

## FOUIS VUITTONS

We were wounded daily by tourists: sweaty, panting, walked-too-far-in-the-wrong-direction tourists. *Como stai, Signorina? À l'étage du dessus!* We sold them fake bags, fake watches, fake shoes. Aunt Eugenie, pink from the heat yet still color-coordinated her red nails to her shirt, manned the stalls. She commanded how many customers went up to see the goods. Squeezed in between the magnet stall selling Hong Kong street signs with puns like “Wan King Road,” and the novelty thong stall, we were stall number thirty-six, with twenty of the latest catalogues of luxury goods from Paris, Shenzhen, laid out on our tables. I led women, children, and desperate boyfriends by the hand past peeling paint, amidst the collecting dust of crumbling skyscrapers, spiraling up and down the truncated corners of the abandoned homes left behind in the wake of rampant urbanization. My mother, tiny and impenetrable, ruled the shop from above. She kept them moving and made sure the purchases went through. When the time was up, she sent them back down with me where I would practice my goodbyes: *Arriverderci! Au Revior!* Goodnight!

Beneath the body of buildings, lineups of clothes hanging out to dry on crude balconies and dripping air conditioners, tourists haggled with us for a bargain on fake Louis Vuittons, fake Chaneles, fake everything. Under our temporary roof fashioned out of red-white-and-blue nylon canvas bags to keep us dry from the light summer rain, the white girl acted surprise when we gave her our initial price. She had stamina for games and tried to pick apart our goods. But we wore her out in the heat. She was in our turf, where the wet grounds were clustered with shops selling trinkets and charms, where the fans of each stall whirred too loudly, and the decaying

stairwells of apartments above pressed closer and closer to the sidewalks, against the steel poles holding up make-shift plastic canopy stores.

“No, three thousand dollars,” Aunt Eugenie said, her final offer. She looked behind her, dramatically swinging her fresh perm.

“Can I see it?” the white girl asked. She was a blonde twenty-something girl, skinny with sharp shoulders and a flat chest that made her pass for a teenager. Tiny beads of sweat framed her face and lined her upper-lip. She had spent all day at the market, roaming the busy and crowded street for the perfect Fouis Vuitton bowler bag.

Aunt Eugenie smirked and asked the white girl for her passport as insurance. Without hesitating, the girl handed it over too eagerly – I recognized this look – wide eyes, a straight smile, the desperate not-to-be-caught-as-a-foreigner look. She wanted to be taken seriously as an experienced bargain hunter. But we knew she was scared. They were always scared. Outnumbered. That’s why my aunt and my mother made fourteen-year-old me take them up.

“My associate will meet you upstairs,” Aunt Eugenie said, with the authoritative air of a club bouncer.

I motioned the white girl to follow me. Most of the quarters were deserted and falling to ruin. She stayed two bodies behind me. Metal gates swung open and closed, ringing in our ears. Her nose crinkled as we passed stalls of fermented tofu, the smell of sweaty bodies stuck in our noses like balls of wax, making her sneeze. I kept my arm out to block damp shirts and muddied shoes from bumping into her as we walked below tangled pipes buried under the weight of urban dross into an alleyway surrounded by concrete dwellings.

“See the amulets hanging above the doorway? Those are to ward away the dead,” I said.

The sun was setting, little streams of light shone through the black smog that covered our sky. Dusk turned gray buildings into a sepic land, a muted brown, the path illuminated by green lanterns above entrances. The girl pretended not to care, but her voice wavered. “Who died there?”

“Last year, some triads locked and chopped up an American in one of the apartment upstairs because they thought she was a Customs spy.”

She squirmed.

“Don’t worry, you sure as hell aren’t the police.”

She brought out her phone and started texting.

“You’re way too pretty to be a cop,” I added.

Her defense lowered. She put the phone back into her purse.

We stood outside the lobby of a thin red brick building hidden in the shadows behind neon signs advertising for one-hour rooms. The derelict entrance went unnoticed by many who frequented the street for jail-broken cell phones and small ounces of ketamine, but I only looked for that dull, yellowed steps leading inside. I told the girl I had to blindfold her and guide her upstairs.

“Is this really necessary?” she asked.

I tied the handkerchief I kept in my back pocket around her head. “We can’t have our customers rat us out to the police about our whereabouts.”

