

Wan Chai Cafe

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Yeung Chak Yan

Jiyugaoka was one of Keith's favourite places to visit in Tokyo when he was off work, but even though he had been here many times before, he still found himself lost more often than not. The few main streets in the area were connected by countless alleys, and these alleys were seemingly built without any order. Some were wider and some were narrower. Some were paved with bricks and others with stones. They cut across one another at random intervals, and the lack of a clear grid design meant it was hard to keep track of where he was. Instead of checking his location with his phone, Keith would simply let himself wander. There were all kinds of small stores in Jiyugaoka, selling bags, cameras, kitchenwares, and hand-made items he had not seen elsewhere. He could always find something new each visit.

Today, he found himself in a narrow alley half-hidden behind a second-hand bookstore. There was a *torii* gate in the middle of the alley, which was unusual since these gates were usually only found near shrines and the only shrine in Jiyugaoka was quite far from here. There was a little girl standing under the gate. The Japanese, even the children, tended to be very alert about potentially inconveniencing anyone. They would not stand unmoving in the middle of a narrow path.

They also would not be wearing a white fox mask while dressing in a bright red kimono.

Keith took a step back at the slit-like yellow eyes on the fox mask, and then the girl started running away. There were no holes on the masks; the girl should not be able to see, let alone run. But then she paused, looked over her shoulder, and beckoned to him. Keith hesitated, then followed as she darted away again. Curiosity prevailed, he supposed.

The girl was fast, running from one alley to another. Keith turned a corner and stopped. The girl was nowhere to be seen, but there was a cafe on the street. Had she gone inside?

“Wan Chai,” he said the name of the cafe out loud, surprised to see the familiar name of a Hong Kong district here.

He pushed open the cafe’s door and took in a deep breath at the welcoming scent of coffee. The cafe had a dark wooden floor and light brown walls. The small potted plants in front of the windows and the soft sunlight that was shining in gave the place a relaxing atmosphere. There was one big wooden table for six on the left, and a few tables for two on the right. A young woman was seated at one of the small tables. A man was working on his laptop at another. The girl with the fox mask was not here. It seemed he had lost her after all.

He looked up at the menu behind the cafe counter. Since he was here, he might as well have a cup of coffee. The woman behind the counter looked to be in her forties. She gave him a warm smile.

“Welcome!” she said in Japanese.

Keith nodded in greeting, maybe a little stiffly. “One latte, please.”

How to order a cup of coffee was among the first — and one of the most important, as far as he was concerned — things he had learned to say in Japanese when he moved here four months ago. But he still tripped over his “*onegaishimasu*” at times, and his butchered “please” must have caught the woman’s attention. She studied him with an amused look.

“Are you from Hong Kong?” she said, this time in Cantonese.

Keith smiled at the sound of his own language. Not that he did not use Cantonese when he called his family, but this was the first time he had heard someone speak it in Japan.

“Yes,” he said, switching to Cantonese. “You too, I assume?”

“Yes, I came here years ago.”

“Four months.”

She nodded as if she could already tell from his sloppy Japanese. “Let me guess,

the cafe name lured you in?”

He chuckled. “I saw this strange girl on the street and she was gesturing for me to follow her, and then... here I am.”

He realised this was perhaps not the best thing to start off a conversation with. He wanted to make a good impression on the first person he had met here who was also from Hong Kong. Now she must think he was strange.

The woman looked surprised. “She let you see her?”

This was not what he was expecting. “What do you mean?”

The woman turned towards the corner of the cafe, where the large table was. The girl was there, as if she had appeared out of thin air. She was still wearing a fox mask, but was in a different set of clothes. A white kimono instead of red.

“This is Yumi,” said the woman.

The girl said nothing. She merely stared at them. The yellow fox eyes were as unnerving as before.

“She has been around for more than twenty years, or so I have been told,” said the woman. “Oh, my name is Jen, by the way.”

Keith looked at the girl. The fox mask covered her entire face. All he could see were her ears and strands of black hair tucked behind them. He kept staring, and eventually the girl lifted her hands to her face, as if embarrassed, and vanished.

“Ah, you scared her,” said Jen, not in the least bit disturbed.

“What in the world?” said Keith, but he said it surprisingly quietly. He managed to stop himself from reacting beyond that. It must be because there were other customers in the cafe, and the few months he had spent in Japan were enough to ingrain in him the habit of not attracting attention to himself, and in turn, to his status as an outsider. His heart, however, was pounding.

Jen smiled. “Take a seat. Let me bring you your coffee and I will explain.”

Keith took the table closest to the entrance and furthest away from the corner the girl had occupied a moment ago. He looked over at the other two customers in the cafe. The young woman was engrossed in her phone and the man was still busy typing on his laptop.

