

BALD NEW WORLD

PETER TIERYAS LIU



WHAT PEOPLE ARE SAYING ABOUT

BALD NEW WORLD

After my heart gives out and I'm on the operating table for emergency surgery, I will have told my physicians and surgeons to replace my heart with Peter Tieryas Liu's *Bald New World* or any of his books really, because that's what I think of when I think of his writing—hear. Similar to the work of Philip K. Dick, this parodic dystopia is steeped in futuristic technology that further bridges the gap between man and machine. Still, whether watching the late episode of the immensely popular reality show *Jesus the General* or sparring against an opponent in the blood-sport known as cricket fighting, the humanity of our narrator shines through. Although we humans are capable of doing and creating sad, funny, glorious, deviant things, we also persevere and adapt, survive. I wonder what Huxley would think of this, but he's dead. You're not, so read this book, feel alive.

Jason Jordan, author of *Pestilence*, editor of *decomp*

The boldly imaginative *Bald New World* follows Nicholas Guan, a military type tasked with digitally touch up scenes of carnage, in his misadventures from Korea to a futuristic California and in his frenzied dash from Gamble Town to China. The novel tells of beautiful flawed characters, the blurring distinction between reality and virtual environments, the comical yet chilling wave of religious fanaticism, and a world battling a strange malady called the Great Baldification, an ingenious symbol of human vanity. Peter Tieryas Liu's *Bald New World* is vivid, exhilarating, and wildly entertaining.

Kristine Ong Muslim, author of *We Bury the Landscape* and *Grim Series*

Bald New World is a hypnotic, surreal, and insightful novel, blending *Blade Runner* and *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* to create a dark, funny, and captivating story. One of the best books I've read this year.

Richard Thomas, *Staring Into the Abyss*

Bald New World

Peter Tieryas Liu



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Dedicated to my Father-in-Law and Mother-in-Law

For teaching me what family is

Prologue

I was eleven when everyone in the world lost their hair. I got up from bed, terrified to see that all my hair had fallen out. In the mirror, the uneven bumps on my head formed an alien tapestry that made me feel like I was staring at a stranger. I spotted a thick black mole above my ear that I'd never seen before and scratched it, only to find it wasn't going away. Both of my parents were away on a business trip so I ran to my older sister, Kelly, hoping she knew what was wrong with me. I found her crying on the bathroom floor, clutching her own fallen hair. My eyes went to her scalp, an oddly shaped oval with protrusions jutting out. "What are you looking at?!" she demanded.

"Your head," I replied. "What happened?"

She got up, pushed me angrily, then ran out of our apartment. I chased her, not wanting to be left behind. When I exited our building, she was nowhere in sight. Instead, a sea of bald people confronted me—everyone on the street had lost their hair. There was a frenzied madness in their eyes, confusion causing many of them to walk in a daze. I trembled as strangers accosted me and yelled that, "The whole world is doomed," and, "We're being punished for our vanities!" The Los Angeles Police blocked most of the major roads because riots were breaking out and I went from barricade to barricade in a daze. Trash littered the streets, stores were burning, and looters stole everything they could. I wanted to get to a 24-hour restaurant where Kelly's friend worked when I noticed a man lying on his back on the sidewalk, motionless. His eyes had an apathetic gleam and his hands were covered in blood. Motorcycles honked and periodic echoes from bullets triggered car alarms. He was impervious to noise. "Sir?" I called. "Sir?" He didn't answer and when I stepped closer, I saw that he wasn't breathing. I stumbled back, shocked by the sight. It was the first dead man I had ever seen.

I got out my phone to call my parents but accidentally pushed the button for the camera. On the digital screen, the corpse didn't look as horrifying and in some ways, looked fake, especially as I could alter the angle of my view. That sense of control calmed me until I heard a spray of bullets from behind. I turned the camera in the direction of the rioters and saw they were charging the police barricade. The police responded with smoke bombs and guns. I turned around and ran home as fast as I could, dodging rioters and masked thieves who targeted stragglers.

It was a miracle I got through alive. I called my parents several times though none of my calls connected. My sister's phone was off as was my cousin's, Baochai, who wasn't home.

even though she was supposed to take care of us while my parents were away (probably partying in downtown like she did every night). My legs wouldn't stop trembling and I accidentally knocked over a stack of bills on our apartment floor. I cleaned up the mess, only to stumble into the buckets that were substitutes for toilets to save on our water fees. A string of explosions lit up the sky outside and I heard people screaming in pain. Their cries scared me and I hid in the closet, covering myself with blankets just in case anyone broke into our unit. Our building was shaking and I wished someone, anyone, was home. Unfortunately, my only companions were the roaches swarming my feet and I was stuck imagining a thousand horrible deaths. Every noise made me want to break into tears and whenever I heard running outside the walls, I wondered if people were coming to break the door down. I tried watching the video I'd captured earlier only to realize I hadn't hit the record button. Sleep was impossible and not just because of the stream of gunfire outside. I counted the minutes like they were hours.

