

Streetlights & Cigarettes

His reflection moved without him. It always lagged a fraction of a second behind, mimicking him mockingly. Under the momentum of daily life, this phenomenon often fell to the back of his mind—he had other things to worry about—but now it was inescapable. Trapped at home, his reflection found him everywhere. On the screen of his phone, on the glaze of the window, in the water of his mug... He was constantly being watched by that thing of a being.

“Yong, I’m serious.”

His father’s tone rose, latching onto his attention. Yong blinked, realising that he had been too fixated on the tiny version of him that lived in his father’s glasses.

“I’m sorry—”

“Five absences. In a month!”

Fucking school, he thought. What a bunch of rats.

His father continued on his tirade, his right eye doing its little twitch every now and then. Yong tried to keep up, nodding at every other sentence even if the words disassembled in mid-air before reaching him. Sometimes speech was like that: letters weren’t properly glued together and they often fell apart before Yong could hear

them. However, upon opening his mouth, syllables would magically slide off of his tongue, as if picking up the pieces and throwing them together on the fly. Most days, words left Yong's mouth before he even knew what exactly it was he was saying.

“Why are you missing classes? You're on your computer all the time anyway!”

His father's cheeks were beginning to pink, meaning that the man was a solid six on the anger scale. Yong stared at his feet, trying to search the marble floor for any kind of answer. There were none.

“I'm sorry.”

What else could he say? Online classes required only two things from him: show up and do the work. And yet he struggled. He always either slept straight through alarms or dozed off during the call. In between, there were moments where he'd stare outside as minutes slipped by, or his reflection would hold his gaze and steal the hours away. On the worst days, his chest would feel rock hard – heavier than anything he has ever known. He honest-to-God would not be able to lift it up, no matter how badly he wanted to. Those days were the worst. Those days felt like death.

“One more absence and I'm taking *everything*. Understood?”

The tiny Yong in his father's glasses blinked, waiting for an answer.

“Understood,” Yong said, taking the cue to retreat back into his room. He needed a cigarette. Pronto.

Summer sat heavy on his shoulders as the warm hum of the streetlights cast two shadows, one before him and one behind. Whenever he smoked at this late of an hour, he liked to stare at the way they dipped in between the bricks of the pavement and how they seemed to fade into the air. If he smoked enough he felt as though he were

fading with them. It was like each puff dismantled his entire being and he would float up—in parts—above the buildings in front of him toward the moon. Parking himself next to the bright orange trash bin, he lit the end of his cigarette and inhaled, long and deep.

“Rough day?” A girl asked, staring at him from the right side of the bin. Yong felt himself turn to look at her, but for a moment all he could see, still, were his shadows.

“How’d you know?” he replied. He saw her now. Li. Her long black hair was tied back that day, but he knew she usually hated it like that. She shrugged, scuffing her shoes against the red bricks.

“Because.”

“Because?”

“You never blink when it’s been rough,” she said. Crossing her arms across her chest, she focused on the centre of Yong’s forehead and stared hard.

“Just like this.” She held it for a second longer before her eyes shifted down to his and scrunched at their corners, the way they always did when she smiled. Even with a mask on, Li’s smiles never failed to shine through. He shook his head as he took another drag.

“What about you? Rough day?”

“Oh man, the *roughest*.” She slipped out her own pack of cigs, her slim fingers taking two before hiding them away again. Li never took more than two. Whether or not her day was great or downright shitty, she never—ever—took more than two. It was her way of regulating herself and Yong admired that kind of self-respect. She pulled down her blue mask, placing the foam filter neatly between her lips and lit up. He waited for her to take a good drag before asking what happened.

“Just got yelled at a lot today. For some reason everything seemed to be my fault, even more so than usual. You?”

“Got yelled at, too. Been missing class and they called up my dad.”

“Yikes.”

They took a moment of silence to wallow as they drained their cigarettes, tapping their ashes into the bin between them. The quiet was what Yong liked the most. Before the lockdown, he smoked in places where he could be alone because the quiet was soothing. The nicotine would make him vibrate until his molecules separated themselves to drift off. He never thought he'd like company at a time like that. Then lockdown happened and he met Li, who also had to sneak out at godawful hours for a light. For some reason, the quiet was even stiller with her around.

