

BOULEVARD OF BROKEN DREAMS

碎夢大道

The nameless hero of this novel doesn't know who he is. Directionless, he takes a job as a bouncer, but soon finds himself given a very different task by the boss; to find the missing dancer Bo. It sounds like an easy enough job, but soon proves to be a more difficult than expected. Who is Bo? No one knows anything about her, where she lives, what she does when she's not at work, or even who she spends her time with, family, friends. Why has she gone to all this trouble to remain a mystery?

Just as he starts to unlock keys to Bo's past and where she might be, he finds himself in a rundown part of town, where the locals are protesting against a plan by the city government to 'renew' the area. What he finds is a story sadder and more moving than he could have imagined.

Marianne Faithfull sang about *THE BOULEVARD OF BROKEN DREAMS*, and Wolf Hsu's novel is written in the same melancholy key, a loving homage to the hard-boiled detective tradition. Narrated in the first person in a clear, cold prose, this is not just a story of a missing person, but the absurdity of reality and the hidden undercurrents that sit beneath our seemingly indifferent surfaces. Full of quirky details, Wolf Hsu reminds us; this is the truest of made up stories.

Wolf Hsu 臥斧

Wolf Hsu is a novelist and editor and has worked at Taiwan's biggest online bookstore for many years. He has published seven books of fiction, including *A MUSICAL LOVE LETTER FOR S*, *AN EMPTY ROOM FULL OF KEYS*, *THE CIRCUS LEAVES TOWN* and *NO ONE KNOWS I'M GONE*.



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BOULEVARD OF BROKEN DREAMS

By Wolf Hsu. Translated by Darryl Sterk.

ZERO

1

I got him in an armlock.

Another inch and his sweaty paw would have defiled Amber's immaculate waist. Dude copped more of a feel than he bargained for. He stared at me in surprise, but before he could manage to look menacing, I had bent his elbow behind his lower back in a fluid arc.

Textbook execution.

People used to ask me where I received my combat training. In the Special Forces? From a book, I'd reply. But nobody believed me.

His face and body contorted in the same instant. He opened his mouth wide, but the cry of pain got stuck in his throat and all that came out was a heady whiff of Miller Lite.

Miller Lite is practically lemonade. Why did he look so drunk?

I knew from the book that, at this point, a final upward thrust would have dislocated his shoulder with a cccrrrrrunch! Of course, close combat isn't something you can learn from a book, you've got to practice to be at all effective. Luckily there are lots of opportunities for me to try out my moves here in the club. And the guys I practice on are usually so pissed they can hardly stand. All I have to do is follow the steps.

But this time I didn't finish the move, because before I made it to cccrrrrrunch! I caught Amber frowning at me. Alright, I'll let him go, I thought. I'm not a bouncer, after all. I wasn't there to teach drunk customers a lesson. I was being impulsive, lashing out like that. I shouldn't be so impulsive.

'Serves you right, asshole! You chose the wrong chick to hit on!' I snorted at the contorted face in front of me, then scrunched up my own forehead in the realisation that I didn't know what to do next—there wasn't anything in the book about what to do if at the last moment you decide *not* to dislocate your assailant's shoulder. My mind went blank, my fingers slack, the customer limp. He collapsed on the sidewalk and the yell, or whimper, of pain that he'd been unable to release until now finally dribbled out.

Looking at the guy lying on the ground, I felt another impulse: to stomp his head. Lights out. That'd teach him. And then I'd go and lay my hand upon his brow.

But the impulse soon passed. There were too many people about and if I'd gone and busted him up for no apparent reason, the customers would have thought: this guy's crazy.

Besides, I knew it wouldn't be right. The number of people there didn't make any difference.

So in the end, I just let him lie there groaning.