I never found out who the dead man was and in the same way, almost twenty-five years later, the best explanation for the hair loss researchers had were still just theories. Speculation ran rampant as the accused ranged from pollution to global warming and bioterror as well as solar spikes. Some had feared it was a disease similar to alopecia universalis that would worsen with time, but no further symptoms materialized. The follicles had sealed at a cuticle level and a chemical reaction in our bodies had inexplicably caused the permanent termination of hair growth. Baldness became a fact of life.

I don't want to blame everything bad that happened on the *Great Baldification* as it came to be known. But it was the beginning of a lot of social change in the world. Marriages broke up at ten times the normal rate and my parents ended up getting divorced two months after the Baldification. Maybe it was the strain from endless fights or that they never liked each other much to begin with. I never heard from my biological father after the divorce. My biological mother dropped me off permanently with Cousin Baochai so that she could pursue her dream of being a travel blogger. My sister, Kelly, going against the trend, married her rap star wanna-be boyfriend and I rarely saw her again after that.

Our economy regressed from disastrous to beyond redemption. Accelerated resource depletion forced countries into a war over Africa even though we were technically all part of the United Nations Peacekeeping Force. Unemployment rates were at 56% in the States (though official reports had it at 5.5%), so soldiering was the only chance for a career most of our generation had. I signed up for the army and was assigned to the media department because of my passions for cameras despite all the combat training they gave me.

My job was sanitizing war for the public. Did one of the scout ships record a scene that was too bloody? I brought out my digital brushstrokes so that limbs could be replaced real time, scars mended, and disasters contained. Constant warfare made the fickle weather even moodier, especially with all those atomic bombs going off. Gasoline got replaced by

electricity, everyone forgot about the Middle East, and flight technology advanced to the point where flights from Los Angeles to Beijing took two hours minus the three-hour security checks.

After the African Wars ended, many of us wondered what we should do next. I took to making films with a fellow grunt, Larry Chao. He nearly got discharged from the army twenty times because he was always running off “in love” with some new girl he swore was “the One.” He wasn’t especially handsome, but had a jovial grin that made everyone feel welcome in his presence. Between his indefatigable exuberance and his easygoing nature, inspired by an early bout of mutated typhoid that nearly killed him, his charm more than made up for his plump nose, small eyes, and fat lips. He had a suite of women who worshipped him. For my part, I never thought our lives would become so intertwined, our names would be synonymous with each other.

As only humans were affected by the malaise (animals still grew fur and hair), wig factories were booming. Larry inherited a wig factory from his father who died of stomach cancer after eating too many Sichuan spices. The factory (or factories, as there were about thirty located throughout China) were raking in the dough. Larry was super rich and after I found out, I asked him why he joined the army when he didn’t need to.

“I got bored and wanted to try something different,” he said, and that was the only explanation he offered.

Instead of reinvesting his fortunes, Larry wasted it making pointless movies throughout China about tragically dumb characters. I, Nicholas Guan, became the cinematographer for many of his films, a bald 36-year-old half-Korean half-Chinese guy born and raised in America whose job was photographing—or beautifying—baldness.

My latest film with Larry was about a crazy filmmaker who wanted to save the rats of his city from extinction. He called it *Rodenticide* and it was full of pathos and pathetic soliloquies masquerading as drama. There was more than his usual spew of nonsense about age and life, which the Beijing actors loved. Larry was 39 and I realized his age was bugging him. Maybe he’d hoped for more success with his films by now. I probably should have paid more attention, but you know how it is with anyone close to you—you never notice until it’s too late.

I passed off his doubts as Larry being his usual idiot self, especially when it came to women. You can’t blame a guy for chasing a girl he loves. Fortunately, the two of us had completely different tastes. He liked tall, lanky women with gazelle legs and I liked chubby girls with cute faces and puffy cheeks. It was easy for us to become good friends. Or at least wingmen for each other.

When he invited me out for another night on the town at his favorite Korean restaurant in Beijing, I heartily agreed. I felt like a good BBQ, even though I’d been gaining way too much weight of late (I promised myself not to check my weight every morning even though it was

the same as the day before).

“Nick!” Larry had yelled into the phone when he called me. “I need you. I’ve been dating this girl for two weeks and she has a co-worker she insists on taking out so I need your help. Oh, and don’t tell anyone this yet, but I think I’m in love. I kid you not, I think she’s the One.”

Of course.

1. From Pyongyang with Love

I.

She was too skinny. Yes, she was tall with lean legs and a pretty face, but her nose had that elongated stoop that made it resemble a horse's nose at certain angles. Plus, she wore way too much perfume. There was a disdainful look about her, dismissing me with a glance. She was one of our waitresses and her name was Shinjee. She wore a short black wig that she tied up in two buns above her head to resemble pictures in Korean history books of what women looked like. I thought it was antiquated and quaint. Larry thought it was "classic."

