the new battleground, his mother, who was mourning his father's corpse, is swallowed by the bloodshed of men and monsters. Standing in the desert, the boy is lost. He doesn't know where to go or who to look to for help. The only one he's been taught to have absolute faith in has just left this suffering behind and told him that people, including him, were born into this bloodshed as a gift. Howling at the sun, the boy grows up as an orphan, trusting no one, believing in no promised heaven, because he knows the lesson now.

* * *

"And which lesson is that?" The girl snuffles, confused and saddened at the fate of fictional characters.

The pilgrim takes another sip from his bowl, answering with an introspective question like a teacher. "After hearing the story, what do you think the lesson is?"

"That people are bad?" The girl wipes her tears, trying to suppress her sobs now and then because she doesn't want to wake her sisters in the brothel.

"No."

“Then what is it? Why must a little boy suffer because he was born into whatever that mess was?” she grumbles, a bit angry now with the pilgrim’s nonchalant attitude. “You are no better than that Gautama.” “On that point, you’re right. In fact, I would say that all of us are no better than Gautama.” The pilgrim cackles with a loud “ha,” then stops short. He draws in breath, judging from the girl’s stern expression that he’s taken the joke too far. “The lesson is we all have choices, but we take the lesson to the extreme and, confidently trusting in our little faith that by heaven, we are safe with the delusional fact that we can choose to ignore the consequences.”

“Like what?”

“Like how the beggar can choose to rebuild what’s been shattered, but he chose to raise another war instead. Or how the mother can choose to escape in time, but she chose to stay behind with her husband. And the boy, he can choose to be there, trapped forever in the constant tribal war, but he chose to escape and live in solitude.” The pilgrim shrugs his shoulders, reaching for the rice wine jars, which lean on one another in the corner near his seat.

“Or like how Gautama can save them, but he chose not to turn his head,” the girl mumbles beneath her breath, making the pilgrim stop short, his hand hovering in mid-air.

He lets the silence weave a thick web of awkwardness, making young, tender hands fidget on cheap silk, causing the innocent face to contort into a kaleidoscope of guilty emotions, shaping the beautiful lips into a tight line of apology. Then, with the natural ease of a desert hunter, he lifts the web, looks intently at his prey, saying: “Save them, you say? And let them commit the war again to end up with the same death? My oh my, you are young indeed. Don’t you see, Gautama didn’t turn his head in this story because he knows whether he turns back or not, people will choose the same ending for themselves. They

don't need saving. They need to walk the road to salvation themselves, something he can't give them."

"But why, if he is powerful enough?"

"Because no one, god or human, is anyone's salvation."

The pilgrim heaves, excited in his fury. He is speaking to himself rather than the girl. The wisdom that he relays to her now is what he wishes someone had told him when he was her age. He lost both his parents and grandmother, fought for a place to belong in a village where the only courage is the courage to kowtow before power, and the choices he had were to stay and suffer or to live in exile and solitude. Either way, he was born into that mess, as the girl said, and the salvation was a long time coming.

Breaking down on the floor for the salvation that would never come, he breathes the stale morning air. Somewhere along the rural road outside, a family is cooking their breakfast. The smell of charcoal and burned wood fills the room. The hazy smoke whirls in, covering both the girl and the pilgrim in an anonymity neither of them had the night before. He greedily takes in the scent of freshly harvested rice, cooked to perfection, whether as porridge or as rice balls to use with crushed peanuts and salt. The girl looks at his eyes as the man leans toward the wall. She knows that look because it fits the description of the other sisters in the house. The look of longing from a person who's been alone long enough that he'd choose poverty instead of riches. The sisters fear men with that look, because it means they can't get any money out of them, nor can they make them stay. But those men are extremely eloquent, with the god-given talent of seduction by storytelling; they often complain. More than once, one or two sisters have tried to escape the house with such a man. The girl wonders if this pilgrim, too, will take her somewhere far away from this

wretched land of petty money-counting and the cooking on a charcoal stove that makes her fingers calloused.

For a brief moment, she catches herself thinking, *I'd be alright with poverty.* And she nods her head to the many voices of the sisters in the past. *Men with eyes like the pilgrim, they can do anything to a girl at will.*

The Argument in The Morning

The girl stretches her upper body, yawning. It's been a long night, or rather, to her, a very short night compressed into a story with so many words she finds hard to understand at once. She looks at the tired pilgrim, whose eyes grow vacant at the subdued light of dawn beaming through the slits of the tiny windows of the cramped room. She asks, "So what are you going to do now?"

"What?" The pilgrim echoes back the question as if he were still in the world of the indifferent Gautama, counting the holy man's steps on the scorching desert sand.

"I said, what are you going to do? Do you have any plans? Why did you visit this city in the first place?" She leans on her elbows, trying to stay awake. In a few minutes, she needs to fetch the meals for the sisters and the old madam. Wretched is the life of girls like her, not old enough to decide her own path, not rich enough to escape the fate she is bestowed like a punishment for a crime she never committed.

"Do you have any relatives here?"

She shakes her head, stepping away from the abyss of destitution. "I had. They died. So maybe I don't have any."

The pilgrim clenches and releases his fists, recovering the sense of his flesh. The girl watches his strange action, and for a moment, she thinks of a

baby who's learning to be human for the first time.

"Well, we can go visit their graves," she says, shrugging her shoulders, diverting her own thoughts.

Since meeting the pilgrim, she has had strange images and illusions burst out of her mind at random. She's determined to find a shaman to disperse the evil spirit the outsider brings to the city and infects her with, though she doesn't know what kind of spirit it is. She heard about the hunger ghosts—the kind of lost souls of people who died with so much regret and starvation that they came back to life as evil spirits who hunted for leftover food and caused harm to the living. The old madam usually offers candies, snacks, bundles of fresh sugarcane, and tons of underworld money to appease those spirits every July. Watching the ceremony, the girl once had a brazen thought that, whether ghost or human, they were all ruled by the power of filthy riches and the fear of an unknown force. Some people call it absolute authority, and some call it pleasure. She doesn't know in which she should place her loyalty, but she knows enough to stay away from the force.

"If the old madam had the power over the hunger ghosts," she had confided in one of the sisters she was close to, "maybe she wouldn't offer them anything. Maybe she would even use them to gain an advantage over other establishments and get other people to offer sacrifices to her—which means she also has the potential of being a hunger ghost, a queen of evil spirits." The old madam got wind of their conversation, and she was chastised heavily for those innocent words. The sister, of course, wasn't punished because she did her duty of bringing in profit. To this day, the girl believed that her fault wasn't in saying the wrong thing—it was because she didn't have enough authority to utter the truth out loud. Since then, she kept to herself. No safety is like the safety of willful ignorance and silence.

And there's no cowardice like it, either.

The pilgrim observes the girl as she traverses the muddled pool of her mind. He doesn't move or say a thing. As if from a deep-seated longing, the pilgrim's soul reaches for hers, and whispers words from a song of old. The song his grandmother sang to him when he was a babe in the cradle and couldn't understand the syllables but never missed any of the meaning. The pilgrim thinks of a gray evening, when the heaven was pregnant with an oncoming rain, and his grandmother fanned him to sleep: "Ai-o, the wind sweeps through banana leaves, who left his child for another beauty. Writhing in agony, I cradle my babe, saving your mother. I sold my life so ours can be happy—" Or when the harvest season was over, and the villagers were all drunk from the celebration of a successful bounty, his grandmother only stared at the fire, the embers glowing eerily in her hazy eyes, and she sang him to sleep in the brightly lit night: "Dear child, wait till the spring, when the spring comes, ai-o, your father will be home, will be home, ai-o, hold your father's hand in yours, and you'll stop crying, so you'll stop crying, and peace will come, so get to sleep, ai-o."

There's an unspoken desperation of a melancholic mountain in each of the lullabies his grandmother sang. He doubts it was her intention. From his traveling and the tales he heard, all the lullabies of this country are just naturally sad. Once, his companion, a mother of three, told him half in jest, "What do you expect? We are constantly at war with one another and with different nations. How do we sing about happiness when we never know what it is?" And she went back to fan her children in the caravan. He bit his lip, glancing at the girl, the words stuck in his throat. He wants to tell her about his grandmother, about the grave she was forced to lie into because power feared a woman with the will to resist, about the lullabies, about her eyes glowing with

embers because she knew then that her singing wouldn't change a thing about the future she already foresaw for her grandchild.

But she kept going on.

The girl, as if hearing his soul's whisper, lifts her head and looks straight at him. Something is pouring out of her crystal-clear eyes, so pure in their reflection of the world, so naïve in their belief that people are all good at heart, but they choose to do evil. She reaches for his calloused fingers, asking: "Do you know where your relatives are buried?"

He swallows a big gulp of courage, speaking slowly, gauging the girl's reaction: "My parents died in the war, and my grandmother is buried in the mass grave for the reactionary prisoners."

The girl, to his surprise, simply shrugs her shoulders again, unbothered by the treacherous confession: "Then let's go to the mass burial site. I think it will take us half a day on foot. I don't have the ration for a bus ticket, and I don't have a bike. Is that alright with you?"

"But she is a *reactionary prisoner*," the pilgrim repeats and wonders in self-loathing at his own cowardice and anxiety. Shouldn't the girl be more worried than he is?

"And she is your grandmother, nonetheless, isn't she?" The girl startles, more by his hesitation than by his grandmother's crime. She fumes at his statement. "Why? Would you abandon her simply because she stood against the majority to protect her truth?"

He withdraws to the corner, taken aback by her sudden fury. She advances; her force is strong enough to take down the pretentious moral army of any hypocrite. "I don't understand much about politics. Reactionary or not, enemy or not, a threat or not, she will forever be the one who raised you. And guess what, Mr. Pilgrim? The moment she lay down, history was rewritten. You

might've been gone too long so your mind is a foreigner to this land. Here, in Sand City, history is the now. Because we write it based on the power that's currently in place. Who knows—maybe your grandmother was a reactionary, but when we get to the mass grave, she is a hero, and the next time you come by, God forbid, she will be reactionary again.”

The girl bursts into tears, leaving the pilgrim astounded, struck dumb in his corner, hands thrown to the overcast heaven, not knowing what to do. Fear creeps onto his spine.

Meanwhile, the girl continues to wallow in her melodramatic monologue. She draws her knees up to her chin to hide her bawling face, but her cries are loud and would pierce the heart of anyone whose conscience is yet to be corrupted by the operative conditioning of the state's indoctrination and fear. The pilgrim feels shame burn his face and his whole body; the heat is blazing, and he's been to the most barren deserts. No place burns this much, except a special place in hell preserved for the ones who, like him, choose running over staying because he dares value his life more than the rest. The pilgrim breaks down, crying ugly tears with the girl. Yes, running away and obeying the masses when his grandmother died was vanity. And what he is doing now, trying to atone for his actions to prove to himself he isn't a coward, is also vanity.

“Let's go to the cemetery. I don't mind if we walk. Let's visit the mass grave.” The pilgrim sobs between words. The shame and the joy of finding a fellow sufferer crash on him like the tidal waves after the storm.

“You...you don't mind seeing your grandmother as a prisoner anymore?”

“Fuck that.” The pilgrim fumbles with the curse word, his lips tremble with the newfound liberty. “She's my grandmother,” the pilgrim shouts tearfully. And strangely, he feels liberated from the shackles he never knew he wore.

The girl smiles; it looks uglier than her crying face, but it calms him down. Outside, someone is knocking vigorously at the door. "Hong, are the meals ready?" a groggy voice calls in.

The girl answers, wiping her tears in a hurry, "Yes, Sister Orchid, they will be ready by ten." Then, she rushes to the door, opens a crack, and speaks in a timid whisper: "Sister Orchid, can you tell madam that I'm sick?"

"Whatever for? Are you sick?" The groggy voice replies with a tinge of worry. "No, but I want to take two days off."

"Why? Your family visits?" The groggy voice reduces its volume. The pilgrim can see the hint of flowing purple and cobalt blue silk appear at the door. Sister Orchid wants to come inside.

"No, but I absolutely must take two days off. I will tell you about it later. Please, sister Orchid." The girl bars the way, and sister Orchid halts her move. A long pause drags into eternity until the burning smell of rice reaches the girl's room. "Oh Lord, the meals! I haven't cooked the side dish yet!"

The girl hastily runs out of the room, putting one slipper on while forgetting the other. Her silk blouse billows behind her like the lanterns in the old days' festival. The pilgrim loses himself in the beauty of the past, where no pain exists and only the bittersweet could-have-beens feed his brain like a special opium. Somewhere far away from his dreamland, Sister Orchid's voice rings intermittently, "Hong, do not get yourself involved with a stranger. He'll leave you when his next caravan comes. Do you hear me, Hong?"

The pilgrim doesn't think of himself as a stranger. He is coming home; isn't that what he told Hong? But when he opens his eyes again, watching the soft light filter through the storage room where Hong sleeps, he wonders if this is the home he is supposed to come back to or if that home has been erased, like Hong said, by all the powers that have come and gone during the time he was

away. All that is left now, after all these years, is a barren land where the people stay because suffering doesn't change from one place to another, and sorrow here doesn't taste worse than it does anywhere else.

That day, after Hong brings the meals, almost burned, to all the sisters, she stealthily guides the pilgrim to the back door of the brothel. The narrow road is covered with green moss, and it is slippery with washing water. Some sisters have recently poured their laundry detergent through the pipeline that leads to this path, which flows to the trench outside.

Hong says little about why or how she knows the little road, or whether she sneaks out often using it. She pushes the old, rusted gate gently and pulls the pilgrim to a maze of crisscrossed alleys.

Pushing his head down low enough so his height won't cause any alarm, she guides him out of the labyrinth. The sun is covered by foggy, grey clouds, and the curtains are shut in every window they pass. Hong leaves no chance for protest or question from the pilgrim, covering his mouth with her nimble, soft hand, and with a will of steel, drags him along the alleyways. It's as if the whole complex operates on a secret code, and that code is: turn your head the other way. After what seems like forever, the pair reach the main road, where, for miles, there are no houses, no trees, no resting place, only a straight path heading toward the end of the city, where the government offices are. "The shades are non-existent. So are the shops and rest houses. The only stops are reserved for public transportation. That's why, unless we have rations for bus tickets, we rarely visit the government offices." Hong shrugs.

"But why don't you have rations for bus tickets?"

"Because I'm an illegal alien," Hong smiles, her eyes abashed, but a certain darkness remains stark in those sparkling orbs. Hidden beneath the most vibrant layers of light, there is the darkest of demons.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to—”

“Don’t worry, it’s nothing. The sisters and the old madam know, but they treat me very well.”

The pilgrim wants to say that contracting a girl into the brothel, making her do chores, waiting for her to be of age to sell her off, are not the definition of “treat me very well,” but he can’t think of a better explanation he could mention. Anything he comes up with will only sound hypocritical, because he isn’t the one experiencing what he preaches, and he knows the people in the city are poor enough that all decisions they choose at first—no matter how nice—will lead to the path of the old madam. After a long exhale, he says, somewhat awkwardly and with pride: “Then I guess my grandmother would like you a lot.”

“Yeah, I tend to have that effect on the old and the dead.” Hong grins. “By the way, I don’t know your name.”

“It’s Ananda. Ananda Gautama.”

“What does it mean?” Hong leans her head to one side. The names are not what she usually hears. “Are you the same Gautama in the story just now?” She gasps. “Are you the Buddha?”

“No—goodness, no,” Ananda vehemently denies and bows his head in shame. His ears flush a deep red as he explains in haste, “I’m just one of the many Gautamas who are walking our path to find the meaning of suffering. And my name was given to me by my grandmother. It means attaining a life of joy, happiness, and enlightenment.”

“Well, did you attain any of those?”

“No, I didn’t,” the pilgrim laughs ruefully, shaking his head in defeat. “Not yet. In fact, not all the Gautamas I know have reached their enlightenment. I think I still have a long way to go.”

“Like the Gautama who crosses the desert?” Hong asks, stretching herself for the long walk to the city’s cemetery.

“Yes, he is the most famous one.” The pilgrim does likewise, groaning his answer. “But I strayed from his path. I refused my enlightenment.”

“And why’s that?”

“Because I haven’t understood why we’re suffering.”

Hong hums an agreement. Together—one tall, one short; one thin, one plump; one in silk clothes, one with a tattered cloak—the two figures begin their walk to the government compound.

Gautama at the Cemetery for Little Girls

Ananda walks ahead while Hong follows behind in close steps.

Once they are out of the red-light district, the pilgrim—Ananda, as he calls himself—grows more confident in his bearing. His feet root firmly to the raw earth with each step, and his back straightens. Hong can see the ember glow in his eyes; the fire wasn't there when they first met. She kicks a pebble on the road, and her mind wanders as her eyes trace the figure of the man before her. The broad shoulders and chiseled face could steal many innocent hearts if he hadn't been so dirt poor, wearing a patched coat and threadbare pajamas like a lowly beggar. His hair would benefit from a makeover at the sisters' top-choice barbershop, and he could get rid of the unshaven look in ten minutes if he had the right amount of money. Hong sighs. That's the point; he doesn't look like the type to care about material possessions.

"Hey, Ananda, why are you poor?" the girl blurts out while dancing with her thoughts about Ananda's makeover, never once thinking of the hurt it might cause.

