

Jane Houg

Bloodswell

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To Leo, the bear

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My love will grow
Vaster than empires, and more slow.
A hundred years will go to praise
Thine eyes, and on thy forehead gaze;
Two hundred to adore each breast,
But thirty thousand to the rest:
An age at least to every part,
And the last age should show your heart.
For, lady, you deserve this state,
Nor would I love at lower rate.

From *To His Coy Mistress* by Andrew Marvell

While parents are alive,
One must not travel afar,
If one must, one's whereabouts,
Should always be made known.

From *Analects of Confucius, Book II*

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CHAPTER 1

A blood-red Harley-Davidson

I'm singing *Bloodswell* in a dark smoky scruff of a room at China Chicks Music Centre. The studio is down an alley behind a bustling street market near my home in suburban Hong Kong. A projector beams our life-size images onto a wall screen opposite: I see Wing rocking on bass guitar and Mimi pounding the drums. My coal-black hair shimmers under the spotlights. Motes of dust shiver. '*Silk sheets, You're neat,*' I trill, nose-bump close to the invisible one I'm secretly in love with. And I grip the mike with snaking fingers, throttle it with desire, while Wing's bass notes thrum and Mimi's gleaming cymbal clashes.

Then my mobile vibrates against my leg and starts bleeping.

It's a text from Peggy: **noodles or rice?**

I hit reply, text: **rice**, then give the thumbs up to Wing and Mimi, who haven't stopped playing.

Chi sin. Crazy. I'd so been in the zone, I hadn't noticed the time. Wing will kill me for dumping her in the middle of a Rock Band session, especially as she has paid for two hours. But Peggy is my best friend and in Chinese History class today, she told me that the hungry ghost visited her home last night. 'I felt a cold burst of air on my forehead and the lights flickered,' she said. 'Can you come round tonight? Big brother's on a late shift. I don't want to be alone.'

'It must've been the wind,' I said.

‘No way.’

Whether Peg’s flat is haunted or not, it’s okay with me ‘cos I’m not scared of ghosts. Don’t believe in them. So I told her I’d come round after Ma left for work. I didn’t tell her I’d be jamming with Wing and Mimi around dinner time, ‘cos she’d feel hurt. It’s not my fault Wing doesn’t want her in our band – Peggy is tone deaf.

Wing and Mimi are still rocking so I turn the volume down, give the slice-my-throat ‘cut’ cue and shout down the mike, ‘Hey, gotta go soon. Peggy’s in a fix.’

I check out Wing’s face. But she seems cool about it. ‘What’s up? Another bad trip?’ she says, her hand glissing up the neck of the guitar and striking a funky chord.

I snigger.

Mimi thwacks the cymbal. I turn the volume back up. We finish the song.

It’s as humid as a steam bath outside. I take my hoodie off, tie it round my waist and stride past mounds of fruit and flapping fish towards the high street. Past the jars of deers’ dicks in the window of the Chinese medicine shop, and the glittering chandeliers of the lighting shop, and the sweet-smelling bakery where Ma’s bread is sold. Then I cross at the zebra, cut through the queue at the bus stop and enter Peg’s public housing estate.

The last time I was here there’d been a suicide. Some couple had been arguing about their daughter. The Pa said he’d pay any amount to send her to a direct subsidy school, even if it meant a lifetime of eating vegetables. And the Ma lost it, went for him

with a cleaver. And the Pa grabbed their daughter and jumped from the balcony. From the fifteenth floor, I think. When I arrived, POLICE: KEEP OUT tapes cordoned off the area where the two covered bodies were lying. But the flashing blue lights had attracted a crowd. After the ambulance left, uniforms paced around measuring distances and cleaners swept up shards of glass.

Tonight there’s just the half-blind guard and his flask of tea. He recognises me, I don’t have to sign in at the counter or anything, and I go up to the twenty-third floor in a lift that stinks of scallions.

I walk along the dank corridor towards flat number 2369, past bolted bottle gates, pots of burning incense, dinner hitting sizzling woks.

I ring the bell, press harder, rattle the gate, knock on the door. There’s no answer. Press the bell again. Nope.

Now Peg’s not perfect. She used to be a ketamine queen. Until she quit. So when she doesn’t answer, I’m on edge. She should be back from the takeaway by now.

Don’t panic, I tell myself. Just phone her.

I listen to two loops of her ringtone before she picks up. ‘Let me in,’ I say.

‘Come to SG,’ she says. Her voice sounds kind of squashed.

Something’s up. Peggy’s not at the takeaway. She’s at Secret Garden, a 24/7 Korean BBQ restaurant where you eat *kimchi* and cook slivers of raw meat on a gas stove in the middle of your table. It’s the place where, after rave parties, we used to chill out before

going home. *What's she doing there?*

I make a run for it. *Shit.* Just missed the lift. And it's going down. I push open the fire door to the emergency exit; it'll be quicker to walk.

