

Goodbye before hello



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

I arrived in front of Phoenix Pub, five minutes earlier than scheduled. My friend Eddie had called me out for a drink, a small gathering with a few friends. As I waited for him, my snooping eyes wouldn't stop moving. Night creepers overflowed the streets of Hong Kong and electrified the air with their high pitched laughter and spoke words entangled by alcohol. A tamed wind brushed against my face, welcoming me into the winter. Two days after the New Year of 2008 and flickering Christmas lights of all colors, shapes, and sizes and seasonal decorations posted wherever possible: on the streetlights, windows, cars and bars.

I was quite a sight that night: a gray trench coat with a thick black belt around my waist to show off my curves and inside I wore a spaghetti strap lacey black dress with that went up three inches above my knees accompanied by killer stilettos that I bought at the Versace sample sale. A cigarette swirl clogged my vision and when I turned to my left, I saw Eddie, a short chubby man resembling a teddy bear in his mid twenties who I'd met in New York half a decade ago, taking a smoke. He was like an older brother to me, always looking out and cleaning up after my mistakes.

He had promised to bring me out to have fun while I was on my winter escape from New York and tonight was supposed to be one of those nights. Entering Phoenix Pub, earsplitting music and cigarette smoke thickened the air, causing me to cough occasionally as I inhaled. Eddie waved to a couple of guys. I sat with Eddie and across from me sat an unfamiliar face. He was tall with broad shoulders, thin yet built with hazelnut curly hair. He was Tommy. I stared at him for a second and turned away until his eyes met mine. My face grew hot red like chili peppers.

We played dice and drinking games and laughed at stupid jokes until four AM. Tommy offered to bring me back to my cousin's house, the place where I stayed on my vacation in Hong Kong, since he was taking the same route. The taxi stopped. I opened the door. In front of me was a 7-Eleven. I got out of the car and I couldn't even walk straight. He led me inside a building and we took the elevator up to the third floor. Three, the number that marked the date of that month. My legs obediently followed every step he took, as I was a puppet with someone controlling my strings.

Wait, where is this place? This doesn't look like my cousin's apartment. The floor was dimly lit, so dim that I had to squint in my already dried up contact lenses. Tommy asked the lady in the front desk for a room. It was kind of like a motel, only in a much lower class. " What the hell are you bringing me here for? I'm not the type of girl you think I am. " " And I'm not the type of guy you think I am. I just want to take a nap. I have to wake up in three hours for work. " I glared into his eyes then I softened up. He didn't blink.

I had a gut feeling that he wasn't lying. Or maybe he was a really good actor but either way I followed him into the room. Inside the closet sized room centered a queen sized bed with worn out flowered sheets and two puffed up pillows. The smell of moth balls twitched into my nostrils. What the hell kind of place was this? I took off my heels and crawled on the bed. Tommy slept next to me. I had my back turned against him and he turned his against mine. The room was silent with the exception of his breathing and soft snoring. I closed my eyes and drifted into a sleep.

Moments later, I was wakened by the ringing from my phone. It was my mother calling, scolding for me to get back to my cousin's house. I sat up on the bed and panicked, waking Tommy up. I was afraid of what my mom would do to me. Not let me go out again. My heart pounded against my chest, so hard that I was sure Tommy had heard it. I've never stayed out so late before. As worried as I was, a part of me wanted to stay with Tommy. The feeling of rebellion took me over. Suddenly, Tommy lifted his head close to mine and pressed his warm lips against mine.

It tasted of Budweiser mixed with French fries with a hint of spearmint. Was it the effect of the alcohol causing him to act this way? I was hesitant at first and just blinked as he kissed me. What kind of guy was he? What the hell am I getting myself into? But after five seconds, I gave in and we continued kissing until the rays of sunlight shone through the window. Two days later, it was a friend's birthday party and Tommy was there too. At the party, we both kept our distance. We sat away from each other and spoke just enough to get pass each other while we were in each other's ways.

It was awkward, like when long lost relatives come visit you and you have no idea what to say or do. Occasionally I glanced over my shoulders to see what he was doing. As he sang and laughed with friends, I saw him secretly looking at me from the corner of his eyes, observing my every move. I waited for him to approach me but he didn't. So I gathered myself and walked over to him. My pulse rate was increasing and blood was having its own car race inside my veins. I forced a smile then opened my mouth. Nothing came out. Tommy was now two inches away from me.

I examined the tiny pores and blackheads on his nose. "Excuse me", he said and walked away. Surprisingly, the next day, he called. We ate lunch and watched a movie together. We didn't hold hands or kiss. We both knew there was something going on between us. He started to call me everyday for the following two weeks. We went on several dates. One time after dinner, he brought me to Victoria Bay, the most beautiful bay in Hong Kong. We sat on the shoreline, one of his hands was glued tightly to mine and the other held me by the waist. The sound of gentle waves sang me a pleasant lullaby.

The smell of fresh sea salt made my nose wiggle. I smiled as we spoke about our future together and he promised he'll wait for me until I graduate from college. I looked deep into his eyes and saw myself. My vacation was over. Tommy held my one of my hands as he strolled my luggage with the other. The sun shone through the glass windows of the airport. It was the perfect weather for some outdoor activity, not too hot or too cold. The loudspeaker had on going announcements. Stewardesses clicked elegantly with the heel of their shoes. We stood in the "Economy Class to New York" line to check in my bags.

A heavy lump formed in my throat, my nose was running and tears drowned my eyes. My makeup smeared. I turned away, trying to conceal myself but Tommy already saw. He pulled me close and told me, "No matter how far apart we are, what we're doing, or who we're with, you'll never be alone, because I'll always be inside of your heart and you'll be inside of mine." There was a spark in his eyes. I waved goodbye one last time and walked into the gate. I touched my hand; it was the same hand that he was holding

just a minute ago. Turned to look at him as he walked away and got smaller and smaller.