

Dead air, empty gyms, emptier streets. Even the undercover policemen avert their eyes.

Hungry Ghost month. People walk with their shoulders drawn in, weaving around the incense, oranges splattered with wax, suckling pig heads. A double-decker brakes hard, metal squealing against metal, an Alphard barging into its lane. You flinch before you realise.

The city itself smells different. Burnt offerings in the air, a faint sourness in the smog. A bubble tea shop with a few dozen drinks on the countertop, plastic seals sagging, pearls bloated, no one to claim them. Red marker on a yellow post-it note that's stamped onto a glass shopfront, fluttering under the sodium streetlight. You want to move through all this, to feel what it's like.

In the distance, a basketball thuds onto concrete, each bounce dull and heavy. It might be easier if you had someone with you, against all this.

You ask Danny if he's free for a walk tomorrow night. He sends back a brief Cantonese voice clip. "A walk would be good tomorrow."

That's surprising. He rarely agrees to anything on such short notice.

Saturday, 31 August 2024

The lighting at the MTR entrance is out, the shadows pooling in the stairwell. You take the bus instead. You stay on the lower deck, leaning onto a steel pole as cold blasts of air drag the sweat from your shirt, and a few minutes later you step out at Ferry Street into the choking evening air.

You round the corner, circling some metal fencing, to Kansu Street outside the Jade Hawker Bazaar. Its tiny entrance is lacquered in red and gold, black lettering announcing greetings in half a dozen languages: Bem-vindo, Swaagat, Benvenuti. It's shut for the night.

Danny's already at the entrance, dressed in a loose black T-shirt, faded khaki chinos, and sneakers that look like they're been through a marathon. Slung over one shoulder is a threadbare cloth bag with a bottle of water inside. He gives you a short nod, adjusts the strap on his shoulder, and falls in beside you.

"Claire. Walking's good. Clears the head."

Together, you set off towards the main road. You pass a half-built highway flyover, its plastic barricades spilled onto the pavement, almost melting in the heat. A vacant retail store, its metal shutters plastered with Midland and Centaline For Rent signs, each new layer pasted over the others. A herbal tea and turtle jelly shop, one of the old ones, with the giant metal urn, not the bright red plastic chain stores where they put too much honey in. The bitter smell of medicinal roots drifts out.

Danny notices your gaze lingering on the turtle jelly. "They're not supposed to use turtle shell in it now. I prefer the 24-herb tea."

"Does the tea really help you? Or is it just a habit by now?"

"Habit is medicine."

You stare at him. It sounds like nonsense. But you understand it in your gut.

Danny sees the change in your expression and nods. He permits himself the briefest smile.

You notice you stopped walking a while ago. You move forward again, but the pavement beneath you feels just a bit heavier.

A few minutes later, you arrive at a major intersection, where the foot traffic thickens. As you're waiting at the pedestrian light, a passing red double-decker blasts you with exhaust, the fumes mixing with the smell of heated metal. A half-burnt hell banknote flutters across your path, the short edge crisped into black ash as it brushes across your shin.

The Gascoigne Road flyover looms above the traffic, its concrete pillars pressing down on the street below. A truck roars by overhead, rusted steel rods clanking as they grind against themselves. You turn right onto Nathan Road, grimy vehicles inching forwards on all six lanes. A van darts forward; a horn screeches as the bus slams on the brakes. Engines rumble, but the pavement is half-empty, like the city's pulse is missing.

Walking along, you see the Eaton HK hotel across the street, its big billboard showing a series of arthouse Pride snapshots. No one spares it a glance. Then behind it, a love hotel, a discreet crescent moon logo above the entrance. You pass a roadside newsstand, with triad pulp comics, soft-core magazines sealed in black plastic, horse racing tip sheets. Hard to imagine it will last the year.

Danny's gaze lingers on the newsstand vendor. He shrugs slightly and says, "Probably been doing it for years now. Look at how his arm is wrapped around the cash tray, like a reflex."

You observe that the vendor looks like he'll continue even if no one buys anything. Danny nods. "Can't let something like having no customers affect you."

You're about to say something, and he continues. "That's how the dai pai dongs died out. You can't insist on everything making sense."

You don't know if that's good business advice.

He exchanges a few words with the vendor and buys a stick of Doublemint gum. He offers you one as you walk onwards.

You continue along Nathan Road, a rapid-fire chime accompanying the green pedestrian light. A smell like damp cardboard wafts out of a cul-de-sac, as large warm droplets plop on the pavement, splashing onto your shoes, steady drips from air-conditioning units high above.

You look up at the tong lau with their protruding balconies, and sidestep the worst of the splatter zone.

Past another pedestrian crossing, you stroll past a plaster wall, empty but for the ghost of a pawn shop sign, the scar left behind where the lettering was removed. Just above head height, reflexology and foot massage billboards in simplified Chinese. On the street, sandwich boards in faded, coated plastic. Through a break in the phalanx of buildings above, you glimpse a bare metal frame, several storeys high, where the neon signs used to hang.

Ahead, clothes shops and property agencies and a burger joint. A vacant shopfront with an overflowing jumble of For Rent signs, Centaline and Midland and more you don't recognise, enthusiastically pasted over each other, contoured like a three-dimensional map. You take a deep breath, the fresh air steadying you. A man approaches, hawking loudly, then sees you and redirects his spit to the gutter.

A bright orange cylindrical rubbish bin stands near the railing, the shallow metal bowl on top full of cigarette butts, some still glowing amber. Black-and-white road signs announce Ning Po Street, Nanking Street. A sign advertises karaoke, backlit by an array of white fluorescents, the right half gone dark. Pink and blue neons beckon you into a "health centre", the blinking arrow pointing up a dark narrow staircase like bait. From a mahjong parlour comes the sharp crack of a tile slammed on wood.

