

# The Annotationist

May first learned that I was a writer at the worst possible time, when we had just moved into our first home together. She had decided to go to the bookstore while I was at work -- a joke about too many empty shelves, a spill on a coffee table photo book -- I quickly forgot why. Instead I came home to see her laying on the couch, buried in a pillow, tears coming again when I shook her awake.

"What happened?"

The book had been a catharsis, after a confusing relationship, nothing more than a fling by anyone else's standards... Something about the intense flashes and the loss drove me to write it down, and encapsulate it in the book. A few thousand people had bought the book, and then it went away.

It wasn't that simple, though, when your fiancée finds it on display at a second-hand bookstore. Not simple at all.

"I wrote to capture a moment in time, and putting it down in the book helped me let it go. It's as simple as that."

"You say in the first two pages, 'she wasn't the first person who I loved, but she was the first that I loved *like that*.' That's supposed to be how you feel about me, isn't it?"

"It's before I knew how this would feel, right here and now. I wouldn't trade this for anything, you know."

"You never wrote like that for me!"

"Because I'm a *failed writer*. Look, someone was trying to get rid of their copy."

"She meant a lot to you!"

And then I did what anyone would do, at the crux of the crisis, and assured her, "Those words were from the editor, we sat and thought about how to make this story work, and we were wrong. Just like that relationship was never possible, fatally flawed, the whole book didn't make sense to us."

"What about us?"

"I learned to bury this relationship and this book. So our story would start."

“No more of these secrets.”

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That promise, that ‘no more secrets’, always strengthened our relationship.

Then one day I received two envelopes redirected from our old address, sent by a new publisher. It was a fluke, I thought, some sort of annual payment. The next week I found another envelope waiting in the mailbox. I tore it open and looked at the number on the check. I should be celebrating the success. But the new, unexplained secret weighed down on me. No more secrets.

I made it a surprise trip to San Francisco. We were overdue for a vacation. We went back to her favorite Italian place with the little tables on the sidewalk. And then, after strolling through the flower market, after taking pictures in front of the bridge, I told her everything that I knew. It was a foreign publisher, a Cantonese edition that was about to reprint, with copies on every bookshelf, every phone screen in Hong Kong. They would keep sending checks.

She reached over cautiously, squeezed, cried on my shoulder.

“Do you need anything?”

“No,” she mumbled.

“You okay? I need to know that you’re okay.”

She took a deep breath and wiped her eyes. “Chinese food would be appropriate. Don’t you agree?” She had a little smear of mascara, but I didn’t say a word.

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The airport was like any other, but it was like May had never traveled before.

“Look at that! Oh thankfully there’s still English on everything.”

“Hold onto my stuff while I go to the bathroom.”

“My phone’s not working!”

“There’s an airport WiFi here, I’m sure they have it. But remember that it’s nighttime back home.”

“Got it.” Her phone started buzzing.

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At the foot of the escalator, a group of grim men in suits carry signs. One woman in a constellation dress lights up immediately as we make eye contact.

She waves. I guide my wife away from the baggage claim and toward our host.

The lady with the sign leans across the barrier for a handshake. "Hello, Mr. and Mrs. Ryan. My family name is Kam, but in English I usually go by 'Wau'."

May beams. "Okay, Miss Wau."

I try out greeting her with "*nei hou*".

Wau shouts, "In Cantonese, even?" And waves for us to come around to her.

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Sitting across from each other in the limo, an actual limousine, I realize how I recognize our host's name. "You're the translator, for the book."

"It is not a translation at all, more of an annotated work, a zhùjiě."

Wau traced shapes in the air, presumably the Chinese characters making up the word.

"I don't understand."

"Let me explain. English reading skills are quite good here in Hong Kong. Your book is only annotated."

May shakes her head. "Annotated?"

"For example, the echo scene at Grand Central Station, where you agreed to be boyfriend and girlfriend. Everyone in New York City will know Grand Central! Even in other parts of America, you tell the reader and they will know it. But you do not describe it to the people who are outside the U.S."

May cringes but acknowledges: "That makes some sense."

"I graduated college and worked at the publisher for two years. They asked me to find some romance books that we can reprint and annotate, in China and Hong Kong, without censorship. Foreign and travel romance books are very popular now. They asked me to write annotations."

“So you picked the book?”

“Someone else found it, and they had me read it, because I lived in New York as a student.”

“Oh, that’s fantastic!”

“Thanks! You know, I think that I even was there in New York during the time from your book, you know, when you and Jill were there.”

I quickly glance at May, but she is staring out the window. Back to Wau: “You must have some good memories... maybe even visited the museum?”

“Of course! It felt like a real coincidence.”

“Well, I’m glad that we could finally meet.”

“The same to you.”

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In the hotel, exhausted, we slept in our clothes until the sun came through the curtains. I connected my phone to the hotel Wi-Fi to reveal dozens of messages from home, and a few urgent ones from Ms. Wau.

I snuck into the bathroom and made a Skype call.

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We are here on Ma Wan to look at the long-term apartment. This tiny island is full of apartment towers.

