



Ho Lin

Trio: A Film Treatment

What follows is a jumping-off point, an investigation, a feeling out of possibilities, queries included.

Characters:

Two men, one woman, all in late twenties or early thirties -- their features will remain the same while the accoutrements (hair, clothes) change, contingent on the character that they are playing. Depending on ultimate setting (see below), they are regional but not indigenous, the kind of folk who may be from the same country, but are not local.

Setting:

A sleepy town, or area, near the ocean. It could be a southeast Asian island, it could be a small northeastern fishing town. Key feature: it feels out of time, or rather, unbothered by

the concept of time. A vacation getaway that has seen better days, or has yet to see them. Buildings and bungalows that are in disrepair, but can seem romantic if you squint hard enough. Streets ramshackle with rental bicycles gathering dust, signs bleached blue from the sun. A local single-screen theater built into the auditorium of an abandoned youth center, the air conditioning rattling like insane bees. A few locals who may play into the narrative in various ways: the plump, crew-cut man who by all appearances runs a travel agency off the side of a desk off to the side of a tea shop, but who may have more nefarious (or profit-minded, let's be fair, nefariousness may be an unintentional byproduct of ambition) sidelines. The pouty teenage girl at the convenience store who isn't really as sullen as she appears, just bored bored bored, far too narcotized by the nothing around her to be aware that her demeanor shields her from anything interesting. The elderly woman who runs the noodle shop (any place worth documenting has a noodle shop, a *good* noodle shop, natch), a bit gruff and smothering in her attitude, but it all comes from a place of love, much like the steam of noodle soup can be off-putting when it's fresh from the kitchen and hits you in the eye, before you come to recognize, accept, and savor.

At night, the town balances on the precarious edge between sleep and dream. A few smatterings of neon lights which can be interpreted as scuzzy in certain contexts, romantic in others. A single all-purpose bar/club/dance hall that may have karaoke one night, disco and glitterballs the next. The sound of the sea is a demure yet constant presence. Sodium streetlamps that give off a gutsy, grainy glow, and hint at mysteries better left alone.

The beach is not the happy crystalline sort found in travel magazines, but it does have a certain charm once you settle in under the wilting palms and it is explained to you that the churn of the water, all chocolate-brown, is merely due to a recent thunderstorm (once all settles down, the ocean will return to a shade short of azure, yet perfectly respectably blue in its own way, like the blue in someone's eyes after a long life, well-lived). At one far end of the beach litter is piled high, most of it carried in by the currents, dragged down to this point from all sides of the coast.

Moving away from town and sea, the roads wind uphill to the mountains, or at least you would consider them to be mountains if they weren't so lush with tall green grasses and bamboo stalks. During the day, in the moments when the sun is hidden behind clouds, these hills have the unreality of a children's book. In the evening, when the sun dips low and getting lost on the footpaths that lead through these jungles and groves becomes a very real danger, one can picture a pursuit, an escape, the possibility that all may be lost. And then there are the temples or abandoned spiritual retreats, choked with dead leaves, the tendrils of weeds, the stone steps cracked and all the more enticing because of it, the interiors always bristling with incense smoke no matter the time of day or year, golden statues (ancient Gods? Buddhas?) trapped in glass cases. And a little bit beyond these temples is a modest little tiled building that houses guest rooms and hot spring baths inside, the smell of sulfur burned into the walls. The proprietor constantly sniffs his nose, and runs the place with spectacular disinterest, so much so that one might wonder if he

does so to protect the secrets and whims of whoever comes to visit: Adulterous affairs? Criminal activities? Someone who needs to get away from something for a while?

Structure:

Omnibus film containing three stories. Each story will have its own tone, its own rhythm, its own ground to tread.

How will these stories be presented in relation to the other? Individually, one following the other, like a collection of fairy tales? Or will it take a fugue-like shape, with skipping and hopping between stories, much in the fashion of today's cinema, "post-modern" if you will, if one is to believe that such a thing was invented in our generation? One incident from one tale connected by causality, theme, or pacing to another, back-and-forth, like Canadian doubles? Will progress in all three tales lead to three distinct climaxes, all given their own filmic space and time to occur, or will all three be juxtaposed together within the final minutes of the overall scheme?

