

In July We Are All Children

BY SHEUNG-KING

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HOTEL 2.0

I and the durian next to the bed are the only things that do not belong to this hotel room. I stare at the durian. It seems further away than it actually is.

It is 8:30 a.m.

I am awake. Am I awake? I am awake.

I'm not hungover—quite the opposite. Everything, not only the durian, seems further away, and clearer. My feet touch the floor. Though I am performing the familiar motions of standing up, my movements feel far away, as if my mind—or rather, my consciousness—no longer interested in my bodily existence—is slowly retreating—becoming a mere observer of this skinny Chinese body of mine.

I open the blinds. Planes take off, like secrets no one remembers ever existed, they disappear silently into the polluted sky. I place the tip of my index finger on one of the durian's spikes. I press into it. I bleed.

This is how it feels to be effectively turned off.

2

PAGODA

She doesn't text me until the night before her flight back to Singapore. It is almost midnight, half an hour before July 1st.

We go to a 7-Eleven, pick up six San Miguel tall cans and a pack of Marlboro menthol lights before heading to a pagoda in a park nearby.

"You're not so skinny anymore," she says.

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BEFORE

"And you make me feel empty sometimes." She's telling me why she's leaving, moving back to Singapore. This is two years ago. "You're like a bag of air, but that's not the problem. I have nothing against emptiness. The problem is that you feel entitled to just being like that." She pauses for a bit. "Men are like permanently closed circuits," she says. "To yourselves, you're perfectly functional, so you don't bother changing." She looks down at her feet. "I'm not disappointed. You're just another man." She doesn't look at me when she says

this.

I don't say a word back to her. I lock myself in the bedroom. When I finally come out, needing to take a leak, all her things are gone.

From that day onward, a hint of loneliness fills the air whenever I hear the sound of my piss meet the water in the toilet bowl.

4

PAGODA 2.0

The cookie she hands me tastes quite good for an edible.

"Are you high already?" I ask.

"I will be soon." She finishes the rest of the cookie. "Happiness is a cookie that your brain bakes itself," she announces, still chewing the cookie. "A cognitive scientist said that happiness, like a cookie, is merely a tool. When you are young, you always want to eat cookies. But once you get older, you realize that eating cookies is just an instrument to make you go back to eating vegetables. Eventually, you stop eating sweets altogether because you don't want diabetes. Happiness is a cookie the brain bakes itself."

"Are you happy right now?" I can't help but ask this question.

"Yes." She laughs. "I miss it here, though. I like being around flight attendants and pilots. It makes me feel like the world is moving. I miss watching the planes from our bedroom window at night. I miss the Indian restaurant your friend opened near the pier and this huge outlet mall. I miss this park, too."

Hong Kong is kind of like a cookie to her.

"It's so touristy, right? But that's how I feel." She takes out her phone to show me a grey cat with brown eyes. "Her name is Soup."

We never got a cat. She always wanted one, I knew, but I didn't want the responsibility, so I told her I was allergic, which is not a complete lie.

"She has beautiful eyes," I say, staring at an image of Soup.

"Can I ask you a question?" Her tone is slightly more serious. "If I ask you to come with me tomorrow, to Singapore, would you?"

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BEFORE BEFORE

She orders vermicelli kheer with coconut milk for dessert. We're having dinner at the small Indian restaurant on a pier in Tung Chung, not too far away from our apartment. There's no air conditioning, only blue ceiling fans. There aren't any lights either. The dining area is lit by electric candles on the tables. The candles are from Ikea. We have some at home

too, on our balcony. Occasionally, fishermen arrive at the pier. We watch from the window as they dock, the waves nudging their little blue fishing boats gently against the shoreline rocks.

“Let’s play a game!” She suggests. “It’s called inconsistent lists. So, let’s say, if the topic is ‘film,’ then we have to make a list of favourite films that are entirely unrelated. Imagine that someone with no personality whatsoever is creating this list.

