

NEON BLINDNESS

SYNOPSIS

The son of an overseas Filipino worker makes the most of his trip to Hong Kong.

Felix looks forward to Hong Kong, whether or not he admits it.

Early in his childhood up to his late adolescence not long ago, he had seen many pictures of the city miles and miles of sea away from home. One photo he clung to, in particular, flaunted her countless iridescent signs, almost viral in their replication and assemblage, hanging from tall buildings. All lit up, these signs of the city's superficial excess bathed the dark streets in colors celebratory and inviting. That one photo appeared in his mind's eye in sporadic flashes over the days leading up to the trip, filling him with a sense of anticipation—and unwelcome longing.

Iconic, he would think, imagining himself already there in those streets, his skin glowing soft in diffused green or blue or yellow, but preferably warm red, like in the picture.

He knows it can be done. Many of those lights will be, appropriately, fortuitous red, and Duke had not yet revealed anything of their itinerary before they boarded. Surely a picture of him surrounded by the red neon lights can be squeezed in. Then he can post it online to prove to everyone that he was there. And there he was, glowing despite himself.

That is the one thing he wants from this trip, he tells himself repeatedly. On the plane somewhere above the West Philippine Sea, he mentions it to his older companion.

“Last time I visited, many of them were already taken down,” Duke replies, looking up from his book of affirmations. “You might be disappointed.”

The sun peeks from the open window behind Felix and he feels its warmth outlining a faint halo around his head, but it casts a somber shadow on his face.

“Oh, but there are other sights,” Duke adds with a blithe sweep of his hand, and then a lighthearted chortle. “This is for your Grindr, ‘no? I’ll make sure you get that one photo. We have three days to do whatever we want.” With that, he returns to his book and Felix spends the rest of the flight staring out his window.

They land on Chek Lap Kok in mid-morning on a Friday. The sky is clear of clouds, but the humidity is more oppressive than Felix had mistakenly assumed.

En route to their hotel in Tsim Sha Tsui, Duke enumerates the many spots they can visit: definitely Victoria Peak and the Madame Tussauds at Peak Tower, the Big Buddha on Lantau via cable car, swimming at Stanley Beach, drinks and dancing at Lan Kwai Fong, on and on his tone rising with excitement, Canton Road for some shopping, and along the Avenue of Stars to pose like Bruce Lee—“Wa-taah!”

Felix spares a chuckle at the poor falsetto impression. He hopes that was the last point, but Duke keeps on, as if never running out of places in Hong Kong to list. Duke names more sites vaguely familiar to Felix and describes activities that are better experienced than heard. Still, Felix nods, without smiling.

Somewhere along Tsing Ma Bridge, Duke interrupts himself. “Oh, how pretty! You should have your picture taken here!” He taps the shoulder of the chauffeur of the airport limousine and instructs him in a language Felix assumes to be Cantonese before continuing, “And with Ting Kau in the background, wonderful!” Duke more forcefully addresses the driver as they maintain their speed, passing the midpoint of the bridge. Just as forcefully, the man behind the wheel finally responds and Duke frowns, muttering several harsh insults.

Horrified, Felix shushes him. “What if he understands?”

“Eh, so what? I’m paying him to follow, not understand,” Duke laughs. He cranes his neck to look out through his window. “Take a look, it’s too pretty a sight to miss.”

Felix leans over to regard the other bridge across the water, connecting two separate islands. It is a pretty sight, but it underwhelms him. “I see it just fine,” he says.

The car zips past traffic and Duke drowns off. Felix sighs in relief when he hears the

man beside him snoring lightly. Looking out his window, he studies the new city. It is his first time—his first time to leave the country, in fact—but everything about Hong Kong so far strikes him as too familiar: the roads, the buildings, the trees, even the people if he squints, are all sights he has seen in those old pictures.

When they arrive at their hotel, Duke is startled awake. He gets out of the car, not tipping the driver, and Felix follows suit. In the light of day, with the sticky humidity, and in spite of the towering buildings with signs in clashing English and Chinese, it feels to Felix like he never left home. He tries to keep a blank face as they get their bags from the trunk.

Duke heads to the concierge and Felix waits on a sofa, watching over their luggage. Though hotel guests and staff pass him by, he imagines them sneaking looks of appraisal.