I watch Wau go through a million courtesies with the front desk lady. Finally, she comes down from her perch and gives me a hug.

“Fan of the book?”

“No, she doesn’t know us. She’s just really happy that you would come to live in Hong Kong. Don’t talk, okay?”

On the sixth floor, our front-desk-lady waves her hand over the lock and I hear the clunk of an electronic deadbolt.

She waves to stop us at the door, and re-emerges with a strange, pillow-sized box, which she sets on the ground. There are a flurry of words between her and Wau.

"I don't understand."

The lady winds a piece of plastic around the corners of the box.

Wau signals me. "Watch." She puts one foot into the box and *snap* a plastic bootie snaps around her foot. She tightens the elastic and *snap* switches feet.

I step in, and my hiking boots are covered by the surgical plastic. We are now welcomed in. From a speaker, classical music welcomes us in. Everything is staged as if someone lived here - coats on hangers, a line of pots and pans, a wall strangely full of empty photo frames.

The two converse again. Before I can wander off to look at the other rooms, Wau waves me back, and then unexpectedly pulls me in for a hug, whispering in my ear, "I told her that it is for us, don't say anything and I will get you and May a great deal." Then she goes back to the conversation.

As we step back into the sunlight, she summons a taxi for us. "Go back to your hotel... the publishers will set up everything here. Take your wife to Lamma Island, go hiking from one end to another. You'll enjoy it!" She stops for a moment. "Maybe you will stay in Hong Kong long enough to learn Cantonese and write about us, too."

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We took the ferry over to Lantau that afternoon, once May was fully awake. From the small fishing village, a path leads up, winding past the power plant, up into the hills, and the map promises to bring us past the windmill. May rambles on about the efficiency of wind power.

On the beach, a boy and girl (a couple?) ran up to us. "Mr. Ryan?"

May and I look at each other. I shrug. "Yes?"

"We don't want a photo, just hello." The girl smiles. "We love the book."

May waves them closer: "Photos are okay! I've never been a celebrity before!" They take selfies with us. "Is the book really that famous?"

"For sure. we just heard that you arrived in Hong Kong."

We fall into a consistent pace as we climb up the steep path to the windmill. The boy gives me a concerned look and then taps me on the elbow. "There's just one part of the book that I wanted to talk to you about."

"Sure."

"In the book, you talk about how you dropped out of college, and that Jill considered doing the same, but I can't tell if it's important to the plot or not. You don't really describe what happened to you."

"Well, it's true. I dropped out years before, so I didn't think it fit into the story."

"But you did talk about it, it did affect you personally in some way."

"I hope that you two aren't planning on dropping out of school!"

He shakes his head. "In this city, it is just about impossible to get a good job without it. You're really lucky to be in America."

"Well this is why I try to shut up about being a dropout... it isn't really an achievement. I was very lucky that it eventually turned out okay."

"So in the story, and in real life also, Jill is going back to college, and she explains that she is a scholar now. It made you jealous."

May hears this and looks back. "You really are that way! So competitive!"

"Well no, I felt that... it was just, I can't even explain how stupid her 'scholar' thing was."

The guy shakes his head. "She was doing her research! You were helping her research project every day, but you were still mad that it worked out for her. It doesn't make sense."

"I did undergraduate research before. I don't know why she would try and explain it to me like I was dumb, knowing that I had the experience. There were a lot of fish that died in Dunkard Creek, in Pennsylvania somewhere. So a professor asked me to make a map of it, and.... there were two things that were dumb about it. So, first, we never visited the place or talked to any of the real people. We just collected bits and pieces of info on the internet."

"I don't understand."

"Me neither! And the second thing is, six months later, the school is considering kicking me out. I never asked for help before, but I wrote to my advisor and the grad student on the project, and never heard a peep from those guys to this day."

"Then years later you meet Jill. She isn't responsible for that!"

"Oh, of course not. Let me explain."

We continued walking for a minute before I could decide what a good explanation is.

"The problem is, we worked on this project together. And she was focusing on what the school was telling her, right? And giving them all of the credit, but the school wasn't providing any of the actual work or actual money! There wasn't anyone there who understood the part that I was doing. And I knew that at the end of the day, they could just push her and the project in a ditch, or tell her to just take surveys, rather than making a real change."

"But you are mad about it, because of what happened to you?"

"I don't know." I think about it. "Sure, okay, It is *related* to what happened to me, but does it mean that it wasn't true in our situation? Did you know, the college tried pulling her funding, made her go to hearings examining the project, started out an email by joking that they were still not funding her! They were cruel and unsympathetic. They wanted her to study minutia. I never wavered on it, but she bought into their research paper, paper chase thing."

The boy grins. "You're still mad about it. I like it. It's very real."

The girl nods. "Very real true story."

"Well, here's what I believe: a lie over many years doesn't become the truth. Someone being shitty to me, over many years, doesn't become okay. I don't need to play nice about it."

May motions for us to stop hiking and hands me a water. "You're getting him worked up about it." She stops me before I can protest. "One thing about this guy is he never lets go of - wait, am I making it sound romantic..?"

