

## Art to the Senses

Huà ěr meets her at the corner store.

She hadn't intended it, of course. She'd wished only to pick up dinner after work, absentmindedly enjoying the crinkle of saturated, plastic packaging under her fingers. But she is accustomed to the little pains of the world, to catching and picking out injustices; she cannot help but catch the rise of harsh, male voices crowding around the corner of the store, a writhing mass of dissonance that leaves the taste of rubber on her furu-soft tongue.

She does not understand the words, and yet the wiry inflections, as flimsy and prickly as the cheap shelves the goods stand upon, make the message clear. Huà ěr would turn tail and run if a man spoke to her with such mocking, such jeering contempt.

She is about to do exactly that, to flee the store and purchase fast food at the joint next door instead, when a new voice rises to fill the gaps between blades. It makes her stop—partially because its owner does not seem to be a man, but more importantly, because it sings with a colorful inflection, a lilting rhythm that feels raw and genuine, that Huà ěr has never heard before.

There is something shrill, something desperate in her voice, that pulls her back in.

The girl's name is Cynthia.

Huà ěr learns this after weakly shoving herself in between the three men jeering at her, barking at them in the smoke-tainted, suburban Mandarin she'd grown up with until they simply decided to leave. She turns to the girl, small-framed with a face curtained by long, hazelnut hair; English sounds weak on Huà ěr's tongue, grey and broken like a meek, grimy doll, but her newfound companion seems to understand, pointing to and naming herself, two syllables melting into one another with a touch of watercolor, the shade indeterminate and speckled with yīnghuā petals.

Huà ěr takes it as a thank you.

She tries and fails to forget about her.

When she'd left the smog-stained city corner she'd grown up in, she felt as if she carried all the smoke and pollution and sewage with her like an unwelcome bottle of reused olive oil tied to her ankle. Floating like a wilted blossom seeking sun and air, she'd hoped this country across the world would be welcoming; colorful. Sweet. Kind.

And yet she found herself disillusioned, for the city streets were as grey as ever, reeking of gasoline and cracked asphalt after cold rain. Exhaust puffs into a rustic, gloomy sky, the shine long dulled by accumulating dust; the voices are as harsh as those back home, yet they are unnatural, the inflections reversed and jagged.

The cruel intentions of those men, and Cynthia's response—her voice had carried a core of yearning behind it, of fruitless wishing for a rotten-berry world to love her, or at least permit her to exist within it.

It reminded Huà ěr of herself.

*How can any plant possibly grow off of acid rain?*

They find one another again on the campus green.

Huà ěr sits on the futon mattress under her mesh-wired window and pans through the two-dimensional squares of the city on her little Blackberry phone, searching for a free way to occupy herself over the weekend. It has been over a year since she'd landed in this country, and she's long tired of the grey skies, the city squalor and haze. She wants something fresh. Something reassuring.

She lands on the local state college just a short bike ride from her apartment. There seems to be green space on the campus, if the colors of the map mean anything; she hopes it won't disappoint, trying not to think of the little college back home, the buildings short and made of brick.

Everything is grander here, and yet it all feels far more empty.

Only the college is as pleasant as she'd hoped, the buildings art deco and separated by expanses of green grass and trees. Perhaps it is an illusion, but it seems as if the clouds themselves are parting, the blue paint seeping through for the first time in millennia. She walks along the campus paths while people slip past her like fish around a rock in the everlasting stream, smooth and gently gushing; vaguely, she feels like she does not belong, a foreign seed, an invasive species, until—

She spies a familiar face, the familiar back of a girl's head.

She calls her name, and it surprises herself, the ease with which the soft syllables slip off her tongue. *Have I been practicing it in my sleep?* The face in question turns to her, the startled sharpness of her eyes easing into comfort.

Huà ěr offers her a greeting, one easy and commercial and smoothed out by months of forced practice. Cynthia hesitates before replying; *what is it about her words that make them so full of life, of color?* Huà ěr does not bother to think about the parts of her speech that she doesn't catch; she

understands her intent well enough, and that is all that matters to her, for she feels like she can finally open her petals to Cynthia's lamp.

*Hello to you too, gentle stranger.*

The two end up seeing each other more often.

Eccentric companions, they make for one another—they cannot understand the words the other speaks, yet at the same time, Huà ěr feels like she knows her best of all. She begins to memorize fragments of Cynthia's schedule, meet up with her on weekends and evenings and walk with her to class. One night, she is led back to her dorm and beckoned to follow within, where she meets her rather unwilling roommate.

The taller girl—who does not bother to offer her own name—looks down upon her, complaining about both her and Cynthia's presence the moment the door shuts. Her tone clashes like a dissonant bell against Huà ěr's ear, and yet Cynthia is unbothered, merely offering a few lovely words of greeting before going to her own side of the stifling room. She trades her backpack for a smaller clutch, which she slips her phone and wallet into before making for the door, tossing a couple more words of prose in farewell. Huà ěr does not speak a word, far too used to this sensation; she feels exactly as her companion does, that speaking and not speaking both come with their little knives, that to do either or neither makes no difference in the end to sway their favor.

So she swallows down the bitter resentment she carries for people like this cruel girl and walks out the door after Cynthia.

*So even your bedroom does not feel safe.*

*My dear, is there anywhere in the world where you feel like yourself?*

Cynthia is so pretty, standing with a book rested upon her little hands.