Leaning hard, spanning his arms across the backrest, and crossing his legs in *de cuatro* fashion, Felix makes sure Duke's leather monogram suitcases hide his own shabby duffle bag. He had never touched anything designer-branded until he arranged Duke's luggage in front of his, and he admired how the supple leather felt against his skin. With the outfit he had chosen for the plane ride, Duke's bags could reasonably appear to be his own.

A pair of tall and muscular men catches his eye. To grab their attention, he feigns a loud yawn. One turns to look, but when Felix notices Duke approaching from behind them, also checking them out, he quickly leans forward and clasps his hands in front of his lap.

"They gave us a room with one queen bed, is that okay?" Duke asks him, and he nods. "If you mind, I could throw a fit at the reception desk, but in all honesty, I'm exhausted. And starving. Lunch? I know a place. We have about an hour before check-in anyway."

As they exit into the street, Felix expects Duke to hail a cab to take them somewhere nice and classy, fine Chinese dining high in a skyscraper, overlooking the city. He made sure to wear

one of his nicer long-sleeves and his best pair of slacks for the flight, and he was quite surprised to find Duke in a tight t-shirt and cargo shorts back at the airport in Manila. To his dismay, Duke crosses the street and into a narrow alley. Felix has a sinking feeling that the only other car ride he will have is back to the airport.

He follows Duke to a small shop without a sign; a cramped hole-in-the-wall packed with customers on short stools and small tables, and reeking of soy sauce and sweat. Steam escapes from the open kitchen out through the entrance and Felix almost hesitates, but with Duke holding the door open for him, he makes his way inside the noisy establishment.

Duke orders for them in Cantonese then raves in a loud voice, “They have the best broth here. And with some chili oil—delicious! Almost as good as the ones in Ongpin.”

Over the racket, Felix signals to a waitress and points to a picture of bottled water on the menu. Duke gestures for two and adds something in Cantonese. “Oh, yeah. Better not to risk the service water here, but their house tea is clean.” When their orders arrive, Duke blows into his bowl then lifts it into his mouth, slurping the hot broth.

Felix spoons some from his own bowl and immediately scalds his tongue. “Isn’t it too hot out for soup?” he complains.

“It’s good for both of us,” Duke argues in between slurps, “to sweat it out.”

“Where did you hear that?”

“I read up on traditional Chinese remedies. Doc might disagree, but surely it won’t hurt,” Duke says as he finishes his bowl. He adds, eyeing the younger man’s damp shirt, “I should have told you to wear something comfier.”

Felix shrugs to hide his slight irritation. With his chopsticks, he picks a dumpling floating in the dark broth. The taste is okay enough, if a bit medicinal, he concedes.

“Good, right?” Duke remarks, his face lighting up. Felix nods and returns his attention to his bowl when Duke asks, “So, how did your interview at that BPO go?”

The abrupt question catches Felix off guard. Swirling noodles in the puddle of broth in his bowl, he remembers their last support-group meeting. During his turn to share, he had mentioned applying to a call center. Nearly everyone else had shared they were employed. He regrets having said anything at all. Not looking up, he mutters, “It went well.”

“Oh, don’t worry. You’re young. And there’ll be other opportunities,” Duke says. Felix mentally chastises himself for his own transparency as Duke continues, “I’ve had a lot of bad interviews too, especially when I was a fresh grad like you, way back in the day. Let’s not mention how many years ago. The important thing is to keep trying.”

Felix hums in response, relieved there seem to be no follow-up questions.

“My parents, God rest their souls, they were really hard on me.” Duke goes on, enumerating the expectations his parents had set on him: to land this job and in that company, get promoted to that position, go through that training, earn this much money. Duke reasons it was because he would someday run their businesses and they refused to hire anyone underqualified, even their own son. “It was so much pressure, but I eventually got the hang of it. I’m sure you will too. Even with, you know, what we have.”

Felix keeps his eyes fixed on his empty bowl, and Duke adds, “Fortunately they passed away long before I was diagnosed. Your mother took the news well, right? You’re lucky.”

“You call that lucky?” Felix scoffs, but then he shakes his head apologetically. “I’m full. We should go.”

The sky is dark and heavy with clouds when they arrive back at the hotel.