The rubbish bins and rat bait are familiar. How many times have I sat on a cold concrete stair, Peggy's pale face propped on my shoulder? A scattering of cigarette butts marks the spot where I forced her to make a pact with me to quit drugs a few weeks ago. We sliced our index fingers with a razor, sealed them flesh-to-flesh and licked dribbles of our mingled blood.

I'm on the main street again, weaving my way through the crowds. The pavement is packed with tight-lipped workers, shoppers and jostling bags of shopping. Mums and maids drag kids to tutorial classes. Neon signs glare, taxis and minibuses honk. There's a seventy percent discount at I.J.'s boutique but I'm just set on getting to the Secret Garden a.s.a.p.

I turn into a side street. It leads to a cul-de-sac which borders a park at the bottom end. SG is only a couple more minutes away. My flip-flops strain between my toes as I run down the hill. As I round the corner, I see someone pinned against the park wall by three guys. There's a girl screaming: it's Peg!

Fear churns my stomach, but I race towards her, hurling expletives like I'm crazy. As I get closer, I recognise Brew, a drug pusher, rumoured to be a pimp too. He's the one holding a knife to Peggy's throat.

'She's here,' Peggy shouts, trying to break free.

One of Brew's mates swings round to face me. He has a deep

scar across his forehead, dyed brown hair and a tattooed chest.

Brew's head jerks in my direction. 'Check her out,' he shouts. Scarface and a skinny guy grab my arms and drag me towards the wall.

'Get off, scumbags,' I scream.

There's a shooting pain from my elbow as my arm hits the wall, the burning of flesh as my body hits the pavement. Skinny rolls me on my back and grovels in my bum bag for valuables. 'Wa! An iPod!' he says, pocketing it. Scarface laughs and lights up a cigarette.

Gaau choa! There's no way I can live without my iPod Touch. But I don't have the strength to wrench myself free. 'Help, help,' I yell, kicking wildly. Until Scarface pulls out a knife and points it at my jugular. Suddenly I'm trying to shout but no sound comes out.

Meanwhile Peggy is wrestling with Brew. Unlike me, she's built like a tank. With a *kung fu* cry, she has got him in a kind of arm lock and he yelps with pain.

At that moment, a motorbike comes screeching around the corner, its HID headlight dazzles. There's the squeal of brakes and the rider leaps off, rips off his helmet.

'What are you doing?' a gravelly voice shouts. I peep over Scarface's shoulder and nearly faint with surprise: it's him! The guy I've got a thing about. The guy who picks Tiffany up from school. He's riding a Harley-Davidson. A blood-red Harley-Davidson.

'I'm Steel,' he says. 'What are doing with my friends?'

He looks fit. Drop-dead fit.

The three druggies are stunned. So stunned, they freeze.

Next moment, Steel has pounced like a tiger, jerked Brew's arm from Peggy's neck and thrown him to the pavement. There's a sickening crunch.

Skinny tries to make an escape through the bushes but Steel leaps on top him, shoves his chin skyward and pins him down.

Scarface releases his grip on me, whimpers, and tries to make a getaway.

'Not so lucky, bro,' Steel says, grabbing him by the neck and dragging him back through the bushes.

'Okay, okay,' Brew says, sitting on the pavement nursing a bloody nose. 'We did them no harm.'

'Oh yeah?' Steel says. His backbone is arched and his bright eyes are smouldering with rage.

Steel. MY friend. My heart pounds.

Peg and I stand side-by-side. Her toilet-brush haircut glistens with beads of sweat. 'It's an old debt,' she tells me breathlessly.

'Let's talk later,' I say, grovelling in my bum bag.

Steel watches. Skinny and Scarface squirm under his paws.

Brew moans.

I slap two red hundred-dollar bills into his hand.

Peggy's brows are furrowed.

I suddenly remember my iPod. Then, it's almost like Steel has read my mind 'cos he's throttling Skinny and shouting, 'Have you got anything to give back?'

Hurriedly, Skinny pulls my iPod and Peggy's purse out of his

pocket. Sweat drips down his face. That's when I notice that Steel's skin is bone dry. It has the smooth sheen of lacquered door guards in temples. That's when I realise he speaks weird. In a kind of posh has-been way.

'Leave them alone, will you? Or I'll be back,' Steel says, releasing his prey and flicking back a loose strand of his sleek black hair.

The druggies slink off into the park.

Peg and I brush ourselves off.

'Hey, Steel, thanks a lot,' Peggy says.

'Thank you,' I say. Parrot-like.

Steel's eyes level with mine. Soften. He swings a long leg over the Harley and slips the motorbike helmet back on his head. 'Those guys are dangerous,' he says. 'You should keep away.'

Then he snaps the visor shut and, with a rev of the throttle and a snort of the exhaust pipe, accelerates away.