YOU ARE EATING AN ORANGE. YOU ARE NAKED.

a novel

SHEUNG-KING

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Do You Like Pineapples?

We are watching *Chungking Express*. Cop 223 eats all thirty cans of pineapple and gets a stomach ache. He goes to the washroom. The clock hits midnight. He decides to visit a bar.

On the screen, Cop 223 is drinking alone in a bar. Cop 223 is drinking because May, his girlfriend, left him. After listening to a song on the jukebox, he decides that he is going to fall in love with the next woman who walks into the bar. A woman with a blonde wig, trench coat, and sunglasses walks in. The woman reminds him of a fox. Cop 223 has a feeling that she will be fond of him, but to be safe, he must ask her a very important question:

"小姐, 請問你鐘唔鐘以食菠蘿?" he asks in Cantonese. She doesn't respond. "お嬢ちゃん、パイナップルのことが好きですか?" he asks again, this time in Japanese. Still, she does not respond. "Miss, I'm just wondering if you happen to like pineapples?" he tries in English. The woman sips her whiskey and ignores him. Finally, Cop 223 asks in Mandarin, "请问你喜欢吃凤梨吗?"

The woman compliments his Mandarin without looking at him. Cop 223 tells her that he is from Taiwan and the woman tells him to leave her alone. But Cop 223 con-

tinues talking, tells the woman that he had been seeing a girl for five years, and that one day, she just left. Cop 223 tells her that in hindsight he feels as if he knows nothing about this girl. The mysterious woman, as you might expect, does not respond.

As the camera pans to the reflection of the two sitting in the bar, the woman says in a voiceover, that a person may like pineapples one day and something else the next.

*

The ancient Chinese scholar Guo Po writes: "At the age of fifty, a fox can transform into a woman. At the age of a hundred, it has the choice to either metamorphose into a wizard, or become a seducer; it can know of happenings a thousand li away; it can bewitch people, leading them astray and causing them to lose their wits. At the age of a thousand, it can communicate with the heavens and become a celestial fox."

On one of our first dates, you suggest that we go to a zoo to see some foxes. The foxes in the zoo have yet to turn fifty. They walk around on four legs and lie on the ground and smell like skunks.

You smell nice and have the most elegant walk.

"I just went on a date yesterday," I tell a friend the next day.

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"How was it?"
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[&]quot;Great!"

[&]quot;How nice. Where did you go?"

[&]quot;The zoo."

[&]quot;The zoo?"

"Yeah, we saw these foxes -"

"I don't want to hear about foxes," he interjects, "Tell me about the girl!"

You prefer wrapping your arms around mine to holding hands. I like it when you do that. It makes me feel like I too have an elegant walk. You enjoy jazz, and your skin is soft.

*

"Do you know about the Panjiayuan Antique Market in Beijing?" you ask. We are in bed.

"No."

"It's the largest antique market in the city and people from all around the world visit there every day. Because the market is so big and there are so many people, the managers of the market used to have a hard time letting people know that it was time for the market to close. They thought it'd be impolite to put on announcements telling people to leave, so, instead, they decided to play a Kenny G song."

"What?"

"Yeah, they play Kenny G's 'Going Home' to inform shoppers that it is time for the craftsmen and sculptors who work in the market to stop working and return home to their families. They've been doing that for years now. If you ask children who live in that neighborhood what they think about when they hear that song, they'll say that when the song plays, father will come home to have dinner with them."

*

At moments I wonder if you are a fifty-year-old fox. Sometimes, when I look very intently, I can see the celestial fox in you. A celestial fox with an elegant walk.

*

"Shoulder massage, please!" you say. The film is over and we are lying in bed. I carefully pull down your silk bathrobe.

"Ah... you have such nice fingers," you say. "They're long and slim, but they're strong."

I am too embarrassed to respond. Being complimented by a celestial fox doesn't happen that often.

"Can you kiss my back a little?" you ask. "It feels nice."

I start kissing the back of your neck. Your skin is soft.

"Let's listen to 'Going Home'," you suggest.

As the song plays, I imagine myself a craftsman in Beijing, walking home to Kenny G after a day's work. I open the door to my house and announce that I am home. Kenny G is still playing from far away.

I notice a little mole on your lower back, to the right of your spine. For some reason, at this moment, I feel like I know you.

I put down my craftsman's tools, and my children greet me. I walk to the dining room and on the dinner table sits some hot rice and vegetables.

I kiss your little mole. You let out a soft moan. Kenny G gives me a wink. You look as if you are about to fall asleep. You grab my arm and put it around you. You smile. I see the celestial fox again, walking elegantly on the clouds.

It is almost midnight on the last day of May. All of a sudden, I have the feeling that you might disappear once May is over, that you will return to the heavens, to walk on the clouds, leaving me behind. I feel a chill and all the blood in my body turns cold. I clench my fist and watch the clock turn twelve. I open my eyes. You are still here, in my arms. I am relieved, but to be safe, I must ask you a very important question: "Do you like pineapples?" I whisper. You are asleep, but I am less than a thousand li away—you should be able to hear me.

