



Death in the Big City

Ho Lin

1.

I was riding my bicycle in 95-degree heat to meet a date. Who does that? Someone who doesn't think of sweat and exhaustion and appearance, someone skilled in self-sabotage. Or my subconscious was telling me I had no shot. My date and I had met once before and it was like riding with a bad driver for the first time: even going straight-line down empty highway, you just know. At the office I put on my nice shirt before leaving and my co-worker Katie asked me what the occasion was. A date, I told her. Speaking it out loud made me proud of myself for a second. *Oh wow, she said, really? That's great! Ha, look at me, you got me all flustered just by saying that.* I didn't know how to take that. I wasn't sure I wanted to take it. I liked Katie, in fact I liked her more than the woman I was about to see, but Katie was engaged and it wouldn't do to think cruel, self-centered thoughts.

I was riding down Market Street where it crosses Taylor, Sixth Street and Golden Gate Avenue and everything gets confused, when a kid ran by on the opposite side. His arms were flopping and one of them held a gun, the gun pointing behind him and then up, going off like firecrackers, *pop-pop-pop-pop-pop.* A group of people were with him, running with him, away from him, it was hard to tell, no one seemed to have a clue what was *to* and what was *from*. I thought I heard

a scream, a shout. Whatever it was, it was too short. I didn't duck or flinch. I veered off Market, down Golden Gate, away from the scene even though Golden Gate was a one-way and I was wrong. I was shocked I kept my cool. I was even analytical: Why did the kid shoot in all directions like that? Was he high? Scared? Careless? Did he sense someone behind him, like a five-year-old imagines an invisible foe? I was still thinking about it when I parked my bicycle at the Opera House. I stood half under the eaves to await my date, weighed down with sweat, checking Twitter for updates on the incident, victims, whatnot. Pigeons flapped overhead and I paid them no mind until shit landed on my right shoulder. I had just enough time to find a restroom and wipe my shirt with a wet paper towel before my date arrived, and even with that there was no erasing the stink.

My date said nothing about the stink, the state of me, or me in general. She was all about the ballet we were about to watch. As we took our seats she recalled an old friend who was a ballet nut. He'd died from a rare autoimmune disease and today was the anniversary of his death. She was feeling it. What she didn't want was anyone saying to her *Life goes on* or *Don't cry because it's over, smile because it happened* or any minimizing shit like that. I could have told her about the kid with the gun and my brush with death, but with no resolution—Was the kid arrested? Did anyone die?—the tale would flop like fish at the bottom of a boat. During the performance a ballerina executed an amazing leap and *fouetté*—my date had just taught me that word—and I couldn't help but go *whoa*. Afterwards my date asked me about the *whoa* and I explained. *Oh, I thought it was for a different reason*, she said, which I took to mean she thought I was enraptured by the dancer's long legs, the split she did, the dripping sexual undertones. I told my date I hoped she was feeling better, and her wince told me no, she was not feeling better, feeling better was not the point, and I should have known that. To show I still had a shred of empathy, I asked her what her late friend was like, and she ticked off his compassion, his warmth, his zest for tackling every day as if it was his last. Did he do that on his actual last day, I wondered, not out loud. It occurred to me that he would have been the love of her life if he'd lived a little longer, and who can compete with that? So it all should have ended there, except it didn't, because we went out a few more times and nothing improved. The kid who fired the gun was never caught and no injuries were reported, so it all might as well have never happened.

2.

I didn't witness actual death until three years later, two deaths in one day if you can believe it. I could claim I was the one who could have died, but wouldn't that shortchange the other times I've flirted with death and just didn't know it? I was meeting someone in Berkeley for what was supposed to be the best bagel in the Bay Area, but woe to anyone who's ever had a New York bagel, because life is nothing but disappointment after that, and no bagel in Berkeley would change that. I was about to cross Shattuck when a rent-a-van clattered towards the intersection in

