



Ho Lin

Downstage

If this was New York, the theater where you live would qualify for Off-Broadway. It isn't, which means an audience of a couple dozen for a single show is a good night. The space itself is adequate; you wouldn't be here if it wasn't. The exterior has the burly brown look of a warehouse, but in the hazy past it was probably a brothel, as all the buildings on this street used to be. First there were wooden trading ships, beached for good when the coast was first settled, and then their skeletons were buried or stripped for wood. Atop the remains brick fronts and rounded windows and frilly curtains went up. The building bricks have grown wine-dark with age, the panes of the windows are blached, and the curtains withered into shreds and were removed long ago, but the structure remains sound. A monument, then, to a particular past, and even that past has been forgotten. You only know about it because you read about it once. You're not good for much, but you're good for reading.

In the basement, neglected in a far corner just under the very edge of stage left, is a hollowed-out little closet. Run your finger along the wall inside the closet, and you'll rub against the scabbed remnants of hooks, the pockmarks left by boreholes. Storage for sex implements? Judging by the height of these holes, and the width between them, you idly fantasize objects for debasing one's way through a dreary evening. Whip? Chains? Featherduster or tickler? The important thing is that no one is aware of the closet's existence, and you can sleep there without detection. Room enough

for a sleeping bag and a two-tier shelf which you have fashioned with a few spare nails and particle boards. Atop the shelf is a little plastic lantern powered by the white glow of three LED bulbs. Your backpack, old enough to resemble well-worn leather, settles in beneath. Somewhere in the depths of the closet is a crack, an opening, some sort of passage to the street, because every so often a whiff of marijuana floats in, like a sigh.

The first floor of the theatre contains the stage and a lobby just large enough to accommodate maybe a dozen customers (self-fulfilling prophecy, you could say). The second floor is offices and storage rooms, all of them hopeless in their disarray. Still, their untidiness is your gain. During off-hours, you prowl about, scooping up loose change here, the remains of a chicken club sandwich there. Show season is bonus time, when you nab a few swigs from not-quite-finished bottles of wine (they always overestimate the wine-patron ratio).

To remain incognito, and avoid the theatre people, demands a certain degree of flexibility. Rehearsal schedules change on a whim. Set dressing and lighting prep can drag on, especially if it's under the frazzled eye of a stage manager getting pulled this way and that. (What is a stage manager but a living, breathing version of Mr. Punch, forever pummeled by Director Judy's stick?) Sometimes the director and a few actors, tipsy with the thrill of their enterprise, will linger after rehearsal to recite lines and movements. During those times you retreat into your closet, sifting through the nuances of performance based on the way the actors' voices vibrate through the wood above your head. During an actual performance, you cannot take chances. You linger out front on the street, not even daring to panhandle, lest you call undue attention to yourself (though some kindly patrons will drop you a few bills now and then). At the conclusion of every show you scan the faces of those who depart. Joy? Bemusement? Aggravation? Some of all that, but mostly indifference. Indifference, the golden mean of life. Soon the actors depart, silent and spent, the doors are locked, and you reenter for the night through a rear window that has every appearance of being secure.

So: not the most convenient life. You're okay with that. You haven't done enough to deserve an easy existence, anyway. Your life has been a big bunch of *always something*. Was it your fault? A karmic shift? You're well past accepting or assigning blame. One bad thing at a time in an ongoing succession. Drug problem. Financial difficulty or malfeasance. Bad relationship. Rotten timing or luck. Re-sequence, repeat. And finally there comes a month when it's not

convenient to crash with someone, and it's a few months before someone else's couch becomes available, and that someone else's ex-boyfriend is still around, their relationship in that squishy state in which shouting alternates with crying. Would you want to be there, caught up in a black mood that hangs over everything like a fire-retardant shroud? Your best option is to live on the university campus grounds. Not really that difficult—dawdle on the college green and in the libraries during the day (something about reading books in a library makes you believe that all is well), sneak into the gym for a shower when needed, and clear out some ground for yourself amongst random shrubbery at night. One night a campus guard blunders upon you just as you are pleasuring yourself (everyone has needs). The two of you are mirrors of each other for a moment, both near-shrieking from surprise, but you are younger and more resilient, and bolt before the guard can even utter a sound. Apart from that one incident, not a bad existence, until the winter arrives. Although it's not a Chicago tundra kind of winter, the rain and damp burrow deep to your innards, as if you are a thoroughly soaked, giant sponge. So retreat to the city, and you have found yourself here.

