



Ho Lin

Taipei 101

Chang was a taxi driver, a real one, not one of those Uber drivers. Never get him started on Uber. A week ago we had drinks at the Fucking Place Bar -- look it up, it exists. Chang was learning English, and found the name hilarious. Mostly he ranted about the Uber bastards stealing his money. He was already in the hole for a couple million NT, and had to borrow more from Big Man Lau to buy a proper *feng shui* burial for his mother. Given that this was Big Man Lau, his loan interest had already tripled. I offered to lend

Chang money -- people from our village stick together -- but he wouldn't hear of it. I was near-broke anyway. Later that night he puked up a few beers and drove me home in his beaten-down cab without a single wobble. It was like witnessing a superpower.

But before he puked, we caught up. I'd been working that love hotel down the coast in Taitung, filming hidden sex videos. Decent job, until you get caught. So I'd high-tailed it back to Taipei, just to lay low over in the Banqiao district. It had been forever and I couldn't recognize the city. Downtown Ximending was Japan with grimier neon signs. Schoolgirls wore oversize glasses and played with chirpy phones. Walking into cafés was like walking into nursery school, with all the tiny cups, napkins and plants.

Chang said Taipei reminded him of the film *Blade Runner*—all the smog, rain and dirty lights. I didn't know the movie so I just shrugged. *Blade Runner* takes place in 2019, Chang explained, and now we were in 2019. To him, that was significant. *This must be our year*, he insisted.

*If only*, I thought. I had found a book in the love hotel about living and dying, which supplied this piece of advice: *There are particular moments when you are naturally inspired to introspection*. So okay, this was my introspective period. I told Chang I'd been hired by some rich folks to give swim lessons to their daughter Mei on Tuesday and Thursday evenings. The family lived up in the Neihu hills, where the streets are free to curve and the shrubs resemble fortress walls. (*I know that area. Rich assholes*, Chang muttered.) Like a lot of people in this great island half-nation of ours, Mei didn't know the first thing about swimming, so I would take her to the local community pool. Every time the two of us would just dogpaddle around, as unproductive as seven-year-olds. It wasn't the worst way to spend a sweltering summer, and when the occasional thunderstorm rolled in, it felt good to be outdoors, under sudden gray skies and rain.

The Thursday after drinks with Chang, I headed to Mei's as usual. Waiting in the hall for her, I overheard her father on the phone: *I need a native English speaker. Someone to write an email to this international school kid hitting on my daughter*. Usually Mei

would hop up and down at the prospect of going out; today, weighed down by a Snoopy-head backpack almost bigger than she was, she stared at a space just above the ground. I would have said something, but hell, I was just hired help.

As we stepped onto the street, Chan's taxi squeaked to a stop alongside us. *I was in the neighborhood, want a lift?* he asked. It was a particularly hot day, cicadas buzzing like electricity, so I didn't think anything of it. We clambered into the back, onto the blessed, cool, faded leather seats.

*Uncle Ming, who is this?* Mei asked. Ming was the name I had given the family.

*He's called Uncle Chang.*

*Like Chang Chen? The movie star? He looks like him.*

Chang in better times would respond with something like *You're cute, sweetie*. Instead he stared straight ahead, his lips working.

*Something wrong?* I asked him.

Still no sound. The car crawled down the street like an old man. I leaned closer, smelling the whiskey at the same moment I saw the near-empty bottle of Kavalan nestled into the passenger seat. His driver ID photo on the dashboard stared back at me, faded to blue from the sun.

*You okay?* I said.

*Her father's loaded,* he said.

*How do you know--*

*I checked with people. Rubber tire empire. He fucking owns the tires on my car.*

Mei was watching a video of the K-pop boy group BTS on her phone. *You know it all, you're my best friend*, the singer wailed in English.

*How much you think we can get for the girl?* Chang whispered.

*What?*

*Ransom. How much?*

*You don't—*

*You get half. You need money too, right? Big Man Lau is going to kill me, brother. I swear to heaven, if I don't pay him back...*

We were merging onto Highway 5, headed west to nowhere. *We can't do this*, I said.

*Uncle Miiiiinnng.* Mei shoved a newly-emptied thermos in my face. *Passionfruit smoothie*, she said.