He was in a festive mood and ordered all kinds of meat; pork, beef, chicken. He asked if I wanted lamb but I told him my conscience wouldn't allow it, thinking of a neighbor's sheep I used to play with when I was a kid. The restaurant was spacious with three floors, bedecked in Korean architecture and cooking grills where we could cook our food. A central courtyard hosted hourly performances on weekend evenings. The place was bustling with activity, the crackle of burning beef and drunk customers making it hard to hear myself. Our black marble table was replete with small *banchan*, side dishes that were Korean versions of tapas. The meat and garlic mushrooms smelled incredible, steam from both mixing in with the pungent scent of the spicy soups.

Larry had on his nicest fedora. He always wore fedoras. Not the kind from old noir films but glowing ones that were red, dapper, and scintillating in colors. If those mystery flicks made icons out of trench-coated detectives, Larry represented the iridescent director solving the conundrum of life through bizarre fashion statements.

"Have you heard of live monkeys with their scalps cut off so their brains can be eaten fresh in the Sichuan area?" he asked.

"I think I saw something like that in *Faces of Death*," I muttered back.

Larry was right. The waitresses were stunningly beautiful in their traditional Korean costumes and they were friendly too, pouring us drinks and making sure our meat was well-cooked while laughing at our dumb jokes. We downed several beers and Larry whispered to me, "Be careful what you say. These girls are North Korean spies."

"What?"

He nodded and gave me a knowing nudge. "Everything we talk about could be reported to the North Korean high command."

"You're joking right?"

Larry's face was red from drink and he shook his head. "Haven't you heard of the Asia

beauty trap? Don't be surprised if our whole conversation is recorded."

I couldn't tell if he was serious or pushing my buttons. North Korea had been the most isolated country in the world for over a hundred years and it seemed that would continue another century. There had been rumors of ex-soldiers in China being kidnapped by the North Koreans to be indentured into a life of servitude. The kimchee and the garlic broccoli stuck in my throat. The demure gestures from the waitresses seemed sinister and furtive glances in the direction of their management felt ominous. Larry and I had served in the UN Peacekeeping forces, but that'd been almost a decade ago and we didn't have any information now. The food didn't taste quite as good and I checked if the alcohol had been tampered with. One of the waitresses said to me, "You should visit North Korea. It's very beautiful there."

When I hesitated with an answer, Larry replied, "We would love to."

After they stepped away to perform a cultural dance for the patrons, I asked, "Are they really spies?"

Larry chugged down his beer. "Don't worry about it."

"I don't want them to report me."

He laughed and said, "I forgot to mention that in Sichuan, they're only interested in the big monkeys."

"The girl you like—"

"Love," he corrected me.

"Is she—?"

He nodded. "Our job is to convince her to leave."

"To leave North Korea?"

"Yeah. We can swing it, can't we?"

"They're indoctrinated with super-advanced machinery so that normal persuasion techniques don't work. More likely, she'll convince us to join them."

"I did promise to help her make an ad for her restaurant," Larry answered. "We're going to talk about it with her later tonight."

"What?"

"It'll be fun. Don't worry about it, man."

"Where are we meeting them?"

"Here. We'll head over together to this super swank arcade near Houhai." Every instinct told me blared caution. But Larry, knowing my soft spot, said, "Her friend has a thing for photographers and I swear to you, she's your type. She kind of looks like Linda too. I think you'll like her."

Damn me for caring.

II.

I blamed Linda Yu, my ex-wife, for all my woes with women. Next to her, all the women I met were like baby frogs croaking next to a falcon gleaming through the cold blue moonlight (I mention that specific image because she painted a portrait exactly like that). Linda Yu lived in Los Angeles when I first made my home in Beijing. She flew out to help Larry do makeup. Linda was a makeup artist who liked coloring people in ways they hadn't imagined. Often the results were ugly, but always startling. She begged people to resist looking like a magazine cover, the anorexic's dream of a heaven without calories. It was ironic because Linda looked like she belonged on a magazine cover. But she disdained her beauty and often made her wigs resemble roosters. She told me later she was initially attracted to me because I looked so strange.

"Thanks?" I remembered saying to her.

Larry and her clashed because she refused to do makeup the way Larry wanted. She made the actors resemble zombies and the actresses look like blue meat faces, which was the only way I could describe them. In between disagreements—Larry having run off to deal with some other issue on set—she would tell me little tidbits about herself, like the fact that she was named after a mythical crying flower called the Vermilion Pearl that wept to pay back the nourishing water it received throughout her life. Right after she was fired by Larry, she told me I should visit her in Los Angeles.

