

Nomad

The ancients say: 'the road from home is long, the road to home is long.' The first time I heard it, I stayed up into the deepest hour of the night, wondering which was longer.

Birds fly northbound overhead in patterned flocks, repainting overcast skies. Their reflection off the windows of my carriage blinds me from the bustle of people. The cries entrance me as I almost fail to notice we were already pulling away from the station. I try to smell the smoke, but there is none. I do not miss the smoky air surrounding the trains of old, but its absence unnerves me like seeing the cut before feeling the pain.

Dear Mother,

The first time you took me to town, I decided the longer road must be the one from home. The walk there was as though I was suspended in time; the dirt beneath my feet turning into cobblestone, the songs of magpies and cicadas being replaced by the voices of people and tapping of hooves, I had endless time to study every detail of the world around me. Yet, of the trip back home, I only remember how once we arrived, it felt as though we had never left.

As I write, a sting of smoke comes at last, though from the inside of my carriage

“Sir, you can’t smoke in the train,” an attendant says, leaving before getting a response.

“Okay,” the old man across from me replies, before drawing the privacy blind and taking another puff of his beedi. As though just noticing me, he continues. “Back in my day...”

‘Back in my day’ indeed. When I rode a train for the first time, not smoking on a train would be unthinkable. During week-long trips in cramped cabins, cigarettes and conversation was all there was to cover the smell of labourers bundled together and the rumbling of the engine. Now, in this crisp, clear silence, it feels less necessary.

My first time on a train was near twenty years ago, yet, I see it as clearly as the present. I rode to the station with my brother Bayan where we sold our horses to afford our tickets.

“I know you’d prefer to stay in our village and die of dysentery at thirty, but-”

“I don’t know why you’re still arguing with me,” I cut him off. “I already agreed to come with you, I am currently in the process of coming with you.”

“Sure, but you were so negative about it, ‘uh, Bayan, are you sure you want to leave home, I want to be a shepherd forever because I love the smell of goat shit.” He exaggerated, but he was not completely wrong. Even now, as we were riding to the station, I find myself imagining simply turning back to the endless grasslands. But Bayan was going to leave regardless, with dreams too big for even our empty skies. What was home without him?

“But no, I’m just playing, yeah? I’m glad you’re here.” He slapped my back

“Of course.” I pat my horse, who did not respond. “Glad I’m here, too.”

His goal was straightforward: go to the cities and make money. Unfortunately, he underestimated its difficulty and overestimated our ability. He also inaccurately assessed what the people would be like, but I cannot say whether he expected too much or too little. We discovered these things quickly, almost immediately, when we found our first real job, the kind which came with a boss, in Chaikhand, near the coast.

“Where are you two from? You them horsefuckers?”

“No.” “Yes.” We said at the same time.

“Well, I don’t really care.” The fat man leaned back and opened his drawer, pulling out two forms with an empty box taking up half the page. “What’s with you two, you wrestlers?”

We continued to give contradicting answers simultaneously, with me claiming to be a labourer while Bayan said we were champion wrestlers. The fact we got the job unsettled me.

“Hey, look at that!” The old man’s booming voice steals me from my mind. He points out the window, looking at me with an expectant gaze. “This is the Heaven’s Valley Station. They have this stall for this goat intestine stew that got famous enough people would visit the station just to try it. You want some? I’m going to go get some.”

He books it out of the train. While there was a chance the train would stop long enough for him to make it back, his bags were still here. Was street food worth missing the train and having to get new tickets, collecting his bags at his destination, assuming no one would steal them first? I would say no, but it does not matter because he has already said yes.

Bayan always said, after he got rich, he would use his money nobly, though kept its exact purpose a surprise. But I believed, even back then, he simply did not know. I suppose, as people who only understood money as a reward for hard work, we had no clue what wealth even was.