“They cannot see her,” Jen explained, setting down a cup of latte on the table.

Keith stared at the fox-shaped latte art. It was expertly done, but still —

“What is this place?” he said.

“Just an ordinary cafe,” said Jen.

“And... the girl?”

“Yumi is harmless.”

“What is she?”

“She is tied to this place. No one quite knows why she is here and she never speaks.”

“You don’t seem bothered by it.”

“I’m used to her being around,” said Jen. “Besides, the rumours about a ghost and the fact that the previous few owners all got ill for no reason mean the rent for this place is very low.”

“Aren’t you worried?”

“I didn’t believe it at first.”

“But you stayed.”

“I’ve been running this cafe for six years now. As you can see, I’m still quite well.”

Jen’s casual demeanour almost made Keith wonder if he was the one who was overreacting. Perhaps she was the one he should be more worried about — this woman who had tolerated the presence of a girl-ghost for six years just so she could pay less rent.

“Why could I see her?” he asked.

“She let you,” said Jen. “A few others could too. She must have seen something in you that she likes.”

“But why?”

In his frustration, his voice came out louder than intended. The man typing on his laptop looked over his shoulder. Keith raised his palm in apology. The man paused for several seconds before returning to his work.

Jen tilted her head and studied Keith, the slight smile never leaving her face. “I suppose we will find out soon enough,” she said. “I hope you will be coming back.”

Keith was not sure what kept bringing him back to the haunted café. His curiosity, perhaps, or the fact that Jen made great coffee and could speak Cantonese. Or maybe it was because Yumi only ever stood at the corner and rarely did any haunting.

Or perhaps he had been put under some kind of spell, so he felt compelled to keep going back. He tried not to think too hard about this last possibility.

According to Jen, Yumi had been an actress — a young girl who ran away from home to chase her dream. She played role after role, throwing herself into each of them. And just when it seemed she was on her way to success, she was killed in a fire.

“Apparently, someone from the TV company snapped and decided to set the whole place on fire,” said Jen. “Her body was hardly recognisable and no one ever came to claim it.”

“And that’s why she became —” Keith tailed off. He was still not sure what Yumi was.

“Some said it was because she got so involved in each of her characters that she could not remember who she used to be, or even how she was supposed to look like,” said Jen.

“But why is she... here?”

“The rumour is her family used to run this shop and this is the only place of her old life that she can remember. No one knows for sure. She is just here, and she wouldn't let anyone claim this place.”

“You said she made the previous owners sick.”

“Yes.”

“But not you.”

“No.” Jen's gaze flickered to Yumi, who was watching them from her usual spot at the corner of the cafe. “I don't know why. Maybe she saw a little bit of herself in me.”

Keith seized the opportunity to shift the conversation from the ghost to Jen herself. “You said you'd been running this cafe for six years.”

Jen nodded. “I came to study, managed to find a job so I could stay, and then I opened a cafe of my own. That's what I've always wanted.” She paused. “And what about you? What brought you here from Hong Kong?”

“I've left Hong Kong for many years, actually. I worked in Taiwan for some time, and then the UK. I wanted a change in scenery and got a new offer here in Japan, so I moved again,” said Keith.

“You've been all over the world then,” said Jen. “What is it that you do?”

“I am a graphic designer.”

“Oh, so you draw?”

“I used to, but it's been a long time since I've held a brush and drawn anything unrelated to work.”

“I could use some decorations here,” said Jen.

Keith laughed. “My apartment is hardly large enough for the tools. And I don't have the time.”

“Maybe when you do have time then.” Jen winked. “I’ll give you a few cups of coffee for free.”

#

Then that summer came.

Keith took a week off work and returned to Hong Kong. He ended up staying for four months. When he visited Jiyugaoka again, it was already November. The sky was brilliant blue and some of the trees were starting to turn red. It was Sunday, so the streets were packed with people. There were many children too, running ahead of their parents and laughing without a care of the world.

Something in Keith clenched at the sound of the cheerful laughter and he quickly walked away. He found his way to the second-hand bookstore and turned into the familiar narrow alley behind the store. He pushed open the cafe’s door and smiled at the particular scent of coffee that only belonged to this place, strong but with a hint of sweetness. He glanced at the corner of the cafe. Yumi was there as always, watching him as he walked in.

“Welcome,” said Jen from behind the counter. She looked paler than usual. “It has been a while.”

“It has been,” said Keith. “I went back to Hong Kong.”

A hint of concern crossed Jen’s face. “Are you all right?”

“I’m fine,” said Keith. He sounded uncertain even to himself. “How about you? You look tired.”

Jen looked towards the same corner Keith had checked earlier. “Yumi has not been happy.”