I hated going to L.A. and not just because I grew up in the city, but I didn't like having to wear a bulletproof vest all the time. Shopping malls were the only gun-free zones, and even there, you had to go through those scanners that caused brain cancer. Drones maintained a vigilant watch from far up above and traffic was a mechanical bog. With the upper 405 freeway countless years behind schedule (they'd been working on it since I was born), it was impossible to get anywhere. But I still went out there to see Linda. I had to. She was the prettiest bald girl I'd ever met.

III.

Of course, Shinjee's friend, Hyori, looked nothing like Linda. She had too many tattoos on her head, including that of a mouse fighting a lion and winning. The four of us ordered a green cab and the mechanized operator arrived promptly. Taxis used to have human drivers, but every country in the world (except the U.S.) had changed to mechanized drivers for safety and traffic reasons so that 6-7 passengers could ride. Shinjee ordered, "Waitian Arcade."

Beijing had become a city of vapors, a metropolis of neon calligraphy burning away the surrounding gas. Pollution had become a permanent fixture in the landscape, trapped by the surrounding mountains and aggravated by dust storms. Contours shined like trailing light buildings appearing permeable, shifting with the perspective. We veered past cars and streetlights suffering from identity crises. Bikers were waiting at a red light, jumpsuits and WWI gas masks protecting their lungs from contamination. Store names floated in mid-air

Mandarin phrases wandered the alleys like unforgiven spirits, and a sentence cried for redemption, crucified in mist.

I saw Hyori as a mask of colors outlined like a jigsaw puzzle, her thick red lips sauntering through dialectics as quickly as mood swings. She spoke good English, even if she had a slight Korean accent, though it was Shinjee who dominated the conversation.

Shinjee looked like trouble. She wore long black leather boots, a red coat, and had on thick sunglasses even though it was night. A beret flopped on top of her head and the first thing she said to me was, “You bloody Americans are destroying our world for a God you don’t even believe in.”

“What?”

“Do you like buffalo meat?” Hyori cut in.

“Never had it.”

“Supposedly, the Japanese branch makes the best braised buffalo in the world.”

“Are we going to have buffalo?”

“Snake-blood wine,” Shinjee said.

“That stuff makes you young, right?” Larry asked.

“Virile,” Shinjee replied.

Waitian was packed and there were a hundred taxis backed up, trying to drop off their customers. The attendants were dressed as videogame characters and some of the parties even had on suits from old retro games like Mario and Zelda. We got out, Larry scanning his credit key for payment. Spotlights were beaming around and I could hear loud drum beats switch to familiar game music.

Hyori asked me, “What was your favorite video game?”

“What was yours?”

“Kid Icarus. That’s why I brought these!” From her bag popped out angel wings and a falcon bow-and-arrow kit. Right in front of us, Princess Peach and Luigi were making out. Some Teenage Mutant Ninja turtles were bumping and grinding with their shells. A God of War stalked a Heavenly Sword. Mega Man was buying different drinks for different women to try to pry his way into their weaknesses.

We had to pick out costumes at the rental booth. I wondered secretly if I was too old for this, but Larry, who was even older than me, didn’t seem to think so. He picked out a Final Fantasy character, Kefka, the madman who succeeded in destroying the world. I matched him with another Final Fantasy character, Sephiroth. Shinjee put on the bounty-hunter suit of Samus from the NES classic, Metroid. We were ready to retro boogie.

IV.

It was loud and spacious inside and there were big screens everywhere. Several top game developers were playing their games and digital editors cut footage from the sequences together. The

music responded to the rhythms on screen and the sound effects responded to the jumping beats. There were thousands of people dressed as videogame characters and our booth had a holographic pad in case we wanted to get involved in the mix. Games were a low priority for Shinjee who wanted her snake-blood wine right away. The menu popped up along with our waitress, a cute holographic dragon who said, "We have a special on soma today."

"I hate soma," Larry muttered. "It's too old school. Doesn't pack a punch."

"Snake-blood wine," Shinjee ordered.

It arrived through a panel to the side. Viscous and gelatinous, I didn't like the look of it at all. Shinjee grabbed her glass and took it down in one shot. The blood dripped off the side of her lip and she said, "I never understood why your Adam and Eve ate the apple when they could have cooked up the snake and spared themselves all the trouble."

"They were vegetarian," I suggested, took my cup, and brought it to my mouth. The stagnant odor was overwhelming and nearly made me puke. It smelled like intestines, tanned leather, and a really bad Bloody Mary.

Hyori downed hers and even Larry made a good effort out of it, stopping a few times coughing, but somehow emptying the cup. One sip made me nauseous and I shook my head. "No way."

"Oh, c'mon."

"No way," I repeated. "I'll just have an 8-Bit Blaster."

The 8BB was a joke of a drink, tasting like a juice cocktail. But as I saw Larry taking down more alcohol, I realized I'd have to take it easy. He was probably counting on me to get him out of trouble if we had any. Shinjee wasn't holding back, matching drink for drink.