No matter how hard we worked, there were no shortage of things going wrong, be it a delayed delivery of cement or equipment breaking down. Yet, our wages and whether we get them was directly tied to how many floors we complete. It was why we always found ourselves on the construction site at midnight and currently found ourself in a bar during midday.

“Motherfucker, I can’t believe how much they charge for beer. Isn’t it made of the same shit as flour, why’s it so expensive?” Bayan ranted into our cups of room temperature water.

I closed my eyes, trying to think of how at least we escaped the heat. Bayan continued ranting about getting new jobs and, though I understood his frustration, half all our salary were due with bonuses come new year’s. Even if we could stand wasting all our efforts so far, could we accept possibly having no money to send back home during the holidays?

“You know you guys can open tabs, right?” Another patron pulled out a chair and sat down between us. “What’s with you two, you wrestlers?”

“Man.” I sipped my water, stalling for more time to formularise the direction of the conversation. I had just noticed the bold white of their clothing. Speaking to people afraid of sweat and dirt still wasn’t something I was good at. “I swear I’ve heard that before.”

“Ahaha, no, I was joking. I was there back when you guys were talking to the owner.” The stranger tapped my arms. “I can tell why people would ask though.”

They were Yuen, a secondary accountant from New Heaven Development, a company contracting the one we work for. It was a strange concept, two different companies just to decide where we’ll build what. But Yuen spoke of chaotic ideas as though laws of nature.

After table of labourers got up, leaving drinks behind. Bayan went to check if work was starting back up. The blinding light from him opening the doors made the room seem darker than before when they swung closed.

“Well, guess he’s out of the first round. How about you?” A gentle kick under the table redirected my attention. “Drinks on me? A gift from someone slightly less exploited?”

“Man, I’d love to, but I wouldn’t want to get back to work drunk.” I got up.

“Hey, no problem, but just make sure there are no misunderstandings or uncertainties,” Yuen said as I grabbed the door handles. “You know I’d been hitting on you, right?”

I stopped. The unexpected straightforward nature and the honest clarity in Yuen’s voice was becoming a hint of reality in this muddled dream I lived in. I felt my subconscious decide the inside of this bar more comfortable, more familiar, than whatever was beyond.

“Yeah, see?” When I turned around, Yuen was already by the counter with two glasses and a bottle of kumis. “How about we start with something that feels more like home.”

As I took my first sip, I realised Yuen was right. It didn’t feel exactly like home, but it was nice.

It was the first time Bayan and I met Yuen. Though I continued seeing them here and there, the next time Bayan saw them again was under less relaxing circumstances.

“What the fuck is going on here?” Bayan slammed the notice on Yuen’s desk, who responded with lighting their next cigarette with their current one. Our new year’s bonus, the only reason we didn’t change jobs half a year back came in form of a notice stating all bonuses and wages are delayed due to payments from New Heaven being delayed. It said to take all complaints to New Heaven, which Bayan had evidently taken to heart.

“No, this is an obvious lie. My boss just paid your boss last night.” Yuen took a puff of their cigarette before continuing. “I mean, I was there, so I’d know.”

“What’s that mean, he had money to pay us but just didn’t?”

“Well, kind of.” I tried to figure out the look in Yuen’s eyes, were they frustrated with what’s transpired or just with us? “It is true part of payment got delayed, one of the demolition and relocation agencies wanted double payment for working during the holiday.”

“So? They deserve wages more than we do?”

“Look, it’s not the same thing, they need to be paid in advance. Besides, the part of the payment that got delayed wasn’t even employee wages, still got the receipt, too.” Yuen opened a drawer but hesitated before taking anything from it. “You guys want to see it?”

“It’s fine, we believe you,” I responded. Whether or not Bayan took Yuen’s words at face value, he at least believed me, if him already leaving counted as evidence of such.

The sun was coming up, but frost still coated the shipping container of the office. The generator’s not on, boss must not be in. I tried to tell Bayan but he had already kicked the door down. For better or worse, it was completely empty, save the dust on the floor. It used to be easy to forget it was just a shipping container, but I could no longer imagine seeing it as anything else.

