



~~DEATH PENALTY FOR A GHOST IN CHINA~~

~~A NOVELLA
BY KIM CANCER~~

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***FOR* 任雪**

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“What, no way this place was built on execution grounds! You’re kidding, right?” Marco asked in a cynical tone, his eyes thinned. Then he hung his head back down to his plate, picked awkwardly with his chopsticks through a heap of oily sliced cabbages slathered in red chilis and chopped garlic.

“Nope, it’s true, I heard it from Jim, the Chinese teacher who lives in our building. It makes sense, though. I mean, how do you think they got the land? Have you seen property prices in China?” I answered before I sipped on a metal bowl of egg drop soup.

I licked my lower lip, continued, “Property in China is like gold. The acres they got out here, this school, this near the city. We’re talking 10 figures, probably, US Dollars.”

“Dog, we’re like an hour from downtown,” Marco lamented and snorted loudly, his nostrils flaring. The spicy cabbages were loosening up his sinuses.

Man-bun Matty, the rosy-faced Londoner, chuckled at his naivete. Muttered something about “fresh off the plane.”

“An hour is close for me. My last school was two and a half hours, to only the outskirts of the city center. This isn’t too bad,” the Man-bun posited, peering up from his phone.

He wiped his nose with the back of his hand, sniffled, and continued, “That school was shuttered because it was built over a toxic waste site. The worst of it was at the football pitch and running grounds. Students and teachers exercising there were having bloody noses, fainting spells, and one came down with leukemia before the word got out. Bloody hell, I’m lucky I don’t take exercise. So, anyhow, after that, I’m okay with execution grounds.”

Man-bun was dressed, as usual, in Hanfu, traditional Chinese clothing, today wearing a shiny gold emperor robe, images of dragons stitched along its sides.

Marco was having issues processing what he’d heard, blinked his bleary eyes, and said, nervously, “Not me. I’m not okay with it. Like, an execution ground? There

has to be ghosts here. Evil, wicked ghosts... This might explain the nightmares I've been having since I got here."

I'd also been having terrible, menacing nightmares since I'd arrived in China, and visions too, things I couldn't explain, things I'd never seen before...

"I might have to call my mom back in Florida. She's into Santeria," said Marco, setting his chopsticks down on his tray.

"Is Santeria the same as Voodoo?" Man-bun Matty asked and snarled.

"Oh no, it's way better..." Marco said, his breathing turning stertorous, "I'm not a practitioner, but this place could turn me into a Babaloricha, alright."

"Santeria's more about syncretism than Voodoo, I think," I averred, checking my phone for no real reason, other than to lessen the weirdness of the moment.

"Do you think there's any poltergeists here? Evil dead that can suck you into your TV?" asked a snickering Man-bun.

"Nah," I said, sarcastically, "no one watches TV anymore. If there are poltergeists, they'd suck you into your phone.

"Hell, I think that's already happening to my students. Probably happening to us all. Must be poltergeists on Twitter, YouTube for sure, some of the comments I've seen there, almost makes me want to cancel my VPN..." I said, myself actually scrolling through Twitter.

While I was trying to lighten the mood some, Marco grew more uncomfortable, was genuinely unnerved.

Marco, the 40ish bodybuilder, Cuban American, was dressed today in his normal attire- an all-black Miami Heat tracksuit, and he rose to his feet, cried out, "The ghosts won't get me. NOT ME, DOG!" and he flung out his phone, started blasting Cypress Hill's "I Ain't Going Out Like That," sang along to the words, then slipped in his white earbuds and stalked off, still mouthing to the music, bobbing his head.

Man-bun shrugged his shoulders and we ate in silence, staring at our phones before heading off to our afternoon classes.



二

“What the hell are you doing in China?” my uncle asked me, belligerently, over Skype, soon after I’d arrived.

Well, I’d come to work, to teach at a university, in hopes of a better position back home...

The university I accepted a position at had only been open for 10 years, as a partnership with the Florida university system.

It was yet another American school hungry to cash in on the growing Chinese market.

Given the dismal state of most Chinese universities, and how desperate many parents in China were to send their kids to a Western school, having a Western school open in China made sense. And many such international schools had opened. From kindergarten through college, international schools were all the rage.