"Nick used to be one helluva cricket fighter," Larry said. "He'd control their little brains through the neural interface. Never saw a guy win so many battles in a row."

"Don't remind me. I hate insects," I said. "Still get nightmares about being a cricket."

"They say the Song Dynasty fell because the ruler was so obsessed with cricket fighting."

"That's because he never had to live as one."

"You have?" Shinjee asked.

"Hundred days is all they have," I answered. "One season to be born and to die."

Hyori was watching me and I could tell she was looking for an opening to say something. But I ignored her and relegated myself to convoy service for the night. Several times, she asked questions about me. I gave pat answers and never allowed it to progress beyond that. Eventually, the two girls decided to go freshen up at the bathroom.

"What's wrong?" Larry asked me.

"Nothing."

"These girls are trained in the art of love. We've got to find out if it's as good as they say."

"I have no interest in my date."

"You've barely gotten to know her."

“She’s a spy!”

“What if the earth collapses tomorrow? What if a thousand-year winter arrives? What if some plague wipes out half of humanity? We’re living dinosaurs, man. We’ll be dead anyways. Enjoy what you got.”

“My idea of enjoyment isn’t being around spies.”

“Expand your horizons, bro!” he declared. “Besides, you want to live a boring quiet life?”

“I do.”

Larry shook his head and said, “I have two big regrets in life. You know what they are?” His breath reeked of alcohol and when he leaned into me, he pressed the holopad which brought up the dragon waitress.

She repeated, “We have a special on—”

“My first is Renee,” Larry continued. “Holy shit, she had the best body I’ve ever seen on a woman. She was also damn smart, an architect who only built underwater complexes. Just thinking about her gets me excited. At the end of our date, she asked to come back to my place. I was so excited, I couldn’t believe this girl asked to come to my place. We arrive, and guess what?”

“She’s a man?” Which wouldn’t have surprised me considering how these stories usually went.

“I have to take the biggest dump of my life. My stomach was raging man. I couldn’t control it. I said, ‘Excuse me,’ ran to the bathroom, and felt my ass pour out of my stomach. The farts man; they were like mini gastro bombs. They were *loud*. By the time I got out, she was like, ‘Take me home right this minute.’ Never saw her again.” He had his hands out in front of him like he was cupping something. “I wish I could have seen her naked just once. Not a day goes by without me thinking about what could have been.” His eyes drifted to the past.

“What’s the second?” I asked.

He looked at me, lost in thought. “It was my first sexual experience. Ever. I’d fantasized about this girl for years. I had the chance to get with her and lose my virginity. But I was so drunk, my little guy wouldn’t respond. It was humiliating. I tried my best and I stalled for like an hour and she was like, ‘C’mon, c’mon.’ Nothing. Nada. I didn’t know it was the drink. I thought I had ED or something. She laughed it off, but I could tell she was disappointed. I couldn’t reveal to her that I was a virgin, try to explain I didn’t even know the mechanics of it all. Can you believe I still remember her smell?”

As he spoke, I wondered about my own regrets.

“It’s been almost twenty years since both those nights,” Larry said, “and I still wish I could have done it differently. A woman ain’t just a body. She’s a journey. Those moments of intimacy you share. It’s like entering a different universe and I thank each and every single one. Let go of your leash, man. I’m not asking you to marry the girl. Just have a little fun.”

Larry was an expert at philosophizing his lust and a part of me wondered, what was the worst that could happen? Neither of us had any secrets that would be valuable to them or their government. Hyori was no Linda. But she was still a very attractive woman. The two of them came back, spruced up. I waved at Hyori and asked her what kind of drink she wanted.

It turned out Hyori had always wanted to be a librarian. She loved books and her cover story was that she came to Beijing to work for her uncle because she wanted to experience more of the world's literature. When I asked what her favorite book was, she told me it was the autobiography of their Great Leader. "Every time I read his book and read how much he cares about his people, I cry," she revealed. "He's sacrificed everything for us. Without him the world would have destroyed the integrity of our culture. Think about your world. You think you have total freedom, but that's worse than restricted freedom because the noise drowns out the truly amazing. It's the loudest voice that gets heard in your country, not the most beautiful."

"The variety of voices has its advantages. You can read and find out anything you want," I replied. "Everyone is heard."

"If everyone talks at the same time, you can't hear anyone," she answered.

A guy next to us moved like a robot and ten guys played a game of fake basketball as they threw out a hovering ball. Some women strapped on jetpacks and were dancing mid-air. As the screens suddenly paused and a spotlight shone at the center stage.

It was opera as spectacle, a brunette in lingerie trying to mimic Pavarotti, or was it Fin Fantasy VI and the Aria di Mezzo Carattere? Her staccatos were thinner than her thong and classical tones raged against digital drums. The performers wore iridescent masks that glowed neon and had caricatured expressions carved into them. There was lust, jealousy, happiness—personified emotions.