The bookstore floods Huà ěr with the scent of fresh coffee, and the warm, amber lights illuminate the titles of the thousands of volumes on these oaken shelves around them. A smile rests upon her face, her hair pulled half-up and away from her silver-tinted eyes, so dark yet alert even at such a late hour.

Huà ěr is disinterested in the books around them, for they are all in complicated language that she cannot yet grasp the nuances of. And yet, when she watches Cynthia, she sees a novel's depth in her rainbow-blessed voice, smooth as satin ribbons twisting around Huà ěr's wrist as she leads her around town and shows her her favorite places to go, a wake of pink blossoms at their heels.

*You're lovely, as lovely as anyone else I could ever meet, ever speak to, ever hear.*

As time passes and Huà ěr learns more about this foreign land she walks upon, its people and its language, she begins to realize something.

Cynthia doesn't speak coherent English. It is the very reason Huà ěr finds her speech so fascinating, actually; instead of rigid patterns and structures, her words take on fluid form, sometimes jarringly unrelated in tone or connotation, a mirage of multicolored flowers in patches that bear beauty when juxtaposed against one another. If Huà ěr were to fixate on trying to make sense of it, she'd make herself dizzy with confusion; but then again, what is the point of such legibility? Cynthia is Cynthia, *her* Cynthia, the blossom of sunny gold and fascinating person in Huà ěr's messed up life, and that is all she really cares for.

Besides, she can understand her well enough without words; they coexist better than Huà ěr does with those humans who speak within rigid rules, don't they?

Unintentionally, yet surely, Cynthia becomes her safe place.

When work is overwhelming and all of the older men's fast-speaking voices become a jumbled-up mess in her head, their unmet demands a deadweight around her thin neck, she lets the image of taking Cynthia's hand through the lit-up nighttime streets—more alive and colorful than she ever knew possible—lift her head and compel herself to keep going. After all, if someone as privately lovely as *her* believes in the goodness of Huà ěr's person, then surely, it must be okay to keep going as she is.

And one evening, she is alone in her apartment when there is a hesitant knock on the door.

Reclining on her little couch with a cheap magazine, Huà ěr offhandedly believes it to be a local of malintent, hoping to break in and chase her back to her home; she wonders, with a lazy tip of her head as the person knocks again, if they know that would be a favor to her, that she'd give anything to be forced back to those familiar, trashed suburbs. And yet, there is something about that sound that is too kind to be a creature with slurs on its tongue.

Huà ěr opens the door to find a small, torn-up person staring back at her. It's Cynthia, with her backpack still slung over her slumped shoulders, her expression oddly unreadable. She says a couple words, their meaning obsolete; her tone, so soft and ripped at the edges, conveys all Huà ěr needs to know.

She's let in; it's not the first time Cynthia has seen her apartment, of course, but tonight, she feels jaggedly out of place, standing in the middle of the tiny living room as if it were a lost backroad.

Huà ěr walks up behind her and takes her backpack from her, guiding her to the couch and sitting down beside her.

Cynthia curls up at her side, her head resting on Huà ěr's shoulder. She's silent; Huà ěr gazes over her, her vacant, colorless eyes and doll-blank face, a bud barely open before it was extinguished with a spring frost. *Hey, I won't know a thing you're thinking if you don't speak, you know?*

Huà ěr begins to run her fingers through Cynthia's hair, murmuring a few accented words of consolation. It feels a little shallow, lukewarm, whispering such empty phrases as *it's okay*, but it is the only thing she knows how to vocalize, and she hopes—no, *knows*—that Cynthia will feel the comfort of being held and hummed to all the same.

It's then that Cynthia begins to speak without looking up, an incomprehensible stream of words of all different colors and shapes and sounds flooding over her pretty tongue; she seems on the verge of tears, her body shaking, wobbling on the edge of the ravine, and Huà ěr simply continues to stroke her back, listen to her shaking voice. It is as usual; the words fall upon her ears like water, familiar yet without shape. *It's okay to cry. You've had a bad day..?*

Cynthia says something with the tone of a question, but Huà ěr doesn't know how to respond aside from *it's okay*. She repeats the questioning tone, and her confused companion hesitates, prompting Cynthia's head to snap up, her eyes wide and desperate and imploring, *begging*, as she nearly screams that incomprehensible phrase of a question at her. And Huà ěr finally gets it, gets it with that final, vulnerable shrill of her voice. *Of course.*

It is as if she is crying *Can you hear me?*, and no wonder; for her, every day is a bad day when nobody bothers trying twice to listen, and Huà ěr feels as if a knife has been driven through her chest, because isn't that how she feels, too, abandoned by those who grew up talking all the same as one another in this foreign country? Staring back into her tear-shocked eyes, lit up not by whimsy but raw pain, Huà ěr feels a pang of bitterness for the world that has wronged her so, that has hurt her and tried to rip her life apart despite the wonder she has for it.

*I hear you, Huà ěr finally thinks. I get it.*

And as Cynthia begins to cry into her arms, it is gratitude that she babbles between tears, for even if Huà ěr cannot understand a word she says, she understands *her*, Cynthia, her lovely Cynthia, so alone and desperate for connection.

*I'm here, now, I promise.*

*I won't leave you behind.*