

## CALL MY NAME

The first time I heard her name was on the radio, among a cluster of other meaningless names, pronounced in the monotone voice of the unknown speaker. Even then I felt my spirits leap as her name rang in my ears like the sweetest bell, like an ocean wave foaming to shore, like the wind in the trees when they are full of starlight, and my soul flickered with unbridled joy.

*'Bringing together the cities of Qianhai, Guangdong, Hong Kong and Macao, the championship is hosted by Greater Bay Area Homeland Youth Community Foundation, targeting those ready to commit themselves to innovation and entrepreneurship,'* continued the speaker. *'The above names have been taken down for the competition. There are 43 places left for registration.'*

"Not a bad opportunity," said my father, looking up from the dry, monochrome content of his newspaper. "Li Wen, would you like to give it a shot?"

My brother, occupied with his work at Harvard Business School, barely looked up from his laptop. "I've got enough work, Father."

"Ah." Disappointment was etched on my father's face, but it could not compare to the misery that rested against my heart, forcing down the golden spark of light that had lit up my soul. For everyone knew Li Wen, son of the renowned Li Qian, businessman and billionaire, genius of the marketing economy. No one knew the younger son who was always cast into the shadow of his own brother, nor did anyone ever witness my father's eye glint with pride as he looked toward the son he was ashamed of.

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The listlessness churning in the cavity of my chest led me to the empty streets of Hong Kong at night. The streetlamps lit up the darkness with their pulsing golden glow, igniting the lonely space that was the domain of those who were young and haunted by dreams they could never fulfil.

My footsteps paced the streets, the pavement shining silver in the moonlight that battled the reflecting glow of the lampposts. They stopped in front of a bar, where a bartender caught sight of my face in the light and reached immediately for a frosted glass bottle of wine on the counter. I had been there enough times for him to recognise me, and call my unknown, insubstantial name.

"Mr. Li Jian," he said as I sidled up to him. "Out for another night-time walk?"

I nodded as he handed over my order.

Drink in hand, I made my way into the pub. Electric lights flickered and pulsed around me, the purple lights weaving their swirling patterns on the floor. They lingered on the faces of the same phantoms that came to haunt the pub at night, the dreamless ones, the aimless ones, who had somehow lost purpose.

The heavy metal music pounded, forcing my blood to throb in my ears, as a jeering, scornful voice pulsed through the speakers —

*When life closes down and dusk falls on the lawns,  
I remember how you betrayed me.  
When the lamps are lit and the new day dawns,  
Come find me; and call my name.*

Inexplicably, my eyes filled with tears. Through my blurry vision, I sought through the misty wreath of the drunken, hazy world another soul that would curb my loneliness. I searched the pub, whose lights flickered and turned it into a revolving lantern, and the faces of the lost souls that wandered here and then were gone, wandered there and were gone again. The lights whirled and danced, and — with a sudden purposeful move — focused on the face of the girl that stepped through the door.

The bartender cried out her name.

My head jerked up.

Her name resounded sweetly through the musk-smelling, drunken air, a note of clarity amid the chaos that whirled through my chest and roared into my thorax. My lips moved, mouthing that name over and over, while no broken sound escaped my lips. She smiled; her body shone with the aura of self-assuredness.

She rummaged in her purse, trying to find her wallet, I assumed — her features twisted into helplessness. My heart lurched with pity, and without knowing what I was doing, I was out of my chair and approaching her.

"I'll pay," I said to the bartender.

"No, sir," she said, her voice like fingers running upon the silken strings of a harp that was my every gesture and word. "I can go home and retrieve the money."

I ignored her and pushed the money across the counter. "No change," I said.

I felt her eyes linger on me, on the gold watch on my wrist, my crisp white shirt, the jacket thrown over my arm. Her hair was in an ebony braid thrown carelessly over her shoulder, shining in the golden lamplight of the empty streets. She accepted the drink without a word.

“Thank you, mister,” she said.

“We all need a drink once in a while,” I said languidly, though my heart fluttered in a frenzy of delight. “Just to cool off. Indulge a little.”

She laughed. “Too true, sir.”

“Call me Li Jian.”

Something in the core of my soul trembled; my name escaped from my lips so freely, so carelessly, the name that no one knew or cared for, not even my father. It was the name of a phantom, a wanderer of empty streets.

“Well then, Jian,” she said, and the way she pronounced my name sent a thrill through me. “Thank you for the drink. I needed one tonight. It took too long planning my entry for —”

“For the Qianhai-Guangdong-Hong Kong- Macau Youth Innovation and Entrepreneurship Competition, yes?”

She looked surprised.

“I heard your name on the radio,” I said.

“I see.” Her smile was beatific. “Are you a competitor then, Jian?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“I don’t join competitions. My brother is the one who does things like that.”