Our new friends laugh. The girl says, "No problem. There wouldn't be a book without it."

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That night in front of my first audience, I see the first paragraph that Wau has highlighted for me.

*Let's try to go up to the roof, she says. She pushes on the door but it seems not to open. I squeeze past her and push harder. It gives way, and there is no alarm. I take off my coat and drape it over the door threshold, to keep it from locking us out. On that drab Chinatown rooftop, all the missteps seemed to melt away. We looked into each other's eyes as if for the first time. The Freedom Tower, which before had always reminded me of the worst, blended into the skyline lit up before us.*

Wau chimes in with a stream of words from the annotation. I see some heads nod. This is really happening. I feel like a real writer. I *am* a real writer.

*She told me her dreams to explore outer space, and I promised that I would come running after her.*

Wau puts her hands up. "Oh, here is Mr. Ryan's wife right now, coming in the door! Make room for her, please!"

I see her come in, a new purse slung over her shoulder. The audience claps again. I step down from the podium to the carpet. "May." I hug her, and remembering the conservative culture thing, trace a line down her face, move her hair behind her ear. She rests her head on my shoulder.

"Awww!" the crowd reacts.

A man's voice calls out, "Jill!"

We come apart. The crowd makes an unusual sort of whispering sound, some people are reaching for their phones.

"This is my wife, um, and-"

"From the book!" the same guy, again. He's drawing out his phone. "Hello, Jill and Ryan from the book."

"No, you see, the book is from when I was younger. Ms. Wau, can you explain? This is my wife May, here." She's already out of my embrace.

"You wrote your book about another girl?" They are all laughing. I look to Wau to explain, but she is just beaming.

"I, well, you should know that I wrote the book a long time ago. It was before I met my wife."

"Where is your wife's book?"

Wau giggles nervously. "Don't get him in trouble!"

The audience is laughing again. Where is May? Damn it.

"Please read the next section that I set aside for you."



I step back onto the podium. Pinch my lips together. Look up... I don't see May... look back down.

*That night I dreamt that I need to wake her up, but I am afraid to startle her. Over and over again in the dream.*

*Actually when I wake, sweating, I see the glowing clock at the foot of the bed, and I know it is what I need to do. I need to get ready for work. I turn on my side, put my hand lightly onto her shoulder, and I stop. She could keep sleeping. I could leave her a note. So I am doing it for me, because I want - more than anything - to have an extra moment with her.*

The audience laughs.

"No, I won't continue."

Wau's exasperated commentary: "Please, please tell us."

"Just read the fucking book! God damn it!"

I hand the microphone to Wau and find myself pushing, running, escaping the store, out into the rain. I don't see her. *Shit.*

I look back to see Wau at the door, calling out to me as the rain drenches my suit and tie. "Mr. Ryan, you promised to sign their books."

I nod and go back in. "Please forgive me," I say diplomatically, before dragging myself back to the desk, taking off the wet blazer, dropping into the seat.

Wau manages the first person in line, whispers to me, "I'll call her and have her back before the interview," then disappears.

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Back at the hotel, May is packing her things into the suitcase.

"We don't move into the apartment for a few days now, sweetheart..."

"I booked a flight to Singapore. Just for the weekend."

"That's good. It's good, right? I can grab a few things in the tote bag and-"

"It's just me traveling. You have a lot of meetings here before we can go home."

"This isn't how we do things. You want to get away from this situation. We don't move away from each other."

May sits down on the bed. I remain standing, I rest my hands on her shoulders, moving my hands then to...

She mumbles, "that's what you would do with her."

"That's what I always do with you, when we need to talk. We always-

"But we can't do that anymore."

I give up and sit on the bed beside her, staring ahead at the same wall. "I didn't want this to come between us. It was that weird guy at the book signing."

"I like to think that, maybe this is part of your journey."

"What do you mean?"

"I don't know, not yet. But I know that it will do some good for you to work through it. Alone."

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On the new apartment on the tiny island of Ma Wan which Wau has found for us, the doorman helps me move the last of May's things, and shuts the door behind him. The wall is full of empty picture frames, waiting for a family to move in.

I stare at May's luggage for a while, unopened. I turn on the television and flip through a cacophony of Chinese shows.

I hope, in a moment of vanity, to catch my own interview.

There is a familiar tap-tap-tap on the door. I open it to see Wau, dressed up in the star dress, like she was when our plane first arrived.

"I just heard that you moved in, and-" her eyes searched the room and looked past me to the bags.

"That's a personal trip. She always wanted to backpack around Asia, and, it's an all-inclusive tour package with this trip and...?"

She looks at me and I continue on, “This has all been very kind of you, but... unnecessary. We do okay on our own, or together, or, anyway, May is coming back from Singapore in a few days.”

She closes her own eyes, perhaps picturing it. “It’s beautiful there, in Singapore.”

“You’ve been?”

“Yes. What I wanted to say is, I apologize for any stress that I might have caused.”

“We were all a little surprised by the pomp and circumstance.”

“Pomp? What do you mean ‘pomp’?”