Like a phantom, you have gained sufficient knowledge of the surroundings to circulate around the premises without drawing attention. Accessways to choice areas have been patched over with nailed-in-place plywood—a simple thing to pull the boards out and reinstall as needed, sans the nails. Your favorite spot, when you have enough forewarning about rehearsal, is a little ledge just behind the booth at the back at the theater where the stage manager is ensconced. A black curtain separates booth and ledge, and you can part the curtain just enough to get a view of the booth, with the proscenium spread out beneath like a game board empty of markings and meaning. You observe the stage manager as she pokes at her four-channel mixing board, and loads up sound effects and interstitial music on her computer. Every rehearsal, she must fight to prevent the screensaver from engaging at an inopportune moment. The Director (officially the Founding Artistic Director, but why mess with semantics? He's the Director, full stop) often retreats to the booth to huddle with his contemporaries for bull sessions (copious amount of beer). There is no practical reason why these tête-à-têtes should be held in the booth; maybe the Director imagines it to be an extension of his mind, like a permanent set, a place where creatives can linger in sanctity. He has applied to all the best drama schools with no success. He's at the miserable point in his mid-thirties in which dread has surrendered to cynicism. His thesis, solid as fossilized rock: Theater is under assault from within and without. If a production

isn't done in by lack of rigor or conviction, it's murdered by poisonous critics who don't make an attempt to even understand something outside the enervating norm. (Nothing crushes a soul and show more comprehensively than a single diffident sentence from a troglodyte's review.) Actually, everyone who sits in the booth, stranger and comrade, feels the same about critics. You yourself have no strong opinion; all you care about is the near-empty cans you can collect later, so you can consume the beer in aperitif-size doses, and make a few extra cents off the recycled cans. The Director and his crew love the crotchety old janitor who cleans up the building. What they don't know is that the janitor just makes some half-hearted sweeping motions for a few minutes after everyone leaves, then totters home, and you are the one that handles the bulk of what he should be doing, because you've always been the organized one—fine, yes, you have a bit of OCD. The old janitor doesn't understand it when the crew compliment him on his work; all he can do is grunt and scowl and say, *Whatever*, which is just as well, because that leads the crew to rave about his “colorful” personality. That's theater, ascribing fascinating characteristics to things that aren't there.

Onstage, the actors fret and strut. Sometimes they kick up little wisps of dust from the stage as they skitter about, like burps from a malfunctioning magic wand. Award-winning stuff this is not, but you are pleased by the sight of them from your vantage point. They resemble little ants learning to reach towards the sun. Everyone is very careful not to trample on everyone else's feelings, since they're all in this together, so each criticism is couched in euphemisms and code. *What do you think about... I have a suggestion? ... What you did there, that was interesting...* After a while you can pick out the weak link in every cast—there's always a weak link—just as fast as the Director, and you can smell the passive aggression as it builds within everyone else. *Just keep being agreeable and laugh and nod because we have no time to get bogged down in conflict. Just do that and we'll only have to put up with this shit just a little longer, even though this actor is always late and he never learns his lines and his B.O. is just rampant and he's always making suggestions for what the other actors should do, which is the first thing you learn not to do as an actor.* In happier times (considerably less frequent), you witness romance bloom under the hot lights. A few dirty jokes, a hand lingering on a shoulder just a touch longer than expected, fake laughter masking real lust, and then one night you'll be lounging in that nook long after rehearsal, the lighting trimmed to a default glimmer, when you hear the rustle of clothing on the stage. Two bodies writhing, all but invisible in the darkness, but the amorous couple's breaths

and moans echo and bounce around the empty space. And eventually, the breakup, because these stage-bound romances always end in a breakup, and every once in a while the breakup is spectacular, carried out in the presence of cast and crew. *Yeah? Well you were a lousy lover!*

It is the spring season, box office in full drought. Someone makes the hitherto unthinkable suggestion: Maybe put on *Our Town*? Everyone is aghast at the thought, including the person who came up with it. The horror! One step closer to repertory, to purgatory. No, if this company is going down, it will go down with a nuclear blast. The Director marshals the troops for their Last Stand. An original play will be produced. In the current social and political climate, we cannot shirk responsibility or reality. Our condition since time immemorial has been misery, and we must remind the audience. Those who see this play will need to be made of stern stuff to withstand the uppercut of these truths, but they will depart bloodied and edified. No wussy, commercialized trifles of entertainment here. If we are to fail, then fail marvelously. We will be a comet streaking across the sky, illuminating with the light of its passing. The Director does not say the above in those words exactly, but the optimists among his collaborators share his vision. Your reaction: *They're fucked.*