“Hey, what does being paid in advance mean?”

“It means to get paid before you start doing the work.”

“Cool, interesting. Well, guess I’m off to find a new job.” He punched out the window as he left, glass shattering on the frozen ground, indistinguishable from ice.

“Guess I should have seen this coming, but I don’t know if tomorrow, it’ll rain or shine.”

“Yuen?” I found them peeking through the freshly broken window. “Why are you here?”

“See, they were upset about the ‘contact New Heaven’ part on the notice. Hey, is that yours?” They pointed to a pocket watch on the floor, a glint in the emptiness I never would have noticed. Yuen pulled out an identical one. “Look, now we match, yours broken too?”

Yuen always laughed when we spoke. It was a crisp genuine sound and an ever-reliable part of our conversations, no matter the topic. It may be why, despite half of a year’s labour meaning nothing, I only felt disappointment and only because we wouldn’t get to visit our family this new year’s. But it might also just be the city’s own indifference getting to me.

“Yuen.” I picked up the watch. “You going home for new year’s?”

“What do you mean?” The glare of the morning sun made it impossible to read their expression. “This is home.”

Bayan’s ambition led him to the same demolition firm while I ended up as a contracted handyman for the same development company. What was once considered outskirts, with nothing but a few scattered neighbourhoods, became part of the city. But despite living in a proper apartment, when I look out at the skyline, sometimes I would feel like I was still just a guest.

“Yuen? You’re home early.” I only noticed their entrance when they dropped a collection of colourful bags and boxes on the table. Yuen was always quiet, but I have no clue how they managed to open the door at all carrying more than all of my worldly possessions.

“Yeah, funny story, New Heaven went down, everyone’s laid off.” Yuen was already setting the table with takeout. “Anyways, now that we got some time off and I’ve saved some money, want to go on vacation? How about we hit a coastal town, you ever been fishing?”

My own lack of worry over losing my job startled me. But every time Yuen acted as though something strange was normal, as though something unexpected was expected, I tend to believe it is. And if things are normal, I supposed things will be fine.

“Hey, I know you’re saving for new year’s.” Answering questions before I even think them had become a habit. “We can put it off for a bit but money is earned to be spent, right?”

“Right, that sounds good,” I trailed off, looking down at the takeout container before me. It was one meal worth a day’s wages, but they never gave buying takeout a second thought. I couldn’t imagine buying such things by myself or for myself. Be it the food before us, the drinks or the tv with no channels. Everything in this apartment reminds me of Yuen. Looking down at the still untouched polystyrene container, I wondered what there was that reminds Yuen of me.

The sound of a water drop rang and the reflection of a ripple flashed as I wondered.

Does Yuen remember me at all?

“That good, huh?”

The world falls by the sound of his voice. Yuen fades into the old man before me and our one room apartment, defined by its stillness, is replaced by a blur beyond a pane of glass.

Another droplet hits the goat intestine stew before me, resting within a familiar polystyrene takeout box. I wipe my cheeks before I realise I am crying.

“Oh dang, you didn’t even touch it yet, even the smell’s powerful, huh.” The old man laughs to himself and I notice the beedi between his lips has been replaced by a proper paper cigarette. It looks like the train stopped for more than long enough, as though just for him.

“Yeah.” I smile, but don’t know if it’s genuine. “I suppose it just reminded me of home.”

While Bayan’s nature caused problems, my own was responsible for much pain of those around me. Whether it was not going on trips with my lover, not sticking by Bayan as he tried to establish his place in the world or not visiting you for years until now, until I’ve received word of your condition and travel whilst not knowing if I will make it in time to look into open eyes. The world and the people within it move quickly, if only I knew how to follow them.

