

Rita Wan

Graffiti on closed shutters. I trace the number on the door with a finger. I have a few minutes.

Turn around to check the street. There is a van parked nearby, seemingly abandoned. The only business is a cafe two doors down. It's turning to fall, so there are no takers for the patio tables and plastic chairs. That end of the street backs into a factory. The other end passed brick buildings until I lose sight and interest.

Cameron said that she'd be here in a minute. Add ten.

There isn't a sound, but I keep listening. There needs to be some reason to reject this place, other than fear.

The man who comes to the door must have just shaken himself awake. He pulls at his beard as though it grew overnight, tells me that he's lost an entire day showing the apartment to tenants. In a single flight of stairs, through a door left open, we are at the apartment.

The hallway and living room are creaky wood, like Hollywood's picture of an inn. There are two others here, lost in the glow of Macbooks. I do the responsible social thing and shake hands. There are a few gruff words, and then I am ushered into the room. It is much cleaner - even the edges and corners seem sharper. One wall is dominated by a blank, gently rippling sheet of paper. "I am a painter," he explains.

I let him talk, trying to "mhmm" properly without interrupting. The paper reminds me of rice paper windows. Reminds me of a friend and I coming in from watch to warm our hands.

I clasp my buzzing phone. Cameron is here, on time possibly.

Back down and up the steps again. Cameron skips the swift introductions and is ushered in to meet me. We squeeze hands. She asks about the utilities, the recycling, the late-night diners. I find myself pacing the blank wall. I put up my hand but don't touch it. He needs it clean for painting.

On the way back out, she splits off to check the kitchen. "Is this a juicer?"

"Oh yes, we have all modern, all updated appliances."

I keep walking to the door.

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Jacob was the best person to keep watch with. He would tell a story in a low, rumbling voice, slowly turning over plot details, dwelling instead on the color of a girl's hair, the furtive glance of a confronted cheater. "Come on Jacob, we don't have all night, what'd she do?" Then he would seem to speed up the story, but it would become stalled again, until, like all his stories, it ended with a corny joke or the hero humiliated. One got the feeling that Jacob was unlucky in love. Maybe that's why he was here.

At dawn we would go back into the hut and rouse the next watchers. I would take a Benadryl without water to sleep soundly through the others' stirring awake. "Damn Risa Wan," I would think, "her war isn't worth this".

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"I know you liked that place," Cameron poked me for emphasis. "All the artists, the paint on the floor..."

I stop eating for a moment to cut up the omelette. Cheese spills out.

"He even recommended this diner, we could go late nights. I know you're into that."

"Yes, I am. That was very sweet of you."

Cameron gestures at her pancakes. I transfer some over to my plate and eat a piece. It's good.

"They even have a juicer, did you see?"

"You mentioned it."

"I like juice; we could make some fresh orange juice just like that, you know."

"Are people into that really? I didn't know that about you."

"Of course! Come on."

I still can't picture it. My morning is pretty simple, up until I get to work. It's pretty simple at that point, too.

"You didn't notice the paint, did you? The spirals and loops on the floor..?"

"I can't do that. It's too much. I know it means something to you but it's hard to mean something positive for me."

"Well you can't keep moving around like this."

"I don't think young people can be in an apartment and sit in an office all the time. It's the same as putting your mother in a nursing home. It cares for them but it takes something away."

"I lived in this one apartment, since my junior year of college, and you come in with this.. bullshit!"

It was my first taste of freedom, Risa Wan's war. We were supposed to be journalism students gone into high gear. Investigative journalists, in a world where it was all Disneyfied or propagandized or sensationalized. Tell the world what Risa Wan's activists are doing. Show the people aching to free Risa from prison, the oppressive ring of military generals who fought for power, rightfully hers.

We burst across the border in camouflaged jeeps, down dirt roads and into a tea field. I know now that the heavy branches and thick weeds meant that the field was untended, that the farmers had been conscripted or dispatched. Through my eyes then, a journalist's eyes, it seemed much more romantic of a cover.

One night they fired mortars. It was never explained whether we were meant to see this or something else. We'd gathered around a fire and saw movement in the trees. There was a tremendous noise, though I didn't see anything, and the more adventurous of us came forward. Each man was heavily armed, and all of the mortars were being loaded, being adjusted based on a screaming walkie-talkie. The girl next to me said that our location would be given away, that we needed to leave. Then she was yelling not to pack up tents, just run. I don't remember her name. I guess that means she didn't get very far.

It was Staples day in the office. Everyone got their orders, including my set of ballpoint pens, and star post-its for the interns. I put a star on their best work, so everyone gets a star.

I booked a conference room over lunch break to Skype with the therapist. I cried a little, I admit.

The next thing after that was our team whiteboard session. I'm very good at what I do, what I do now.

My only luggage is a yellow duffel bag; I got it here in the city. I carry it up the stairs and over the threshold, leaving it by the mattress. Cameron has already moved her chairs up here - a friend is helping her.

"Get my bags from the car, will you?"

Can't sleep. The anti-psychotic hasn't kicked in yet; it's supposed to help me sleep, is all. There's nothing that wrong with me. I see Cameron check her phone.

"We have graffiti on the front door."

"Yeah?"

"I'm a straight-lace office worker and you sell phones. Neither of us are graffiti people."

"Like punks or rebels or something like that?"

"Sure."

"You want me to be a rebel?"

It's hard to tell what Cameron means sometimes. Especially when I can't see her face.

"This is what living in Bushwick is all about, and I want to be a part of it. The paint on the floor, didn't you see it?"

"I'm going to look at it now."

"Okay."

I roll over to the lip of the loft. I move the curtain for the streetlight outside to illuminate the room. I see it now - ripples like the sea. Cameron is looking up for a reaction.

"It's beautiful."

She smiles. "Told you so."

The next morning I pick clothes from my bag. It's time to take the whole lot to the laundromat.

Cameron grasps my hand. "Put them in the dresser when you get back."

"We don't have a dresser."

"I'm getting one today. I'll send you a few pictures and phone you this afternoon."

"Okay."

Soft sunlight comes in now.

"Can I paint something?"

"Can you?"

"I'll start right here," I say, "and to this corner." Somehow I imagined there would be a brush to start right away. She kneels to finish lacing up her sneakers, smiles and leaves.