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BABY, YOU CAN DRIVE MY CAR

The only reason I went out with James in the beginning was because of his car.

I was sixteen, he was twenty, and he drove a BMW that rode smooth as velvet. (On such bases do the world's great romantic partnerships begin.) I loved cars, speed, things fast, the sensation of being wind-borne. I also had a tacky tinsel imagination: when I was older I was going to get myself a Parisian page-boy haircut, black shades and long golden droplets for earrings and cruise around in an open-top car making all the boys on the street corner go, Waah! This was the most complete antithesis I could think of to living with my mother in a crumbling post-war flat earmarked for demolition, where the corridors were so pitch-dark I imagined molesters to be lurking in the shadows. Small weedy men with hollow chests and nervous tics. Then again my mother belonged to the sterner school of Confucian morals, where school, studying and success were the ruling triumvirate. I escaped with a vengeance into a fake magazine existence – white villa and the sound of the sea in the morning. Which brings me to James and his car.

Then, he was just emerging from the NS cocoon.

His father had been ambassador to some West European country, his mother was a lawyer, he was entered for medicine; the world, as far as I could see, was handed to him on a platter, but all he did was to look at it with detachment through the black blindman's glasses he used to wear. With his shaved head, the glasses made him look like a Chinese Mafioso. "Eyes tell lies," he said; he liked to kid me in a dry, ironical way which I didn't think funny. Five years of being bounced around the globe had made him impervious to the things which excited the rest of us; in addition he seemed to have read almost everything and he had a habit of correcting me in a mechanical way that drove me mad.

"You're a bloody condescending know-all!" I'd yell.

He would consider this dispassionately. "Yeah, I suppose that makes me sound pretty gruesome, doesn't it?"

"You don't even bother to deny it! What are you, God?"

He never raised his voice in an argument, which was what impressed me most in the beginning, coming fresh from all-night shouting sessions with my mother. His self-control was pitched to perfection, partly because, I think, he didn't care about anything too much. He was also given to saying things like, "Frankly, I don't think the political situation in Warsaw will warrant a resumption of the Cold War

mentality,” which to me was plain showing off; in those days I suspected everyone of trying to be superior.

We went to parties where I was the youngest and didn't know anybody and guys with gelled rainforest hair and beaded sweaters would ask me whose kid sister I was. Every hairdresser in town would be there, frantically ululating in his clothes like a giraffe in the wind; models resembling Eiffel Towers wrapped in layers of Versace would come jellyfish-wobbling in; deejays with bracelets would darling everyone in annoying transatlantic accents interspersed with bizarre lah's. The menagerie was completed by every Bright Young Thing, would-be popstar and magazine journalist; the constituents of the so-called avant-garde scene. I don't know what James found in their natural idiocy and charming narcissism – some unthinking release, perhaps. He never confided in me. As for me – man, I was dazzled. I thought this was the secret to life, the universe and everything: the secret was hedonism and talking about the emptiness of modern life with casual references to Kierkegaard – which was not exactly the best training for someone who still had to go to school every day to listen to searing excoriations on the subject of pink socks.

I remember a party where a girl in a diamanté dress standing in the middle of the room suddenly burst out crying; the glass she was holding slipped



through her long chopstick fingers to the floor, while the tears, coursing down her face, dissolved rouge, lipstick and eyeshadow in long colourful streamers. I never found out why she was crying; people I asked later simply looked blank. When Joo Kwan disappeared after June 4th – he simply failed to show up anywhere – I ran into the same complicity of silence, as though they were all trying collectively to blank out some distasteful memory. You could fall through a trapdoor at their feet, and they wouldn't blink. In those days I seldom read the papers – and never the obituaries.

Joo Kwan was James's friend, a six-foot string-bean with hair like thatch and a wild, lopsided grin that showed one tooth; an exuberant madman obsessed with his own fantastical world. He took nothing seriously, found everything funny, even the army. I used to wonder how he and James got along: James was nothing like him; James also disliked the army. The dislike, according to Joo Kwan, was cordially reciprocated: James's C.O. thought he was an arrogant son of a five-letter word, the reason being that James had shown a marked lack of enthusiasm for confirming his masculinity by singing a dirty song on the way to Pulau Tekong.

"Oh, James can't pretend," Joo Kwan said. "If he thinks something's stupid, by his standards anyway, he shows it. A very uncomfortable person to live with. Actually," he added dreamily, "the only

reason we get along is mutual stinking wealth. There's nothing that quite binds souls together like money."

He liked to think he was jaded ("I'm *so* jaded, for God's sake") but he was one of the few people I knew who got high on life itself and especially the movies. He tramped after every horror flick, every Kurosawa and Truffaut screened here: "I love French films, man. No, no, I *adore* them, darling. One never knows what's happening. People walk in a garden and talk and there's a wonderful Freudian moment when a little girl's uncle taps her on the knee with a mallet. Perhaps he was a doctor, but the exact significance of the action, my dear, escapes me for the moment, lah."

His other fascination was America; America for some reason was dreamscape to him, an extended fantasy sequence from a movie musical; it was Chandler's L.A. and Martin Scorsese's New York, a place where things could happen around the corner without any particular wonder. It started with Kerouac's beat visions. Up till then he'd read nothing but Graham Greene and the post-war British novelists; after Kerouac he went on a literary rampage: "You know what I think of, when I think of Britain? Stodgy food. Vaguely left-wing soggy liberals who've been refined and civilised to a point where they don't know how to get a kick out of life any longer. America, man, America's a figment of

the romantic imagination ...