Possible timelines:

1. Story 1A – Story 2A – Story 3A – Story 1B – Story 2B – Story 3B
Advantage: Build of suspense, climaxes piling on top of each other
- 2.
3. Story 1 – Story 2 – Story 3
Advantage: Each story self-contained, more consistent tone/moods
- 4.
5. Story 1A – Story 2A – Story 3 – Story 2B – Story 1B
Advantage: Climax of story 3 can catalyze and contrast with conclusions of story 1 and 2
- 6.

How tangible will the connections between these stories be? Will they be of the sly variety? For example: Perhaps our local travel agent is a benign, almost comical figure in Story 1, as he attempts (and fails) to procure travel reservations for one of the main characters, but in Story 2 his true intentions are revealed (local gangster lying low, connections with big men in the big city). Or the connections may be of a more thematic nature: perhaps a character from Story 1 desperately wants to be someone else (a person of means, a person with a mission, a person without responsibility) and becomes that person in Story 3.

Or perhaps it is not necessary to settle on one method of delivery – one can create a trio of films, each of which uses one of the structures noted above, much like an art installation that can be viewed from different angles.

Music:

Will the soundtrack come from a single artist? Depending on the approach below, highlighted music from a particular artist or group would provide unity over the course of the film. Or perhaps a certain song can be performed by different artists for each story, giving a particular flavor to each (see note with Story 2).

Story 1 will make use of diegetic sound. The faraway cries of seagulls. The tinny, high-EQ music from a boom box on a café table. The spluttering trucks that lumber down the town's main street, ten years too old and carrying a few hundred pounds too much weight. The peculiar invigorating *crack* of sandals on a gravel road. The stereophonic *whoosh* of the wind at night, as it moves from right to left, from sea to shore. Does Story 1 conclude with a musical piece that rises above the ambience? Something minimal like Avro Pärt or Harold Budd? Or a long-underrated pop song? Perhaps the concluding music has an ironic twist, with a character commenting early on how he or she hates pop songs, yet finds himself or herself pulled into the emotions of the moment when the song plays on the end, first on the radio, then expanding into full fidelity.

Story 2 will have a more aggressive soundtrack, propulsive and introspective in equal measure, underscoring the action, or pushing it to the brink of parody, given the characters' potential delusions in this segment. Perhaps the defining song of Story 1 returns, but in a different variation. Think of the theme in Altman's *The Long Goodbye*.

Story 3 will fall between the approaches of Story 1 and 2 – mostly ambient and environmental sound for the most part, with music during the flashback sequences and the conclusion. Or will Story 3 be a musical, to match the more operatic scope? One can see a finale in which all the townspeople join our main characters in a bustling, swooping number that carries them through the streets and out to the seashore for the finale.

Cinematography:

Story 1: Naturalistic in lighting, with framing mostly medium shots. Long tracking shots following the characters as they move in and out of each others' orbits.

Story 2: Fast-paced, shots and sequences timed with the action or comedy on screen. Aggressive cuts and pans. Close-ups and dutch angles allowed.

Story 3: Saturated with color and shadows, the story takes place within the span of a single evening. Faces prevail over surroundings, to the point that every blurred movement in the background could be a whispering curtain, a figure that may or may not exist.

Synopses:

Story 1: Interval

Running forward, or away? Or learning to enjoy standing still?

Spring, verging on summer. A woman (female lead) has arrived in town, alone, burdened with a beat-up backpack and a digital SLR camera that can take photos and video. From the outset it is apparent she is running away from something, or at least avoiding it. Her cell phone is always buzzing, with an insistently annoying pop song as its ring tone, but she never turns it off. Every time it rings she regards it as something she has stumbled upon, as if she is an amnesiac, striving to remember if she has left something important behind in memory and past life.

She wanders about the town, taking snapshots of everything – the bisecting lines of tiled roofs and sky, the shaggy street food, the scooters that zip to and fro. She tries filming some of the goings-on around town, but in a humorous sequence, she stations herself at various points, hoping for motion, happenings, *anything*, only to film a near-motionless street, an outdoor café devoid of people, a single truck taking forever to sputter from one side of the town’s central square to the next. We don’t see her in a hotel, or talking to the locals; she sits, she lounges on the beach, she loafes, the click of the camera and the ring of her cell phone the only constants. In one sequence we see her at the convenience store, picking up toiletries, studiously avoiding conversation with the pouty girl behind the counter, divorced from everything short of her bemused existence. In another she visits the local tea/travel shot, appraising the posters and brochures of other vacation spots, the plump man who owns and manages the place attentive, waiting, wanting to speak up at a few points, ask the relevant question: *Can I help you?* But he never does, and she never speaks. Often she looks up at a sky that is unchanging blue, in stasis.

