

Money Girl

By Elizabeth Cui

Can Tho University, Saigon, 1991

It was a Friday, and his students had all gotten off early. The last few stragglers made their way out of the lecture hall, pant legs hiked and ears jammed tight in their Sony Walkmans. The air was thick with anticipation, of final exams, of those last warm evenings spent indoors, the distant promise of summer. He was getting ready to take the old 19 bus back when Vinh tried convincing him to grab beers at the karaoke bar in District 3. The one that all the other single professors went to on their Fridays.

“It’ll do you some good and give you a chance to finally get out of the house,” Vinh chirped, clapping a hand on his back with all the sloppy confidence of a man in his twenties.

“Thanks for the offer, but I think I’ll pass again for tonight.” He shrugged off the younger man’s touch.

“Damn Long, you pass every weekend. It’ll be fine, I promise. The other guys in our department are coming out too, and Quang’s uncle owns the place, so I know we can get discounts — if you’re worried about pricing.” Vinh crossed his arms, eyebrows raised high.

“Hmm, I’m not sure. I have all these papers, and grading isn’t over for *all* of us yet.” *And I still have to catch up from the last few months.* He watched Vinh’s face fall, his eyeglasses drooping down the slope of his round nose.

Long had turned away to go, but something about the sound of cold beers on a June evening tugged at him. In truth, the only thing that awaited him at home was a sack of moldy Mandarin oranges in the fridge. And that plastic bag of empty Kirin Lagers, sticky and reeking of someone who had tried hard to forget. He wondered if old lady Trinh would take them out for

him again, and how he could repay her for her fussy kindness. She would never take his money, but maybe he could buy her a crate of fresh *balut*, he decided.

“Ah, I guess I’ll come, just this once. Drinks are on you though, for getting my old ass all the way across town,” he teased.

They all crammed in the back of an old Subaru, and weaving through the city center traffic, it took another hour to arrive. The van reeked of ash and sweat, and with each step on the gas pedal, he felt his stomach roil. He focused his eyes on the fleet of multicolored mopeds that darted past his window. The workday had long ended, and the night with its loyal crawlers bloomed to life in a sea of cigarette smoke and fluorescent lights. The professors chatted amongst themselves, pale blue shirt sleeves rolled up, collars popped. Their smiles were large, but their eyes remained small and furtive, looking anywhere, everywhere, but him. Everyone had been so cold, ever since Yui. Many things had changed, since Yui.

Nestled in the youngest part of the old district, Uncle Quong’s karaoke bar was attached to a nightclub, aglow in pink lights. He had expected the AC to be a sweet relief, but the combination of human bodies and Vietnam summer rendered it futile. The uncle ordered a round of beers, and they arrived in a plastic bucket, sweaty and cold. Long resisted the urge to press the bottle against his face.

Several rounds flew by. Shots of *Rượu sim*, sharp and cruel down his throat. The flash of photos. The squeal of girls. A single kiss on one cheek, a cupped hand on the other. They meandered into the nightclub, and he remembered Vinh’s shirt coming off.

What would she think of me now?

The young man, glasses askew, hands pawing around the waists of the servers. The young man coming to him, shaking his head.

“Long,” he shouted over the throbbing music. “Long, I’m so sorry.”

“Why?”

“I never got to really give you my condolences. Truly. For Yui’s passing. I know it’s been difficult, which is why I tried to get you out tonight,” Vinh paused. His eyes were bright, but not lucid. The glasses were nowhere to be seen.

“Thank you Vinh, seriously. It’s ok, don’t worry about me, tonight. I’ll be alright. Go have some fun.” Long pressed his drink into Vinh’s flushed hand. Best he didn’t remember this night, this conversation.

He wandered his way to the bar. Suddenly, everything hurt. Long thought of the moldy oranges in the fridge. *Yui*, what am I doing? She did not answer, not even in his mind.

The bar was empty, save for a wizened old man cracking salted peanuts. Long frowned. Would he have a wife at home, a bowl of *Cao lau* waiting for him? Or was he one of those men who stumbled the district streets after dusk, kicking hungry alley cats and crushing beer bottles with a single fist? Did he say hello to his elderly neighbors, buy them fresh *balut*?

Long waved his hand, and the bartender drifted by. Her back was to him.

“What do you want?” She yelled over the imported Japanese pop song.

“I don’t know!”

“What??” She turned and cupped a pierced ear.

An old tele propped on the counter was showing one of those American shows, the one with multiple blonde children and their big yellow house in California.

“Give me something western. American.”

She nodded. Awash in the glow of the TV, she worked to make his drink, fingers moving deftly. Her nails were bright red.

Long peered at her from the corner of his eye. He would rather be watching her than the show about the happy family. There was something feline about the way she moved, the curve of her spine, her slender brown arms shaking the cup above her head. Her eyes tilted up at the edges, and her hair was cut short in a spiked crown. Unlike Vinh, she did not have a kind face — but it wasn't cruel either.

She placed the glass before him. He could smell her perfume; that was western too. She wore a shirt the color of a ripe pineapple, and Long could see the pink piping of her bra through the sweaty cotton.

“What are you looking at?” Her eyebrows furrowed, in a way that was more teasing than angry. She would be used to the look of men, Long concluded. She was beautiful, more so from her youth than anything particularly special, but she was beautiful to look at, nonetheless. A city girl, with a painted face and those painted nails. He tried to think of Yui again, and what her nails looked like, but he suddenly couldn't remember.

“The television,” he lied.

“Stop lying. You're looking at me.”