“It’s a phrase. Please come in, come in and sit down.”

The doorman appears again carrying two grocery bags, which he drops inside the door. My hand moves for my wallet and Wau waves me to pause. The doorman leaves and closes the door behind him.

“This is all my fault, and I want to make it up to you.”

“Please, I am not really a celebrity or anything, so I wasn’t really expecting the company or the gifts. I can get you a drink, though.”

“No, I was hoping to make you a dinner.”

“Dinner? Thanks, but I wasn’t so hungry and-”

“You can’t have had dinner already! Have you had *char siu*? Of course not yet. When you smell it cooking, then you can tell me if you’re hungry or not.”

My tongue catches on the unusual syllables.

“You can help, and teach your wife later. Come on now.”

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The next day at the office, the publishing team is silent while Wau commands the head of the table. She flicks through publicity slides on her tablet, which display on the TV behind her.

“I might be able to book you on another show. And your visa is almost good, your visa is almost ready to enter the other parts of mainland China.”

I tried to push back. “If our flight is too soon, you know that we can always come back to Hong Kong...”

“You stay. The publisher is very happy. Of course you will need to write the sequel.”

“The sequel? But I just started answers your questions for a translation!”

“Your story is too known already for us to translate and sell it again. Who will buy it? By now someone will have gone and made a translation on the internet. I think that I see some people discussing it already. In fact, I have already seen people with the translation. People are done with reading these translations.”

“You saw people with a translation and stopped? You should have said so, Wau. I’ve been writing so many notes for you. Why are you not telling me this?”

The rest of the team looks as uncomfortable as I am.

“There is a lot going on here in our office, and we are making it easier for you by giving you one person to talk to, and not having you answer to everyone there. Do you understand that? Do you want to get questions from everyone in this room? And their English is not as good.”

I didn’t reply.

“In the space program, there is one person in Mission Control who is called CAPCOM. And he is the one who talks to the astronauts. The only conversation between the astronauts and the ground is to this CAPCOM. There are a million people in NASA all talking to each other and then they talk to the CAPCOM, that’s me, and they talk to the astronauts directly, so there is no confusion going on.”

“I think that I understand what you mean, but why didn’t talk about this last night?”

“Because today it’s time for us to talk about the sequel.”

“There’s no sequel. Nothing more happened!”

Across the table, one of the publisher guys, who appeared to be the oldest, leaned forward. “Do you mean to tell me that the story that you wrote is one-hundred-percent true events? That you are not able to write fiction?”

“I made bits of it up... But not the general idea.”

He continues. "Well, how about you bring up old experiences, make up new ones, or... we discussed ghostwriting."

"Ghostwriting?"

Wau cuts in: "It will not be favorable to you. Someone else will write your book, and it will be so disappointing to our readers, so we will give you a small fraction of the money-"

I shake my head. "Wait, explain to me what's happening in the sequel. Story of how I met my wife? You know we-"

"No, the story has the same girl. It needs to be the same girl. Your readers like her."

*Fuck.*

"Same girl, and you are in Hong Kong."

"In Hong Kong?"

"You are *both* in Hong Kong. Do your research. Go on the sightseeing tour that I sent you."

"Do you have any idea the trouble that you're causing for me? What am I supposed to tell the museum?"

"The museum? How much are they paying you?"

The whole team looks at me, pencils ready.

"That isn't appropriate to ask. Not now. They expect-"

"They expect you to go back and *b/a b/a b/a*, follow their schedule and their rules, and maybe you will get promoted next year, maybe not. Now tell me, what are they offering you to go back? I am not afraid to talk about the money now."

"No, no, no, May and I were doing just fine before you got involved."

The older man leans forward. "I did some research online. Do you know what would happen to your book payment if we saw your old salary? You should keep quiet about this old job."

Wau nods. "I read the book, so I know that you are smart and analytical. This sequel is worth more than going back to the museum. It is more valuable than any other work that you can do. It means a lot to all of our careers, too. And if this book press stops, it will go away. Lightning doesn't strike twice."

It was true. I felt a burning in my eyes. I pushed back from the table.

"I need to talk to my wife."

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I reach her on Skype that night.

*I miss you.*

*I miss you, too.*

*Are you coming back?*

*Not yet. Would you maybe come here?*

*They need me for something. We are making a video tomorrow.*

*Okay.*

*What does it mean: okay? Are you-*

*Just... okay for now.*

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I find Wau in the Starbucks upstairs from Central station. She is on the phone with someone as a camera crew is setting up and brushing makeup on two... tourists? Interviewers?

She sees me and abruptly cuts her call short.

"Mr. Ryan? You're here!" She embraces me.

"What's going on?"

"It's a book trailer for YouTube and the Chinese channels. Very common now. It gets young people interested in buying hard copy books."

The male actor pushes past the crew to shake hands. "Mr. Ryan, nice to meet you."

"And you are?"

Wau laughs. "He's you!"

He smiles. "Call me Jimmy." I see his light brown hair, the geeky glasses, the backpack. They have captured a little bit of me, after all.

"Jimmy, if you have any questions, I can try to answer them."

