

Phan Hon Nhien

THE HUNTER

1.

It looked like a spacecraft was about to land on the narrow road. The white light spread over the darkness, and the walls and windows of the old villas along both sides of the road appeared suddenly and clearly—worn-out hinges, engraved lines of scribbles, pieces of paint chipping off. Even the arcs of the trees' dark purple leaves, silent in the garden, stood out as if human bodies in deep sleep had been pulled up and were now panicked and exhausted. Circles of people were gathering around the light, quiet, as though attending a secret ritual.

They stopped and watched carefully the scene in front of them. Holding An's hand, Lam felt the blood drain from her face.

"Just a film shoot," he said.

She felt her heart jump slightly. Turning around, she looked at him. Her face became transparent under the hundreds of watts of lamplight. Much to her surprise, she smiled suddenly:

"I never knew how films were made."

"It doesn't matter. When you don't know, watching films is more interesting."

"You know so much about cinema, don't you?"

"Not so much. I once worked on a film project. Five years ago. But then it became uninteresting. When the project ended, I knew I wouldn't want to do that kind of work any more."

"What's uninteresting?" An asked, concentrating.

"Nothing" he shuddered "It might be a feeling. Uncertainty. An improper judgment. Something like that."

"Making a film is strange work, isn't it?"

"Maybe it is, and maybe it isn't." He evaded her question. "But are you cold? Would you like to eat something?"

She shook her head. After working all day on the books, she only wanted to return to her small flat where they lived together. Getting lost in a zigzag alley and wandering for a long time, they finally found a road that did not run through the filming location. They didn't know the road but it led to a parking lot two streets away. They didn't speak a word on the way. The young woman kept a short distance ahead of Lam. The sound of their footsteps resounded against the brick sidewalk. Occasionally, a sparrow flew off a brown tiled roof and rushed into the dark sky. The noise of wings flapping tapered off, sounding thin and light. A world was still alive and breathing. He wanted to say something, but stayed quiet. Meeting with business partners all day had exhausted him physically and mentally - so much so that he felt that understanding and compassion for others was absurd, totally unnecessary. But he also knew An was as tired as he was. In a day of ceaseless standing and walking to and from different desks, her feet, crammed into office shoes and brown socks, had been in continuous motion. An turned around suddenly and waited for him for a moment. Then, urged by hidden thoughts, she walked more quickly.

2.

It was nearly eleven at night. Lam pulled up at a small supermarket. An wanted to buy some fish, vegetables and fruit. He lowered the car's glass-door, smoking, waiting for her return. The red spot on the tip of the cigarette glowed occasionally but he didn't catch the familiar smell of a curl of smoke. He felt as though his body first became the empty hold of a ship, then became penetrable. The curl of smoke vanished into the air, with no place to

linger. It was like an odd image carved out of the movie *Hollow Man*. He put on a CD to get rid of the unpleasant, uncertain feeling.

The voice of Laura Fygi came in and rose. The introductory lines of *Watch What Happens* were sung slowly. It was the very CD he tried listening to for the first time when he had emptied his pockets to buy the car. Soon after that, he met An, fell in love with her, and asked if they could live together. Less than three years ago. But it seemed a hundred. The CD player was silent for a few seconds, then Ask Yourself Why began. Lam suddenly remembered why he had bought the CD.

At that time, a break-up with his first lover had left him in a heap of chaos and anxiety. Watching films was the only thing that relaxed him. He was completely absorbed by films both old and new, anytime, anywhere, anyway, until he was paralyzed. One time, sneaking in as an uninvited guest, went to a session of free screenings during a European culture week. He remembered nothing except for a melody and a line of words repeatedly sung in *You Had Be There*. The film ended. He walked out of the theater and suddenly realized that everything has been accepted. After that, things inside him returned to normal. He got another job and quit cinematography. Not getting further involved in art erased from his mind the delusions he had considered important. He was more comfortable. He changed jobs twice more and bought an apartment. The only trace left from that unusual period was the habit of listening to music. But the pleasure he got from that was waning over time.

An came out of the supermarket. In one hand he held a big shopping bag from which a bouquet was sticking out. In her other hand she carried a small fish in a plastic bag filled with water. The shopping had made her lively. She sat by him, telling him about a small accounting mistake she had made at work. A lot of small talk with a lot of details. Lam burst out laughing, thinking about the chase of the hunter and hunted. When he laughed, she kept quiet. 'Watch What Happens' came on again. Leaning into the passenger seat she listened attentively. All of a sudden, the air inside the car was filled with the smell of earth, plants and grass.

"What film is this song in?" she asked suddenly.

"*The Umbrellas of Cherbourg*, maybe."

"I've never seen it."

"I'll buy you the DVD."

She nodded slightly, took a look outside. Just like two dark rear-view mirrors, her eyes didn't reflect anything. He thought she was probably distracted by images she had seen in films.

3.