“Pardon. My wife died not too long ago, you see.” The words were out of his mouth before he knew it, lying naked in the air before them. He waited for her to say something, an apology maybe. Maybe she would walk to the back and report the creep at the bar, and he'd be dragged out. *At least I won't have to pay.*

“Do I look like her?” She polished a glass.

“No.”

“What was her name?”

“Yui.”

“Well, my name’s Yen. Like the money.” She rubbed her fingers together, a flash of red, and turned towards him again. Her eyes narrowed.

“Do you have kids?” *She’s not afraid to ask questions.*

“Yes. Daughters. They’re not in the city, though.” He looked away. His youngest could not be more than fifteen years younger than Yen. Or could she? He could never be sure, with this woman.

“Why are you here, then?”

Long wanted to cry. *Why am I here, Yui?* He paused and sipped his drink as he waited for the nonexistent reply.

“I guess the same reason why he’s here,” he nudged his shoulder to the man, still shelling peanuts.

Yen burst into laughter. Peals and peals of laughter, like little bells.

“Same reason why everyone’s here, my good sir. Don’t worry, if lack of love was a currency, I’d be a rich woman.”

Long wondered if she was crazy.

“You’re one of those university teachers, I bet. What do you teach, *Professor?*”

In his button down, in this city, in this bar, he could be anyone. But those eyes would tolerate no lies, and they grew big now, waiting for his answer.

“I work at *Can Tho* University. Guess what I teach, since you’re so confident.”

She giggled and set the glass down. “Lemme guess. Maybe something to do with... art? Mathematics... no, no. It must be something to do with the humanities.”

“How so?”

“People with loss always tend to lean towards the dramatic.” The words surprised him, but she did not say them with malice. Yen shot a glance at the back door, before pulling out a bottle of nail red varnish. She plopped onto a stool beside him and began running the slender brush over any cracks.

“I teach literature.” *People with loss*. He could feel the heat from Yen’s hunched body next to his. He ached all over once more.

“That’s cool. I love reading. Everything. Magazines, books, even those silly adverts they have in the papers now. You know, about those European shampoos that will *immediately* fix grow your hair and other bullshit.”

Long wished he was clever enough to know what to respond, but all he could do was gape at her. The American drink was doing wonders on him, and he wondered what she had put in it.

“You can’t possibly read *everything*. I don’t read *anything* now, really. There’s some stuff that’s worth the time, but most of it is rubbish. That’s what teaching is all about. Finding what’s worth reading.”

“Well, I never was a good student,” Yen snapped the polish bottle shut.

“Yen, I used to read everything before Yui died.”

He stood up, and the room spun. *I need to shut up*. The old man glared at him before giving his peanut a good, hard *crack* with his knuckle.

Yen slid him the check, and he pushed a damp bill onto the table.

“Wait, here’s your receipt.” She slipped him a white paper, folded in a tight square. Long nodded and placed it into his pocket.

She grabbed his hand. “Professor, I might have been a bad student, but I think there’s a lot more in the world to read. Worth reading.”

Her hand was warm. He wanted to hold it longer, but she let him go.

“I’ll try my best, Yen.”

It was only later that night — or maybe the early hours of the next morning, as he was cursing and fumbling for his keys — when he rediscovered the receipt. How much *had* he spent? If Vinh was telling the truth about that damned uncle, hopefully not too much. He unfolded the paper, fingers still clumsy with drink. There were fewer numbers than he expected. Written in neat black ink, was:

27 Nam Kao Road, Apt. 12

District 7

Ask for the money girl.

District 7, Saigon, 1994

Long could be slow to wake, and even slower in the dead of summer. But the city would always rouse him soon enough, first with the trill of the birds, then the men on their motorbikes, and then the cries of the hawkers and the smell of their goods. Even with the rusted windows clamped shut, the noises had a way of leaking through.

That morning, he had woken first, much to his pleasant surprise. She lay beside him, muttering softly in her sleep. He stretched, leaning his head in every direction and relishing the cracks of each joint. It was hours before noon, and they were only on the second floor, but the air

simmered, thick and slow. A slice of sunlight had cut its way through the curtains and etched across the bed, falling right against the gentle curve of her ass.

He thought back again to the night she gave him her address. How he had paced through the back streets until his mind cleared. By then, it was so late that the only people still awake were the street sweepers. It had begun to rain.

The address she had led him to was a small gray building, tucked between an old coffee shop and a retro *pachinko* parlor. They had been shuttered for the night, but their lights still flickered, and in the unreliable neon, he could see the tomato plants someone had left on her front steps. He knocked. Silence. He knocked again. And again. And again. His heart raced. He didn't know who to ask for advice from anymore — for some reason, he couldn't even recall the sound of Yui's voice, once so loud in his mind.

I think there's a lot more in the world to read. Worth reading. Yen's words echoed, instead.

Silence. Then a creak. The door had opened just enough that he could see a nose and a pair of eyes through the crack.

“Who is it?”

“I'm here! For the money girl!”

It had been three years. Long's mind wandered back to the present day.

Yen had kicked off all the sheets, and she lay on her stomach, her legs entangled with his. Her face was obscured by a mop of hair, now cut square and short like those women in the magazines she so coveted — but today it had lost all shape in the throes of her sleep. Her nails were painted a bright red and her underwear was a pale blue.

In those three years, he had memorized all the shades of her. It had taken a while, to let the money girl bargain her way into his heart. But now he knew the color she liked her coffee, blacker than sin. Or the deep blue of her eye bags, after a long day's work. Or the way her skin flushed bright pink, right beneath his. Long felt himself stiffen, momentarily, and he wondered what she was dreaming of.