

## Four Walks Through Hong Kong

In conventional fiction, the narrative follows a single path. In interactive fiction, readers make choices that shape the narrative. This collection presents four versions of an evening walk through Hong Kong during the month of the Hungry Ghost Festival. Same protagonist, same route, same evening, but four different companions.

Each walk offers something different:

Warmth amid decay.

Curiosity and wonder.

Tension, electric desire.

A meditation on loss and time.

These four stories come directly from the interactive fiction game [Below the Skyline](#), each capturing one narrative thread. Each choice subtly shifts the experience. Four conversations on identical streets become four different stories about what it means to inhabit a disappearing city.

You can read these stories in any order. You can read all four, or just one. The choice is yours.

## Eric

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 Eric if he's free for a walk tomorrow night. Eric's text comes back promptly. "A walk? Tomorrow? I have training..."

You answer with an acknowledgement of how important training is to him. Then another message arrives. "I almost never skip training. But I will, for you. Just this once."

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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.

Eric's waiting there at the entrance, hair combed back more neatly than usual. His gi is nowhere to be seen today, replaced by a red polo shirt that's tucked into black jeans, leather belt a notch too loose. His leather shoes gleam, too shiny for his casual attire. He looks straight at you, a wide grin forming before he reins it back, and embraces you in a tight, warm hug.

"Claire! Looking forward to this."

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.

Eric observes, "It's interesting that they serve turtle jelly like a dessert here. Back in Shunde it was more like a medicine thing." He looks over at you, eyes gauging your interest.

"What's Shunde like?"

"Shunde? We have way better dessert, that's for sure. I've lived in Hong Kong for years but I still go back for the food."

You ask him what he thinks of his hometown, whether he likes it here in Hong Kong.

"Hong Kong has a lot more restaurants. But in Shunde they cook with more care. They make the dace stuffing for the peppers by hand, pounding it for hours." He slows, then stops walking, looking down at the pavement.

"My mum made the best stuffed peppers. I kept hogging them, so one time she left the seeds in one of the peppers. I took a huge bite and my throat was on fire. I thought I would literally die, and she's laughing, patting me on the shoulder. I was seven then."

You try not to laugh, picturing a young Eric gasping for air. He nods and starts walking again, a brief smile bubbling to the surface.

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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. The stop-start traffic hits you in waves, testing your balance.

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.

Eric notices the love hotel and flashes you a half-smile. "I like it. Clean, simple. A room with a purpose. There's no private space in this city."

"Yeah. An entire family sharing a hundred square feet. People don't have a choice."

He waves a hand at an old apartment block, dozens of storeys high. "That's just life here. We get used to anything."

He rubs his chin with one hand as he stares up at the apartment block. Then a smile, like he's happy with the thought.

"Some people look down on it, but it's giving people a door they can close."

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.

Eric nods his head towards the furnace. "Can you see that? It's an entire mansion, with windows and cars and all, made out of paper. Burnt in a minute."

He lowers his eyes, a faint frown on his face, something that could be sorrow. It looks like he wants to say more, but he swallows his words and stares at the old woman and the flames.

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

Eric brightens, turning his head to face you. "Yeah, it's an interesting story. Around this time the barrier between earth and hell weakens. So the hungry ghosts can come and visit. They call it hungry, but I think it's more like, restless, or something like that."

He clears his throat. "Anyway, that's why people don't fight. But it also means you can give them things more easily. So this woman is sending gifts to someone she knew."

He gazes at the furnace for a bit more. Then, satisfied, he turns towards the narrow gap between the concrete wall and the woman. You squeeze past, Eric guiding you forward with a steady hand on your back.

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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. The clothes suggest they're mainland tourists. Not many of those still come.

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 mouthing 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.

Eric casts a glance at the policemen, scanning their posture more than their faces. "Discipline isn't holding your breath. Their energy is stagnant."

"Maybe they don't even care about energy. They're just doing what the uniform demands."

Eric doesn't reply, preferring to move past as soon as possible.

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 Eric squinting at him, his mouth opening slightly then closing. 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 Vitasoys and an opened bag of *Ethnicans* potato chips, the smell of onion and garlic trailing behind them.

You nod at Eric 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.

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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. Eric's still.

"They built this place for movement. But no one moves."

"The stillness doesn't bother me. I'm here, beside you."

His eyes close as he breaks into a smile, though he catches himself almost immediately.

"Thank you, Claire. That's enough for me."

You've seen him blaze in the ring. This is something else entirely.

At a far row of seats, an old woman stands, mumbles something to her friends, then drifts away. Eric leans back slightly, spine still straight, and skewers a *siu mai*, lifting it to you. As you take it from him, there's barely any space between your hands.