Which is where I came in. I’d been an adjunct professor, teaching cultural studies courses at Florida International University, in Miami, plus a few local Broward, Miami-Dade community colleges.

Life for an adjunct is no cakewalk. It used to be a college professor could score a tenure track position pretty easily, with the right credentials, of course, but these days, as even higher education has become part of the gig economy, tenured professorships are growing increasingly rare.

After scraping together a meager existence in my hometown of Miami, I decided to jump at the chance of a possible tenure track post that FIU was offering. However, the post wasn't in sunny Florida. Nope, it was far, far away from the land of swaying palm trees. Far as can be imagined. Far east.

In the industrial heartland of central China. In Nongzhou, Henan.

Not exactly my dream job. But, if I stuck with it for the entirety of the 3-year contract, I could, possibly, secure a tenured position in the International Studies Department back at FIU in Miami. It was too good an opportunity to pass up. Plus, it allowed the once in a lifetime opportunity to travel in Asia.

So, I sold off most of my stuff, packed up only a few essentials, like clothes, my computer, an external drive stuffed with eBooks, and navigated a maze of bureaucracy to attain my Chinese visa. Finally, on a cloudy September morning, I boarded a plane bound for China.



三

I landed in Shanghai, stayed my first couple days there, doing the tourist thing.

I was awed by the metropolis, its varied architecture, dazzling skyline, and endless cultural, historical attractions. It was like a larger, more crowded, more lit up, more neon, more exotic and more futuristic version of New York City.

However, my school and its surroundings were a far cry from Shanghai's towering, glass-plated buildings, Lamborghinis, and grandeur.

As I rode in the carriage of a bullet train, I was amazed at how fast the train traveled. It was as if it glided supersonically, flying over the tracks, was propelling like a bullet shot towards its destination. However, gazing out the window, I was dismayed as the sky got darker and grayer the further we got from Shanghai, and noticed that the people looked poorer, darker and grayer, sullener too...

Henan province is widely ridiculed in China as a backwater, similar to how West Virginia is viewed by most of America. However, more recently Henan has also been known for its factories and pollution, its smoggy skies of gray. The air quality reaching its abysmal apex in the bleak days of fall and winter when the pollutants leave the air with a flavor like a mouthful of car exhaust.

Having done very little traveling outside Florida and the Caribbean, arriving in Henan in fall and not seeing the sun, at all, was tough to handle, and I was experiencing seasonal affective disorder lethargy almost immediately, the initial elation of being in China subsiding quickly...

Nongzhou, the city nearest my school, was dreary, almost as crowded as Shanghai, but lacking much in the way of culture, only having restaurants, KTVs, clothing stores, phone stores, grocery stores, and mostly vacant shopping malls. The buildings were drab, identical, rectangular, strangely empty edifices contrasting bizarrely to the place's overpopulation.

Driving out of the city, en route to the college, I looked out the taxi's windows, studied the barren environs, its farms, factories, square blocks of dead apartment buildings. Along the way I saw scattered clumps of withered old men, cigarettes dangling from their mouths, the men seated on plastic stools, selling fruit and vegetables from baskets alongside the road.

I saw several active and abandoned construction sites and occasional small hills, many of which appeared to have been mined; the hills had large chunks missing, open dirt wounds on their tops and sides. Alongside the mountains were winding rivers of the most curious shades of brown or green. The highways we drove on were in pristine condition, however, newer looking than I would think...

The college's campus was vast, had green trees, flower bushes everywhere, many state-of-the-art square, curvy glass buildings, but, like the city, the campus was also mostly empty, much of it still under construction. Along the campus's perimeter were active factories and empty, hollowed out buildings, half-built office buildings and a colossally large petrochemical plant, a dark metallic superstructure, with twin smokestacks billowing steady upward streams.

It was depressing, the surroundings. Looked like a bomb had hit it.

But the air, the polluted air was even worse and had lived up to its infamous reputation.

I swear, the air not only burned my lungs and throat, but also ate at my mind.

Since I'd arrived in China, even in Shanghai, even after the jet lag had worn off, I'd had cognitive issues, trouble thinking straight.