Inconsistent list of top five films:

- 1) *Sex and the City 2*, 2010
- 2) *Human Flow*, 2017
- 3) *Triumph of the Will*, 1935

“No!” she says. “*Triumph of the Will* is too much of the opposite of *Human Flow*. It’s too binary, not random at all. It needs to be more complex.”

“What about *Human Centipede*?”

- 3) ~~*Triumph of the Will*, 1935~~ *The Human Centipede*, 2009
- 4) *Ponyo*, 2008
- 5) National Geographic

Inconsistent list of top five favourite actors:

- 1) Ronald Reagan
- 2) Tobey Maguire
- 3) Lupita Nyong’o
- 4) Bruce Lee
- 5) Kourtney Kardashian

“Something’s not working,” she says. “This list isn’t good enough. Maybe they’re all too famous? I don’t know. I just feel like something’s off, in a bad way...”

“Let’s try musicians,” I suggest.

- 1) LL Cool J
- 2) Yo-Yo Ma
- 3) Limp Bizkit

4) Arianna Grande

5) G-Dragon

“You’re kind of good at this,” she says.

A little tipsy from the bottle of red wine we finished, we continue making consistently inconsistent lists as we walk home.

Inconsistent list of top five favourite fashion brands:

1. FILA
2. Kirkland Signature (by Costco)
3. Dior
4. Hollister
5. NASA (by NASA Depot, apparel for space lovers)

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HOTEL 3.0

If someone uploads my consciousness to a machine, I would prefer to be a rumba. My purpose would be clear: to clean.

Warm water from the shower lands on the back of my neck and runs down my spine. I come to a realization (based on a feeling): my identity is not fixed. I might have known this all along, but now, I am more aware of the fact that my memories, on which my identity is based, are something intangible. My identity feels stable only because of the illusion of continuity.

The tool, I realize, that binds the ‘me’ from this hotel room and the ‘me’ from the day I wrote the lists is the thought/illusion/belief that I have memories of him (the me who wrote the lists) and her (of course). This sense of continuity between events is, much like happiness, a cookie, nothing more than a tool that allows me to convince myself that I am myself. I am a machine that thinks that it is me, nothing more. When my body stops functioning, someone can upload all my memories (my data) to a machine (a rumba) that thinks that it is me (continuity).

Continuous existence is an illusion in the first place. At the core, we’re all completely empty.

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PAGODA 3.0

“Do you like Hong Kong?”

“I don’t know.” It’s my honest answer.

“Let me ask you this then,” she takes a swing of beer. There are only two cans left.

“Are you afraid of death?”

“Sure.” I light a cigarette.

“And why’s that?”

“I don’t know what happens after.”

“Why do you care about what happens after? You’ll be dead. And regardless of what happens, you can’t change it. Let me ask you another question. What’s your identity?”

“My identity?” I pause for a bit. “I’m twenty-eight. I work as an in-house translator for an ad agency,” I take a drag. “I’m working on the subtitles for a shampoo commercial right now and another one for hair growth products. I’m Chinese, a male, I live alone in a private apartment complex near the Airport. I have a mortgage, which my parents helped me take out three years ago. I don’t have any pets and I visit my parents in Macau once a month.”

“So, when you die, you lose your identity as a Chinese male who works as a translator and has parents. Am I right?”

“I suppose.”

“No offence, but who cares about that? A Chinese male? So, there are like, what, at least three million of you in Hong Kong alone?” She quickly asks Siri to confirm this. There are 3.4 million. “If you were, let’s say, the Panchen Lama, then that would be a factor that actually matters.”

“Why specifically the Panchen Lama?”

