

Waves of Memory

by Jowell Tan

I remember this really specific car ride that I took a lifetime ago, when I was nineteen and the world seemed wide.

It was the last day of school. The last day of any studying I would have to do, really - In 3 months from that day, I would adorn my graduation gown, walk up the auditorium stage, receive my degree, and become an adult. No more books, no more lectures, no more exams - We were done with all of it.

We celebrated by heading to the nearby bar for drinks. We stayed out till last call, tumbling over each other onto the street, our laughter loud and boisterous. We were drunk enough to act like complete idiots without shame, yet thankfully one of us was sober enough to send the rest of us home. We all piled into his car and drove off, whooping and hollering, changing the stations until a familiar song came on the radio.

I can't remember what the song was now, but for some strange reason one of us decided that he was going to attempt to chase the song, *i.e.* flip the stations until he found the song again. Thus began his twisting the knob back and forth, the radio emitting static, small batches of music, chunks of speech, before lapsing back into white noise, and repeating again in his quest to play the song as many times as possible. And us, the drunken quintet that was me, the Driver, the Drunk Quixote, and the Lady Couple, we were shouting at the radio to obey our commands, cheering every time the song came on.

As the drive progressed, the situation settled into a sort of *fixedness* - Drunk Quixote chasing the song through the airwaves, the Lady Couple making out in the backseat, the Driver trying his best to focus on the road ahead, and me, staring out the window at the

lights streaking past, the buildings coalescing into one continuous blur as we sped along.

I remember we had just entered the expressway tunnel when I did it.

Surrounded by all this action going on around me, I suddenly felt like I couldn't just melt into this backseat and let the night fade away into morning without any movement from me. So I went and did it. I wriggled my way into the centre of the car, breaking up the kissing marathon, swatted the rotating wrist away from the radio dial, and pressed the button to open the sunroof. As it was a hardtop car, the sunroof was merely a retractable, rectangular piece of glass that hid itself under the roof to expose the interior to the night air.

Then I did it. I stood up on the seats and my upper body was outside the car.

I was taken aback at first by the strength of the wind, forcing me to hold onto the car to steady myself. I had to consciously keep my eyes open against the air pushing against my face. I felt weighted pressure on my ankles. I looked down to see the Lady Couple anchoring me to the seats so I wouldn't fall out.

Once I felt comfortable enough, I released my grip on the roof and lifted my arms to meet the air. I had become the teenaged girl in every coming-of-age film we'd seen in class. And just at that moment, Drunk Quixote found the song again and cranked up the volume, completing our remake of the most common indie movie scene of all time.

Feeling the air rushing through my hair, winding through my fingers and pushing against my skin, I realised why this was such a popular thing for teenaged Hollywood starlets to act out - It did feel fantastic. Before adulthood would come along and give my life rules

and routine, this one act of young recklessness was my final act of freedom, my last chance of acting like a child before I couldn't anymore. I gathered up my courage, took a deep breath, and I let out a loud "Wooooo!" at the top of my lungs. I held it for as long as I could, only stopping when I ran out of air. I looked down, expecting laughter, but what I saw instead were my friends smiling from ear to ear, cheering me on whilst looking up at my rashness.

We exited the tunnel, and as the concrete ceiling gave way to the night sky we let out another scream, loud and piercing, echoing into the night.

As much fun as we had, eventually the night had to come to a close. We dropped off Drunk Quixote at the gate of his house, the Lady Couple at the front of their walk-up. Only the Driver and I were left in silence, me looking out the open window, and the Driver driving me home.

Too soon, we had reached the parking lot of my apartment block. I didn't want to leave yet. I didn't want to step out of the car, where beyond this door was the reality after the fantasy. I wanted this night to last forever.

He pulled up the parking brake. In silence we continued to sit, leaning back in our seats, unsure how to carry on.

"So. Tonight was fun, huh?" He asked awkwardly.

"Yeah..."

The silence returned. I could sense him staring a hole through me, psyching himself up for the speech he wanted to give. *"Listen, I -"*

"Stop." I cut him off. *"I don't want this night to end badly."*

He blinked once, twice, then turned away wringing his hands. Now it was my turn to see him. I understood his intent, and the cruelty in my stopping him. If I didn't speak after tonight, he would have that stone in his heart for a long time. I reached over and caressed his cheek. He let out a ragged sigh and a lone tear from his eye. I wiped it off. I leaned over and held him, slowly and carefully.

"It was never your fault - We just couldn't work together. Sometimes things just don't go as planned. It doesn't mean anyone is to blame - It just is."

We were skin to skin for a very long time.

Eventually I released him, opened the door, and stepped out onto the asphalt. Closing the door, I looked back through the window to make sure he was alright. He was wiping his face with his shirt sleeves.

"I'll see you at graduation," He said, shifting the car into drive. I watched the shape of his car disappear around the corner as he exited the parking lot. I waited for the moment to pass me by, and exhaling a quiet breath, stepped into the lift and out into my home.

And that was it. 3 months later, I was onstage in the auditorium shaking the dean's hand, smiling for the photograph, collecting my diploma. Outside, I found the Driver, and we exchanged hugs. He smiled at me and he tousled my hair. I went home and changed out of my gown. I had dinner with my family and went to bed. The next day I went to my first day of work.

That was years ago, that last night of school. Over time the memory of my school days have faded into vague recollections, inexact details and hazy faces. My friends and I have lost contact with each other after many changed phone numbers, with only an occasional

Facebook update here and there reminding me that they're still alive.

But that last night of school - chasing that song I'll never remember, standing on the backseat through that open sunroof, that seeming eternity in the parking lot - That I will probably never forget for as long as I live.