And once I got to the school, after hearing of the ghosts, my first night on campus, at that pickup basketball game by the cafeteria, ever since then, I'd been plagued by insomnia, and, what's worse, when I did manage to sleep, I started to have wild, weird and terrifying dreams. Nightmares like I'd never had before.



四

The nightmares fit a pattern. I'd be in my apartment building's corridor, find myself in vivid encounters with angry, confused souls, mostly men, wearing dark blue prison clothes with a bar code like number on the front and back of their shirts.

They were in pain, these men. Physical pain. Psychic pain. Many were riddled full of bullet holes, and they were holding spades, trying to dig into the floor. Their festering, open gashes, flesh wounds were streaming dark red blood as they stabbed their shovels fecklessly at the tile.

In these recurring dreams, my teeth were falling from my mouth and I was spitting my teeth out like bloody white seeds from a fruit, and I'd be crawling down my apartment building's first floor hallway, hearing shrieks and grunts, seeing through doors, seeing angry, wild-eyed men, men with shaven heads, men in dark blue prison jumpsuits banging on the doors, doors that'd been chained, welded shut.

The men just slapping, thrashing, headbutting the doors; a couple kicking at the doors spastically, the men shaking like epileptics.

Then I'd see a headless man, lurching towards me from the end of the hallway. The man was in a navy blue boilersuit, with an open gash in his chest, and he held a pair of blood-dripping eyeballs in one hand and was lifting a butcher knife, wildly slashing at the air with his other hand.

Nearly every night, I had these dreams, if I could sleep. Which I started not wanting to do, because the dreams were so surreal and upsetting. I was also being awoken nearly every morning, sometimes in the small hours of night, by jackhammering, drilling that rattled the whole of my modest apartment like the voice of an angry God.

I reported the noise to the school, but they told me no construction was going on in the building. Other teachers heard it as well, but no one could locate the drilling's source.

I started taking pills, Xanax, so I could finally sleep and stay asleep. I'd read that Xanax intensifies dreams in some people. But for me it was the opposite. Xanax not only allowed me to sleep, but it also stopped the dreams. If ever I didn't take the pills, however, the dreams came back, even more frighteningly...

The dreams, the night terrors, always with me spitting bloody teeth from my mouth, crawling on my belly, sometimes through swarms of cockroaches scurrying about the floor. And those men, their sounds, shrieks, shrill voices, their banging, clanking on the doors. The headless man at the end of the hallway, the man in the hallway sometimes stabbing and slashing and churning the butcher knife inside his open chest wound.

I'd never experienced visions, dreams of the sort. And the visions began to bleed over, enter into my days. Diurnal sightings. I'd see the figures, at the top of stairs,

staring down from a window, in the distance trying to dig holes. They'd lock eyes with me and then vanish, go back to hiding in the smog, where I knew they lived.

I don't know why I told my coworkers about the history of the school. Maybe it was me who was evil, and I selfishly wanted to unhook the ghosts' claws from my flesh, pass off and stick the ghosts to others. Maybe it was that misery loves company, and I wanted to share the ghosts. Or maybe on a subconscious level I thought that getting the ghosts into the open would help dispel the visions and rid the ghosts, rid the insomnia.

But talking about the ghosts, sharing them wouldn't rid them. The ghosts would stay. They had jumped from my nightmares into my days. They had stuck themselves to me. They were with me, a part of me now.

Little did I know that soon enough, I'd be talking and lying with one of them.



五

As the term went on, day to day life, work was becoming more difficult- and more bizarre. Classes would often be canceled or moved to other classrooms, much of the time without the school informing me, and I'd have to search the hallways, searching the cavernous, mostly empty teaching building, looking for my class.

While looking about the building, searching for my students, I'd see shadowy rooms with emaciated men in tiger chairs, being lashed with a truncheon by men in dark black uniforms. Or sometimes the rooms were filled with equipment, machinery, workers seated in rows, wearing leg irons, assembling Christmas lights. After doing a doubletake, glancing back at the rooms, they'd be empty, the cavernous lecture halls filled with nothing but air...

When I did have class, the students, started to shapeshift. From humans to dragons. Humans to rabbits. Humans to rats. And all the different animals of the Chinese Zodiac. The students, the passive lot, who rarely spoke, would shift into sheep, or dogs, or snakes, and sit staring, watching my every move.