After some time passes -- a few days we reckon -- another visitor arrives (male actor #1). He is also a traveler, burdened with a heavy backpack. He notices the woman, and she notices him, over breakfast, and they acknowledge each other, but little else. A little later, by chance, they’re both in the city square around lunchtime, eating food from the same food stand: he has chicken, she has rice and vegetables. He sees her taking photos of her food and his mouth curls skeptically at the sight. Not too long after, the woman stumbles across the man, who is violently ill in an alley. He tries waving her off: something bad I ate, he says. The woman insists on helping, and they both go to the local clinic, where the doctor, engrossed by the local soccer game on television, is slightly off the mark when he jabs him with antibiotics, the needle hitting a nerve, the man yelping.

The next few days the man is confined to bed in his hotel, and the woman stays with him, camped out on the floor, giving him water, making sure he’s bundled up with he’s shivering with fever. They don’t say much besides introducing themselves, the man thanking her, the woman demurring. *Where are you from?* he asks. *It doesn’t matter*, she says. Still her cell phone rings, still she doesn’t answer it.

Finally the man is healthy enough to be up and around, limping around (his leg is still sore from where it was jabbed with the needle), and the woman accompanies him around town. He wants to tell her where he’s from, what he does, where he’s going, but she refuses to let him do it. *If you have to talk about yourself, make something up*, she says. *Just pretend. We can be anything we want.*

And so they start making up stories about themselves. To the tea/travel agency man they present themselves as eloping lovers, undecided on where to go to settle down, putting sly, undue pressure on the agent to come up with the ideal getaway. To the old woman who runs the noodle shop (and thank goodness they don't have to make do with street food any more, it's noodles every day from here on out, now that they've discovered this place), they're long-lost relatives of someone in town, perhaps you know him? Caught up in the lie, they have to improvise, come up with certain memories, a certain age range, maybe one or two mutual friends, and by some miracle, the old woman lets out an *aha!* And steers them towards a lonely little house near the seashore, where a man lives alone (male actor #2). The local man has recently lost his parents and is spending a lone summer in the house where he grew up, and even though he has no recollection of these two newcomers, he is in the mood to share drink, talk, even one of the spare bedrooms. He asks them about where they're from, and the man and woman continue to fabricate, spin tales of far-off cities, of life on the go, of trains and laptops and coffee.

And so the summer passes, the three of them at the beach, at the noodle house, at the local bar/karaoke club/dance hall, not so much living out of time as much as ignoring it. They are now part of the town, part of the landscape, no longer simply observing. Their bodies grow long and tan, their smiles easy and unforced, their movements loose.

And then one day comes when the three of them are relaxing under the palms, one of the men lingering on a cigarette, the woman resting her head on the first man's shoulder, and it dawns on them that they're caught up in a moment of contentment. Then the woman's cell phone rings. The two men look at her questioningly; many times the question has begged to be asked, but neither of them have asked it. And she gives them a last look of understanding, of appreciation, of love, before she answers the phone: *Hello?*

Next day: The woman is packed and must return to whence she came. The spell broken, the first man has decided he must leave as well. The third man, sensing that perhaps he will never see them again, makes small talk about keeping in touch, *if you're ever in the area again...* Everyone is too polite, too grateful to shatter the illusion. They all make their goodbyes at the local train station, the woman taking the train, the first man intending to hitch to his next destination. For a moment the first man and the woman exchange a look, as if to say: *Is it time to tell the truth yet?* No, there is one last final impish smile between them. No truth, not here ever. No need for it.

And the first man walks off down the road, whistling to himself, his limp all but gone, while the local man sits in the noodle shop and chats with the old woman who runs the place, both of them forever part of the town. On the train, the woman looks through the photos she has taken, all of them from her first few days in town; they all look alien, unnatural. She comes across a final photo she took of the beach, before she met either of the two men: in the shot, the beach is empty, the palm trees lolling, the sea frozen just beyond. She closes her eyes and sees the three of them under the trees, their backs to the person taking the photo, eternally unknowable, looking out to sea, which is now rolling, cresting.

Story 2: Intermezzo

In the end, who is who?

