

Being the boy I was, I began to pretend that I was a sheriff on the trail of rustlers. But I never saw a naked girl in a pond. I don't have the imagination to do re-creation.

I was a sheriff without a horse, a boy with an erection in his corduroy pants, staring at an infield of water.

ANNIE ZHU

THE HALL MONITOR

A prostitute lives on my floor. It took me a while to discover this, even though she worked from home. A different car would be in her parking space every time I pulled into the lot: from broken-down Honda Accords and modest Toyotas to shiny Ferraris and Porches—even a Hummer once. Some cars made repeat visits. I assumed that my neighbour didn't drive and had a spare parking space for the diverse group of friends she liked to entertain; and this, in a way, turned out to be true.

The apartment building itself was a drab cement structure on the east side of the city that mingled in nicely with the other humble homes in the Anerdale neighbourhood. Main Street was the official border that divided us from being a part of the Backen suburb: The Badlands, The Borough, The Ghettos. Crossing the street to buy milk literally meant being on the wrong side of the tracks. "*Better get Backen!*" was a running joke amongst the Anerdale community, trailed with nervous laughter. My run-down bachelorette pad on the tenth floor was the best I could afford, but I considered myself lucky that I was still technically living in Anerdale and not Backen.

I didn't hear any gunshots, witness any gang-related stabbings, hear the muffled cries of a rape victim, spot any chalk lines on cement or police tape circling shady premises; but the six o'clock news regularly announced that these things happened in the Backen slums and that I should be careful.

After a few weeks of living alone, I thought I was in the clear. I started to think that perhaps the news and my parents, who were still calling constantly to make sure I was still alive, were over-exaggerating the crime rate, that it really wasn't as bad as it seemed.

But when strange men started knocking on my door, I got this slippery feeling. Sometimes it happened twice or three times a day, and then I'd go weeks without hearing from anyone. When I answered the door, these unsavoury characters usually gave me the once-over, despite the fact that they could only see a sliver of my face and maybe a bit of elbow. I kept the door chain latched.

They all asked if I was The Queen. Some added that they were here for the Royal Treatment. I always said no and most of them turned away, disappointed. Some stuck around a bit longer, thinking I was pulling their legs, playing an arousing sort of mind game. Others would not take no for an answer.

"Are you the naughty princess then?" asked one thickly-mustached man only two weeks ago, wiggling his matching uni-brow up and down.

"You've got the wrong door."

"Okay, fine." He immediately dropped the flirtatious tone and rolled his eyes. "I didn't come all the way for nothing. Have you seen this chick around?"

He pulled out a crumpled piece of newspaper from his pocket and shoved it through the door slot. I watched him as I unfurled the ball, ironing out the wrinkles with my palm before realizing that I was buffing a page full of nude women in an assortment of provocative positions. If they weren't completely naked, they wore teeny string bikinis or schoolgirl uniforms flashing a bit of white cotton. If they were naked, pink or black stars concealed nipples and other erogenous zones. Black strips hid eyes or even whole faces if they weren't blurred or cropped out already.

Automatically, my nose crinkled up to my eyes, my cheeks indented, my lips snarled. I tried to smooth it out in time to appear unaffected.

"Which chick?" I asked coolly.

"This one." He reluctantly pointed to a certain ad, as if I should have known by instinct. "Her Royal Highness."

I looked. She was all hair, lips, and smooth, glistening buttocks.

"It's *Her Majesty*," I said.

"What?"

"It's *Her Majesty* for the Queen."

He raised one eyebrow, causing a furry downhill slope. Derision broke into his twisted smile.

"So you've seen her or what?"

I took another look. "No, I don't think so."

"Shit. I could've sworn she said 1007."

"*Sworn*," I muttered. "Wrong apartment. This is 1001."

The illegible cursive font of the door numbers—the building's only attempt at appearing high class—was inconsistent with the somber, derelict decor. His face lit up at the mistake and practically skipped down the hall, no doubt into the ample bosom of the prostitute.