“Oh, don’t worry, I read the book, sir.”

I don’t know what to say, but already Wau is waving me over to one of the cameramen.

“We would like to start out on you, zoomed in on the face.” She confers with the cameraman.

“On your eye.”

“What do I do?”

“You say, in monotone, *‘this is a true story’*.”

“Okay. *This is a true story.*”

“Hmm, needs more serious.”

“Is the video that serious?”

“Okay, so we start with you. *‘This is a true story’*. Then behind you, we see you and Jill walk into this Starbucks.”

“Wait...”

Wau tilts her head. “I’m sorry, yes, you two are about to break up!”

Sharp intake of breath. “Okay, we can do that.” Hide the grimace.

Wau continues: “We see Jill enter the bathroom. She looks in the mirror, gives herself the pep talk, then back to you...”

“Hold on, hold on.” I motion for her to hand me her script paper, but it is all in Chinese. “What is this about a pep talk? There is no pep talk in the book, I mean... it’s all written from my point of view.”

Wau pushes the cameraman aside. “Mr. Ryan! There is a pep talk!”

“Uh... I am sure that I didn’t write a pep talk, and this is a video about my book. Why add this over-sympathetic scene to-”

“There is a pep talk. Jill says so.”

I can only feel and hear my breathing. I can’t think.

“We are telling the story and Jill says to herself-”

"You can't do that!" Actor-Me and Actress-Jill are staring at us now. I see behind them that the crew is rigging lights up in the bathroom.

"You say to the cameraman, *this is a true story*. Then we pan-"

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A few minutes later, I stare directly into the lens. *This is a true story*.

Later, I see Actress-Jill enter the bathroom and position herself in front of the mirror. My memory has changed to third-person omnipresent. This time I can see and hear Jill. She opens her mouth and speaks her heartfelt thoughts to her reflection... it is a torrent of rapid, angry Cantonese. Wau shouts something to her, Actress-Jill starts over...

I walk out.

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Wau calls my phone to bring me back to the Starbucks. I was fuming a little bit and got her to change the location to an old-fashioned noodle shop two blocks away and four stories up.

As we overlooked the river, stirring our noodles, Wau waved for the waitress to come over and then handed over her phone.

"Let's take a picture together!"

I obliged, confused.

Wau looked at the photo happily. "When I was a girl in high school, I would come here after all of my toughest exams. To look out at the boats and buildings across the river. And the people here were so... so authentic. It isn't swarmed by Brits and Americans."

I looked around and smiled. "And the noodles are very good, too."

She smiled. "Are they as good as mine? Ah! Don't answer that."

I went back to eating as she talked on about her high school days, about how she never would have pictured herself then, bringing an American here, and a dozen unrelated things.

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We are set to present at the mall at Tsing Yi, the second island now. I decide to visit the bookstore ahead of time.

"Mr. Ryan?" An elderly Chinese woman notices me and quickly places her stack of books on a nearby table.

"You know me?"

"I congratulate you." She pauses for a moment. "I'm Catalina Wang, your book reviewer. Do you speak any Cantonese?"

"Unfortunately, I don't. Sorry."

"No matter. I want to tell you... something. Have you met your annotation-writer?"

"Yes?"

"And how is she?"

"She's... been really helpful. Interesting character."

"I think that the English phrase would be: 'whatever they are paying her, double it'." She laughs.

"I understand that the book was not so easy to understand, right, if someone isn't from New York."

"No, I mean, the annotation is quite beautiful. Your writing is not too difficult to understand, to be honest. If someone truly studies English, then they can read the book. But the annotations for each piece tell so much, some are a page long. A love letter. A reimagining of Rockefeller Plaza, as figure skaters in the sky..."

"That's quite beautiful."

"I have taught many English and Cantonese writing students. This is something quite special."

"I'll ask her to come by your office!"

"Oh, I don't teach anymore. Don't mind me."

"Of course!"

She shook my hand, and re-hefted the stack of her books into her arms. "Until next time."

"Thank you."

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That night, I choose a new section:

*Ted wishes us well as we head for the door.*

*Jill and I were reunited, even friendly again, but I don't see a return of the ease and comfort that I had hoped for, not a trace of romance, no meaningful looks. The break-up held. I was devastated, but there was nothing else to it.*

*As I made my way through Union Station, up to the Amtrak seating and then the escalator up to the New York buses, she trudges behind in silence. Before we reach the top, she pulls my hand. "I have a headache," she says, "I need to sit down."*

*We backtrack to the McDonalds. There is some time but I would never eat here. I suggest water or ice but she refuses everything. A little confused now, considering our long silence, I start to tell her about 'Big Eyes', a new movie that she might like.*

*"You can't go now," she interrupts.*

*I'm surprised. "It was good to see you again, but if we aren't feeling this, there's no point."*

*"I'm on the third day of my period. It usually doesn't hurt this bad." She looks so exhausted and I see something new, revealing a little bit of pain. "You have to stay, you have to."*

*Twenty minutes later we are back outside Ted's place. I am trying to reach him on the phone.*