Sweltering summer weather, noir-like with sweat. A man (male actor #2) has arrived in town, alone, his eyes hawk-like and on the lookout for trouble. Carrying beat-up luggage, he is dressed simply and formally – black dress shirt, slacks, leather shoes. He has been on a long trip, in search of something. He is meticulous in everything – the snap of his wrist to consult the time, the notes he writes to himself in tidy shorthand, the way he hangs his clothes in the hotel closet, each item equidistant from the next. Within moments he stows his gear, changes into a relaxed tropical shirt, and heads out into town, armed with small notepad and camera. At first glance, he might appear to be a hard-boiled man with a soft-boiled conscience, or a hired gun (itinerary of an assassin, perhaps?).

No, not really. He is on mission, true, but he is also indulging in roleplaying -- a secret man in a secret locale, at least that's how he approaches it. We see the streets through his eyes, pregnant with surprise, excitement, mystery. The man down the block could be a spy. [To us, it's clear he's just a drunk.] The locals regard him with curiosity, in the way that locals will eye any visitor who is calibrated differently than everyone else. He tries chatting up the girl at the convenience store, expecting her to take a shine to him, and it is true he is not without a bit of charm, even if it's of the overeager puppy-dog sort, but the girl continues to pop her bubble gum and stare at her magazine on the counter.

That chewing gum you like will come back in style, he jokes.

What? she says.

It's from Twin Peaks. The TV show.

Oh. Unimpressed.

And yet: this man is troubled by something. He receives a one-sided call, from someone in the city, we gather, someone who's not shy about browbeating him. *A whole day in town and you haven't found her? God, I wish you were at least a piece of shit, because then maybe she'd slip on you and you'd find her that way!* It is clear the man is here because he's been ordered to come, as repayment for a debt owed. Something shady, or something that began innocently and has turned shady. The man grits his teeth as he responds obsequiously to the barker on the other end of the phone.

The manager at the tea shop/travel agency is his local contact. They have met before; a tinge of antagonism lingers between them, even though their conversation is polite enough. Apparently the manager owes the man's boss a few favors -- a past payment was sidetracked, deferred, capitalized on with interest, and not repaid. Even though the man has been instructed to lean on the manager if necessary, he lacks the stomach for it, and the manager soon catches on, transforming their tête-à-tête into a kvetch session as he rails about their "big boss man." The man is too glum to halt this stream, and it is almost

a relief when the manager offers him ginseng tea. Finally the point is reached: Have you heard anything about this woman? *Try the local noodle shop* is the manager's advice. *Everyone ends up at the noodle shop.*

It is evening, and the man arrives at the noodle shop. A woman (female lead) is eating there, facing towards the door, looking at nothing. She's dressed like a local, and moves slowly like the rest of them. He eats silently, watching her, even as the old woman who runs the shop gets nosy and peppers him with questions: *Where you from? What you doing here? You wanna talk to her?* Alarmed that his anonymity may be blown, he makes a quick retreat, and waits down the street. Finally the woman leaves and he trails her down the quiet streets. He is entranced by her walk, the way she throws her hair out carelessly. Eventually she leads him to the local cinema, oldies night, and they are the only two people in the theater. Once again he is staring at the back of her head, and the sight is somehow haunting, even as the movie (a crime melodrama) blares at them.

After the movie, he trails her to the local club, dressed up for karaoke night. Some random tourists are hogging the mike, but soon they relinquish the stage to the woman, who vamps on an old tune, something from decades before, a sultry love song. She doesn't oversell it; instead she twists ever so slightly with the lyrics, as if channeling a long-dead star. Watching from a safe distance, the man is transfixed. *Veronica Lake, that's it.*

Leaving the tourists to howl their karaoke, she floats down the solitary road to the beach, her figure swallowed up by the dark between the streetlamps. He watches her walk right up to the edge of the ocean and station herself under a palm, gazing out to sea. A few bursts of light -- is she holding a flashlight? Making a signal? It's hard to tell from his vantage point. Soon the woman turns and heads back to town, and the man follows her back to the noodle shop, which is now closed for the evening. To his surprise, the old woman who runs the place lets her in. Is she a relative? Did she get paid off? No matter. He phones in and makes a report to the big man back in the city. The man is told to sit tight -- reinforcements will be there by tomorrow afternoon.

The next day: The man wakes up in his hotel room, bottles of beer piled high. Feeling unclean, he walks out, and for the first time, he lets himself relax into the rhythms of the town. He buys sunglasses, ditches his camera and notepad (which he has scribbled on assiduously as he followed the woman last night), and even buys a beer for the travel agent. They share a moment of commiseration, both of them making grim jokes about the big man back in the city.

