

Nostalgia By The Pint

They look disconcertingly like tombstones, the buildings that line the road leading back to my apartment. It's the shape, yes, but also how dark they are—an oddity for residences at such an hour. Investment vehicles, perhaps—big concrete and steel banks housing speculative investment properties in the form of apartments that will change hands but never host occupants. It's a business practice that's going to sink China one of these days and everyone knows it, but the allure of easy *yuan* is too sweet.

All those giant tombstones, yet I'm still alive—slightly drunk, a little disappointed perhaps, but the blood still flows as best as I can tell. Tired, though, more asleep than awake despite the early hour. In moments like this, I envy the stiffs for being able to secure a tolerable night's sleep. I'll be up another three hours once I'm home, pacing my tiny patch and relitigating the evening's conversations in my head.

But I love the place behind me all the same. Really, I need it. Everyone requires some immovable spot where they can ground themselves when the world decides to whip around too fast.

A good expat bar is equal parts local and foreign. It slots well into the neighborhood, even as it beckons to the outsider. It is apart from the surrounding culture, but not above it. Cross the threshold and you enter a place that's almost familiar, where one can imagine being back home but with touches here and there to keep anchored—the world map with pins marking the home nations of the owners and patrons, the framed photographs of people from scores of countries, signage in a smattering of languages. The chintzy Christmas lights glint in the whiskey glass just like they do back home, but back home they don't have posters for Mid-Autumn Festival events.

I resisted the lure of the expat bar for a long time—the Yard is the first one I frequented, in fact, and only at the prodding of my coworkers. I wanted to appease them—pure pragmatism on my part. I'm a big enough boy to understand the ways of the world, to know the importance of being

seen and recognized, of having people who will miss you when you're gone. Honestly, I sat in judgment of the banished souls who haunted these places, who made their daily bread on the curious awe that the Chinese hold for pale faces but wouldn't lower themselves to walk among them and partake in their culture.

This was always an unfair assessment. People don't go to places like the Yard to forget where they are. They don't go for business, nor do they go for the desperate get-wasted get-laid weekend routine of the college town bars back home. No, people go to these places to remember who they are.

That's a piece of information that's easy to forget, you know. Wear the white monkey's little outfit and you can just about lose your own name. We all need an occasional reminder that we had lives before this.

Who the hell am I, anyway? The fifteen minute drive through those rows of mammoth tombstones provides just enough time to reflect. This is the same road I took when I first landed in this city, riding to parts unknown at two in the morning in a questionable cab whose driver was brazenly picking my pockets. He played the same song on a loop the whole way. At least this driver provides me the mercy of silence.

The streets are dark when he lets me off, all the businesses closed save a few tiny stores defying the hours. I probably shouldn't go looking for more liquor, but the \$0.80 giant bottle of beer is a temptation too far. There was a time in my life when I sat in judgment of drinkers, too, but time and circumstance have a way of shaping you in unexpected ways.

I still know who I am. Break it down to the essence and I'm no different than any of the people in the Yard or any of those other watering holes I made a point of passing by. We're all people with needs, people whom curious times have driven to a place that obsesses over us even as it regards our presence with suspicion.

More than that, I'm alive and I'm awake, and as long as I'm still conscious, there's time to enjoy one more glass, one more song, one more dance, one more romantic interlude. It's a reminder well worth the next-day sorrows.