“And why only your brother?”

“My father believes he has the potential. And I, unlike Li Wen...” I shrug. “I don’t.”

She stepped forward, turning her face upward, until her face was bathed in quicksilver and the moon was reflected in her eyes like a silver sickle. “I don’t believe you, Jian. You do not cast your hat into a ring because you desire victory. You do it so that you might leave a mark on the world... a memory in someone’s heart and soul.”

A shudder ran through me. What was I? I was Li Jian, insignificant compared to my father’s accomplishments and my brother’s genius. I came into this world, quietly, and spent my life in the shadows — and I would leave it just as soundlessly.

“Why did you join?” I asked.

Her face turned downward, staring at the golden pavement.

I called her name.

“Can I tell you a secret?” she whispered.

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She brought me to the outskirts of Guangdong city, away from the hustle and bustle of the golden utopia beside the singing Pearl River Delta. Her hand clung to mine as we stepped off the glistening high-speed train and into another world.

A cracked pavement ran under our feet, narrowing as it tunnelled between the outer walls of houses with peeling lacquer, resembling cracked human molars. The sun drowned the world in heat. Dust covered every inch of the place, sinking into the wrinkled faces of the houses we passed and milling into the blind eyes of the street.

“This was my home,” she said.

I was speechless.

A woman sat on the crumbling doorsteps of a cottage, cradling a delirious child in her arms. Our appearance — clad in fashionable raiments, the coins jingling in my pocket — caught her attention, and she fell forward on her knees, head bowed to the relentless sun. “Help me, miss!” She crowed to my girl, who moved forward a step. “He is dying! Save him!”

The girl beside me took a breath; a storm raged inside her, a conflict of conscience and helplessness. Her hand drifted outwards, but fell back, useless, against her side. She took me by the arm and tried to lead me away.

“But she needs help,” I protested.

“We cannot help,” she whispered.

The woman sobbed, tears falling upon the cracked earth like rain upon stones. I hesitated, dawdled a moment longer, and turned away.

The sickness and helplessness settled like a plague over the village. Fallen behind, left behind by the world of Greater Bay, a world sunken into poverty while we within the shining cities indulged in wine and begotten happiness. A sickly queasiness lurched in my stomach; I looked towards the girl beside me, but her face was stoic, though tears spun within her eyes.

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“That’s why you joined.”

She answered nothing. Did she have to?

“You want to come up with a cure.”

“I need the money to help my family,” she said, ‘so I thought I would help them by doing something good for everyone. Medicine. Technology. It’s the only thing I can give them — a way out of poverty, a new life...’

Her voice faded away, listless upon the wind.

The train whisked us through a world of glamour and mystery; the daylight shone upon Greater Bay, and Greater Bay basked in that light, unknowing, ignorant of a world that was borne ceaselessly into the past.

“I’ll join.”

Her eyes flickered to mine.

“We will both try to come up with a cure,” I said. “That way we both get what we want. You get to help your family. I get my father’s recognition. And if one of us wins —”

She leaned closer to me, smiling. Her breath was warm against my lips; her fingers rested on the gold watch around my wrist.

“If I win, I’ll name my medication after you,” she said. “Li Jian.”

I grinned. “And I’ll call my medication by your name if I do.”

She laughed her beautiful, dainty laugh, and her mouth covered mine.

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The revolving lantern hovered above me, releasing a powder of golden light on the snowy parchment that lay on the golden mahogany desk; they were furled and unfurled, their folds releasing the scent of musk and mothballs into the air. My fingertips lingered on the printed characters that spiralled their way across the scrolls, their strokes bare and drifting, but with purpose.

My head fell forward into my hands — by God, what folly have I landed myself into? I should have left the glory to my brother. My mind was incapable of such feats as a perfect cure, despite the countless tutors my father hired to light some intelligence into my witless brain.

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My nights with my girl left us wandering in Hong Kong’s empty, darkened streets in the hour of early morning, where we drowned in the indulgence of alcohol and the flickering haze of dreams. She asked me often for what lay in my pockets, to facilitate her research, she said, and I willingly handed over the dollars that would give her the support to find a way to give the villagers a better life, a new life.

She came to the pub one night, and her cheeks were flushed with ardour and ecstasy. She took her wine, and in the midst of soaked euphoria, she told me her findings — she has found an equation that would lead to the cure she found, but she needed money — money to procure the ingredients and forge an all-curing medication.

“I found it all,” she said, and cast onto the counter before us a piece of parchment. The characters spun across the manuscript a thread of equilibrium among the treacherous work of innovation and medical studies.