The guy looked about twenty. He was dressed in a designer T-shirt and Diesel jeans, and tackily accessorised: a pair of special issue Lunar Solstice Mid SP Nike sneakers with a cartoonish plastic timepiece like something off a night market stand but which was actually a limited edition Swatch. It was the beginning of the month and he wouldn't have gotten his pay check yet if he were a 9-5er, so I gathered he was a rich college kid. It was a Thursday and the only student who would come to a nightclub on a Thursday doesn't have a morning class the next day, or doesn't give a monkeys about his studies. How could a class in mechanical engineering possibly compete with the possibility of a night when a whole different kind of spark might fly? That's right, Thursday is ladies night: no cover charge and a fifty percent discount on drinks for the gals. Thursday, of any weeknight, has the highest ratio of chicks to dicks at the club.

Flashily decked out, drunk and on his way out, he had spotted a girl at the entrance and tried to put his arm around her waist, only to have it twisted behind his back. What the...? he must have thought. Why me?

Which is why I told him, under my breath: maybe things have gone smooth for you up to now, but life's full of surprises. Get used to it.

'Cos surprises are happening all the time. That's about the only unsurprising thing in life.

I speak from experience. I'm practically the poster child.

2

Earlier that day, I'd been at home watching a TV news report about the accident.

It happened in an old neighbourhood west of city centre, a few streets east of the Special Administrative Area where the central government complexes are concentrated.

There had been a big fire. The beautiful anchor explained that it started in an empty domicile. According to forensics, the electrical system had been poorly maintained and rats had gnawed away at the insulation around the wires. Most of the buildings in the neighbourhood are made of wood and huddled so close together that the fire spread, well, like wildfire. It was put out soon enough and didn't really cause that much property damage, but it did end up claiming several lives.

Cut from the pretty anchor to a handsome but solemn man.

His name was Black. Most people recognised him by sight, a frequent central government spokesman. As much of a political star as a civil servant can be, he worked in the Special Administrative Area. At a press conference on the fire, Black simply explained that a pre-existing government plan to tear down the old houses in the neighbourhood and build brand new and much safer residential high-rises could now go ahead. The project would 'light up the city and prevent a tragedy like this from ever happening again.'

In theory, it should have been a local politician in front of the camera, not Black. But Black's appearance made sense to me. He was on television to promote it because residents were griping about the proposed teardown and relocation and activist groups were championing their cause. In the face of

this resistance, Black was the only one who could convey the message from the highest levels of government persuasively: there was a silver lining to the cloud of this tragic accident. No, not silver: 'It's a golden opportunity for us to build a brighter tomorrow, to fashion the city of the future.'

Another cut, to a fat guy oozing compassion.

The fat guy was a well-known religious leader who runs a massive temple complex in the south. His multitude of followers call him the Supreme Master.

Though based in the south, he was always showing up at religious ceremonies around the country. In fact, the government had—surprise, surprise—slated him into the urban renewal project: another huge temple would be built in the nation's capital for the Supreme Master's northern disciples. The Master looked dutifully grief-stricken. Surrounded by microphones, he promised to call the new temple the Sanctuary of Dreams and provide free slots for the spirit tablets of 'all the poor souls who perished in the fire.'

The fire was certainly an accident. As was the fact that the project would now go ahead as a result. Probably.

Without waiting for the pretty anchor to reappear, I called my laptop out of hibernation, set aside Lawrence Block's *Out on the Cutting Edge* and opened a web browser.

In this day and age, traditional news media reports always seem a bit fragmented, not to mention biased; better to look things up on the Internet. Admittedly, there's a lot of false or misleading information out there, but if you're smart you can always find enough clues to follow up on as you find your way to a more complete and credible version of the truth.

I'd soon opened up several windows and was just going to visit the blog of an activist organisation I frequent, when my phone rang.

'Come to my office,' came the boss's voice through the receiver. As always, the call ended before I had the chance to reply.

There was something for me to do. I scratched my head, turned off my laptop and the TV and changed into a shirt and a pair of slacks. And, of course, my shades. I was ready to roll.

Why wear sunglasses in the evening? Well, that's was also an accident.

