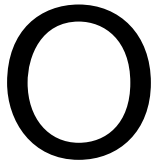


Poster Boy



n that fateful day, I sat where I always did on my

lunch break, on a bench in the mall that offered me a perfect view of the poster. It was for “Moon Wars,” a sci fi movie. I was obsessed with the lead actor in the movie, Phillip Chow. Chow is the greatest Chinese action hero ever. His martial arts moves are off the hook, and I know a little bit about moves...unfortunately. Thinking about Chow, living in a fantasy world of perfectly choreographed fights where nobody really died and everything turned out okay in the end, was helping me to forget my unpleasant experience of the not-too-distant past.

In the poster Chow stood bare-chested, golden skin glistening with sweat highlighting every exquisite line on his perfectly formed body. Long black hair woven with feathers framed his noble, intensely alive face, the slanted eyes on fire with passion, nostrils flared, mouth set in a determined line.

The force of Chow's energy leaped off the poster and grabbed hold of me as I sat there, pulling me in. I felt myself transported to a magical place, Chow by my side. We were fighting together, beating off an entire army of evil sorcerers and when the last of the enemy fell we turned to one another, sweat pouring from our bodies, clothes torn, locked eyes, drew close and...

“Excuse me, mind if I sit here?”

I stared, unseeing, my eyes finally focusing on the timid, balding man leaning over me, a hint of impatience hiding behind his forced politeness. I gathered up my trash and left.

I'm obsessed with Chow but more obsessed with China and everything Chinese. Who would I be without Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon? I'd be nobody—just one more ordinary receptionist of European descent, working in a ridiculous Beverly Hills plastic surgeon's office, living a dull, meaningless existence. I must have watched Crouching Tiger a hundred times. I wish I lived in that kind of magical world. I bet I was a warrior in another life. I love Bruce Lee. I've memorized all his karate moves. Fist of Fury is the best. I wish I was Chinese. I wish I knew Mandarin. I want to go to China so bad—and I'm going to, just as soon as I save enough money.

When I was thirteen, I got into trouble with a girl named Jessica and was thrown out of school. Jessica was one of the “good” girls, from a rich family, always wearing designer clothes, perfect make-up even at that age. She got straight “A’s” of course, was a cheerleader and volunteered once a week at a homeless shelter. But she was a weasel, I’m sorry. I used to go to school dressed as my favorite anime characters and she’d make fun of me. Not directly, she was too sly for that. She’d play the goody-two-shoes all day long and then, when nobody was around except her skanky posse, she’d pick my clothes apart, make fun of every single accessory and they’d all have a good laugh. She even got physical. When nobody was looking, bam! She’d brush up against me, elbow me out of the way, toss her long blond hair in my face—I hated that—and always she’d say things like, what’s that smell, or we’re praying for your sinful soul at church but it’s a lost cause.

One day, after taunting me for weeks, she tripped me in the gym and I fell flat on my face. Next thing I knew I was standing over Jessica and she was on the ground howling with blood pouring from her nose. I tried to explain to the principal that “she started it,” but of course he didn’t care—not when Jessica looked so awful, while I looked perfectly fine. My parents had to pay her medical bills.

I have to say that whoever fixed her broken nose did a great job—it looked even better afterwards than it did before.

I was put in continuation school and the day after the fight, my dad marched me down to the local martial arts gym, handed me over to the owner and said, “Do something with my daughter.” My dad was a wise man. Suddenly I was channeling my pent-up energy into an activity that resulted in positive progress instead of endless trouble. By the time I was eighteen I was boxing and had competed in a slew of amateur fights and had won them all. I’d trained in every kind of weaponry imaginable. I’m especially good with knives.

When I graduated from high school I got this job so I could continue my training. When I leave Dr. Franken’s office, I leave the world of the ordinary behind (if you can call plastic surgery ordinary) and walk into the gym, sweaty, smelly, vibrating with pounding fists and booming rap music. I love it. It’s my world, where I belong, what gives me purpose.

But that night, I had a special mission: the premiere of the Moon Wars film. I was going to stand along with all the little groupies in front of Groman’s Chinese Theater and watch Phillip Chow walk down the red carpet. Embarrassing, I know. My best

friend Olivia agreed to come with me and I trusted her to keep her mouth shut. Olivia didn't exactly understand my obsession but she loved the idea of it and she was down to be a groupie for the night. After work, I picked her up and we headed across town. Luckily, a parking space was waiting for us just a few blocks up from the theater and we hurried to take our places amongst the crowd. With a few well-placed nudges, we managed to make it to the front by the ropes, close to the theater doors.