The Director sets to work on the script. Classic structure: one set, two acts, each act separated by five years. Over that duration, hope surrenders to resignation, certainty crumbles into dissolution. The play opens with a postcard sunset and concludes with a superficially perfect dawn, as if mocking what has transpired. Throughout, the verities and Ibsen will be observed, and a gun will eventually be fired (Chekhov would approve). Given the time crunch, the Director (and Writer) sticks with what he knows. A failed relationship from his own past, the embers of which are stoked anew into a white flame of hate. The Director gets the last word this time, but with a smidge of self-loathing, just enough to assure himself and audiences that he is mature.

It all sails forward, for a while, and then like a vessel slammed by becalmed weather, the whole enterprise slows to a dying crawl. The Director is struggling to reconcile his truth with the play's fiction. Draft after draft, lines and motivations revised on the go. Morale, never high to begin with, at a new low. Funds for props and set decoration, always low, are now nonexistent. The Publicist (friend to one of the actors, always a dangerous proposition) relocates to New York without warning, and later the crew hears that she's representing a once-popular actress in her return to

Broadway. (*Who knew she had such connections? More importantly, the rest of us are still stuck here.*) The Stage Manager gives off the appearance of being snappy and cheerful, since that's what stage managers must do. Super-competent drill sergeant and den mother, that's the idea. But all alone in the nook, you hear her curse under her breath, a long stream of nervous invective. *Fuckity-fuck-fuck-fuck, fucking cocksucking* this and that.

Privately, the Director laments his actors, who would actually be adequate if he could focus long enough to prescribe certain parameters for them to explore. He's not in the kind of mind space to offer aid anyway—he's been connected by a friend to a local massage clinic to shoot a series of five-minute videos on spec, quick turnaround required. Instead of stagecraft and narrative coherence, his thoughts are now crowded with terms like *rolfing*, *hellerwork* and *craniosacral therapy*. The video work will last a few months and offer more income than his entire theatrical career thus far. This thought could encourage him; instead the futility of it all sinks in, and more beer is consumed. (More leftover booze for you, at least.)

The true nature of what's at stake only sinks in about mid-way through rehearsals, when you hear talk of overdue rent and letting the lease run out. You're of two minds about that possibility: while it is conceivable that the building would remain empty for a good long while and you would have the place to yourself, the more likely outcome would be a dot-com purchasing the property and renovating it from stem to stern. Ergo, no more living accommodations. *Auf wiedersehen. A bientot.* Good night.

The Director and his Lead Actress are in the booth, sipping at Two-Buck Chuck (even drinking habits are getting miserly at this point), and he is in full-disclosure mode. *I don't think we're going to make it*, he says. He looks at her with those puppy-dog eyes that suggest what he needs more than anything else is a tender nod and noises of sympathy. She obliges, without ostentation. You like her. She seems to have her head on straight compared to other actresses, and you can tell by the way she pats the Director's shoulder that she respects him even though she's nowhere as far into him as he is into her. *You're good. Really good. I mean it*, he says. *Don't stop with what you're doing.* Maybe she can make him happy. That would be something. Everything else could go to shit but as long as he got some happiness out of the deal, that might be a net positive. You know that's not going to happen, though. Watching them through the curtains, as if the booth is the real stage and they're just playing parts, they seem unreal, malleable.

After a particularly listless rehearsal, after the janitor has performed his cursory rounds and fled, you find yourself in the Director's office. He has left his computer on, his email account open. The current version of the script has been printed out and left in a strikingly neat pile on the desk. You read through it. It's not so bad, in truth. In fact, with some tightening, it can be quite credible. Just give an actor a few notes on how to play this scene, how the Lead Actress can respond in this moment, and you start to see a dramatic shape forming, like shadows coalescing into pinpoint shafts of light. You jot a few suggestions and leave them on the desk, signed with the Stage Manager's name. Sure she might get fired for this breach of conduct, but what's the difference if she's sacked a few weeks before the whole company goes under? If anything, she should thank you for giving her a head-start in finding a better gig.