“He identifies as a form of government, a part of an institution, not just a person,”

She says. “His identity continues, regardless of what body it is in. Identifying characteristics such as gender are supposedly irrelevant. You identifying as a Chinese man means nothing to anyone. Your identity doesn’t need to live on; there’s no reason for it to. We maintain an identity to achieve meaning—to do the things we’re supposed to do before we die. And what we’re supposed to do—our meaning—something programmed inside us—exists inside us as things we *feel* we need to do. We want to accomplish those things regardless of if we can pin down what exactly those things are. If you fear death, what you’re actually afraid of is not accomplishing some of those things. So, what do you want to accomplish? Can you accomplish it by staying in Hong Kong? If not, what reason is there for you to not come with me?”

“I’ll come with you,” I say abruptly, surprising even myself. My mind becomes

"I don't know what happens after."
I don't know what happens after."

blank. "I'll come with you to Singapore. I can finish my work wherever I am. But I need a little more time. Give me a month. I'll come to meet you then."

"I'm asking if you would come with me tomorrow." She puts a cigarette between her lips. "My flight is at noon. I can get you a ticket," she says, lighting the cig. "We're ten minutes away from the airport. There's a shuttle that takes us to the terminal at 10 a.m. If you're coming, meet me in the hotel lobby at 9:45." She stands up. "You don't have to answer me now." She stretches her back, arching backwards. "Ah! It feels so nice when it rains here. It's always too hot." She starts skipping around the small puddles in the pagoda, cigarette in hand. "I love puddles. Puddles are great."

"Yeah," I say. She loves puddles and thick socks. She prefers wearing socks at home over slippers.

"I'll tell you a secret." She leaps on the bench, standing over my head, looking down at me. "I learned to turn myself off." She takes a drag of her cigarette.

I don't quite register what she is saying.

"There's a way you can meditate to a point where you still have self-awareness. As in, you will still know everything you know and know that you are you but not identify with change of any kind," she says. "You can be effectively turned off. Monks spend months trying to accomplish something like this. I have an easier way to do it. It's not quite the same, but it works. Want to try?"

"How does it work?"

"Minds are software states. Software doesn't need an identity. Software, in a sense, is nothing more than a set of principles capable of maintaining identity. And the maintenance of identity is not terminal but instrumental to something else. You identifying as whatever you identify as right now is nothing more than you trying to use this identity as a starting point to accomplish your goals. This, in a sense, is where the meaning of life comes from. I can, so to speak, reprogram that. Your 'meaning,' whatever it is at this moment, cannot be deleted but can be delinked from your current identity. You can lose the desire to change yourself in order to accomplish your goal. You and your current identity will be completely intact and you will become indifferent to change of any kind. Isn't that quite beautiful? Perfect, even? Won't someone like you, a Chinese male in Hong Kong, want the ability to be completely indifferent to change?"

"I'll be able to do this whenever I want?"

"Let me put it this way," she sits down next to me, putting her hand on mine. "You suffer because you care, am I right?"

"I suppose."

"And to a certain extent, you decide to change or not change your behaviour so that you can accomplish what you care about, so that you will suffer less, correct?"

I nod.

"These things, to you, are linked. But for me, they're not. How I behave and my identity do not serve a larger purpose. In other words, me, my identity, and my purposes are

completely separate things. You know, when you take antidepressants, you can become kind of indifferent, capable of continuously thinking about what makes you sad without having to feel the sadness attached to those thoughts?”

I nod again.

“It’s similar.”

8

HOTEL 1.0

There is a durian on the nightstand, sitting still next to the bed.

“Our minds are nothing more than stimulators and experiencers.” She wraps a tie around my eyes and ties a tight knot. “Do me a favour, Mr. Yang.”

Mr. Yang? Why is she calling me by my last name? And my last name is Yeung, not Yang. She of all people should know. I am Mr. Yeung, not Mr. Yang. I am Mr. Yeung, not Mr. Yang.

“Imagine that I’m pointing a gun at you.” She whispers into my ear.

“What?”

“And stop speaking English. Speak Cantonese from now on,” she says. “I’ll start speaking in Malay. And remember, there’s a gun being pointed at your right temple.”

