

Stop at Red

Wan Yi stood in a lacy dress and stiletto heels, outside the Viper Room in Hollywood at the exact spot where the actor River Phoenix died of an overdose over twenty years ago. As a teenager she had been heart broken, but it seemed silly in retrospect to be sad over an actor since she had found out how complicated life actually was. She leaned against the black wall with the club's logo stenciled in white paint: a silhouette of a woman with perky breasts wearing a top hat, smoking a cigarette, and from waist down having the body of a snake.

Wan Yi held a cigarette; it was her first smoke since being pregnant eight years ago. With each inhale, she felt a flood of relief into her flesh and nerves, as if her cravings for nicotine remained unabated from her last cigarette to that very moment. She felt compelled to smoke on the Sunset Strip: the home of legendary stages at the Whiskey and the Rainbow, bands like The Doors, Guns and Roses, and, of course, The Daisies. That part of LA, its hey days had passed. The madness and wildness had tempered, but the frisson she felt by being there didn't completely fade and she wanted to relive her youth for a moment.

She watched Roberto say goodbye to his bandmates. As they walked separate ways with their instruments to their parked cars, he joined her and kissed her. His bandmates had ignored her completely the whole night, even more skeptical of her staying power than other girls, but she'd been around a lot longer than they knew.

Her black SUV—which she'd taken to the car wash that day, wanting to remove any obvious marks left by her children—glided to a stop and the valet handed the keys to her. She then stumbled a bit and held them out for Roberto.

“I'm not sure you should give them to me,” he said to her.

“I don't think I can,” she replied. Leaving out the words “drive.”

He understood her anyway, and took the keys off her, even though he was pretty sure he shouldn't be driving either. It just seemed a lot of trouble, getting the car parked again before getting an Lyft.

When inside he adjusted the seat and the rearview mirror. “Don’t run any red lights, please,” she said.

Which was exactly what he did.

“Red. Red. Red,” she yelled.

She heard the high pitch squeaking of locked rubber on concrete as the tires skid. In her mind’s eye, she saw the horrified faces of imaginary passersby as they watched what would undoubtedly be a fatal accident.

How would her husband explain to her two young children under what circumstances their mother had died? She had dressed inappropriately, accompanied by a man more than a decade younger than her, who nobody knew; on a week night. A tattooed young man in tight jeans, and Converse that no one else their family socialized with would wear, behind the wheel of her car, both she and him high and drunk, all while their dad was away on a business trip. Maybe—she hoped—Don would skip those details when recounting the story.

But her and Roberto’s deaths didn’t transpire. Neither of them flew through the glass. The screech did not follow the sound of crunching metal, smashing itself on something else. Instead they sailed across the intersection, passed the red light, as no cars, stretch limos nor lemon Maseratis--driven by someone equally intoxicated—crossed their path.

He slowed to a stop near the next red light.

“Mierdaaaa! I’m so sorry...” he said in his East LA accent, which dragged all the vowels out real slow, mixed with a more traditional rounded Spanish accent.

Without replying, she opened the door, stuck her face out and felt a hot blast of humidity.

The skies had wanted to rain for days but hadn’t achieved it yet. Taking a quick glance at the gated shops, noting she had no audience, Wan Yi dry retched over the pavement. She stared at the concrete, noticing the cracks and splotches in front of her, which smelled like dried urine.

“You okay?” he asked, reaching over stroking her back, gently.

“I’m glad I’m not dead,” she coughed, still bent over.

“I’m glad you’re not dead too. I’m sorry.”

“Maybe I should read one of my kid’s books to you so you can freshen up your

understanding of colors. Green for grass. Yellow for Sun. Red for Stop,” she said as she got up back into the seat.

He laughed.

“Is that all you're going to say? After I nearly killed both of us?” He paused, incredulous. “Girls my age would be screaming at me.” He paused again, puffing out his chest as though he'd made a precious discovery before settling comfortably on the seat. “You're ridiculously cool. You're like the most badass Japanese chick I've ever met.”

“I'm Chinese,” she replied. He never remembered.

“Whatever. You're cool. I can't believe you're like one of those stay-at-home moms that drive a big car...live in a house with a pool and all that shit.”

“I wasn't always,” she told him. Feeling a pang over the life she had chosen. At the time it seemed it would be fulfilling. It seemed like the sensible choice.

He rolled up the sleeves of his black shirt, exposing an arm completely covered with tattoos of various characters from the animated *Alice in Wonderland*. His dark hairs piercing the skin of the caterpillar and the Cheshire Cat made those Disney versions more like the originals: menacing. He pressed a button in front of him and a blast of cool air came from the air conditioner, a relief from the stickiness. A relief from the thoughts that would take her somewhere into the past.

She closed the door. Except for the street lights peeking through the tinted windows, it was dark now inside the car. He looked like a shadow behind the wheel. When they had met on Tinder, she expected just the one night.

But even then, he must have felt something for her because he had invited her to watch him play that Friday. He didn't care about her age, he didn't care she was married. He didn't care much about anything most of the time—not money, not having a stable job, nor his future—except for his music, and in that instant for her to see him on stage.

She stayed away at first. There was no need to know him any other way, if at all, but they kept seeing each for the hot sweaty nights of sex, a kind that maybe she once enjoyed when she was younger. Then again, maybe she never had sex like that, not even when she was young. She had no memory and it didn't matter because, as he pounded inside her, she only needed to remain aware enough to meet his thrusts and allow her body to react with gushes of wetness, which had nothing to do with remembering or thinking. Then, after so many nights, she wanted to look at him. To see what he actually looked

like: to see his walk, to see him stand, hear his voice—outside of the confines of his small bedroom—under a spotlight.

“Whatever. You’re cool.” He made a devils horn as he pursed his lips towards her.

In those small moments, those tiny interactions, she found split seconds of girlish joy.

She gave no answer. Listening to the whoosh made by passing cars. Depending on the speed and loudness of the sound, she could make out if they were going too fast. She wanted to stay there for longer, just to be there in stillness, stopped in the car, on the way somewhere, like the two of them belonged to a real life together.

She knew they weren’t meant to be, but she knew they would continue. For how long she was unsure. She wondered if her husband would forgive her if he found out. Which he eventually would. Secrets never lasted. Yet she hoped he wouldn’t ever know, as it would make her feel remorse over her time with Roberto. She didn’t want to feel that way about it ever.

He drummed on the wheel, making the sound of rain that would eventually come.

“What time do you have to go home?” he asked.

“Not yet,” she replied.

Everything would continue a little longer. Which was what she wanted.