

Everyday Stranger

Growing up, Sunday mornings used to be my favourite. I would stretch in bed like a cat before running down the stairs to the kitchen. I can still remember waking to the smell of coffee and freshly baked bread, to the singing of birds in the garden and to the familiar and comforting sound of my parents' voices. Quickly securing a seat at the table, I would let out a cute little giggle as I reached for one of the warm and fluffy croissants. That was then.

A lot has happened.
A lot has changed.
A lot has been lost.

'Happy Sunday' I think to myself as I lay in bed determined not to move. It's past lunchtime already but I don't feel rested whatsoever. Why am I always so exhausted? Alone in my flat – somewhere in the heart of Shanghai's concrete jungle – it is to complete silence and emptiness that I open my eyes after yet another tormented night. I wonder when the vivid dreams and lifelike nightmares began. Perhaps they have always been there. Who knows. It seems like my brain is having a conversation with itself right now.

Will the nagging inner voice stop?
Will my brain ever quieten down?
Will I do something this Sunday?

As I attempt to stretch like I used to, my bones click loudly. Shoulder. Neck. Ankle. Knee. My dad, a lively wine connoisseur, often compares me to a piece of furniture without the screws. Listening to these painful clicks, I think he might have a point. Unlike good wine, time is not kind to our bodies but is it kind to our minds? There we go again. Wandering thoughts fill my brain which probably resembles an overflowing infinity pool right now. 'Focus', I mutter to myself as I stand up and get dressed. It is decided, I am going for a walk today. Why not?

Overwhelming heat.
Overwhelming beat.
Overwhelming leap.

As soon as I step into the city, the temperature and the humidity hit me. Like an invisible armour, a thick layer of sweat immediately covers my whole body. Hot and sticky, Shanghai summers make you feel as though you are stuck in a washing machine in the middle of a heavy rinse. I do not think I could ever become accustomed to this and it looks like most people agree. The streets are empty. The clouds are low. The air is heavy. One of the biggest cities in the world deserted. What am I doing out here again?

Left then right.
Step by step.
Here to there.

As I walk along the narrow streets of the Former French Concession and marvel at the architecture that surrounds me, I reflect on my recent trip back "home". Inverted commas. I can't help but use them. I've tried without. I really have. But I can't. I really can't. Why?

A party.
A story.
Let it be.

A week ago, I was in Paris having dinner with a few friends. They smiled when I arrived and we hugged when I left. That is the only warmth I felt. In between, no one asked about my life in China, my travels around Asia, my full-time job or anything else for that matter. They spoke about films I hadn't seen, music I hadn't heard of and memories I couldn't recall. There was a lot of drinking, talking and laughing. Not for me. I just left empty.

Distance too strong.
Been gone too long.
No longer belong.

There I was, a stranger in the place I am supposed to call home without inverted commas. A sudden outburst of sadness brings tears to the corners of my eyes. As I look for a tissue in my purse, I notice a cute little girl pointing her finger at me. She must be about six years old. "Lao wai, Lao wai, Lao wai" she screams at the top of her lungs with a defiant smile. My fingers linger into my purse and stumble upon my Alien Employment Licence. This little girl might be right after all. Foreigner, foreigner, foreigner.

This is who I am here.
This is who I am there.
This is who I am everywhere.

Or is it? Having spent more than ten years travelling and living around the world, I am starting to come to terms with idea that I do not belong anywhere. I looked long and hard for a place to call home but realised that home is more than just a place. It is also the people you surround yourself with. Those who love unconditionally. It is also yourself. The one thing you cannot go travelling without. Perhaps one does not need a place to have a home.

Foreigner.
Outsider.
Stranger.

I see the world differently. Some people say they think the globe is blue. Others say it is yellow or green. In my head, the globe is the most colourful painting I have ever seen. It is a canvas without borders and without structure. It is a masterpiece that is diverse, complex, and alive. Constantly evolving, it cannot be contained and is extremely difficult to describe. All the superlatives would not be enough to characterise its beauty and the diversity of those it is home to. Us. Despite our fights and misunderstandings, whether we like it or not, this is where we all live.

We are all human.
The world is one.
Tell everyone!

Can an everyday stranger bring us all together? As I turn a corner and greet the friends I am meeting for lunch, hope fills my heart and spreads through my veins. We are all from different parts of the world, different backgrounds, and different cultures. We might not

speaking the same mother tongue. We might not read the same books. We might not always agree on what food to order. Regardless, they know. They agree. They trust. This dream could become reality. Call me unrealistic or idealistic. Maybe utopian is who I am. Regardless, not an ounce of doubt in my body, a believer in a world without borders is who I choose to be.