You take the skewer naturally, brushing your hand across his. He smiles, and there's the faintest flush across his cheeks. You eat the *siu mai*, not even noticing the rubbery taste, and then let your hand settle on the armrest between you.

Eric places his hand on yours. The warmth is steady, contained. He keeps his gaze straight forward, but the silence feels shared.

The swing creaks once in the breeze, then goes still.

## Katie

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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 Katie if she's free for a walk tomorrow night. Her response arrives almost instantly, a real-time cascade of messages.

"Really? You asked me?" A short pause, the *Katie is typing...* notification pulsing.

"Yes! Absolutely! I'd love to! Oh. Sorry for rambling, I wasn't expecting this. See you tomorrow!"

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Katie's standing at the entrance, sporting a plain pastel top tucked into black jeans, a slim belt, and spotless white sneakers, laces tied into neat bunny ears. She smooths her shirt, then gives you a warm smile, eyes crinkling, and embraces you in a slightly awkward hug, her body not quite touching you.

"Claire! I wasn't sure if this was casual or, like... never mind. I'm happy you asked!"

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.

"Do you like turtle jelly Claire? I tried both kinds, I actually liked the bitter one more. Made me shiver and almost seize up, you know? So fun! Uh. It's fine to like that, right?" She glances at you, bites her lower lip.

"I don't think many people enjoy eating it," you say. "But you turned it into an adventure. That's pretty cool."

Katie breaks into a broad smile. "Wow... thanks, Claire. I... no one says this kind of thing to me, usually..."

She blurts out, "do you want to... eat some?" You're already past the shop. You open your mouth, and a soft "uhh" escapes. A faint blush appears on her cheeks as she looks straight ahead. Her hand twitches at her side, close to yours.

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.

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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.

Katie's gaze lingers on the newsstand. "I've never actually seen anyone buy anything from these news vendors. Wonder how they make any money."

You say that you're seeing less and less of them around. Katie smiles and nods energetically in agreement. "Yeah! Feels like most of them just disappeared."

She steals a glance at the vendor, who's slouched in his flimsy fold-out chair, and looks at you. Lowers her voice. "Feels kind of sad, right? Like you look away for a while, and when you look back, part of the city's gone."

She runs her eyes slowly over the newsstand, and her smile fades. For the moment, there's no one else on this stretch of the pavement. She grabs your forearm lightly, palm not quite touching, and hesitantly pulls you along with her.

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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.

"Wow... is that a *paper house*?"

Katie's eyes widen. "A stack of banknotes too. So many zeroes... wouldn't that, I don't know, mess up the economy on the other side?"

You see her eyes narrow slightly as she listens to her own words, then a slight frown. She looks at you, her head slightly tilted.

"That's fascinating to think about. If they have banknotes, that means they spend money in hell. But what would they buy?"

Katie beams and nods enthusiastically. "Clothes? Food? Air conditioners! Wait, no, this underworld isn't hot. It's different, right?"

"I saw *Journey to the West* on TV a while ago. I think they have a lot of different things. Like one of them is that your bed is made of iron."

She bursts into delighted laughter. "That sounds terrible! You'd get a sore back when you woke up! Maybe your pillow is iron too!"

The old woman stops tending the fire and looks over, one eye narrowed in confusion. Katie mumbles a "sorry", still grinning, and gestures you towards the narrow gap between the concrete wall and the woman. As you squeeze past, Katie follows, close enough that you don't need to look back to feel her presence.

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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. The kiss is just a gesture. Something that keeps them going. Best not to dwell on it.

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

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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.

Katie gives the policemen a wide berth as you pass, but then turns to you. "I always wonder what their training is like. Do they get lessons on how to make everyone uncomfortable?"

"There's probably a whole course on it. Intro to staring people down."

Katie's cheeks dimple as she smiles, then she pulls you along by the wrist.

"Let's keep moving."

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 Vitasoys and an opened bag of *Ethnicans* potato chips, the smell of onion and garlic trailing behind them.

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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. Katie fidgets, then reaches for the tray. She skewers a *siu mai* into her mouth without looking at it. A grimace, then she forces a swallow. "That's... not how it's supposed to taste."

Looking around, her eyes land on a row of metal chairs. "These chairs are warm, but your skin insists that it's cold. Nerves are so subjective."

"Cold or not, I just want to be next to you."

Her face reddens instantly, impossible to miss. She presses her palms against her cheeks, then drops them. You let the moment breathe. It's a while before she speaks again.

"That... makes me very happy. Thanks."

As her face slowly returns to its regular complexion, she looks down at your *siu mai* tray.

Then, Katie sits up straight. She blurts out, "Do you... like me? Like not just for the research?"

She digs her fingers into her thighs as her legs bounce. "No, no! I didn't mean..."

Staring intently on the *siu mai*, she shoves one into her mouth. "These are... um, high in amino acids. Very functional," she mumbles through the mouthful.

