

BARGAINS

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“So how’s the writing going?” Jeff asks me when we meet up for dinner. He’s wearing that cute paisley button-down that we got from Levi’s last week, and it fits him perfectly. I dig into my nasi lemak and assault the fried chicken.

“It’s going,” I answer between bites.

“So what’s it about?” He laces his fingers together and rests his chin on top of them. A lock of hair falls straight across his eyes. He looks like a cross between one of the Four Flower guys and the Korean singer Rain. If he were straight, I’d totally go for him.

I thoughtfully chew on a spoonful of coconut rice. “You know what, I’m still thinking about it.”

“You know what?” Jeff points his chopsticks at me. Bits of hokkien mee still cling to the bamboo surface. “We have less than a week here. You need to turn in that story when we get back. Amelia, you need to start cracking.”

I nod and finish the rest of my food. It didn’t taste as good anymore. “I know, I know. How’s your progress going?”

Jeff shrugs. “I’m done. Just giving myself a couple of days to breathe before editing.”

I push my plate away and glare at him. “Come on then. I want to get back and have a few pages done before turning in for the night, then.”

We walk out of the kopitiam and into the cool night. It's hovering between summer and the monsoon here, and the air seems heavy with the promise of a storm. We wander the bazaars of Temple Street in Chinatown, passing hawkers selling cheap knockoffs of Prada and Louis Vuitton, plastic toy cars, and display case perfumes by the dozen. Bright orange lanterns criss-cross overhead, and there's the rising scent of satay being grilled. Jeff takes out his digital camera and starts snapping photos.

I wander off to a stall selling bright Thai silks, wondering if I should buy a bolt or two for my mother, when a flickering light catches my eye. I stop haggling with the stall owner and turn towards the light. It's there, dancing, right at the corner of my eye, like my own personal St. Elmo's fire. I walk towards the light, and realize that it's behind a barred door, with small windows cut out at the top. Intricate carvings slither in and out of the woodwork, seemingly alive. I can see scrolling clouds, dragons with curling whiskers, lotus flowers blossoming against the wood. I lift the heavy brass doorknocker and rap against the door.

"Come in," I hear a voice say.

The smell of camphor hits me as soon as I enter, and incense smoke surrounds me like invisible fingers ushering me inside. I feel like I walked into a movie set, a fantasy Chinatown land, replete with stereotypical lacquer boxes against a scarlet-painted wall, hand-woven straw baskets full of dried things that have no name, and carefully carved jade ornaments hanging on the wall. A fat golden Buddha sits on the counter, its carved face shining with good fortune. Wall scrolls depict delicately painted bald men, as white as a sheet, clad in ornately decorated robes of state as they ascend towards the top edge of the scroll, where presumably Heaven lies. There are myriad signs written in Chinese calligraphy, none of which I could read. They cover

the entire top half of one wall, gilt-edged and framed, watching me as I make my way through the aisles.

“Hello,” says the same voice. I turn around and there is a little old lady standing behind me. She is wearing a yellow blazer and matching slacks, and her white hair is neatly tucked into a bun at the back of her head. She has the kind of face that you want to kiss, the one you want to start confessing all your secrets to, hoping that she will give you a kind word, a quiet benediction. “Welcome to my shop.”

“It’s very lovely.” I am suddenly aware of my size, all five feet and four inches of me, sweaty with the humidity from outside and smelling distinctly of charred meat. My cotton tank and shorts don’t belong in this world. I have the sudden urge to take a bath in rose petals and sandalwood, and brush my hair a hundred strokes. “I’m sorry, but I didn’t catch your name—”

“You may call me Auntie Wang,” she said, moving past me and making her way behind the counter. She takes out a small set of weights, perfectly carved in miniature. A dragon curls up the middle pillar of the scales, its sapphire eyes glinting in the ruddy light. “Now then, my dear—Amelia, was it? What was it you wanted to buy?”

“I, ah—didn’t want to buy anything. I just wanted to take a look.” I don’t recall giving her my name, but she looks at me and her face crinkles into a soft smile and I want to tell her everything. Then the door jangles again, and Jeff enters, slipping his lithe frame past the door, camera held out in front of him. “Oh, there you are,” he says amiably. He waves at Auntie Wang. “Hello!”

She nods and smiles, then turns back to me. Her face glows softly, like the full moon. “Now where were we? Oh yes, you wanted to purchase something.”

Jeff joins me at the counter. “Buying souvenirs already? You can go shopping later. I want to go and try some of that rose drink they have down at the corner.”

