

THE STATIONERY BOX

Excerpt (pages 16-35)

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PREVIOUSLY-INTRODUCED CHARACTERS:

MEI - 22, a graceful, Chinese beauty of a dancer, undiscovered and unable to make ends meet. She plays the lead role (Adria) in the community theatre dance performance.

TINA - 23, head chorus dancer, leader of a jealous, petty group of partiers bent on making life miserable for Mei.

MILES - 25, Mei's violent, abusive ex-boyfriend (she cuts off their relationship early in act 1).

ELYSSA - 22, another dancer, friend of Mei's.

ASHLEY - 13, daughter of the main patron of the theatre-- her mother buys Ashley's way into the shows.

JERRY - 40-something, director of the dance production

BEATRICE - 40-something, Ashley's rich, pushy mother

The following section picks up after Mei endures a lousy dress rehearsal followed by a confrontational dinner with her mother, who constantly nags at her about dancing instead of getting a paying job.

Please note: the tone of this piece is fairly dark; there is mature content and some bad language.

EXT. MEI'S LOW-INCOME URBAN APARTMENT BUILDING, LATER

Street lamps throw confusing patterns of barred shadows across the ground from the railings above. Mei's car SQUEALS up, bumps onto the sidewalk before landing in the parking spot. The RADIO cuts off along with the engine. Mei gets out with her dance bag, slams the door. Takes the stairs two at a time.

INT. MEI'S TINY, ONE-BEDROOM APARTMENT, CONTINUOUS

Detailed view of a hand-painted mural travelling along the hallway wall. From outside, FOOTSTEPS approach, keys JINGLE. Drop. Mei curses.

The mural wraps around the end wall, continues unbroken across the door. A key SLIDES in, the door swings open. Mei enters, shuffling through a handful of mail. There are several bills. She continues down the hall past a bedroom door which also blends into the mural.

INT. MEI'S SHABBY LIVING ROOM, CONTINUOUS

Without entering, Mei tosses the mail on a coffee table buried under papers, magazines, crusty dishes. It slides against a half-empty gin bottle. Mei heads away through another door. Returns. Grabs the bottle, exits. The mail shifts revealing an envelope bearing a collection agency return address.

INT. MEI'S JUMBLED BATHROOM, CONTINUOUS

Mei throws her bag down on the cluttered counter, scattering various toiletries. Still holding the bottle, turns on the shower, full hot. Drinks. Tries to run fingers through her knotted hair. Opens her bag, reaching in for a brush. Finds the strip club postcard Tina hid there earlier. An additional dancer has been drawn in: an unflattering, slant-eyed caricature of flat-chested Mei, dollar bills stuffed in her g-string.

She lets the card fall, looks in the mirror. Leans over a hair-littered sink to clear the mounting steam. Really sees herself, the purple bruise on her cheek. Sits on the edge of the tub, drinking again.

The card fell face down, revealing text on the back. Mei cocks her head, squinting.

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After a beat, Mei stands again, retrieves the card. Turns it over, considers her caricature. Tucks it into the mirror frame. Turns off the shower, removes her sweatshirt. Drains the bottle.

Searching through a jumbled drawer, Mei extracts a pair of scissors. Glances at the ad. A change comes over her face: a performance face, a new character emerging.

She opens the side cabinets to form a three-plane mirror.
Begins cutting her hair.

SERIES OF SHOTS

Mei finishes the cut, short at the nape, tapering longer in front. It shows off her graceful neck. Sets the scissors down next to a spray bottle. Swings her hair, evaluating.

Mei bleaches streaks into her hair.

Mei works closely at the mirror, applying dramatic makeup.

Multiple reflections reveal an exotic beauty. Mei exits, turning the light out on the card still wedged in the frame.

EXT. SLEAZY EROTIC DANCE CLUB PARKING LOT, NIGHT

A flashing neon sign reads:

Girls Girls Girls All Flavors, All Beautiful!

Mei's car pulls up beneath it parking near the low, run-down building. The car door opens revealing sculpted legs and high-heels. They splash down right into a muddy puddle. Confined to small strides by the form-fitting skirt, Mei crosses to the club door, wiggles up the steps.