I joined her hand and led her in the lobby, nodded at the security guard reading the Apple daily, his box lunch opened on his desk, rice cold. We excused ourselves past old, scraggly bearded men in white tunics and Jinnah caps playing checkers on the stairs, the girl tip-toeing

around them. I made sure we were careful not to knock their board over or to rub our shoulders on the ashy walls. They made no eye contact with me as we strolled into the rickety elevator.

“Are you American?” I asked, pushing the button for the top floor. “I can tell from your accent.”

She nodded. “From L.A.”

She held her breath but her lips smelled like strawberries. I loved American girls - how sweet they smelled, and how lucky American boys must be to kiss them. I knew Los Angeles well. I was born there but left when I was a baby. I’d only ever seen L.A. in movies, like the ones where Jackie Chan ran around with a black cop trying to rescue some rich real estate mogul’s daughter. The streets were wider, the cars were bigger, and the food just meatier. Palm trees lined the highways, and tall women walked around in shorts so tiny I wondered if they even wore underwear. I’d always wondered what clean air would taste like, above the Hollywood sign, and above beaches full of bikini clad women. Even American dogs must be enclosed in gardens larger than our homes.

“What are you doing in Hong Kong?” I asked.

“It’s summer for me,” she said. “Vacation.”

We walked out into the corridor, long and narrow, the sound of water dripping, each splat more noticeable following her short answers. Running up and down the building wasn’t as lonely when I had a companion to show around.

“We need to walk again,” I reached out to her. “The elevator won’t take us there.”

Three knocks later, chains rustled aside, and the doors opened. The blindfold came off. I elbowed our customer into bright light where rugged hands patted us down. A gruff voice

ordered us to the right, and we were smack in the middle of a showroom wall-to-wall with designer copies.

Our shop, stuffed with purses and leather goods, was bigger than our own apartment. Every purse fit in a spot, every spot had its role. Scanning from left to right, the eye moves through the poorest quality goods first; the purses with mismatched logos, thread unevenly sewn, and wax slapped onto the sides. The triple-A grade stuff was on the far right, built by ex-factory workers who knew what the real stuff looked like. We prided ourselves in bringing those in, wiping them with baking soda to remove the smell of smog and city off, a trick I learned watching a real Louis Vuitton's salesman open up shop.

There were three men posted by the door – uniformed in black – tall schoolboys hired by my mother to look intimidating. She had even given them menthol Marlboros to smoke. There, our regular patron, a Mainland Chinese woman, was silently browsing – she had bought over thirty bags from us over the past two months – picking up and putting down a collection of Fucci totes.

“Welcome to Hong Kong,” my mother said, gesturing to the wall of bags around us.

She wore a muted uniform of black slacks and a white shirt. Her role was to close, and having been at the store since the early hours of the morning, stacking bags according to their color schemes and wiping off fingerprints and dust from yesterday's customers, she preferred to look clean and unadorned – no jewelry, no make up, and her hair tied back in a little bun. I often told her how this made her look more stern, and she would remind me that she was my mother, and that's what older women were supposed to look like.

I ran to the corner, and picked up the bag my customer wanted, tracing my fingers over the seams of a Fouis Vuitton bowler Montaigne. I showed her the monogrammed logos and how they were continuously in line when parted by the beige leather trim.

My mother grabbed it and held it over a lighter: “See? No red ink,” and casted it to the table next to us.

“It’s triple A quality,” I said, an expert on pirated goods. “Any less, and this nasty red wax would drip off it.”

“From Korea,” my mother added, bringing out a wallet, placing it next to the bag. “I can give you two for three thousand Hong Kong dollars.”

“No, one thousand five hundred,” the tourist said.

My mother laughed, “No way ah. So good quality cannot.”

*Gwai-los*, my mother once told me, come in thinking they will be ripped off. They read guidebooks, forums, and websites, thinking they know better. The sites told them, “Ask for half!” then bargain up. So we started our prices even higher. “But they chase the thrill,” she had said. “They want to go back to their families to brag about how they scored a deal. About how they ripped us off, and made us concede to their prices.” She looked defiant, little wisps of baby hair framed her delicate face: “They wanted a real hawker experience, with the Hong Kong people embracing them, as though they were locals just like us.”

I punched into my cellphone a number, and showed it to my mother.

“My son says to give it to you for two thousand,” she said.

“One thousand eight hundred,” the white girl tapped back. She thought she knew the game so well.