The following day at rehearsal, the Director flashes the Stage Manager a thumbs-up as she bustles past him to the booth. *Hey, thanks for those suggestions*, he says. Although being magnanimous is new to him, he has decided it's the best way to maintain control of the situation. *I think they might help*. The Stage Manager, already harried by dozens of crises to extinguish, assumes he must be referring to some technical items she hounded him about the day before, and gives him a brisk nod. *No problem*, she says.

It's surprising how creation can sometimes be an avalanche. One person does something that's interesting, the synapses start firing for the other people in the room, and soon enough everyone is contributing. The Director, still in his mental fog of depression and massage techniques, is implementing most of your suggestions without a second thought, because why the fuck not? And just like that, thanks to a subtle shift you engendered in the Lead Actress's reaction to a certain revelation, the biochemistry of the play changes. The Lead Actress, minus any sort of pretension or ego, is stepping forward to inhabit the emotional center. The other actors see how they can play off her energy, or redirect it in their own performances. Where there was dull flailing, one now finds concentration that comes with intention.

This is only the beginning, you realize. You can't cure a gushing wound by just slapping a band-aid on it. This will require cauterization, some antiseptic, careful bandaging. The next step is to fix the lighting. You've read enough on the subject to recognize that a strategic gobo would be helpful for a certain scene, to give it

a patterned aquamarine affect, as if the characters are struggling to stay above water, as we all are in life. Obviously a dedicated gobo projector is out of the question budget-wise, so you'll have to make do with something cobbled together. You find it on a visit to the local dump—some shards of stained glass, most probably from a demolished church. Some edging and sanding, a few random tubes of glue dug up from one of the storage rooms, and you have a plate that can be placed in front of a spotlight (it's a bit heavy, but not bad for a jerry-rigged solution). Using the Director's email, you dash off a message to the Lighting Designer with some thoughts on the subject (deleting the message from the sent folder after sending), then leave the plate propped up next to the spotlight in question. Fortunately the Lighting Designer is a just-get-it-done type, and he's already under the gun to help out the local Jewish Community Center with their play—he feels like he owes them one even though he's not Jewish, maybe it's because they always serve him fantastic pastrami when he's there—so he goes ahead and sets up the gobo plate just so, since it means accomplishing his task of making the Director happy a bit faster. When it's first used in rehearsal there is a thrilling pause for a moment, as the actors realize what is happening, and then they attack their lines and movements with renewed conviction. Hung over from too much wine the night before, the Director thinks for an instant: *Did I ask for that gobo?* But he cannot deny the rightness of the overall effect, and so says nothing. After rehearsal, the Lead Actress gushes about the lighting in the scene. He modestly accepts the credit.

Next priority is fixing the staging. This doesn't require much, just the surreptitious re-placement of several marks, with relevant adjustments included in a separate note to the Lighting Designer. Where one character was once trapped in a corner, ignored within the landscape of the scene, now he is relocated to the center, caught in the middle of a triangle as two fellow actors confront each other, mirroring the audience's torn loyalties as his gaze whiplashes helplessly between the two antagonists. For a critical soliloquy, the Lead Actress is placed at the edge of the apron, right up against house right, as if she's about to fall off the edge of the world, adding the slightest tension to her impassioned speech. Just to ensure that everyone's movements are correct, you take position under the stage for one rehearsal, listening to the footsteps above as the actors place themselves in their new positions, each little squeak of floorboard confirmation that everything is proceeding the way it should. The Director somewhat notices these changes, and puts it all down to his actors attempting to take responsibility for the production's success. Yes, it's better to think of all this as a

collaborative effort, because the alternative would be to admit that he has lost all control of the production, and why would he admit that when it was all coming together?