Ananda stares at her, bewildered at first, then with caution, he measures his words to observe Hong's intention. "First of all, I wasn't born rich."

"But suppose you were born rich, then. Would you still choose to reject that wealth and be poor?"

"Why are you asking me that?"

“Because you said you wanted to understand why humans were suffering. Well, being rich means you would suffer less, right?” Hong tilts her head, gazing with all the seriousness of her youth at a puzzled Ananda.

“I don’t think being rich or poor has anything to do with suffering.”

“Your Gautama seems to be very poor, though. He doesn’t even have a pair of sandals.” Hong continues, ignoring Ananda’s remark.

“Gautama chooses to abandon his wealth because he realizes the vanity in it.”

“But what does he choose then? Ignoring everything? I don’t understand.” Hong puffs up her cheeks, kicking more pebbles. The scorching sun above is adding fuel to their debate, and the vaporizing heat from the road is inflaming their words. They are almost at the shouting stage now.

“No. He chooses to accept the pain, to bear the agony, and to understand that the suffering is inevitable. Not being able to change anything is excruciatingly painful. But holding onto the thought, the what-ifs, and the maybes, it won’t hurt any less.” Ananda gulps. His throat is desiccated. He can feel the sand trickling down his windpipe. “Or will it?”

“Are you holding onto the desire to change, or are you already letting go, like that Gautama?” Hong pulls a bottle of water from her cotton tote bag and chugs it like a holy elixir, then passes the bottle to Ananda, who takes a few sips in moderation. “Keep your pace. We have ten miles to walk until the next drinkable well.”

“I don’t think I’ve let go of anything.” Ananda chuckles at Hong’s brash behavior. She’s fanning herself with both hands, swinging the linen bag and hitting him from time to time. “In fact, I don’t think anyone is willing to let go. If we can make a change, we will.”

“But if it’s in the past?” Hong casts a glance at the pilgrim.

Somehow, Hong's gaze remains sharp with unspoken but fully understood meaning, refusing to let Ananda off the hook, forcing out all the answers the pilgrim wants to hide. Ananda stands still for a long moment. The sun pierces through his brain until every sensible thought is smothered, and the mask he puts on melts in chunks of ugly vengeance. He seethes with a smile: "That's why I told you I haven't reached enlightenment."

Ananda strides ahead, faster now, without looking back to check Hong's condition. She wonders how he knows the way without her directions, as if he'd always been here and the fact that he is a stranger is a lie. After all, he did confess on their first meeting yesterday that he thought he had come home. Hong thinks he used to be a citizen of this city, but she can't guess the timeline. Judging from the lines and sagging skin on his face, he could have been here from one to many decades ago. She scrunches her nose as she always does when something bothers her a lot, but she can't say it out loud. Ananda notices the change in her lingering shadows, and he asks first before it becomes a problem between them later: "Is there something wrong?"

"I wonder if you had been here before," Hong blurts out. She measures his posture rather than his demeanor because he has pulled the cloak over his head to hide from the blazing sun, which partially covers his face and emotions.

The pilgrim mulls over Hong's question for a long while, then he pauses for a break and points to a dried layer of dying grass by the side of the road: "Let's sit down for a bit, shall we?"

"Yeah. It's a bit hot, isn't it? This part of the road doesn't have shade." Hong shrugs and sits down without another invitation.

"Which parts of the road have shade, then?" Ananda laughs heartily, fanning his face and neck, then follows Hong's natural behavior, sitting down

beside her.

“None. That’s the fun of it.” Hong grunts, wiping the sweat that’s dripping down her round, flushed face with an embroidered handkerchief. It’s a New Year’s gift from one of the sisters at the brothel. Hong doesn’t have the deft fingers for these delicacies—knitting, crocheting, embroidering, sewing, etc.,—such things are fine arts to her. But Hong has always had an eye for beauty. “Anyways, have you been here before?”

“In a way. When I was here, there was no sand, and people didn’t have to buy rations for bus tickets. But at that time, I didn’t do anything to stop things from heading to where they are now. So, I’m as much of a stranger to this land as any passerby. Sand City isn’t my hometown,” Ananda says. His voice is calm like a breeze as he unburdens his past onto Hong, a fellow sufferer. He wonders if she is a gift or a disaster, but whichever she decides to be in his life, Hong is the treasure he chooses to accept, to bear with patience, and perhaps one day, he can say with pride that he knows why he had suffered with her on the road.

“Then where is your hometown?”

“A place called the Pearl City of the East. I wasn’t in the center, though. My grandmother and I, and my parents, too, because they were alive at the time, were in the mountain range. We lived in a little hut made of palm leaves, stems, and mud. It was a fun time to be alive.”

“Why?”

Hong stares without reserve at the pilgrim. Her eyes sparkle with interest; the gleam of many questions lights up her face, and it catches the pilgrim’s heart with a blunt, dull ache. He turns his head away, thinking how much strength the other Gautama had to keep staring ahead, no matter the darkness and the depth of the abyss within him. Because there are many bloody wars in

history—some recorded on paper, some rectified and sanctified by historians, some buried beneath the grayscale of morality—but Ananda knows there is none as tough and none that will cost as much sacrifice as the war against oneself. He's spent years on that battleground; the enemy is standing tall while he's on his knees, wavering between giving up and trying one more time.

“So?” Hong repeats her curiosity, unaware of the pilgrim's inner turmoil. Ananda wipes his bloodshot eyes, saying instead of a direct answer: “Let me tell you of Gautama's adventure at the cemetery for little girls.”

* * *

Gautama passes by a cemetery on his way to the river. He reads the signboard. It says: “Cemetery for Little Girls.” Seeing as his strength is wearied, and his legs are tired, Gautama decides to take a rest inside the cemetery.

As he walks between the rows of gravestones, the nameless and the named, he sees that the little girls here are orphaned. He reads the inscriptions on each tombstone: Unknown, age seven, parentage unidentified; A. V. Lydia, age thirteen, parentage unidentified; C. J. Lim, age fifteen, parentage unidentified; and so on. He halts his tracks, not because he has arrived at a resting place, but because a little girl is there, standing in front of an empty lot, contemplating something with all the seriousness a child her age can muster. Her dress is patched in places and tattered at the hem. Her face is pure and clear, a ghastly contrast to her body, covered in purple and green bruises. Her fingers are as black as the begging figure Gautama had seen on the bloodied battlefield. Gautama feels the heat of the high noon on his nape. It carves out the invisible scars he bears on his body when the world's goodness surrenders on its knees

before the new world order. Whatever they can't get with a blessing, people can buy with money. Gautama questions the girl, though he already knows the answer, but still wants to find the cause.

"Child, what are you doing in a place like this?" "I'm thinking of my dead."

"Are you dying very soon?" "I think I will."

"And is this lot here what you want for yourself?"

"It's as good as any other. Because once I close my eyes, everything ceases to be my problem." The girl shrugs.

"Child, what ties you to life?" Gautama asks, reminiscing about his time under the palm tree.

"The bad people don't allow me to escape it. But they don't let me live it easily, either."

"There are bad people in your life, then. But are there good people?"

"If there are, I haven't met them."

"Do you believe there are, and that there will be a time when you will meet good people?" "I don't know. I haven't decided yet. "

Gautama looks ahead to the end of the row, where a large oak tree is standing tall, with white ribbons tied on each branch like a prayer for each soul in this exhaustive cemetery. The little girl goes back to staring at the grave that will be hers one of these days, soon. He feels no desire to walk away, nor does he want to continue his journey at this moment. The two face their paths with unwavering will, and the little girl is as fearless as Gautama's indifferent yet cruel benevolence. After a while, Gautama asks the girl, "The bad people, in a way, are keeping you alive. The good people, knowing there's a cemetery for little girls here, do nothing to prevent its existence. Child, life is suffering, and yours happens to be a very small circle of it."

"Then isn't it a good thing?"

“There’s no good or bad circle. But you will be glad when the circle is over.”

Gautama continues his walk. The girl, unlike the blackened figure in the bloody war zone, doesn’t hold him back. She keeps staring at her own grave, pondering something else, maybe about her next circle. Maybe about her current one, when the night comes, and the monsters are out. Gautama doesn’t show any thoughts or troubles between his brows. He reaches the old oak tree, tying a piece of his robe—yellow and old with age—to a newly bloomed branch, and rests under its shadow. In a short moment, he falls asleep.

Gautama dreams of the large, stormy sea. The raging, howling wind roars in his ears. The waves wash to the shore, erasing whatever is built, then retreat to the dark ocean again. The tsunami is unceasing, and the little people keep running in circles, crying, mourning each other’s deaths. The corpses are there one moment, then they are gone with the waves the next, only to reappear a long time later. The robber steals food from a kind grocery store owner’s pantry, claiming hunger, then dies of starvation when the wind blows his loot away. Gautama watches all of this happen, thinking, *What the sea takes, it will return; like sand running through our hands, nothing will remain if we hold onto things, and when the cycle ends, you will be glad it’s over, only to jump into the next one with the same glee. Because life is suffering.*

Gautama wakes from his fever dream. Heavy drops of sweat are dripping down his face in streams. The cicadas sing louder in the midsummer night, as if they’re chasing a life of their own. Something is slipping through the cracks of his fingers. Gautama clenches his fist and releases the force gently, like wind blowing through the willow branches. It is sand. He watches the grains flowing down his palm, and the heat of the morning sun scorches his nape. *This is life.* Gautama clenches and releases his fist, once, twice, many times, like a sacred

offering to the divine. Life is flowing through Gautama from the end of the fever dream to the last of the grains of sand, and it keeps flowing still, until Gautama closes his eyes to sleep again. The next time he opens his eyes, it is morning, and the girl's grave is already filled. Her tombstone reads: Unknown, age fifteen, parentage unidentified. But different from other graves, beneath the large print, there is another line, smaller, almost illegible to the normal eyes: "Loved by all who've used and abused her."

Gautama stares at the grave, face-to-face with the conversation that will be here long after he leaves, like a wound that refuses healing even by the best medicine—forgetfulness and time—and it will keep festering, bleeding, molding. The smell from its pungent, pus-covered edges will haunt the people who chance a look at it, but no one dares clean up the mess. Like the cicadas' song every summer, they can only tolerate the common wound, some with fear and shame, some with their conscience's eyes blinded by greed and sin. The sand keeps running. Gautama inhales the stale morning air, thinking that the smell is already reaching him. He picks a wild daisy and puts it by the grave of the girl as the last offering. No one will visit her for a long time to come, and everyone will try to forget that the cemetery for little girls ever existed.

* * *

"And did Gautama try to change the world after what he saw?" Hong asks, wiping the sweat off her face, standing and wriggling her feet to relieve the tension in both legs.

"What do you think? He's that Gautama. He knows he can't change the world. It has to change itself." Ananda draws circles on the sand near the road,

mumbling.

“How can the world change itself? Did Gautama teach the world a lesson?” Hong purses her lips. She can’t grasp the importance of Gautama and his constant passing through. “Let’s keep going. I can’t tolerate another story of this Gautama.”

Hong walks ahead, and Ananda follows behind in close steps. After a long, arduous silence with scorching heat pouring down both of them like liquid fire, Ananda broaches the subject: “What Gautama teaches is how to overcome suffering. He spent years telling us where our suffering begins, but what do you think we take from those wise words?”

“What? I hope it’s not about forgiving and forgetting.” Hong rolls her eyes, striding away.

“No.” Ananda halts in his tracks, waiting for Hong to turn back. Then, he speaks slowly to the red-cheeked girl, as if he has just realized the fact himself, “He knows that what he possesses can’t be taught. That people must live through each one’s personal hell to reach their own nirvana, and even then, some can’t get through the cycle the first time. They will return again and again to learn the origin, and his words will only ring empty. Not because they are wrong, but because the truth can only be one specific truth to one person. And he can’t live multiple lives at the same time. Neither can we. Also, after entering Nirvana, the Buddha can’t re-enter Samsara again. It’s a one-way ticket.”

“So the point you’re making is that we all must suffer?” Hong purses her lips. “Why do others suffer less and we more, then?”

“Because suffering isn’t measured against a scale.” Ananda squints his eyes. In Hong’s round face and defiant nature, he thinks he is seeing his grandmother in her youth. Always asking, always protesting, always breaking

the ceilings of the unknowns, she resists because she knows that's the only way to leave her mark. Perhaps Hong is a reincarnation of his grandmother. Ananda smiles at the thought. "Suffering is something very intimate. My own can be way worse than a child born with a silver spoon in his mouth, but who's to say his pain is not equal to or larger than what I have?"

"For that, we should all love the rich," Hong sneers.

She almost turns away when the pilgrim says, "No, for that, we should love everyone, rich or poor. And we should always remember the cemetery for little girls exists."

Hong wants to retort by saying that what Ananda tells her is just a myth, but she finds it hard to utter a single word. How can she jeer at the pilgrim when his eyes are dark and hardened with the pains of many tombstones, the nameless and the named, with a single wild daisy relieving them of the heavy shame? She ponders in the middle of the road. The sun watches over them, as stern as any scholastic audience. Hong thinks she hears a cicada chirp somewhere. From afar, a government bus is coming their way. It promises cool air and comfortable seats. Hong closes her eyes, feeling the sweat pierce her muscles and the salty taste invade her mouth. She heaves a sigh: "I'd rather destroy the cemetery. I'd rather they all die. In fact, I'd rather not bear the shame and guilt of those who've done the crime, abusing the girls without a care. I'd love to be excluded from the narrative. And yes, I know how stupid I sound. But it's cruel, don't you think, to force all of that on us poor people, who are doing nothing but surviving? You ask too much of me, Ananda or Gautama or whoever else. I'm only human."

Hong smiles at him, and Ananda sees the reason for his return here to the Sand City. He didn't learn his lesson the first time when his grandmother was buried in the mass grave. He is still sitting on his moral high ground. And he is

only repeating others' truths. *What about mine?* Ananda questions silently as he continues to walk behind Hong. *Do I have any truth?*

Gautama is Dreaming

The scorching day turns into the blazing night in the slow, torturous flow of the unforgiving desert landscape. Ananda walks on the barren road, feeling the stab of every sharp rock and pebble through his thin, leaf-woven sandals. He glances toward Hong. The girl hooks her sandals on one finger, walks barefoot on the pebbled earth, and giggles at the pain she would never know if she stayed at the Red Camellia for her lifetime. Ananda wipes the thin film of sweat on his forehead. The moon rises high above them; its purity reminds Ananda once more how nauseating the earth is, and how life on earth can only be a whisper of tales among the hungry ghosts. The craving goes on eternally: for fame, for wealth, for power, and then, for the sinful treasures those trinities can help people attain. He stops walking. Is there any meaning in visiting his grandmother's resting place? What is he here for? Why were all of them born?

The last thing Ananda is aware of is Hong's shout, calling his name, as he faints to the rugged earth. He feels the stones scratch his face, the hard landing knocks his consciousness far away, and the lullaby from a distant past echoes, "Ai-o, the wind sweeps through banana leaves, who left his child for another beauty. Writhing in agony, I cradle my babe, saving your mother. I sold my life so ours can be happy—"

Ananda's world turns to darkness, and he swims upstream in the soot-blackened river to reach the light, far away from Hong's lament, the eternal traveling of the caravans, the strangers and the lonely exile. He keeps swimming against the current until he reaches a moss-covered shore, where the sublime sunshine filters through the palm leaves, and the wind is caressing the canopies, weaving its own symphony. Underneath a palm tree, just before his eyes, Gautama is sitting, seemingly sleeping in the comfort of the cradle of nature. Ananda stands still, takes the scene in for ten, twenty seconds, almost forever if not for Gautama's sudden gentle voice: "You've come to me at last."

The voice wakes Ananda from his dream-like state. He falters on his feet, then, clenching his fists to steel his determination. Directly opposite Gautama, he says, "Wise teacher, I've suffered enough. I don't understand why people must suffer the way they do. I can't accept that humans have no other way to go but to reject their carnal passions. Wise teacher, what if samsara is the answer? What if we are beyond salvation?"

He stops to breathe. Contrary to his excited state, Gautama remains at ease in his peaceful pose, leaning against the palm tree. His eyes close, as if he is still sleeping, or is eternally smiling at the world's agony, sharing their pain, tolerating their lamentation, but never once interfering to lessen the burden. He remains silent for so long, Ananda thinks Gautama hasn't heard his heartfelt protest. The pilgrim gathers his courage, preparing himself to repeat the daring confrontation, but Gautama raises one hand, quietly halting his intention. "Listen to the trees, Ananda," Gautama says, soft as a whisper, but the echo of his voice is loud like the ring of a copper bell.

"What?" Astounded, Ananda asks. "Listen to the whispers of the trees."

"Is that your answer? When we suffer, just stop and listen to the whispers of the trees. Is that it? When we kill and maim one another, listen to the

whispers of the trees. Oh, why, wise teacher?" Without realizing, Ananda's knees buckle, and he falls to the moss-covered ground. "Why won't it stop?"

The pilgrim's cries pierce the palm forest. The leaves howl with him. The stream mourns his name. But Gautama remains the same. He waits, patiently, until Ananda's cries turn to stifled sobs, and speaks with the same mysterious, understanding smile on his gentle face: "Ananda, when you suffer, the trees suffer with you. When you cry, the stream cries with you. When you reach the depth of your sorrow, Ananda, life is there within you. So, Ananda, listen to the trees, don't listen to me."

