

lost rats.

Anticipation settled like a heavy smog over Hong Kong.

Radios and television sets across the city stuttered with the announcement and newsboys shouted from every corner, black and white journals held victoriously in their upraised fists. Shopkeepers took extra care when they arranged their displays for the day, dusting and polishing away any leftover bad fortunes. And all day, Jade and her classmates sat primly in their seats as their minds regaled them with sweeping romances, like the one they saw in *My Fair Lady* (their parents had thought they were at the library — they weren't allowed to watch those "loose American movies"). Their backs stood straight in the electrified air as the day they had been waiting for grew older.

The American soldiers were visiting for an R&R leave.

Jade's father had warned her about them last night, words dampened by his cigar's unwinding exhaust. "If you see one of them, you make sure you walk away. The *mei gok yun* are a special type of rats. Nothing good comes from the war in Vietnam."

Jade took her time to respond, watching his rough hands crack open the durian's thick skin. He scooped the slabs of blond flesh into a porcelain bowl, palms satisfied with the familiarity of this routine. "It doesn't matter. I'm going to study at Suzie's house anyways." The lie spilled softly from her innocent lips.

He paused, scrutinizing her through the creamy fog carrying the sickly sweetness of the offensive fruit. "Good," he said, snuffing his cigar against his overworked jeans, leaving a smoulder. "Good girl."

The instant the school bell rang, the girls rushed to Suzie's house to spin magic from makeup brushes, charm their hair to shimmer, and stain their lips with cherries and sins. Then, they tiptoed out before her mother could notice that a dozen girls had gone through her powders.

"I'll dance with him and he'll fall in love with me and ask to elope," Suzie sang as she swayed through the humid night. Her parents were cozy with the British officers in the area and it showed in her faint shoulders, slick with sweaty perfume.

The rest of the girls twittered as they melted into the viscous shadows of *Wan Chai*, Hong Kong's infamous red light district. Their faces wavered under the neon lights, the pinks and greens and oranges flashing as they made their way towards the hotel at the end of the street.

"You're sure they're going to be there?" Liza asked again, voice taut with nerves or excitement or both. "And no one will catch us?"

"Heard my dad say it with my very own ears," Jade replied. "He stays in his office. Says he doesn't like to mingle with the rats in his bars."

"Everyone's a rat to him," Cherry quipped and the girls laughed. Jade's uneasy giggle was an acidic afterthought on her tongue.

Finally, they made it to the entrance of the bar. Jade took a stuttered breath as her eyes adjusted to the sultry lights, a thick haze of smoke snaking around her vision. The jukebox crackled a tune for blurry figures doing the twist, long skirts hiked up to reveal the secrets in their skin. But when the other girls gasped, she saw them: the uniformed *gwailo*¹.

¹ common Cantonese slang term for Westerners

They were tall, made of strong lines as if chiseled from stone, and all around the room. A lot more vivid than the fizzing television sets at home revealed, when the British programs came on. The soldiers were not the gallant men she'd seen in movies so many times before — they stumbled drunkenly, wandering eyes glassy yet piercing. They were the eyes of men who wanted to drink away the demons they were leaving behind in the Vietnam War.

The room slanted and Jade was fully aware of how her father would beat her if he knew she was here, in this place full of strange men. She mumbled a flimsy excuse on lost ears; the other girls were already making their way to the dancefloor.

Jade faded away to the stools by the bar and watched dejectedly. Her classmates weaved in and out of the soldiers, dancing wildly and offering smiles that gave nothing but also everything away. They did the Madison, makeup blurring their features as the soldiers' bright eyes bruised their milky collarbones. Their usually prim charcoal hair was messy. They were unrecognizable.

She understood now why her parents had told her to stay home tonight. Wartime was not the romantic era she and her friends had dreamed up with their teenage idleness. The hunger in her stomach was not for revolution, but for something more than the meagre rations she and her family received.

Just as Jade was about to get up to leave, a soldier appeared in the stool next to her. "Hi there," he greeted, an easy smile adorning his face. "Fancy a dance?"

Jade hesitated, surprised that one of them had addressed her so directly. She felt herself flush as she tried to grasp the English vowels in her head, tried to string them together into

something coherent, before she realized it didn't really matter what this soldier thought. "I . . . was just leaving."

"Aw, come on," he encouraged, flashing teeth. His blue eyes (so blue, like the expanse of denim under faded ash) were smiling, polite and welcoming and an entirely different world. "Don't be shy."

The round bellies of the girls who had rough hands and lived alone in *Wan Chai* came to Jade's mind. "I'm tired," she said, hopping off her chair and attempting in vain to muster her height into something it was not. Her eyes strained to ignore his yellow hair (so yellow, like silken durian bleeding in the palms of a marketplace) and brushed past him.

"Well, I'm sure I can wake you up," the soldier laughed and his hand slipped around her wrist easily (so easy, like the way daughters manipulated their tongues). So easy, like the way Jade was sucked into the dance floor by dancing girls and soldiers with yellow, yellow hair as Hong Kong darkened.