I wave him away. “What can I buy here, Auntie Wang?” I hope my voice has a respectful tone in it. I’m used to yelling at editors, and being yelled back, that the notion of respect hasn’t quite sunk in.

She touches the tip of her nose with a wizened finger. “Ah, well, this shop, see, is full of cures for all kinds of ailments, of sicknesses here—”

She leans over and touches my forehead

—“and here.” Her fingernail brushes lightly over my heart.

“I can brew you a special tea that will make time stop, make it go forward and backwards. Or maybe an ointment to soothe a broken heart, hmm? Powder to make your mother stop asking you so many inappropriate questions. I can give you a jade charm for happiness, or money, or intelligence.” She gives me another smile. “The only thing I cannot do is tell the future. That is best left to soothsayers, not medicine women.”

Jeff lets out a laugh. “Seriously? Oh God, come on, Amelia. This woman is clearly off her rocker. We’d better get going.” He moves away from the counter and towards the door.

I wave him on. “I’ll meet you outside.”

His face suddenly darkens. “Oh God. Don’t tell me you believe in this crap.”

“For goodness’ sake, Jeff, just go.”

I hear the door close behind Jeff, and once more we are alone in the shop. I turn back to Auntie Wang. “Are you pulling my leg?”

“All I say are true.”

I take a deep breath. It wouldn’t hurt, right? And besides, Singapore has great healthcare, the best in the region. If I get a stomachache, at least I’m not in some backwater village in Laos, retching behind a banana tree.

“All right. I’d like to buy some inspiration for a story. I’ve been trying to write this damn thing for ages now, and whenever I see a blank page, I just—” I look back at all the hours wasted and wonder what the hell I was doing. “Well, you know what I mean.”

She gives me a shrewd look, her lacquer-dark eyes narrowing. Then she turns her back on me and starts delicately removing several of the small glass jars arranged in shelves behind her. The contents look dead, and old, and smell of decay and age. Their labels, written in a cramped handwriting, are taped on the front, the ink already bleeding against the paper. I hear her muttering to herself as she mixes the compounds, grinding everything into a powder with her mortar and pestle. After a few moments, she turns to me and presents me with a small bag of powdered material that looked suspiciously like potting soil, tied neatly at the top with a piece of red thread.

“Here. Steep this in boiling water for exactly three-quarters of an hour, then drink under the light of the full moon. You will find yourself in a frenzy, a... hmm... a need to write.” She wraps the bag in brown paper, stamped with what was probably the name of the store. “The effect lasts for 24 hours, so you must use it wisely.”

“Thank you,” I say, pulling my wallet out of my bag. “How much does it cost?”

“No.” She gestures emphatically. “You pay me in a different way,” Placing the paper-wrapped parcel on the weighing scales, she gives me a searching look. “Now then, inspiration is expensive to brew. So it is one of our most valuable items for sale. What do you think is the price for this?”

I stare at her blankly. This must be a joke.

She sees the look on my face and nods sagely. “I see. You do not know the price. Go on then, and take this as a gift. I shall name my own price, and you will have to accept it.” Suddenly, she doesn’t look like my favorite grandmother anymore; she looks hard and mean, a woman of steel. I take my parcel and rush out the door, colliding with Jeff as I stumble out. He looks at me, half-pitying, half-mocking, and leads me away from the medicine shop.

I plug the electric pot into the socket and unwrap the paper packet. Upon closer inspection, it smells faintly of dried flowers. I shrug and place it in the hotel-provided coffee cup on top of the minibar and wait for the water to boil. I watch a couple of episodes of *How I Met Your Mother* on my laptop while waiting for 45 minutes.

We’ve been here for over three weeks now, researching and writing for a travel magazine. I didn’t want the assignment at first—what with the break-up and the move and all. But Jeff was quite adamant that I get away from all “the negative energy” as he termed it, and our editor was probably more than happy to see me with more than one expression on my face (morose). But while the bracing Singapore heat was more than enough to burn Omar out of my mind, the writing was going nowhere.

The room begins to smell of air-conditioning and lavender. I can’t believe I was so critical of the scent earlier. I totter over to where the tea bag is steeping and discover that the water has turned golden, as if Midas himself had touched it. I take my

cup, blow across the surface a couple of times, and walk over to the balcony window. Moonlight streams across the balcony and I slide open the glass and walk barefoot across the tiled floor. Everything seems tranquil and at peace. I take a sip of the tea, then another, and before I realize it, the entire cup is empty.