The man passes by the noodle shop and is impelled to go inside. The woman is there, still eating and facing the door. He sits down and has his own meal, savoring it, unlike the night before, when he ate mechanically.

And then the woman walks straight over to his table, gaze unwavering, pulls out a chair, and deposits herself on it. *You're not very good at this, are you?* she says.

There's no point in even pretending to be something he's not, so he replies: *Sorry. I learned all my moves from old movies.*

Which starts a conversation about favorite old movies, and they have some in common, although they disagree about *Laura*: he loves it, she finds it creepy. Soon they're out of movie talk and she asks him: *What did the boss man tell you?*

He says he's been told she's the boss man's kid sister, and she's a little crazy, and has run off. His job is to keep an eye on her until the boss man arrives to take her home. Equably, she tells him that he has been lied to: she's not anyone's sister, she is no mentally unstable heiress. *So what am I?* she asks rhetorically, then answers: How about a former squeeze of the boss man who has something he wants, something important, and she is merely making a pit stop in this run-down little town, with a final getaway this evening, when someone will pick her up. The little sister business (sounds like a Raymond Chandler novel, she jokes) is just something to protect the boss man's reputation, and prevent other interested parties from intervening. Smirking at the tale, the man asks her to show him what she has that belongs to the boss; oh that's right she can't, because she doesn't have it. *Of course I can't show you, she snorts. I don't show trump cards.*

The man is still unconvinced, although nothing about her manner seems to suggest crazy. *I was hired to keep an eye on you until the boss man arrives, he says.*

And if I run?

Grinning at the implied challenge, he answers: *I have to keep up. I guess.*

Fine -- then come on!

And before he can respond, with perfect timing, she is out of her chair, out of the restaurant, and walking down the street. With a few stumbles, he pursues, catches up, makes a half-hearted threat about locking her in his room until the boss man comes. *If you believe I'm the boss man's sister, you're not going to touch me, she purrs. So come on, let's have a day. Help me shop.*

So it is back to the convenience store, where they pick up random items, including a bottle of vodka and a frying pan. *You need a frying pan where you're going?* he asks. *A frying pan has its uses, is all she says.*

And so they walk around the town, surrendering to the rhythm of a hot summer day, as she quizzes him on his past, what he's done, why he owes the big man. He refuses to resuscitate many details, yet the little bits of information he does drop suggest a life lived at the behest of others, thrown this way and that by debts and bad relationships, demanding bosses and girlfriends. He chuckles it all off in the tough-guy way he imagines Bogart would.

Maybe you should learn about doing something for yourself, she muses.

Nope, I'm too tied up to even think about it, he says.

It's simple. Watch. And with impeccable timing she jumps aboard a passing bus (which only happens by once an hour) for the mountains, he diving in just behind, but not without an unfortunate encounter with a closing door and his leg. The bus bops up and down, side-to-side, as it makes its way up winding roads to the nearby mountains, and there is something serene about her as she looks out at the window, quiet and content, even as the uneven bounces make him carsick. Just to humor her, he asks her about where she's going. She tells of distant countries, friends and opportunities, a chance to think differently, live differently. She imagines herself on a city street far away, someplace foreign and vibrant, amongst the human swam and energized by it, and we see her vision.

It is a dodge-and-parry, their dialogue, matching the erratic, uneven motions of the bus. He asks her questions, trying to gauge her sanity -- she throws back responses that don't confirm one way or another.

But she keeps talking: *So what happens when this is over? You just go back? Continue being the boss man's lapdog? Why not just start over?*

Eventually the bus comes to its last stop: an empty hot spring hotel hidden in the shade of a bamboo forest. She invites him into her room to relax; feeling a sudden attack of propriety (and not wanting to have anything to do with the boss's sister, if that is indeed the case), he insists on standing sentry outside her door, fully aware that she could escape through the window, but something about her makes him believe that she will not do so. So he grabs a beer with the proprietor of the hotel and they settle into easy conversation -- they're both from the same city, with some of the same circles as it turns out. *It's way more boring here, the proprietor says, but I don't care. We all find our place, and this is mine. The most excitement we get is when we make videos.* He shows off some hidden monitors which have video feeds of all the rooms -- *hot stuff on the Internet, you understand.*

The man bursts through the door of the woman's room to warn her, just as she is getting undressed. Taken by surprise, she responds by slugging him with the vodka bottle, which miraculously remains intact.