As rehearsals go by, you continue your fine-tuning. It only makes sense that you would step in like this. All the other members of the company have day jobs, bills to pay. As a friend of yours once said, *Art belongs to those who can afford it, or have time to do it.* (You decide to add that line in the script.) A few dumpster dives at local Goodwill and department stores lead to useful props and costumes. You leave them in a box on the stage, with a simple handwritten note signed with the name of the janitor: THESE MIGHT HELP YOUR PLAY. When the Director grabs the janitor in a bear hug and thanks him for his contributions, the janitor, bemused, shrugs him off with a gruff *Okay, okay*, and a look that says, *These crazy white people*. The script requires the most work, and by this point you're peppering the Director with suggestions from every source, whether it's from an "actor" (you've learned all their names from the Director's email, so it's easy to create new email accounts using the same names—who notices Actor'sName21@gmail.com compared to Actor'sName21@outlook.com?) or someone else associated with the production. Chekhov's gun has been removed, the most embarrassing parts of the Director's personal story excised (the play doesn't really need all those bitter S&M jokes). In their place remains tragedy, but the kind that stems from misunderstanding, bad timing, the whims of fate. The play's tone tends towards the monochromatic, so you do what you can to introduce some color. Nothing as genius as *exeunt, pursued by bear*, but some nice comedic moments. It helps when you can draw on familiar situations from the lives of the people you've lived with. That's the funny thing: though nothing happens to you, your friends go through *everything*. When your own life is empty, it leaves plenty of time to observe. Who knew that painful lovers' arguments would find a useful place?

Surprising even yourself, you've devised some avant-garde touches. At one point you decide to have a character drinking water out of a dog bowl. While the play supplies a half-hearted reason for why this happens, the important thing is the grotesque staging of the act. It came to you after you read up about how drunkards and opium addicts were shanghaied in the old days, imprisoned in basement closets not unlike the one you live in right now, your life whittled down to bars and dog bowls with fetid water to drink. In short, we're all one step from subjugation. You have clearly injected a bit of your own history into the script—nothing too overt, just enough to supply a more authentic view as to what it means to

be down and out. You have been a failure and a fuck-up. You have never found a vocation to be good at. Yet you've remained stoic to the end. We're all going to hell, but at least we can face it with dignity. An audience can find the pathos behind that.

I know where I've been, and where I'm going. This line is repeated several times in the play by the Lead Actress, and each time the significance behind the line shifts. At first it is a declaration, and then it is a lie, and finally it is a capitulation. It takes a while for the Lead Actress to invest herself in the different interpretations of those words. Masking yourself as the Director (Director'sName2@gmail.com), you don't order her to act a certain way. Instead, you pose a few questions, probe motivation and intent and effect: *Don't think of yourself as just acting, you're reacting too.* Enthused, the Lead Actress is staying after rehearsal with the Director every day now, asking him what he thinks about this approach, or perhaps she can do it this way? She's too smart and intuitive to go down the wrong track; all she needed was a nudge. For his part, the Director is still fixated on getting her clothes off, and simply encourages her to experiment, to go for it, to get naked on the stage. Metaphorically, of course. She stands at the edge of the apron, addressing House Right, saying those words every day, again and again, as if she is saying them for you, since you can't say them for yourself. *I know where I've been and where I'm going.* Underneath the stage, you can hear her footsteps. Each day it seems she gets closer and closer to that edge. She is an acrobat without a net. From the nook behind the booth, you watch her from a distance, and even though she never smiles when she says these words, you can close your eyes and see her smile, or hear her heart beating fast and strong, because she knows how close she is, close to the edge, close to success, close to achieving. She is no longer actor or character. She just is. Seeing her in this state, it occurs to you that you want her, yet you must keep your distance. Any closer, any revelation of your presence, would destroy it all. Watch from a distance. Listen from under the stage. It's privilege enough to be a witness. *I know where I've been and where I'm going.*

Finally the day comes: first preview. You have taken the liberty of emailing a variety of critics in the area, after researching which ones might be most amenable to the play's approach. Across town, near other theaters and in artist ghettos (which are so hard to find now that everything's gentrifying and the artists are fleeing), you plaster walls with flyers for the performance. As is your custom, you vacate the theatre far in advance of the opening curtain. You've done all you can; the turnout is excellent. Friends of actors,

the familiar friends of the Director (you're not accustomed to them sober), as well as those critics you invited, the hyenas and jackanapes that can make or ruin this. All you can do now is wait. You've attended so many rehearsals, know the script so well, that you can envision each line of dialogue, the length of each pause and scene change. You pace the sidewalk in front of the theatre like an expectant parent-to-be, breaking off from the dull rhythms of back-and-forth every so often to pantomime what must be happening in the play at that exact instant.

Just after ten, the doors open and the crowd exits. Faces are thoughtful, neutral. Impossible to gauge response. You enter the lobby (today you've showered and shaved and found some newer clothes to wear, so you can pass for disheveled creative type) and mix with the remainder of the audience as they chat over wine. Observations are being handed around. *She's so good in this... I thought the story was good... What was with the dog bowl though? I didn't get that...* (Yeah, you think, that could have been integrated better.) *Liked the stage design too... The lighting in that one part was gorgeous!* All very promising, but they could all be just friends of the actors of the Director. One can't get too high or too low based on initial feedback.