I wondered if they could smell my blood, my trepidation, as I attempted to carry on my lectures, seeing a lecture hall full of horses holding phones, tablets and pencils. They'd switch back to human when the bell rang, though, and I'd need to rush to the bathroom to do deep-breathing exercises just to get my pulse under control...

Breathing was becoming tougher, too. As the leaves turned, the air grew sharper, and I was beginning to notice even more pollution in the skies. The air, my lungs, were stinging like they were filled with acid. The air drier than bone, too. The air sour, like spoiled milk, and I'd have regular nosebleeds, cough up chunks of black, gobs of blood...

The rooms around the school, including classrooms were unexplainably hot or cold, even those with thermostats...

Although the campus was newly built, I was starting to find that some of the buildings looked to be 50 or so years old, moldy, with cracks running down the walls, graying and blackened exteriors, crumbling facades, and on some of the half-built buildings, I'd never see any construction being performed, the buildings standing bare as skeletons.

What's worse, one day after class I found the elevator wasn't working, so I gamboled to the end of the hallway, opened a door that'd been marked "Exit." Expecting stairs, my heart skipped a beat and I abruptly stopped in my tracks when I peered down and discovered that the door led to nothing, only air! Had I stepped a foot further I'd have plummeted from the 7th floor of the building!

I immediately reported the incident to the school. The secretary responded that they'd have a repairman look into it, and then she replied later that day, saying the repairman had found no such door. "Impossible," I said, but, sure enough, the next day, before class, I went to the same hallway and found that there was no door...



六

The drilling sounds in the morning were becoming louder and louder, waking me up every day, often around 4 a.m., if I could sleep at all.

The insomnia got worse. It'd grown malignant. I'd have to take Xanax, every night, otherwise I couldn't sleep a wink.

It wasn't only me. Marco, the others, they'd been looking rough as well, their complexions sallow...

I was starting to believe the school itself to be a ghost or maybe a vampire that was sucking away our collective life force, cruelly drinking away our vitality and sleep...

Marco told me after breakfast that the lecture stage in his classroom collapsed as he and two of his students stood on it. Luckily, besides a couple bumps and bruises, no one was seriously injured.

“I asked the school, three times, to fix it,” Marco seethed, glancing up angrily at the creamy gray sky as we were walking down a tree-lined promenade, on the way to give our classes. Even under the penumbra of sagging clouds, I could see that the lines on Marco’s face were growing deeper, especially the crinkles on his forehead. The dude had seemed to age five years in only the short time we’d been there.

Another of our colleagues was with us, Rick, a late middle-aged Clevelander with leathery skin, platinum blond hair and piercing blue eyes.

We called Rick “Rooster” because of the spiky shock of hair he had running along his scalp, which, along with his pointy, chinless face, sort of made him look like a chicken.

As Rooster was walking with us, he lamented that “furniture, equipment was starting to disappear from his classrooms. And chairs, new chairs would snap. A student, a skinny one, cracked one the other day and landed on his ass.”

Rooster went on, scowling as he spoke, “There’s been buttlords of roaches in my apartment, too. Not to mention the mosquitoes, and the stray dog that ran in once. There’s been rats in my kitchen, rats... Ugh, the first-floor sucks... There’s a gaping hole in my balcony, too. I keep bugging the school to fix it, but they haven’t yet. There was a frigging hornet in there yesterday, a massive one...”

“Hey, Matty, was it you who said that hornets and wasps would fly into his classroom all the time last term?” I asked, then swirled and wiped my tongue at my teeth, checking to see if they were still there.

Man-bun nodded, made a facial expression like he had a stomachache and told us that the roof caved in that classroom, too, and that it was a newly-built room, to boot, but fortunately he didn’t have class the day the roof collapsed and thankfully the room was empty at the time.

Man-bun Matty is one of only three foreign teachers remaining from last term.

Matty started telling us that these were the challenges of living in China and that most foreigners couldn't hack it, only survive a year or two.