They first met a week and a half into lockdown. Li had finally given up trying to quit smoking due to the circumstances and snuck out at a ripe 3am, making a beeline for the orange bin right outside their building. Yong was already there leaning against the lamp post, hood up with his slides, staring down at nothing as he smoked. She hesitated at first, but with the way he mechanically lifted the cig to his lips, sucked, then lowered it without a single glance her way made her feel at ease. He was just trying to get what she was trying to get. There shouldn't be any trouble. Plus, they were surrounded by housings; if there was any funny business, help was just a shout away. So, she smoked. It was only when his cigarette was done that he came to life. He snubbed it on the metal post and turned to drop it into the bin when the sight of her made him jump. His reaction made her choke on her smoke as he asked how long she'd been standing there on the opposite side of the bin.

“Around ten minutes,” she said.

“Holy shit,” he said. He hadn't noticed.

Since then, they met at the same time every Monday and Friday to catch the buzz together. Despite having lived in the same building for the last six years—Li moved in, Yong had been there his whole life—they never really took note of each other. Li recalled seeing Yong once in the stairwell. Yong remembered a glimpse of her walking out of the lobby as he walked in one time. Though other than that, nothing. They didn't stand out. Now, it was a different story. Now Yong couldn't imagine nights smoking without her. If he couldn't smoke with her, he was convinced he wouldn't smoke at all.

Li finished her first cigarette with a scrunch of her nose. She didn't like smoking all the way to the butt, so the moment it began to get bitter she would snuff it. Yong, however, liked smoking all the way to the end. Ever since he met her, he liked filling the cigarette box back up with used filters until all the sticks were gone.

"I want to run away," Li said. She exhaled the words into the night and watched them rise. Her lips were flushed with the heat. Half-opened, they leaked things that Yong felt he couldn't read.

"Where to?"

"Somewhere. Anywhere."

Last time, Li said she wanted to drown herself in the sea at sunrise. Not because she wanted to die, but because she felt like it would feel good. Another day she deadpanned that she would sell herself off to some rich dude with a disgusting interest in minors. Not only for the money, but for that sweet ticket to wherever he was. Yong didn't really feel worried when she talked like that. Nor did he want to do anything about it. He didn't know why. He just understood.

"I don't think I can stand another day in that house," she said softly. So soft that it was more to herself and Yong just so happened to hear. He looked down at her. Her nose was pink from the cold. The bags beneath her eyes weighed down her

gaze. She looked like she was crying, yet nothing came out. She leaned against the lamp post as she sighed, “Fuck the virus. I hate it here.”

Yong lost track of what happened next. One moment he was pushing his used filter back into the box. The next, he was holding her hand, the post awkwardly behind their arms. Bit by bit, he processed what the hell was going on. The strain of his reach. The warmth of her skin. The shock in her stare. They blinked at each other, waiting for someone to say something.

“Same,” he replied.

He wanted to die. *I hate it here, too. Let's run away. Let's go and never come back.* Though all his throat managed was that one word. “Same.” His heartbeat pulsed in his fingertips. Or was he feeling hers against them? The thought only made his race faster. They stood there, stunned and confused, both not knowing what exactly it was that made their insides shake. Then, regaining control of himself, he quickly took his hand back as the world faded away from him. The road sank into darkness. Streetlights were pulled into black. The sky fell into nothingness and he was floating, floating, floating...

Until he felt something weird in his left hand. Something strange. He caught onto the sensation that began to prick at his palm, a kind of tingling that only got stronger and stronger the more it pulled his focus. Inch by inch, it reeled him in and soon enough, his feet found the ground again. The world re-emerged from wherever it was and he settled himself back next to the orange bin. Orange bin... Li. He looked over to the right, mouth ready to apologise for touching her, but she wasn't—

“Yong, are you okay?”

Hearing her voice from his left made him jump. There she was, on his other side for a change. A grin stretched out across her face as she laughed, “Jeez, why are you so on edge today?” She gave his hand a little squeeze.

He couldn't believe it.

He just couldn't believe it.

He stared at his hand and watched as it squeezed hers back. He smiled.

“I don't know. I blame the cigs.”

“Let's quit.”

“Tomorrow?”

“Tomorrow.”