INT. SMOKE-FILLED, NOISY CLUB, CONTINUOUS

A dark, crowded bar stretches along the first third of the room, leads into an open area interspersed with supporting posts. Tables cluster before a stage where a thong-bikini'd ebony STRIPPER undulates to NIGERIAN MUSIC. Remnants of her costume litter the stage along with crumpled dollar bills.

The bartender, SAMMY, a graying, pony-tailed, goateed hulk looks up from pouring a drink as the door opens. Pauses, staring. Two patrons turn. Mei enters. Leans in over the bar to be heard.

MEI

I hear you're hiring.

Sammy nods, finishes pouring the drink. SLAMS the glass down on the bar, recapturing the men's attention. Gestures for them to watch the show. He takes Mei's hand, draws her through a crowd of standing men. Someone gooses her; Mei stiffens, but keeps walking, head high.

INT. CLUB GRUNGY, STAINED HALLWAY, CONTINUOUS

At the end of the empty red-lit hall, Sammy knocks on a closed door covered with a curling life-size centerfold cigar advertisement. Ushers Mei in, shutting the door behind her. Peers through the keyhole until the CLICK of approaching high heels chases him back to the bar.

INT. MANAGER'S TACKY OFFICE, MINUTES LATER

A dirty leather couch sags across the starkly lit room from a bulky desk. Mei stands in between, eyes fixed on a wall lined with photos of near-nude beauties. A tall, power-suited WOMAN and the MANAGER, a sweaty man in a cuff-linked shirt, flank her. Both are smoking. They walk opposite each other around Mei, appraising.

WOMAN

Pretty thin. Bony.

MANAGER

And flat as yesterday's news.

WOMAN

But Asian. We need Asian. (beat)
You wouldn't expect one to have big
tits.

Unthinking, Mei pulls her shoulders forward to protect herself.

WOMAN

(to Mei)

For god's sake, stand up straight!
(resuming circle; to Manager)
Yeah, looks Chinese. That's good.
The last one was Korean or
something-- too ephemeral. Waify.
This one at least has muscle. (to
Mei) Up on your toes. That's it.
(to Manager) Nice tone.

She runs her hand across Mei's bottom. Lifts off her shirt. Slides the bra straps off her shoulders, starts to lower the bra. Mei's hands interfere.

WOMAN

What do you think you're here for?
If you can't handle this, you're
wasting my time.

Mei drops her hands and her head, face flushing. The bra slips down around her waist, exposing small, well-formed breasts.

MANAGER

(to Mei)

Shimmy your shoulders. Yeah, that'll work. Now pinch 'em for me. Make 'em stand out.

Mei blushes deeper, looks at the woman, who nods. Face burning, Mei lifts hands to her breasts, twisting and pulling the nipples erect. She raises her chin and stares at the wall.

WOMAN

She'll be a hit. Especially with that make-up. (to Mei) You're on the late shift Friday. Go see Marie back stage-- she'll set you up.

The woman exits. The Manager leans against his desk, smoking, watching Mei. Turning away, she dresses as he chuckles. Pauses, hand on the door.

MEI

That's it?

The manager takes the cigar out of his mouth. Snubs it in a pink tulip-shaped ashtray.

MANAGER

'Less you feel like giving me a private show. (laughs) You'll do just fine. (beat) Don't worry, no one lays a hand on our girls...

Mei exits.

INT. MEI'S BEDROOM, LATE NIGHT

Orange streetlight streams across the bed where Mei is sleeping, covers tossed aside. There is movement in the dark hallway-- a shadow steps into the room: Miles. He stands next to the bed watching Mei. After a moment, reaches down, slides one hand up her leg, under her silk nightgown. She stirs awake, sits upright, one strap slipping off her shoulder.

MILES

You shaved. Is that for me?

MEI

What?!

MILES

It's nice. I like it.

He reaches for her, but she shrinks back, pulling her legs beneath her. Miles turns on the bedside lamp.

MILES

(seeing the haircut)

Woah, what's with the new look?

MEI

How did you get in here?!