Chang boomed at her: *We'll get you one, sweetie! Okay?* In the rear-view mirror, his teeth were bared. *Daddy's little girl gets everything! Your daddy is a special guy, right?*

She frowned. *You mean special because he has a lot of girlfriends?*

*Dammit*, Chang muttered. *Lau's guys are behind us. Black RAV4.*

*Fuck!* I said.

Mei pointed at me, her mouth merry and wide. *Bad word! Bad word!*

Chang switched gears, pretty as a Super Formula driver, and we caromed to the left. The RAV4, windows tinted black, brights on in the daylight, swerved to follow. I cinched Mei's seatbelt closer around her. *We're doing a little race, just having fun*, I assured her. Then hissed at Chang: *You gotta drop her off. It's not safe.*

In reply, Chang steered us off the highway, down a ramp. Low-slung tenement buildings broke up the sun. Restaurant and store signs stacked atop each other flew past, like a card deck getting

shuffled.

Wow, Mei said. She had thrown down her phone and pressed her face to her window, entranced by our speed.

Chang punched the horn in machine-gun rhythms. I had impressions of people ducking out of the way, scooters veering into the curb. Something that looked like food hit the windshield and flattened out.

*You have to not give a shit, Chang said, all calm now. I'm sure that's the secret. People like Lau get rich because they don't give a shit. It's very Tao.*

*Come on, man, both of us can't afford the trouble.*

*Life is nothing but trouble. You gotta acknowledge it.*

He swung his left arm on the wheel, like he was delivering a left hook to the jaw, and we bounded over the curb and down an alley.

*Uncle Ming? Mei's eyes were growing big with the beginnings of worry. Can we stop? I want to get out.*

*We all want to get out, Chang said in a sing-song voice. Tell me where we should get out!*

One second I was looking at Mei, the next the ceiling of the car was upon me. No, more like I was rising to greet it. We were weightless for one moment. Then the gargantuan sound of metal colliding with metal overwhelmed me, my window splintered and the taxi came down hard on all fours.

*Shit! Chang was pounding at the wheel with his fists. Shit shit shit.*

I put my hand up to my face and came away with blood. It was coming down from somewhere just over my right eye. Unconscious, Mei had landed in my lap. No blood from her, at least. Just beyond the jagged mosaic that had once been my window was the yellow hood of another cab. Lettering on the car's

hood taunted us: *UberTAXI*.

I could hear someone saying *Are you okay?* To my battered hearing, it sounded like it was coming from an old record player. A man with a buzzcut, jowly and rumpled in that typical local way, was staring at me through my window. Must have been the driver of the other car.

*You fucking bastard!* Chang yelled. Somehow he had gotten out and come around to my side. I couldn't see what he did. All I saw was the other driver twisting sideways, as if he was being folded in half, then disappearing from view. Then Chang kicking at him. *Fucking Uber bastards! Fuck your mothers!* he screamed.

I crawled past Mei and out her door, gathered her up in my arms. Smoke and burning engine oil choked my eyes. Chang was pointing down the street where we had been. *Look! Look!*

The RAV4 was at the corner of the alley, swamped by halted cars and pedestrians. Just in front of it was one of those political campaign trucks with the PA speakers mounted on top, spouting the local candidate's slogans. *Earn good money!* It sounded as strident as monks chanting in the morning. *Protect Taiwan together! Earn good money!* The truck was moving forward, centimeter by centimeter, making sure its message penetrated everyone's skull. With every moment the RAV4 behind the truck nudged a bit closer.

*Get in!* Chang was in the Uber taxi, revving the engine. Mechanically, I shoved Mei into the back and flopped in after her. The seats smelled of spring linen. As we pulled out, I saw the front right tire of Chang's taxi, all but detached, face-down in the street. We lurched onto a boulevard, motoring into the setting sun, scrawny trees down the middle and four lanes on each side. I wiped at my face, could hear tinkles as small bits of glass fell.

*You see them?* Chang asked. *They still following?*

I couldn't tell; in the lengthening shadows, all the cars behind us were of a sameness. At least none were accelerating at us. Already,

our damaged car was emitting ominous rattles.

We must have been on Xinyi Road, because ahead of us, the Taipei 101 building jutted into the gloaming. I hated that spindly thing, how the top of it lorded in the clouds over the rest of the city, no other structure even close to its height. It was like a dick pulled out of someone's pants.

