

A FLASH OF PEPPER by KAVITA JINDAL

Winner of the 2012 Haruki Murakami Short Story Competition



Carrying a single bag, the young man is travelling alone at his whim with no particular destination in mind. These are the times when fantastic things happen, when he is likely to be discovered, or he will stumble upon people and places that affect him forever. When he takes the day off from life, from window-cleaning, and instead of lazing in a yum-cha place he heads out to far corners of his buzzing city, that's when life in all its wonders and weirdness will find him; it will come barrelling at him with its surprises.

That was the theory. It was not quite how it was working out today.

The satchel slung loosely from the young man's shoulders and although there was place to sit on the MTR he decided to stand by the door. At each station he'd wondered whether he should get off the underground train and change lines, then take a bus to somewhere in the New Territories. But he hadn't been quick to make up his mind at the last three stops and now the train sped through long blackness to the other side of the shrinking harbour. At the first stop on Hong Kong Island he escaped the train and rode upwards on a random escalator, upwards into the open air. This was better.

He followed a woman who had been on the step ahead of him on the escalator. She moved purposefully towards a walkway stretching between buildings. He didn't think much of her dress sense: black skirt, black blouse, white cotton cardigan, black pumps with a white bow. He had aunts who dressed like that, maybe it was an eighties look, something these ladies had not grown out of yet.

He himself liked to dress carefully, although he only had the one style. T shirt, jeans, converse trainers. The T shirt was always fresh for the day, his hair was always clean, also his face, his ears, his nails.

The lady he'd followed was heading into an office tower. He took up the footsteps of a person who looked like a tourist; a tall man with matted blonde hair and a large backpack. The tall man led him to the ferry terminals for the outlying islands and the young man, Sze, decided that he too, could play tourist for the day, as he had occasionally done before. He had never visited the Big Buddha on Lantau Island and today would be the day. Nothing wondrous had happened yet, although last night as he looked out at the eerie glow of the flyover outside his window, he had thought that this day in June would be special somehow.

Last night the thought had come to him that the flyover was an alien land. Although about ten metres away from his vantage point, when he looked down at its bright loop in the darkness it was a space that offered a complete contrast to his room on the other side of the window. Sze lived on the twenty-first floor of 'Money Gardens', a collection of scruffy buildings for those with not that

much money. There was certainly no garden. His bedroom had been small to begin with, but when he had moved in with his family, they had partitioned it with plywood into two narrow rooms, one for him and one for his grandmother. Each of them could fit a single bed and a cupboard into their allotted spaces. But at least they didn't have to share.

Sze had got the window because he asked first. His grandma spent most of the day sitting at the dining table from where she looked out of another window into the world below, where there was a taxi rank. She preferred the activity of the taxi area and the bustle of tiny people arriving and departing from Money Gardens, everyone so tiny, the taxis too, because she was looking down at them from this great height.

When Sze gazed at the flyover, which was so much closer, the cars were not small, and nor were they life-size. At night, the flyover was a plaything, an unreal world. The lamps cast a green glow that arced over the flyover's steep curve. Late at night the traffic thinned and he watched the long yellow splinters of headlamps appear first, beaming ahead and crisscrossing the green arc. Then there would be the whoosh, a short whoosh, and the car would scurry by just out of reach, seemingly just below his window, before looping out of sight. Last night he had stared at the strange lights and empty curves for a long time in a half-dreaming state and that's when he'd realised that the flyover was an alien land. One that belonged to the viewer from his window.

It was a small consolation. There was not enough money to go to a truly alien land, to other countries, unless the other country was China, which didn't count. All young people wanted to travel and see the world, it was natural. That's what all those Scandinavians were doing in Hong Kong, and what he wanted to do in their big, clean, cold and green lands. But if you couldn't get on a plane because you couldn't buy a ticket, or not yet anyway, not with the proceeds of window-cleaning for a clutch of shops around Money Gardens, all you could do was travel one day a month and see the sights of your own city. You didn't have to follow a tour guide or have a plan. You could step out and let the world find you. No one had had to tell Sze this. He'd thought of this himself.

His philosophy might seem fatalistic, but if so, it was still a positive philosophy. His father, who read faces for a living at a street market, had told him life and everything in it was all about interpretation. His father didn't earn much at the street market but hadn't been able to secure a spot at a big temple where he could charge a good price. Where he operated it was all about enticing the tourists to pay twenty dollars for five minutes having their fortunes told based on the features they had been blessed with; or not, as the case may be.

Sze disembarked the ferry at Mui Wo and found the bus that would take him on its winding uphill route to the foot of the Big Buddha. He too, could find whatever it was the tourists found here. Last night, on discovering his own alien land outside his window, he had felt that a magical moment was blowing itself towards him. It hadn't happened yet, but it was only the afternoon and there were many more hours in the day.

As he started up the two hundred and sixty steps he realised that the tourists were sniffing the air, thick with incense smoke and pine-scent, and talking of peace and contemplation. They

were also talking of vegetarian food. And drink. Water. Water. The gweilo were sweating buckets. Sze, too, was perspiring but he was walking languidly up and not bounding. He was propelled by a sense of mystery and hope. Would the day hold anything for him at all?

The giant seated Buddha looked down at him in benevolent bronze. Yes, he liked the Buddha, he liked the lush trees and mountain shrubs that surrounded him, he liked the glitter of the South China Sea in the distance and he liked the planes gliding by in the sky, waiting to land, or taking their first circle before flying away.

Sze wasn't on a plane. He bowed thrice to the Buddha for the sake of his parents and grandma and he turned to retrace his steps downhill. Something flew by him. Something flamboyant. Something that had a vivid reality as compared to his own dull existence. It was a bright red dragonfly shining in the sun.

Sze stopped under the overhang of a cedar tree, its long green arm offering him tender shade. He had never seen a red dragonfly before. Sze knew a little bit about dragonflies, nature's most beautiful creatures. Not that they did much other than feeding and finding a mate. They just didn't have the time. As adults they only lived for two to six months in their final beauty. They could spend almost four years as nymphs in the water where they'd been laid before they emerged in their brilliant colours and gauzy wings.

He was not as fragile, thought Sze, as a dragonfly. But could he be as stunning as the pepper-red one that had brushed him in flight? It was a resolve he could make. He could spend time looking good; maybe it was not such a shallow thing after all. Then, when opportunity knocked, as it would one day, he'd be ready for it. He would be ready for anything remarkable, when it happened.