MILES

You seeing another guy?

MEI

Get out! Leave me alone!!

MILES

Is that it? You found a new toy?!
(beat; threatening) I don't think
so.

He slides forward, pushing her down. Mei scans the room, eyes darting to the door, the phone on the bedside table, a ceramic vase.

MEI

(shifting to sweet,
seductive)

Let's not fight, there are better
things to do... now that you're
here.

She rakes the nails of one hand along his back. He brushes the back of his hand down her cheek, past the bruise.

MILES

That's my girl...

She kisses him, arching, other hand groping for the vase. It is out of reach. She begins to shift beneath him, edging closer to the table. He breaks off the kiss, starts to turn his head. She recaptures him.

MEI

You always get what you want, don't
you...

MILES
I've always been resourceful...

MEI
Maybe I'm being too hard on you...

Mei's fingers reach the vase, grip the edge.

MILES
No fun when it's easy...

She lifts the vase, brings it arcing toward the back of his head. Without looking, he grabs her wrist; the vase CRASHES to the floor.

MILES
Hey, Little Tiger. (roars) Feisty!

He pulls her wrist in above her head, presses his weight on her. Mei drops all pretense, begins struggling.

MEI
Stop it!

He lets up on her chest, trapping her beneath straddled legs.

MILES
What's the matter, Pussy, Pussy?

He pulls down one side of her nightgown. Pinches an erect nipple.

MILES
I know you want it. Purr for me...

He bends down to take her breast into his mouth.

MEI
Get the fuck off me!!

She slips a leg free, shoves him in the crotch, pushing him off her. Dives for the phone, clutches it to her.

MEI
GET OUT!!

She lifts the receiver.

MILES
(turning on the charm)
Hey, baby, I'm sorry. Don't be that way...

He picks up her foot, begins massaging. Mei pulls her legs to her chest. Still holding the phone, wraps her arms around them.

MILES

You're getting the sheets all wet...

Mei draws her legs under her, huddling at the head of her bed. Miles turns serious again.

MILES

You better not fucking call the cops.

MEI

I better not fucking see you again.

Lightning fast, Miles scoops up the broken vase.

MILES

Fine, bitch! Here!!

He hurls it at Mei. She dodges as it shatters against the wall by her head. He exits.

INT. THEATRE, OPENING NIGHT (FRIDAY)

The house is fairly full. A COUPLE arrives late, is seated by an usher with a flashlight. Above them, a pair of binoculars watch the stage from a box.

INT. THEATRE STAGE, MISTY PLAIN SET, TWILIGHT

Dance Scene: Adria, now dressed as a spirit, wanders through fog. Demons rise from beneath the mist, claw at her. She fights, but they draw her down.

INT. THEATRE BOX, SAME TIME

Lowering binoculars, STEFAN HILLMAN, a dance company director, is slender New York in a classy jacket over a turtle neck. He jots notes in a small leather-bound book.

INT. THEATRE STAGE, ROCKY DESERT SET, TWILIGHT

Dance Scene: Demons carry Adria through the boulder-strewn landscape. A BLIND MAN, eyes bound by a black cloth, steps out from behind a rock, challenges them with his sword.

The demons drop Adria, run away. She approaches the man; he is lost. She guides him out.

INT. THEATRE BOX, SAME TIME

Stefan finishes writing. Movement in the curtain behind him: Lien enters. Perches on the edge of the only empty seat, watches her daughter perform.

INT. THEATRE STAGE, EDGE OF DESERT, TWILIGHT

Dance Scene: Adria leads the blind man to a small house at the edge of the desert. There are mountains in the distance. A woman comes out and greets him. Children flock around him. The blind man takes Adria's head in his hands for a moment, then turns her and points to the mountains. Gives her his sword.

INT. THEATRE STAGE, LATER

The curtain closes on sustained APPLAUSE and the cast begins chattering, celebrating. Mei, arms full of flowers, gets congratulations from all around. As she walks toward back stage, Tina jostles her and the flowers fall, scattering. Mei gets down on the floor to gather them back up. Elyssa sets down her own bouquets, helps her.