“Done,” my mother exclaimed, and put the purse in a black plastic bag, a cheap disguise for an even cheaper item. They always thought they were better than us, my mother once said, and yet they were willing to stoop down, from their fancy houses, their fancy cars, their fancy lives, to be here with us. They carried bags they didn’t want to pay the full price for, which meant they were ashamed of how little money they had – unlike us – we had no choice but to admit we did this for a living. We served them. But in many ways, they served us. Sustained us. The white girl silently flipped over red and orange bills in her hand, and I knew it was my time to spin back down and bring back up a new fool.

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We opened our shop right before the Handover, when the British still owned Hong Kong. My father had left us for his young mistress then, so my mother worked to support her grief, and my Aunt moved in to help out. “My cousin in Shenzhen picks up discarded leather from the Louis Vuitton factories,” Aunt Eugenie had said. “They use one sheet of leather to cut out one bag, and whatever’s left around it gets tossed out.” The Europeans were so wasteful! We kept empty tissue boxes as jewelry holders, washed take-out containers to store our leftovers, and reused cooking oil until they turned our fried chicken black. I wondered when we would be able to toss out the extra pieces we didn’t need to save.

At the time, I was ten and going to a government-subsidized school, learning English with white kids and mixed kids. My mother valued my education and reminded me that speaking English would land me a better job. Making white friends would give me a better chance at meeting folks with names that helped them, and they wouldn’t see me as a Hong Konger, but as

their equal. But there were rumors then about my teachers eating oysters for lunch in the staff room, about them flying first class to visit their families abroad, about them living in houses – not apartments – but houses with stairs and multiple floors, and my mother said, “I’m not paying for that.”

Once the British left, the new government no longer wanted to fund the colonial school system that excluded locals from attending a hundred years ago, and since my family couldn’t afford rent and an English school, I left. My Aunt and mother promised me that they’d send me back to school after we made more than enough for rent and my uniforms. At first, I enjoyed the freedom a class-free day offered. I ate lunch an hour later than the office people. I strolled the hills in sandals and adhered to no dress code. I read two books day in the public library. Only when the summer came to an end did I question what I should spend my time on, and only then did my mother ask me if I wanted to help her and my aunt on a project.

We ran the business like this: On Mondays, my Aunt called her cousin, Billy, in Shenzhen to confirm our stock. We never knew what we were going to get. Some days his men brought back enough to make belts. Some days we had limited edition prints depending on the season. After confirming how much we were picking up, and what we wanted made, my Aunt and I crossed the border on the KCR dragging large empty suitcases across tiled station floors, paid Billy forty percent of what we sold, and returned with “gifts” we declared at customs. The officers never batted an eye. At home, we formed an assembly line to check the goods, and if we found a broken zipper, a mismatched shade around the purse, or a frayed lining, my mother would discount the item. A-grade quality goods came from Japan. The triple A-grade quality goods came from Korea. All of them really came from China. When she got bold, my mother

would even boast that the goods were simply used, making up stories of how old owners begged her to help sell them and how widowed wives of billionaires wanted to part with their past.

The next day at the shop, I joined my mother upstairs in trying to convince the same Mainland Chinese woman we saw yesterday that she didn't really want the Chanel cerf bag, and that the Hermés Kelly was much more suited to her style. The Kelly was more structured, like a box, and had to hang off the arms, perched at the hips, and held as though one was part of the Royal British family.

"It's high class," I said, walking to her. "I saw pictures of Angelina Jolie in a magazine toting one down the streets of Beverly Hills. It's very professional and still fashionable."

"I want a refund of my goods," she said. Her accent was strong, the r's rolled and her tone was harsh like a car horn. My mother had said that she knew this lady was from the Mainland the moment she stepped foot in the door by what she was wearing: sparkling pink velvet jumpsuit that stretched tight across her behind, with "Sassy" spelled out by glued on crystals. Her black roots had emerged, giving her a dark halo around her bleached orange hair. She was my mother's age, but wore too much blush on her cheeks. She rolled around a hard shell carry-on of cash but she picked up our bags with the tips of her fingers as though they smelt like rotten meat, and left them on the floor for us to tidy. And she refused to speak in Cantonese with us until we gave her large discounts for her loyalty.

"Tell her we don't do refunds," my mother said.

I repeated what she said, verbatim.