When he awakens she is watching over him, solicitous, and he explains the cameras. *Thank you, she says, massaging the bump on his head. Such a spongy head, she notes, then offers vodka from the unbroken bottle.* Both clothed, both lying on the bed, he still woozy, she feeling responsible and protective, they drain the bottle and observe the sun dipping towards the horizon, just under the bamboo trees, the room a patchwork of light and shadows. It is a lazy afternoon and they feel it go by, rolling with it.

Hey. Why not come with me? she asks. *Does it matter if you think I'm crazy or not? Just wait for sunset. I'm meeting my ride on the beach at sunset. Once you see the ride you'll know I'm telling the truth.*

Still he is not sure, but the prospect is intriguing. They talk about being on the lam, just like those doomed couples in classic movies, but it's never as romantic as it seems, it can't be as romantic. It doesn't have to be romantic, she says -- just comrades on the run. Even comrades turn on each other in old movies, he says.

And then his phone rings: it is the boss man. He has heard from the proprietor that they are in the hotel and is on the way over. Don't move.

Well? she says.

Emboldened, he escorts her from the hotel, but as they leave the boss man's sedan rolls up to them, and the boss himself (male actor #1) emerges, flanked by two thugs. After an indifferent thank-you to the man, he beckons for the woman to come with him. A short argument ensues; he calls her "sister," she denies she is such. The boss is solicitous, and yet as he talks away he pulls more and more frequently at his tie and starched shirt, sweat breaking out in the heat. For the first time, the man sees his boss's coolness as an act, just like everyone he has met has put on an act, including himself. She refuses to move, and it is a delicious moment, as all five of them frozen there for a moment, swamped by the late afternoon air. Then she makes a run for it, into the bamboo trees, and the boss man orders his men after her. The man follows his own course after all of them, figures blurring in and out of frame, everyone dizzied and seemingly in pursuit of everyone else. Dodging from behind, the man knocks down the boss man's two thugs, then catches a bright flash of clothing where the woman is running. He eventually finds himself at a temple deep in the forest, the faces on the statuary already darkened in late day, the woman on the front steps, out of breath and giving him a quizzical look, as if to ask, *Would you make up your mind already?*

The boss man has joined them. *Don't listen to my sister,* he says. *She makes up things.*

The man hesitates; the boss man snarls. *What are you waiting for, you idiot? Bring her over. Do what I told you to do, you piece of shit!*

That does it: he tackles the boss man to the ground, and an awkward fight breaks out, for neither of them are fighters, and fists connect with earth and the stone sides of the temple more often than with flesh. Finally at a crucial moment the woman steps in with the frying pan and brains the boss man. *Oh,* the man says, finally understanding the uses of a frying pan, as she grabs him by the arm and they dash to the boss man's car, which they appropriate, both of them free and giddy.

Down at the beach: the car has been driven off the road and onto the sand, where it now sits, sinking at odd angles. Footprints lead away in golden divots, over to those familiar palm trees from the first story, where the man and woman stand together, hand in hand, looking out to sea, waiting. We hear the sound of a motorboat, getting nearer and nearer. The sun is nearly down and we are in those few magic moments in which everything is velvet. The man nods in approval when he sees the motorboat coming in. Yes, this is it.

Are you ready for this? the woman asks. She has her arms around him, the customary prelude for a kiss.

I am if you are.

Ah. That's the problem. I'm not.

The woman smacks the man upside the head with the same damned frying pan. As the sand breaks his fall in a comic burst of particles, she hops onto the motorboat, her escape complete. He struggles to his knees to watch her go, the question poised on his lips, and before he utters it she answers him:

Come on -- I don't even know you!

Slowly, a grin spreads across his face, an acknowledgment of his own foolishness and an understanding of what he has to do next. For the first time since he can remember, he doesn't have a care. He gives a last firm wave in her direction, but the boat is already a loping shadow, lost amongst the light dancing on the waves. He turns and walks down the beach, seemingly to nowhere, the rueful grin still stuck on his face, and he looks at the sea again, hypnotized by it, and closes his eyes. When he opens them again he is on a busy street in a country far away, just like the woman was in her vision. Is this his vision or his future?

Story 3: Aria

Ghosts are alive.

If the first story takes place mostly in the light, and the second story takes place at all hours, concluding at sunset, then this story is nocturnal in nature. Sounds are diminished, or given fearful volume at certain moments, and the town has a lonely air to it that compels one to seek the company of others in warm little noodle shops, or surrender completely and wander off into the fog, never to return.