You find yourself in the theater, in the house proper, amongst the seats and paying customers for the first time. The Lead Actress is with friends, throwing her head back and laughing loudly at something. It's a terrible acting job. Still, you can't begrudge her this moment of slippage. After a grueling performance, it's nice to not have to focus on being good, or convincing. You approach her. You say: *Hey, just wanted to say, great job.* She looks you up and down, memory banks activated. Nope, she doesn't recognize you. Time for her to put on the polite, somewhat distant smile. *Thank you, she coos. Thanks a lot.* You search for what to say next. Surely you can comment on some of the technical aspects of the performance. You could pretend you're somebody you're not. It's too late; she is back to laughing with and at her friends as they clap hands on her shoulders and give her European hugs.

The director is towards the back of the house, near the booth. He and the Stage Manager are toasting. *Half of this belongs to you,* he says. *No, no,* she replies, waving her free hand. *It's been an honor. How you pulled this together from where we started... it's just incredible.* He has a faraway look in his eyes now. *Yes... he says. One thing I've learned from all this is you just have to trust the process. It's like David Lynch talks about with transcendental meditation. You just have to let you mind go, and place it in a state*

where you're receptive— You interrupt him before he can go any further, and say, *Congratulations, excellent play*. He beams at the space just over your right shoulder. He must be a little tipsy already. *Thank you*, he says. *I appreciate that. Have we met before? You know the theatre community here is so incestuous, but I don't think we have...* You shake your head. *No, we haven't*, you say. *I've been following your career for a while, though*. Then, with the slightest of swallows, you add: *You should be proud of what you've accomplished*. He nods. *Yes, thank you. That means a lot. So are you a director yourself? I say that knowing absolutely zero about you, but I just had a feeling... we should talk more, what shows have you done?* You reply: *Just a couple. Excuse me*. You can't take any more. You give a friendly smile to the Stage Manager—she never did manage to calm down during the whole production, but such is the lot of a stage manager—and you depart.

Much later, after the last of the friends and guests have left, the crew lock up the theater and hit a local bar to celebrate. Through the windows of the bar, you watch them. If you had more nerve, you would find a table nearby and eavesdrop. What purpose would it serve, though? They must keep on keeping on, blissful and unaware. In your view, what's most important is keeping the theatre company solvent, the building occupied. You go back to your closet for the night, with plenty of leftover wine from the lobby to indulge in. You toast the stage above your head. The show must go on.

Only it doesn't. The play is a surprising critical success, but in the end, a theatre only large enough to hold a few dozen has a ceiling on its revenue. After a month of performances (matching the anticipated length of the run when this whole project began), the play closes, and so does the theater company a short time later. Still, much good results from the production. The Director doesn't receive his scholarship to Yale; what he gets instead is a plum role as an assistant on a larger production with a much-respected company, and while that ultimately doesn't pan out, he has enough cred to gain a steady gig as a theatre reviewer for the local newsweekly, where he becomes known for attaching far too many adjectives to every noun. The Stage Manager moves on to another production company, in a more upscale part of town, where they put on *A Christmas Carol* every holiday season.

Finally, the leading actress, after some sterling notices, is off to New York to try her hand at Off-Broadway, as well as the occasional guest starring gig on shows like *Law and Order*. Shortly after the play's run (and shortly before the theatre group vacates

the building), she returns one afternoon by herself, and stands on the stage, gazing out into an empty house, mouthing dialogue silently. She is saying farewell to what has come before. You are in that familiar nook behind the booth and watch her, her only audience. Later that day you will be back in your closet, packing your single knapsack and rolling your sleeping bag in an uneven ball. Above, the stage will be silent, and outside the theatre, the letters spelling out the name of the play on the marquee will be drooping at angles. It would be nice, if futile, to believe in another theatre out there with the same sleeping arrangements, the same opportunities. As you walk out of the front door of the building for the last time into black night, suddenly sad beyond any reasonable measure, you remember a play you once read which contains the exit line *Now you see me, now you—*

Ho Lin is the co-editor of Caveat Lector. His collection of short stories [China Girl](#) will appear later this year.