Larry was entranced. So was Hyori who was also on her fourth glass of wine. Shinje seemed annoyed that the singer was distracting attention from her and smoked a cigarette, puffing out whiffs of discontent.

"You don't like this song?" I asked her.

"I think love songs are sappy and pointless."

"Why?"

"Whenever you dramatize love, all the mundane stuff gets thrown out. That's 99% of love. It's a lie to only emphasize the 1%." She stood up and said to Larry, "I'm bored. Let's get out of here."

"Where to?"

"My favorite dumpling shop. I feel like some dessert."

V.

Hyori was inebriated and wanted to prove to me that freedom was overrated. "Does freedom

really make you happy?” she asked inside the taxi. “It’s true, you have more knowledge than people did a hundred years ago. But does that liberate you or just complicate everything?”

We arrived at our destination and as we got out of the cab, Larry whispered to me, “Shinjee likes you.”

“That’s why she’s lecturing me?” I said out loud, wanting her to hear me.

“If she didn’t like you, she wouldn’t be trying so hard to convince you.”

The more drunk and dogmatic she got, the harsher the contours in her gestures came in focus. There was something cruel in her eyes, perhaps because she’d suffered too much. Shinjee was worried about Hyori revealing anything, she didn’t indicate it. Her and Larry were discussing the details of their restaurant commercial which he’d generously offered to finance.

“I don’t know what they do at my factory, but they make tons of money and I’m always happy to spend it for them. My family has been making wigs for four generations. They’ve never been rich until now. Who would have thought, eh? The greatest ecological disaster in the world made my family super rich,” he said, laughing.

I didn’t recognize where we were. We ducked under labyrinthine corridors, crossed stone bridges, and came to a busy street filled with pedestrians. A man blew fire from his pipes and an awkward woman with a huge nose swallowed swords. There were long alleys everywhere we turned.

“I’ve never seen this place before,” Larry said.

“It’s one of those well-known secrets that’s hard to find the first time,” Shinjee said. “You just need a guide.”

There were puppet shows of dynasty romances playing out in high-pitched shrieks and cymbals. Food was boiled in the cauldron of oil drums, cobs of corn burning with an eye pizza that smelled like cinders. Dice players reveled through their rotting teeth, gunned and eviscerated by poor hygiene. The street was bursting with lights, a ballet of lanterns dancing to the swell of the night breeze. There was a guy who smelled of garbage with a dog trained to speak Mandarin. The dog jumped on Hyori and barked, “*Wo ai ni.*” I love you.

“I love puppies,” Hyori exclaimed.

The owner encouraged his canine to say more, then pointed at the cap filled with coins. His swarthy eyes and his desperate smile depressed me.

“Life becomes more poignant with humiliation,” Larry said.

“What do you mean?”

“There’s an old Chinese story about a town that was attacked by fox spirits. They hired a Taoist monk to protect them so he took a bunch of paper, wrote his special Mandarin characters, and wha-lah! It came to life as a paper golem that fended off the evil spirits. But it had to be fed all the time and grew so big, it ended up destroying the town it was meant to save.”

Shinjee, who couldn't stop smoking, said, "I've never heard this one."

Larry shrugged. "My uncle used to tell me a lot of weird stories. He was depressed because his wife left him after he lost all his money gambling. He was part of the wig business too but hated it, thought there was no future in it, and sold his shares to my dad before it hit big. I named one of my last films *Rennaili* because of a street like this in Beijing he always used to talk about."

"What about it?"

"More than a century ago, the Empress Cixi got mad at one of the merchants and shut the whole street down. After she was deposed, people came back. During WWII when the Japanese took over Beijing, they chased away all the vendors. After they lost, people came back. During the Cultural Revolution, the officials said this place was too capitalistic and closed it down. After it ended, people came back. The place is called *Rennaili*—endurance in Mandarin."

The girls wanted to stop at a clothing store and Larry said to me, "Don't look back, but I think we're being followed."

"Where?" I said, immediately looking in the direction he'd told me not to look. I saw two butch Korean guys sporting Mohawk wigs, trying hard to blend into the crowd. They both wore sunglasses and green striped suits.

"I could be wrong," Larry said. "They've been following us since Waitian."

Shinjee and Hyori came back out. "Nothing we want," Hyori explained.

We rushed to the dumpling restaurant. It was a crowded hole-in-the-wall that barely looked sanitary. The tiled floors were dirty and there was only one waitress for the whole place. She spoke a guttural Mandarin that was thickly accented. There were old 20th-century photographs from before the Baldification, though even with real hair, people looked pretty much the same.

Shinjee ordered a hundred dumplings, three hamburgers, five anchovy omelets. "I'm not that hungry," I warned her.

"This is for me and Hyori," Shinjee said. "If you guys want to eat, you'll need to order something yourselves."