The one thing about Yumi that Keith would always remember was that she had made the previous owners of this place sick in an attempt to evict them. Jen had been an exception so far.

“What happened?” he asked.

“Things have changed and she is confused.” Jen shook her head. “But don’t worry about me. You are here for coffee, aren’t you?”

“Jen —”

“It will be fine,” said Jen. “Yumi just needs some time.”

She turned away and started making coffee. Keith took his usual seat and waited. There were other customers here, but somehow the place felt empty. It was a “Wan Chai” that was too clean and too quiet, with unmarked walls and plain wooden tables, and a menu written only in Japanese.

Jen returned and set a cup of latte on the table, with her signature fox-shaped latte art at the top as always. “You are not in a hurry, I hope?”

“No, why?”

For the first time since Keith had met her, Jen looked uncertain. “Could you... could you tell me what you saw?” she said. “When you were there. In Hong Kong.”

There was a look in her eyes that Keith had not seen before. He recognised that look. He had seen it on the streets of Hong Kong. He had seen it when he looked into a mirror. And the answer came easily.

“Of course,” he said. “I will tell you what I saw.”

#

Jen did not get better. Every time Keith visited, she looked paler than before. She was always so tired that she had to change the cafe’s holidays from Thursdays to Mondays and Thursdays so she could have more time to rest.

“I feel better when I’m away from here,” she said.

“So Yumi is definitely the problem.” Keith kept his voice low, though he suspected

Yumi could hear him regardless.

Jen nodded at the empty seat opposite Keith, who gestured for her to take it. She sat down and closed her eyes for a moment. It seemed merely standing there and talking had taken a toll on her.

“Yumi ran away from home so she could be an actress,” said Jen. “She worked hard and finally got her first major role to play a kitsune in a TV show. That same month, a typhoon came. A landslide destroyed her family home and took her parents away.”

“I thought you said she couldn’t remember her old life,” said Keith.

“She remembers bits and pieces of it. She recalls the landslide, but nothing about where her family home was or what it looked like. The clearest memory she has is spending time here with her parents when she was a child.”

“Did she... tell you all these?”

Jen smiled. “The longer she spends with someone, the stronger her connection with that person is. It lets her read that person’s thoughts.”

“And vice versa?”

Jen’s smile widened at whatever must have shown on Keith’s face, but she neither confirmed nor denied what he had said.

They sat in silence for some time. Jen gave him a questioning look, as if she was giving him a chance to leave before he was drawn deeper into her problem. Keith took a sip of his latte and set down the cup. The white fox floating at the top was slightly blurred, but could still be seen clearly.

“What happened after the landslide?” he asked.

“Yumi convinced herself that it was better this way,” said Jen. “Without her family holding her back, she was free to go wherever she wanted to go and be whoever she wanted to be.” She paused. “But that’s just a lie, isn’t it? We can’t help thinking about where we came from. It’s like we can’t ever run away.”

“Is that why she’s bound to this place?” said Keith.

“That’s my guess.”

“But why is she upset with you?”

Jen said nothing for a moment, then she let out a long breath. “Maybe because I’m now coming to that same realization,” she said. “I’ve hated that place for so long. The noise. The pollution. The pressure that kills the possibility for anything like this.” She gestured around the cafe. “And yet... ”

“We can’t ever run away,” Keith finished. “It’s not a bad thing.”

“Is that what you believe?” said Jen.

There was a hint of bitterness in her voice. Keith could understand where it came from. She had not been there in the last several months, after all. She had not seen what he had. He looked towards the corner. Yumi was staring at him. He forced himself not to look away.

“Yes,” he said. “It is not a bad thing.”

An idea formed. And whereas before Keith would brush it aside as ridiculous, things were different now. He was different.

“You said before you could use some decorations here,” he said. “Do you still want them?”

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Keith set up his easel at the spot Jen had cleared up for him next to the cafe counter. “Are you sure you are fine with me doing it here?”

Jen chuckled. “Nervous?”

The cafe was not that busy, but there was a constant stream of customers, and Jen had picked a spot where they could easily see what he was doing while they waited for

their orders.

“A little bit,” he admitted.

When he said he wanted to work on some paintings and asked Jen if she would like to display some of them in her café, he had planned to do it in his own place, but Jen had insisted that he drew at the café.

“The whole point is to let more people know, right?” said Jen. “And you were the one who said your apartment was too small for the tools.”

Keith did not think she would remember his excuse from months ago. “All right, let’s get started.”

He sat on the chair he had pulled over and picked up a brush. He felt as if he was back in university, when he would spend hours after hours on a painting, when the act of painting itself gave him joy. He missed those days.

There was a movement at the corner of his eyes and he spun around. Yumi was there, closer to him than she had ever been.

“She is curious about what you are up to,” said Jen.

