

"At the Fish Market"

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At the fish market, too, I am out of place.

A cacophony of sounds assails my ears as I stride up and down the aisles of rickety boxes, the poorly thrown together stalls: vendors screeching, knives thudding, day old newspaper crinkling. It is all foreign and unfamiliar, unpleasant and grimy. I feel almost as though the muck and filth of the fishermen and their greasy black hair will rub off onto me, as if their fishy fingers and the black lines of dirt under the nails will soon become mine as well.

I shudder involuntarily, and the vendors pounce. "You cold, lady? Cold? I have fish for that. Fish for health. Make feel better."

The grammar is poor, but I cannot judge their broken English; my Chinese is worse. I shake my open hands at them - babble in English that they probably don't understand. "No, no. I have no money. I want no fish. No. No."

Out of the corner of my eye, I spy street urchins streaking up and down the narrow alleyways. "Missus. Some money, missus? Missus." They call to me and any other tourist, fingering our American clothes as we weave through the throng of people. "Missus."

My head is throbbing and the smell of fish makes me woozy. I am not supposed to be here. I am supposed to be anywhere but here, far away from the smell of fish and the street urchins and the vendors and the fishermen with their black fingers and the chaos. Not here.

I am supposed to be at home, if you can call it a home, amidst towering piles of precariously stacked papers, drawings that I've never finished; half-shaded limbs, birds, flowers. I am supposed to be lounging on my broken couch, if you can call it a couch, the one with the slats falling out the bottom and the faded red cover and the mystery stains in the left corner.

I only ended up here when my mother called me, three months after the fact, to tell me that Rachel had bought a plane ticket.

"She's going to China, Lynn."

How did you get this number? I think. "Was going to China," I say.

She ignores my comment, blathers on like an untapped faucet. "China. To live with a family, a little Chinese family. Isn't that quaint?"

I can think of several words for it, none of them quaint, but I am walking on eggshells with my mother already and I have to pick my battles. "So, was there a reason you called?"

"Well, she was going to China, Lynn."

"I know, Ma. You told me."

"Oh, well. We have the ticket here and all. I mean, it shouldn't go to waste. Why don't you...?"

"Oh Ma. China? Me? That's a cute joke, really, but look Ma, I have to go, I'll call you later and..."

From the other line, only sniffles.

"Ma? Don't cry, okay Ma?"

"I just...she was going to China, and I thought that maybe you could go, you know...in her place..."

In her place. It is the story of my life, in her place.

It was only natural, really. One in the light and one in the shadow; she was the prodigy and I, I would have been the prodigal, had I ever decided to come back home, which was the scenario that I had been trying to avoid.

When I go to pick up the ticket, I have to go back inside the house. It's not that big of a deal, I suppose - I just make it that way. Still, stepping inside feels like surrender.

The walls are the same as when I left: striped wall paper - how typical of them - and framed pictures hanging from every free space. Her face smiles where ever I look - in the one picture of me, I am frowning. Aside the pictures, you can see certificates, medals, other chronicles of her vast achievements. Her high school diploma. Her honor roll plaque. I know for a fact that my G.E.D. certificate is still locked in a desk drawer in the spare office upstairs.

They make me sit and talk for a while, awkward half-conversations that I am more than eager to bring to an end.

How's work? Oh.

How's that...uh...art thing working out? Oh.

Are you completely miserable yet? Oh.

Ma puts an arm around my shoulder. "You know you're welcome here, any time."

Yeah, sure. There's not enough room for the both of us in this house, even when it's just her memory. "Of course, Ma," I say. "I'll swing by again sometime this week."

I lie. She smiles. It's how things work - they're comfortable.

I arrived on a Sunday - I don't know how to say Sunday. Come to think of it, I don't know how to say Monday, or any other day of the week. I bet Rachel knew. I bet she knew them all - the days and the months, and probably the years too. Year of the Tiger. Ox. Rat. I pick at a scab as I wait for the seat belt sign to turn off.

When I finally make it inside, the airport is crowded and confusing, much like the fish market, but it smells of people. In the baggage claim, where I hoist my backpack - "Pack light," Ma admonished me - I see too much black hair, too many smiling faces. I am blonde and frowning - I am sure I will not fit in.

I don't, and the family who is supposed to be meeting me is late. I sit on a concrete slab outside of the airport for a good twenty minutes, lamenting my luck as the sky threatens to empty itself on my head right then and there. Before it can do so, though, they show up. The cardboard sign they carry is bent, swollen just slightly with the humidity. "Welcome, Rachel."

When I was eight and she was nine, she studied the tones while I drew crude, elementary school pictures of the magpies. "Dipping, rising, falling-"

"Sounds like bird flight to me. Neeeeeoor!" I dive bomb her, my drawings forgotten.

"Ugh, Lynn! Stop it. Can't you see I'm trying to learn?"

In this town - or village, it should be called - there are no birds. I have come to this conclusion scientifically. Because I never hear them, they must not be there. In my experience, birds are vocal creatures, silent only when they've taken contemplatively to the skies, and sometimes not even then.

I am also sure that if there were birds, we would have eaten them by now. Surely anything would taste better than the watery porridge that the plump woman has made the past four days now. I don't know her name and I don't know how to say "in America we eat food with substance," but if I did I would have done so by now. Man cannot live by bread alone, and I'm pretty sure he can't by gruel either, not when it's four parts water and one part sawdust.

I keep waiting for a hunk of maybe greasy chicken meat, an egg soft-boiled or even half-rotted in the sun. I'm sure that Rachel would have been more sensitive to the plight of the poor, but I am sleeping every night on a thin bamboo mat and my back cannot afford sensitivity to the plight of anyone until I've slept on anything but the floor.

That's why I sneak into the barn, which is a barn in the loosest sense of the term. As far as I can tell, it's basically just a shack where they store their extra hay for who knows what, but by the time I discover it, hay seems like the best bed that's ever existed, fit for Gods or at least the likes of me.

Apparently the little stooped over man doesn't agree because I wake to him screaming in Chinese, not that I can make head or tails of anything he's saying. I just jump up and mumble "I'm sorry's" and sip at my gruel a bit more dejectedly for the next few days.

"Watch, Lynn, isn't this cool?" She traces her finger down a line of characters, little houses and steeples and stick men with their hands held high. "The sun...rises...in the..." her brow wrinkles for a moment before smoothing out again. "Morning."

I should be proud, or at least appreciative of her effort. "Well, duh, Rach. Everyone knows that."

Somehow, my wanderings - away from the stooped over little man and his pepper head and his angry scowl and hopefully towards something substantive to eat - have carried me to the fish market. Here where I have no money in my pockets and no words in my mouth, I am not wanted, for all the street vendors think that I will buy their wares.

The skin-thin orphans and their quick-silver fingers find nothing in my pockets, and they turn away, disgusted. The bare bones strays brush their flea-ridden coats against my bare legs and I step into a puddle of warm urine and stagnant rain water. It is some sort of karmic revenge, I am sure, for not visiting her grave, for not saying goodbye.

"I'm sorry, Rach," I tell the too-gray sky.

It doesn't answer, so I steer away, leaving behind the thick cuts of fresh catch, bleeding and leaking through yesterday's news print, leaving the yelling vendors and the thieving children and their mangy counterparts. I glance up at the sky as I wander in search of perhaps a piece of bread, something solid and decidedly not fish, or maybe just a place, an identity of my own.

And behind me the sun rises from the clouds as a burst of birds explode out into the air.