*"You men are so lucky not to have periods."*

*I nudge her. "Does it give you any superpowers?"*

*"What?!"*

*"Well, sometimes when superheroes or in Stephen King books or something, when the girl gets her period she also discovers her superpowers."*

*"You are so weird!" She smiles though, at the thought of it.*

*Ted opens the door and lets us back in. Jill takes a pill and disappears into the bathroom. For a few minutes we talk about football and his new job, but he keeps looking through me. He hasn't decided what to think about me and the girl. No doubt he is remembering the bar that turned us away, maybe he remembers some naive girlish comment that she made and we had laughed about. It's different now.*

*There is a spare room for us to lay in the bed together. As we drift off to sleep, I mumble, "I didn't bring a change of clothes or a toothbrush or anything. I wasn't thinking, like, staying."*

*She moves forward to rub noses like we used to do, in the Chinatown place.*

*"I did."*

The audience bursts into applause.

At the signing, an unfamiliar woman places a book in front of me. "It must have been hard for her."

"Excuse me?"

“To tell you that she wanted you to stay. It isn’t easy to be open like that.”

“Thank you, and-”

“I mean it seriously, though your book treats her so harshly, especially at the end. She really did care for you, so much that I am sure she still does. I hope that you can see that.”

I am at a loss. She takes the signed book and disappears into the crowd.

----

The next signing is deep underground, in a subway station too large for me to think it’s real. Most of the audience is students, for some reasons. How do these things get scheduled and booked and marketed behind the scenes? How much do these people know about me and my past?

Eschewing the passages about Grand Central, Wau has highlighted a different passage for this reading.

*I had a friend, she says, who had an online relationship. And when they met up, you know, things didn’t happen right away. It takes time to know someone in person. How can you say that? I could only feel disappointment and anger. After we have been on dates and teased each other and kissed on forbidden rooftops and shared beds, how can you talk about how we sent messages to each other online? The problem runs deeper than-*

“How can you say that?!” someone shouts out.

“What?”

“Hello, my name is Suzie-”

Wau finally chimes in, “You’re interrupting the reading, please wait for the end of the chapter.”

“Just one question!”

I nod. “That’s alright. I just didn’t understand your question.”

“You wrote a whole fucking book to blame Jill for this tragic relationship. She is a teenaged girl, and I am a teenaged girl, so I wanted to say, how can you say that?”

I blink. “It’s what happened. Simple as that.”

Wau moves to translate.

“No, no. I understand him completely. Lots of guys... should listen. Really, listen to me. If you are older and more experienced and think you’re responsible, when did you stop to tell her that the relationship was not working? Can’t you see she’s having trouble talking about how the love isn’t there?”

“I can only tell you the truth, which is, I didn’t want to say something and then lose her.”

“You didn’t want to tell her the truth.” And Suzie sat down.

Wau motioned for me to continue. I flipped a few pages, thinking to defend myself with another section, or no... no, to change the mood. The room sat silent.

Wau shouted to me: “Grand Central Station.”

*There is a stairway landing in the basement of Grand Central known as a whispering gallery, shaped such that you can hear words on the opposite corner of the room as if they were directly in your ear. At 10pm we alighted there, and I led her by the hand...*

---

When I reach home, I have an email. *Coming home to you.*

-----

Wai is waiting outside the restaurant and waves frantically. “Hey! *Nei hou!*”

“Hey!”

“So May’s flight is coming in tonight?”

“Yes. It... it feels like a huge weight has been lifted.”

“Feels good, doesn’t it?”

“Yes. Thanks for that.”

We go up the steps to a more isolated table.

“Waffle place. I’ll get your favorite”

I take a look outside.

-----

With the waffles done, I let the conversation drift back to the book.

“Do you think that I really did it? Capture a piece of Hong Kong for the sequel? I haven’t lived here long enough to really do it right.”

“I would say that you did. But I think you should not worry so much. Did you know, most of the people who read it are in other cities and towns and villages? Such a person will not know Hong Kong from a place in your imagination.”

“It turns out that it’s really nice, the annotations you write.”

“Yes. I put a little bit of my soul, and -elbow grease?- into the annotation work.”

“There was a lady in the bookstore, a retired professor. I wish that you could have met her. She said that it was something beautiful, she used a special term for it.”

“What, in Chinese? Do you remember what it sounded like?”

“No, in English, she says that it is like watching figure skaters dancing. She says it’s a love letter. To New York City, I guess.”

She laughs. I had my hand next to my tray and she is squeezing it. I look up at her in surprise.

“You could call it that.”

The waitress appears and leaves the bill in front of us. I feel Wau’s hand squeeze and then withdraw back into normalcy.

What just happened.

---

That night, May and I are together again. I reach out to her. “Are you awake?”

A murmur, a hand emerging from the blankets to clasp mine.

“We have to be careful about Wau.”

She laughs. “Oh, we have to be *careful* about Wau. Oh really, you think so now?”

"Don't talk like that."

"I see the way that she looks at you. And you fall right in line."