Gautama exhales deeply, then falls back into his deep slumber. The palm leaves cradle his robes and caress his head as he dreams of another lifetime, where people know him by another name, where he lives another life, and suffers all the same. Ananda reaches out his hand as if to grab at Gautama's saffron robes before the wise teacher is asleep, crying out: "Wait—" Much like the wise teacher, Ananda is floating away again, but he hasn't asked the most important question: where is his truth? Where must he find it? He crawls on the moss-covered shore, trying to stay inside the dream. The gale rages on out of nowhere, whirling the trees from their places, sweeping the leaves into a bellow, and as Ananda lets his hands go, he listens to the trees: "Ai-o, the wind sweeps through banana leaves, who left his child for another beauty. Writhing in agony, I cradle my babe, saving your mother. I sold my life so that ours can be happy—"

The next time he opens his eyes, Ananda faces Hong's back, which is fleetingly lit by the campfire she kindles herself by the roadside. They don't have permission to stay inside the rest stop, so they drift and take refuge along the road like any other illegal alien. Ananda pricks his ears in his weary stage, turning to his side to listen better, and Hong is singing: "Ai-o, the wind sweeps

through banana leaves, who left his child for another beauty. Writhing in agony, I cradle my babe, saving your mother. I sold my life so that ours can be happy. Ai-o, the wind is whirling me through life. Who gets to eat the crab at sea, and who gets to eat meager rice? Ai-o, the wind hurls the moon to my side. But the moon is here no more, then for whom does the wind rise? Ai-o—”

Ananda listens to the lullaby in reverent silence. In the glimmering light of the crackling fire, his tears reflect an iridescent gleam of a past many people around them share. The past, when, as children, they were carried on their grandmothers’ backs or their mothers’, as the women of their lives toiled in the field, prepared the meals for the family, and cared for the elderly. In the everlasting twilight of the war, where there was no beginning nor the end, these women waited on the front porch for their husbands’ return, their children suckling on their dried-up breasts while the lullaby sang on, eternally.

He wonders if Hong was once a child like that, and whether she will grow up to be a mother like so many women before her, singing that sad lullaby as she did just now, waiting for a man who never promises to come back, and wasting her life in this wasteland, desiccating her youth on the barren sand. Ananda weeps, and Gautama’s words from his dream ring in his ears again: “Listen to the trees, don’t listen to me.” He glances around the campsite. There’s a family sitting not far from them, gathered by the cluster of banana trees, sharing their packed meals. The kids are munching silently on their rations of salt and rice, while the two adults pass the salted meat among themselves, forcing the other to eat more, then quietly give their portion to the kids, pretending they are already full. Ananda bites his lips. This scene is too familiar to him; it doesn’t invoke sadness anymore, just pure ironic acceptance.

“Are you awake? You should say something! I was grilling fish for dinner.” Hong pulls him back to their situation.

“Fish?” Ananda asks, befuddled. “Where do you find fish in a desert?”

“Not fresh fish per se,” Hong fumbles, her ears flushing a deep red. Perhaps from the heat of the flame, or from the poverty of the city she has been living in her whole life, Hong looks pretty in her ragged clothes and unkempt appearance, with black soot on her nose and cheeks. “Salted fish. But it’s good with rice.” She wipes the soot mark on her left cheek which has been itching for a while, grinning.

Ananda takes in everything. The evening, whose blazing heat is enough to kill a weaker person, is a comfort to him; the gradation of the deep violet sky, cascading to the end of the world, turns into a magnificent beauty. The fire crackles in front of them, behind them, next to them, everywhere as the illegal aliens are preparing their dinners. Ananda listens, closing his eyes, and the wind blows gently through his hair, thick with dirt and dandruff from many days without washing, caresses his face, which is rough and dry, proof that he has spent his life fighting humans and beasts. He lets go of a long exhale, a breath he has long forgotten how to perform with ease. Hong stares at him; her head tilts to one side. Her eyes reflect the little fire around them: “Are you going to eat or not?”

“Before that, let me tell you one story.”

“Gautama again?” Hong groans, but she still sits down next to Ananda, ready to listen. Somehow, this strange Gautama triggers something in Hong; something akin to a forbidden desire in these restricted walls of Sand City—like the will to be free.

“No. Not exactly about Gautama, but it involves him in a way,” Ananda chuckles. He picks up a dried tree branch and begins to draw circles on the hard, sterile earth. “Once, when Gautama was so tired of the crying in the world, he lay down to sleep, and he dreamed—”

* * *

Gautama walks along the seashore, listening to the sound of waves crashing on the sandy carpet. He feels the pain of sharp shells stabbing his heels while the silken sand cradles his feet. Gentleness and cruelty, goodness and evil, salvation and despair, black and white, all of them return to nothingness. Just like how Gautama, treading with peace by the ocean, is heading to his resting place.

He finds a shaded spot under the palm tree up the hill, and the path to the cool space requires intensive effort from his weary body. Yet, he persists. His feet are bleeding. The scorching ground is burning his skin, despite the calluses he has developed over the years. The wind stands still, not willing to provide even an ounce of relief for his parched skin. “Who am I?” Gautama asks with one step, then, “What am I here for?” with another step. He climbs the hill with torturous will, and the large, dripping drops of sweat fall into his eyes, temporarily blinding him.

At long last, he reaches the palm tree. But the sun has moved to another position, and the shade he had longed for isn’t there anymore. Gautama, with his eyes closed, sits down, leaning his back against the rough tree trunk, and begins to dream.

He dreams of the wars. The beggar is still by the bloody fields of corpses. The people are killing each other, and the cause changes every fifteen minutes on the scoreboard: one moment, it is faith; the next, it is liberation. Gautama wonders if the beggar has found the reason for all these wars. Putting all the

causes side by side, it is clear to see the greed in every life lost in the battle for power. Then he floats to the cemetery for little girls. There, he sees new graves. There are more flowers. The mourners come by more often. The promises to change hang on to each tombstone in the form of a white daisy, but the change never comes. Gautama wonders if the men who abused that little girl he met once upon a time ever atoned for their sins. Or maybe the world is large enough to contain justice both for the masses and for the easily forgotten.

Gautama keeps on wondering until he awakes. The night has come. The air is cooler, and the stars are starkly bright against the dark sky. He looks at them, connecting each little light to the other. One faded light will light up another. Life goes on in a stream, and maybe he doesn't believe as much in fate as in hope, especially in the hope that no matter how dark the world is, the sun always rises. He stands up, walks down the hill again to reach his next destination, exclaims to himself and the space around him:

"Heaven above, earth below, I alone am the living man."

* * *

"And? Why are you crying?" Hong asks, somewhat sheepish and meek, as the pilgrim has been crying throughout the story.

Ananda wipes his tears with his tattered sleeves. The moon shines on them, watching in her silent judgment. The people around them cast Ananda funny looks, then go back to their conversation. The pilgrim cackles, hacks a short cough, then replies. Something in his voice shatters. "Because I was the child at the battlefield. I grew up to be the beggar in every war. I'd met the little girl at the cemetery, repeating the Buddha's teaching, wishing all the while that

he'd turn his head. I had prayed that he would look back and see that we are suffering."

"But he never did, did he?" Hong stokes the fire, munching on her salted fish and the rice balls she prepared at home. "Why would you care for a figure who never promises you anything, not even salvation?"

"I know. Trust me, I understood that fact when the little girl I met died without any help from the people around her. But I asked myself, why wouldn't he turn his head? Why wouldn't he help us? So I keep on searching, and Hong, do you know what he told me?"

"Wait, you met him? The Gautama?" Hong gasps. "No, I mean, what did he tell you?" A piece of half-bitten salted fish falls from her mouth, but she quickly picks it up and puts it in her mouth in haste. "Three seconds. The germs haven't gotten to it yet. And madam said not to waste food." She grins, her teeth full of rice.

Ananda knows she won't understand no matter how he tries to explain it. He knows Hong lives a different way of life, and for better or worse, she doesn't have the same tortures, the same punishments, cut out for her as he does. He opens his mouth, but the will to confess his heart has dwindled at a breakneck speed. What's the point of talking when the other party is there but will never be with him on the journey? And he is thinking with vanity; he understands that, but if he explains himself to Hong, the treasure he just realized in his heart will also become vanity...

Thus, Ananda simply smiles, contented and serene: "Heaven above, earth below, I alone am the living man."

Hong doesn't listen to him. She clicks her tongue and continues with her meal. Ananda thinks it is for the best; there are treasures he can share, and there are some special ones that people have to live through to earn.

He looks at the stars lighting up the night sky, talking loud enough for Hong to hear: “Listen to the fire, Hong. Don’t listen to me.”

Whether Hong heard his words or not, Ananda doesn’t know. The world is outside his control. And he has come to forgive that fact.

The Mass Grave

The pilgrim and Hong slowly approach the public cemetery, their feet dragging along the dirt-covered, pebbled roadside as if they were laden with iron chains. The heat changes from intolerable to acceptable if one learns how to be patient under the hands of torture and the force of nature. The pilgrim—Ananda—tastes the sweat on his upper lip and feels the sting of something spicy mixed with the inevitable saltiness. The closer they get to the city's cemetery, the seething pain from Ananda's pungent sweat becomes more noticeable. He thinks of his grandmother, whose corpse he isn't sure will be in the mass grave, whose death he never knew the cause of, or whether it changed the course of history, whose existence is now reduced to a label: "Unknown, parentage unidentified." Then he thinks about the teaching of Gautama, that life is suffering. Ananda has been suffering through it gently and with tenderness.

Cradling his traveling life in his palms, he asks Hong, who's swinging at life with full force, come what may or may not: "Do you think our suffering comes from us?"

"What are you asking?" Hong retorts, somewhat grumpy because of the heat and dehydration. The well is nearby, but the water, as with all wells in this city, is undrinkable because of the parasites and dirt in it.

“I mean, do you think we are the cause of our suffering? Because we have so many desires, and we are too greedy, we’re bound to jump down the abyss, thinking that after darkness, we shall come to heaven.”

“That’s one way to put it.” Hong shrugs. She thinks about the brothel, the cool air underneath the brick roofing, and the clay walls. She never cared where suffering begins. As the old madam would say, if she heard Ananda’s words, *What a waste of fucking time.*

“Then what’s the other way?” Ananda picks up a pebble on the roadside. It has one smooth side and one rough surface. He turns the pebble in his hand. “Do you mean that even when we are all good, we still have to suffer anyway?”

“Listen, I don’t think anything about it—suffering, samsara, Gautama, the teaching, salvation—all your yapping. I just pay attention because you told me you would give me a story that would amaze everyone. And so far, it is a bit underwhelming. No, underwhelming is too light. Ananda, don’t you think you’re looking at the trees and not the forest or something like that?” Hong wipes her face, groaning, taking in the rare gust of wind from afar.

“As in?”

“As in, you focus too much on suffering and explaining why you have to suffer. And you also obsess over why bad people live so much better than good people. But hey, take the pebble in your hand, for example; what if the things you see are the smooth surface, and the things they see are the rough side instead? I live a good life. I never thought I had a bad one—and don’t preach to me about the brothel, I know what it sounds like—but to you, and to many people outside my world, that’s suffering. And when you ask me where the suffering begins, I can only say, ‘Well, there you go.’ Because even if I let you see how happy I am, or will be, you will continue to see things from your eyes. That’s your truth, Ananda. This is mine. So we better get on with life, instead

of dissecting it into ten pieces or a hundred pieces of philosophy or commandments. Now, my goal is to get to the mass grave and go home. I'm sick of your self-pity and self-righteousness. Who do you think you are? You can barely save yourself."

Hong stands back; her posture stays upright, her shoulders square up, her spine is firm, and her eyes are blazing. There is something within her that has suddenly changed from a dormant domestic servant to a ferocious beast that's holding its sway over the last piece of its rotten land. Ananda retreats a few steps. A familiar feeling churns inside his stomach.

His ears are deafened. His eyes waver. He hears the same word from his childhood in the riddle his grandmother used to tell him: *fear*. The cemetery's gate stands looming before them a few hundred meters away. He looks at the decorated metal frame and the ostentatious, fake flowers, thinking, *This isn't who I want to become*. But along the way, in the days of traveling light and on the nights of borrowing others' wisdom, thinking that would help him build a fortress against the injustice that he refuses to bear, Ananda knows neither option will bring him peace—to fight or to fear, to die or to live. The choices only solidify the prison he is inside.

The knowledge he was taught as a child and the multiple truths from the different facets he dips his feet into when he becomes an adult eventually turn him into the tallest symbol of the thing he hates most: a hypocrite. He preaches Gautama because, like the great revered man, he had hoped one day he would understand why life happened. Facing death in front of him, the nameless and the named, row after row of molded tombstones, Ananda listens to the silence of generations when people like his grandmother had tried, failed, and lay here as a testament that obedience might be cowardice, but it opened the doors for peace.

And peace had been good until someone decided it wasn't any longer. Like the blackened figure who begged Gautama, when miracles and benevolence stop serving greed, another war will break out in the name of a new age, to justify the false throne of the gods they believe will sanctify their sins.

Ananda looks at the piercing blue sky above him. The azure color is beautiful to the point of being cruel in its wake. Why must it show such color? Whose hope is it holding in the white chiffon clouds and the streak of sunlight that blinds the normal eyes of its beholders? Ananda feels the anger rise within him. The strange sensation he thought he had lost a long time ago now squeezes his throat and wracks his neck. His breathing stops short. He forgets how to take in oxygen, the most natural act of living. The earth falls asunder. Ananda moves one foot forward and realizes the world is cracking open and the cries are everywhere. The agony won't stop just because one person wakes up one day and chooses goodness. The futility of it all, the balance of mountains hanging on a strand of hair, and the realization that he, Ananda, would rather walk ahead, make him desperate enough to believe that there will be an escape from this eternal cycle of damnation and relentless hope.

He touches the tree trunks as he runs fleetingly through the rows of graves, like a child returning home looking for his mother, his salvation, his resting place. Finally, he reaches the site of the mass graves. An oblong tableau is erected upon a flattened piece of earth: This graveyard is the resting place of—and Ananda tries to find his grandmother's name. He looks for the Gautama surname, for the weird syllables and pronunciation, but how can he be ready for what awaits him? In this land of migrants and refugees, all the names are as strange as the next. They bear the mark of being the only ones in the immense world of forced conformity. The stark difference stares back at him and Hong, as if to say, *That's right, we're here because we stand up for our opinions.* He

brushes a blurred name at the bottom of the tableau, which is covered by the moss and overgrown, wild daisies: “Hong, let me tell you one last story.”

“If it’s another story about Gautama’s adventures, I won’t hear it.” Hong leans on the marble tableau, looking at the sky. A swallow flies by, its wings covering the sun briefly, and Hong thinks, How fortunate for the bird—he can be anywhere but here.

“It’s another Gautama story. But it’s one I’ve heard from a direct witness.” “Really? Gautama lives that long, huh?”

“Gautama doesn’t die. He lives, and he will keep on watching over us from Nirvana, bearing the same memory of the many lives he has been through.”

“Do you think that’s a blessing or a curse?” Hong blurts. Her mind follows the swallow to the next open field in the adjacent desert, the next city, and maybe, if the swallow is lucky enough, a new country. But what does it matter? Any place is the same. The war is still going on. Lives are being lost fast. Nothing is here, but everything exists.

“I think Gautama had thought through his ending, and he chose the appropriate path forward.”

“Which is?”

“To never turn his head, come what may.”

“I don’t understand.” Hong scratches her head, wiping the sweat off her eyebrows. “If it were me, I would turn back and redo the choice until I get the best outcome.”

“Because we’re human.”

“That’s why we’re human,” Hong corrects a brooding Ananda. “And Gautama isn’t?”

“Gautama is beyond us. He decides to face his consequences because he knows the conclusion is the same.”

“Oh, what the hell. Tell me, then; tell me the story about Gautama. The last one,” Hong grumbles. She stands and walks toward the well at the end of the road, heaves up a load of water, and brings it to the tableau. She wants to clean the mass grave site.

“It explains why Gautama would never turn his head.” Ananda picks up a ragged piece of cloth from the ground, just beneath the tableau and the blurred name, then begins to scrub the cemented border. He wants to relieve his mind of a burden—the branding of cowardice his conscience has seared on his brain and heart since the day his grandmother died.

“Even in a world like this?” Hong chides, pouring the water from the top of the tableau.

“Especially in a world like this.” Ananda replies calmly, cleaning the carved names with a concentrated meticulousness. “The legend says that...”

* * *

Gautama arrives at the village when the darkest of nights has fallen. He walks slowly through the deserted road, his eyes downcast, his face serene. There is no gentleness as the cradle which is made of moonlight and the silence of the night. His feet absorb the pleasant cold of the cobblestone road. His hands hug the wind that passes by like the caress of a secret lover. And he knows life is a wonder one must suffer through to see the beauty in every deep, dark, ugly corner. Suddenly, in his deep meditative state, a moan brings hi back to the reality of dried palm roofs and clay walls. A man is lying by the corner of the road, right next to the garbage dumpster, and he is groaning as if his life depends on someone hearing him, coming to his rescue. That someone turns

out to be Gautama. Only Gautama. Thus knowing, Gautama approaches the man, asking gently, "What ails you, my child?"