An old woman blocks most of the sidewalk, an iron rod in her hand. She's stoking the flames in a metal barrel alongside offerings of poached chicken and barbecued pork in oily styrofoam boxes. The makeshift furnace blazes, spitting out ash and embers and choking black smoke that overpowers the minibus exhaust at the kerbside.

Danny stands a few metres away from the old woman, giving her space.

"Not many young ones carry on the traditions now."

He's quiet, just watching the smoke curl up.

You confess that you've seen these furnaces around this time of year, but you've never thought about what they represent.

"The paper houses turn into real houses on the other side." Danny gazes at the woman. "But really... it's for us. A reminder."

You want to ask what kind of reminder he means, but he's transfixed by the flames.

The old woman gently lowers a paper Playstation into the fire. It crackles as it burns, too loud for something made out of paper. You don't think about who it might be for.

Danny turns his gaze away. He moves to a gap between the concrete wall and the old woman, and signals with his eyes for you to come along. You squeeze past, and Danny follows, a last glance at the fire before he catches up.

You're a block away from Jordan MTR now. The traffic is louder, but there's also the chatter of overlapping Cantonese and Mandarin conversations, music blaring from phone accessory shops. You pass a metal cart, a plastic cut-out window showing the tong cung beng inside, honeycomb-like sugar cylinders dusted with coconut flakes and wrapped in a thin pancake. The vendor lifts the lid and chips at the honeycomb with a metal spatula. Tink, tink, tink. A warm, nutty smell hits you. Don't see those much any more.

Overtaking you, a pair of shoppers wheeling Rimowas, the man sweating in chinos, dress shirt and blazer, the woman in a pink Juicy Couture tracksuit, oversized sunglasses to shield her from the dim light. She plants a quick, quiet peck on his cheek. He leans in, still looking forward, and they continue walking.

You can't tell if it was habit or intimacy. Either way, it was something fragile.

As you wait at the pedestrian light, you're bombarded by a cacophony of honking. A plug of taxis has blocked the intersection, and a truck driver is stabbing his finger at them and

mouthed a stream of obscenities behind his rolled-up window. More cars and more taxis join in the honking, a medley of long, continuous screeches and rapid jabs of noise.

The light turns green, and you cross and approach the mouth of the MTR station. A pair of policemen straddle the entrance, clad in light blue shirts and dark blue cargo trousers. They scan the foot traffic, eyes sharp, hunting for anyone wearing the wrong clothes. No one looks up.

Danny doesn't look at the policemen. After you pass them, he keeps looking forward. "Every day they stand there. Imagine carrying that home."

"That kind of weight is light at first, but it accumulates."

Danny exhales softly and keeps walking, his pace unchanged.

You pass a jewellery shop, its lone signpost still standing where the street used to shine. Your eyes sweep across the display window. Diamond specks framed in gold and platinum. A necklace, showcasing a fat pig in solid gold, with half a dozen dangling gold piglets. The pig's smiling.

A man in a grey T-shirt and shorts walks past you, pausing regularly to drill a Muay Thai block, knee rising, elbow dropping. You catch the salt and sweat as he passes. The crowd thickens at Austin Road, so you slip back onto Tak Shing Street, where the sidewalk breathes again. A 7-Eleven's there, next to an overly orange Mannings pharmacy. Two teens shuffle out, each holding malt Vitasoy and an opened bag of Ethnicans potato chips, the smell of onion and garlic trailing behind them.

You nod at Danny and duck inside the 7-Eleven, the electronic door chime sharp and grating. You squeeze sideways between stacked shelves. You head for the hot food counter and order some takeaway siu mai. He ladles a dozen of them into a flimsy plastic tray, pasty yellow skin wrapped around a lump of grey fish paste. He tosses a handful of thin bamboo skewers on top and hands it to you.

Carrying the food in one hand, you walk down Tak Shing street. It's just off the main road, but a few steps in and it's quiet. An unmanned currency booth on your left, the frozen exchange rates ghosted into the display. A Japanese restaurant, styrofoam box of dead mackerel left at the entrance. Property agencies, signs shouting HUGE DISCOUNT, EMIGRATION SALE. The prices are still seven figures.

At the end, a playground. Crumb rubber flooring, a slide barely a metre high, a swing with rust on the chains. No children. Around it, clusters of metal chairs, the steel a cold shock even in the summer heat. A few elderly residents are seated, reading newspapers, waving small hand fans, listening to stock tips on the radio.

You rest your arm on the armrest, then lift it away from the film of dried syrup. You shift slightly on the metal seat.

Danny says nothing, eyes fixed on the empty swing as it sways in the breeze. You eat a siu mai, rubbery and bland, the skin sticking to your teeth. The silence lasts until Danny finally speaks.

"The children left. The elderly remain."

"Yeah. Only the elderly have time to sit here."

Danny nods. "Time is more of a burden for them."

You watch an old man, hunched forward on his seat, peel an orange with his bare hands. The peel tears from the pulp with an invisible mist that stains his fingers. One peel detaches, then another.

It's like time works differently for him, its passage marked only by the orange.

Danny's noticed your gaze on the man, and he watches him too. He says, "After he's peeled the orange, he will eat it."

You nod. The man will eat the orange.

The slightest hint of citrus drifts over. A group of teenagers cut across the playground, absorbed in their phones. The man pulls off orange slices one by one, eats them methodically. It's a sour one.

There's nothing more to say. The swing sways in the faint breeze.