Duke talks to the concierge as Felix peers from behind him. When the receptionist hands

them only one keycard, Felix blurts out, “One more? Just in case.” Duke smiles in agreement, wiggling his eyebrows, and the two share a knowing laugh. Each with their own key, they make their way to the elevators and go on up.

The room is smaller than Felix had expected, but the window is large and spans an entire wall. He goes straight for it from the door, hoping to marvel at the view of Kowloon from a respectable height. A precipitous downpour prevents him from seeing far and below.

“Welcome to Hong Kong. Unpredictable—”

“Just like the Philippines,” Felix finishes. He turns to watch Duke unpack his suitcases, pulling out clothes, shoes, and a plastic bottle with the label peeled off. It rattles as he sets it on a nightstand, marking his side of the bed. Felix inquires about the torn label.

“Without the label, it could be anything,” Duke explains as he takes more clothes out. “People won’t have to know right away.”

Felix stares out the window once more, but the rain obscures whatever view there might be. He hears a soft thump on the mattress and finds Duke lying on his back, stripped to just his boxers, and scrolling through his phone.

“Short nap, then let’s head out. Victoria Peak tonight? Hopefully the rain subsides by then,” he says, closing his eyes. Felix examines Duke, reevaluating his initial impression from when they first met. Duke has a paunch, unsurprising for a man his age, but with a muscular frame; he is stocky rather than chubby. And with his chinito features, combined with a full head of hair, he is attractive. Nevertheless, Felix is not attracted to him.

Duke starts snoring, louder than in the car earlier. Felix unpacks his own duffle bag, an old pasalubong from his mother. He brought with him what he thinks are his nicest clothes, but sneaking a glance at the range of brands of Duke’s, he tucks them back inside.

He pulls out his own bottle of meds, carefully so that he does not disturb Duke, and puts them on the nightstand of his side of the bed. A few thoughts cross Felix's mind as he glances at Duke's meds and looks back to his own. Their survival depends on taking them daily for the rest of their lives. Like anyone else, he fears missing a dose or worse, running out, but Duke must think it such a secret burden to always sneak them with him.

Felix reads the label on his bottle and considers tearing it off as well, but decides against it. Unlike Duke, he does not see it as something to hide.

He considers also taking a nap, but grabs the opportunity to explore the city alone. He takes a hotel umbrella from the closet, tiptoes out of the room, and heads down.

The downpour seems heavier from the street, and he knows better than to risk his health this way, but the sound of the rain spattering on concrete soothes him. Walking down the sidewalk he sees that some establishments have already lit up their signs in the premature gloaming. He stops in his excitement, but the feeling fades when he sees the signs do not glow in the way he hoped: stark LED, rather than soft neon like in his old pictures.

A proverb he heard not long ago rings loudly in his head—you get what you pay for—and he cannot help scrunching up his nose and snorting. Of course, he has yet to pay for anything in this trip, and so it is only apt that he has gotten nothing.

A local bumps into Felix and both nearly fall at the impact. The man hurls insults in a piercing unfamiliar language. Felix understands none of the words, yet fully comprehends the foreign harshness in the man's anger. He bows in earnest, repeating sorry over and over. The man glares, taking a long drag from his cigarette, and walks off, trailing smoke and coughing as he goes. Felix decides right then to make his first purchase.

Common sense, his doctor, and his will to live longer would all speak against it, but he

wants to make a point, even if only to himself. Besides, other patients in his support group still struggle. It takes time after all, and deliberate effort, to overcome long-held vices.

Inside a brightly lit convenience store, he walks up to the counter and chooses from a wide selection of flavors on display. All the warning labels are graphic, depicting bloodshot eyes, jaundiced fingertips, enlarged hearts, or charred lungs, as if imploring him to choose better for his life. The words, however, are in sharp Chinese characters. So, he decides on a pack with the least upsetting image. With pocket money he has pulled from his savings, he pays for the pack and a lighter, wincing at having to pay three times the price than back at home.

He rips the pack open and finds a dry corner outside, under the awning of a closed bank. He pulls a stick out, sticks it between his lips, and nearly lights up. The sight of a short, brown woman picking a dog up from a pet salon across the street makes him pause.

She is a stranger, but given the time of day, the worry on her face, and the colorfully patterned uniform underneath her denim jacket, Felix knows what she is. In the many upscale parts of this metropolis, he is sure there are tens of thousands just like her.