The business card read ‘Horse Wrestler Demolitions and Relocations,’ a strange name for most, but in line for Bayan. While business cards were an unknown concept two years ago, he now not only had his own, but also his own company along with it. I supposed we were all getting used to the city now, in our ways.

“Can’t believe I still ended up hiring outlanders and working for foreigners,” Bayan said. “Wish I could immerse properly like you, yeah? Working with city folk, fucking city folk...”

“Hey,” I interrupted, but I knew it was just how he spoke, which was why I worried.

“No, I’m joking, I like Yuen, which is why I can’t take your money.” He shoved the envelope back in my pocket. “You guys are like a family now, yeah? Family first.”

Family first indeed, it was why he had no money to start his company with after sending all his savings home for new year’s instead of going himself. I could still go, but home without Bayan was too strange an idea.

Snow was settling on our clothes and the balcony around us. Even the bars weren’t on the ground floor anymore, seemed like everyone in the city wanted nothing more than to rise above it, which was why it was so strange demolition is in such demand. I supposed creation cannot exist without destruction, but I sometimes wondered if this city, at times, destroyed for no purpose at all.

“But I could use your help, you know? Relocation involves talking to these people and that’s always a nightmare, but it looks like it comes natural to you. You know, with you fucking them at all.” He slapped my back. “You ever feel like a career change, drop by anytime, yeah?”

Bayan revelled in the climb to be better and was always looking for a place where his potential could be realised. He thought telling me of the role I could play would motivate me to join up with him. But what would work on him does not apply to me. I know Bayan is Bayan, but, to a degree, he never figured out I am me.

I am sorry I did not come to speak to you in person then. I am sorry I did not come home for so long. But with my shame, I could not find it in me to face you.

I write but do not see the train car around me, do not hear the old man before me and do not feel the time that has passed.

And yet, now, as I am finally on my way, spurred only by desperation and uncertainty as is my nature, the shame is gone, with only regret in its place.

As seasons came and went, the city continued to rise until we could no longer see the horizon from our window. Buildings were replaced as quickly as they were torn down. I am a witness to both, every day on my way to and from home.

Even now, I can hear yelling and crashing of another old apartment being demolished beyond covered fences. Even the construction site we first worked at was likely a different building once. An explosion spurred me to walk faster, the tools people used to get what they wanted got more violent with each passing year.

I came home to takeout on the table and smoke in the air, a sight so familiar I could no longer imagine coming home to anything else. Yuen was on the phone though, a machine I

installed but couldn't figure out how to use. I tried to be quiet, but they saw me immediately and slammed the phone down.

"Hey." I sat down and opened one of the containers. They were untouched but already cold. "How was your day."

"Hey, welcome home." Yuen hesitated "I got some news and heard some things."

"Is everything alright?" My question and worry were both genuine, Yuen never hesitated when they spoke, I knew at least that much.

"Not long ago there was an explosion at a construction site."

"Yeah, I think I hear those all the time these days."

"Well, it turned out a resident refused to leave an apartment set for demolishing, said they were born there and wouldn't die anywhere else." Yuen took a cigarette but set it back down.

"Then there was this argument between her and the owner of a demolition company."

The owner of a demolition company.

"The owner wouldn't budge no matter how she threatened him, ordered the bulldozers to get going even when she tore the gas pipes from her walls. But she wouldn't stand down either and lit up the entire floor," Yuen continued. "I think your brother- I think Bayan..."

My brother. Bayan.

"I think he might be dead."

Yuen said 'think' and 'might' but I knew. The smoke in the air had dissipated and I saw Yuen clearly. In that moment, there was nothing else. I continued to see only Yuen, unable to speak, unable to think, unable to feel. We sat in silence, though Bayan's voice rang in my ears.

When the cremator was lit, only Yuen and I were there, standing in silence in an unpainted concrete room. Cremating was such a strange ritual. It was not our way but I could not

bury him in a land that took everything but gave nothing. But what I would do with the ashes? I couldn't send them back but also couldn't bring them back, couldn't face his family, our family.