front of me. I estimated speed, distance, knew I could beat the van and make it across if I hustled. Some hustle across intersections and some don't, and I plant my flag on hustling, but that day, for no good reason, I stayed put. Maybe I was mourning the New York bagel of my childhood. As the van hit the intersection a motorcyclist on a fat black bug of a bike soared through on the perpendicular, as if the van wasn't there, as if time and space were malleable, and plowed right into the side of the van. The motorcycle's windscreen rained and tinkled as it disintegrated, the motorcyclist torn from motorcycle, tumbling under, the van still moving, rolling up and over the human speed bump, before coming to a stop. The man on the ground not moving, then on his knees, jerked up as if on strings, helmet off his head, his hair thatchy and standing up. His hand went to the left side of his face, and then the face was melting under his hand, blood and skin and other stuff dribbling off him. That's when he started screaming and didn't stop. Someone on the sidewalk yelled Call an ambulance, and I chimed in, late to the party: *Someone call an ambulance!* A woman ran out of the ice cream store on the corner and over to the man, who was keeling over and still screaming, and covered his side of the face with a white washcloth, one side of it stained with chocolate. The van driver stood over them, just a curly-haired kid with an undernourished beard, his face stone, and I knew that look because we all have it at some point: Not just *what the fuck*, but *how the fuck*, *who the fuck*, *why the fuck?* I swiveled and walked the opposite direction for two blocks, crossed over, then walked back up and around until I was back on original course, and the van, the motorcycle and the ambulance lights were just sparkles behind me. It wasn't until I made it to the bagel shop that I had a thought: Why did I call for someone to call an ambulance when I could have just done it myself?

That night I was in Portrero Hill, attending a reading of a friend's play, because no one in our tax bracket can afford to stage a full-fledged play. My friend had lived in the city twice as long as I had and was a fixture in the literary scene. People say *fixture*, I think rusty faucets. His play wasn't bad as far as it went, or better to say as far as I went, because I'm nowhere when it comes to Goethe and Schiller's lives, so for all I knew this play was hooey, but taken on its own, I understood it, which put it ahead of most plays. The actors were fine, because again, I don't know with Goethe and Schiller, so whatever they did, I was okay with it. I was relieved when Queen Elizabeth and Mary the Queen of Scots showed up, not because the play didn't have women—there was a serving maid wench in there—but because the two women seated alongside the guys playing Schiller and Goethe had been silent for so long I was worried they'd been plain forgotten. When they finally spoke up I wanted to applaud: *Let's go!*

My friend the playwright hugged everyone in the cast when it was over, right down to the serving maid wench who inspired Goethe's "Marienbad Elegy," and this made me want to have a good cry, which is unusual, because I only cry when dogs die in movies, and yet everything seemed futile, because no way in hell would a play about Goethe and Schiller go anywhere beyond a staged reading. The play wasn't good in the way that contemporary plays must be

good—no rock musical numbers or snarky one-liners that twirl about the actors' tongues like a *fouetté*, for instance. My friend invited me to join them at Bloom's for drinks and as we walked over he explained Chekhov's gun to the actors-readers, some of whom weren't familiar with the concept. His own play had a Chekhov's gun that was never fired, which was intentional, because if the naysayers were focused on why Chekhov's gun wasn't fired, they'd maybe be distracted from the play's other flaws, which my friend thought was clever in its way, and it was, as long as everyone knew what Chekhov's gun was. By the time this meditation on Chekhov was done we were outside Bloom's, where two men were yelling at each other. They were both unshaven, both smelling of street, both tottering in floppy clothes that could have passed for hip or destitute. One pushed at the other and missed. The other had a typewriter in his hands, one of those classic manual ones. *Get the fuck!* said the typewriter guy. *Mother-cock-sucker!* slurred the other. *This is amazing*, my friend said, and I understood: crazy man with typewriter, some sort of allegory behind it all. The typewriter guy swung his weapon. Some of it hit the other man's shoulder, the rest the side of his face. The typewriter let out a *brrrrrriinnnnng*, carriage return, next sentence please. The man who was hit got up close to the typewriter guy and hooked an arm around his shoulders, as if he'd been knocked into sense, apologies now offered and accepted. Then he was off and loping down the street, stumbling with every step as if he would face-plant but never getting there. The man with the typewriter fell to his knees, the typewriter still in his clutches, his shirt going dark with stains from the stabbing, and then he flopped over the typewriter, protecting it like an infant. By the time we pulled him off it his eyes had already rolled and you could tell it was over.

We had to wait around for the police, who were blasé about the whole thing. *Yeah, uh-huh* they said over and over to what we said. The actors huddled around each other, obeying the animal instinct to herd for protection, while my friend stood above the body, just like the van driver stood over the motorcyclist, with a similar look, but knowing my friend, I knew that what he was thinking was not *What the fuck* but *I must memorize every detail*, because he had the mania of a true artist. I was ashamed of myself for not thinking the same way, that I would never be invested in the way he was invested, that I had missed my moment when the motorcyclist went down, that mine was a piss-poor way of living life, no better than *Life's a bitch and then you die*. The other actors were too shaken to stick around for drinks but my friend and I had a grand time at Bloom's. We drank to his play and I silently drank to his uncompromising principles and I got blasted enough to toast myself although I had done nothing noteworthy, and that's the last I remember until the next morning, when an SFGate headline reminded me about the motorcyclist, and I read that he didn't make it. I then remembered the best bagel in the Bay, which wasn't all that. The next time I talked to my friend he'd moved to Portland, but he told me the night of his play reading was one of the best nights he ever had.