"I like you."

Katie swallows hard, then faces you and starts to lean in. Then her brain catches up. Her eyes widen as she freezes, breath still, halfway to you.

She's completely stuck, so you gently lean in to meet her. Katie closes her eyes, a bit too hard.

A quick kiss on her lips.

Katie doesn't dare to look, trembling slightly as she holds the moment, a smile melting onto her face.

You ease her back, and she sinks into the seat with a contented sigh.

The swing creaks in the faint breeze.

## Chloe

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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 Chloe if she's free for a walk tomorrow night.

"You can't be serious. A walk? On the pavement?"

You confirm that this is your intention.

"God, that's insane. Fine, let's do it. Can't wait to see what I'm missing."

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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.

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Chloe's already there, leaning against the wall. Her black cropped top hangs loose above black drawstring pants and scuffed white sneakers. Her eyes are sharp in the streetlights, lines too clean. A small silver stud sparkles in the light as she turns her head, then it's gone.

"Claire, this better not be boring," she says, walking alongside you. A hint of peach drifts from her direction.

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.

Chloe boots a stray rock aside. "You're serious, aren't you? We're just going to walk like this." She smirks, one eyebrow arched, as she continues alongside you.

You say that your biggest joy in life is walking on pavement and achieving nothing. Chloe stops walking, rooted in place, and looks at you, eyes wide open, mouth hanging open. She stares for another second. Then a smile dances across her lips.

"The scary thing is, you could have been serious."

She runs a hand through her hair. "This walking... it's... not bad, actually."

She grimaces, then bumps your shoulder with hers, unbalancing you for a moment. She flashes you a cheeky grin, and lightly pulls you along by the elbow.

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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.

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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.

Chloe points at the moon logo. "I'd take the moon hotel over the fancy one any day. Eaton forces you to pretend to be romantic."

You say that you'd take the moon hotel too. Being direct has its advantages. Her eyes gleam, sharp as glass. "Direct, huh? Dangerous. I like it."

Chloe moves in, close enough that you feel the warmth from her arm. "Makes me wonder if you'd actually follow through." She holds eye contact with you, just inches away.

You realise you've been taking shallow breaths, and draw in a deep one. She moves back a step. "Anyway. Moon hotel. No contest."

She slides her hands into her pockets and keeps walking.

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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.

Chloe grins suddenly, the twitching kind you've seen before. You take a deep breath.

"Imagine being stuck in hell and a big bowl of paper noodles pops up on your table. What would you do?"

"That would be interesting. Imagine biting down on that!"

Chloe bursts into laughter. "Yes! Everyone watching you out of the corner of their eyes, and you have to pretend to enjoy choking it down!"



She steps in close, slurping some invisible noodles right in front of your face, then clutching her throat with her hand, before pulling back. A few passers-by glance over at her.

Still grinning, she points at the gap between the concrete wall and the woman. You squeeze past; Chloe's hands land on your shoulders, steering you forward.

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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. The clothes suggest they're mainland tourists. Not many of those still come.

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 mouthing 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.

Chloe ignores the policemen, but after you pass, she remarks, "Money gets you everything in this city. Except immunity from those brutes."

"All the money in the world won't protect you from raw power."

Chloe smirks, but her eyes are hard for a moment. "Anyway. Come on."

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 Chloe's face twisting, her lips curled, eyebrows

drawn together. 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 Vitasoys and an opened bag of *Ethnicans* potato chips, the smell of onion and garlic trailing behind them.

You nod at Chloe 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.

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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. Chloe sprawls back in her chair, legs spread wide. She grabs a *siu mai* from your tray with her fingers and pops it into her mouth. She grimaces at you, then swallows.

"A playground with no kids. Such a romantic date. You're really spoiling me."

"Gourmet siu mai, scenic playground view. What more could anyone ask for?"

Chloe laughs, shaking her head. Her eyes flicker over your face, reading it.

"If this is your idea of a date, I'm both impressed and concerned."

You study the *siu mai* tray with interest, instead of answering.

Chloe becomes still for a moment, then picks up another *siu mai* with her fingers, brings it halfway to her mouth, and pauses. She raises her eyebrows, a slow smile spreading on her face, and she offers it to you.

You lean forward and open your mouth.

She leaves you hanging for a moment, then slides the *siu mai* in. As she pulls away, she slowly brushes your lower lip with her fingers.

Chloe just watches you, her fingers resting on her lips. You chew slowly, not even tasting it, stretching out each second.

She doesn't look away, nor can you read her expression.

A radio crackles with a weather report. Rain tomorrow.

## Danny

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.

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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.

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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.

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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.

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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.

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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 Vitasoys and an opened bag of *Ethnicians* potato chips, the smell of onion and garlic trailing behind them.

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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.