A wave of anticipation swept the crowd, murmuring voices swelling to a higher pitch of excitement as on cue, necks craned in the same direction and we all looked down the red carpet. The first limo arrived, followed by a train of others, the crowd showing good-natured enthusiasm for the occupants, while saving the big welcome for Chow.

At last the moment came that everyone was waiting for. A silver cloud pulled to the curb and the door swung open, revealing, not Chow first, but a pair of long shapely legs followed by the body and head of a breathtakingly beautiful young woman wearing a shimmering cream colored gown so sheer it might as well have been see-through, the front cut so low her voluptuous breasts seemed ready to pop out but never quite did. Blond hair, shiny as satin, cascaded down to her shoulders like Lauren Bacall's in *The Maltese Falcon*. She struck a pose and bulbs flashed but clearly the paparazzi were waiting for the person who exited next: Phillip Chow.

And then, there he was, in the flesh, looking even better than all my dreams. He was tall and infinitely elegant in his Armani suit, yet emitting a magnetically animal charisma, as if at any moment he'd tear off the suit and prowl amongst the crowd, a panther surveying his prey. Which woman would he devour? Any one of us pushing against the ropes would have gladly submitted to a thorough ravishing right then and there.

As the glorious couple moved in unison down the carpet, insanely in those few moments when Chow was so close I could almost reach out and touch him, I had eyes only for his cream-colored companion. Who was this woman, how did she get so lucky?

They came abreast to me, pausing for another camera moment and for an instant my eyes locked with those of the woman before she looked away again, flicking her hair back in an arrogant gesture. Something clicked in my brain. As she moved on by, her profile with its absolutely perfect nose was displayed and I thought, I'd know that nose anywhere, that thing she does with her hair....

Holy shit...it was Jessica, the girl I'd beaten up in Middle School, that perfect girl who had so infuriated me because she'd known exactly how to do it. And she was doing it still.

At the theater door, the couple turned to the crowd for a final smile and royal wave and then they were gone, followed like a swarm of killer bees by the paparazzi, the other cast members and all the hangers on who had somehow bamboozled their way into the premiere.

It was uncanny how quickly the crowd dispersed after that. Olivia and I went across the street for a drink but my heart wasn't in it. Deflated, depressed, completely out of sorts, I made some excuse, saying I had to leave. Olivia pouted a bit but her friend Sarah was on her way and could take her home so we said good-bye.

I walked in front of the now silent theater, all the beautiful people sealed inside, Phillip and Jessica chief amongst them. As I passed the side of the theater a movement caught my eye and I saw that someone was smoking in the semi-darkness of the alley, just beyond a set of steps leading down from a theater side door. More importantly, close to the entrance of the alley three hooded figures all but blended into the shadows, crouching behind a large trash bin and watching the smoker. This was getting interesting and I pulled back, deciding to see what would happen next. A stealthy advance ensued, the flash of a knife appearing in one of their hands. The knife-wielder let the others move ahead and I calculated that their job was to loosen up the victim, then he'd move in to execute a little carving, the artist of the group.

I couldn't help myself, elation gripped me, every muscle taunt for combat, my world reduced to this alley and nothing beyond. I loved this very precise world where right and wrong, winning and losing, wasn't distinguished by rationalization or theoretical conversation but by actions. And those actions brought immediate results. No waiting for years to find out whether or not you'd made the right choices. You knew instantly because either you ended up on the ground or they did.

I went first for the one with the knife. It took less than ten seconds to break his arm, sending the blade clattering to the ground. I snatched the blade and turned my attention to the other two who had brought the smoker down. They were so busy kicking him, it took a few seconds for them to notice me. As they jumped up and turned, I kicked the closest thug in the kidney. His accomplice tensed, a look of stupid surprise on his face, and I punched him in the nose with the blunt end of the knife, sending him staggering backward, clutching his face, blood gushing between his fingers.

Fear and confusion registered in both their eyes as I swung the knife, while behind me the other one scurried out of the alley, clutching his arm. In five seconds the other two had done the same, rats in the dark.

Helping the smoker up, I received a mind-numbing shock. The man staggering to his feet was none other than Phillip Chow.

“Where are they?” he gasped.

“Gone.”

He eyed the knife in my hand, moving slightly backward.

“What do you want—money?”

“What?” I gasped.

