

The Wolf's Choice

I.

$v=Hd$ was the equation for the rate at which galaxies sped away from one another, the H standing for Hubble's Constant, the v , for the rapid volume of velocity. The third variable was d , representing distance, the diametrical disposition of difference. And somehow, these three digits summarized the universe into a trinity of letters, simplicity exemplified. It struck me, when I first learned the variables, how it would have taken a thousand times more energy to resist change than to accept it.

I'd spent eight months wandering through the honeycomb of Asia, shifty Bangkok, grand Beijing, contemporary Shanghai, futuristic Tokyo, all convicted in the nexus of modernization and unshackled faith. I was adrift, tugged and pulled by the gravity of solitude, a festering hunger driving me like a relentless martinet.

"When did you get so afraid of loneliness?" May, my ex, had asked a month before I left. "You used to love being by yourself."

She always talked about the beginning of time, the constant motion of the universe.

"Everything in life is us trying to reproduce that first moment," she said. "That frenzy of unsustainable energy exploding into a billion directions."

Was she trying to reproduce that moment when she poured Drano into her coffee? She melted her esophagus and stomach, bombarded her entrails with acid and left as the shell of a dead star. I became an imago mired in puberty, a roach who woke up one morning and found he'd metamorphosed into a human.

When I returned to my workplace in the States, I'd overcome the manifestation of my inner-turbulence. With the scalpel of a surgical blade in the hospitals of Seoul, I'd cut my cheeks, shaped my nose, incinerated my brows, elevated my chin. When I first took off the bandages, I thought they'd pulled a joke on me- I couldn't see any difference. Only after I compared my mirrored image with old photos from two months before my convalescence could I see how much I'd actually changed.

My first day back, several colleagues entered my cubicle, about to welcome me when they stopped, confused by my appearance. "Did Keith move seats?"

"It's me," I said.

"What?"

"It's me, Keith."

There was a momentary pause followed by uncomfortable glances.

"How come you look completely different?"

"I had plastic surgery."

"What?"

I explained in more detail. They weren't sure how to respond, staring at me for a long time, leaving as quickly as decorum would allow. For the next few days, everyone responded similarly, discomfited by my transformation. My actions didn't help the situation—I withdrew completely, unable to take part in their subtle machinations against one another, the politicking of leverage and advancement, cubicled alpha's ramming each other over email.

I thought I could find solace with my family.

"How could you change the face you were born with? It's a disgrace," my dad said.

"I needed change in my life."

"By cutting up your face!"

"..."

"Look, your mother is having a really difficult time dealing with this. We'll talk later."

My younger brother called me an attention whore who'd betrayed all my values. "Don't send me any pictures!" he shouted. "I don't wanna see the freak you've become." He and my mother held prayer vigils for my soul, calling members of their congregation to help me find my way back.

Back when I was getting surgery, they ran a psychological profile to make sure I was mentally fit. One of the questions was, what is heaven like? I told them about a dream I had- a big throng of people from all different religions went to hell. We were outraged cause we didn't know which religion was right and we wanted to know what happened. A horrendously disfigured monster came down and said, 'You just left Heaven.'

'What do you mean?'

'Hell is a factory to make Heaven- Earth- and we spend millions of years building it so we can live there. Before we go back, our memory gets wiped so we can forget the suffering we endured here. But we always end up destroying it so we get sent back to build a new heaven.'

Surprisingly, the doctor found the answer refreshing. "When do you want to start?" he asked.

II.

I was a programmer for an online game where everyone got to play as a customizable plant. Our company did well and a big publisher purchased us about a year ago. Immediately, they looked for ways to reduce costs while my supervisors started training candidates from the India and China branch. "We're training our replacements," they sarcastically commented, then taught them everything they knew.

Traveling through Asia, I saw the inevitability of the shift towards an Eastern labor force, their hunger and passion blazingly palpable despite working at a tenth of our cost. I found it difficult to attend meetings and engage in bullshit jargon to raise declining morale. What was the point when it was all going to be outsourced anyways? My supervisors sensed my negativity, stuttered directions awkwardly, their eyes peeking furtively at the contours of my resculpted nose.

It took them seven weeks to garner the courage to tell me they were making 'cutbacks.' And even then, they sent their lackeys to do the dirty work.