“知道,” I say, accepting my identity as Mr. Yang, and by doing so, accepting the reality Mr. Yang inhabits, one where a gun is pointed at my head, and only Cantonese is spoken.

She grabs my hair and puts my head between her legs. I hear a click. Does she actually have a gun? She presses my head down and brings her legs closer together. I start moving my tongue inside her. She pulls my hair harder. I raise my head. She slaps me in the face, and pushes my head down once more, holding me tight between her legs. This time, I let my mouth indulge in her wetness. I feel my movements becoming slow and more precise. Then, I start feeling cold metal pressing against my temple again. But the feeling seems to

She grabs my hair and
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her legs.
her legs.

be emerging from within me, somewhere beneath my own skull. *Our minds are nothing more than simulators and experiencers*—her words echo in my mind. She’s pointing a gun at me. She’s pointing a gun at me but I continue licking. The feeling of the gun being pressed against my temple is becoming more and more real. I don’t only feel the gun, its cold metal pressing against my skin, I also feel her fingertip gently touching the trigger. She *is* pointing a gun at me.

She says something, but what? I learned some Malay before, and had picked up some words and phrases during our visits to Malaysia and Singapore, but in Mr. Yang’s reality, all thoughts are confined within a single language, Cantonese.

She pushes my head away and climbs on top of me. My breathing becomes heavy. I feel the cold metal still, now pressing hard against my forehead, right above my eyebrows. She rides my dick. She holds my arms down with the weight of her body. She’s strong. I can’t move. She starts moving faster. The gun is still pressing hard against my forehead. She spits on my face and slaps me.

“我射啦。” The words barely escape my mouth when I ejaculate.

My entire body is weak. My blindfold is still on.

“I’m going to leave now, but nothing has to change.” Though I understand the meaning of her words, the language these words are spoken in escapes me.

9

IN JULY WE ARE ALL CHILDREN

Cabin attendants look too perfect— as if they don’t belong to the same reality. A crew from Emirates, dressed in their perfectly straight, mushroom coloured suits and maroon

hats are waiting for the rest of their crew members to arrive before boarding their bus. She's not in the lobby.

I am in the shorts and the windbreaker from last night. I'm also holding the durian. None of the elegantly dressed attendants even glance in my direction. Cabin attendant, as an occupation, will probably be automated away soon. I feel as if I'm in a zoo, looking at endangered animals. But then again, who am I to think that? Isn't my job also endangered? We'll probably not need that many translators in the near future.

The pilots always arrive last. It is almost 10 a.m. A crew from Cathay Pacific assembles in the lobby before boarding their bus, and a team from Etihad Airways follows. Again, none of them seem to notice me sitting right next to them with a durian on my lap.

It is 10:05 a.m. I watch as the shuttle bus scheduled to take hotel guests to the terminal departs. She's not here; this doesn't surprise me. I take out my phone, which is for some reason turned off. I think about checking if there's actually a flight to Singapore that leaves at noon, but I don't. I don't turn my phone back on either.

I came to the lobby, not to look for her, but to confirm something that I perhaps already knew. She wanted to turn me off, not because she wanted me to go with her. She turned me off so that I can continue staying here, in Hong Kong.

I leave the durian with the receptionist, saying that I found it on the couch. The young man, confused, reaches his hands across the counter and takes the durian from me.

July 1st is a public holiday. People are lining up outside restaurants, waiting to be seated for morning tea and dim sum. It is still raining a little, but the sun is out. A young couple, holding Starbucks coffees and an umbrella, passes by with their dog. A group of seniors are practicing Tai Chi in the pagoda we were drinking in last night.

The hotel isn't too far away from the Indian restaurant near the pier, a mere ten-minute walk. Ever since she left, I stopped visiting the joint. It's barely lunchtime. I'm not even sure if the place will be open today, regardless, I start walking towards the pier.