I passed and Larry ordered more vodka. The steaming dumplings came out and I was impressed at how heartily the two ate their food. There was no sense of propriety or false demureness. These women liked their food and I liked how they shed their artifice and devoured their meals. They used their fingers, didn't bother closing their mouths, and chewed loudly. It was the only time this evening I felt like I was seeing a genuine side to them. The hamburgers were doused with Sichuan spicy sauce and Shinjee offered some to Larry.

"Those peppers make my ass burn when I do my business," he said. "Forgive me for being so crass."

That elicited knowing laughter from the two ladies. "They say they've found a prehistoric

crab that used to be the size of a grizzly bear,” Shinjee said. “I’d love to have seafood like that.”

“Shandong has the best seafood,” Hyori said. “Have you visited their shrimp farms? Those shrimp get pretty big.”

We both took sips from our vodka and I tried to imagine a crab that was bigger than me.

Shinjee, after helping devour the hundred dumplings, brought up recent movies as they started critiquing various elements from an action flick.

“The Great Leader loves movies,” Hyori said. “He would esteem your position if you two came and made movies for our great country.”

“I’m not ready to move just yet,” Larry said. “I’m working on my next big epic.”

“What epic?”

“The one that’s going to change everything.”

“You never told me about this,” Shinjee said.

“I haven’t told anyone yet. Until I finish it, or at least start it, I’m not going anywhere. I’ll tell you though, this is the film that’s going to change everything.”

“What’s it called?” I asked.

He grinned at me. “We’ll talk when the time’s right. Not yet though. I still need to work out the story.”

Usually when he had an idea for a movie, he would gush with information. In fact, he usually had too many ideas and it took months just to settle on one out of tens of thousands. Phone calls in the middle of the night were the norm, telling me he knew what his next “epic” was going to be, talking until the morning. Then a few hours later, another phone call from him saying he had an even better idea. He wasn’t secretive with strangers either, not the least bit worried about people stealing his ideas. “It’s the execution, not the idea that counts,” he liked to say. In this case, his silence was so uncharacteristic, I didn’t know what to make of it and I pushed for more information. But he wouldn’t budge.

“I still have a ton of research to do,” he insisted.

Shinjee whispered something in his ear and talked in a sweet tone.

“Sorry. Not until I’m ready,” he replied to her. “If this movie fails, then I’ll know I don’t have what it takes to be a filmmaker. I’ll give up and focus on wigs.”

“Your ass is drunk,” I said. “This is the third straight film I’ve heard this threat.”

“This time I mean it!” he declared.

“Sure, buddy,” I said and burst out laughing.

“Don’t laugh at me! Don’t laugh at me!” he yelled. “Not everyone’s meant to lead. Maybe I don’t got the vision.”

“Ladies. Larry needs some fresh air. Let me escort him out.”

I grabbed Larry and helped him outside.

“No more alcohol,” I said, then noticed the two thugs lurking across from us. They were

casting furtive glances in our direction and I wondered if they were coordinating something with the girls. I peered inside, but Shinjee and Hyori were still eating. “I have this strange feeling that maybe we should leave the girls and get the hell out of here.”

“You mean just leave them in there?” he asked. “I’m trying to get laid, man. She won’t even let me kiss her yet. If I leave, it’s over.”

“And those two guys following us? What if they plan on kidnapping us?”

“If I get to sleep with her for one night, it’ll be worth it. Besides, I got you to get me out of trouble. Remember those girls we visited in the Congo?”

“Don’t remind me.”

“You saved my life twice that night,” Larry said. “That lady nearly cut off my—” and he stumbled. I helped him back up. “All that technology, all those computer simulations, and we’re still risking our asses for a lay. Or was that just me? You were a prude back then too weren’t you? I thought it was just Linda that yoked your ass.”

“If these girls are spies, they’re more dangerous than the girls back then,” I said.

“It’s a good thing you have your toys to help us.” He took off his fedora, unattached hair wig, looked at the brand tag that read Chao Toufa. “Everyone says we make the best hair in the world. We have some special chemical that makes the hair super real, better than hormonal hair. Can you believe these wigs cost a fortune?”

“Hair is the most precious luxury in the world.”

“Long time ago, people used to shave their heads on purpose because they didn’t have showers like now and lice would get in your hair and make your head all itchy. I can’t imagine living with bugs in my hair all day.”

“It would make life less lonely.”

He laughed and put his arm around my shoulder. “Shinjee is so pretty, it makes me want to cry. The only thing I want more than her is for my next film to succeed. It’s going to be amazing.”

“You’re not going to tell me anything?”

“Not until it’s ready. I promise I’ll tell you everything when it’s set. Just know it’ll be bigger than anything I’ve done before. Can you please help me tonight?”