"It's this pain. I can't escape it. The pain comes every night when I try to sleep, and haunts me in the daylight when I go about my business."

"What pain is it?"

"I can't explain it. You wouldn't understand anyway. It feels as if I'm buried alive every day, and the earth I'm walking on keeps sinking. The sand is swallowing me, eating at my flesh, the pain is suffocating, and I can't escape," the man moans his suffering to Gautama.

Yet, to his utter despair, Gautama doesn't move from his position. He stands underneath the shining moonlight, a thin film of sweat covering his honey-colored skin, the mysterious smile plastered on his face, as if this, too, is all a part of his master plan. The venerated Buddha looks straight at the agonizing man; the gentle, downcast eyes bear within them a hidden blade of steel, cutting down the man's mask, piercing through his flesh, and chilling his bones.

"Save me," he mutters through clattering teeth.

"Ah, how all of us want to be saved by a miracle." Gautama speaks with so much softness that the man starts to think of forgiveness.

"Then you will."

"But none of us will be."

"Aren't you the venerable master of all?" The man crawls on hands and feet to the Buddha's heels, clutching at the hem of his robe.

Gautama thinks of the blackened figure, the white tears turned to darkness, the little girl with soot-covered fingers, and the cemetery with the oak trees he had slept under. This lifetime has been the most arduous of all, he thinks, but as the lake's water will turn to raindrops, he still plans to come back

here again. Maybe deep inside his heart, he harbors a wish to see the little girls living, smiling, and sleeping in a better place than a square piece of earth with a grey slab of stone. He says, with a benevolence as immense as the ocean and a sternness as narrow as the man's hope for salvation: "And aren't you the owner of the cemetery for little girls?"

"How do you know?" the man yelps in surprise, then lowers his voice in pain. "Oh, the insufferable little gremlins—are they the cause?"

Gautama bends down, picks up a wild daisy the man had trampled on in his tossing and turning, then gives the withered flower to him. He says, "Don't worry, 'the insufferable little gremlins' will sleep in peace if you plant these wild daisies to remember them."

"Will my pain lessen then?" the man asks, a spark of deceit lighting up in his cunning eyes. "Let's see to it that you plant the first wild daisy."

Speaking thus, Gautama walks away into the depths of the night. Many months later, the villagers found the filthy rich man dead outside the edge of the village, right at the gate of the cemetery for little girls. He was starving, and his tongue was hanging out of his mouth. In the last moments of his life, he couldn't eat or drink because the pain was licking at his flesh like a ferocious hound from hell. The villagers tell each other about the curse of the little girls. The myth spreads far and wide until it reaches the ears of Gautama, who is traveling to his final destination. Sitting underneath the oak tree in a foreign town, Gautama only beams at the urban legend, as rotten and appealing as the corpse by the grave stones, in that enigmatic way no one can decipher whether it's judgment or a saint's kindheartedness, saying: "So he didn't plant the wild daisies, I see."

* * *

“And what happens after?” Hong asks, sweeping a broom she took from the public facility room across the grave site. The sky is overcast with the oncoming rain. The season is as unpredictable as the human heart. “Did they destroy the cemetery for little girls?”

“I don’t think they ever did.” Ananda changes the moldy water in the vases beside the mass grave and places bouquets of wildflowers into them. He watches the train of clouds trail away, turning from white to a pregnant grey as he heaves a sigh then leans back on the ground. “When I heard the story at first, I thought Gautama had punished the man. But now, I think maybe it is I who am looking for the punishment in that story. See, we’re only seeing what we’re finding. Maybe there was forgiveness, but the man hadn’t seen it, and neither had I. We’re all too human.”

Ananda laughs, placing his hands behind his head, feeling like he let a lifetime slip through the cracks of his fingers, though he never knows when his life begun and when it will end. Maybe it started when he left Sand City when it was still Pearl City. Or when his grandmother was resisting with a scythe in her hands. He thinks of the events in his life.

Everything will leave; only he is staying. And it’s sad but sweet that he is holding onto himself here, purely existing while the rest is flowing through, undulating, passing him by like a river.

Hong stands still, leaning on the coarse broom. Her mind is elsewhere; her feet are firmly rooted in the earth where she was born. She wishes she could

grow wings, and her thought blurts out of her mouth like the afterimage of a complaint: “If it were me, I would tell the man to grow a forest of oak trees.”

“What?”

“Your Gautama story. If it were me, I wouldn’t limit it to the wild daisies. Either way, he would end up the same. Might as well grow a forest of oak trees.”

“How would you know that he would end up with the same fate?” Ananda asks.

Hong stares at the darkened rows of weeping willows, her eyes sparkling with a cryptic, benign light that looks so much like vengeance. Her innocence has long gone. A smile plastered on her face, gentle yet bitter and belligerent in its perseverance, she says, “I just know.”

The rain comes as suddenly as the change of time itself. Ananda and Hong lie under the shadow of the weeping willows, watching the water flow away to the small stream, which, hitherto, has been desiccated. Ananda and Hong still don’t fully understand the Gautama stories. They never fool themselves into thinking that they will achieve the greatness of Gautama and reach enlightenment if they keep repeating the anecdotes. But at that moment, when raindrops fall on dried earth, Ananda and Hong know that Gautama is right about one thing: life is suffering, but how beautiful it is sometimes, and that is enough to keep one lingering here, coming back to this pain—eternally, if possible.

Behind them, the blue range of the mountain peaks hides underneath the darkening sky. Somewhere along the winding path of the forgotten village where the pilgrim was born, Gautama is walking, his face forward, his eyes always looking at the world. His head never turns back, not even once.

The End

II

Full Moon in October

Full Moon in October



11/11/11

11/11/11

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One

hang myself to dear life by the threat of an existential memory called, “there was once a person like you.” I know, it sounds pathetic as much as it does foolish. Like a cracker going off on New Year’s Eve, failing to, then going wayward, and trailing

I
down the river, lost, drowned, dead. I wonder if you remember the promise that between heaven and earth, only I am your trusted friend? It’s alright if you don’t, because I will carve it somewhere safe—the sandy shore of a stormy seaside, or better yet, I will draw it on the window glass on a cold winter’s night with my breath and watch it evaporate into nothingness.

Don’t trust my words because to dream these lines onto paper, a person must walk on thorns and a featherbed at the same time, relishing the agony in the treacherous comfort without a moment of doubt. I write these stories for sales, at midnight, on a discounted I*** chair I bought on a financial plan, in the lingerie that no one will see, and the full moon in October is watching me. Silence in the darkness of the room, and I know the moon is judging me. But I’m glad my pain can earn me some bread.

You said it first, that it didn’t mean much to you—love and the monsters behind the pretty, amorous chase, the thrill of the passionate dance where we

devour one another and neither of us emerges as the winner. “Yes, but what about someone you hold in your heart? What about your first love? There must be something—someone—who ignites in you the reason for living,” I said, sipping my French vanilla, bought cheaply at ninety-nine cents for a large cup, because I was a broke-ass bitch and you were a pragmatic asshole. “Aren’t you sad, living that way?”

“Leia, you’re letting the social construct get to your head. We don’t need ‘love’ in that sense to live. In a way, we need a companion. But such a person doesn’t necessarily mean he or she will change your destiny. Our brains work marvelously with a whole map of chemicals and switchboards. It’s less romantic to be in a relationship than you imagine.”

You shook your head. Your hands are covered by the dark gloves, the fingers wrapped around the red cup so neatly, like little, twined forget-me-nots, and when the moon hung above our heads, the beam shone a gentle blue so the tips bloomed in a bouquet of cruel detachment. “Don’t trust anyone, Leia,” you said, sipping your black coffee, “Especially yourself.”

That was the night you told me you wouldn’t take anyone else to the park on the hillside. I sat on the bench, floating between the thin line of “would not” and “but why?” The temptation was ever so sweet when you were the one speaking the lines in the script. Your eyes were dark, and many years later, when I grew to be your age, the wounds and bruises on my knees and feet were finally deep enough so I could understand that look you carried then.

It is hopeless, Leia. This world isn’t a gentle cradle, Leia. You will find a better person, Leia. We are never meant to be, Leia.

This is my wife, Leia.

Two

made a dreamcatcher out of a plastic ring and polyester wool the first time I found out your birthday. It didn't catch whatever fragments my dream or yours left behind when they shattered and fell apart, cutting us into different people. The chase was

I
finished before the timer began. You were not to blame. And I could only ask every cell in

my body, my existence, to hold up, to compress this yearning into a short burst of laughter, so when you texted me, "Thanks for the birthday present," I could reply with, "I was being silly lol," while crying out loud amidst a team meeting.

First year. University. Was it whatever I had hoped it to be? Perhaps. Hey, at least I learned that when you said love wasn't real, you were lying. Because my brain was deceiving me like you said it should, and yet, I couldn't forget that first taste of the bitter elixir people have surrendered to for thousands of years. "Chemicals and switchboards," the mind tells the system, and the system retorts, "But when will you ever switch to a sitcom or at least a stand-up comedy act? Because the plain old Greek tragedy of your life is killing yourself."

Don't trust anyone, Leia. It's a mad world, Leia. I know betrayal is inevitable, Leia. Call me, Leia. You're my best friend, Leia.

Don't you think you're destroying yourself, Leia?

Three

We drove down the empty street when the clock struck midnight. It was winter. The snowflakes stuck on your windshield, and I laughed when you told me all textbook authors should just die. In fact, I believed that

no matter who you thought should die then, I would still laugh it off and think of their deaths as the most hilarious joke anyone ever told me. Such bland stupidity of youth is something I can only taste once in a lifetime, and it leaves a bad, bitter aftertaste. I didn't find your words funny, but I had my heart scorching in the fire of hell, wishing you would think of me as a fellow sufferer in your damning world. Who will shoulder the blame of my life's magnificent ruin for me?

The car was speeding at seventy kilometres per hour on a local neighbourhood road, and I couldn't care less if we crashed and burned. My finger was bleeding because I accidentally cut myself on the shaving blade when your call came. Could we blame my carelessness on the clumsy personality that would one day make me an undesirable in everyone's eyes? Or could I say, if it weren't your name, I would turn the phone off and go to sleep, because the world matters so very little to a perfectionist whose only goal was the next full mark on the midterm exams?

I held back. The bubbles of happiness burst in little fireworks inside me. I loved you. I never loved you. The pain was throbbing sweetly in my chest as you rolled down your car window and the wind blew through your hair. Your laughter rang in my ears; that was enough for time and space to cease their existence. We were forever; we were nothing. I bit my lips. Crying would be awkward after the bland taste of your joke about textbook authors and death. “Freud should think better about his obsession with incest, and Jung could’ve chosen a better mentor,” you said. I laughed with all my strained muscles, because those names were still new to my freshman brain. My hands were white-knuckled. The thought that even if I cried now, the world wouldn’t stop moving, hit me as hard as a car crashing from the other direction, and my breathing stopped. “What’s wrong?” You asked.

“I was thinking the archaic language is stupid.”

“Right? Who uses ‘latter’ in normal context anyway? They could say it in simpler terms, and it would be much easier to memorize, too.” You rolled your eyes for dramatic effect, your hands in tightly fit, dark leatherette gloves. The road was lit with streetlamps so dim I thought I was dreaming things into reality.

“I wish it were easy to memorize. They’re all gibberish to me.” I giggled.

Because it was all gibberish. My nonsense and the blind faith in whatever lies you were spewing between my room and the park in the middle of the night—what else can we call it but a misdirection of youth? In archaic language, I can call it a bildungsroman, except someone forgot to decorate it with an epiphany as good as James Joyce’s in *The Dubliners*, so the younger generation can dissect it into a graduation thesis and put the word “latter” to its correct use.

Like the way you dissected me, picked out the personality trait that wasn't there, moulded me into the frame of your egoistic intellectual preference, and told me how everyone was the same underneath the mask they wore. Which position would you put the word "latter" in your thesis about the subject number thirteen, Leia, who's been perfectly strung on your grand manipulating stage, I wonder?

After you, I walked on my path to a salvation I never thought I'd need. I retraced the steps of the road you had destroyed for five fucking years, never once realizing who that bitch was—the girl that smiled and accepted your diagnosis of her as if your words were gospel, and she was a devotee of a religion no one would believe. I picked up the pieces of her, the girl who died a million deaths for something as meaningless to you as love, and asked her if she would do it all again. She smiled at me, whispering through her death-rattle, "Yes, yes, yes."

My girlfriend cheated on me, Leia. Discrimination is normal, Leia. Death is a normal thing, Leia. Wake up in the morning, Leia.

Working in this career, I must not have a heart, Leia.

Four

You went to England for post-grad. I asked your friends if you were as good as the degree sounded, and they laughed, saying, “Yes, he was a straight-A student.” You stayed silent during the whole party, sipping on your beer or wine or whatever type of alcoholic drink they served at the symposium. The grace of your presence showed from the tip of your downcast eyelashes to the thin lips gripping the rim of your glass. I adored everything that was you in that moment. The light was dimmed, and the crowd was cheering something stupid—who contributed to the club activity the most during the year of 20XX. Words started slipping down the top of my head and gliding on my body because I refused to catch their meanings. Your girlfriend’s best friend was sitting at the table opposite, and she was staring daggers at me. She hated my guts. Girls often have that innate power, you see—they stand up for each other, usually against other girls who pose a threat to their friends’ happiness. Maternal instinct, I would say. Why don’t I have anyone like that near me?

But let’s talk about something fun. Something like the party, where I chatted up your friend and tried way too hard to get your attention through him. I kept insisting, *It’s alright, we’re best friends, and best friends will never break up. This is for the best.* But deep inside, my stomach churned, and the nauseating feeling painted me black with disgust: I wanted you to lift your eyes from that

steak and see me. Not a childish little girl from nowhere at all, but me, someone who was brave enough to ask your number the first time I saw you in the crowded club, someone who chased after you for years—someone who will unyieldingly held onto your sleeve long after the curtains were drawn, because blind faith is so much easier to swallow than the thorny fruit of truth.

You cut the steak into tiny pieces, picked one up, and chewed slowly. Your movements were ever elegant and deft. The neat fingers wrapped gently around the knife, harmless, until the intention hit and the aim appeared. I knew you were a hunter with more than ten years of experience on your hands. Phrases like “Betrayal is a friend” or “I’m used to being abandoned,” etc., were the perfect triggers for your fatal shot, and you always shoot to kill. I watched the way you finished your meal. While your friend was yapping on endlessly about some fantasy fiction, my brain was floating. The chemicals were doing their job. I was trying to figure out whether I loved you or if my brain’s chemicals were mixing up a bad batch of toxins, and I was the poor victim of an addictive LSD. Leaning back on the white chair, I let the moment pass through me like a river, listening to nothing, hearing everything. Someone was calling my name, and I wished the night were over. But the club’s president came by, shook my shoulders, and said, “You’re awarded a participation trophy for your contribution.”

Yes, I fucked up well enough to get a pity certification out of my eagerness to be closer to a jackal. That’s what I would think, many years later, when I couldn’t sleep, and the medication I was on was no longer strong enough to numb the burn scars you left behind. Look, if you saw me now, you would hardly recognize my appearance. All my beauty was gone, and whatever Time couldn’t heal, it left there, searing on the body, reminding me constantly every

October that loving you was the best choice I made to destroy the youth I had but once in my life.

I have a girlfriend, Leia. The whole school knows about it, Leia. I didn't try to hide it, Leia. Too bad you were the only one who didn't know, Leia.

I like you, but not enough, Leia.

Five

I remember the day I found you with your girlfriend together on a date. It was Valentine's. Twenty-fourteen. One year later, I would be committed to the hospital for schizophrenia and depression. They say too much sadness can kill a person, and

I say let me try it out as a social experiment.

I was helping the club with their preparations. Busying myself so I didn't have to think about you or anything else was the best hobby I could have chosen at that time. That was why, when T. asked me to act as a stand-in for the event, I accepted willingly. Lifting heavy things was my specialty—after all, I lifted the burden of my feelings for you, both love and a bruising vengeance for years, with a smile on my face, wishing you every October, happy birthday. If you knew about my participation, you never showed it. Who knew, maybe you were laughing with your friends about the silly first-year who tailed around you all day long, even joined the club in the hope of sparking an interest in your cold, dark, unfathomable eyes. And I couldn't blame you. I took a willing role in the act—in fact, I almost feared that my script wasn't thick enough so I purposefully added in the scenes.

Texting you at midnight? You bet. Messaging you every Wednesday because somehow you always appeared in the school's coffee shop that day at the exact same time? Well, count me in. Didn't you see we worked perfectly together on that comedy so I could turn out as the bad guy in your playbook? I would say I was an Oscar-worthy actress—I never missed my beat, and on every cue, I spoke my phrases to appease the inflated ego the size of a solitary planet within you. Come on, give me the trophy.

Hey, do you remember that time when you boasted to everyone at our table when the club's jazz music was on, and maybe the whole school, that I would never like sci-fi or

fantasy fiction, that I wasn't the person to think too deeply about one problem, and I nodded along, laughing? Yes, I was that desperate to fit the mould you carved out for me. Like Cinderella's sisters, I cut my heels, my pinkie fingers, my hair, and shed my skin, so your gaze would turn my way. Look at the ragged doll I had become; I'd never known who I was before you, and after you, I don't know who I am anymore.