Autumn lingers, fog general everywhere. It is early evening, and a man (male actor #1) has arrived in town, alone. He is clearly a world traveler, in plain T-shirt and jeans, carrying a beat-up acoustic with him, no plans or reservations past the next few minutes. He has been sharpened by his travels like a blade, with all thoughts whittled down to practicality: find food, sleep, useful camaraderie. Within minutes he is inside the noodle shop, regaling the owner and her customers with a few songs, happy to appear boisterous and silly and *different*, the foreign traveler exploiting his foreign-ness. At the end of his performance he admits he has no money to pay for his noodles, but would be happy to sing a few more songs and entertain the customers if that will suffice.

For the old woman that runs the noodle shop, that will not suffice. Off to the kitchen with him, and make sure those dishes are spotless! Taken aback but taking it all in stride

(because travel is all about managing disappointments, in the end, and besides, if he works hard enough, maybe he can bum a room off this old bird for the evening), he settles in at his temporary gig as the customers leave and the shop shuts down for the night. He has been composing a song -- he has a few chords down, a few stabs of whistled melody that may stick, but nothing in the way of lyrics -- and it catches the attention of the old woman, who used to be a folk singer back in her day. *You remind me of my old husband*, she says. *Good for nothing but singing and having a good time.*

And what else is there? the man replies, and they both laugh.

The woman doesn't have many memories of past days -- *You get to a point where you start forgetting more than you remember*, she sighs -- but her recollection of music is good. They find common ground on a particular song and both sing it, not with gusto or bravado, but the way you might sing something at the end of a long day, where the breaths between lines are just as important as the lines themselves, and it feels good to get something out without taxing yourself.

And then both the man and the old woman, as if sensing it simultaneously, turn to look at the front of the shop. Pressed up against the window is a young woman (lead actress), looking disheveled and lost, her eyes pleading, her hand held up against the glass as if trying to push her way through.

The man and the old woman immediately let her in, and sit her down for noodles and tea. She is shivering, small and disoriented, yet she is gaining a certain calm, as if she knows what she must do. She is from somewhere else, and it has been a few years since she has been to this town. Some things have changed, and it is difficult to find one's way in the fog.

The old woman throws together a bowl of noodles as a lifeline, and the woman accepts gratefully. *I heard the music*, she says. *One of our favorite songs.*

You and who else? he asks.

My boyfriend. From back in the revolutionary days. Not so long ago, but not so close that it is fresh in everyone's heads. Slowly at first, but with gathering strength, she tells a tale: her boyfriend was an activist, and not one of those quiet ones. One of those college idealists, packed in a classroom late at night with like-minded people, drinking and arguing and pontificating and laughing, because we were innocent enough to laugh about such things back then. He didn't want to leave the city, but he knew he would be arrested eventually, so he came out here to hide with some friends. I came out to be with him on the weekends, when I could, when I wouldn't be missed.

We see episodes of her with her boyfriend (male actor #2): we always see them rooted in a particular location, as if they are physically a part of the town, inseparable from it. Lying on the beach, her head on his chest, picking at something on his arm. Sitting at an outdoor café, watching life move around them, lost in their individual thoughts. At the

temple deep in the bamboo forest, near nightfall, candles lit up around them, bundled up close together against the darkening day. Watching an oldie at the local cinema, both of them caught up in laughter. In the noodle shop, deep in animated conversation about something, oblivious to the immediate world.

Is that tea store still open here? she asks. We used to get tea there often. "Early Spring," that's what they called the local black tea. My boyfriend loved it, he said if he ever got in on the ground floor of the new government, the first law he'd pass would be to make Early Spring the national drink. Started calling me Early Spring just for fun. Now I sit here years later, and no one remembers him, and no one outside this town drinks Early Spring.

A final image of happiness: the man trotting over a bicycle that has seen shinier days, the two of them riding the winding mountain road into the bamboo forest, he mashing the pedals furiously, she riding side-saddle and eventually getting off to help push him forward, up the hill.

What happened to him? the traveling musician asks.

The police finally found him. I was with him when it happened. He didn't put up a fight -- no, all he wanted to do was debate them! Like maybe he could change their political views if he kept at it long enough. They took him away in a car... and...

A bad twist of fate: a wrong turn on one of those mountain roads, the car plunging off the side. Everyone aboard dead.