Accidents are happening all the time, just like surprises. Nobody knows that better than me. Except maybe the would-be womaniser at the door of the club.

3

I looked around and discovered the young gentleman hadn't come alone. Several of his associates, around the same age and similarly attired, were standing behind him, pushing and shoving one another. Like awkward junior high schoolgirls getting their friend to deliver a letter to the school hunk? No, it was more like they had to go to the bathroom. I waved them over and two hesitantly approached, helped their fallen brother in arms up and started leading him away.

'Hey!' said Blondie, who'd been watching the show from the sidelines. 'Leaving so soon?'

The young blood stopped and looked askance at me and Blondie. Blondie cocked his head, at that angle that made the ladies swoon but which to the young men must have seemed gangsterish. ‘It ain’t polite to paw. You boys got no manners. Didn’t your teachers ever tell you to say sorry? Mr. Sunglasses over here was good enough to give you a valuable lesson for free: were you just going to leave without so much as a thank you or goodbye?’

The young men muttered something snarky and Blondie was going to tell them what he thought of it when Amber interrupted to smooth it over: ‘It’s cool. I’m fine.’

‘Now git!’ Beast walked over and waved. It was like an amnesty had been declared. The young pups backed away, cowering like a clutch of frightened chicks. Beast looked after them and shook his head: ‘Frigging college kids!’

Occasionally, Blondie and Beast have to go in and help around the club, but most of the time they just guard the door. I’ve never asked the boss about the arrangement, but the reason isn’t hard to guess: Blondie is too short-tempered and Beast is just too big. One tends to come into conflict with customers, while the other simply takes up too much space.

‘You got fast hands,’ said Blondie, tapping me on the shoulder. ‘I’ve always thought you’d make a good doorman. You wouldn’t have to rough anyone up, you could just take your sunglasses off. You’re totally cut out for it.’

He made it sound like I’d have a brilliant future as a bouncer.

If he’s right, it’s all thanks to a freak accident I was in a year and a half ago.

A train wreck.

Photographs of the scene showed two of the central cars had jumped the rails and buckled. It looked like a giant had whipped a wet towel and wrung it dry and we passengers were the drops of water that were squeezed out.

According to the doctor, I was thrown around the compartment, out the window and down the slope by the side of the tracks. Somewhere along the way I lost consciousness, broke two ribs, fractured my shin and suffered abrasions all over my body. My death-defying tumble also left its mark on my speech: something must have struck me in the throat, as I now spoke all hoarse and rough.

My voice is no big deal, ‘cos I’ve always been kind of taciturn. And for the most part, my abrasions healed without scarring. But for better or for worse, my face was not so lucky: my miraculous roll down the hill left behind a skewed grid centred on my cheekbone, right below my left eye socket. Several lines of the grid crossed the bridge of my nose and extended below my right eye.

Cosmetic surgery would have costed a buck and was risky due to proximity to my eyes. I thought it over and decided to just cover up.

With a pair of wrap-around sunglasses. It’s a bit strange to wear them at night, but dressing up weird attracts less attention than looking weird. One time I heard a couple of customers commenting on my fashion sense: the guy wearing those sunglasses looks pretty cool, one of them said. He’d look even better in Ray Bans, the other guy said.

I was like: Cool my ass. And here I was scared I’d frighten you two metrosexuals. FYI, Ray Bans

wouldn't cover the sides of my face.

'He's totally cut out for it,' Beast nudged Blondie on the shoulder with his elbow. 'But come on! Doorman? You make it sound like all we do is stand here and look tough.'

'Isn't that about it? Oh yeah, we also park cars,' said Blondie, swiveling his eyes at me. 'You do know how to drive, don't you? If you don't maybe you can learn it from a book.'

No problem, I can drive. I just don't have a license. Maybe I could ask the bartender to help me get one.

Oh forget it. I might have to start explaining some things about myself that I'd neglected to mention when we first met and which would be too awkward to bring up now.

Like how I felt about Amber.