Your girlfriend was a cute princess. Take one look at her, and everyone would know why you preferred her to the Southeast Asian girl who chose baggy jeans, ugly sweaters, and a short haircut that was rarely styled to perfection. She was everything I wished I could be then. In dresses with frills, nails adorned with little gemstones, and soft with perfumed hand cream, her sweet scent hung around me for weeks as I passed her by, and trust me, I tried to scrub it off.

As a defense, I will declare here that I was raised to believe that knowledge, wisdom, and intelligence mattered more than a girl's outer appearance, which

has been proven wrong so many times, despite people not wanting to admit it. Which was, and still is, my downfall.

Which remains my side of the truth, and I've never regretted choosing knowledge. But do I regret you?

I scream the question to the void in my heart, and the chasms echo back: *You, you, you*. Which, from my side, means, *Me, me, me*.

That Valentine's Day, in twenty-fourteen, you avoided my eyes. I went home, and the sky was white with snow. I thought heaven was crying because a maiden had her heart broken over a narcissistic coward who couldn't even stand with his back straight and introduce her properly. His betrayal: This is my girlfriend. My mind was in a whirlwind, and I kept the

one song on repeat, "Your Winter," a Vietnamese song which my English was never enough to translate the cadence for:

*The day you loved me, you had forgotten it in the sweetness and bitterness of time
The day I loved you, I had drowned myself in the new sky of happiness*

*My dearest, the winter is back here again from the thousandth year of coldness
I've only loved you for one day, and lost you for a thousand lifetimes—*

Unaware of the crystallized sadness in my heart, I cried the whole way home. The passersby kept to their business, and that was its own blessing. Because if one of them had asked, I wouldn't have been able to recover from the abyss you pushed me into. Kindness can heal, I know, through experience after years of paying for therapy sessions—an expensive lesson for a love I delude myself was requited—but kindness can also break a person. The latter is only true to anyone who's down badly enough to cry on a bus moving sluggishly through a snowstorm, hoping that time could stand still so they can

wallow in that sweet agony a bit longer, and the lover of their dreams won't disappear after the tears are dried.

Leia, I'm going to London. Leia, you are the first person I'm telling this to. Leia, I have no hope in keeping a long-distance relationship.

I'm glad you confessed to me, Leia, but it won't work because we're so far away.

Six

You drove me to a bubble tea store in the middle of the night. Your car was a cheap, silver Honda, and I kept the irony of the situation to myself, how you were blabbering about luxurious car brands that you'd rather own had you

not been confined to this country but you stopped at a common car model. The night was starless and cold. The drive was filled with empty words and flatteries that didn't have any meaning except the silly adoration you thought I still had for you. I didn't. Not at that time. Not anymore.

Your post in the UK was confirmed; that was all you had to say. My brain couldn't focus on how much you hated the weather over there, or the political unrest your hometown was facing. I nodded at your shallow opinions, thinking, *I'm drowning in a sadness so comfortable and warm that it is closer to my best friend than the make-believe happiness I'm forcing myself to trust*. Your voice drifted away into the bubble tea store's stuffy air. The sugary smell made me sway, and the unmistakable, pungent scent of overnight black tea mixed with powdered milk was strong enough to keep me high. I thought, at least, in that singular moment, when everyone was leaving the store and the last light of the opposite restaurant was off, you were mine to hold. It was a secret between us

as long as you kept on lying, and I chose to have faith in your fleeting promises, religiously.

I wonder if life has ever treated you well enough to make you care about the ones you hurt. Or maybe it treated you better than “well enough,” and you thought you were undeserving of such kindness. The idea that people only choose to trample on others because they are wounded and bleeding is something funny to both of us, but more to you than me. You said we had choices, and if someone chose to hurt other people, it was their prerogative. What did I say to that?

I don't remember. Sitting on my bed at half past three in the morning, watching the blue hydrangea shed its last petals, I recall myself saying something along the lines of, “Well, why not choose to save a life?” And you laughed. There's no answer to such stupidity, so

you just laughed. On the ride back to my place, you said, “Leia, you dreamed far too much. You're off the ground, and one day, you'll fall to a terrible crash.” I was too young to understand your meaning, hidden beneath your pretentious, wise-man advice. I joked back that you were too pragmatic for your own good, and you turned grim.

The abyss between us was made of fear: I strove to reach your shore and grasp your elusive heart. You were eternally running away from the betrayal you said would happen, sooner or later. Love never lasts—such is your belief. Thirteen years later, I reminisce about our silly conversation on that winter night, as the full moon was shining her startling light upon us in October, and finally understand what you wanted to say. In my cashmere cardigan, I feel the lush fabric caressing my skin and think of another human's warmth wrapping around me. I dream of reaching the stars, of getting to the peak where

Sisyphus has to bear out his punishment and never get down again, but you know what? I never crash. You crushed me first. And there would never be any crucifixion as piercingly agonizing as the aftermath I had to live through after you.

The winter comes and goes as it pleases. I read many stories—legends, myths, fictional creations from the genius minds of writers before my time—about the origin of winter. Did you know that in Japan, there was a mysterious existence called *yuki-onna*? A woman who owned wintertime, and she was as beautiful as the word could ever be, but whenever a man tried to hold onto her, she disappeared, leaving behind a trail of cold, white snow. People tell stories of how she tempted humans who climbed the snowy peaks in the winter, or saved them, or showed herself to them as someone who would lead them to their peaceful ending. There were so many ways to satisfy the curiosity and desire of men. None were as wicked and vile as telling them she loved them first, only to abandon them later.

But hey, you already knew I would fall for the same trap. Aren't you the same as *yuki-onna*? Look at me holding onto your vanishing coat sleeves as you close the car door, and look at you leaving, never once thinking that there was a person who loved you like absolute faith.

Leia, England is a cold and heartless bitch. I'm sorry, but I won't be back this winter, either, Leia. Don't call me too often, Leia; I will miss the country.

Leia, this is my gift for you. You need to wake up.

Seven

I
t's a black wake-up signal. I only need to slam the button, and the shrill alarm will ring loudly enough for two whole rooms to hear. The sound was jarring, and the thing's design was tacky. You said you picked it up thinking about me. Should I feel
offended?

I had trouble staying awake. You knew that much because whenever you called me in the middle of the night, I told you, "Listen, can we stop? I had trouble staying awake." You said I was in the best time of my life—being a student, absorbing new knowledge, making friends, staying up late at night—and time didn't mean shit to a young person coming from a cage searching for freedom in a strange place. I nodded along: Yes, yes, yes. Best time of my life, for fuck's sake, but can you just not shove your dissection of my psychological anatomy down my thirsty throat? I took what you said and internalized it as if it were holy water to a plagued woman by the punishing wall, waiting for the mercy of passersby's judgment. I did nothing wrong, but give it time, and you will find something to justify the diagnosis. Leia, you think too much of it; aren't we friends?

Diagnosis number 1: I think too much of everything. There you go.

I lost the wake-up button toy two years after you were gone. Moving house, I told you as a flimsy reason, though secretly, the guilt rushed to my windpipe and I couldn't breathe. A freefall from the high peak of half-truths and the undying, narrow hope that you will notice the burning love inside every lie I told holds me in vertigo. You waved my fear and the exhausting lies away as if they weighed less than a feather: It's alright. I know you have that tendency to lose things, Leia.

Diagnosis number 2: I tend to lose things easily.

Sometimes it gets to me, on nights when I'm sitting by the windows, in flight, between countries, and strangers are snoring all around. How much do you know me? The truth is, I don't have trouble staying awake. I've been suffering from severe insomnia all my life.

The longest I've gone without sleep was five days. It was a record I'd rather not keep. And another truth: I don't lose things, my heartbreak. The bitterest proof for that statement is this fucking memory of your existence, which I've tried every way to shed and burn, unsuccessfully, for how long do you think?

Thirteen years. You have lived inside my ruined soul for almost as long as the time I took to destroy myself gradually with the power of love, hoping against my better judgment that one of these days, you will love me back.

I turn on the nightlight and watch the moon's pattern dance across the ceiling. What if there were life on Mars or the moon or Mercury—anyplace but Earth? Would the gravitational field do something to lessen the hurt I bear? Or would the time-space theory somehow erase what I've been through and slow things down enough so I could change the trajectory of the past,

create a new present, and build a future where “you” will be a synonym for “happiness?” Leia, don’t talk about depressing things; you’re not suited for it.

Diagnosis number 3: I couldn’t be depressed because I am “not suited for it.”

You said so straight to my face, and I can’t suppress roaring laughter. It only proved to you that I was acting. No one who’s depressed acts like you, Leia. You scowled, and I agreed.

No depressed person would be so damn self-destructive, hilarious, conscientious, hard-working, normal, abnormal, and mix all the universes into one like me. Or perhaps you were just a bad psychiatrist-in-training. *My mistake from a youthful fever dream*, I said, laughing breathlessly. *I wasn’t depressed.*

Oh, that’s good.

I’m schizophrenic.

And we let the silence dance between us until the call ended naturally, because of timing, or rather, because neither of us was willing to break the poignant tango of our egoistic selves as they tried to kill the other out of sheer spite. I hate you and all the things you represented: the arrogance and self-assurance of a jerk who thinks he’s got the world at his beck and call. And to live a life without an ounce of shame or remorse about the girls you ruined with your charming ambiguity, your Schrodinger’s cat theory put into practice, your two-cent philosophy dressed in a university gown, you must hate me, too. Because—

Diagnosis number 4: I'm the bitch who bites your head off to show the world how empty and hollow you are, my smallest man who ever lived.

Leia—

Do not talk to me.

Eight

Y our return from the UK came as no surprise. I learned during your invaluable absence that as long as one never expected anything, nothing would hold any importance over their fleeting life. I guess this is a long way of saying I didn't

think of you, except for those days in October, when my Facebook wall was lit up with people tagging you in their posts, wishing you a happy birthday.

Seeing my phone go off every ten minutes with a new update on how many people out there loved you and wanted you to have a good life, I bit my tongue and typed, *Hey, I hope you found what you're searching for.*

I don't believe in prayers and well-wishing. What I've gotten in this life, I've acquired through sheer willpower and toiling with my flesh and blood. I guess when my mother told me that my ancestors were watching over me, I took the most literal meaning of the phrase: they were watching. Period. The rest of the heavy workload to reach my final destination is what I have to suffer through myself.

When I flipped through Albert Camus's *The Myth of Sisyphus*, I understood the one thing that had no relevance to the great man's work but bore a belligerent force over my life: To love a man like you, I must have imagined

that I am happy and blessed in the presence of your pity. How I would light up at the shortest text from your whimsical boredom, or the long-distance call you bestowed upon me as a mercy for the loyal subject of a lost kingdom. It's almost lunacy. And it's the best kind of lunacy—deluding myself that there was nothing as innocent and harmless as the love of others.

So I drowned, willingly, helplessly, hopelessly, resisting all attempts at salvation. All through the whirlwind of the theatrical puppet stage, with you pulling the strings and I dancing to

the movement of your nimble fingers, directing me to the end of my follies—Ophelia in her madness, screaming, *Oh, he must love me*. The theme song of our catastrophic eruption plays eternally in my ear:

Caramels, bonbons et chocolats

Par moments, je ne te comprends pas

Merci, pas pour moi mais tu peux bien les offrir à une autre Qui aime le vent et le parfum des roses

Moi les mots tendres enrobés de douceur

Se posent sur ma bouche, mais jamais sur mon coeur —

Seven years after the separation that should be for a lifetime, you swing back into my life, full force, with the same old power, with the authority of one who's forever sure of his throne in the kingdom of idolatry and adoration: Leia, it's me.

New phone, who's this? Leia, come on. It's me. Seriously, who's this? It's me.

Say it three times, and I will call your name out of my fading memory. Hi, you're back. Tears were swelling up in my eyes; the sadness I tried to outrun

caught up with me, and my voice cracked with a desire to hug the girl inside me until she knew what love was: Welcome home.

Nine

You came by in the night, blew a message of missing the memories we never cared about, but without which we wouldn't have anything to talk about, and disappeared.

Two years later, you introduced me to the girl who would be your wife in the years to come.

The meeting between us three was as splendid as a salad of unspoken words, unsaid confessions, missed opportunities, and the Thousand-Islands dressing of what-ifs, maybes, and could-have-beens. You persistently asked me for an appointment, and I gingerly agreed, incessantly debating with myself whether the remorse would be worth it decades from that time. Then, as luck would've it, on the day we were supposed to meet, a brisk October morning, the storm was sweeping over the city. Would it be cruel of me to say that I was happy? I thought that heaven was helping me, that God was giving me a chance to reject you, to walk away, to escape the web you wove so intricately since the day we first met at the university club. But no. You defied metaphysics: your car was already in front of my door, your girlfriend was beside you, beautiful—a perfect picture of what the word “elegance” means. I walked down in my too-tight T-shirt due to the recent weight gain from the change in my medication, hyper aware of the fat showing through my stomach, my arms, and

everywhere else on my body. I was the glorious painting of what the word “hideous” means. And your girlfriend said, “He just landed and insisted on meeting you first.”

What a lie. We all knew you had a friend living in the same city, and that friend coincidentally happened to be busy on that same day. I was eternally your second choice—

the next-best alternative when the costume fit. I gritted a smile through my teeth and bore the lunch with grace. As your girlfriend reapplied her luxury lipstick, I was reprimanding myself for being a beast. A fat, ugly, totally tactless and too-haughty beast. I was not a woman. To you, I was never an option.

The truth is, I should never be an option. But I needed to burn myself at the stake, survive the witch hunt, rise from the ashes of the unlikeable women trial, to know that I am, above my gender, my degree, my knowledge, my everything, human, and nothing more or less than human. How about we start with that the next time around?

One year after that awkward meeting, I met the manchild who reminded me of the you I had yearned to have and persistently, relentlessly, obstinately chased after, only to catch the shadow of a nightmare I was bound to wake up from sooner or later.

* * *

In the café of my hometown, where the baristas are friendly and the musical language I grew up with will never hurt me the same way the austere, sterile syllables of the foreign tongue, which categorizes me first and speaks to me

later, would carve pain on my skin, I go over each incident in chronological order. Though I pursue a writing career, I was raised to follow the principles of mathematics and logic. You could say that this is my way of unraveling the question of what happened to the heart, and when the track went off the rails. It is a futile task; even Leonard Cohen would tell you that. But not to me, the girl who never knows how to give up, but understands far too well the cost of crushing her dreams in her hands just to satisfy the egoistic vanity that is her arrogant, intellectual pride. Yes, I don't settle for "enough;" I want the extremity of all, even if it means "the worst."

Let's see, her name was the same as a famous actress, and I thought, *Wow, I never knew you were into glamor and beauty.* It turned out we didn't know anything about each other, despite our claim that we understood the other person the most. Tragic, wasn't it? And in a twisted sense, humorous, too. She said you wanted to see me first thing when you both landed back home, and my mind screamed, *Liar, liar, liar.* But my face kept smiling, and my words jumbled out into appropriate jokes, flatteries, compliments to her, and playfully derogated you. My nails carved little crescents into my palms; she didn't know, or maybe she, too, was already a victim of your master plan, that I was never your first anything. At best, I was the choice that nobody wanted when all else failed, and you picked me because it's the option that showed both your wicked generosity and your taste in saving "the unlikables" from the disgrace of society. Please, spare me your judgment.

I don't remember what we talked about during the awkward luncheon. What I did remember was how uncomfortable both she and I were when we approached the subject of your romantic heart. "Oh, he approached me first," she said.

“No, it was she who confessed to me,” you told me later in one of our secret calls. There I was, standing between her pride as the chosen one and your selfishness as the privileged one who has the right and power over us, thinking all along, *What did I ever find in your little existence that made me sacrifice so much of my youth and passion?*

But I didn’t leave that spot. I couldn’t lift my feet, no matter how hard I tried. The thought of letting you go came to me as an easy choice, but what remains as an eternal Babel Tower is the belief that without you, there will be none who would understand my pain. In other words, I don’t fear losing you; I’m afraid of being left alone in the vast sea of my own

solitude, thrashing around in the agonizing fact that you alone had seen me for who I was, and there would be no others.

Then, he came. The bastard who, like you, talked far too much but had just as little courage. Ladies and gentlemen, please welcome to the stage the coward who never figures it out, no matter what “it” is.

Ten

He was a man three years older than me, but I think you would agree that, psychologically, he was ten years younger than both you and me. Let's agree that he existed on a plane of suffering that was alien to us, with the same glamorous stage and glittering tears, but his script bears the blandness of Western mashed potatoes instead of a char-siu rice dish.

He caught my attention the same way you did: with the arrogance of a man who believed that he was larger than the world and more vulnerable than a wet tissue. "Leia," he said, when we sat opposite each other in the same lecture room, "Your writing touched a place it shouldn't have." I felt my heart throb, and in the vanishing room, his face morphed into yours. My hands grasped the edge of the table, my breathing hitched, and the memory twirled in the air like billowing smoke dancing in the dark. I didn't know who I was looking at—the past, the present, or the future—but a shrill howl rang in the air, and from the pit of my stomach, a clawing hand clutched at my heart, growling, *Do not fall*.

"Leia, it's me, the guy from the lecture this afternoon. Thank you for the compliment. I love your prose, and could I read more of what you're writing?"

It's funny how the wise men preach that no one falls into the same river twice, but in reality, people soak themselves in the same mud pit forever, thinking it

is comfort and safety.

