

Nomad

*Dear mother,*

*The ancients say: 'the road from home is long, the road to home is long.' I always wondered which is longer.*

Birds fly south overhead in patterned flocks, repainting the cloudless skies. Their reflection blinds me from the bustle of people. The cries entrance me from the train pulling to the station. I try to smell the smoke, but there is none. I do not miss the tar of the old trains, but its absence makes me nervous with the feeling it will come eventually.

*I'd always thought the road away from home would be longer, your initial unfamiliarity when leaving creates time in your mind to process. Since the sights back are ones already seen, all you're thinking of is the future, making the trip go quicker. But now, as I'm finally and truly on my way home, I am no longer sure.*

I fold my letter and settle down in the cabin, laying my bag, canteen and phone onto the bed. Then the smell of smoke came.

"Sir, you can't smoke in the train," says an attendant passing by.

"Okay," the old man across from me replies, before closing the door, opening the window and taking another puff of his bidi.

"Hey kid."

"Hey."

“You want to talk?”

“No.”

“Alright,” he inhales deeply before blowing smoke out above him. It sticks to the rounded ceiling and settles in a solid cloud above us. “Back in my day...”

Though the engine is not loud enough to drown out his words, my thoughts are. ‘Back in my day’ indeed. When I was younger, not smoking on a train would be unthinkable. During week-long trips in cramped cabins, smoking was the only way to pass time and cover body odour. Though now, with dual rooms and climate control, smoking seems less necessary. I suppose it’s a habit hard for many to break.

“We are now approaching Red Cliff county station, Red Cliff county station is a transfer-” the speakers droned on. ‘County,’ how pretentious. It used to just be called ‘the area by the cliffs.’ It was where I rode a train for the second time in my life. I unfold my letter.

*I remember my first time on a train clearly. I rode to the station with my sworn brother Bayan on my donkey and sold it for a shirt and a train ticket.*

28 years ago

“I’m not saying you’re unfashionable, all I’m saying is you need to present yourself different. Buy a straight button shirts and one of those neck things.” Bayan gestured at his neck; he was probably referring to a tie but looked more like he was threatening my life. “We don’t want everyone to think we’re just donkeyriders.”

I looked down at my donkey, then I looked down at his.

“What the fuck do you expect them to think?”

“Okay, yeah, I know what you mean. All I’m saying is instead of them thinking we’re donkeyriders, it’s better for them to think we are just people who ride donkeys.”

“What the fuck does that mean?”

“I mean we need to present ourselves differently, look at these people.” He pulled out a photo, colourless, blurry and the size of a cicada. “This is what the people of the future look like. I know you’d prefer to stay in our village and die of dysentery at thirty, but this is for all of us.”

*His goal was straightforward: go to the cities, make money, live like kings in peasant lands. Unfortunately, he underestimated how hard it was to make money and overestimated how much money he would make. He also inaccurately assessed what the people would be like, but I do not know whether he expected too much or too little. We first settled down for real in Chaikand, near the coast.*

27 years ago

“You two new? You them donkeyriders?”

My brother turned to me. I didn’t need to look to know what his expression was and what he wanted to say: ‘Shave off your beard, everyone can tell where we’re from.’ I don’t know why he always blamed me when he has the stronger accent, the tattoos and the hawk scars.

“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. “You come here at 6am tomorrow and bring your own helmet.”

“Got it,” I said.

“Don’t say anything. You-” He pointed at my brother. “You look like a stout young man, you a wrestler?”

“I am.”

“Hmm,” he put one form back. “Come with me.”

*The days in Chaikand passed quickly and easily for the most part.*

“Hey, oh, that beard, aren’t you one of them donkeyriders?” The stranger squeezed my upper arm, nearly making me drop my cigarette. “You’re strong, you a wrestler?”

“Why do all my conversations with everyone in this city start the exact same way?”

“Sorry sorry, my name’s Yuen.” A gentle laugh followed by a hand outstretched. “It’s good to meet you.”

“Likewise,” I shook it.

“So, are you a wrestler? You look like you could take down a bull.”

“Maybe if he was malnourished and had osteoporosis. No, I just lay bricks.”

Yuen laughed again, though I was barely trying to be funny. “Well, I appreciate a man who can live off honest work.”

I took another puff and dropped the butt, kicking sand over it. Dust replaced the smoke in my lungs. “Thank you.”

*Though there are great treasures to be found, cities are dangerous and disorientating. It's easy to lose things, lose yourself. Unlike how I presented myself in my letters, I had no plan for what to do in the cities, everything I've ever done away from home was on impulse. I apologise for being dishonest with you, though I suspect you already knew the truth.*

25 years ago

I sat in the bottom bunk of our shipping container with windows open and a cigarette in my hand. Yuen sat across from me.

“You know, back home...” I began, pretending to have things worth saying.

The door burst open.

“Brother, you wouldn't believe what-” Bayan stopped in the frame. “Sorry, can we be alone for a sec?”

“What is it? Just talk.”

“No, it's fine,” Yuen stood up- “It's getting late anyway. I'll see you later.” -and slid out the door.

“Well?”

“Okay, look.” He leaned against the wall. “You know how these foreigners are all coming in now? Every sale we’ve done is miniscule, and I mean miniscule, compared to the money these outlanders bring.”