3.

A few years later, my roommate left the city, as did a lot of roommates around that time. Cost of living, dying arts scene, heightened crime, piss on the streets, etcetera. Seeing I was thirty-five, still committed to this wonderful and ridiculous town, not wishing to become one of *those* roommates who never evolve and turn into a nosy neurotic, I vowed to buy my own place. If I had jumped into dot-com maybe six months earlier than I did maybe I would've had enough shares to afford something decent, but I was standard dot-com expendable so *c'est la vie*, a studio it was. I eyed a place in Alamo Square, a few blocks up the hill from the Painted Ladies: small top-floor unit where the sun shines through the skylight in gorgeous slices. The realtor agreed to meet me at 2 on a Thursday, and I got there ten minutes early to take in the unit's porthole windows, the vertical cladding, the bedtime fairy-tale vibe of the whole place. As usual, I got ahead of myself and thought positive—*Yes, I can see myself here*—when it would have been better to safeguard against disappointment. I waited, waited some more, all the way to 2:45, and the realtor never showed up. I called him but nothing, so all I could do was gaze at the unit and hunger while the clouds lazed by the porthole window. The realtor left me a message later that day, talking all over himself, so sorry, he had plumb forgotten about the appointment. He didn't actually say *plumb*. I appreciated his honesty but I would have liked him more if he said *plumb*. I never responded or spoke to him again.

I told a woman at work about the incident when she asked me how I was doing. That was a mistake, because she said *It's rough out there, just don't get discouraged, okay?* She had pellucid skin—I always want to use that word for real in conversation but never get a chance—and thick sexy spectacles, but she always talked to me like I was a third-grader instead of a man with a working penis. Still, a friend of a friend of hers lived out there and maybe I wanted to meet him and see what his place was like, just for comparison? He's really cool, pretty famous writer. I checked Amazon and there he was, three books to his credit from the seventies, all out of print and stock, and a blurb from the New York Review of Books: *Two-fisted prose that recalls the best of Mailer, filtered through a counter-culture sensibility*. The library had one of his books—checked out, never returned. The only images I could Google of him had the glamorous faded quality of the era, with distinguishing features and flaws impossible to pick out. With his windswept tangle of hair, he seemed two-fisted enough.

The writer's apartment was a loft-style number, just a few doors down from the place I looked at. It even had a porthole, although this one held a mosaic of stained glass that smothered the incoming daylight. The wrinkles on the writer's face rolled over wrinkles and he smelled of mothballs, the whole place did, but he was Patient Zero. His hair was still something, though: silver and full, tumbling in a single wave from head to shoulders. His words were mealy, dying in his mouth, and his fingers shook when he laid them on my shoulder, my shoulder vibrating

too, like we were communicating over telegraph. *So your friend tells me you're quite the writer*, he said, and I was all like huh? because I had never told the woman at work about my stabs at writing, which meant that someone else had tattled, and I wouldn't rest until I found out who. We had Jack Daniels out of a plastic bottle and sat in identical creaky armchairs that were built in a previous age for daintier bodies. The writer had been in the city since the late seventies. He'd had a bout in Hollywood—that's how he described it, a bout—as a screenwriter, but drugs and booze had fucked him up, so he'd retreated to San Francisco, back when residuals could pay rent. Ever since then, he had rotted in the most extreme comfort, as Gilbert Sorrentino would say. Did I know who Sorrentino was? I didn't. The place seemed homey in the way tombs seem homey. A bookshelf took up the whole far wall, books crammed in at all angles, laced with dust. When we're gone, the only thing that should remain of us is a bookshelf of our favorites. Mausoleums should be wall-to-wall with shelves. *Hmm, this guy was a Library of America edition kind of guy. Seems like this one over here came up during Wigstock and New York's second Gilded Age.*

I asked the writer if he knew anyone nearby who wanted to sell their unit—or maybe he was thinking of moving? Sure, he'd wanted to move out, many times, to Big Sur it like Kerouac, but he was only paying a few hundred a month (praise rent control), and had little money saved, so. Hollywood was something, he said a few times. Really something. He knew people. Clint Eastwood, Ava Gardner, John Huston. Decked Lee Marvin once. Great guy, Lee was, but when he got lathered up, he was a handful. Don't even remember what we were getting into it about. Busted his nose pretty good, not that you could tell with that nose. No one pressed charges, no one wrote about it, because back then people decked each other now and again and just moved on. It was different. That and the honeysuckle. To smell southern California honeysuckle back in the day, my lord! So thick, so everywhere. The writer's eyes went milky as he smiled about the honeysuckle.