I tried to imagine what it was like to work in a field where I would have to accept seedy men into my home. Was it mercenary pleasure or mercenary pain? Maybe it was just too much for my imagination. The idea of it, the dirty visuals, followed me like the sour stench of sex that seeped from beneath door 1007, a smell that could spread and contaminate the whole building.

I started paying more attention to my other neighbours. There was a heavy-set bearded man with a large greyhound who was always barking and jumping on passengers in the elevator. There was an old retired couple that did little more than speed walk around the block in matching jogging suits. There was an Indian family with four boys two doors down. I was grateful for the pungent smell of curry from their unit; it masked the smell of sex. I also appreciated the efforts of the college student across the hall who was capable of playing both the banjo and acoustic guitar, whose sanguine plucking and strumming tuned out the sounds of squeaking bed springs, mingling flesh.

Little did they know that a whore lived undetected among them. I volunteered myself as a secret guard, to protect the innocent from the indecent.

I started roaming the halls for hints of obscenity. Once I put my ear to her door to listen for orgasmic moaning, heavy breathing. I heard nothing, but if I did,

I'd like to think that I would've had the guts to bang on her door and tell them to keep it down. There were children and old people living here.

I had to admit: she kept her advertised promise of being discreet. She probably wasn't the type to prance around half-naked to advertise her business, but I spent more time roaming the hallway after hours just in case.

She finally emerged from her apartment one night to make a visit to the garbage chute. Her hair was wrapped in a white towel and her feet snug in a pair of fuzzy pink slippers with the faces of twin bunny rabbits grinning up from the toes. Her curves were inconspicuous under an oversized white bathrobe with a fancy emblem over the breast, the kind usually stolen from upscale hotels. She must have just showered to cleanse herself from all the infectious man-fluids.

Her face looked vaguely familiar. I wasn't sure if it was because of the ad or if I had seen her in passing. I half expected her to toss her garbage bag aside in a graceful sling and start stripping, slowly unraveling her hair towel and opening her robe like it was another novelty costume. But I remembered that she was not a stripper; there was a difference.

She prepared for the blast of stench by holding her breath when she opened the door to the garbage chute. I was too distracted and got hit.

I could only imagine the kind of items she was disposing: used condoms dripping with semen, empty tubes of lubricants squeezed clean like toothpaste, several ripped nylon stockings from an endless supply, distasteful gadgets from sex shops, elastic bands, used needles. Depending on her level of tolerance, she might have needed drugs to numb the pain of working in such a profession.

Slightly startled to find me in her path, she smiled in relief when she saw that it was only me. Her eyes crinkled when she smiled—premature crow's feet. She looked older in the flesh.

"Hello," she said in a breathy, Monroe-esque whisper. Her breath smelled minty. I suppose it was in good taste to brush after a round of fellatio.

I wanted to tell her I could help her. She could call Enid, my old career counselor. Together, they could sit and talk and figure out what she really wanted to do with her life, update her resume, shoot off some applications, and lead a new life where her body wouldn't be the merchandise, sex the main function. I just didn't know how to phrase it properly, and as the words jumbled around in my head I tried to find a sensitive, tactful tone. All the while she was trying to get past me. We played a game of wiggling our bodies left and right, trying to get out of each other's way while still blocking each other's path. She laughed apologetically, as if it were her fault. I stopped moving so she could walk around me.

I was still gathering the right words. When I had something fairly adequate, I spun around just in time to watch her disappear behind her door. I suddenly felt lonely, standing in the empty hallway with a swollen bag of garbage. I quickly disposed of it and went back to my apartment.

The following week I lessened my duties as hall monitor, allowing the prostitute to work with no intrusion on my part. I thought it would only be fair that

the men leave me alone as well.

