

The Boy

As was his habit, the boy paused briefly on his way to the pier. The bronze man, who in truth was mostly green, had been damaged by age and exposure to the weather. An external and powerful force had removed and mutilated the right side of his body. Even given these injustices the bronze man looked forward with a stoic, yet peaceful, face. Dressed in a long robe, hands folded together passively across his lower chest, he reflected calm and peacefulness. The boy loved the statue. The boy also knew that the statue loved him as well. The routine of the early morning visits provided an anchor for the boy.

This was one of the reasons the boy had stopped by the statue daily since his father's disappearance. Shows of peacefulness were lacking in the boy's world now— in reality they had always been lacking. The lack was more particularly defined and potent since his arrival in the city. The boy had arrived in New Shanghai, at age five. The boy had been too young to understand the reasons his family had left their home in Saudi Arabia to travel here, leaving their possessions and friends behind. As the boy grew, the topic was never discussed. If the boy questioned the reasons for the move his mother grew mute. His father would leave the apartment, returning late in the night smelling of tobacco even though it had been pronounced *haram* – forbidden – to believers. The boy did not feel his father still carried belief in anything, even though his mother adhered to Islam.

The only thing the boy believed in was the statue.

The boy always wanted an explanation for the move. He still awoke covered in stale sweat, the smell of fear. In his dreams, the boy vividly relived the way he was hidden in a bag in

the overheard compartment on the plane. He would awake face down in his pillow convinced that he was again being forced to wear a hot and suffocating mask, as he had been for the entire flight. The boy, Ahriman, had been terribly afraid that he would be forgotten in the compartment and die. In his dreams he watched himself die nightly in that compartment; bleeding his hands as he tried to break out. Screaming in vain for his parents to free him. Promising that he would be a “good” boy, wondering if he would become a ghost when he died. In the real experience, the boy had prayed to Allah to keep him safe and to let his death be painless. He was dreadfully afraid of pain, as most five-year-old boys are.

In reality Ahriman slept for the majority of the flight, immersed in dreams running with his pet dog Mahzur while hunting rabbits in the watermelon fields near the home he was being torn away from in the real world. Mahzur, was technically a “working dog”, not a pet. Owning a dog as a pet was illegal in Saudi Arabia. Ahriman’s father consistently make Ahriman recite the ways in which Mahzur “worked” for the family, the tasks he performed and the certifications the dog had received in the work animal courses. Mahzur was a golden Saluki who was an excellent sight hunter, and he was the boy’s best friend. Perhaps his only friend; until the statue.

Ahriman resented his parents for the way he was forced to stay indoors in their new “home” upon their arrival in New Shanghi. During the days, Ahriman and his mother sat in silence inside of the small apartment and never went out. The fact that they could not make noise or look out of the window made him furious. Ahriman tired quickly of the games of making the stains on the wallpaper into animals

The boy remembered overhearing his father talking about how they were unwanted here. During the day, father went to the Sciencetarium to work. His mother would do school lessons

with the boy. He tired of the mildewed and torn school books his parents made him work in. At night, the young boy would sometimes sneak looks out at the streets. The bronze man glowed bright against the night. An iridescent aura surrounded the bronze man. The young boy felt that the bronze man held all of the love that was left in the world and was trying to transfer some of it to him thorough the window. The bronze man was really an angel, and the boy was the only one who knew. As Ahriman watched at night, other people would touch the statue and receive small boxes, understood to be magical gifts by the boy, from the right side of the bronze man. Ahriman never dreamed he would be free to walk on that street. His parents had ripped him from his life, tortured him and conspired to keep him from the bronze man. He never felt he would be closer to the bronze man than he was in that window. Completely confined indoors, Ahriman could not imagine a better experience than being able to touch the statue and receive a magical gift. The boy spent hours of his youth trying to predict the contents of “his” box in his bed each night.

Sometimes Ahriman imagined his box would contain a hundred Ramadan pastries or packets of mint tea. Other times he thought the box would contain a ball or hoop to play with. Often the box contained a large sum of money in his mind that he would use to fly his family back home. This prediction was always bitter sweet. The boy could never decide if he wanted to bring his parents back with him. The boy knew that this anger towards his parents was wrong, but he had no way out of it. He could not respect parents who did not trust him with the truth.

When the loneliness of the confinement of the apartment weighed on him so physically that his back ached and he felt he could not get enough air into his lungs, Ahriman’s box

contained a magic whistle. The magic whistle that would call Mahzur to him, so they could run away and find new types of fields to run in.

When the impossible happened, the boy was older, but not yet over his dreaming of this moment. The boy spoke softly to the statue, placing his hand in the cratered right side left by the bomb. His skin prickled with electric nerves and excitement. "I am Ahriman, you remember me?" the boy began. "You are Confucius," the boy said running his fingers along the name and other text engraved on the base of the statue. "We must remember each other so that we do not disappear. "Then standing the boy stated a little louder in an adolescent, cracking voice, "When the Great Principle prevails, we will be wanted again."