"I bought these a month ago, and when I was walking through the train station, the zipper broke," the Mainlander said and zipped and unzipped the bag furiously as proof. "This stupid

purse wouldn't even hold all my belongings. I had a water bottle, a laptop, my makeup bag, my wallet, my – ”

“Show me the purse,” I said.

She whipped out a classic beige Chanel 2.55. The seams were worn, the threads dirty, and browned by use. The bottom of the bag sagged, little lines on the edges cried from holding up the weight of the day. She held the purse by the chain-linked handles, dangling it in front of me and holding it high for me to see it in all its despair.

I looked to my mother. Out of all the tourists, I figured the Mainland Chinese should be most sympathetic to our plight – after all, weren't we from the same stock? One time, Billy told us about how he was arguing for his deposit back from a rental unit in Shenzhen. He had fought for days and when he finally confronted the leasing manager, and the guy took the contract Billy and him had signed and ate it. “He ripped the papers and rounded them into little balls and chewed it,” Billy had said. We had agreed that the Mainlanders were tough – they had lived through Communism and in fear of their government for so long. There were no laws in China, no consequences for the rich if they broke them – they could always pay their way out. There were no laws for fake bag merchants who sold fake goods to tourists in China either.

“It's clearly been used,” my mother said, not even looking up. “There's no way even if we were to give a refund, we could resell that purse.” She waved at the woman, signaling one of the boys in black by the door to take her downstairs.

“This is not how you conduct a business,” the woman said, hugging the purse on her chest. “This is how you conduct a scam!”

“Do we look like Ocean Terminal to you? You are buying bags out of a rented room,” my mother said.

“Everyone back home talks about the scams you Hong Kongers pull on us, taking away our hard-earned money because you’re jealous of our success,” the woman spat. She looked menacing even in her sparkly pink velvet jumpsuit. Her eyes were wide, her pupils large and black, and I thought there would be a tiny flame in the middle of them.

“We can give you a bigger discount,” my mother said. This was why she was the gatekeeper. Her patience, a characteristic I valued and wondered if my father took advantage of, and her willingness to deal with difficult customers, earned her the right to run the shop.

“For your troubles.” My mother piled different wallets and clutches on the table, arranging them from reds to pinks to oranges, then tapped a number on her phone and showed it to the customer.

Velvet Jumpsuit shook her head, her face rabid.

“I will give you trouble, for making me come back here for nothing.” She turned and knocked over the table full of wallets.

The two boys in black and I went first to pick up the mess she created, and my mother shooed her out the door. Velvet Jumpsuit dragged the gate closed behind her, yelling profanities, enunciating each curse with conviction: “You sons of dogs!” “You filthy pigs!”

I strode out after her, straight to the elevator and stabbed the down button while the two boys in black made sure to usher her into the box. The metal doors shuffled to a close, as she screamed: “You watch out. I’m calling the police. I’ll tell all my friends about this place and no one will buy from you,” and vanished.

After the Handover, we had seen an influx of tourists from China. They were filthy rich, allowed to leave the State in style, in Audis larger than Chevys in cowboy films, in shoes so shiny you could see your own reflection in their designer sunglasses that covered half their faces,

carrying wads of cash in their roller suitcases. They came to Hong Kong to celebrate, to buy contraband gifts for their family – baby formula, beauty products, fake luxury goods – all things the Chinese didn't believe were up to standard in China. In Shenzhen, we saw the Chinese equivalent of ourselves, the noodle stall owners, the sweepers at the nail salon, and the young officers at the train station ticket booth. The ones fighting for the right to live amongst the wealthy. The ones keeping the wealthy rich. I feared we would be serving them for the rest of our lives.

When I walked back into the room, my mother was kneeling on the floor, picking and packing up the wallets, the table still turned over, muttering to herself.

“You okay, Ma?”

She sighed. “Where are the good old *gwai-los*?” she said, as I kneeled beside her and gave her a peck on the cheek.

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By the end of summer, business was going slow. We weren't sure if the hyper-vigilant policemen who had blocked off the crossroads were responsible for scaring away our customers or if the reason there were none was because summer had ended. During the evenings, it would be too hot to eat inside. The sunset bathed Mongkok's high-rise landscape with a fluorescent glow and Aunt Eugenie, my mother, and I, would pretend we were sitting by the ocean with sand between our toes. We pretended we were in a Scottish castle, the kind I read in books, overlooking the moors. We lived our evenings in the open, outside of our two hundred square feet apartment, where the walls barely contained us. I always argued how little our home needed

to be because we used the city – and what we needed is given to us by our city. We shoveled braised vegetables and goose feet stew into our mouths, sitting on top of our building swathed in bamboo scaffolding and green plastic, convulsing to the rhythms from the streets below of a mah-jong parlor, the loud cheers from gamblers winning on their chosen horse, and listened to the gruesomely dark confused babel of voices, the voices we played a part of.