"You want some time alone? Well, hey, I'll give you some time alone."

Why was it only us? Bayan had employers, coworkers and even employees of his own. Were all of them busy or did they simply not see the need nor feel the desire? Despite everything, I felt sympathy towards the one who killed him. Bayan deserved to die where he was born, where his life and death would mean something to someone. No one exists in this city.

I heard footsteps and a door open behind me. It wasn't Yuen, wouldn't have heard Yuen.

"You're Bayan's family, right?" The first stranger spoke. "Our condolences but there are certain matters to discuss, no? It would be dishonourable to leave things unresolved."

I felt an envelope being shoved inside my pocket and a rough hand grab my shoulder.

"On account of this, we've lowered the interest, but leaving debts completely unpaid..."

"Aye," the second one said. "That's not what he would have wanted, is it?"

"Bayan was a good friend to us, a proper business associate, we hope you'll be one too."

What would my brother do if he were here right now? Turn around and beat the shit out of both of them? That sounds like him. But I am me and he is dead. So, I settled for remaining silent and watching the reflection of the flames as they left.

Friends, they said. I remembered Bayan saying he 'kinda' managed to make friends here and how he didn't need our money. Whether he genuinely thought they were his friends or if he just thought the truth would be too much for me, this city was too much for both of us.

"Hey." The next voice I heard was Yuen's. "Who the fuck was that?"

"I-" I paused, calculating the emotion in my voice. "I think Bayan owed them money."

"Yeah, no shit if they're here." Yuen grabbed my arm. "We should go home."

“What about the ashes?”

“Well.” I felt Yuen’s calm return to their voice. “Guess we can wait until then.”

I almost wondered why Yuen didn’t warn me if they knew who those people were. But I also knew Yuen couldn’t have known whether or not Bayan even borrowed money from anyone, couldn’t have known whether tomorrow, it would rain or shine. Yuen was many things to me, but how could only one person guide me through this chaotic, debauched land.

The second we got home, Yuen swung the door open, putting the first dent in our walls. I had read what was in the envelope on the way, but the only thing of importance was the number. Yuen saw it too and knew what it meant, better than I did.

“Yep, you gotta get out of here.” Yuen was opening every drawer, one by one.

“Is it not possible to pay them back?” I asked.

“No, being in debt means you’ll die paying it back. How do you not know that?” Yuen covered their mouth. “I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have said that. I- Sorry, will you forgive me?”

I knew before I asked, but I didn’t want us to restart, even if it meant staying here.

“Okay, okay, there we go.” Yuen slammed closed all the drawers and slapped a stack of cash into my hand. It was more money than I’ve ever held, but not even a fraction of what I needed. “Hey, you take this and buy a plane ticket, alright? Airports are safer.”

“Me?” I didn’t process anything else they said.

“No. Hey, no, don’t ask me to come with you.” Their lips curled but their smile didn’t reach their eyes. “Don’t do that. How will I bring myself to say no?”

“Why would you have to?”

“My love.” They’ve never called me that before, it’s never been necessary. But was it necessary now? “I can’t do something like that.”

“I can’t be like you, no matter how badly I want to,” Yuen continued. “Look at you. You came here, far from home where you knew no one and built the life you have. When we first met, I saw you were an outlander but also saw you adapting and living without fear.”

“I was afraid,” I said. And I believed it. “I only stopped being afraid after meeting you.”

“You’re only saying that now to prove you love me, which I already know.”

Yuen laughed. Usually, in their laugh, I heard their confidence and let it reassure me. But now, for the first time, it did not convince me reality was any more normal than I thought.

“I wish I could be more like you,” They continued. “You can make any place your home, make your living from anything. You are a nomad, bold and enduring like your ancestors. But I am not. I hoped some of you could rub off on me, you know. Maybe take vacations to faraway places so I could learn but we never got to. In the end, I only know one home and the mere thought of being away from it terrifies me. But something happening to you terrifies me more.”