ELYSSA

I saw that...

MEI

Yeah. No big deal...

ELYSSA

She's always gotta have someone in her sights.

MEI

Lucky me.

Elyssa hands her the last of the flowers, stands. Brushes dirt and chalk off her costume.

ELYSSA

Can I catch a ride with you?

MEI

(passing Elyssa her bouquets)

I wasn't gonna go...

ELYSSA

What?! C'mon, you never miss a party!

Mei stands, uncomfortable. Elyssa watches Tina walk by chatting with some of her groupies.

ELYSSA

Don't let her get to you...

Mei shakes her head, dismissing the idea.

ELYSSA

Something else bugging you?

Mei fusses with her dress, schools herself.

MEI

Nah, I'm OK. (beat) Let's go...

INT. THEATRE BLACK-PAINTED BACKSTAGE, SHORTLY AFTER

Mei passes through on her way to the dressing room. Jerry intercepts her. Stefan is with him.

JERRY

Mei, Mr. Hillman represents *Two Steps Forward* out of New York. Great stuff tonight. (to Stefan) Don't you think?

STEFAN

Very promising. (beat) But I look for consistency.

Before she can respond, BEATRICE sweeps in--a flurry of fluffy fabric. She embraces Mei, who dodges her enormous hat. Ashley hangs back behind her.

BEATRICE

Here's our star! Worth the trip, wouldn't you say, Stefan?

She lets go as Mei squirms. Pulls Ashley forward.

BEATRICE

And you noticed my daughter, of course... Mei has been training her personally. I've seen marked improvement.

MEI
(catching Ashley's eye)
All her doing, ma'am. (beat) Excuse
me.

Mei exits, all eyes on her. Ashley waits until Mei is out of earshot.

ASHLEY
So, mom, can I? Please? Tina said
she'll drive me...

BEATRICE
(waving her off)
I'll collect you after dinner.
(taking Jerry's arm) Gentlemen,
shall we? (over her shoulder) Mind
yourself, Ashley.

Ashley flashes an excited grin, dashes off.

INT. HOUSE CAST PARTY, LATER

Fingers adjust sliders on a mixer. Pick up a beer. The headphoned DJ swigs, hovers over his equipment. Bodies bump and grind, close, sweaty. Cast and crew members hang out in knots around the spacious living room, many of them drinking. Tina and her gang are there along with a bunch of guys. Ashley stands among them holding a beer and trying very hard to be grown-up and cool. She sips from the bottle and makes a face despite herself. Looking bored, Tina lounges against RON, a tall, leather-clad man.

TINA
(to Ron)
Hey, what you got on you?

Ron fishes through his pockets. Pulls out a ziploc bag with some Ecstasy pills. Ashley watches intently. Tina gives her a sidelong look.

TINA
Had your vitamin today?

Ashley edges closer, shakes her head.

TINA
Want one?

Ashley shrugs, acting in the know. One of the other dancers nudges Tina, points.

Mei has entered the party with Elyssa, looks around the room. Spots Ashley trying to tuck herself behind Ron.

ASHLEY

Shit.

Tina notes Ashley's reaction. Smirks as Mei approaches, but puts the bag of drugs back in Ron's pocket.

TINA

Hey, it's the big party girl.

Mei shoots a look at Ashley, at her beer. At Ron.

TINA

(indicates one of the
other guys)

Here, Chad's been wanting to meet
you... (to Chad, re: Mei) She's
always up for some booty call.

CHAD, 25, assesses Mei, grins, moves toward her. Mei turns and walks away.

TINA

(to Chad)

Maybe it's the new haircut... she's
not usually so picky.

RON

(to Chad)

And that says what about you...

His friend play punches him and all three laugh. Ashley slips away to go after Mei, who heads out sliding glass doors.

EXT. BACKYARD DECK, CONTINUOUS

Mei leans against the railing looking out into the night. Ashley steps out onto the deck. Realizes the beer is still in her hand, puts it down. Wipes wet hands on her clothes.

ASHLEY

I thought you said you weren't
coming.

MEI

(without turning)

That only makes it worse.