

CALL ME UP IN DREAMLAND

抵達夢土通知我

It's M. Night Shyamalan's *Unbreakable* meets modern politics: a strong, young man who lost his memory in a train crash discovers he can read the memories of others through physical contact. Widespread political unrest throws him into a situation he cannot escape except by his own bravery and ingenuity.

The scene is a moment of political revolution, a student takeover of Taiwan's legislative building nearly identical to the events of the Sunflower Movement. One night, while leaving the sit-in, our protagonist runs into a Filipino woman who is clearly escaping someone; she is half-naked, mutilated, and losing consciousness. The protagonist literally runs to the hospital, and her memories begin to seep into his mind. The police name him as a suspect in her murder, but life grows even more complicated when a friend asks him to help search for his missing sister. As the body count begins to mount, our protagonist decides that he must go after the killer himself.

Wolf Hsu's newest novel has been hailed by domestic critics as one of the best works of "hard-boiled fiction" to appear to date. Its gritty language and stark descriptions of the macabre are sure to attract any devoted fan of *The Watchmen*, *Sin City*, or even *Saw*. Part of its brilliance, however, also derives from its connection to the moment – as a darkness incubating in a corner while Taiwan is rocked by political upheaval.

Wolf Hsu 臥斧

One of Taiwan's best-known and best-loved young writers, Wolf Hsu has been working with words his entire life. He has published several works of fiction, including *The Circus Leaves Town*, *No One Knows I'm Gone*, and *Boulevard of Broken Dreams* (see BFT Issue 1), all while steadily rising through the ranks of digital publishing to become deputy editor-in-chief at Taiwan's largest e-book platform.



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By Wolf Hsu

Translated by Jeremy Tiang

"In the heat of the night, I'm a feelin' motherless somehow." – Ray Charles

1.

I held her in my arms as questions jostled for room in my brain, leaving no space for thought.

She wasn't tall, and through the bath towel she was wrapped in, I could feel her fleshy, voluptuous body shaking non-stop. It was late March, and the night air in this city still had a hint of chill. Under the towel, she wore only underwear, and as my gaze drifted downward, I could see her deep cleavage in the gap the towel left exposed.

Sadly, I wasn't in the mood to admire a woman's curves just then.

Her cheekbones were badly bruised, her lip split, and her eyes surrounded by swollen, dark circles. Red and purple scars criss-crossed her naked arms, and her chest was smeared with blood. Tracing the path of the gore, I found its source: two bloody holes on either side of her head where her ears should have been.

The wounds were jagged, suggesting the ears had been yanked hard, then sawn off with a blunt knife or scissors. They looked fresh, though the blood that flowed down her face and torso was now dry, which meant it happened more than a few minutes ago, but definitely within the last hour.

That is to say, while I was pounding the sidewalk earlier on, pausing now and then to sit and listen to a speech, she may have been getting assaulted just a few blocks away.

*

About a week ago, a member of the legislature defied protocol and rammed through an extremely controversial bill. To protest this, several civic organizations gathered in front of the Legislative Building, many of them students concerned about the current political situation. Some of these students took advantage of reduced security after hours to barge into the debating chamber, where they staged a sit-in. Others broke through the police cordon, and soon occupied the main chamber. That night, the police tried sending in reinforcements, but the students managed to keep them out by blocking the doors with chairs. The police pulled back, defeated, but didn't withdraw. Instead, they began a stand-off with the students.

Within a few hours, all sorts of civic groups had heard the news, and came to stand in solidarity with the students. Fearing escalation would lead to protesters getting hurt, some regular people also showed up to hold a vigil next to the building.

Over the next few days, the crowds of students and citizens outside the Legislative Building continued to increase. Donated supplies, first aid teams, and legal organizations kept showing up to offer assistance as well as to make a stand, lending their support to the movement. Student representatives of the occupiers demanded a dialogue with government leaders over the bill. As the leaders were busy denouncing the protest to the media, rather than taking it seriously, the situation remained unresolved.

That's roughly what I understood from watching the news, anyway.

I'd seen many reports online about overseas protests, and was prepared for tense face-offs between citizens and the police around the Legislative Building, the officers holding up riot shields and batons, protesters reaching down to pick up broken bricks or cement chunks to fling into the fray.

After a short while there, I realized it wasn't like I'd imagined.