Waking up together on the weekends was a pleasant habit. Resting his back on a high pillow, he turned on the television, tuned in to an economic report, then to the Discovery channel. The worlds of Pacific marine life or wild animals on the African savannah mesmerized him. He often paid attention to the little animal that was a prey or a weak fellow-traveler. He observed the way it tried and pushed its way through the herd hysterically, the way it bent its legs and rushed when a hunter emerged unexpectedly, and the way the animal collapsed and was dragged along the savannah in the jaws of the hunter. Now, it was the marine life and the escaping phosphorous fish that were were sorrowful to him. All the fish always sped away together, in one direction. In the blink of an eye, they vanished into the strong jet of water caused by the hunter. The camera could not catch up with them, couldn't find them in the huge whirl of the sea.

Laying next to him, An woke up. Her body was slender and warm. She was wide awake, a spot of sunlight on her flat forehead.

"What are you thinking?" he asked, gently touching her short, soft hair.

"What does a cameraman feel when he's shooting?"

"It's just a routine." He laughed. "Of course, there is some danger."

"This world is an unbearable place. The cameraman thinks so. I suppose."

“What else do you suppose?” He felt a bit uncomfortable.

“I think it would be fun to be featured in a film.”

“Very funny.”

“No, really. I’m not joking!”

He rested his head on the pillow and laughed out loud again. The young woman jumped out of bed and quickly threw on her clothes. She went to the kitchen to cook breakfast. She cooked fish porridge and quietly sang some lines from *Watch What Happens*. The bouquet of bright yellow flowers she had bought the day before turned out to be a kind of vegetable. Lam made some coffee. When he said he had planned for them to go look at a bigger apartment today, in preparation for their wedding at the end of the year, An asked if she could act in a film. She pushed her cup of coffee nervously aside. He frowned and thought the joke was not funny any longer.

4.

The coffee shop was crowded in the morning. The music was loud enough to crack the glass in the windows. Looking around for a while, Lam could see a walkway to the basement flat. A man in black shirt stopped him at the steps. Strangers are not allowed to enter the film set. Lam said An’s name. After a brief hesitation, the man let him in.

In contrast to the cafe, the air of the basement was extremely quiet. The cold light was focused on a corner. The faces around were concentrating. Looking over the shoulders of two men in black uniforms, Lam saw An was the actress.

He held his breath. Her familiar soft cheekbones were covered with thick powder. Her hair was combed, pressing against her ears in an ugly style. Her innocent face was deformed by all the make up. She concentrated on her supporting role, but her tenseness spoiled the scene. On the third take, the director’s voice was no longer gentle. On the fourth, he shouted.

At first, Lam just wanted to shriek with laughter. Given his experience, he realized that An didn’t have any gift for this art. Her quixotic reverie did not help: An’s face still stood out – a nimbus of light in the middle of a bright light. In her limpid eyes, opened wide, something showed he had never seen in her before: a desire to be seen by people around her. A desperate craving for transformation. A crazy flight from the encirclement of irritations and constraints.

He took a seat and waited. The air conditioner buzzed lazily. The cameraman was defining the face of a lead actress. A weary but professional wax mask made audiences feel good. Taking full advantage of An’s unhappy situation, the leading actress gave a highly effective look, of tiredness and contempt. In another scene, she slapped An’s face. A very hard slap. An staggered and was about to fall but kept standing. She didn’t cry. Lam wanted to push his way through the circle of people. He wanted to hold An’s hand. He wanted to take her out of the world she didn’t belong to. But her persevering look, the passion in her eyes stopped him. Had he lost the passion she now had? Why did he pull her down into the grungy pit he himself wanted to escape? When he had called the director to find An an opportunity as a stand-in in the cold light of the spacecraft, hadn’t he thoroughly understood that her desire was not a joke?

5.

The last scenes were shot in the suburbs. An sent Lam a text message telling him to pick her up late. It was nearly two in the morning. The Laura Fygi cd was still inside the player. In the dim light of the tip of a cigarette, he selected a song from among its titles, a song that wouldn’t stir him from his quiet state of mind now. *Once Upon a Summertime* or *Et si deman?* *Rachel* or *What Are You Doing the Rest of Your Life?* But at last, he turned it off and got out.

The grounds were immense. In the darkness, a residential quarter set up as a backdrop looked like a row of tents, far away. Lam inhaled the smell of soil and grass. A gust

of wind from behind made him feel cold, and startled the grass. The space around him seemed to be transforming. And he, a liberal being, was going for a leisurely walk in that space despite the fact that in no time he might rush off to dodge the bullet of a hunter or the chase of a predator.

There was a soft call of his name. In the blackness of the night An appeared. She removed a layer of brown powder. Now another woman, energetic, sitting by him, daringly told him to speed the car up.

“What were you thinking when you waited for me?”

“About the hunters. About the people who stand behind a camera. About people’s habits,” he said calmly.

She smiled.

“I knew you would be thinking about the Discovery channel.”

“How did you know?” He looked surprised.

In the flash of light from a truck coming the other way, An’s face lost its vacant and uncertain expression.

She smiled.

“That’s what I think about when we shoot.”

Translated from the Vietnamese by Mai Son