'Knock it off, you two,' Amber shook her head and smiled at me, the pendant on her necklace glowing faintly. 'Will you come in and have a beer? My treat.'

'Free beer for getting rid of rough customers?' Blondie squealed. 'Why haven't I ever had the honour?'

Amber frowned and stared at Blondie. Smiling, I shook my head and pointed, first at Blondie, then up. Amber finally figured out what I was doing there: 'The boss wants to see you? Come on then, I'll take you. I've got to go on stage soon.'

I nodded and Amber turned, flashing the pendant across my line of sight. We walked in and I pulled the heavy, soundproof door open for her.

A wave of techno swelled out.

*

It was a sunny Sunday. A lovely day for an outdoor photo shoot.

They'd arranged to meet her in a central city park. As she walked towards the rendezvous, she saw newlyweds in full regalia taking wedding photos and fellow models growing out of thickets of cameras, like blooming flowers.

Doves were flitting overhead. One alighted on the path in front of her, pecked at something, flapped its wings and flew away.

The well-tended grass, along with the seasonal flowers in saturated hues, showed that the contractor wasn't cutting corners. A regular visitor, she knew that the plants were dug up and replaced as soon as they had faded. The transient replacements were nice to look at, but somehow not as exuberant as the wildflowers that manage to escape the sickle of death.

And there were far too few trees.

The sun was high and she felt hot. Fanning her cheek with her hand didn't make her feel any cooler. Fortunately she was wearing SPF-50 foundation and had brought blotting paper, moisturizing lotion and touch up powder.

A few days before, when she was getting off work, these college kids had struck up a conversation

with her and asked her to model for their photography club. She'd assumed they were totally out of their league and that their budget would be miniscule. Only when they named a substantial sum did she notice they were clad head-to-toe in designer threads.

This kind of 'daylighting' was easy money and since they made her a good offer, she had no good reason to refuse.

They asked to meet her in the daytime, so she'd brought a couple of eye-catching outfits, outfits that breathed youth. One was a floral print dress with wedge sandals, a pink blouse and a white pleated skirt, the other a fuchsia spaghetti strap crop top and hot pants with cowgirl-style ankle boots. For her makeup she'd chosen something understated: baby blue eye-shadow and pale rose lip gloss. This wasn't the club, after all.

Each student was wielding an expensive SLR. As she posed and smiled, she noticed that not everyone was practiced in the use of a camera and that some of them had selected angles not for artistic reasons but to try to shoot the glories of her underskirt.

So when she bent over, her pose seductive, the sound of swallowing couldn't have been louder had it been thunder.

No surprise. And no worries: she was prepared.

Precautionary spandex. Just like when she's dancing at the club.

The more youthful her uniform, the better this particular move goes down.

And she is a masterful performer.

As she yawned between poses, she couldn't help noticing someone in the circle of photographers who looked as bored as she.

He was nothing like the posh college kids. He was a bit older than they were. Clean-shaven. Neatly combed hair, no dye, no wax. A plain T-shirt. Faded jeans, old. He had a medium-sized camera bag; all his gear was simple and plain. Looking closely, she could tell his camera was well-used, with signs of wear around the edges. The strap was dirty and old. Unlike the students, he wasn't there to look fashionable. And he took only a few shots per pose.

Didn't he think she was pretty? Or did he find the activity boring? If so, why even attend?

The sun was even hotter now, so everyone stopped for a breather. The man went to get her a bottle of water. She thanked him and commented: 'You don't seem to be having very much fun.'

'Portrait shoots are not my strong suit,' he said, managing an awkward smile. 'I'm actually just filling in.'

'Filling in?'

He nodded. 'The guy who runs the club is my friend. He couldn't make it today.'

'Ah, no wonder... you're a substitute teacher?' she smiled. 'But you don't seem to be teaching them anything. Aren't you failing in your pedagogical duty?'