*What are we going to do?* I rasped. I looked Mei over. Still breathing, no major damage, as far as I could tell. You'd think we were on our way home from a long party and she was napping away, free as can be.

Chang was staring at Taipei 101. *You know you can only go up to the 91<sup>st</sup> floor? The top ten floors are for VIPs, celebrities, rich people only. But if you're ordinary folk, you can get admitted to the Summit if you spend more than one million NT in the Taipei 101 Mall.*

*Chang, man, we can't do this,* I said.

*When I first moved here, I would tell my buddies that if any of us were ever in a jam, we should meet up at the 101,* Chang murmured. *Because no matter where you are, it's easy to find.*

He continued staring ahead, the car bucking underneath us. Then he asked softly: *Remember when we were kids? Running around on the beach every day?*

*Sure. I remember.*

*Cutting our feet on seashells. What did we have to our names back then? A couple of rusty old bikes? Fuck, it was great to not be an adult, wasn't it?*

We were silent as we continued down Xinyi, towards that damn tower both of us hated. We were too close to take it all in now; we could only see the building's stubby bottom. Next to me, Mei's eyebrows crunched together in restless sleep.

I said, *Just before I left Taitung, I found a book in one of the hotel*

rooms. The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying. *You know that one?*

*Fuck, every taxi driver in Taiwan knows that book.*

*You read it lately, though?*

*No.*

*One part I read stuck with me, I said. Can't remember the exact words but it's like: "Planning for the future is like fishing in a dry gulch. Nothing ever works out as you want it to. If you want to think about something, make it the uncertainty of the hour of your death."*

*Chang laughed. So we're all fucked?*

*We're not fucked. Just uncertain. I'm sorry. It's not much.*

Chang tapped his fingers against the wheel of the stolen car. The rest of his body was still as rock but his fingers danced and twitched. Then he pulled over.

*Get out, he said. Go.*

Mei was groaning as I hoisted her and carried her off in no planned direction. Chang stayed in the car. I could see a cloud of cigarette smoke pirouette out of his window. A RAV4 had detached itself from the infinite flow of traffic, and was pulling up just behind him.

*Come on, walk, I said to Mei. She gave a single sound of discontent as I placed her back on the road, and gave her a soft pat on her head. Other pedestrians were around us; we were normal and unremarkable once again. Mei's Snoopy pack dragged behind her, the dog's ears scraping pavement. We were almost at the other end of the block now. I stayed behind her so she couldn't see what was happening where Chang was. The RAV4's doors had opened, and headlights bounced off their reflective surfaces like mini-spotlights. I could see Chang's broad back in the driver's seat. The*



men were surrounding him. They hefted longish objects in their hands, probably baseball bats.

Taipei 101 was just across the street, glowing emerald, cars scurrying by in front of it, preventing us from getting any closer. Mei blinked, as if she had been dreaming all this time, and looked up at me.

*Is Daddy here?* she asked.

*Daddy's probably at a love hotel,* I said.

*What's a love hotel?*

I looked down at her. She was staring up the side of the building, and I followed her gaze up. If you squinted just a little, the building looked like a fat man, with an elongated turban atop his head.

*I hear you've got a boyfriend,* I said.

She shook her head, embarrassed. *Dad doesn't want me to talk to him.*

*Follow my advice. Don't ever visit a love hotel with your boyfriend. Promise?*

I held my pinkie out, and after a moment she nodded and locked hers around mine. The crosswalk light finally changed. I took her hand and guided her north, away from Xinyi Road, away from the tower, away from whatever happened to Chang. Through the din of the traffic, I could hear the rough, bulky sound of thunder, and the evening's approaching rain.

That was the last I saw of Chang, and pretty much the last I saw of Mei. Her father wasn't thrilled that I disappeared with her for two hours, or maybe I didn't make enough progress with her breaststroke. I remember later that night, alone in my hole of an apartment in Banqiao, looking at the lights of the 101 across the river in the blurry rain. The sight looked much like *Blade Runner*

2049, which I saw a few months later. Maybe it's 2049 and not 2019 that will be Chang's year, or my year, or Mei's year, if any of us are still around by then.

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