Maybe it was better that way. What if they made it all the way back to the city? Maybe he'd be getting out of prison now but he would be lost, behind the times, no place in this new world. She sighs. So now I'm back, years later, and I'm the same way. I don't recognize this town anymore. Don't recognize anything anymore. Sorry to trouble you --

She stands to leave, but the musician says *Wait*. He proposes they walk around the town together, if she's up for it; he doesn't have a place to spend the night anyway, and maybe if they stroll for a bit, some of the memories will come back to her. She agrees, and they head into the misty night, visiting the places of memory: the movie house, the outdoor café, the beach. On his part, the musician is caught between solicitousness, desire and curiosity, and can only drift slightly behind her as she walks, mute. Flickers of recognition cloud her eyes, as if intellectually she remembers these places, but the emotional connection has been lost. She is sorry she has wasted the musician's time.

It's funny, she smiles weakly. I thought coming here might bring him back, somehow. It was a stupid fantasy.

Wait, the musician says again. They are on the road near the beach, and just beyond them are those familiar palm trees facing the sea. He admits that he wasn't around for those days of revolution -- he was too busy traveling around the world, and he doesn't know

much except maps and music. But at least there's music. He starts strumming a song, something that dates back to those old days, a simple pop song, something that might be silly to some ears, and yet he throws himself into it, and for the first time, a laugh escapes her. *Thanks for taking me back*, she says.

Something is coming out of the fog towards them -- something squat and wide, like a creature with a giant lower half. Both of them caught up in the atmosphere of the moment, they grab each other like scared teenagers, rooted to the spot. It is not a creature; as it draws nearer, it is clear that it is a man with a bicycle. It is the boyfriend, dressed in the same clothes he had in that long-ago summer, with the same burning, almost cocky smile he had when he was discussing politics.

Finally found you, he says. *Want to go?*

Wait, the musician says, for the third and final time. *This is impossible --*

You can see him, right? I can see him too, she says. *It's a fantasy. Like I said.*

She embraces the musician, silencing his oppositions, and joins her boyfriend on the bicycle. They began pedaling away, down onto the beach, parallel with the shoreline. The musician walks after them, then breaks into a jog, and then a blundering run as he tries to keep up with them, but the bicycle gets farther and farther away, until it disappears into the dark and mist. Dogged, the musician keeps running, following the tracks left by the bicycle, and then the tracks disappear into nothing in the sand. He stares at the dead end for a moment before the waves sweep in and erase more of the tracks. He looks towards the ocean, down the beach, for any evidence of anything, and sees nothing.

Back at the noodle shop, the old woman and the tea shop manager are enjoying some cups of tea, having a laugh, as the musician enters. *Where you been at?* the old woman says in that lovely gruff tone of hers. *You haven't finished the dishes yet.*

Hey young man, the tea shop manager offers a cup. *Have some Early Spring.*

Sorry, the musician says. *The woman needed some help.*

What woman? the old woman asks.

The one who was here earlier. The one from revolutionary days, who told us about the boyfriend who died.

Is that so? The old woman looks honestly puzzled. *I don't remember anyone being here. But I forget things faster than I can remember them these days...*

Wait a sec, boyfriend who died? the tea shop manager says. *Back in revolutionary days? What was the girl's name?*

She didn't say -- but she said her boyfriend named her Early Spring as a joke...

No way. Impossible, the manager says, but behind his conviction is a bit of fear. I remember them. They came to my shop all the time. Made that Early Spring crack. But they're both dead. Police came and got both of them, they both died in a car accident. You remember, Granny?

I told you, I don't remember...

She was here, the musician insists. Come on Old Woman, you made noodles for her.

I remember I made noodles for you, the old woman snaps, irritable, and you still have to pay me for them.

She was here! Incensed and confused, the musician storms out of the shop, leaving the tea shop manager to stare at the old woman, the question in his eyes.

He was playing an old song, the old woman says. Old music brings up a lot of stuff.

Outside the tea shop, on the street, the young musician stands helpless, looking all around him at a misty wonderland that betrays nothing. Somewhere far away, he can hear cars, motorcycles, and even the crash of the waves on the beach. Slowly, he sinks to the curb, and sits cross-legged, his guitar on his lap. Something in him is shaken; his old certainty about things will not return. Raw and open, he begins playing the chords to the song he was improvising earlier, only this time he is not singing, he is playing a song for ghosts, something that requires no words.

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