'Even if I wanted to, they probably wouldn't listen.' He narrowed his eyes, looked around and shrugged. 'Maybe you haven't noticed, but these kids don't have any sense of composition or proportion. The only thing they can focus on is the hot babe.'

‘Yeah?’ she said, offering a slight smile. ‘What’s wrong with that?’

‘Nothing wrong with it at all,’ the guy said, looking back at her, heaving a faint sigh.

ONE

1

I made my way across the dance floor towards the storage room.

The techno track had just finished and now the loudspeakers were blaring Muse’s *Supermassive Black Hole*. The club DJ was mixing it himself. He clearly had good taste. A song about a self-destructive love-hate romance, but the customers were dancing with such self-abandon, swinging their hips so hard to the heavy beat, that I could barely get through the sea of their writhing bodies: nobody seemed too hung up on interpreting the lyrics.

The club sits in a building in the east end with eight floors above ground, two floors below. The nightclub occupies the first and second floors, its interior design an ostentatious Rococo. The boss eschews sharp edges so that even if customers get a bit too wild or high, they won’t hurt themselves if they collapse on the floor or against the wall.

The dance floor is in the middle of the first floor. To the left is a smaller, spotlit stage to one side for the contract dancing girls, or for live bands to rock fields of limitless power, jugulars bulging. To the right is the DJ’s booth and then the door to the little storage room, which is directly opposite the bar.

A balcony on the second floor with tables and chairs allows customers to wine and dine while watching the seething well of energy beneath. The lighting engineer’s booth is on the second floor, too.

Food is served until 2am. The kitchen and warehouse are on B1. B2 is for parking, but the entrance is on the other side of the building in an alley and it isn’t open to the public. Street parking in the area is hard to find, so the two Bs, Blondie and Beast, double as valets. They just have to swing around back and park in the garage and when a customer settles the bill they give the impression of having made quite a hike and pocket a fat tip.

The nightclub culture in this city is actually nothing special. There are big places and small; some clubs are rough, others slick. Like anywhere in the world, clubbers come to get laid, high, wasted, or wild.

The powers that be have strong opinions about such things.

The club has no private booths, to keep everything in the open. The boss is pretty strict about maintaining order, hiring a crew of bouncers to look after the place and instructing them to ask anyone acting suspiciously politely but firmly to leave. The rules haven’t changed since opening night and the club has maintained a certain reputation ever since: customers know it isn’t the place for a brawl. Of course, they might reach an agreement in the club and then take it outside, but then once they’ve left the premises there’s no need to pay them any mind.

One time I asked: ‘Didn’t you ever wonder whether all your rules would be bad for business?’

‘Why’d you think I pay those beautiful dancing girls so much money?’ the boss replied, with a rhetorical rolling of the eyes.

Made sense.

There was another entrance besides the front door and the garage in the back alley, an escalator for people who want to go straight up to the third floor.

Whatever dance track they play in the club plays on the third floor, too. And the customers on the third floor sweat just as much as the clubbers, just for a different reason.

Floors 3 to 6 are occupied by an international fitness chain, with only stairs connecting the floors, no elevator. People who pay to pump iron probably don’t mind the extra exercise.

There is actually an elevator, which stops on every floor from B2 to 8F, except for the four floors of Fitness World.

You can take it to the seventh floor, the club’s ‘executive branch.’

This is where the payroll, procurement, HR and operations personnel work. At most small nightclubs in the city, the management is relaxed and the staff come and go. To keep turnover low, the boss set up a system offering comprehensive training for the bar girls and signing long-term contracts with the dancers. The boss is particular about the quality of the booze and the food and is a connoisseur of acoustics and interior design. It’s not easy to meet the boss’s high standards, but staff respect a boss like that and tend to stick around. Such dedication has won the operation something of a reputation in the industry and the place is popular with the customers as well.

The seventh floor looks like the office of any small enterprise. If you didn’t know any better, you’d never guess that these prim professionals were actually working in a nightclub.

And if you were going up to the eighth floor? The doors would open straight onto the boss’s office, my destination.