I lost myself in the fever of him and forgot all about you. Your call went unanswered. The rare text messages became stale and scarce between us. *Leia, what are you doing?* Seen. *Leia, I'm doing a residency at an institution.* Seen. *Leia, I hope you will be graduating soon.* Seen, seen, seen. I took every excuse I could to not open the app. The moment I typed a single letter, my resolve to forget you—forget us—would dissolve as salt thrown to the sea, and I would buy the first ticket to fly where you were. It's madness; a lovelorn girl working on her graduation thesis while juggling the meaning of her existence against the other option: to abandon it all and return to nothingness. Meanwhile, he was there, watching me unravel on the pages, pour my heartbreak into the lines of stories and make-believe, and silently steal the show.

"Leia, I can't help it. Your prose made me cry. I've never cried this much. Leia, why didn't you keep writing? You're the best writer I've ever known in that lecture. Leia, whatever happens, do not give up your passion."

And when I had to choose between your "Leia, when is your graduation?" and his "Leia, will you invite me to your graduation?" I knew the river was the same. The water never changed its course. Only the person who drowned in it was different.

On that special night in October, when I received the piece of paper that I traded my peace of mind for—a recognition that will follow my name like a useless echo after my shadow—the closing call happened. He ghosted me on the dinner invite, leaving no trace, no communication, no evidence that he had been in my life since the beginning. And you sent a text as cryptic as it was cruel:

Leia, congratulations.

Thanks.

Will you do postgrad? Yeah.

Where?

I'm thinking of UBC.

Oh, it's near, Leia.

Yes, I knew it was near. It was in the city where your doctoral residency was; a perfect choice for you to ruin me again, like a new research topic for your upcoming paper in a famous journal. Think of the potential title: "The Causation and Correlation of a Young Girl's Tendency for Self-Destruction." Would it get you a new acronym besides PhD, BSc, MSc, OMG, etc., and would I get another participation trophy as a party favor?

Leia, did you forget me? Leia, let's call. Leia, it's been a long time — forever maybe — and Leia, you are still the same drunken idiot in the little garden of love.

Leia, we are best friends, aren't we?

Eleven

I held onto his existence as if it were a long echo in the dark, calling my name, bringing me home, caressing my waning figure, telling me that I had arrived, though the place was foreign and the night was eternal.

And you were never there. Instead, you were like the monsoons in my hometown, peppering the harsh drought as you pleased, thinking you were doing the greatest mercy within your immense, God-given power. A call here, a message there, and I jumped at each

contact point, thinking I wasn't abandoned; you were just too busy. "Leia, you are still not giving up on me."

"Oh, but I did."

"When?"

"Two years after you were gone." "With whom?"

"A guy. You don't know him. He's in the same class." "Then why don't you date him?"

"Oh, that."

I dismissed the question; it's a funny joke. How could I move on from the heartbreak when you were the ghost who's been haunting my days and living my dreams? I could say, "Oh, that. He disappeared." Or, "Oh, that; he never grows up, so I must go on with my life." Better yet, I could tell you, "Oh, that—I tried hard, but he wasn't you, and I couldn't see myself going anywhere in this labyrinth of self-destruction." But the words refused to come out. Any answer I gave would inflate your ego and demonstrate how pathetically childish I still was in your holy eyes, on your altar of the eternally right, of your surreal, perfect morals where everything is within your control: you saw me as the same girl you left, bereft and mourning the loss of something she never quite understood the magnitude of. Spoiler alert: I wasn't that girl, still obsessed over the loss she had thought would be her life force, but the proof always went against me.

"Leia, you are not living a good life."

"I am. In fact, my life is going so great that I think it's the closest I've ever come to understanding the meaning of it."

"Leia."

"What?"

"I'm getting married." "Oh."

"What are you getting surprised for?" "And what are you being offended by?"

We laughed, and I hung up the call. Getting married, huh? I mulled over your cold announcement, dropped on me like the heartless, blunt blade of the

guillotine, and it kept grinding my neck off, persistently unsuccessful, drawing out the pain. Of course, I would be surprised. I had thought it would be us till the end of time; that ours was the unnamed, unlabeled, holy relationship, sanctified by my one-sided, stupid sacrifice and your cruel ignorance. Didn't you say friendship was the epitome of romance? Because there was no beginning, we won't be worried about separation. I echoed, Yes, yes, yes. My tears flooded the sweetness of your words from the shallow dreams I had, in which you placed a soft kiss on my lips. Before I could taste the scent of your fleeting goodbye, soaked in chocolate ice cream and the cheap, one-dollar black coffee, I woke up. My hands grasped onto the vanishing air. He wasn't here. You were gone, this time, forever. Leia, we are not meant to be. Leia, I appreciate you, truly, but you will find a better person than me. Leia, do you hear me?

I stared at the stark white wall in the dark. Who was calling my name, and who was bringing my existence back to life?

Me.

Twelve

Three years passed by in suffering and agony. COVID-19. Lives were lost, and there was no time to wallow in any personal sorrow. I was busy aching for others' losses. After our last call and your short announcement, we drifted apart. Perhaps you were suffering even more than I was — between the two of us, you were the one who had to deal directly with grief, the monster haunched on everyone's back like a black dog that refused to release its bite. I wrote letters and depressing stories, many of which were torn and burned on the stove just for the fun of it. I meant to say you were a part of my graduation thesis. A protagonist in a manuscript for my independent creative writing English course; as I received my A plus, I immediately erased the whole thing. "The sadness was excellent," my professor commented, "but Leia, why must you have such a depressing ending?" I stared at the moon, asking her the same question. She said I was mad for love, and I settled for that answer.

* * *

Standing in the kitchen in my short pajamas, I crunched up the rejection slips from a few publishers, agents, magazines, and whatever establishments are still

in the printing business, and thought about him. The man who told me to never give up on writing, ironically, was the man who gave me every reason to give it up. His email flared up on my laptop: *Hey, it's been a while. I'm sorry if I got the wrong email, but is this the email address of the girl from the English class a few years back? I had the best time being in the same lecture hall as that girl, and I thought—hoped—it could be you...* and yada-yada. The lies that kept on lying. The men who stayed in my life were children who looked for shelter in the rain, only to catch the first train when the sky became clear. I got used to it. Who's to blame? The me who treated myself worse

than a Salvation Army shelter, or the you who taught me that being used and manipulated like a puppet on the grand stage of love was a blessing from the Lord, and I should relish in the pain?

Let me tell you about him in passing. Maybe these pages will reach you, whom I carry in my heart with reverence still, and maybe evermore.

He was the only person who saw the real me. Yes, laugh, you have all the right to do that. After all, I said the same thing to you when we were visiting the parks at midnight thirteen years before. But this is the truth: he knows exactly how to hurt me so I would yearn for the pain once more, and crave the agony until he comes back around to play with me again.

Think of the fox and the little prince: I was trained to love his lukewarm coming and going. Every email he sent was torn from a romance novel. How about I show you some examples? The best ones were:

Leia,

Please treasure yourself more. I don't deserve such love and admiration.

Or:

Leia,

How are your parents? I asked the translator for your language, and I apologize if I made any mistakes in spelling or grammar. I love your native tongue.

Or the most impressive one:

Leia, Leia, Leia,

I love your voice. I appreciate how you treasure every little thing. Your laugh is soothing to the ears. Will you do more podcast episodes? Send them to me. Leia, you are never a bother.

Each one is a needle piercing through my darkened heart, until the blood stops pumping through my veins and my brain commands me to shut down my memory. Have you ever known a love that was so sweet, so luscious, so sumptuous to the starving soul that you crawl on your knees until they bleed, begging, pleading, trading your dignity for an ounce of your beloved's mercy? Of course, you don't. That's the reason you tolerate a life of mediocre happiness and keep your flame dimming.

Does that mean I'm having the most beautiful life and I'm satisfied with everything I have? I can only say, my flame is burned through.

* * *

At the moment when I was drowning in my depressive mess of medication, hospital trips, and the hallucinations of “this, too, shall pass,” I met Sensei.

Sensei was, after all he had lied to and cheated on me, a good person at heart. I doubt you will think that way, but it never mattered to me then, and it matters even less to me now. Sensei was just unfortunate—so many times. He got a job, then lost it; got another job, and lost it again, until he found his true calling: selling love for a get-rich-quick scheme or being a host in the red-light district somewhere in Shibuya. We don’t talk about sensei’s life choices the same way we don’t talk about your judgment of humanity: they are all wrong, and neither helps advance the story.

One night in October, I was getting tired. The kettle boiled with a shrill ring, and my head swayed. My phone lit up with a message from a child in a strange language I had barely learned a few months ago: “Leia, you up?” I swiped up, opened the app, and texted back: “Sensei, long time no see.”

“I wonder if you’re free. I thought of calling.”

“Why don’t you call?” “Is now a good time?”

“Call me. Without you, it’s so lonely.”

A ring. I picked up the phone in a second. His voice, laden with cigarette smoke and half-hearted promises, whispered: “Are you angry?”

“Why would you ask that?” “Because I didn’t text for so long.” “I was. But I’m not anymore.” “Why?”

“Because I love you, Sensei.”

“What are you saying? Do you fully understand the words you’ve just spoken?”

I fell to the marble floor, my knees crawled up to my chest, my head buried in my arms, the cry forced into a sardonic laugh: Yes, I understand them all too well, Sensei. And I still say them. I love you. From the bottom of my heart.

I wonder if you know about 愛してる and 好き, or that when someone missed another person's presence in their life, the usual expression in Japanese was, 君はないなら、寂しくてね, meaning, I was lonely without you. The dependence of one's life upon another's

was drastic, and it was reflected deeply in the language itself. This is a long way of saying, I didn't love him. I was only craving the feeling of loving someone brutally enough to forget that "I" ever existed.

Thirteen

Sensei was a stray dog I picked up on the pavement of a wayward dating app. That sentence alone should let you know everything about him. He smoked frequently, a regular at a few bars in the famous Nichoume in Shibuya, worked

himself to death if he could, and occasionally, he would think about me. “Leia, are you up?” It was midnight. My phone lit up with the simple text message. I replied underneath the veil of dreams and temptation, “Yes, yes, yes.”

“Leia, when are you coming here?”

“Sensei, I don’t know. I kept getting stuck in stuff.” “What was that? Your Japanese is funny.”

“I know. I’m sorry.”

In the dark room, where the only source of light was the screen of my phone and my e-reader, I turned the page of another great philosopher’s thesis on why love has always been a monster to men, thinking, *How do I say “I’m drowning in the river of my memory and there’s no one to call for help” in perfect Japanese?* The words on the e-reader’s screen passed me by without leaving a

lasting trace of meaning. One never learned the truth about love because there was no such thing as the truth about love. There's only ever a truth, which is one-sided, biased, distorted, and benefits the person who spews it. Sensei, I love you, from the bottom of my heart. As Albert Camus's closing phrase came up, "One must imagine Sisyphus happy," I had absolute faith in my delusional adoration for Sensei. Who else, in that time of distance and isolation, would tolerate my fickle heart and whimsical lies, told at the drop of a tear? Him.

And who else would fly in with the force of an apocalypse, swiping my sand castle to smithereens, at the notice of an unknown call? You.

"Leia, can you send me your email address? We need it for the guest list."

"Oh, I don't know. I might not, you know, be available. Everything is so hectic these days with the travel restrictions and..."

"Leia, you're my most trusted friend. Are you going to reject the invitation?" "I'm not. Listen. I really am not, but the circumstances—"

"Leia, let's give it time, alright? The restrictions will be lifted by then." "How are you so damn sure?"

"I am."

A deafening silence ensued. If I had something in my hand, I would have smashed it on the floor. But there's nothing. Not even a cigarette. I'm not a smoker. I don't drink. I'm too much of a decent person to express my rage by any other way than shouting at you to leave me the fuck alone. But hey, that's weakness—you taught me so, remember? And it was a lesson I won't forget. Using verbal abuse, Leia, is proof that you failed intellectually, and you are showing your vulnerability to others. I gripped the phone until my fingers

turned white. Fuck your institutional intellect and your high education, your degrees and the acronyms I worked so hard to get for myself, your residency that people admired, your everything that acted as a shield so no one could see you for who you are.

But who are you? Nobody. And who am I then? Grief.

* * *

“Of course not. What crazy thought is that?” “Is that so? Then why—?”

“The circumstances. I’m out of the country. And stuff. I kept getting stuck in stuff.” “What funny things are you spouting? What about the guy you dated the last time we talked?”

“No, we weren’t dating. I—well, if you must know, I’m sorta in a situation with a guy.” “What sort of situation?”

“We don’t put a name to the relationship. That sort of situation.”

A brief pause screamed itself to life amidst our video call. You knitted your brows so closely I thought they could build another Great Wall of China. Your face showed how much you disapproved of what I said. After a long exhale, you said: “I’m in no position to say this, but don’t you see that you’re destroying your life?”

And I fucking laughed. I knew it ticked you the wrong way when I burst out like a madwoman high on drugs, and I apologized immediately to appease you because it had been ingrained in my flesh and bones: I didn’t want to hear your reproach or see the hatred and contempt on your face. But internally, that

tiny flame of rebellion was turning into a forest of little fiery sparks as it screamed: *Yes, you are absolutely in no position to say it.*

Not because you have no maternal relationship to me, nor because you were not my therapist and psychiatrist—no, my beautiful loser, you have no authority to say anything because you destroyed my youth the same fucking way. Stare at yourself in the mirror; now, dare you say you didn't commit the crime? Or has your conscience failed you, too?

Leia, that relationship isn't good.

Leia, she proposed to me first. Leia, Leia, Leia—

* * *

Are you up?

I opened the app. It was Sensei. Had I been through a nightmare? Was I still inside the dream? Or was the dream the only reality I could live inside? The phone vibrated to life and Sensei's nickname appeared on the screen. I picked up the call on the first ring. "Hi."

"My birthday." Sensei's voice came through, hoarse and breathy with the Tokyo winter. "What?"

"You asked me when my birthday was. Today is my birthday."

I let the line go awkwardly silent for a while as his friends congratulated him. How could I speak anything in any language when my heart was exploding into thunder, lightning, and fireworks at the same time? I whispered hoarsely

into the phone, "Happy birthday, Sensei." He laughed, said thanks, and hung up amidst a roar of laughter. I lay awake the whole night, crying. Happiness could shatter the same moment it touches one's fingertips, but as someone skilled at treating others' pain, you already know that.

Leia, you are only hurting yourself. Look who's talking.

Fourteen

S

aving myself from you was easy. I only had to turn the other way and move on. I did. From one manchild to another, I moved through life as if it were a movie filmed in black and white. There was no noise; it was unnecessary because the

script stayed the same every time. The audience read the transcript: And so she goes, then they would understand the whole manuscript. The scene was always a coffee shop at some remote place out of town, at a faraway corner table, when the October rain was dribbling outside the windows, and I was sitting there, hidden behind the crowd of cozy scarves, quietly waiting.

“Hi, nice to meet you.” “Likewise.”

“I just got here from the gym, by the way. Would you like to share a bagel?”

“Oh. There’s no need.”

Then the scene moved. Another coffee shop. The same script. The actors changed their masks and wore different costumes, but their roles were always the same: Mr. Nice Guy Until I Don’t Get What I Want. How well we know the play and the farcical ending it will lead to, the audience roaring with laughter. In this comedy, the damsel in distress saves herself by escaping with an Uber ride and a credit card. I think you would love that pragmatic element.

The scene moved eternally until it morphed into the shape of you or the manchild from the English class or Sensei, then all would vanish, and I was alone once more. I thought of calling you before the wedding, just to ask if you were sure I had made a big mistake in getting involved with Sensei. I wanted to hear your reproach because I yearned for the

tender care in your voice. But I was no longer in your story. Clicking on the invitation, which sat abandoned in my mailbox long enough to show you that I was actually busy, I checked the box “decline” and wrote a flimsy excuse: “I will be otherwise engaged.” Who am I kidding? At most, I’m only deepening the wounds you carved. We are both

accomplices in the murder of a young girl named Leia; a Jane Doe who’s living with the living but was secretly rotting inside, eaten alive by the things she never had the chance to possess. Cause of death: Jane Doe was always dreaming, her feet never touched the ground, and she died from excessively reaching for the moon.

Sensei called, but it’s your voice I heard. “Leia, you’re destroying yourself” sounded so much like “Leia, I need you here right now” in that second. Foreign languages have that miracle touch of mingling meanings and mixing signals, I suppose. I let the call stay on, listening to Sensei’s hoarse voice. He was drunk off the cliff. “Where are you?” he asked.

“In my hometown.” “Three years.” “Yes?”

“We’ve been doing this for three years.” “Right. It’s been a while.”

“I want to see you.”

“April? I can arrange something by then.”

“But you might not be approved for a visa, and something will come up—you said you kept getting stuck in stuff.”

“I know. But I also want to see you, Sensei.” “How much?”

“As much as you.”

“Do you want to see Tokyo at night?” “How can I?”

“Look.”

And he turned on the camera. The deserted street underneath the soft light, the closed restaurants, the night snack shops, and his worn sports shoes appeared on my screen. *Technology brings people together*, the ads said. I protested: technology makes people learn the depth of loneliness. Because in that singular moment, when Sensei laughed and pointed to his favorite restaurant, I had understood there was a pain even more acute than being in love: the things that were within my reach weren't for me. Some things are meant to show us why we exist, and other things show us how to treasure that fleeting existence. Sensei was both.