He waits with her for the rain to subside, the cars stalled in traffic between them. He imagines she will head back to her employers, present their newly groomed dog, and then prepare dinner: a sumptuous feast for them, a hearty meal for the dog, and scraps for her.

All she earns is scraps, which she sends to her family waiting back home. It is all for them, and she truly hopes it is enough, but Felix knows it can never make up for the insurmountable, growing distance between her and her children. So many are forced to, given no better opportunities, and none are any richer from it. What they end up with, at best, is comfortable survival, on separate islands. Felix lights up. He is familiar with this desperate necessity; it is a resilient epidemic very few care to cure.

Even though he cannot be sure, he cannot be convinced otherwise. Felix watches the tip of his cigarette burn fiery red as he inhales, and notices the woman staring at him. Warm recognition blooms on her face. Felix coughs as he averts his gaze.

He breathes in, then out, and then takes another drag, the lighted end glowing more furiously. He breathes out again, and in that breath, he exorcises any chance that he might end up resembling her, them, in any way. With smoke trailing behind him, he storms off through the rain to forget the woman and every ill she represents to him.

The sky out the window is black when he returns to the hotel room and finds Duke dressed and ready to go. Duke sees him and orders him to “Shower, quick! You’re soaking wet!”

He could argue against Duke’s mothering tone and reason ‘that’s just a silly superstition,’ but he finds comfort in the man’s concern.

In the bathroom, he undresses and steps in the shower, allowing the warm water to rinse away the smell of cigarette smoke and all traces of exhumed resentment. Under the hot spray, he wishes he could simply wash his body clean of it. At the very least, he can mask that particular affliction using the fragrant toiletries complimentary from the hotel.

With just a towel wrapped around his waist, he steps out of the shower and stuffs his damp clothes inside a disposable laundry bag with the hotel logo silkscreened on it. He notices Duke watching him and stands up straighter, flexing slightly, waiting for a compliment.

“You’re really lucky you got diagnosed early on, before it could take a toll on your body,” Duke says instead.

“Your idea of lucky might be skewed.” Felix reaches for a change of clothes from his duffle bag, grabbing whatever is on top.

“I mean it. You look really healthy.” Duke pauses, and then goes on. “I had one foot in

the grave when I found out. My chest looked like a xylophone. All bones and loose skin, with rashes all over. Thank God my skin cleared up and I eventually filled out again.” He flexes his chest and biceps. “Thank God, the doc, and my personal trainer.”

“Do you know who gave it to you?” Felix asks putting a shirt on.

“I might have an idea,” Duke says, sitting on the bed. Felix shimmies his boxers up his legs through the towel wrapped around his waist and grabs his jeans next. Duke continues, “But blaming anyone for it was the least of my concerns. I didn’t have time for it. I still don’t. Haven’t given it a thought in years, not until just now when you brought it up—”

Felix, fully dressed, cuts him off. “Well, I’m ready. Let’s go.” And they go.

Duke brings Felix up to Victoria Peak. Breakneck winds whip their skin and muffle their hearing as they emerge onto the viewing platform and approach the railing.

The sight below should impress Felix, and it nearly does. Skyscrapers cutting the thick blanket of fog brought about by the earlier rain coupled with the mesmeric symphony of multicolored lights are a sight to behold. Yet the view does little for him except remind him of what he has yet to see. There is a haze over the lights, and they are muddled and muted.

“Stay there, I’ll take your photo,” Duke offers over the noise. “They may not be the neon lights, but at least you have a lightshow.” Felix acquiesces. Looking at the camera, his elbow resting on the railing, he attempts a smile, but even he can feel that it comes off stiff.

Checking the photo, Duke tells him to try again. He gazes into the camera lens of Duke’s phone and stretches his lips wider to achieve a smile that shines through his eyes. This is not the picture he wants to recreate, but when Duke shows it to him, he has to admit he likes it. “Your turn,” Felix says.

Duke rushes to the railing and poses—knees bent, arms outstretched, grinning from ear to

ear. Felix takes the shot, but Duke does not bother to check. Instead, he leans on the railing and stares down at the harbor skyline. Felix joins him, giving the view another chance.

“I haven’t seen this view in ages,” Duke muses. Below them, the laser lights slice through the fog and the night sky. “It can get old after a while.”

“See? Now that’s what I’d call lucky.”