“Great,” he said. He was not sure if he meant it to be sarcastic or not.

He turned back to the canvas and dipped the brush into the yellow paint. This was nerve-wracking, and there were not even any customers in the café yet.

Once he started to draw, though, he began to calm down, as he always did. The main problem, he realised, was not that he was nervous about his skills. And he was not worried about not being able to speak Japanese; Jen had agreed to translate for him if any customers had questions about what he was doing. The problem was not even Yumi, who was still standing so close behind him that he could feel an eerie coldness radiating from her.

No, the problem was what he was drawing, and what he was digging up in order to draw. He had never painted Hong Kong before. He had never thought there was anything worth painting, never mind putting it out there and showing the world.

Now it was as if nothing else mattered.

Yumi shifted behind him. That was right, she could read thoughts. The longer she spent around someone, the stronger her connection with that person was.

Keith thought he would be scared — he probably should be — but he found himself welcoming it. Here under the clear blue sky in Japan, where everything seemed so bright and peaceful, he yearned for someone to understand what was going on in his city.

Then again, he had left his home behind long ago and could not bring himself to regret it. Even now. Especially now. Who was he to ask for sympathy?

#

He did it every Saturday. And when the pandemic started and he was allowed to work from home, he began to spend even more time at Jen's café. With her permission, he brought his laptop with him and practically made the café his workplace. It was better than spending the whole day alone in his small apartment, and he could work on his paintings once he finished his work.

To warm up, he started with a painting of Wan Chai — a view of the yellow MTR station and the small stores surrounding it. After that, he moved on to what he had seen when he was back in Hong Kong. He focused on the small moments, like those two men he had run into on a footbridge, one giving the other a piggyback ride as they tried to paste posters along the bridge ceiling, or the young girl playing a recorder on the street and the small crowd singing around her, or the group of strangers on the streets waving their phone lights in unison.

There was one more painting he had in mind. The top half of it was a burning land. The houses were set aflame and the people were running around with nowhere to hide. In the bottom half of the painting, a man stood high up on a cliff, watching from afar as the land burned and withered away.

He never drew it. It felt too personal. A painting like this would ruin the relaxing mood of the café, in any case. But he was certain that Yumi could see this painting as

clearly as he could. And whenever he found her looking at him through her mask, he could not help thinking that she knew exactly why he had been spending so much time in this cafe, drawing one painting after another.

Maybe she, too, was hoping that by preserving what memories she had left of where she came from, she could soothe some of the guilt that never seemed to go away.

At least something good had come of Keith's effort: Jen slowly started to get better. By July, she was almost back to normal. She insisted it was because Keith's presence made Yumi happier. He was convinced it was because Jen herself seemed happier, or at least more content. She had helped him answer questions from the Japanese customers so many times that she could now tell the stories behind each painting by heart, almost as if she had lived through those moments herself. And as she stopped wrestling with the idea of who she was, Yumi also became less agitated.

Keith had spent so much time in the cafe that he eventually got used to Yumi's presence. Even when she stood right behind him, he could focus on his painting. Sometimes, when there were no other customers in the cafe, he would even try talking to her.

"What do you think about this colour, Yumi? Too bright?"

Yumi shook her head.

"Orange it is then."

"Good to see you two getting along so well," said Jen from the counter.

There was a hint of teasing in her voice, and Keith was reminded of his first meeting with Yumi on the street. It felt like a lifetime ago. It was, he supposed.

"You get used to her," he said.

Then the door opened and a teenager came in. He stopped and stared at the paintings on the walls, then he hesitantly approached the counter. He talked to Jen in a low voice. Keith could not hear what they were saying except that they were using Cantonese. Then the boy reached into his pocket and pulled out a wallet. Jen shook her head.

“The drink is on me,” she said.

“But —”

“Let’s call it a welcome-to-Japan gift.”

The boy ducked his head. “Thank you.”

Then he walked over to where Keith was and watched him paint. Yumi studied the boy for a moment, then turned away and went back to her corner.

There was no reaction from the boy, but Keith was not surprised. Yumi only let a selective few see her, and it was clear that this boy was not like them. They were here because they yearned for something better. This boy wanted to go home; the longing in his eyes when he looked at the paintings was almost painful to see. Keith was tempted to ask the boy what his story was, then he decided it did not matter. The boy would tell them when he was ready.

So he kept drawing. Was he making any difference? His paintings seemed to have drawn the boy here and brought him some comfort, but was that enough? Perhaps not, though Keith was beginning to understand that nothing would ever feel enough. But maybe that was the point. This wound that was invisible to most was what had brought them together to this corner of the world. It was what would keep them going, flying free but always carrying with them a piece of where they came from. One day, it might even guide them back home again.