He asked me what I wrote about and I couldn't tell him because the thing was—*here's the thing*—nothing I wrote about mattered. Oh sure, I had characters and stuff happened, but my writing was like a summary of something else, like I had crammed for a test and could tell you answers but the answers themselves were just a sequence of words, a machine spitting output. So I said that Jack Kerouac was an influence, because he'd mentioned Big Sur and Kerouac. Ah, good old Jack, that punk, he laughed. He'd hung out with Jack a lot, back before the writer's time in Hollywood, before the writer was ruined by Hollywood. And just when he said it I had the odd feeling he didn't really know Jack, that he probably sat with him and a bunch of his cronies in a North Beach bar a time or two as Jack held court, that he might have told Jack something that could have been interesting or maybe even profound, and Jack had warded him off with a nod and gone back to pontificating about whatever he liked pontificating about. In fact, the writer went on, I've been sitting on a manuscript that's kind of inspired by him. He presented me with a folder that was probably older than I was. Inside were one hundred seventy-

four pristine sheets written on traditional typewriter. Since I was a writer, I must be connected with literary agents and such. Could I try getting this out? It was doing no good sitting around this apartment. He thought the manuscript was quite good, although I am far from impartial, he added, with a wink, and I could see the ghost of his younger self in that wink. Anyway, he'd anguished over it for decades and didn't want it tossed away with the rest of him when the neighbors found his body.

I protested, just a bit. I wasn't that connected— Please, the writer said. I wondered how often he'd tried this with others. Maybe I was the first new person he'd met in years. So I took the manuscript, which had a whiff of him, and told him I'd be in touch. When I got home I read the first ten pages and it had the two-fisted thing all right, Papa Hemingway reborn, or to be clear about it, reanimated, like he'd just stepped out of 1957 wearing a battered fishing cap, bottle of scotch in one hand and a Cuban cigar in the other, charming and cocky and hopelessly out of place. *The Last Lions of Monterey*, the book was called, and the first ten pages were about men getting together in a bar and having good drinks and a good fight. I knew where this was headed. A woman would be involved, more men, more fights, more drinks, and in the middle of it we would get a flashback to the fifties, maybe the sixties, when life was different but good. I flipped forward a few dozen pages, and there she was, the woman, an iron lady with hair streaked white, somewhat less ravaged than the men but drinking just as hard. I flipped forward to the last bit. A death. Always a death. Books always end with a death or departure. This one had both. A man looking out to the sea, going over what had been lost, ready to leave Monterey for good. I didn't know who died. I felt like if I found out, it would ruin the story.

I sat on the manuscript for a while. My playwright friend in Portland couldn't suggest any agents—he had enough angst over not getting his own stuff published. Then the manuscript disappeared from my desk. I must have been cleaning, thrown things together, moved it all in one go. Five years and several roommates later, I relocated to an in-law out in the Sunset, where I might as well have been in a different country. I opened an old box I hadn't unpacked and boom: the rib of that ancient folder sticking out. Up close, the manuscript still smelled like the writer, both mentholated and rotten. Shit, was my first thought. And then, Oh yeah. And finally, What happened to that old man? I could have Googled an obituary easy enough but I didn't. Had I tortured him to the end with my silence? He could have called me for an update. Maybe he'd lost my number. Or forgotten he'd given me the manuscript. Or forgotten about everything. Maybe it was a mercy that I'd taken it from him.

But those are just excuses. I come up with them every day. I stretch out in the Adirondack chair at the rear of my in-law, facing a sunset colder than the wind, the manuscript in my lap and smelling of mothballs, pages slapping my fingers, wanting to get free. I could check if the old man was still around. Or I could not check and pretend that he most certainly is, still resting in

that dainty chair in that mausoleum of a studio, still powered by fading hope, his hair still long like a lion's mane, remembering Clint and Ava and John and a thousand other things that would die with him.

Ho Lin is the co-editor of *Caveat Lector*. He is a writer and musician who resides in San Francisco. His work has appeared in *Foreword Reviews*, *The New York Journal of Books*, *Your Impossible Voice* and *The Adirondack Review*. His books include [China Girl and Other Stories](#) and [Bond Movies: A Retrospective](#).