This was not how I’d fantasized our meeting would be. Could this despicable, pathetic man be the glorious specimen in the poster?

Carefully, I offered him the knife and he snatched it, grimacing with pain. “I got a bad back or I would have killed those mother fuckers. Where’s Manson?” He glared at me petulantly, clearly expecting an answer.

Before I could voice my anger, the stage door opened and a fat little man burst out, calling, “Phillip?”

Jessica was right on his heels.

Jessica looked back and forth between me and Chow, her big violet eyes narrowing. “What’s going on here,” she demanded, marching up to Chow, ready to lay into him. Her expression changed to one of horrified concern when she saw his face.

She turned on me. “Did you do this?”

I hoped she’d lunge at me so I’d have the pleasure of breaking her nose again. No such luck. The fat man took her by the arm and steered her away.

“How many times have I told you not to sneak out to smoke?” he barked at Chow.

Jessica glanced back at me, recognition dawning. “Hey, aren’t you--?”

I didn't hear the rest because chaos descended on the alley. Magically, people began to appear as if the universe had sent a message to all interested parties that this was the place to be. Cameras and microphones materialized in front of Chow's face.

"What happened?" everyone wanted to know.

Chow never even looked at me. Under the spotlight, his transformation was miraculous, becoming the star once more, nobler and more impressive than ever, if possible, thanks to his developing shiner. He told an incredible story and I must say his acting was superb. I listened in amazement as he recounted how he'd single-handedly fended off not just three but six attackers. His Shakespearian voice slowly faded away as I allowed myself to be pushed to the back by the jostling crowd.

As I walked away, an arm grabbed me and I tensed. It was the short fat man, his pale piggy eyes viewing me with small-minded distrust and cynicism.

"Name's Manson, Terri Manson. You are?" He extended his hand to shake mine.

"Natasha Beil," I said hesitantly.

He smiled, but the effect was blisteringly cold.

"I'm going to make this fast, Ms. Beil, 'cause I don't have a lot of time. Nothing happened back there that you know anything about, if you understand my meaning. You do understand my meaning?"

My smile was no less frigid. Between the two of us, we could have stopped global warming. "I'm not sure that I do, Mr. Manson, can you explain?"

He put his face two inches from mine and said in a menacing voice meant to frighten, "Don't mock me."

I moved my face an inch closer. "Okay," I said and walked away.

Back home I flipped on the television, unsurprised to find that every station in LA showed Phillip Chow recounting the story of how he'd been attacked by six knife-wielding psychopathic gangbangers and how he'd disarmed them. It was a PR moment made in heaven and Chow's celebrity status sky-rocketed. Not only did "Moon Wars" become the highest grossing movie of all time but

over the next few weeks—and I know this is hard to believe but it's absolutely true, the press went so far as to suggest Phillip Chow should run for president—and he wasn't even an American citizen. And then, he did a public service ad for Homeland Security.

It was enough to make a person gag. I'd actually saved Phillip Chow, the most famous martial arts actor in history, who turned out to be a charlatan and a coward. I couldn't shake the image of him lying on the ground in a fetal position begging for mercy and me reaching down to help him up.

What should I do, tell the press? I laughed at the absurdity. No one would believe I'd saved Chow's ass. And I'd been warned, oh yes, the piggy man had warned me big time.

Amazingly, after a few weeks I almost convinced myself that the whole thing had never happened. I was pretty good at telling myself lies—making believe that the real violence had never happened, covering it up with play-acting in the ring.

It was spring, a busy season at Dr. Franken's since the pressure was on for all the desperate LA women to look perfect for summer. Between work and training, I barely had time to think about anything else. In the evenings I pushed harder than ever and was rewarded with news of my first pro fight in the fall.

But somehow, ever since I'd beat up the thugs, my heart hadn't been in my fighting. At home one night brushing my teeth before bed, I allowed myself to voice a concern that had always been at the back of my mind—where is this leading me? Boxing and MMA are short-lived careers and then what? Like my dad had always told me, before he passed away, When you gonna develop long term goals, not just live in the moment?

As if things weren't bad enough, the next night in the gym I heard someone say the police had caught the knife guy. The minute I got home, I turned on the television and sure enough, it was all over the news.

That's when Terri Manson called, sweet as sugar, and invited me to lunch at Koi.

He was already seated when I got there and rose to greet me, his smile bright—too bright—piggy eyes still cold and cynical. After ordering a fortune in miniature helpings of artistically presented sushi, he said, "We got off on the wrong foot, Ms. Beil."

