

Squid Boats on a Foggy Night

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If there was one thing they both loved, it was Zeny's seared tuna. She had previously worked for a Japanese family and was an expert when it came to cooking fish.

"I'll join you outside in a minute," his wife Astrid said as Zeny cleared their plates. "I'm going to check on the kids."

Chris pushed back from the dining room table and reached for his glass, the remnants of wine sloshing around as he stepped out onto the balcony. It was a warm night with a bright moon. Chris sank into a broad chair's thick red cushion, gifts from a former tenant who couldn't be bothered to move the outdoor furniture.

A cargo ship sailed into view. It was stacked high with multi-colored containers loaded with thousands of Chinese-made goods for the overseas consumer. Megatons of steel, gliding across the water. He sipped his wine and tracked the ship's movement east toward Lamma Island. Only its stern remained visible as his mobile phone rang, no doubt his Friday evening conference with his boss in New York. Twenty minutes to recap his week and prepare for the next.

“Raul,” he said. “How’s it looking this morning?”

“Hello Chris. Too early to tell. I haven’t even finished my first cup of coffee.”

“I had mine 14 hours ago,” Chris said. “Now I’m into the good stuff. A fine French Bordeaux.”

“Wish I could join you.”

“Next month when I’m in New York for the conference. You pick the place, I’ll pick the wine,” Chris said.

Wind whistled on the water, pushing low-lying clouds across the sky.

“You still there?” Chris asked.

“Yes, sorry, it’s just that I have rather bad news.”

“Okay,” Chris said. He took a big gulp of wine, letting the flavors percolate in his mouth. Burnished cherry with a hint of pepper. He’d remember this bottle.

“There’s no easy way to put this,” Raul said.

Squid boats chugged across the bay, the engine boat pulling five trailer boats behind, each like an empty sandbox waiting to be filled.

“Your job,” he continued, “it’s being eliminated.”

Illuminated? Elucidated? Inundated?

Everything swayed as though the balcony was part of the sea. Chris grabbed the side of the chair, clenching its wooden frame.

“Chris?” Raul asked.

"I'm here," he said, his voice not quite his own.

"I know this must be difficult," Raul said.

"You weren't the only one. All expats are being replaced in the Hong Kong office." Replaced . . . Chris swigged the last sip of his wine and laid his head back against the chair, exhaling slowly.

"You've probably sensed it coming," Raul continued. "The world has changed so much since you've been there – what is it now, five years? And, well, we just can't afford to keep expats in the overseas offices anymore."

He hadn't seen it coming. "I see," he said.

Astrid stepped onto the balcony with the bottle of wine in her hand. She wore a thin cotton wrap, the soft blue one he'd bought for her on their trip to India last spring. She sat down in the chair next to him, oblivious to the clock running on her Hong Kong visa.

"It's an economic decision, you see, not a personal one," Raul said, rattling on about severance, moving costs and health insurance.

Chris counted the boats in the water, getting to thirteen before losing count.

"Chris?" Raul interrupted.

"What?"

"Monday. We'll talk more about this on Monday," Raul said. "Why don't you call me in the evening, your time, my morning. I'll be in early and we'll go over everything. Alright?"

“Hmm,” Chris muttered, unable to move his heavy tongue.

“Goodbye, then,” Raul said.

The phone went dead yet Chris held it tightly to his ear. The boats. There were fourteen of them now. He put his phone down and his head in his hands.

“Do you want to try that new tapas place tomorrow night? Maybe see if Erin and Teru can go,” Astrid said.

Chris reached for the wine bottle on the table between them and refilled his glass, filling it to the brim. He lifted the glass unsteadily, its burgundy liquid spilling over the edges.

“So? What do you think?” Astrid asked.

Her toes were painted a shimmery gold.

“About what?” he asked, admiring Astrid’s polish.

“Dinner, tomorrow with the Zelnicks at the tapas place. The one in Wan Chai.”

He turned to her. God she looked beautiful. Radiant, with sun-kissed skin and a manicured body. Hong Kong had been good for her. For them both.

“I love you,” he said.

“I love you too,” she said, her smile quickly fading. “Are you okay? You look kind of funny.”

Chris looked back toward the sea, immersing himself in the silence. No dogs barked; no television or stereos blared; no exotic sports

cars raced along Island Road. The night held its breath, waiting.

All at once, the squid boats ignited their lights. Eight or more mounted along the sides of each boat like tentacles soliciting their prey. Dim at first, they grew brighter by the second, lighting up the whole bay within minutes. Chris narrowed his eyes until the lights morphed into one chorus line on the water, the soft buzzing of the electrical current the music for their dance.

“Do you think the fisherman use halogens or incandescents?” he asked.

“I have no idea,” Astrid laughed. “But I’ll go with halogens because the lights are too bright for incandescents. What do you think?”

“Yeah, I think you’re right. Halogens,” he said, suddenly laughing.

“What?” Astrid asked. “What’s so funny?”

Chris’ laughter grew hysterical.

“Oh, man, those poor little fuckers,” he said.

“They think they’re going to a nightclub with all their friends, and they’re swimming up to the surface, all excited, the guys are thinking they might even get lucky, have some squid-lets, then - wham - the net smacks down on them and they’re done. It’s over.”