Kitchen God

1

"There's a little bit of rice left on your plate," you say.

It is a warm Sunday afternoon in May and we are having Thai food. I tell you a story.

2

Once, there was a lord who loved to eat. He sometimes left his palace to find new flavours. One day, from far away, he smelled a smell like none other. He came to the house of a peasant woman. He begged to taste her food. She gave him some sugar cakes. He ate them all. He wanted more.

Peasant: That is all I have.

Lord: Come with me.

Peasant: Where?

Lord: To my palace, where you will bake for me.

Peasant: Why?

Lord: Because I like your cakes. Peasant: I will not come with you.

Lord: But I am a lord.

Peasant: I will not come with you!

Lord: Then I will hit you.

The peasant had magical powers. She slapped the lord and the force threw him against the wall.

The lord was stuck to the wall.

The peasant woman placed a curse upon him.

He was to stay on the wall and watch other people eat, forever.

No one knew who the peasant woman was. No one had ever seen such a powerful curse. Not even the Jade Emperor could free the lord from the wall, so the Emperor appointed the lord Kitchen God. His altar was to be found near every family's kitchen stove in China. Each year, he was to report to the Emperor on every family's doings. The Jade Emperor would punish the families who had bad reports. Every New Year, families offered the Kitchen God small, sticky, melon-shaped candies. His mouth filled with sweetness. As a result, he could only report good things.

Some say the candies simply glued his mouth shut.

3

The Kitchen God also made sure that people didn't waste food. My mother told me that. We had a domestic helper. My mother never cooked. She told me children who did not finish all of the rice in their bowls would be punished.

Food left in children's bowls would appear as warts on the faces of their future spouses.

I did not want my future spouse to grow warts. I only put a small amount of rice in my bowl.

When I was eleven, I discovered sushi. I liked sushi because I could finish a piece of sushi in one bite.

Would the Kitchen God be mad at me for eating Japanese food? Was the Kitchen God a Communist? Or did he only care about food? Nationalism, after the war, made its way into food culture. "Rice in Japan is the most delicious rice in the world," I once heard in a commercial. I agreed with that part of the commercial. Japanese rice was delicious. Japanese people must not have had warts on their faces. "Those who cook Japanese rice are the happiest," continued the commercial. I am Chinese. I wondered what it meant for a Chinese person to eat Japanese rice.

When I turned twelve, I ate Japanese rice more often. Maybe I was swallowing Japanese nationalism. Maybe I was reinforcing it. What would the Kitchen God think?

I discovered that the Japanese character for rice, "米," has the meaning "the root of life." The Chinese character for rice is also "米," which in Cantonese can mean wealth.

Rice is nationalism.

Rice is the root of life.

Rice is wealth.

4

"We were all thrown into the world at the start of our lives," said Heidegger. Just as the lord was thrown against

the wall, I was thrown into the world. The Kitchen God was stuck to the wall. I am stuck in the world.

I was thrown into Vancouver and moved to Hong Kong at the age of five. It was the early 2000s. I know of some Hong Kongers who were proud of having once been colonized by the British.

Why should I be so proud of where I live? Some people were thrown into Hong Kong. Some people were thrown into Vancouver.

The British ate mashed potatoes. I preferred sushi rice. I was never proud of living in a post-colonial city. I needed to prove that my life was separate from the nation, and from rice. I decided to throw away some uncooked rice. It was an act of resistance.

Uncooked rice is not in my bowl.

The Kitchen God cannot punish me.

My future spouse will not grow warts on her face.

5

Mother: What are you doing?

Me: I am throwing away rice.

Mother: Why?

I explained to my mother that it was an act of resistance. We lived in an apartment on the 17th floor. I was throwing rice out the window. My mother struck me with a spatula.

My mother explained to me that throwing away rice was throwing away fortune.

I stopped my act of resistance. That night, my mother told the helper to not serve me any rice. Everyone else was served a bowl of hot steamed rice during dinner. The helper took away my chopsticks and gave me a spoon. Then she took away my bowl and gave me a plate. I had no choice but to have mashed potatoes for dinner. That was my punishment.

The Kitchen God was watching me.

I did not want my future spouse to grow warts because of me.

I stuffed the mashed potatoes in my mouth.

6

It is a beautiful Sunday afternoon. You finish your wine. You reach for your chopsticks. You are blushing a little. You pick up the rice that's left on my plate and eat it.I touch your cheek. Your face is perfectly smooth.

You are in the bath, reading a book—something by Marguerite Duras.

You: Can you read to me? I need to condition my hair. I sit on the toilet and read to you.

Afterwards, you dry your hair. I stand behind you and hold your waist as you apply lotion to your face. Your hair, your shoulders, and your back are warm. I kiss the back of your neck and then the back of your ears. In the mirror, I

see that your eyes are closed and I hear a soft moan. Your hand caresses my groin. My penis is stiff; with the tips of your fingers, you start stroking it gently, then you stop.

You: Let's set the alarm first.