Leia, why don't you come to my wedding? I kept getting stuck in stuff.

You stopped calling. Your texts became scarce. How could I spell “pain” in fewer than four letters? In the past, I'd say it's impossible. Each word has its own designated meaning and usage. But I know better now. I still can't find a way to spell “pain” shorter, but I understand that sometimes, people express it differently. To be more subtle and grown-up, they say, “hope.” So here I go, writing down the grown-up things that my childish heart at that time couldn't articulate well enough to hold you back: *I hope you remember me*. My therapist asked, “What do you want in such a relationship?”

“I don’t know.”

“Why do you keep going back, even when it causes you pain?”

“I don’t know.”

“Let’s reframe the question. If he appeared now, in front of you, what would you hope to hear from him? What would you hope to receive?”

“An apology, perhaps. An explanation. Some words about why he did what he did.” “And?”

“And I will forgive him.”

Fucking forgive and forget. Such is the dogma I live by but never follow. If you want proof, I could show you the latest texts from the manchild I met back in university, who happened to come back into my life whenever he’s high on marijuana and life’s too sad for him to handle alone:

Leia, what’s up?

Nothing. What about you? I’m hanging out with friends. Where are you?

Some places. I’m sharing a room with a classmate. He’s sorta crazy. You’re always with some sorta crazy people. I’m not surprised.

I just thought of texting you.

That’s new. I always texted you, though. Hey, listen. What?

Next time, before you disappear, notify me first, alright?

He disappeared the next day. I couldn't say he didn't follow my words. I asked for it, didn't I, when I told him what to do? And yet, the cruelest thing I ever did to myself was telling the therapist that, with an apology and explanation, I would forgive him.

Which "him" was I talking about? And how many "hims" am I capable of forgiving until my heart bleeds its last and the death rattle leaves my hollow body, long drowned, suffocated like Woolf in the search for freedom?

Fifteen

At the age of fifteen, I tried to drown myself. It sounds wrong, but I didn't want to die or anything that nihilistic. I simply wanted to know what it felt like to be immersed in an embrace as cold as sleep. Did you know that when you were

dreaming, you came as close to death as mortally possible? So you knew. Not surprisingly, you told me to stop sleeping, because to slumber in make-believe dreams about somebody who will love me for who I am was pure suicide. You said, while driving at full speed on the highway at night, "There's something wrong with people who sleep more than eight hours a day."

"Really? But I love sleeping."

"What's there to love about it? At most, it's a necessary function for human bodies." "Then you must be sleeping wrong."

"How can one sleep wrong? It's so easy: one only needs to lie down and close one's eyes." "What about dreams?"

"Are we going to argue about Freudian theories?" "What if we are?"

"I'm not in the mood for hypothetical debates involving unproven ideologies." "Oh, you sure as hell are sleeping wrong."

I teased your frowning face. You hated losing, especially to a nobody who failed Psychology

101. I got a D minus, which qualified me as your worst enemy in a battle of wits. Of course, I had no right to talk about Sigmund Freud. I skipped him and barely knew his contemporaries. The Jungians, B. F. Skinner, and other founding fathers of the science that could tell what was wrong with humanity. The professor once asked, "What do you think it is?"

"I'm sorry, sir?"

"What do you think is wrong with humanity?" "Human. I think 'human' is what's wrong."

"My, my, be sure to talk about what you think with your counsellor in your next appointment, alright?"

He left the empty classroom and hurried to his next lecture. I don't remember his name, nor what he looked like. What I never forgot was the pain his kindness had inflicted on me as I stared at the blackboard, where the white chalk writing said: Merry Christmas. I was crying in my sleep the entire lecture. He tolerated my insolence and went a step further: caring about the wounds of someone who would become a stranger the next semester.

That Christmas, I went to Japan. Disney was a magical place to be when one was heartbroken and wished to forget reality existed. I walked along the famous Shibuya Crossing, mesmerized by the way everyone was moving on without touching anyone in the process. I loved it here, but hated being another cog in the machine that was crushing the souls of the people by my side. My friend said, "Let's find the mouse between the Christmas trees." She meant the famous Mickey Mouse that was hidden between the tree branches. I

walked for ten miles with her; she found many, I found none. Even the Micky Mouse of the

Christmas Miracle refused me. I wiped the snow off my hair and thought, I don't belong here, or anywhere for that matter. I was passing through, carrying light luggage, and people knew all along that was why they never chose me to be their companion: no one wanted a person who'd never fit in and would break the mould to choose freedom.

I turned off my phone the whole time I was away. At the Narita Airport, I had a selfish wish that my plane would be delayed. I would have a proper reason to stay here for another day; perhaps within the limits of twenty-four hours, I could have found myself a new life.

Waiting in the lounge, munching on a rice ball seasoned with tuna flakes and mayonnaise, I looked upon the crescent moon and wished that somewhere, there was a person who also found this lacking lunar cycle beautiful.

One night, Sensei called. We talked for hours on implied meaning and walked around in circles of unspoken confession. Understanding and saying the truth turned out to be two different things, and the first was a trial while the latter was a tribulation from the Lord. So Sensei said:

“The moon is beautiful, isn't it?”

“Sensei, are you looking at the moon right now?”

“Yes. I'm in Thailand. Everyone is sleeping after the party, so I go out to watch the moon.” “Thailand? Where about? Can I come to see you? Or you can come to see me.”

“I can’t. I’m going with the company.” “Let’s meet in the middle, then.”

“I can’t, Leia. It’s against the company’s policy.” “Sensei?”

“What?”

“The moon is beautiful at my place, too.”

That year, when I came back from Japan, the first person to call me was you. I had erased your phone, deleted your friendship on all social media accounts, and hypnotized myself into believing that there had never been an existence called “you.” Yet, when the strange number appeared, I knew who it was at the drop of a needle. I picked up the phone, listened to your voice lying sweetly to the melody of a song I have loved since meeting you: “Burn, burn this love—”

Sixteen

It finally comes to the pivotal question: Did I ever love you or did I just pretend, because loving someone and being loved in return is the only thing we need in this cold, harsh world?

To find the source of the wound, I must lead you back to the winding road of my past. It was empty and hollow, so you don't need to expect much. Anyways, you have not expected much from me since the beginning. Remember when I told you about how I wished to build something that would outlive both of us? You said, "Leia, the problem with you is you dream too much."

That was the only time your diagnosis of me was painfully accurate. I had no other choice but to laugh at it, pretending I was alright after the dissection.

Yes, I dream too much. I've always lived on cloud nine, thinking that as long as I walk one more step, try a bit harder, and go the extra mile, I will find what I'm searching for. But what was I searching for?

Amidst the intersection of the past and the future, where your shadow crosses his and Sensei's haggard body, which is drowning in expensive champagne and exquisite spirits, I found it. The one thing I should never lose was also the one thing I had sacrificed to mold myself into the shape of a woman you'd love to

hold. Would it make you mad if I told you that I was never a bubbly, cheerful girl who's always thought your words were gospel?

What about my truth that your heart had long been buried somewhere down the Pacific Ocean and what you possess now is only a one-to-one replica? Or that I understood why every girlfriend keeps leaving you, and the ones who stayed never saw through your pretty façade for longer than fifteen minutes? Because you are a damn genius under the spotlight for fifteen minutes.

Leia, you could never be depressed. Other people, I would understand. But not you. Leia, reality will ground you down.

Leia, don't be so childish.

Leia, everyone confesses to me first. I never take the initiative. Leia, you're too much of a dreamer. Grow up.

So many words and flourishes just to paint the portrait of a person who barely knows how to treasure an existence decently enough to remember that even rocks can be hurt if the water flows over them long enough. And it takes me fucking eleven years to make peace with the fact that I had done my best at the time you were there, as much as when you weren't. At the end of the day, when life was too tired to be kind, and humans alone couldn't solve the problems of humanity, I and the girl I used to be hugged each other, immersing ourselves in the tears of forgetting and forgiving.

Because no matter what that girl did, you never once said, *Leia, you are enough*. And no matter what I achieve now or in the future, no one will be there to say, Leia, you are trying, and your dreams are flying high.

Only me. I dance with the girl whom I used to be in the dark, with the moonlight filtering in through the window blinds. We share the same wounds. And where hers cry, *No more*, mine are growling with teeth and poison: *Not anymore*.

You. Him. Sensei. I loved you. I loved all of you. But more than love's prayers and faithful whispers, I choose to forgive and never to forget. My therapist asked, "What were you most thankful for in those relationships?"

I looked myself in the eyes and said: "I found me."

Seventeen

My friend called me one weekend, sometime in late October. She told me all the things she had learned from her trip abroad. In a wicked turn of events, she chose the same major as you. I told her as much. She didn't

know what to make of that, and I said it was fine. We set up a time to meet, then I got out of my moldy bed, sluggish and lethargic, with all the memories and remorse I longed to escape. Putting on a white dress with pearly ornaments, donning a pair of clay flower earrings enameled in silver detail, I looked like the socially approved, strong female protagonist of my own life. My high heels were uncomfortable. My soles were hurting. I was beautiful, but nothing in that beauty felt rightfully mine. Smiling at myself in the mirror, I boarded the cab to the restaurant where my friend was waiting.

"I thought you were dead," Tama joked, sitting down opposite me at the table by the window, overseeing the bustling city life below. She was changed, but the change only

made her into the unique shape she always yearned to achieve, relentlessly since she was seventeen. Her jeans stayed rugged and her t-shirt was wrinkled from the hems up to her waist, but those minor details only added to her

rouged beauty. I hugged her, inhaling the thin veil of her off-the-counter perfume, and the world suddenly came full circle.

“Hey,” I said, “I could say the same about you.”

We talked a lot about the journeys we took. She laughed about hers as I mourned mine. Each of us suffered the burden of Atlas, but we were too deep into the habit of thinking that the rest had it worse than us. That thinking didn’t make our pain any less real nor more tolerable, but it helped push us through. She told me she had had enough of psychology.

“Why?”

“Money problems. I would have to spend a lot on all the certificates.” “Your parents could help.”

“Or they won’t. It’s their choice. I have mine, and I’m living the best time of my life now.” “How about moving permanently?”

“Or how about making do with what I have right now?”

“I don’t know. I guess I still want something more than what I can hold with my hands.” “Oh, that goes for everyone. We keep going until we can’t.”

“Do you think it’s greed that turns humanity onto the wrong track?”

“If we dissect that topic, it will take ages. And I’d rather talk about you.” “What about me?”

“Any news on the romantic side?”

I flipped the napkin and let it fall to the floor, mumbled a soft “sorry,” and bent down to pick it up in an attempt to buy more time. There are many ways to tell

a story: a person can

be a villain as much as a hero, and the reasons will always make sense when the readers have an omniscient view of the whole plot. Did God ever think twice about Cain and Abel's reward and punishment? Did Gautama ever turn back to see how much suffering was left on his track, and how much more he would bear? I fumbled underneath the table long enough for her to say: "Let's pretend I didn't ask the question."

"No. No, don't be absurd. It's just that love isn't my strong suit." "It never was."

"I had a few passing crushes here and there, but they didn't go anywhere."

"I guessed as much. I thought you'd end up with your sweetheart when you were in university."

We waited for the server to take away the appetizer, pepper my steak, and grind parmesan on her spaghetti, then we resumed the conversation. Life had its strange interludes; sometimes, they were loud chatting from the next tables; other times, they were the sounds of the waiter's retreating footsteps.

"I couldn't possibly end up with him. He wasn't my sweetheart, by the way. He had a girlfriend at the time and everyone knew that."

"So?"

"Everyone knew, except me." "Mm-hm."

"But that's all in the past now. He's married, settled down on the coast. Lovely family, if you think about it, and a respectable career."

"Doesn't make him more or less of a jerk."

“You hold too much biased judgment for a psychology graduate.”

“I only tell it as it is.”

She stuffed another forkful of spaghetti in her mouth, chewing words through the fresh tomato sauce: “Leia, I won’t be as delusional as telling you that you deserve better or worse, but I will say what I always believed. We’re entitled to facts and truths. If he never told you anything, it wasn’t because you didn’t try hard enough to learn. He intentionally omitted them, and that’s outside your due diligence. Now, it was a relationship in bad faith, wasn’t it?”

I picked at my medium-rare steak, glazed with peppercorn sauce, feeling a hunger grow violently inside my stomach, like vines binding me to the things I had never dared to confront: “What if he had excuses?”

“Fuck his excuses. He had so many opportunities. By the third time, it was not an excuse problem anymore. It’s a *him* problem.”

She pointed her fork at me—a tactless act in a fancy restaurant on the fifth floor of a high-end mall. Her hair was tied back by a cheap plastic band. Her round face was red with both tomato sauce and the flush from eating too fast and talking too energetically at the same time. Something in me burst, like raindrops ricocheting off my blue-black heart, and thus washing off the opaque dirt, they revealed, yes, that flowers could still bloom where the earth for hope was fertile. And hope was always fertile. I laughed, knocking on the table, wiping the physical tears from my dried eyes. She cheered along with me. We were two crazy diners in an otherwise dignified and luxurious eatery, attracting all the menacing looks from waiters and the whole clientele at the same time with our loud laughter and the burst of sudden shouts—“No

kidding! She did what?” “And what did he say then? Oh, the insufferable jerk!” “Fuck that manchild! Grow the fuck up!” Uncouth, uncivilized, manners

thrown out the windows, we chose ourselves instead of the costumes society forced upon our meagre, ordinary bodies. The script was torn, the dresses and pearl necklaces were preserved for someone else, as I went to the next store and bought a pair of jeans, tried on the most comfy ugly sweater, took off the earrings that were hurting my earlobes, and walked barefoot with her until we both got new sandals.

It wasn't an “excuse” problem anymore. We chose freedom. We rightfully belong, weird and always pushing against the rules; people called us the unfit while we called it living. Even if it were hell, torturous, painfully writhing with each step as the passion for life burned our feet, we both knew we had destroyed the walls of our prisons. Now, it was an “us” problem. And “us” was all I had. It was the treasure. Warmth seeped through my skin, indulging my flesh, tingling my heart, and cradling my fried brain like the embrace of Mother Earth preserving Her long-lost child who had returned after a lifetime of wayward journeying, only to realize that he needed to be more than to belong. Tama and I against the world—it didn't sound so bad.

When we got in the taxi, I asked her how her last job had been. She was an intern at a psychiatric unit. “The guy you told me about when we last talked,” I said, “the young guy of seventeen. How is he now? Discharged, I hope?

“Oh, him? He's dead. Suicide. I was the last person he saw.”

We were silent the whole way home. I held her hand in mine, feeling every little tremor as she held back the urge to break down and fall apart. There are days like that, when the abundance of heaven and earth isn't sufficient to hold

the sadness of a person who tried to push at the boundaries of God and realized what the pain of “not good enough” means.

Eighteen

I had come closest to the flame of love when Sensei called me one night asking me about my promise to come to Japan. I was packing up my luggage; the valise lay open on the floor of my one-bedroom apartment, filled to the brim with the things I

wanted to give Sensei all through the four years of our ghostly relationship. They were nothing much: a pair of scarves I knitted myself; homemade chocolate I just got out of the fridge, ready for the flight; a card I wrote in both perfect English and broken Japanese, awkwardly confessing to him how he had saved me when I had thought drowning was a form of survival; and of course, a handmade rose with a hidden message, asking, *Will you marry me?*

My face was flushed. I opened the window to let the night breeze in. Spring was coming at full speed, and in my mind, I was walking by Sensei's side beneath the cherry blossom trees. The pale pink petals swirled into a storm of flowers and I lost sight of Sensei's face for a moment, then forever. He said, "But you would have to pay for my time, Leia."

"Why?"

“It’s my job. I’m a host now. I suppose you know what a host is.” “I understand, but Sensei, I love you.”

“And I told you we could still meet each other but—” “Money, isn’t it?”

“Leia, don’t yell.”

“I’m not. Does my love mean nothing to you then? I knitted you a scarf, I made chocolate, and I—”

“Leia, I don’t need love to live.”

He hung up. I stared at the crescent moon until I was too late to board the flight I had secretly booked to come to his side. We were under the same sky, but the moon we saw was no longer the same. He had moved on. Only I still held onto the beauty of the moonlight, hoping fervently that Sensei would turn around and see that I’m still waiting. The phone was still in my hand, but I didn’t need it anymore. There was no one else to call; I had set myself up for failure just as you said. Picking up the scarves, I undid the stitches, slow and deliberate, counting the mistakes I had made when I fell and got back up. Was I serious about getting married to Sensei? Did I believe that I would be happy with domestic home life, knitting sweaters and scarves, making dinners, waiting for Sensei to come home, waiting forever? By the end of the curly yarn, I rolled the glittering gold thread into a neat ball of wool, sealed it with a sticker, and put it into a corner for my miscellaneous stuff.

Soon, it will be covered by dust, cobwebs, and a thick layer of ignorance piled on top of willful forgetting. Then, I stuffed my mouth full of chocolate, savored the bitter taste of the delicacies I made, dreaming that I had reached

the station destined for me, and the train would stop here. Life, it was a never-ending show, and the show must go on.