“Of course I can give you the money,” I responded swiftly, my heart hammering away — I felt a sense of resistless dread mingled with breathless eagerness, and guilt weighed on my heart with anticipation of what my mind compelled me to do — a dreaded act — a traitorous deed —

“Thank you,” she said languidly as I handed her the money; she wandered in a drunken haze of liquor. And in those moments, as she wandered helplessly in the domain of dreams, I folded the scroll shut, and tucked it into my pocket.

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The headlines blared the golden news — *The Champion of this year’s Youth Innovation and Entrepreneurship Competition — The Son of Famed Businessman comes up with a Cure to Change the World — How proud must Mr. Li Qian be to have a son equally accomplished as he!*

Even my normally placid father was moved to jubilation. His eye glinted with surprise and pride as he bent his gaze upon me. My name inscribed on the golden trophy. I was no longer the insubstantial phantom that my father tried desperately to hide, who lurked in the shadow of his brother’s success; my name was called all across Greater Bay.

In the months that followed, filled with bliss and merriment, there was only one flaw, but it was a flaw that widened day by day. Every night I wandered the empty streets still, but they were empty and offered only solace, not companionship — the girl I loved no longer returned to fill the air with the music of her laughter, and my night-time walks were just as silent and drifting as before. I lingered in the shadows, and my tears blurred the vacuum of memory and nostalgia into a bowl of black night.

Why was it that my name floated upon the winds of fame, shouted and called everywhere, and still I lingered, a lost and star-crossed wanderer, haunted by memories, in a tunnel of darkness in the early morning?

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I saw her again a few nights later, at the place where we met. She looked very much the same as she did the first time I heard the bartender call her name, but the aura that surrounded her was different.

Her shadow fell across the counter as she sat down beside me. She drained her cup of liquor in one continuous swallow.

“You betrayed me,” she said.

“You betrayed me,” I echoed.

“You took my findings,” she said, “and you used them for yourself. You stole my future from me. I could have done much more for my village. Instead you took my work in exchange for fame.”

Her eyes burned with anguish and anger; I had not wanted her beside me to feel her rage, I had wanted to listen to her laugh, feel her warmth against my body, feel the love that drifted here and there among the people of Greater Bay Area, but never stayed —

“You took my money,” I answered. “You never wanted my love. You pretended to be in love with me so you could make money off me.”

Silence hung between us. The purple lights flashed on her face, illuminating it for an infinite moment, before plunging it into darkness.

“I suppose that’s what’s going on everywhere in Greater Bay.” I kept my eyes on the ebony braid on her shoulder. “All you care about is yourself. Once you see something that will give you an opportunity, an advantage, you drop everything — even the ones you love — so that you can grasp on to it.”

“And we linger as ghosts,” she said.

We sat in silence again. My eyes fell on the gold watch on her wrist and hung there until her sleeve slipped over it.

She rose. “Goodbye.”

I called her name.

It resounded endlessly, hopelessly, in the space of the pub.

Irresolutely, tears filled my eyes. Through the blood that pounded in my ears and the storm roaring through my body, the semblance of a tune trickled through my eardrums —

*When life closes down and dusk falls on the lawns,*

*I remember how you betrayed me —*

She was right. We in Greater Bay lingered here, as ghosts of forgotten dreams and genuine feelings. We betrayed each other for wealth and fame, and for that we paid the price of unconditional love. What was worse was that we did not regret it. If given the chance, we would betray each other all over again — and again — and again —

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The girl sat at the desk in a clinic in Guangdong, in the crumbling remains of a village. She glanced outside the window.

The sun was setting on Greater Bay Area. It highlighted the glistening circle of cities that ringed a shining centre they called Beijing. Thunderclouds were dispersing on the horizon, its underbelly swollen like a pink udder; daylight shot beneath it and the land beneath it glowed with an artificial light.

The last patient had just left the clinic, and the girl stretched her hands behind her head. Fatigue overwhelmed her. She would have put her head down on the desk and fallen into slumber gladly, if her assistant had not poked her head around the door and called her name.

“The new prescription has arrived,” she said.

“I didn’t order new medication,” the girl replied.

The assistant brought a box to her. “Well, it must be our lucky day, then. I hear this medication can cure cancer.”

The girl’s gaze was doubtful. “Who invented it?”

“Li Jian.”

The name floated in the expanse of the room, and the girl trembled with its resonance. The familiar name that haunted and dwelt in the empty nighttime streets, where the puddles from last night’s storm were left behind, and the moonlight turned the rainwater to quicksilver, and the trees were full of starlight —

The girl looked down at the box in her hand, and her hand trembled slightly. Her name was embossed on the cover; in her ears she heard him call her name across a distance, in a longing tone, in the tenor of strange remembrance, and it vibrated with memory, and love, and hope —

The dusk closed down upon her; the storm was leaving, leaving behind its soft singing voice.

*When the lamps are lit and the new day dawns,*

*Come find me; and call my name.*