As the last drop touches my lips, I suddenly hear voices in my head. I clamp my hands over my ears, frightened, staggering back inside the hotel room. Over the babble, I could hear a sentence, a single sentence I could latch on like an anchor amidst the turbulent sea of sounds. I grab on to the sentence in my mind, a buoy to the harbor that was going to be my story, the ship that would take me to the promised land. I sit in front of my laptop, pull up a blank page, and begin to write.

If someone had asked me when I was young what I wanted to be when I grew up, I would have answered “A marine biologist” or “A ship captain.” But when I was twelve, my mother brought me to a book signing at a local bookstore, where her favorite author had come to visit. We stood in line, clutching hardbound copies of his latest novel, and listened as he came up to the microphone and read out a chapter of the story.

I remember sitting down on the carpeted floor as he spoke, allowing his voice to wrap around me like a warm blanket. Everything seemed to make sense when he spoke. He built everything into my mind—the way buildings rose and fell, the way the sun sparkled across an open sea, the way people fell in love. This was probably how serpents felt once their handlers started playing a commanding tune. I couldn’t help but follow him, follow every word that came out of his mouth. And it was there and then that I decided, damn, I wanted to be a writer.

But even at school, I knew that there were others better than me. I could carry a pretty turn of phrase, an inspired page or two of writing. But it always felt like someone deserved it more. I was no product of a broken family, and abuse was restricted to

mean salesladies and absentee boyfriends. My first experience with sex left me bored, wondering where the romanticism was in the act. I felt raw, unready, like a beanstalk that never had the chance to grow. The only time I felt like the world made sense was when I was tucked into a corner of the sofa, my favourite shawl around my shoulders, sinking deep into another new book. But no matter how hard I tried, I could never do what that long-ago author did in the bookshop. I could never spin magic.

Not until now.

“You look like shit,” Jeff comments as soon as I walk into the Jasmine Lounge, the restaurant attached to our hotel, and slide into the seat in front of him. Against two walls, the buffet breakfast is spread out like a king’s feast. “Watched too much TV again?”

“No,” I say, trying to tamp down the defensive tone in my voice. I peer at him over the rim of my sunglasses. “I was writing.”

He choked back a laugh and pushes a cup of coffee in my direction. “Oh really? Can I see it?”

I take a long drink out of the cup, ignoring the scalding heat as it burns down my throat. “No, because I sent it off to Alice already. She gets to be the first to read it.” I shake my head to clear out the cobwebs. It seemed only an hour ago that my face was re-introduced to the pillow.

“Wait a minute, wait a minute. You sent an unedited draft over to Alice?” He shook his head. “You’ve got some balls, ‘Melia. She’s gonna have your hide for that.”

Suddenly, my phone rings. I answer it before Lady Gaga’s voice, singing about poker faces, is amplified over the heads of the hotel guests. It’s Alice, my editor. She says a few glowing

things about my story, then casually mentions that they'll be submitting it to an awards committee for vetting. She thinks I have a good shot of winning. I find that my mouth is dry and my brain has suddenly run out of steam. I thank her and turn to Jeff. My look says it all.

"They're submitting it to the awards committee," he says quietly. "Am I right?"

I drain the coffee cup and nod, peering into the cup with one eye. "Dude, did you put sugar in this thing?"

"Yeah, two tablespoons. Stop changing the subject." He leans across the table and stares at me like I'm some sort of science experiment he's trying to figure out. "You drank that thing the crazy lady gave you at the shop, didn't you? And you thought that would help you write better?"

"It helped me write!" I clutch my head in hands. There's the sound of distant drums pounding out an erratic rhythm in my head. I run my tongue across my lips, tasting—nothing. I bite my lips, sucking every last bit of coffee from the fleshy crevices. I can feel wetness in my mouth, but there is no bitterness, no sweet tang from the sugar of the dark liquid that I had so recently drunk.

I look up, frightened. I stumble over to the plates and pile my own with food. Rolls of bread, warm from the oven. Pats of butter. Pancakes, doused with maple syrup and topped with strawberries. Whirls of chocolate logs, Frosties in cold milk, cubes of bright red watermelons and honeydew and papaya. Jeff gapes at my plate, slack-jawed, as I shovel food into my mouth. My tongue runs along each and every morsel of food, but there's nothing to taste. Nothing salty, or sweet, or even the faintest bitter aftertaste.

“What the hell are you doing?”

“That woman,” I scream as I inhale food, “has done something to me and now I can’t taste anything!”

Jeff grabs me by the arm and half-pulls, half-drags me away from the table. The other guests look at us as if we’re crazy. Servers and waiters are poised to help Jeff, if needed. “Okay, that’s it. We’re out of here.”

