

## The Stars Shine Brighter Tonight

By Kiku Leung

### Summer 2023. My life is falling apart.

I am crashing at Dan's, drinking tequila like it's Coca-Cola. I close my eyes and headbang to No Party for Cao Dong.

*When did tragedy become irresistible? It fills my heart entirely.*

After two or three songs, I feel a hot current biting my chest from the inside. I open my eyes and the air becomes unrecognisable; oxygen is duelling with carbon dioxide. I almost fall rushing to the toilet where I vomit for two hours.

The monitor at the back of my head replays fogged moments:

#### 1. Mother screaming

This happens every day at home, but I could never seem to recall the beginning of each episode. She is like a ticking bomb, anything can trigger her. Or maybe from the moment the doctors found out that I lack the XY chromosome I am destined to be her bane of existence, her shame, her life-defining failure. Or maybe we have become each other's trigger.

#### 2. "I want to talk to you..."

...about how poor we are, about how the government would cut our subsidy after Father is being placed at a home, about how I should start to spend less. Yet, Mother condemns second-hand clothing like the devil himself had worn those clothes; and when she caught me buying them she insists that we now suddenly have enough money to afford brand-new clothes.

I look at Father who is already long gone. Humans think they can outrun death with advanced(lol) medical technology, but it is just an empty undead vessel that they are preserving. He is not there. He never was.

#### 3. Arduous meetings that refuse to end

Dan and I are both in a student paper group. One of the last surviving ones in Hong Kong after 2019. 50 years of history. Different people interpret its historical significance differently, which means some people are paralysed by the responsibility and some just don't think much of it. I am sure nobody would have initiated the production of the 2023 Orientation Issue if I had done nothing. Countless meetings have been held since then, on what to include, what we as editors would like to write about, etc. Some people are so shy they refuse to communicate what they want or what they think, but would be such a social animal when it gets to the drinking part of the night.

We are walking in circles.

#### 4. C and K

All of these responsibilities are too heavy on just anyone. They are the seniors who have been here way longer than us, but they cannot be here forever. I have witnessed their sweat, tears and nicotine addiction. I want to help pass the flames, but I don't know, for me to do that, they would have to learn to let go first.

I am playing hero for people who do not want to leave hell, and for that, I am sucked into the same black hole.

#### 5. Guy nitpicking

Let's just call him Guy. He always has something to say about me. Instead of giving suggestions, he would just straight up call me a "tyrant" when my decision as Chief did not please him. Or I would be chit-chatting with someone about how my hair seems thinner. He would feel the urge to chime in and comment on how messy and untidy it looks in a way that no one knows how to continue the conversation.

He is indefinitely, irrevocably, irreconcilably cruel to me, but I don't see that yet. I just think maybe he thinks he is being rational and critical. I don't know that, in a few months, he will reveal his true face at a meeting, where he tries to convince everyone to hate me because apparently, I am such a tyrant that people willingly got me a birthday cake with the word "Chief" written on it. (Which, I did not ask for!!!!) And he doesn't like that. When he fails to get people to agree with him, he will finally

confess his unfounded hatred of me. He will say it's compulsive, he can't help it too. He will say he has always found it hard to make connections with others. It must be so hard for him.

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“Keep drinking, your body needs a lot of water now.”

I drink the glass of water Dan brings me. We don't really talk about feelings a lot. (At least not in Summer 2023.) We would drink and we would smoke together. Still, it means a lot. Because just months ago he was my biggest headache. He speaks loudly and aggressively that it is rather easy for every meeting that involves him to turn into a heated argument. And as the moderator I would have to calm everyone down and keep us on track. I remember having a two-hour breakdown at a McDonald's at 12 am because of how stressful it was.

But thankfully, we did get to talk. He noted that he has always had temper issues, and jokingly gave me his permission to yell at him if he acts out again. But the problem is more than that, “The seniors are not listening. They are too hung up on the “old ways”. What's worse is that they are refusing to communicate. They would just tell you that they are “too busy” to talk when you try to start a conversation and tell them what you think. And, sometimes, it's okay to not reach a conclusion when we're discussing the ideology or theories at play behind a piece of article! Firstly, we're wasting time. Secondly, times are very different now! Our generation of editors aren't and couldn't be traditionally trained as journalists or sociologists like before...”

I lie in his bathtub next to the toilet. So many fragments cross my mind simultaneously.

At this point, there are a lot of other things I don't know. I don't know that a toxic environment can be quite detrimental to one's well-being (you don't say); I don't know that those people are not my friends, or at least they shouldn't be; I don't know

that they will continue to hurt me, intentionally or not, until I physically and mentally cannot take it; I don't know that nothing in the world should be enough for me to sacrifice my self-worth. But on a brighter note, I also don't know that I will eventually find my chosen family out of this ordeal. We might not always know where our choices would lead us. We can only try our very best to steer the wheel of our life in the sea of fate.

But before that, I will let this drag on for what seems like eternity. There is no way to stop it, no way to stop me. A sense of duty plus stubbornness is the worst combo possible in this situation.

It will get better, I promise, but it has to get worse first.



### **It is Fall 2023**

and hot elderflower tea is my only reason to live.

I look at the ceiling and contemplate what is the point of waking up towards the end of the day. I know the lecture I just missed is on Ocean Vuong and to say that I am both very disappointed by and angry at myself is an understatement.

The doctor has just diagnosed me with bipolar depression. There is no reason to get up anymore. I don't even want to go pee.

*I know you're awake. Use your arms, use your legs, and crawl. Crawl back to your consciousness.*

Because I am not about to go out like this. I would **never**. But what can I do?

My phone vibrates, it's a text from Timmy.