Astrid stared at her husband a moment.

“And?” she asked.

“And what?”

“You’re forgetting the best part,” she prodded him. “They show up on the table at

Bacar deep fried and dripping with chili garlic oil.”

Chris licked his lips. They were chapped. Too much sun in Bali the week before.

“God, I’d love a cigar right now,” he said, running his hand through his thick, sandy blond hair.

Astrid refilled her glass and took a long sip. “You’re not yourself tonight. What’s wrong?”

Another tanker came into view

“Chris?”

The tanker seemed to be headed directly for the chain of squid boats. Cool. Steam roll over them.

Chris opened his mouth but couldn’t seem to find the words. “Stupid fisherman,” he finally said.

Astrid hesitated. “They’re just fish, “ she said gently. “It’s nature’s way. You know the one’s with the bigger brains eat the one’s with the smaller.”

“Yes, well, the bigger brain is the guy from China who’s about to take my job.”

“Very funny,” she said.

“I’m not joking,” he said, clenching his glass. “Raul just called.”

Astrid’s hand rose to her mouth. “My God,” she said, her eyes glossing over with tears.

“What did he say?”

“I’m being replaced. All the expats are.”

Astrid’s mouth hung open. A beautiful mouth, even now. Her full lips were a natural

pinkish-peach. He touched them. They were soft. She kissed his fingers and held his hand to her cheek.

“How can this happen?” she asked. “What about corporate culture and all that stuff about building from the home office out?”

A fog drifted in, slowly at first then gathering speed as it headed into the bay, seeping around the small islands that rose from the sea.

“What are we going to do?” Astrid asked. “The kids will be devastated. My God, they’ve just started a new school year. Alfie can’t just miss the first half of 7th grade, and Lauren has so many friends in her class.”

Tears streamed down her cheeks. Chris looked away, biting his lip to stop its quivering. The fog overtook the squid boats, diffusing their lights.

“My God!” she continued, propelling herself forward to the railing and grabbing it with both hands. “This isn’t right.”

Chris stared into the murky half-light.

“Chris?” said said, more calmly. “Maybe it hasn’t been fully decided yet. I mean, if this is really just about money, then why shouldn’t you have a shot at keeping your job?”

He didn’t respond.

“They should be thrilled at that, wouldn’t you think?” Astrid pressed. “Corporate culture and all that crap at a discounted price?”

Eleven boats were visible now; six squid boats and five others, mostly Chinese junk boats.

“Are you listening?” Astrid asked, her voice shrill, almost hysterical.

Chris looked at his wife. A foghorn sounded in the distance.

“Astrid,” he said, his voice raspy. “We’ll figure it out. We can always go home.” He winced as he said it.

“This is our home,” Astrid said, spinning towards him.

“I know, it is, and it’s been a great home,” he said, grabbing her hand. “But we can’t stay. It’d be too expensive to live here on our – “

“That’s not true,” she interrupted. “We could do it. We can move to a cheaper apartment and give up Zeny.”

Chris raised his eyebrows.

“Okay, we’ll keep Zeny,” she said, “but we could give up vacations and dinners out. We could spend far less if we tried. Call Raul back and see if it’s an option.”

“Let’s take the weekend and think about this,” Chris said. “I’m supposed to call him Monday.”

“It will be too late by then. We have to stop this before it goes too far.”

“I don’t think it would work,” he said. “The numbers – “

“We’ll make them work,” she insisted. “I could even get a job.”

Chris raised his eyebrows again.

“What?” she laughed. “I could! The schools are always looking for teachers, and my credential works for me to become one of those Native English Teachers for the local schools. I could maybe even work at the kids’ school and get their school fees covered.”

“Really?” he asked. “Would you want to do that?”

“I would if that’s what it would take for us to stay,” she said. “I don’t want to live anywhere else. I love it here. Our friends, the weather, the food. This view. I just don’t know that I could go back to the East Coast. Not yet anyway.”

Jazz music drifted from one of the junk boats, its beat moving across the water and onto the shore.

“Between taxes, rent and school fees, I don’t think we’d have much left over. But if the school fees were covered – “

“We’ll make it work. Scores of people do,” she said.

The fog descended on the beach, consuming the lifeguard towers, trashcans and trees in its path.

“Please. I don’t want to leave, not like this, not now,” she said, holding his phone out to him.

Chris took it from her and spun it around in his palm. Laughter erupted from a junk boat, the one with the jazz playing. He looked

toward the boat as a fine mist settled on the railing and the balcony succumbed to the fog.

“What should I say?” he asked.

“Tell him that you want your job here; that you’ll do whatever it takes to stay.”

“The food is amazing,” he said, a smile forming on his lips.

Astrid nodded and gestured toward the phone.

“And the climate,” he added, as if to himself.

A warm breeze pushed the fog past them, lifting it to the green hills behind. The wine was gone but the view was now clear. Chris pushed a button on this phone and placed it to his ear.

“Raul, it’s Chris. We’d like to stay in Hong Kong,” he said as the sound of jazz music floated through the air and out towards the South China Sea.