When I first met Larry, I didn’t know who he was, only that he didn’t seem to give a shit about anything or anyone. The military gave him demerits, censures, and reprimands, and he’d just laugh it off.

One day, he charted who downloaded what porn in the base, categorizing them by their preferences. He was stunned that the married lieutenant who always espoused the Church of Peace enjoyed, “Weird animal stuff involving broccoli and purple dildos,” while three asshole sergeants strayed towards revenge porn and bondage.

“It makes sense, a lot of them are just angry about (fill in the blank).” He put the list in a document and sent it “accidentally” to the entire cadre. Was nearly court-martialed until

general who saw this gave commendations to Larry for his act of “moral courage.”

“What are you doing, man?” I asked in concern.

He laughed. “C’mon, man, it was totally worth it.”

VI.

With Larry, it was hard to distinguish between courage and crazy recklessness. Shinjee and Hyori invited us back to their place for drinks. Before I could answer, Larry replied, “Sound great.”

They lived in the east part of town, out near Sihui. The street lights resembled circular halos that hovered like frozen hummingbirds and a vendor was selling mushroom lamps, pink and green neon sprouts flourishing in the night. There was a pickup truck that had sleeping bags in the back, exhausted workers snoring inside. A group of drunks engaged in a rabid game of Chinese poker, demanding more beer, commenting vociferously on their play. The apartments were high-rises that were mostly twenty stories high, a steppe of buildings compressed as closely together as possible. We entered their apartment building. Shinjee stomped the ground to trigger the light sensor. The elevator took us up to the sixteenth floor and we entered their unit. It was surprisingly spacious. At the center of the apartment was a grand black piano, polished smooth so that both of us were reflected upside down. The keys were ermine, the set of chords looking like an intricate rib cage on a charred torso.

“Who plays the piano?” Larry asked.

“I do,” Shinjee answered. “I used to be a musician. I even played once for the Leader’s nephew.”

“Not a love song, right?” I asked.

She simpered. “Not a love song.”

“Play something for us,” Larry said, and pressed in closer to Shinjee to try to kiss her. She deftly avoided him as though expecting his move.

“Get us some drinks,” she ordered Hyori.

Hyori went to the kitchen while Shinjee sat down in front of the piano. She played a piece I didn’t recognize. Larry put his arms around her and she asked, “Do you want me to play something or not?” I could tell Larry wanted to be alone with her so I quietly made my way to the kitchen.

Hyori was getting drinks ready, but there was something uneasy in her behavior. I didn’t announce myself, watching to see if she was going to do anything. She used a teaspoon to mix juice and soda with heavy doses of liquor. Then I saw her take a tiny capsule and pour it into both our cups. She turned around, about to bring out the alcohol on a tray.

“What was that?” I asked.

“What are you talking about?”

“I saw what you just did.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Then drink our drink.”

“You don’t trust me?”

“Larry!” I shouted. “Larry!”

“What?” he answered.

“We need to leave.”

“What are you talking about?”

“You can’t just leave!” Hyori shouted.

“Larry, we need to get out of here. Larry!”

“What the hell happened?” Larry demanded as he approached.

“She was trying to drug us,” I said.

Larry stared at her. Then back at Shinjee and grinned. “Can we just put all the cards on the table?”

“What do you mean?”

“We’ve been pussyfooting around it the whole night. What do you want from us?” Larry asked. “Wait, it doesn’t even matter. I’m willing to do it, as long as I can have one night with you.” He looked directly at Shinjee.

Hyori was flustered and Shinjee looked confused. There was a loud banging on the door. While I was happy Larry was smart to what was going on, it didn’t help our plight any. I was not interested in sacrificing myself for one night with Hyori, especially as my eye kept coming back to that dumb mouse tattoo on her head celebrating its victory over the lion.

“You can call off the infantry because you won’t need them,” Larry assured the two. I knew he was turning on his directorial “I’m in command” voice. “You want me to make a film for you? You want money? Name it. Anything aside from the factory, you can have. I can even give you the factory, except I don’t have that kind of authority. My dad knew how crazy I was and since I have no other family left, he put selling control over it to a computer. Even if you took me hostage, you couldn’t touch Chao Toufa. So what is it you want?”

Shinjee was surprised and I knew she hadn’t expected this twist. “Y-you knew it was a trap?”

He went and kissed her. She didn’t stop him. The knocking on the door got louder until the door lock turned and the two goons following us burst through the door, getting stuck for a second because they were too big to enter at the same time. I looked over at Larry and his lips were smeared with lipstick. He gently let Shinjee down.

“Welcome, gentlemen,” Larry said. “You guys have been following us the whole night. Have fun?” He looked at me, then took off his fedora and covered his eyes.

I took a light grenade out of my jacket and tossed it up, putting on my protective glasses. An explosive burst of light designed to cause retinal damage shined with the intensity of a small sun, rays deluging the senses. “If you open your eyes for more than three seconds

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