"Please-"

"You're a fucking gold mine. Mailroom girl lands a book deal, one thing leads to another, and now she's taking everything she can to the bank."

"Is that it?"

"Is there something else?" She shifts, sort of unnaturally, to sitting up. I try to follow.

"What, sorry..?" Rubbing eyes.

"Do you mean, beyond being the gold mine."

Deep breath. "She, to be honest, she made this weird move yesterday, okay? She was taking my hand and-"

"What?"

"It was nothing, it was a squeeze, and it was so out of place. I didn't say anything."

"Better not. Do you think everything is an invitation?"

"No, I think this was something really odd, and that's why I told you about it. It was yesterday. Or maybe the day before that, now. When did we-"

"You think too much."

"Do you trust me?"

"Let me explain it like this. I trust you with her. I trust you about the book, and the sequel if it comes to that. If I didn't trust you, I wouldn't be here. Can't you see that I'm here with you?"

"Yes."

"Just don't sign anything. And don't get too close to her."

"Understood."

----

There is a buzz on my phone. Limousine ready downstairs. I look to May, all dressed up.

May twirls around to show off her dress; I take an Instagram video of it before she steps in.

Wau closes the door and looks up to me. "She has gotten into it now, hasn't she?"

"Yes. Thank you so much for this."

---

We step into the studio. While our publishers talk to some new important-looking people, I search the room to get a feel for our interview. There is a sign with dancers on it being unlit. The neon lights are being tested. At the center of the stage there is a smooth oval table with three leather chairs around it.

"Fifteen minutes!"

Wau introduces me to one of the men. "This is the host of the show! Say *ni hau* to him, we are talking Mandarin now, for mainland China."

"*Ni hau!*"

"Here is your translator for the performance, one of the great ones in Beijing. We will also have a speaker in your ear for him to explain any Mandarin that is spoken."

I shake hands. "Please let me know if I should say anything more clearly."

"That's unnecessary, please speak freely and naturally." He grimaces. "I used to do the realtime translation for Trump speeches, after that..."

I patted him on the back. "And who is your friend here?"

"This is my colleague, Ms. Anita. She will provide additional translation."

"Excellent."

They nod to each other.

---

The host is seated in the middle chair and practicing speaking to the camera. Only a few minutes now.

I turn to one of the stagehands. "Hello? Where is Ms. Wau? Will she be sitting in the other chair? I have a few questions."

He shakes his head and fits a microphone over my ear.

"I don't understand."

I hear the translator in my ear. "Mr. Ryan, can you hear me?"

"Yes."

"Great. I can hear you. Alright, after this clip, the host is about to introduce you. I will translate everything that he says."

The stagehand gestures for me to wait, while that infuriating Starbucks clip plays. This is the first time that May will see it. Fuck. *THIS IS A TRUE STORY* the recorded-me says. Actor-Me and Actor-Jill play their parts.

The translator says, "We now welcome the author, Mr. Ryan."

I stride out, give a wave. He offers me a seat. "Welcome," the earpiece says.

"Thank you," I say, as I slip into the comfortable chair. In the darkness behind the cameras, I can see studio audience, and my wife, and... is it Ms. Wau? But then who will be joining-

The host begins talking, and a few seconds later it is in my ear. "Well today we have a special opportunity. Please welcome a muse and inspiration for our writer: Ms. Jill."

Somehow unnaturally, she appears from behind a curtain, unmistakable and just like I remembered her. The host reaches to her and guides her to the seat. We are feet apart. "Thank you! Thank you all!" she beams, and I hear Ms. Anita's voice translating, equally cheery, "*shie shie, shie shie*".

What.

---

"Mr. Ryan, do you have anything to say?"

I slowly filter back to reality, the studio lights, and then look to the host who is not really speaking to me. Jill is giving me a questioning look, waiting for me to offer some sign of recognition.



"I spoke to Jill earlier today, and I think it would be good for you two to have a little talk."

"Oh, I would rather we didn't."

The audience laughs.

"It should be clear to anyone who read the book, there is nothing-"

Frustrated, Jill turns away from me and toward the audience. "I was young! Our relationship was so weird, so distant... and you knowing all my private fears, don't forget it, that I didn't know everything about myself yet."

The host: "go on."

"I-"

"Hold on," I say. "Have you forgotten what you actually told me? Not now. Not later. Right then, in that Starbucks scene we just saw?"

"I remember that you said that I didn't care about you! Trying to hurt me-"

"But what did you tell me? Oh, your friend says, 'what if it works out with Ryan and you don't get to-'"

"I wanted to know myself better."

"Someone who never met me, goes and breaks us apart by asking you, 'what if it works out?' You were that afraid of us being happy together?"

The host looks confused. "Guys, guys, this is your first reunion, there are other things to discuss."

"Did she tell you," I add, "I left so much out of the book... just... this girl tells me as we break up, 'I've changed so much, it'll be easier for me to open up in my next relationship' like I'm supposed to be happy for the next guy...? Where the fuck does that come from?"

"Don't." She has her hands out. Stop. Stop.