At the stall one day, Aunt Eugenie spotted two policemen with our Los Angelean angel turning right from Waterloo road, coming upon the start of the market. They were lined up by height, both with matching comb-overs and wearing dark blue military jackets. We had a rack of leather totes on one side, small jade and bead bracelets in cardboard boxes on the other, plastic phone covers strewn across the table, and no magazines showcasing fake goods in sight.

“There has been a report of a burglary that occurred here at Lui Yun Gai,” the tallest of the two with glasses spoke. “This young American had her passport stolen and has been at the U.S. consulate for days, waiting for a new one to go home.”

Young and inexperienced, he had buttoned his shirt all the way to the collar and sweat appeared in wet circles under his arm. I knew he was scared. Every stall down the street had an escape route. Some of them even had backing from the triads, and for all they knew, we could’ve had backup too.

“I remember him,” the white girl said, and I no longer saw the earnest-spendthrift in her. “He sold me this bag.” She narrowed her eyes and swung around her Fouis Vuitton as though I would claim it.

“We never see her before,” Aunt Eugenie said, unintimidating and unassuming with her fake bad English.

“Is this your son?” the second policeman asked. He was older, round in the belly from enjoying the benefits that came with working as a civil servant. He stepped closer to make note of my face. “Young man, shouldn’t you be in school already?”

“School hasn’t started yet,” I said.

“Where do you go to school?”

“Queen Elizabeth’s,” I lied. “They don’t start until late September.”

“You go to Queen Elizabeth’s?” the first policeman said. “That’s where I went ten years ago.”

“And look at you, a policeman,” I said.

“Is Mr. Anderson still there?”

“How is it you go to one of the most prestigious schools and you are here working at a market?” the second policeman said.

“It isn’t them,” the white girl hesitated. “But I don’t know. I was so scared that I didn’t get a good look of the people I met.”

I shrugged. “See? We don’t know her.” I couldn’t recall whether or not we gave her passport back, but who wanders off without taking back what they owned? That was her responsibility, not mine. I wished we knew people who would keep up in one of the apartment upstairs. Chop off a little finger or something. She was a clog in our drain, putting a stop in our lane, and my mother wouldn’t be able to come down from the shop until they left.

“Young man,” the second policeman said in Cantonese, lowering his voice as if he were a friend. “We know what goes on in this market.”

I smiled. You know? C’est pas vrai! Che Palle! No way, José! We know what we’re doing. We’ve been watching these stalls forever. We’d never had a run-in with the law, and our

plan was to uproot and burn the goods if we did, like Billy's leasing manager who ate his own contract. Though I questioned whether my mother would really set the room on fire.

"If you take us in, you'd have to take the whole market in," Aunt Eugenie said, her voice shrill. She rarely raised her voice, not even to Billy when he didn't have goods to give us. "If you wanted to bust us, you'd have to bust the entire place. Take down the people, shut the streets, shut down the city."

The white girl sighed loudly as though we were taking up her time. I hated the tourists' hypocrisy. They seemed innocent and good-natured until things didn't go their way, even though we catered to them. We had sold goods to all kinds of rich tourists the past month, humored them, told them what looked good with their outfits, their hair, even though we laughed afterwards in our little home about "That fat lady with a bulldog that looked like her," or, "No wonder her son didn't call her, annoying witch." Some came back bringing their friends to buy from us. "Look at him," one of them would say in English, as though I didn't understand. "He's just a child. We should get another one so that they make more of a living." As though they were helping us. As though the rich could fix the poor. As though the poor could be fixed.

"Were there any other people with her when you were selling her the purse?" the first policemen said.

I shook my head. We had blindfolded hundreds. We avoided looking at other store owners leading customers up to their stores. Our boys went home with extra pocket money, not telling their parents how they earned it. I tried to not remember faces as much as we didn't want our customers to remember where we were located.