Duke laughs. “I meant coming here again by myself. Thanks for keeping me company.”

Felix nearly responds, but over the whooshing of brisk winds, the piercing cry of a toddler just a few feet away catches his attention. He looks over to find a well-dressed woman, the toddler’s mother, pick it up. As she embraces it closer and tickles its chin with her finger, she mouths what Felix reads as ‘my darling boy’ over and over. It stops crying.

Mother and child move closer to the railing. Though Felix hears no sound, he sees its ecstatic cooing, and its tinny laughter echoes in his mind. Its father joins them shortly, and holds a camera over their heads. With the view, and the lights, behind them, all three smile for a beautiful family picture. Felix looks away. “Let’s skip the tourist traps tomorrow.”

After breakfast the next day, and with the weather more cooperative, he accompanies Duke for some shopping at the high-end boutiques. Felix can only watch as Duke inspects every accessory and fits every garment before moving on to the next shop to do the same.

In the middle of one store, Felix takes a seat on a plush ottoman. Surrounded by perfumed shoppers pointing at bags on display and handing out credit cards, he crosses his arms over his chest. Some time passes and a vendeuse approaches him offering tea or champagne. Afraid to even inquire about prices, Felix declines.

“Are you actually buying anything?” Felix asks.

“Maybe. I mean, when in Hong Kong,” Duke replies, eyeing a pair of shoes. “Without

VAT or sales tax, it's so much more tempting to spend. But at these prices, I have to be sure I'm getting my money's worth." Felix stands up to hazard a look at the price tag of one plain t-shirt and balks, wondering how anyone could spend what amounts to three months of a domestic helper's wages on a piece of fabric.

At the fifth or sixth shop, after Duke finally makes his first purchase, Felix says he will explore on his own. "Take your time," Duke says, paper bag with new shoes in hand. "I might get busy in the hotel later," he adds with a wink.

Felix walks away from Canton Road's luxury retail stores and affluent consumers. He hoped to fit in as just another tourist with cash to spare, vacationing in Hong Kong the way he longed for when he was younger. But with Duke footing most of the bills, he fails. He feels judging eyes on him, as if there were a neon sign above his head advertising how much he is worth and why he is worth so little, and he picks up his pace.

His one goal was to recreate that photo, with the neon lights in the background, their soft glow red and warm on his skin. He reaches the shanty neighborhoods of the city—Tai Kok Tsui then Sham Sui Po. Blocks upon blocks of decrepit buildings, home to Hong Kong's poorest, flank every street. The forgotten elderly scavenge the garbage for sheets of cardboard to sell as Felix marches on, resolute, but directionless.

He keeps his harried pace, down long streets and through moving sidewalks. He crosses a bridge, goes down a ramp, and finally stops when the briny smell wafting from the sea jolts him.

Around him are dilapidated houses, walls falling apart or vandalized, and gaping holes where windows and doors once were. It is one of Hong Kong's many ghost towns. He enters a house, covering his mouth and nose against the dust and the stench of abandon, and recalls how the old residents had left right before the handover, to pursue more hopeful futures elsewhere.

Felix approaches what used to be a kitchen and leans on the chipped tile counters. It is all familiar to him—the empty space, surrounded only by detritus. Yet his house back home had never looked as derelict. Over years of pining, his mother has made sure of that. The moldy odor irritates his nose and he sneezes.

He wanted to show his mother he could be different. And she left so that he could.

Dust particles get caught in his throat. Coughing, he staggers out of the house and teeters by the dock until a caretaker rushes to him, asking if he is okay.

It is almost midnight when he returns to the hotel room. Inside, he accidentally kicks an empty paper bag in the foyer. He sets it upright and out of the way, and walks further in to find Duke on the bed, in only a bathrobe, reading from his book of affirmations.

Duke asks Felix how his day went. He grunts a noncommittal answer without looking and walks to the nightstand of his side of the bed to take his meds. He nearly asks if Duke got lucky when he notices that the label on his pill bottle had been haphazardly scratched off. He turns to Duke and immediately apologizes, but Duke stops him.

They bask in the sudden silence. Felix sits at the foot of the bed and lies down, eyes closed, hands over his face. Duke sighs then sits up, putting his book aside.

“What should we do tomorrow? It’s our last day.”

Felix opens his eyes and decides he should see his mother.