I stare at my face in the mirror of my hotel bathroom. My eyes are rimmed in shadows. They are dark, bloodshot. There’s a bright spot of color on my cheeks, as though I am out of breath, hyperventilating. Everything will be all right. None of it is logical, or rational, but deep down inside, I know—I know the price I paid for this.

The phone rings once more and I flip it open. It’s Alice again, all the way from the home office. Everyone loves my story. I am on my way, a rising star in the literary magazine world. I could do anything and everything. I thank her for her kind words. She asks me if I have anything else for her, something to cement my status as her new favorite. I stare at my fingers. I would give anything to be able to taste even a morsel of freshly baked bread again.

“She wants you to stay here?” Jeff asks incredulously.

We are sitting at a seafood restaurant along the Singapore River, and his hands are stained with chili sauce. The steaming mantou gleams in the yellow light, the crabs are still warm, tomato-red, streaked with egg white. I pick at my food, pushing the morsels around with my fork. I know I should eat something, but ever since this morning, my appetite seems to have decided to take a permanent vacation.

“Alice says that I should go around the region, let myself be

inspired by the exotic locations and all that.” I push a lock of hair away from my eyes and wave the hovering waitress away. “So I guess I’m staying here. She wants you to go back, though. Pronto. Says that she wants to see your work ASAP.”

“Are you sure this isn’t just more of that hocus pocus that old lady cooked up?”

“I wish it were. No, wait, scratch that. I don’t even want to see her again.”

And then there’s that flickering light at the corner of my vision again. My heart starts pounding, cramming its way into my throat. I clench and unclench my fists, trying to tamp down the rising—panic? Elation? Excitement?—and wonder, irrationally, if I was really this ambitious, this crazy to even believe in this kind of shit.

“Hey, where are you going? Hey—Amelia, wait up! Hey!”

I feel as though I’m walking on air, floating from the pavement. Lights sparkle on the trees, reflecting against the water like iridescent fishes, liquid fireflies. I pass by Indian maitre’d’s and Thai waitresses in tight cheongsams, British and Australian and American men all congregating around a giant TV in some pub, their beefy arms slung across a girl’s hip or shoulder. I pass by knots of friends, couples holding hands, a family of four. I can hear Jeff running after me, but I reach the door of the shop first, tucked between a neon-lit club and a swanky uptown café. He reaches out to grab my shoulder, but I shrug him off, still buoyant, and close the door behind me.

Inside, the room is dark. Auntie Wang perches behind the counter, strangely luminescent. I approach her warily. There is a part of me wanting to ask for more, to always give more and more and more. I want to be, as that cartoon theme song goes,

the very best. This is only the beginning. I see myself standing in front of a crowd of hundreds, thousands, waving copies of my books in the air. A whirlwind of daytime talk shows, book signings, framed awards and honorary degrees. Children in Africa reading translations of my stories. I am offered a seat in the United Nations. I can do anything—anything I can think of. I giggle, imagining what I would say while accepting the Nobel Prize for Literature. This was a chance at making magic. This is a shot at living forever.

Auntie Wang looks at me slyly. “I see you’ve made up your mind.”

“Name your price.”

Auntie Wang looks at me thoughtfully. “Your sense of taste was purchased at quite a high price. I can only imagine how the others will sell. However, I must caution you: once a bargain is made, you can never go back.”

I take a deep breath. “Look, whatever you did with your mumbo jumbo, it helped me write. And now I need more. In fact, I need everything you can give me to make sure that I’m the best.”

“That is a steep request, and for that, you must pay a price that I do not think you can afford. Not even I would bargain my soul for such a paltry thing.” She taps her finger against her chin. “However, I can make sure that you will never want for anything in this regard. But are you willing to pay?”

I drum my fingers against the glass surface of the counter. A part of me is trying to pull away, pretending this is a bad dream. I can go back home, go back to a normal job where Jeff constantly knows better, where he is the prized staff member and Alice glaring at me over her morning coffee, wondering what she has done to be saddled with the likes of me. A place where I can enjoy a bagel with cream cheese, a bag of sour cream potato

chips, where I can still taste butter melting on my lips, the salty tang of another's kiss. Where I am normal. Where I am not special.

And then another thought takes over: a great black creature, serpentine, hissing angrily. How dare I even think for a moment that I would want to go back? How can I not take this chance at something more than what has been given to me? My mind is surrounded in a scarlet haze, rising like a fire, feeding on the dreams I've had since I was twelve. I can be special, I tell myself.

The other voice is now feeble and weak, a dissonant tone. I push it away, lock it behind an iron door. The creature flashes a sharp-toothed grin and coils around the space inside my mind, pleased, replete.