“There was someone else here at the time, I remember now,” Aunt Eugenie said carefully, “although, I’m not sure it would be much help since she’s from the Mainland.” She paused. “Is this negotiable?”

The policemen nodded at the same time.

“We won’t get in trouble if we say anything more?”

“We’re on the same side,” the first policeman said. “We are all here because the U.S. Embassy came down on our boss, who then grilled us on why we couldn’t find this young woman’s stuff.”

Aunt Eugenie and I were distressed. She glared at me, blaming me for not remembering whether or not I gave the girl back her passport. I couldn’t bear to tell my mother that we had to close shop because of something I didn’t do – and even if I did give it back – we would still be marked on these policemen’s list. If we got shut down, we wouldn’t just lose our source of income, we’d lose our purpose. I narrowed my eyes at the girl, who looked less and less pretty to me as the clock kept ticking, cursing her for dragging us down.

We needed more time to find her passport. I was now sure we had it. If we told them the truth, we would have to admit that we sold fake goods. We didn’t know the full terms of selling fake goods but one of us could go to jail. We’d definitely have to pay a heavy fine. Billy would be out of a job. I could be down one parent. But if we lied, this white girl would still blame us and we’d be in the exact same position anyway.

I described her: Mainlander. Late forties. Sparkling pink velvet jumpsuit. Rolled around a small hard shell carry-on. Too much blush on her cheeks. I remembered Velvet Jumpsuit screaming down the hallway, threatening to call the police, threatening to wreck us. I felt the ground sway beneath me. I had never thought to take her threat seriously.

“She’s from the Mainland,” I said. “Or at least she told us she was from there.”

“The woman we just spoke with,” the white girl said and the second policeman pulled out a Polaroid photograph of Velvet Jumpsuit from his wallet.

“We just spoke with a woman from Guangzhou. She owns a stall down the street,” he said.

Aunt Eugenie and I were stunned.

“No, no, she’s a customer,” Aunt Eugenie said. “She bought lots of bags from us.”

The two policemen gave each other a nod. They shared a look of triumph, one of recognition that made Aunt Eugenie and I worry that our answer was wrong. We may have given them the answer they were waiting for.

The second policeman pointed down the market. “Shall we bring her over and we can clear up whether or not this is the same person?”

“Sure, bring her,” I said. Aunt Eugenie pinched my lower back hard and I hid a yelp.

“She said she had seen the girl when she was getting her supplies for her shop,” he said.

Supplies. The moment he said the *supplies*, I knew where this was going. Dumbfounded, I didn’t know what else to say. Aunt Eugenie seemed to understand, her lips twitching as though she was about to cry, though crying would implicate us. That damned Mainlander had ripped us off.

“That piece of shit,” I said, no exclamation needed.

Velvet Jumpsuit had played us. She bought all of our bags, and here we were counting our earnings and laughing. We led her by the hand from the start to the finish, except she would be cleared since we were her source, and here we were dealing with the police. I imagined she stood cackling at her store, while we hustled, making trips across the border, on long-haul trains,

selling her our stock, handing over her life – a life she sustained for herself and her lie. My mind raced for an excuse, anything to pass off the spotlight, to buy me a minute to text my mother to get rid of it all, to burn down the evidence if necessary. Make a run. Aunt Eugenie blurted, “We’re just trying to make a living like everyone else on this street!” and I turned to the white girl and reminded her of how big of a discount we gave her, how pretty she looked with her new bag, while she nodded at the policemen in agreement.

“Mrs. Wang said that she saw you bring in this blindfolded girl into the store while holding her passport,” the second policeman said, pointing at me. He had been waiting to say this the entire time.

Velvet Jumpsuit had a name, a face, and had earned the policemen’s trust by ratting us out. In the five years I’d been doing this, no one had ever said a word. Not even the men in Jinnah caps in the building. Not even the security guard. Not even our stall-mates.

“Yes, yes, I remember he asked me where in L.A. I lived,” the white girl said. “He was asking me all about my life in America because he wanted my passport!”

“I do not want your passport,” I said. “I do not even need your passport.”

As though I could even pass for a blonde girl at customs! *Gwai-los*, they only had one narrative for us, one single story they believed in how the world of fake luxury goods should play out. There was no way that a local could rip them off. They were the ones supposed to do the ripping off. They were the ones who brought our goods back to their friends in England, in America, in France, wherever, to show off as though they had gotten the best deal, that they knew the language of the streets, even if they had never been to those streets before. I imagined striking her, it would be worth it, but the more I spoke, the more time I bought for my mother. Aunt Eugenie, cowered a little behind me, tapped furiously on her phone. I knew she had sent an

S.O.S. to my mother, to let her know to discard the goods, to leave. Her silence became my source of relief. At least one of us would be able to walk out of this free.