I wanted to say something, but only thought of excuses. I thought about how wrong Yuen was, how I’ve always been lost, how I’ve always been afraid, how Yuen and Bayan were always what had held me together and how I don’t know how much of me would be left without them.

I packed what few possessions I had with few words. And, with a gentle touch of Yuen’s lips against mine, I opened the apartment door. The burning cold reminded me new year’s was approaching. Once again, I couldn’t go home, but, for the first time, there was no home to go to.

I looked back at Yuen. They were against the window, the glare of the setting sun hiding their expression. But still, I looked, taking in the glint of their eyes, the shape of their lips. I was doing everything I could to mold their face into my memory in case it would be a long time until we met again, in case it would be so long I might forget.

“I’ll miss you.” “I’ll miss you, too.” We said, almost at the same time.

I closed the door, turned away and never saw Yuen again.

I promised you I would provide for us. I promised the heavens I would protect him. I regret both making the promises and breaking them, but I don't know what I should have done.

I open my eyes to the darkness of the train's ceiling and the darkness outside. My mind races to piece together all I remember about Yuen. It takes a while, but I remember everything.

As my eyes adjust, I finally see the old man, sleeping in his bunk with a pile of ashes in a polystyrene box on the floor and a pack of cigarettes on his chest. I take one and light it.

I continued trying to seek what my brother sought, but I don't know if I had forgotten what it was or simply never knew. What was certain was I never found it. As I roamed, though you were all I thought about, I could not bring myself to come back to face you.

As the smoke fills the carriage, I close my eyes and hope I will not dream. But I do.

As concrete and cement rose around me. I walked, not knowing where, and saw nothing but more shapes of the same colour. I grabbed at myself, to see if I'm real. I felt a toolbelt and reached around it. A wrench, a screwdriver, a plough, a hoe, no matter what it was, the moment I grabbed it, it faded into dust and smoke. Every time my eyes followed the smoke, I saw a different city surrounding me. It was always one I had been to, but never one in which I lived.

Until, eventually, I saw Chaikhand. The buildings around me were tall enough to hide the sky, but I knew it was Chaikhand, for Bayan was burning before of me. I stepped back but he was just as close. I tried to pull him out of the fire but the fire itself reached out and pulled me in.

I called for Yuen, but they were not there, though I saw them each time I closed my eyes.

I called for my mother, but all I saw was a faceless blur. I reached but touched nothing, for nothing was there.

I open my eyes. The inside of the carriage is bright, empty and clear. We've already arrived at the station, my destination. The old man is already gone with the pile of cigarette butts and takeout containers already cleaned up. I do not bother thinking of the dream, it is one I have been having for long enough to remember every detail. Though this may be the last time.

The letter lies beside me on the bed. Though it starts with proper writing, its ending is barely legible. I hear the beeping of the doors and get ready to leave, stuffing the letter into my bag, next to nothing but a jar of ash and a broken watch.

I leave the station in a hurry, as though these few seconds will make a difference. As the automatic doors open, the smell of smoke and tar hits me. Buildings surround me, blocking out the mountains and grass. There are no herds, only bundles of people, stuffed in busses and cars.

I walk, directionless, until I come across the first crossroads. Though I know my destination, my memories are of no use as a guide. I stop and add one more line.

I will tell you everything next we meet.

I wipe the paper on the ground, dust and dirt being a replacement for sand and earth, and set it alight. If I am here in time, I will get to explain myself to her before she reads it. If I am not, I will explain myself after she reads it, when we eventually, and inevitably, meet again. I close my eyes but cannot think of any vows to make.

Opening my eyes, I watch the smoke waft up. By the earth and sun, I knew birds flew south overhead, but could not see them through the smog nor hear them above the wind.

I look back to the train station, a place suspended between space and between time. And then I look forward to the unfamiliar roads branching into unfamiliar streets and wonder which leads to home.