Auntie Wang looks at me as though she is satisfied. "Very well. I will make this for you. But after this, you will never see me again."

I nod and smile. "Thank you."

I hobble onto the stage, carefully navigating the steps. My nurse, Maris, holds my hand, but I cannot feel her grip. Five steps to the podium, and shakingly, I turn and hear tumultuous applause. I wish I could see them, but this is the price you pay for greatness.

Once the speech is done and the theatrics of another university commencement is over, I tell my nurse to drive me back to the hotel. We are in Zurich today, and in two days, my agent tells me, we are off to Madrid, then home for a handful of weeks before I go on a tour for my latest book. I am tired and my feet are probably swollen once more. Old age is a burden more than anything else, and if I knew what I had bargained for over forty years ago, I would have included perennial youth as well. However, given popular culture, I probably would have been accused as a vampire—or worse.

I hear the car stop and wait for the door to open. Maris clucks at me in sympathy; I must take my medicines, take a nap, get ready for the evening. There's a publishers' dinner at eight and they're awarding me with another plaque for my achievements—in other words, lining their pockets with money. I shuffle in the direction she leads me, feeling the weariness with each heavy step. Even though I cannot tell soft from rough anymore, and do not care whether or not I am wearing perfume from Germany or France, I know, in my bones, that I am tired.

This was not what I wanted; this was not what I dreamed of. There is no magic in this.

“Madam, we need to take off your shoes.” I encounter an obstruction and realize that it is the hotel bed. Maris lifts my feet and I find myself horizontal, sinking against a rise of pillows and sheets. I wave Maris away and close my eyes. I am in a gray fog, surrounded by shadows of things I used to know. All the stories in my mind have faded, receded back to unmappable shores. They tell me I have made my mark on literature, critics say that I am Eyre and Woolf and Chopin returned from the dead, that I am the most important writer of my generation. I do not tell them that marks can be erased, that another will take my place, that I am already dead.

I grasp the sheets underneath my fingers, wondering if they are made of Egyptian cotton, of combed wool. I am incapable of luxuriating in sensation anymore: everything is dead and dull, cauterized by a wish made forty years ago. Everything returns to that place: the scarlet walls, the smell of camphor and incense smoke, jade stones polished until they stare at you, wide-eyed and waiting. I remember the taste of the golden tea, as though it came from some fabulous tale, and the frightening need to be something more than myself. I wish I could go back. I wish I could tell myself, my younger half, something about the world, about the choices she made, the choices she is making. But don't we all wish for something like that?

There is a flickering light at the corner of my eye. I wonder, irrationally, if Maris has left a candle lit somewhere in the room. I have never seen light since I wrote my third book -- that was the one that won the Pulitzer Prize. I could smell camphor in the room, and sandalwood burning. Slowly, I get up from the bed and walk carefully to the source of light. Somehow, the world is getting brighter, moving into focus, like a camera lens being adjusted by careful fingers. I wonder if this is hell, if I am being punished for my bargain with the devil.

There is a wooden door in front of me, carved in familiar markings. Here is the dragon, the lotus flowers, the clouds of heaven. I run my fingers across their raised relief, marveling at the smooth polished texture of the wood. I lift the heavy brass knocker and announce myself. The door opens and I step inside.

Auntie Wang sits at the edge of the counter, sipping a cup of tea. Her ornate golden scales are in front of her. I navigate through the bales of dried items and stacks of lacquered boxes and stand in front of her. Her jade necklace shimmers around her neck. "Hello, Amelia," she says to me, smiling. "Did you enjoy yourself?"

"'Enjoy' is probably not the right word." I am finally able to meet her gaze. "Why are you here again? I thought I would never see you again."

"Well, we have one last bargain to make. I remember what you asked for earlier: a chance to tell yourself about the decisions you made, was it?"

"I thought you said you can't go into the future."

Auntie Wang puts her cup down. "This is not about the future, but the past. But are you ready to pay the price?"

I look at her, and see the road stretched out behind me. The loss of family and friends. The loss of feeling, of scent, of sight. I would turn back the hands of time, gladly, for a chance to tell myself that happiness is not on this road, that it is elsewhere, somewhere, but not here. “What is your price?”

She leans over and whispers into my ear. A chill runs down my spine. But yes—I will do this. But not for her.

For myself.

I can feel her outside. She has found the door. “Come in,” I say.

She is small and slight, her hair held back by a piece of cloth. She is every inch the tourist: young and carefree, ready to take on the world. But I can see the sadness in her eyes, the need to be somewhere else, someone else, other than herself.

“Hello,” I greet her. “Welcome to my shop.” #

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