"Call me Natasha," I said.

He nodded, encouraged. “Lovely Natasha, so young, your whole future ahead of you.” Deftly and at a stupefying rate, he popped food into his mouth with the chopsticks, never pausing in his conversation. “Five people know what happened that night. One’s an apprehended criminal who’s probably spilling the beans right now. Obviously, whatever he says is a lie. Isn’t that right, Natasha?”

“How would I know,” I said testily, trying to steal some food before he ate it all.

“Sarcasm isn’t flattering in a young woman. Let me spell it out for you: the police found one of the muggers before we did. No doubt he’s spouting off about some mysterious female superhero. Before long they’ll be knocking on your door and that’s not in our best interests—or yours. That’s why we’re offering you a little vacation—say for one year—to anywhere outside the United States. There must be someplace you want to go Natasha?”

The eel I’d finally managed to secure slipped from my chopsticks and slithered down to the plate. Manson immediately snapped it up.

“You must be crazy,” I said. “I have a job, a career.”

He winced. “Please. A pretty girl like you has no business fighting in the ring—or out of it. We checked up on the boyfriend incident. Lucky to get out of that one, Natasha—but who am I to judge?”

The “incident,” he called it, the little encounter I was trying to forget. Yes, the piggy man had done his homework. Once again, there it was, playing back in my mind. My boyfriend, seven time world champion kick boxer Danny Lada, a living legend in the ring but useless at anything practical—like paying the rent—coming at me in a drunken craze, long, thin kitchen knife in hand, accusing me of cheating on him with his trainer, Mickey. Yeah, can you believe it, cross-eyed Mickey. Me, wrestling the knife away and Danny falling forward onto the blade. Always made sure those blades were sharp and so it went in clean and easy, flesh made of butter. Dead center in the heart. Dead all right, no chance for survival. Mickey bursting in, knowing nothing of what had happened, just seeing Danny convulsing on the floor, knife sticking straight up as if we were all in the middle of a horror movie, and Mickey thinking, and why wouldn’t he, that I’d killed Danny. Mickey, flashing the knife he always carried on his hip—too many knives around that night—and me pulling the blade out of Danny and killing Mickey for real, just like that, fast, hardly any

effort, slitting his throat. No accident. Self-defense.

The weird thing was, I didn't feel remorse, just satisfaction, exultation in fact, victorious, a rush like no other; my world, my element, the only "right" being to get them before they got me. Not fantasy, a real fight, where you really know whether you've won or not, because someone ends up dead.

I was acquitted, thank God, thanks to my neighbor who heard the noise, walked in and saw it all. For a few days, I was a bit of a celebrity, splashed everywhere in the news until, finally, the hype died down. But it left its mark on me—killing people does that, you know. Leaves a mark. Even if it's in self-defense. Especially when you realize that the act of taking a life comes with a rush of power like no other and you have to push it down, deny it or it'll consume you.

And then the publicity. I hated publicity.

"You listening to me?" The little creep was jabbing at my arm with his chopsticks.

I cut my eyes to him so sharp and cold just like those knives, he actually stopped his jabbing, slightly subdued for a second. Of course, his recovery was quick and he continued, "You must know that given the circumstances of your past, this is a very good offer. You see Natasha, you can go this way," he pointed left with a chopstick, "or you can go that way," he pointed with the other one. "Make the right choice and your future is wide-open. Make the wrong one and you'll end up... well, let's just leave it at that, shall we?"

"Why do I get the feeling I don't really have a choice?"

He sighed. "What will it be, Natasha?"

"China." The word popped out of my mouth, just like that, before I could stop it.

Surely now he'd laugh, a camera would appear and someone would yell I'd been punked. But none of that happened. He simply shrugged. "Not my first choice but never mind, I'm not the one going. You leave late tonight. We've gathered some things for you and taken them to a hotel. Can't risk you going back to your apartment. The police might be there already."

"I can't get a visa to China just like that!"

He rolled his eyes. “You wait in Mexico while we arrange your papers.” He motioned for the waiter, who hurried over, and Manson signed the tab and got up. “Everything’s been arranged. We won’t meet again.”

He was gone then in a black convertible VW Bug—who would have guessed—and I was left to ruminate as I was taken by taxi to the hotel.

I was screwed. I knew enough about powerful people to realize that the whole “you have a choice” speech was bogus. It was useless to fight someone like Manson. No matter that I could put him on the ground in two seconds. People like him controlled the media, the money, the masses—everything. Maintaining Chow’s image was worth a fortune to them and they weren’t going to let a little nobody like me ruin it all.