“Son, my partner is going to stay here with your associate,” the first policeman said. “I’ll go up with you to search your store for the passport.”

I cemented myself to the ground.

“If we find anything we need to report, I’m afraid we’ll have to do that.”

“What do you think you’re going to find up there, skittles? A candy store?”

The first policeman offered me his hand. “You have my word. We are only looking for her passport. Then we’ll be on our way.”

Lies, lies, lies. They may be on our side this time, but who can prepare for the next time they came through. I told the policemen that I would take them to the store, no blindfold needed, but before I accepted defeat, deafening alarm bells blared through the stalls.

The alarms of the buildings around us went off one by one, earsplitting sirens looped over and over again, a cycle of whooping and rising, of metallic rings, of heavy reverbs. Those in the market kneeled down and covered their ears. Tourists gathered their bags and started running, their flip-flops slapped their heels. Stall owners snapped their necks turning around too quickly to see the source of the calls. Puddles splashed, tables turned, and we were getting knocked left and right by a flood of scared women, children, and men making their way out of the market.

There was no way of checking if my mother had left. She had not answered Aunt Eugenie’s texts or calls. The buildings were old. I had never heard alarms go off at this rate, and instead of being paralyzed, I ran. I couldn’t care less at that point if the policemen were following me. I ran down the market. Past the tofu stall. Under alleyways covered by pipes. Turned left. Under green lanterns, up yellowed steps beneath neon signs. There were no men in

Jinnah caps. No security guard. The elevator button wouldn't work. My mother had surely gone. There was no way she would give up her life for our store. We were eleven floors up, and I couldn't smell a hint of smoke, which meant that our building was not on fire. But I had to check.

I heard the footsteps chasing me as I bolted up the steps. Two storeys became five storeys, and I would have lost count if I didn't notice the number one hanging off another one in the stairwell. Someone yelled for me to stay out, but the voice came from beneath me – I had no idea whether or not it was the policeman following me or someone else's. When I opened the door into the corridor, cockroaches and rats came streaming down like a sea of brown and gray, their little legs clicking across the floor. Smoke stung my eyes and I coughed and covered my mouth with my arm, making it down to our store. Clouds of gray rose from underneath the door, but the gate stood ajar and I kicked it open, only to walk on my mother faced down on the floor.

She had tried to cover her face with a wet cloth, now boiling to the touch, but passed out from the smoke. All around me, the bags were lit up. A roaring furnace of leather, wax, and oils – who knew what was used to seal the goods – and I dragged my mother out into the corridor. Her heavy body stayed limp and I couldn't hear my own cries in the smoke. I remembered calling for her, calling for help, but even the coward following me had not reached us.

I saw orange, yellow, and red, amidst the black shadows and lines. Flames fanned like hundred, thousand dollar bills. The alarms for our building finally went off. Through the piercing rings of the bells, I thought of how far we had come. How could we survive this? I had gone to school, been taken out, put into this role, and now being pushed into this new one, and forced to endure. I closed my eyes and thought of a land where palm trees lined the highways, of cute women walking around in shorts that barely covered their asses, of rolling hills in Scotland and

soft clouds that lined the sky. I thought of the ocean. I recalled our meals on our rooftop, of where we would go if we made it, whatever making it meant. I prayed for water. I imagined my toes curled in sand as waves lapped around my ankles. Our lives were worth more than our livelihoods. Only in this inferno was I able to see that. I called for help, succumbing to trusting the next person that came across us. My voice echoed in the dark, engulfed by smoke, by darkness, in a place my blindfold can be taken off.

By my knees, my mother laid asleep. Her eyes were two black slits. I reached to cup her face with my palm, only my hands were charred. Blackened, like burnt wood, my fingers became uneven branches, scratching her cheeks, her forehead, and her lips. I couldn't hold her to say that I was sorry. Sorry for not warning her earlier about running, sorry for not volunteering my place instead of hers, sorry for misplacing the passport. My fingers crumbled as I tried to grab a hold of her, forming a pile of ash around her dead body.