"We love your work, but we can't afford to keep you," the thin red-haired HR girl named Nikki, told me.

"It's okay," I answered.

"Thanks for understanding. Here's all your documents... Hey, I have a strange question."

"Yeah?"

"I feel terrible about this whole situation. How about I take you out for a drink?"

"Excuse me?"

She shook her head. "Forget it," she said, embarrassed.

"No, no. I- I'm free."

"Really?" she sparked up.

Nikki was tall with sapphire eyes, a gait filled with frivolity and taut sensuality. She was known for her elaborate dresses, her flashy business suits that vaunted as much flesh as they hid. Lightly freckled with flaring lashes, there was an exotic intangibility in her aura, a riveting sheath that could blind and tantalize.

"Let's meet at 6:30."

I went back to my desk, packed up. Even though I'd expressed nonchalance during my termination, I was disappointed no one came by to say farewell. I headed down to the underground parking lot with my belongings. Waiting by the valet, there was an elderly male with grizzled hair, a gold tooth, suspenders for his white collar shirt. He had ruddy cheeks and a pimple on his nose. I recognized him as one of our vice presidents.

"You too?" he said.

"Yep," I answered, surprised he'd received the axe as well.

He sighed. "It's all about numbers."

"I know."

"Do you?" he asked. "I missed one mortgage payment while I was off in the Bahamas. A day after the deadline, three of my credit cards were canceled. I spent four weeks fixing the problem, screwed up a big contract, and now they're giving me the can. Can you believe it?" He sighed. "What'd you do?"

"I had surgery on my face and no one wants to look at me anymore," I answered.

He burst into laughter, then turned grim. "Too much wit killed you, eh? Personality, charm, individualism — quirks of the past. You wanna survive now, be like a virus."

"A virus?"

"Symmetrical, methodical, easily reproducible, but still susceptible to improvement and change. The perfect employee."

"I guess so."

"You guess so?" he said, and a mad glint flared across his eyes. "You're a number, I'm a number — but I'll show them I'm not just any number." Around the corner, the valet was bringing a SUV. The VP charged out in front, arms wide open, about to get run over. I sprinted at him, slammed into his body, both of us rolling as the SUV skidded to the side.

"What the hell are you doing?" he demanded.

"Saving your life!"

"My life is already over! What am I gonna tell my wife? I'm just a goddamn number they replaced?"

“Being a number isn’t so bad,” I said. “It’s the most guys like us can hope for.”

He looked at me, said, “I’d rather die than be a number.” Then burst out crying. “Can you hold me?” he asked.

A minute later, the valet pulled up in the VP’s Porsche. He didn’t say good-bye as he drove off.

III.

Nikki met me outside our office building and we decided to walk towards a local bar.

We chatted about the charm of a childhood driven by infatuations, wondered why drugs had become so emotionally trendy, then pondered which new disease would end up destroying civilization.

“I used to work at an epidemiology office,” she said. “The disease center I worked at thought we were due for a big plague that’ll down the population in half.”

“Half?”

“Yeah, half.”

“Were there any diseases that were especially nasty?” I asked.

“Lupus.”

“What’s that?”

“It’s when your cells start committing suicide and your immune system makes antibodies that attack your own tissue, making your face bloat up like a wolf.”

We arrived at ‘Dash,’ a three-story bar filled with young rich singles. In Asia, I was used to people’s friendliness — you could approach almost anyone and strike up a conversation. Here, I saw the disdainful looks from girls who’d size me up and dismiss me, the millions of unspoken rules that were inviolable. I’d forgotten how divisive love could be.

Certain I was doomed to futility, I was surprised when Nikki downed three Long Islands and said, “Ever since I first saw you, I thought you were hot.”

“You did?”

“You know, I probably shouldn’t be telling you this, but a lot of girls are really attracted to you. Is it true you had surgery?”

“Yeah,” I answered.

"Well I didn't see you before, but it looks great. I had my boobs done and I've had a tummy tuck too. If it looks good, who cares, right?"

"Right."

"Why aren't you drinking?" she asked.

I shrugged, looked at the bar. Saw some ketchup and mustard.

"Wanna see something gross?"

"What?"

I grabbed bottles of both, asked for a cup, poured a mix of the two in.

"You're not gonna actually drink that, are you?" she asked.