“So in America when the sun goes down and I sit on the old broken-down pier watching the long long skies over New Jersey and sense all that raw land that rolls in one unbelievable bulge over to the West Coast ...’ ”; those lines from the last paragraph of *On The Road* for some reason would make him laugh and cry and bang on the table: “That’s poetry, man, that’s poetry, what d’you need stanzaic forms for? Poetry oh boy is feeling!”

“Hark at the great soul-boy,” James said sarcastically.

“James always reads me like a book, don’t you? I’m Chinese but I’ve got rhythm in my soul and nothing to work it out on, so help me, brother –”

James looked at him with his quizzical, half-twisted smile. “You’re nuts,” he said kindly. “You’re not black, white, or native American. You live here. You probably have to live here for the rest of your life.”

Joo Kwan howled. “Well, for God’s sake, that’s it, don’t you see?”

I knew what he meant. *Ways of Escape*. James hadn’t a clue because nothing touched James, or so I thought.

“Tell me what you want to be,” Joo Kwan said abruptly.

“A doctor,” James said, to humour him.

“Not what you are going to be. What you want to be.”

“Can we cease this puerile conversation, huh?”

“I’ll tell you,” Joo Kwan said. “You want to be a religious mendicant. You’re nothing but a sad-eyed, ascetic truth-seeker with no truth left to seek. You were born in the wrong century, James.” He said to me, “D’you know what happened when James was twelve?”

“Shut up,” James said.

“He went through a solemn little apostasy of his own. We were both Catholics and he tried to practise a bit of Nietzschean philosophy on me, only we didn’t know what it was. ‘God is dead.’ So we went to this brother who taught us and he absolutely disgusted James by saying he was one of those who can never stray very far from God, whether he likes it or not. He’s tied, hand and foot, while we sinners have to pray like mad to keep within sight of land. ‘Snot fair, man. So what d’you think?’”

“Being Christian here is just a middle-class phenomenon,” James said matter-of-factly. He was tapping his fingers, his eyes narrowed and looking into the distance as if he saw some indefinable object we didn’t. “Why the hell are we talking about this anyway?”

“I’m drunk,” Joo Kwan said. “When I’m drunk I sober up.”

He asked me to dance. His dancing was peculiar, like a road-runner's energetic walk.

"Do you always talk about stuff like that?" I had to shout to make myself heard.

"Stuff like what?"

"God and stuff."

"God and stuff," Joo Kwan repeated thoughtfully. "Hey, what a great title for a book ... No, not always. But James – he's a very peculiar guy. I used to think, drop any of us on an island in the middle of the ocean and we'd go raving mad from the isolation in a week, but not James. Indestructible sanity. Frightening, man." He said, "Music's giving me a headache."

"So why do you come to parties like this?"

"Me?" He laughed. "I hate being alone. It's as simple as that. I'm a very uncomplicated homo sapien. I crave human warmth. In return I exude my fascinating charm. It works both ways."

I kicked him in the leg. "Ouch," he said politely. "So why do *you*?"

Why *did* I? "I want to have a good time. I'm sick of being like everybody else. I hate school. I want to die young. That's about all." I must have been drunk. My mother would've died.

"You like to think you're tough, don't you?"

"It's a good defence," I said airily.

"Poor James."

That was the last thing he said to me. About a

month later I overheard a guy on a phone say in exasperated tones, "I keep telling you, Joo Kwan's dead." Finally I got someone to tell me the truth. Apparently a grenade had blown up in his face in the army.

I didn't fully take it in until some days later, when my mother and I were having dinner and the wailing banshee sounds of the neighbours' Cantonese opera were renting the air. I burst out suddenly; my mother put down her chopsticks, stared at me judicially and waited for me to stop.

"So – you don't like the food, is that it?" she said drily.

"No; a friend died."

She looked at me doubtfully. She had a long Modigliani face, cheekbones high and protruding, her mouth small, closed and tight; her hair was pulled back into a bun. "So – was it cancer?"

"No – he was in NS – killed by a grenade."

"You know I don't like you mixing with all kinds of riff-raff from NS," my mother said automatically, "but you never listen to me, do you?" I had to get out; the food was choking in my throat. My mother wanted to know where I was going. Out. Out where? Out, out damn spot – out where Joo Kwan's death meant something more than the crockery on the table.

"Sit down," my mother said peremptorily. "Term is going to start and I want you to study." I said the

thought of studying made me physically sick and she got into her I Carried You For Nine Months routine, a routine not even the Marx brothers could salvage after the hundredth replay. “Look, look, I’d’ve been premature if I’d known how!”

In her special, quiet voice that’s supposed to tear at my heartstrings, she said, “How can you speak such a thing to me?” but I was sick of the sad old lie that won’t drop dead: you owe that devouring monster, your family, your mother, you owe us, you owe us! I don’t owe anybody a damn thing.

Somehow whenever I looked at my mother I seemed to see two thousand years of Chinese mothers’ sufferings etched in her face; she always had this guilt-ridden effect on people. Perhaps she had it on my father too – he left when I was five and never returned. My mother’s face goes grey when the black sheep is mentioned. My mother, you have to understand, is one of those people whose suffocating intensity of moral purpose could blight you with more devastating effect than a nuclear holocaust.

By then I was out of the flat and down the midnight-ridden stairs. I knew what she’d do after I’d left: she’d sit for a while composing herself, then she’d clear the table and light the joss-sticks for my father and me. If there’s one thing I hate, it’s being prayed over. It makes me feel like the sacrificial lamb. I knew I was being unfair, but I was past caring. I walked along, kicking stones, not thinking.