Fingers covered in chocolate, I opened the booking app, got myself another ticket to Japan. Outside, the stars were lighting up the sky with mysteries and possibilities: were they dying or simply reflecting the sun's brightness? It was left to us to go and find out. That was what I planned to do. Japan hadn't done anything wrong to me. It was still the same beautiful sadness I had adored since forever. My first love and last regret. Sensei was right: no one needed love to live, so why should I abandon the Snow Country and the Sea of Fertility for a mere mortal who suffered and would go on suffering still?

I tore up the hidden message, along with the handmade rose. Who needed love when the whole world was out there, offering its future to the simple touch of my present? Early morning, I boarded the flight to Haneda Airport. They asked me the reason for my visit. "For love."

"Visiting your lover?" "In a sense, yes."

"I wish you a pleasant stay."

The customs officer let me through with a polite bow. A cold breeze from the air conditioner caressed my face gently, whispering, *Welcome to the family, Leia. We're all alone here, and we enjoy the solitude.* I watched the sunrise through the cab's window. My name was never as beautiful and free as then, when I repeated it to myself, each time more enchanting, each time more spellbinding, as it affirmed that I was here, not for anyone, not because of anyone, but simply to be me. Simply to live.

Nineteen

A few days after I was back from Japan to visit my colleague, the manchild from university sent an email. *It's been a long time*, the subject said, or at least that was what I remembered. I considered logging it into the trash folder, swinging

around in my swivel chair, letting spring pass me by outside the windows as I reminisced about all the unrequited loves in my life. The loves I burned to warm myself every winter, then, like the little girl in the Andersen tale, inadvertently let the flame swallow me in the most ardent slumber amidst the frozen ignorance of strangers. A light spring rain pattered on the glass of my window, pulling me back to the suffocating room, cozy and warm in its

comfort, but the more I stayed here, the harder it got to leave, when the field outside was blooming. Soon, the grass would grow.

Mulling over will and faith, my hopeful heart won over my coward brain in the end, and I clicked open the email, my eyes resting on each word for longer than necessary. “Leia—“Leia, it’s been a long time. I hope you still use this email address. I lost all other email connections, except you. Possibly. I’m in London. What are you doing now? Judging from

your personality, it must be something great. I'm sorry if you sent emails to my old mailbox. I lost the password to it, and I can't access any of your messages now. They keep getting deleted. Anyways, what I mean to say is..."

The rest of his email floated in the room, not my responsibility to hold nor a regret I could pick up and fix with gold leaf. Kintsugi—my trip to Japan taught me that much. Broken things could still be beautiful if we mended them with care. The most important part here was the care and love we put into the process; he had none, and I already packed my things, ready to cross the threshold. I was waiting for my train.

Leia, I lost this and that and blah blah blah. It was both funny and pathetic how I had known what the email would say before I opened it, yet I still dug in each line, between the spaces, the punctuations, and the smiley faces, a flimsy possibility for a different meaning. A sign for his change, a hope that he had grown from the manchild I met when we were still fresh out of pain in university, tear-stained, bleeding, begging for attention and passion without thinking of the consequences. I closed the laptop and curled up on the swivel chair. The rain went on like a ballad for a lost lover. He would forever be the same. I refused to settle for this stuffy room. Waiting didn't do shit for a person who never looked away from his broken ankle to see that the world was moving on, and the train would soon be leaving.

Drawing the curtains closed, I turned down the light in the room and walked downstairs, crossed the front door to get to the pavement outside. The rain fell on my head like a lullaby, and it was soft, sweet, indolent—a caress from the girl who had bet on him returning and saw for herself that winning the bet never meant he would be anything better than a loser from her youth. On her way to look for Kurt Cobain, she found a cheap \$0.50 copy of him. And even if

it were the reincarnation of Kurt Cobain, who's to say that she wouldn't lay down her sacred life for a man who could barely live through a day without ten thousand episodes of a nervous breakdown? I laughed at the thought of living by Cobain's side. It would be dangerous; temptation in plain sight with a dagger hidden underneath the pillows every night. The love will be as high as the drugs we both would take. That's called living at the brightest point life could offer. Too bad I wasn't built for it. I loved the rain, living normally, suffering an ordinary amount of hurt, staying by my friends' sides when their worlds fell apart, and at the end of it all, I would still have enough space left to keep me from jumping down the abyss.

So I deleted the email address. It's been a long time. I lost everything that would connect me to him. The rain washed the earth of all longing and yearning for the things I was never meant to hold. When the sun reappeared, I arrived at the bus stop near my home. Beneath my feet, a dandelion was blooming. The bright yellow color was beautiful enough that I cried about its ending for the whole trip to the supermarket.

My youth, like the dandelion, ended blowing up in the wind. Some fragments perched on the roof of my university's chapel. Some landed in a garden in Montreal and grew a healthy plant there. Others, having no place to be, withered and died, thinking they had the best time surviving the journey, searching for the meaning of their existence.

Twenty

I blow out the candles on my birthday cake. I've reached the age where nothing matters more than a secure bank account and a steady job. Perhaps reality has successfully ground me down, as you said. Or I have become like Sensei, treating

every problem as a money problem, thinking that a piece of polyester cash could solve all my worries, and if one piece isn't enough, then many pieces would do. And the worst possibility of all: I have a touch of him in my personality—evading responsibility, dismissing people's feelings, and blaming the other party for my incompetence. In short, I'm an adult in the most ordinary sense of the word.

But if we dissect the Jane Doe called Leia now, we will also find that she never gives up dreaming. She still stays up until three in the morning, speed-typing a heartbreaking chapter from her mind to paper, thinking all the while that the lives in her stories are so exciting. She escapes to the world of Albert Camus, not to appreciate the man, but to argue against him, and takes the fun in knowing that he won't argue back because he is six feet under. She laughs obnoxiously loudly, talks crudely with her friends (and they love her for it), swears, cusses, throws in a little shade here and there when the men around her start being too much psychological labor for her.

And Leia loves being her.

Age never equals wisdom, I know. Everyone talks about eternal learning and education, and I understand that living means the lessons are forever. But hey, Leia isn't you, or him, or Sensei. She doesn't need wisdom to preach and talk from a high horse, so people can label her with some term or other and place her into a neat category in their social folders. She doesn't want to be wise—life will be half as fun when wisdom takes the command

position. She hates being a wallflower; she refuses to be hurt a fourth time by a lesser enemy. And she is passing through.

Outside, the full moon shines brightly at midnight in October. Yes, I wish on my birthday candles, Leia is me, because I love the script, and the costumes, despite the wear and tear, have always been marvelous—beauty as nobody has seen before and will never know again after me. And I won't let anyone steal this role from me: I had fought for it, bled for it, loved and hated for it—what rights do other people have on the life that the heavenly gods had bestowed upon me except watch it as the show goes on? So, stand back, and on my cue, applaud when you hear the phrase:

Welcome to the stage, Leia as the damsel in distress of the tragi-comedy,
Full Moon in October.

The End

About the Author

Thanh Dinh is a Vietnamese-Canadian author, poet, and professional overthinker who firmly believes that every terrible life decision eventually

becomes excellent material for fiction.

She is the founder of Writerly Books, an independent press dedicated to publishing stories that are often described as “a little too weird” or “emotionally devastating”—which she chooses to interpret as compliments.

Her work wanders somewhere between literary fiction, psychological drama, philosophy, and the sort of dark humor people develop after reading far too much Dostoevsky, Camus, and the morning news. She enjoys writing about flawed people trying very hard to become better, systems that insist on making that impossible, and the uncomfortable possibility that everyone might be right for all the wrong reasons.

When she isn't writing, she's usually buried beneath an alarming pile of books, convincing herself that buying one more notebook will finally solve all her organizational problems, or arguing with long-dead philosophers who, inconveniently, never argue back.

She currently divides her time between writing, editing, publishing, and wondering why every manuscript somehow grows another twenty thousand words after she declares it “finished.”

She sincerely hopes you enjoy this book. If not, she respectfully asks that you blame the characters—they rarely listen to her anyway.

Website: <https://writerlybookspub.com>

Instagram | Facebook: @writerly.books Podcast: A Writerly Night (Upcoming)



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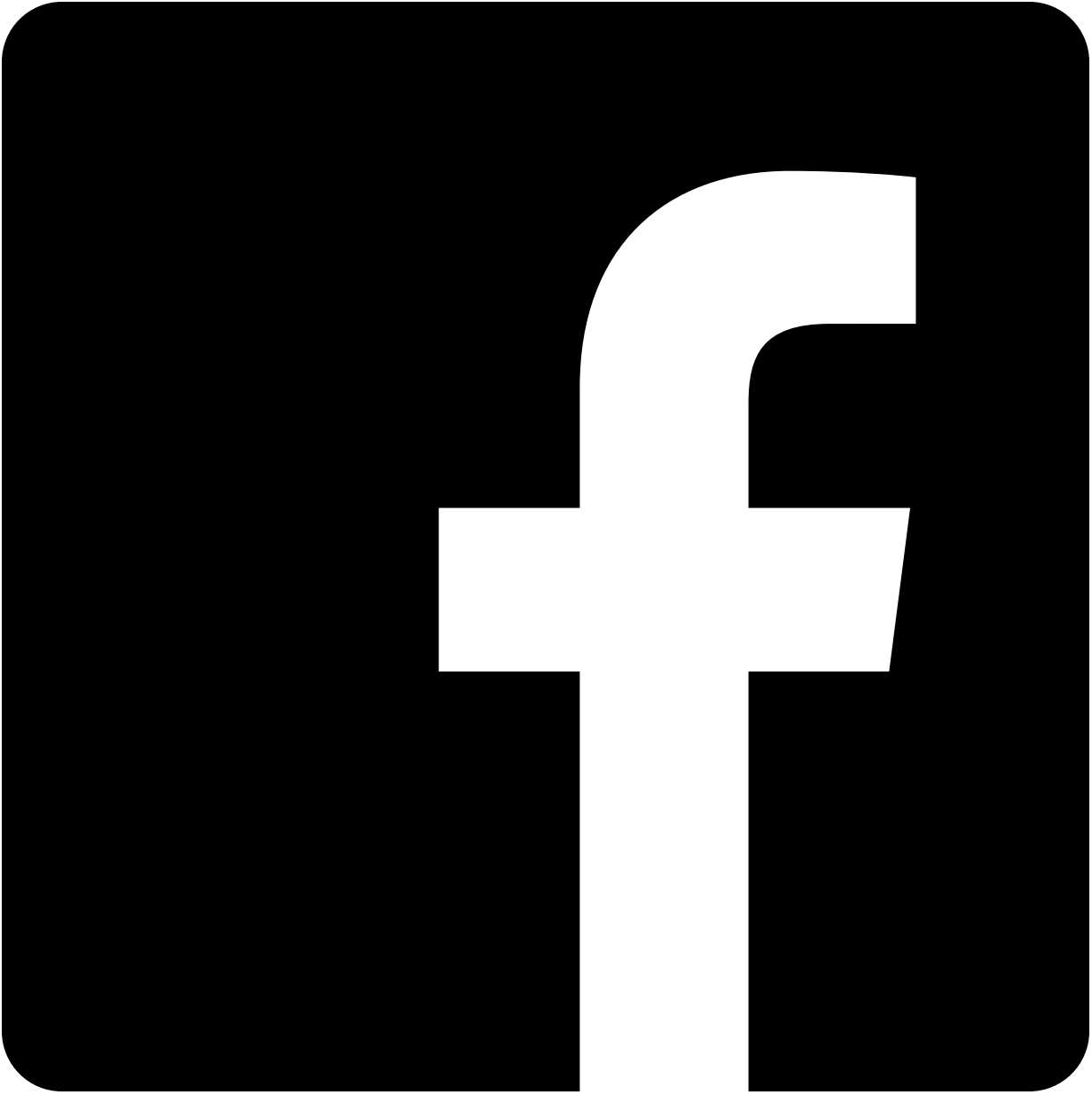
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You can connect with me on:



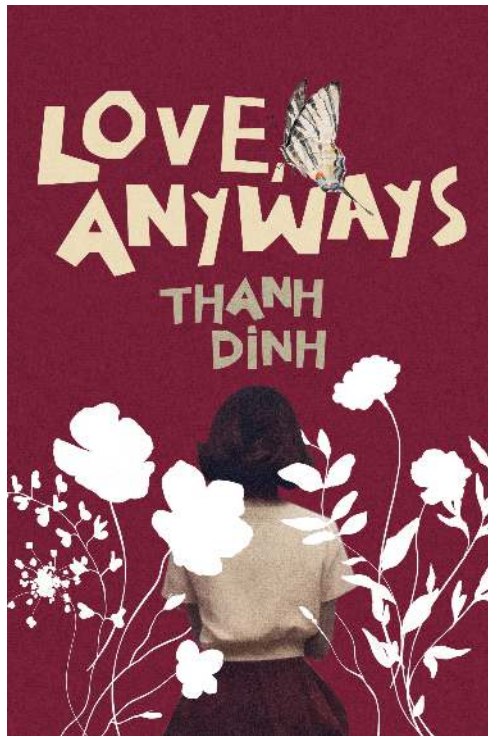
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Also by Thanh Dinh

An eclectic collection of sleepless thoughts and daydreams...



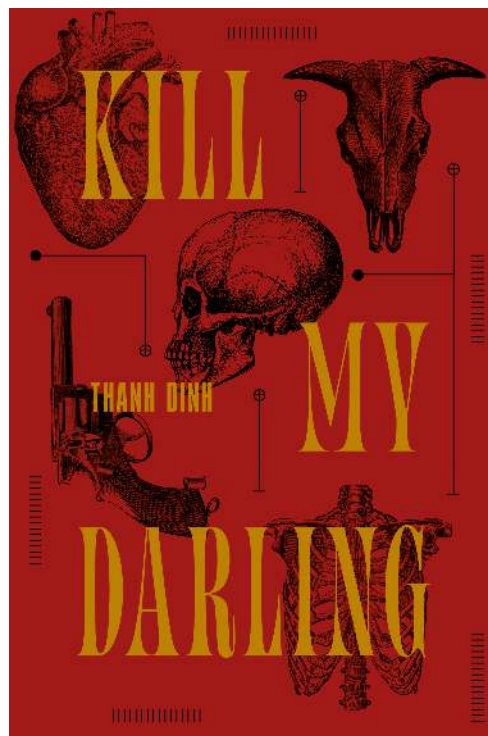
Love, Anyways: Because the Apple Trees Blossom

<https://www.amazon.com/dp/B0FXPF6HMJ>

If life is indeed filled with evil deeds, why does the apple tree still blossom?

That is the question at the heart of *Love, Anyways* — fourteen stories about the stubborn, aching, sometimes ruinous act of choosing to feel in a world that gives you every reason not to.

A sound technician waits in a tea shop for the man she has loved in silence for thirty years. A patient and his aging doctor debate whether freedom is even possible inside the mind's own walls. A journalist travels to a poor labor town to investigate one man's death and finds herself confronting her own. Two women argue about goodness and evil through the night while the world outside keeps burning. A murderer in prison explains, quietly and without apology, why love made him less human — and more.



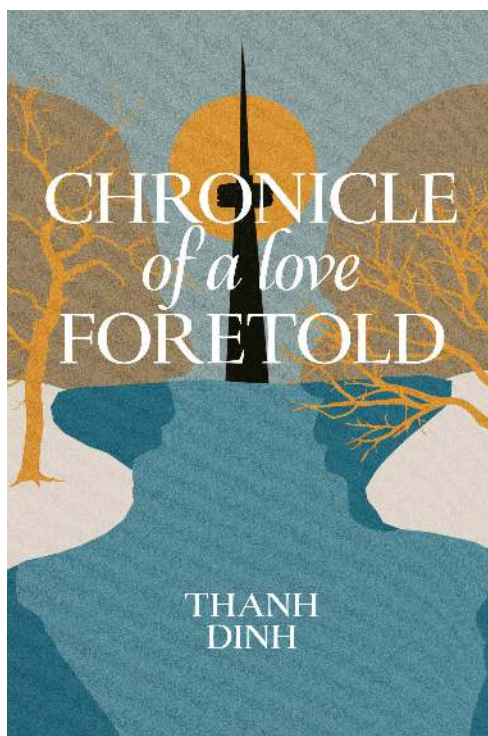
Kill My Darling

<https://www.amazon.com/dp/B0GCBGKTNG>

She didn't plan to love him. She didn't plan to bury him either.

On Valentine's Day, Angela disposes of her lover's body in a frozen Toronto lake. Bambi Raymond — rapper, icon, the kind of man the world forgives everything — is gone. And Angela, who gave him five years of her life, is finally free.

Except freedom looks a lot like a police investigation. And Bambi's twin brother just offered her a place to hide.



Chronicle of a Love Foretold

<https://www.amazon.com/dp/B0FPFFH3F9>

For readers of Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, Elizabeth Acevedo, and Celeste Ng.

Dong is the son of Vietnamese immigrants in Mississauga — dutiful, brilliant, and carrying burdens far heavier than a teenager should bear. At school, he is mocked for his name, his heritage, his silence. At home, he

suffocates beneath the weight of a mother whose love arrives as sacrifice, never as permission.

What no one knows is that Dong is gay. And that the only thing that has ever made life bearable is Simon — the boy with the easy smile, the basketball star who once showed Dong that kindness could be more than pity, that love could exist even for someone like him.