Ahriman's father, Insar, had often talked quietly at night, in their old life, of this Great Principle. The boy loved to sit on his father's lap while he talked and read aloud to his mother, Aamirah. It seemed an omen that the statue had these words engraved on its base. That was the first time Ahriman had touched the Bronze Confucius. This was after the bombings, after Insar had stopped coming home, after the man in grey had come to the door. The man in grey had looked past Aamirah and, seeing the boy, mumbled "unfortunate" while shoving an envelope to Aamirah through the chained door. Ahriman had just turned eleven. His mother had somehow gotten an apple for Ahriman as a gift.

The money from the man in gray was gone in three weeks. Aamirah was sick and coughing up blood within another five weeks. Still, Insar did not come back. Aamirah waited for seven days, the number of days that Hagar ran desperately between Mount Safa and Mount

Marwah in her attempt to save Ishmael, her son. Allah was clearly not impressed with Ahriman's practices. God was as lost as everything else in this world except the statue, and Aamirah just continued to fade away.

“Mother,” Ahriman tried to speak calmly to Aamirah, but it was hard to keep his voice under control. He fought to be both respectful and authoritative. He was, after all, the man of the house for now at least, and probably forever. The boy understood the reality of the events, even if his mother did not. “There is no choice mother. I must go outside. I know how to get money, you have to be rational.”

How many times had Insar said the same thing when arguing with Aamirah? Ahriman tried to straighten himself in order to be taller.

“You are not to be seen. It is the rule,” Aamirah replied. Her teeth were stained with blood and she wheezed as she spoke.

“It was father's rule. As far as I can tell he's never coming back”, Ahriman tried to sound more angry than scared. He was not at all sure that he had pulled it off, but he continued.

“I am the man of the house now!” he spoke loudly and towered over the sobbing form of his mother on the mattress she had shared with Insar.

“I forbid it!” Aamirah's voice was stronger for a moment and then she collapsed into coughing again.

“You are no longer in charge, but to be honest, you never were,” shouted the boy. The adolescent crack returned to his voice.

Ahriman watched his mother’s face freeze in confusion and fear. His rage blurred his vision and distorted Aamirah’s face into an unrecognizable montage of emotion. His mother seemed already on her way to becoming a ghost and Ahriman felt sick. Regardless on this, the boy could not stop himself. He looked hard into Aamirah’s face and stated forcefully, “Do not leave the house. I will be back.”

Ahriman acted quicker than his mother could comprehend the situation. He moved faster than she could react as well. In her greatly weakened state this was not saying much, but the boy took no chances. Grabbing his father’s work jacket from the hook by the door, Ahriman ran from the apartment into the cold of the early, lightless morning.

He worried. What if he was wrong? What if it wasn’t there? What if the bronze man was one more falsehood – one more disappointment?

Ahriman, frozen in this point in time, struggled alone in the compartment of his isolation. The sidewalk morphed into a recreation of the trip when he was five, stopped at the statue. Looking around he put his shaking hand into the hole in the right side and removed the small box. It was not a magical gift. There was no whistle with the promise of his dog and watermelon fields, but there was something there. He almost cried when he felt it. Ashamed and scared, Ahriman quickly shoved it into his jacket and spoke to the statue quietly, as if in prayer. “Do not forget us”, and under his breath, “please do not forget me”. *Everyone else has*, he thought.

Feeling dirty and dishonest, the boy ducked into an alley and hid behind a large dumpster. Ahriman felt completely disoriented. He had not been outside for six years. The sights, sounds and noises overwhelmed him. His head felt ready to explode. He looked around for anything that was familiar but could not read the fluorescent signs that were beginning to blink in the morning sky. He could not see the sun, but only a hazy smear of yellow where it was rising.

The air was heavy and burned his nose and lungs. He coughed hard and his head throbbed. His heart pounded as he looked closer at the box. There was a set of numbers and letters written on it. These seemed like the labels on the goods that Insar had brought home from the dock.

Insar had talked to Aamirah about the “market” at the dock a couple of times in the last year at night when his parents thought Ahriman was asleep. Apparently, The State was aware of the existence of the market but allowed it because it placated the “citizens”. From his eavesdropping Ahriman understood that this market is where Insar had gotten the set of wireless handheld communication devices his parents used sparingly to communicate during the technology riots that had begun to occur every month or so and kept Insar confined at the Sciencetarium for days at a time. Once, the area was actually bombed. Insar had been gone for three weeks. Ahriman’s parents had stayed in touch for the first week and then the devices failed. When Insar had returned home, and Ahriman had faked sleep, he told Aamirah about the loss of a hundred Sciencetarium workers in a single instant and his own entrapment in an elevator for five days. Insar felt as if he would die in the elevator.

Aamirah had wondered aloud if Ahriman had felt the same fear on the trip in. he cried then and Insar sought to comfort her. It was the closest thing to an explanation or apology that Ahriman had ever received from either of his parents. The boy still hated them both for that.

