

Among the *Invisibles*

From his favorite hideaway, five storeys above the ground, Little Po is an inconspicuous witness to the chaos below.

There has been talk of trouble for weeks, soldiers and police regularly taking up stations on street corners, stopping and harassing people, making a nuisance of themselves. Intimidation is the norm with the ruling junta but this time, it seems, their tactics have only succeeded in making things worse.

Shouts and screams, the rattle of automatic weapons and *crak-crak-crak* of small arms fire. Smoke drifts over the neighbourhood, a grey, evil-smelling pall. There are makeshift barricades and men roaming about with home-made clubs and pop bottles filled with gasoline. The building shudders from a nearby explosion, a *crump* as a burning car bursts its seams, provoking whoops and cheers from the surrounding crowd.

Little Po is safe or, at least, safer than he would be down there, in the midst of the mob. Some women have joined in, adding their unmistakable shrieks to the din. Most of the men are intoxicated, swilling alcohol looted from a nearby store. They swagger about, brandishing crude weapons, their courage fortified by drink. The boy creeps back under the overhang created by ducting and ventilation works. Finds his tattered blanket and slips into an uneasy sleep, sucking his thumb for comfort when the tumult disturbs his slumber. This sooty rooftop, shared with none but the occasional stray cat and roosting pigeon, is a refuge, shelter from a dangerous and hostile world.

He wakes to dull morning light, the stench of burning rubber.

His hunger is an undiminishing ache, a twisting, voracious worm in his guts. He spends most days in a surreal netherworld; sick, confused and disoriented. Bumping into buildings or colliding with passersby, clutching at them for support and being swatted and cursed for his trouble. He begs, he steals and *still* only manages to scrape by.

As he descends *via* the rickety fire escape, he is aware that slowly but surely he's losing the battle. Malnutrition is eating his frail body and soon he will be reduced to nothing. When someone reaches such a state, people say that person has "joined the *invisibles*". One day, they're simply *gone*, evaporating into the air, leaving nothing behind, not even an ounce of bone dust to bury or mourn over.

The first person he spots when he ventures out is Old Fania. Her pet monkey chatters on her shoulder and she makes a warding gesture at him. He gives the witch a wide berth. The monkey eyes him sullenly but is constrained by a short leash made of twine. The little beast has been known to inflict a painful and septic bite.

The streets and avenues have been transformed overnight. Rubble and debris are scattered carelessly, gutted buildings stripped of everything that can be carried or dragged away. He scours the ground for leftovers, something to eat or barter. But he's competing with other scavengers who fiercely guard the meager leavings, growling and threatening him if he approaches. He is smaller and weak and therefore must go without.

It is not that ordinary folk are unsympathetic or hard-hearted, it is merely that deprivation has become a way of life to the people in this part of the city. They have been herded together, marginalized, made to feel they must fend for themselves. Poor and increasingly desperate, they have lost any sense of shared or communal suffering.

The riot last night followed days of demonstrations, spontaneous protests against the inhuman living conditions. There have been scores of deaths, nervous soldiers shooting into crowds, protesters beaten and dragged away by security forces.

And finally the world press has taken notice. Reporters flood in and, congruently, the economy goes into a tailspin as investment money dries up, foreign nationals leaving in droves. It is a familiar, sad story in this region of the world.

Little Po drinks from a puddle and forages from a dumpster behind a restaurant. He is covered in rat bites and festering sores that won't heal. He knows that his situation is increasingly desperate but there is nothing to be done about it. As he clammers out of the stinking bin, the back door of the restaurant bangs open and an employee toting a five gallon pail of grease and slops spots him. They regard each other for a long moment and Little Po finally slinks away, what little food he has found clutched in his fist.

There are rumours that local businesses have hired a squad of off-duty cops and given them the job of ridding the city of riff-raff. Some kids were gunned down as they sat on the steps of a church. *A church.* In the last two weeks, several dozen street urchins have been either killed or spirited off in dark vans, never to be seen again.

Later that morning, Little Po is walking through a park and spots Fish and the Silent One. Fish has fresh bruises on his face, rolled for pocket change. And the thing is, everyone knows Fish has absolutely nothing worth stealing. He tells the joke that he's so poor, someone once cut him open and stole his heart. And he'll show you the long, zippered scar to prove it. The Silent One glowers behind him, a menacing presence. His head is squashed, misshapen. He can't speak but his dangerous mien says *don't fuck with me, brother.*

Little Po falls in alongside them and they head off to the mission together, stand in line for a bowl of watery soup. Supposedly there is a piece of chicken in there somewhere. Either donations are down or the priests have been dipping into the collection plate again. Little Po deftly palms an extra slice of bread, the maneuver escaping the sharp-eyed Brother's notice.

When they finish, they hang out in the graveyard for awhile. Fish produces three precious cigarettes but smoking only makes Little Po queasy so he puts his away until later. Soon afterward a cranky old caretaker shows up and chases them away.

Fish says he wants to stop by Ven's place, that he's heard something and Ven Ficus is the one to go to if you have information to trade. Depending on his mood, he'll either reward you generously or snap his fingers and have you turned in to a human pretzel. But Taft, Ven's imposing gatekeeper, says his bossman isn't in today and hints that it's in their best interest to fuck off. *Now*.

Fish is disappointed but vows to come back later. Taft goes back inside and they hear him say something to the other hoods. Mocking laughter follows the trio down the street.

As they walk, Fish has to keep stopping to retch. Every time he does, he groans. He says something feels broken inside. Little Po and the Silent One exchange grim looks. Who knows when the free clinic will open again. The French doctors who ran it were declared *persona non grata* and given forty-eight hours to clear out. No one has replaced them. Word is the junta was embarrassed to have foreigners tending to the needs of the poor. This past winter Little Po caught a bug that made him cough until his

ribs ached. He truly believed he was going to die. His lungs still feel tender, especially on cool days.

In the early afternoon he parts company with the others, waving as he angles away.

Despite the soup he is still famished, light-headed. He thinks about the slice of bread in his pocket, the one he is saving. Little Po takes out the bread, raises it to his mouth and bites off a piece. This is the way it is. You are hungry and when you have food, you *eat*.

Later he will curse his greed. This, too, is the way of things.

But for Little Po, time has shrunk, contracted, the future no longer measured in years, months, weeks, but days, perhaps *hours*. His skin is transparent, his arms and legs thin, meatless. His joints ache; pain and hunger and despair are constant companions. The world around him is losing definition, leaking away at the edges.

Soon he will join the *invisibles*. It is almost certain. He knows this. Maybe even tonight, on his rooftop haven, under the high, eternal stars. He wonders what it will be like to be dead. His undernourished imagination has a hard time grasping the notion. The priests speak of heaven and hell during the sermons that are mandatory with the free meals they dispense. In the afterlife our sins are remembered and judged. The worthy are rewarded and the evil ones consigned to an all-consuming fire where they burn forever and ever, a-men.

Little Po steers a course toward the only home he has, occasionally stumbling, nearly falling. Traffic rolls heedlessly by. The soldier on the corner stares past him, through him. A few moments later, Little Po looks for his shadow and can't find it.

Perhaps it is only the angle and intensity of the sun. He moves on, seemingly lighter than air, no longer able to feel the hard, unforgiving ground beneath his feet.

End

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