And then it hit me: so what? Wasn’t this what I’d been dreaming of? And here it was falling into my lap. Not exactly how I’d planned it, but hell, this was better than scrimping and saving for years and maybe never getting what I wanted. Thank God I hadn’t signed a contract for the fight yet. To hell with the fight, it was all a stack of cards ready to fall anyway. And women got no respect in the ring, who was I fooling?

That night as I exited the hotel, a car pulled up and the darkened window rolled down just enough to reveal a pair of violet eyes. Jessica.

“Get in. I’m taking you to the airport,” she said.

I got in.

“You were a real asshole in school,” she said.

“So were you.”

She smiled. Even in her sweats, no make-up and hair pulled back in a ponytail, she looked gorgeous. “What the hell were you doing at the premiere?”

I flushed. “I had a crush on Chow, but no more.”

“Ditto that, though, much as he’s a prick I don’t want him dead. I’m going to be the love interest in his next movie, so, thanks for saving the mother fucker.”

I gave a mock bow, as best I could in the car. She looked at me

thoughtfully. “After you beat me up in school, nothing was ever the same. I hated you, was scared of you, too. Everybody made fun of my nose job and I couldn’t do anything about it. I’m pretty good at kicking ass now, though.”

“You were always good, Jessica, much better than me.”

“No, I claw my way up just like women always have, with sex. But you...” she moved closer, wide eyes filling my vision, hunger on her face. “I heard you killed two men. I’d give anything to know what that feels like.”

Her face had turned to me so I now saw her left side. I realized that she was, indeed, wearing skillfully applied make-up, covering a black and blue mark by her left eye.

“Does he hit you, Jessica?” I asked bluntly.

Her body recoiled and she laughed, bitter. “I know what I’m doing. I’m using Chow and when I’m done, I’m going to crush him.”

“Ouch,” I said. “What if it doesn’t turn out like that? Where’s your pride?”

Naked hate twisted her fine features into a clownish, repulsive caricature of herself. “You fucking hypocrite! I hope you enjoy your exile because you’re more in a cage as I am. You talk tough but you obeyed Manson and did what you were told, just like everybody does. You punch someone and maybe get a few thousand bucks—so what? I sleep with the right guy, take a few punches, and end up with money and influence beyond your wildest dreams. I’ll go for that any day. Now get the fuck out of my car.”

I got out and boarded my plane for Mexico. Two weeks later, on my way to China I still hadn’t shaken the encounter. I’d never felt what Jessica felt when my fists were in her face. I’d never covered my wounds with make-up. I wore them with pride. I’d never cowered on the ground, begging for mercy like Chow. I was the one who made others cower, even killed if necessary. Did it have to be like that, one who controlled and one who submitted?

“You are so deep in thought,” said a voice.

Startled, I turned to look into the face of the Chinese man sitting next to me on the plane; a beautiful, serene face with intelligent, inquiring eyes and a finely chiseled mouth, slightly upturned in an inscrutable smile.

I blinked as if to clear my vision. "I guess I am."

He nodded sympathetically. "Long flight ahead. How about a drink?"

He called the flight attendant over, then said with a hint of playfulness, "You have a secret. Secrets cannot resist a good champagne."

Great line, I thought cynically. Then, I shook my head as if to empty it of negativity. For once in my life, I was going to enjoy the ride. At thirty thousand feet, suspended between heaven and hell and hurtling towards the unknown, a giddy rush of anticipation ran through me. The champagne came and I toasted Chow and Manson. Hell, I even toasted Jessica.

"And who are they?" the man asked.

"My benefactors," I said, reaching for more champagne, our glasses clinking merrily.

"Then they must be very good people, indeed," he remarked.

I laughed. "Oh, yes...indeed."

I gulped down my second glass. I was feeling great, really great. Life had a crazy way of turning on its head and in a split-second shift, becoming something altered and unexpected. Case in point, who'd have thought that a creep like Manson, my old nemesis Jessica and that pathetic poster boy Chow would have helped to make my dreams come true. Here I was, heading towards China and adventure, seated next to a gorgeous man who was surely a million times more interesting and sexy than Chow could ever be.

Or at least, that's how it seemed so far.

"Let's drink to poster boys, cheerleaders and the powerful little pigs who own them," I said.

"Whatever you wish," said my companion, smiling knowingly.

And to that, we toasted again.