I took the cup and downed it.

"Oh my god."

"When I was in China," I explained, "I had a craving for American food but everything tasted a little off so I started drinking ketchup and mustard."

She burst out laughing. "I've heard of people going crazy for their cravings, but you've just taken it to another level. Tell me more about Asia."

"Like what?"

"Something that sticks out."

I thought about it. "In Thailand, I saw a bird that got caught in a spider web. It was tangled up and there were hundreds of baby spiders crawling over it, sucking its life away. I felt so sorry for the little thing."

She put her hand on my shoulder. "Let's go back to your place right now."

"What?"

"I can't bear to see you sad. Let's go," she said, her breath reeking of alcohol.

"I'm sorry, I'd rather not."

She appeared stunned. "Excuse me?"

"I'd rather not."

"Are you kidding me?"

"No."

"I'm saying let's go back to your place to, you know," and she twisted her hips back and forth.

"I know. And I'm sorry, but I'd rather not."

"You really are a freak, aren't you?"

“What?”

“Yeah, everyone thinks you’re a freak. Why do you think we got rid of you?”

“There’s no need to be hostile.”

“You’re such a freak. I’m glad they got rid of you.”

I bit my tongue, stood up.

“Yeah, get out of here you freak! FREAK FREAAKKK!!!” and she stumbled.

“Nikki,” I said, helping her to get up.

“Get away from me!” she yelled, splashing her drink in my face. A guy with a crew cut and muscles the size of boxes rushed to her aid. “Is he bothering you?”

“Get him out of my sight!”

“You should leave,” he admonished, prince to the rescue.

“Nikki.”

“Didn’t you hear her?” he said. “Get out!” And he swelled his chest up in a menacing pose, clenching his fists.

I stared incredulously.

“Did you hear me?” he demanded.

“I heard you. So go ahead, hit me.”

“What?”

“Go ahead and hit me.”

“You crazy?”

“Yeah I’m crazy, and if you’re gonna threaten me, carry through.”

“You’re nuts.”

And though he glowered, I glowered back.

He shook his head, backing down.

I turned around. Saw him trying to comfort her as I made my exit.

Outside, I was fuming, the muted blast of hip-hop resonating through the street. Drunkards staggered along the block, ranting about misplaced desire, while swarms of women were being chased by horny guys hiding their loneliness with exaggerated machismo. It wasn’t that I didn’t want to be with Nikki. Quite the contrary. It’s just, I could still feel the embers of May shining light-years away even though she’d supernova’d into nonexistence.

I walked without direction, traversing aimlessly. While I passed an alley, I heard a shuffling sound, a pile of garbage collapsing on itself. I looked more closely. A scruffy dog emerged from the bundles

of trash. He was an ugly mutt, hair patched together. He crashed into the wall, dumbly falling over. Was he blind? He stumbled his way over and growled suspiciously.

“It’s okay, I’m—”

But he made several rapid barks before charging me, biting my arm.

I could have lashed out but didn’t. Instead, I petted him, trying to soothe his rage, calm his nerves — he was scrawny and I knew he just wanted food. After a minute, he let go, his anger sated. He actually looked guilty, wagging his tail and standing there helplessly. “Wait here,” I ordered.

He followed despite my command. I bought some band-aids and snacks at a store, tossed him scraps while I sat on the curb and cleaned my arm.

The dog nibbled on his food, sidled next to me. I stared at him, found myself in a talkative mood. “I went on a trip to Asia to change everything about myself, but even after it was over, I felt like nothing was different. It’s bizarre cause everyone’s treating me so differently. But I don’t feel different inside.” The dog stared blankly, tongue sticking out. I thought of an old tale I’d heard in China. During the life of every wolf, they’d become a human for one day. They’d live, sleep, eat, shit like a human. Afterwards, they could either go back to the pack, or change into a dog and serve humans, understanding how lonely mankind truly was.

“What was your day like?” I asked.

Peter Tieryas Liu has recently had short stories accepted for publication in the Binnacle, Gargoyle, Prism Review, Quiddity International Literary Journal, and ZYZZYVA. He’s worked as a technical writer for Lucasfilm and is a character technical director for Sony Pictures, where he’s worked on features like Tim Burton’s Alice in Wonderland and I Am Legend. This story is dedicated to Leza.