The host soldiers on: "Mr. Ryan, she told me today that many times she asked for you to be friends again. She offered to meet in New York one month later, eight months later in San Francisco..."

“We were never friends.” I hear a few gasps. “Has one of you actually read this book? We had already split. She gave me the silent treatment, I did the work to get us back together, she claims that’s what she wants, then what? Then she breaks up because *I don’t like when you do things for me*? When I cooked breakfast, introduced her to the company, when I gave her the Christmas gift - she shoots me down and tells me that I need to apologize for it somehow. That’s not how it works in a relationship, or a friendship.”

I heard my translator covering the same words.

Above it Wau is frantically interjecting in my ear, “Let her talk.”

The host: “Please wait, please pause a moment for me to catch up. I read the book, and you care about her, don’t you? You don’t want it to be this way.”

“You’re right. I would have told her to stay at home.”

She shakes her head. “You mean that only you get to tell our story? What the fuck is wrong with you?” The audience cheers a bit. “Remember that it was my first relationship, and I didn’t know then that it was work for you, and to support me on the project was work for you too? It was the first time I did something like that so your part seemed so simple. Not until I tried to do a project with another programmer, and then I apologized to you! And whatever you did, it sure as hell doesn’t entitle you to anything from me.”

“You didn’t know that it was hard work because *you didn’t believe me*. I was pleading with you. A year later, just writing ‘oh, I realized it must have been difficult for you’ ? That’s no apology. So then you walk away with the project, all the credit, and funding, and what is there for you to be mad about?”

She is still fuming.

“I always asked you... you’re angry now that I wrote a book? Fine. But just try and tell me what was wrong back then? You agreed then that I hadn’t inconvenienced you, you used to admit that I ignored it whenever you messed up....”

“I fell out of love..... Or stopped feeling what I had felt. Listen, it can’t be black and white.”

“Then say that, and don’t come up with something like it’s my fault.”

“I... Ryan...”

I can stand up. "I'm done." I watch a cameraman track me as I walk up to the studio audience. The first person to meet me is Wau, but I don't listen to her shouting and awkwardly cross the threshold to grab May's hand. Moments later we are outside on the daylight street. We are alone. I take the nonfunctioning earpiece off and lay it on the sidewalk.

Not letting go of my hand, May waves for a taxi.

---

The airport again. I look up to the TV monitors, muted in the airport, but showing scrolling Chinese characters. They are all showing me and Jill.

I turn back to the cashier and show her the newspaper which I'm buying. She points to the screen but I pretend not to understand.

As we sit at the gate and begin the long wait before heading home, I nudge May and show her the book review in the *South China Morning Post*.

*"An Annotated Bestseller?"*

"Read this part."

*By chance, I met the author in our local island bookstore. I realize now that he was doing research on our community for the sequel, which is quite thoughtful.*

*The greatest irony is that the author does not know how we read the book. At the simplest level we see the relationship as naivete, as misplaced young love. At another level we see the author at his desk, making sense of his failed relationship. Neither the relationship nor the writing are particularly outstanding. But in Cantonese, in the careful margins, we see the annotationist working to explain each detail, rationalizing even the author's sometimes indefensible feelings and choices.*

*This tone descends to envy, to regret, almost an incredulity that this affection is for someone other than herself. We are witness to such a raw feeling, and that is what makes the story work.*

May closes her eyes and tilts her head. "Wait, so you weren't making it up? About Wau?"

"I wouldn't do that. And also... also, I wouldn't do that. You have been a saint this whole time."

"Me? I went to Singapore. You were so sweet, you know, to take that in stride." She pauses to read another part of the column.

"Oh but, the sequel and the video project. What do I do?"

Turning to me: "Give it to her. It's what she wants."

"I don't understand, I mean Wau will..."

"No, sign it over to Jill from now on. She came to Hong Kong knowing and-" she pauses "-when I was backstage I saw her baby. She needs this and we don't. We have enough in our lives and this book monster is eating us alive."

"A baby? Oh." I think back for a minute. "No, you weren't backstage."

"I was backstage and... I saw her and her baby."

"I didn't see you there, backstage."

"But I was. You were busy in... hair and makeup or something, I was just walking around, and-"

"What did she say to you?"

"We didn't know each other, I didn't recognize her or expect her to be there, so... yeah."

"And the baby looked okay?"

"The baby was fine."

"Baby... like a little baby?"

"Jesus, Ryan, the baby was maybe a year old. I know that the baby isn't yours."

"Right, right." I bury my head in my hands. "It's so much money and, to just hand everything over to her? After all that crap, about she doesn't like me doing things for her! And all that money that I raised for her project, I would be doing the same favor for her, all over again."

I stop for a second. "I'm not thinking about this rationally."

She puts her arm around me. "That's OK. That's normal. You won't be able to think about this rationally, so you need to trust. Trust me a bit here. Taking Wau's money is saying she and Jill own you, and she doesn't. Throw your dinner to the wolf at your door, and it will go away without tearing your limb."

"I don't understand."

"It's a mixed metaphor, but I like it."

“And May, I owe you an apology. No more secrets.”

She nodded. “No more secrets.”