*want to come watch the stars with me? I brought your favourite ;)*

Timmy got into stargazing recently. He likes to watch the stars move ever so slightly. It's like that one Adventure Time song, he says, "Everything stays, but it still changes." I pour the hot elderflower tea that he brought into my camp mug as he sets up his telescope.

The warmth of a cup of hot tea under the November breeze is trying to tell me that everything is going to be alright. It is of proper etiquette that a tea drinker allows the aroma to greet their nostrils before drinking. I take a small sip and close my eyes, keeping my nose close to the rim of the cup. Elderflower is delicate, eccentric, perhaps a distant cousin of citrus, or lemon, or raisin(?), or all of the above.

It is nostalgic. Smell triggers memories of what happened last week. I am not proud to say that Guy finally got me. For the last two months, I have been talking to Timmy, about how his microaggressions are starting to get serious. One time when everyone was discussing a small issue in the group chat, someone disagreed with Guy, and when I seconded them, Guy, for some reason, chose to argue with me and not the other person. To be honest, he has been like this for the entire year but it has just gotten so much worse lately.

He had decided to unleash all of his dissatisfaction towards me in one of our regular meetings. That whole meeting seemed to last way longer than the laws of physics allow it to be, given how little of it I will remember. I must have had a breakdown at some point and burnt myself with a lighter. I texted Timmy that I kind of hurt my arm a little bit and he rushed to see me. He brought ice bags, ointment and everything.

“You hold it against the wound, but not with too much pressure.” He carefully tended to my arm.

I was still trying to rationalise, but Timmy told me of this new Whittard tea he bought that I must try. Its aroma will become my source of solace and comfort for the next whole year.

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“You know, if you squint your eyes a little bit,” Timmy pulls me back from my thoughts, “you could almost see the lines between the stars.”

“That’s impossible.” I laugh.

“Okay. Remember Orion the Hunter, the one with the belt and bow?”

“Yes?”

“Those three right there, are his belt!” He points to the sky, “And now you just traced upwards, and you get his bow!”

“Right... Yeah, I kind of see it!”

“The stars are always there, you just need to connect them.”

Tonight’s sky feels much bigger than usual. November always has the clearest sky.

A plan emerges within. Like every twinkle little star, we all deserve our own family, who would help each other shine just a little bit brighter. Despite all that I went through last year, I did meet a lot of lovely people. If I connect them, I bet I can draw a constellation map of my own.

## Spring 2024

is when I have officially come to the conclusion that I actually don't enjoy the smell of nicotine and the taste of cheap alcoholic bitterness. And I prefer tea to coffee.

I reach out to everyone I know; I spend time with each and every single one of them; I get to learn more about what their goals and aspirations are, as well as their expectations for our campus; I develop a strong bond with everyone through uncommon and spontaneous gatherings, such as sneaking into rooftops for karaoke, walking the entire campus in the middle of the night and weighing the rice in each canteen to see which one is the best bargain. I imagine this is exactly what being young feels like.

And so 流水山城 lau4seoi2\_saan1sing4 is born! We are a student-led group dedicated to community building. Back in my Student Paper days, community was a recurring topic, but now I have the chance to practise it, to actualise my vision. It feels much more fulfilling than just writing about it; it feels like what I should've been doing a long time ago; it feels right. What's more, this time, I have my people with me; Dan, Timmy, Kai, Angie, Yu, Ming, Tak and Olie, and many more who will soon join our group. They are the shining stars of my life. Together we are each other's support system.

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Community Kitchen is our first-ever event, we have Dan and Tak as our cooks. I draft the confirmation message and send it to all the participants myself; I prepare every question that they may ask; I calculate the minutes required for a group of 5 to transit from Tai Po Market to International House Block 1; I rehearse my self-introduction.

People are starting to arrive. Dan is teaching people how to properly chop meat and Tak is preparing the soup. I am happy to see people that people seem excited. After all, there have not been any events like this at CU for a very long time.

“Wow, this is fun! How did you guys come up with the idea?”

“Didn’t we meet before?”

“Kiku! Has Carson replied yet?”

“Oh my god! A friend of mine wants to join now! Do we have a spare seat?”

“Kiku, did you see where the tomatoes went?”

“Yes! We have always been interested in the idea of community building and what’s a better way to do it than through eating?”

“Oh, have you been to the events held by the Student Paper? I... wait, the Wi-Fi isn’t working. Yes, I was in charge for a while.”

“Who?... Oh, right! He hasn’t. Or maybe he has but the internet here is so bad.”

“Um... Did she fill in the form?”

“Didn’t we put it in the fridge? Wait, I just got a text...”

Suddenly, and yet slowly, the air starts to spin. I go back to half a year ago and see C and K leaving the venue as all the participants stay behind and ask questions, and it’s just me and Dan handling all of them. I would later find out that they were off drinking beer to unwind because it was too stressful for them. They were supposed to be the seniors. They were supposed to be there.

“Kiku! Are you alright?”

Kai always knows how to surprise me. She asks the one question that I did not prepare for the night, but somehow I feel my feet touching the ground again.

“I...” Words fail to line up as coherent sentences. I pull Kai in for a hug.

“Boo, you don’t have to do everything! We’re all in this together.”

“Why do you know me so well?”

“You know I am no stranger to panic attacks.” I swear, Kai has the prettiest smile in the world.



I look around the kitchen; on one side, Dan and Angie are casually chatting with the participants as they prepare the pan and watch the soup; on the other, everyone is laughing at how Timmy is struggling to get the eggshell out of the bowl. I chuckle at the sight.

Olie surprises me with a hug from behind. He must have heard our conversation.

“Take it easy!” Olie’s voice is tender as always.

I know I have found my family.