Still, one day there was a knock on the door. The man turned out to be a boy, a boy on the verge of manhood. A man-child. It was hard to tell through the peephole and I opened the door without the chain to take a better look. He was a head taller than me, which was still not terribly tall, but his lanky form gave the illusion of height. He had the facial features of a girl, a doll face, one of those guys who would look convincingly female with some makeup and a wig. But his potential as a girl was ruined by his five o'clock shadow. He grew facial hair most men would be envious of: perfect, without sparseness and island patches, but not too thick that it looked like hundreds of tiny worms wiggling out of the earth. He was dressed in a playful white t-shirt with line drawings of a bow tie and tux, undermining the serious expression he wore. His lips, in the shade of rosebuds mostly found on children, drooped slightly apart, never completely closed.

I weighed all of this and tried to decide on an age. He was no younger than eighteen but couldn't possibly have been over twenty-two.

"Are you ... The *Queen*?" he asked, his eyes skirting around my face, down the length of my black hair to his own well-worn sneakers. He rocked skittishly from his heels to the balls of his feet. His hands were slung deep in his bottomless jean pockets, which seemed to be only hanging on to his scrawny hips by a tight belt. His arms were two rigid sticks.

"Do you think I'm The Queen?"

His eyes found their way back to my own. Pink blotched his cheeks.

"I'm not sure," he spoke carefully, as if it were a trick question, which it was. "Did I speak to you on the phone?"

"What are The Queen's duties?" I asked, ignoring the question.

He looked at me again, this time searching carefully for a sneer or laughing eyes. When he found nothing, he answered.

"I suppose she does things most people wouldn't ..."

"What kind of things?"

The pink burned red, spreading across his whole face and neck. "Are you The Queen or not?"

"I don't know," I said, crossing my arms. "Double check the address."

He pulled out a piece of paper from his pocket that had been folded into a one-inch square. I watched him fumble with it, unfolding it layer by layer until it became what I suspected. It had been cut cleanly out of the magazine with a pair of scissors. The back of it read in blue and orange letters: ... **rgeous SINGAPORE SURPRISE VERY PLAYF** ... The flipside—the side the boy was consulting—had the familiar, generous photo of a young woman squatting left of centre within the black borders. She wore spiked red heels as shiny as her plump wet lips. Her long black hair floated down her bare back. Almost nude, the thong she wore was nothing more than three thin pieces of black rope held together by a gold pin right below her tailbone in the shape of a crown. Her right hand—strong, fierce—held on to an oversized novelty scepter that seemed capable of shaking the earth. With an awkward turn of her neck, she gazed back at her admiring audience with her nose in

the air: sovereign snootiness. The blindfold she wore diminished her power a little, but increased her sex appeal.

The ad read:

*The Queen will Conquer,
The Queen will Rule,
She will Get Down,
And make you Drool.
(No private calls please)*

He took another look at my door number. "1007?"

"Does it look like me?" I asked. "With the blindfold and everything?"

The boy closed his mouth so hard I heard his teeth collide.

"I don't ... I guess so."

"What's your name?"

"It's Ja—Jim."

"Okay, Jim. Shouldn't you be at school?"

"No," he cleared his throat and coughed. "It's spring break."

"Ah!" I nodded vigorously. "I see. Had a week off so you decided to drop in."

He shuffled and glanced side to side, watching for any onlookers. "Do you want me to go? Is this a bad time? Do you want me to leave?"

There was an awkward silence. I watched him squirm. It was hard to suppress a smile. It was almost endearing.

"No," I said, a little kinder. "But I'm not her. She's down the hall. This is 1001."

"Oh." He exhaled in relief, before realizing that he should still be embarrassed.

"Are you going?"

He was still clutching his paper, and his eyes darted everywhere, at the door, at me, at the paper, at me, at the door.

"You're quick, just like the rest of them," I teased.

Finally he stopped squirming, looked in my eyes, and said softly: "You know, you really should do something about the door number. Put up a sign, maybe."

"Thanks Jim. I'll keep that in mind."

He turned and walked away. I watched him for a while, then closed the door.