Either the pollution bothers them too much, like one lady whose face turned into a pepperoni pizza, or they drink so much they can't function, or their demons take hold and they go crazy, literally, spaz out, run naked through campus or start fistfights with other teachers or students or security guards or they pack up, leave in the middle of the night, make a midnight run, or, in the most extreme case, there's a suicide, like the New Zealander who jumped from a building, and there was one Japanese teacher a couple years back who died from leaving his cooking gas canister on, died from breathing the fumes.

"I don't know if that was a... Think what's his name is living in his apartment... Don't tell him..."

Rooster stopped Man-bun there. "I guess I know why they were gruff about answering too many questions in the job interview. I was interviewed by the old fidgety guy from Tasmania. Someone said he's been here since the school opened and doesn't talk to anyone, except one or two Chinese teachers."

Man-bun concurred, chuckled, and said, "That's right. He's invisible. You'll never see him anywhere on campus except the bicycle shop where he pumps his bike tires. He practically runs away from other foreigners. The only time you'll talk to him is during the Skype interview."

"Maybe he's a ghost. He's one of them. There are foreigners in Chinese prisons," Marco said, his eyes lighting up, "But they're not having me. Nah, dog. I'm not ghost food. I'm not their doll. I'm fighting back. I'm starting Santeria. These ghosts might be bandits, bandits on the road, pirates on the rivers... But they'll see. I'll fight their fire with fire. Magic with magic!"

Marco kicked at a pile of litter on the ground and a plastic bottle launched off into the smog. The four of us parted ways, off to our respective classes.

Looking down at the pile of litter that Marco had kicked, instead of an empty Styrofoam box, I saw a pool of blood, with a beating human heart in its center, encircled in ice cubes.

I blinked my eyes twice, and the ice, heart, blood, and Styrofoam box were all gone.

I shook my head and flinched as an old pot-bellied security guard brushed by me, only inches away, riding on a creaky bicycle. The security guard snarled at Rooster and hocked up and launched a gob of spit at the ground.



七

The drilling had stopped, thankfully, but I hadn't slept in three days. After what I saw in my dreams, sleep wasn't what I wanted. Sleep or no sleep, though, I was thinking there'd be more, more ghosts, worse ghosts, and that the ghosts were probably hungry...

Lacking sleep left me both alive and dead. I felt like my head was slurry, wet and sloshy with cytoplasm. I lay in bed, supine, awake to the night, reading my phone in the dark, my room black as marble.

A story popped up on my phone, a local news story of three people drowning to death in a manure pit. A maintenance worker, trying to fix a septic tank, had

plunged in, and two others rushed to help him, and they too were swallowed into the pit of shit.

Reading it provided me a guilty bit of schadenfreude. Despite my current woes of ghosts, insomnia, and filthy air, there was really nothing I could imagine worse than drowning, suffocating in a pool of shit. That being how one leaves the Earth. What a horrific fate.

Perhaps a “ghost of shit,” a violent, vengeful janitor’s ghost sucked them in. What a bilious, malicious spirit that must be...

Then another story popped up. An anonymous news article from tomorrow, written in the future tense, saying there’s going to be a dreadful traffic accident. The article didn’t mention ghosts, but I knew the spirits would have something to do with it.

The story said that a deliveryman on a motorbike, next to our school, will die in gruesome fashion, be run over by a semitruck. Aghast, I couldn’t read past the opening paragraph and clicked off my phone, popped a handful of pills and drifted off...

Sure enough, the next day, walking back from class, I witnessed the aftermath, the carnage, the young deliveryman’s body split in two halves. I’d seen plenty of gore on TV, movies, in video games, but seeing it firsthand would be forever etched into the eyes of my mind.

I’d suspected it’d been ghosts on the roads. The ghosts must have caused the truck driver to swerve suddenly. I bet the apparitions I’d seen had escaped from my dreams and were appearing on the roads, day and night, frightening drivers, causing accidents...

After witnessing the grisly accident scene, I had to take a walk around campus to get my head right. I passed by the Tasmanian in the small park near the gymnasium, eyed him solemnly. He was seated on a stone bench, under a bamboo tree, practicing calligraphy, Chinese characters. He looked so Zen, so peaceful drawing them.

So, I decided I’d copy his practice. Went to the stationery store, bought a brush and paper and then went back to my apartment, began writing my own

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