“The fuck? Sales? We?” I stood up and quieted down when I heard the aluminium walls shake. “What have you been up to? Who are the foreigners?”

“I don’t know, I think they worship a dead guy or something.”

“We also worship dead people.” I had to stop myself from yelling again. “Who do you think the food and papers we burn are for?”

“How can they be dead if they’re in the skies reading our— I’m getting off-topic,” he looked around and crouched down. “Look, I didn’t tell you this before but I’ve been running some security.”

“What kind of security? There’s no security in this entire province.”

“It’s just security alright?” He shook his head. “That’s not what’s important, what’s important is I’m going to try to draft a business deal with them and I can’t tell you what it is until you say you’re in.”

“Of course, I’m not *in*. How is that even a question?”

“What do you mean you’re not— We had a goal right?”

“Our goal isn’t to get involved in secretive bullshit. All we have to do is send home enough money to our families to move back and live well.”

“And you think what you’re doing is helping, working for a few coppers a day, eating nothing but millet so we have some coins to mail back? I have a plan, I do, okay? I just need to make some money.”

“I’m not getting involved.”

“Fine, fine,” he turned around. “We weren’t born brothers but we’re family now. Everything I do is for family, I hope you know that.”

“I do,” I said though the door was already closed. “Me too.” I leaned back and began to light another cigarette when I heard the door open again. “I told you-“

“Ah, did you?” Yuen peeked through the door. “Tell me what?”

“Oh, sorry, I didn’t know it was Yuen- I mean ‘you.’”

“Yes, yes, I’m Yuen.” As the familiar gentle giggles and confident footsteps filled the room, I lost the urge to smoke. “Well, I don’t think he will be back tonight, however will you deal with the crippling loneliness? Ah, I suppose I shall have to stay.”

There was brief moment of weightlessness as I was pulled to the bed. I continued looking up at the aluminium ceiling, thinking of the skies beyond it.

*. I promised you to provide for us, I promised heaven to protect him. Every promise was broken. Yet, what I regret is not breaking them but making them, since I do not know what I could have done.*

22 years ago

“Yuen, we have to leave,” I was already shoving my stuff into random bags.

“What? Slow down,” Yuen touched my hand, a feeling I took for granted. “What’s happened? Why do we need to go?”

“Look,” I took Yuen’s hand off mine. “My brother was executed by the guys he ran with. I don’t know what happening next but we need to leave.”

“Are you sure?”

“They left a piece of his flesh outside my door. Unless they put his tattoo on a stranger and killed him just to trick me, yes I am sure.” I ran my hands down my face. “I’m sorry, I’m stressed, we need to leave the city- the province, somewhere.”

“It’s fine, I understand, but *we* need to leave?”

“You’re not coming?”

“This city is the only home I know. You know how much I care for you, but my family, my home, I cannot leave it all behind. Do you-”

“No, don’t, I know how hard it is and I know you’re right” I looked into Yuen’s eyes, trying my best to remember their colour. “I need to get a train ticket, quickly.”

“Don’t go by train,” Yuen dug through the drawers, pulling out a stack of cash. “Buy a plane ticket, faster, harder to track.”

“I- thank you,” I took it and weighed it in my hand. “How did you get this money? Don’t you still need it?”



I heard the same laugh I had, by now, heard countless times. Though it was the first time I realised Yuen's laugh had naught to do with my sense of humour.

"What I planned to use it for..." Yuen trailed off. "Ah, well, I do not need it anymore."

"Okay, okay, I will, but." I turned to leave but stopped and handed half the notes back.

"Can you take this to move? Go somewhere else in case anyone comes looking here?"

"But if I move, how will you write to me?"

"We'll figure it out somehow, some time in the future."

"Maybe," Yuen took the notes and my hands along with them. "Who knows what the future holds?" For the last time, Yuen's lips pressed against mine. For the last time, someone's lips pressed against mine.

"Who knows indeed." I turned to leave, truly, permanently.

A day later at the airport, when I realised the money I had was not enough for a ticket, I found all the notes I returned in my back pocket.

*I continued trying to seek what my brother sought, but I never knew what it was nor how to find it. With my nomadism, you and Yuen could not write to me. With my shame, I could not write to you or Yuen. Through years, all I could think of was how much I missed home. Now, as I'm finally on my way, my shame is gone, with regret in its place.*

Now

The train reaches the station.

“We have arrived at Pabasain City...”

City.

I leave the station in a hurry. As the automatic doors open, the smell of smoke and tar hits me. Buildings surround me, blocking the sights of the mountains and grass. There are no herds, only cars and bicycles. The images and memories I’ve been keeping in the forefront of my mind... I suppose they will remain there.

*I will tell you my stories in more detail next we meet.*

*Yours loyally,*

I make my way to the intersection, stick two pieces of gold foil to the paper, fold dried leaves and wormwood incense in between and set it alight. I close my eyes but do not bow nor kneel for there are no vows left to make. Opening my eyes, I watch the smoke waft up. By the earth and sun, I knew birds flew north overhead, but could not see them through the smog nor hear them above the wind.

I turned back to the station, between past and future, never at one for too long.