Slowly, things fell into place in his head. Ahriman had watched people put their hands into the statue for years. He had assumed it was a thing people did for luck, like the way that people in his homeland thought certain stones were lucky. A superstition. In a way, it was both. They were making drops to be delivered to the dock. It was all too similar to how Insar had talked to Aamirah about the “market” at the dock to not be what was happening. Ahriman did not open the box. He did not think he wanted to know what he was going to be carrying. He was scared enough already. This was a world he knew nothing about. Yet, he had no options. His mother was going to die unless he could find a solution. His father had most likely been killed at the Sciencetarium. So, without any real experience, and only secondhand, pilfered knowledge of the world he was walking into, Ahriman, not yet a teenager, headed towards the dock.

The smell of salt assaulted his nose from blocks away. The world was so much louder than he could have ever imagined within the confines of the family’s apartment. It was still early but there were people on the streets talking and yelling at each other. As Ahriman looked around he was nearly run over by a two-wheeled cart of some sort that was not pulled by an ox or mule. It seemed to run itself and carry a man as well as cargo. Most people were on bicycles and on foot. There were few pack animals to be seen.

The clanging and clanking of metal pots announced the cooking of food in some of the buildings. The buttery scent of eggs caused Ahriman’s stomach to growl. It had been years since

he had eaten eggs. There were peddlers selling codes to access the knowledge net to find out about the day's news. This seemed a straightforward thing, like a newspaper, but it ran inside glasses that people wore. Ahriman could not understand it all.

Overwhelmed and scared of being discovered as a thief, Ahriman kept his head down and walked into the dock area. He was glad for the bulk of his father's jacket and hoped it helped him look older. The boy focused on standing at his full height without slouching.

Ahriman found the slip at the dock after having to ask strangers for help. Thankfully the men seemed completely disinterested in him, preferring to stare at their glasses instead. He had then needed more help and instinctively chose women to ask. They were kind and helpful and pointed past the ships and freighters. A small boat was secured there, and a young man sat on the dock nearby drinking tea.

The man looked up quizzically and shrugged. "Guess you are new?" The man stood slowly, "I swear the bronzes just keep sending younger and younger carts. I suppose they are running out of experienced ones." The man slid his finger across his neck. The man was dark skinned and wore a colorful suit that covered his whole body. A mask of some sort hung around his neck. There was a clip on his right ear that seemed to be making noise.

Ahriman kept his head down and prayed that the voice that came out would sound like a man's instead of a girl's. Thankfully it did. "Yes, I am new". He breathed deep and tried to stand taller. He placed his hands in the pockets of Insar's work jacket so that the shaking of his hands was not obvious.

“As long as you got the box, I don’t care who you are”. Ahriman almost dropped the box retrieving from Insar’s jacket but handed it to the young man.

“Here is the cart fee”, the man pressed some bills into Ahriman’s hand. “Maybe I’ll see you again, maybe not,” he laughed, “depends on how good you are at avoiding the light.”

Ahriman nodded, unsure of what to do. He walked back towards downtown. Once in a shop, labeled in Arabic instead of Chinese, Ahriman pulled out the money. It seemed like a lot, but he had no real idea if it was. Ahriman spoke with the man at the counter when no one was around.

The boy explained that he wanted to buy something to help his mother with her pain. After Ahriman gave a few more details about Aamirah’s health the man gave him some liquid that he explained would help with pain and sleep. “It’s the scourge,” the man behind the counter explained, “if you want to be kind, give it all to her at once”, the man explained. “And then get the hell away for her before you get it.”

Ahriman bought bread, and a small piece of candy for his mother as well and left with only coins in his pocket and a lump in his throat. The money had not gone very far. Ahriman wandered the city for a long time but saw none of it. Instead the boy thought about the grapes that had grown near his home in Saudi Arabia, and how his mother had fed them to him off the vine when she was harvesting them. Aamirah had always sang as she worked and thinking of this made the boy inside of Ahriman tear up. He hid in an alley and cried into Insar’s jacket.

He thought about Insar and his belief in the Great Principle. His father really believed that the whole world could and would work together to cultivate peace. It was just a reality that had not yet happened in his father's eyes. Insar felt that it would happen in his lifetime – that somehow everyone would be valued and wanted equally. He spoke of “everyone being welcome at the feast”. The doors would be open for everyone when the Great Principle was finally embraced and accepted.

The hazy light of the sun disappeared into the coming night as Ahriman stepped out from the alleyway and made his way back up the roads to the apartment. He had been observant and did not lose his way. He passed by the Bronze man and lightly touched his hand. “I will see you tomorrow”, the boy pronounced.

Going back into the apartment for the last time, Ahriman knew his mother would apologize and hug him. She would be grateful for the food and the medicine. Aamirah would not ask what he had done, only if there was going to be enough money. Ahriman would tell his mother that it was going to be fine. The boy would not tell her that there was only enough money for him.