The civic organizations staging the sit-in outside the building had invited scholars from various fields to give short speeches, explaining the objectives of the movement and the problems with the bill. Public figures such as actors and musicians were joining in too, while regular folk motivated purely by concern for the students and the bill were also taking the stage to voice their observations and experiences. The site of the protest had become that rare, precious thing: a public classroom open to all.

I mingled with the crowd – the atmosphere was indescribable.

Some members of the public got up on stage to explain why they'd wanted to come and speak. It turned out some had rushed there straight from work, and others had even taken leave and traveled in from elsewhere just so they could take part.

My work wasn't fixed, but depended on how pressing or complicated the tasks the boss assigned me were, so I ought to have had plenty of free time. Unlike these zealous activists, though, while I'd assiduously followed news of the protest, it had never occurred to me to lend my support in person.

In the end, I wasn't sure what this movement would actually be able to accomplish.

Besides, when I did get there, I found the protest much calmer than I'd imagined.

The chamber couldn't stay occupied forever. The government's current tactic seemed to be to stonewall them, and hope that as time passed, the movement would run out of steam.

My colleague Beast didn't think this would work.

*

Beast was a big guy – his shirt barely closed over his bulging muscles, the buttons in perpetual danger of popping off. Like me, he worked at the night club, handling the valet parking and keeping order at the entrance. He also had to deal with all sorts of trouble whenever it arose. In other words, Beast was the night club's bouncer, and worked for a set number of hours every night.

The year before, his grandmother – who had raised him alone – passed away, partly because of a levy imposed on their family-owned farm. After that, Beast began paying more attention to various civic movements. Even if he hadn't done much to help while his granny was alive, at least he could lend a hand to other people being bullied by the authorities.

And so, starting from the first night the debating chamber was occupied, Beast showed up at the Legislative Building every day.

"Having more people at the scene makes it less likely the police will dare to disperse us by force," he told me. "Didn't the Speaker publicly state they wouldn't send in the police against the students? That proves our presence there is doing some good."

I believed the meaning behind the Speaker's proclamation wasn't that simple. Everyone knew there were all kinds of power struggles raging within the ruling party, and it was an open secret that the Speaker didn't get on with the Party Leader. For all we knew, this might be nothing more than a tactical maneuver. Yet seeing Beast take this so seriously, I didn't want to shut him down. As a friend, all I could do was take over his shifts as the night club's bouncer.

When the weekend came, it was hard for Beast to take time off.

Saturday nights were always the busiest, especially around midnight, when all kinds of shenanigans would kick off. Sometimes there'd be too much for Beast and Blondie, the other fixer, to deal with, and they'd rope me in. A few hours before this, I'd been having supper nearby when I got a call from Beast. At first I thought he was summoning me back to the night club for help.

“Can you go down to the protest for a while?” he said instead. “I’m stuck here.”

He told me that a few hours ago, a group of protesters had forced their way into the Administrative Building, which was just a few streets away from the Legislature. The sit-in and speeches were going on as before, but someone had gotten in touch with Beast to say they could do with back-up.

“I’m afraid there’ll be trouble,” said Beast. “Do me a favor and go have a look.”

*

When I got there, I had no idea what I was supposed to be doing, and ended up walking around aimlessly. Cartoons and slogans mocking the government were everywhere – along the perimeter walls and sidewalks, on the railings of the pedestrian bridge, and even atop the spikes of the police barrier. Walking amongst them felt like being at an outdoor art exhibit. After one of the speeches, the emcee mentioned that the police presence around the Administrative Building had increased dramatically, and water cannons were rolling in. Everyone was urged not to avoid violence, and stay safe.

I left the sit-in and walked over to the Administrative Building. The speeches could be heard from outside, and the number of police with riot shields and batons had indeed swelled significantly. The situation looked stable, though; neither side was spoiling for a fight. After a while, more of the crowd from the Legislative Building came over to continue their sit-in here. Their thinking was probably the same as Beast’s: greater numbers would discourage the police from acting out.

It was almost one in the morning, and the scene felt calm. I decided that a clash didn’t seem likely; Beast was being over-anxious. I texted him to say everything was fine. After a moment’s thought, I decided to walk to my gym, where I’d get some exercise before heading home to bed.

After a couple of blocks, I pulled off my mask and turned into an alleyway. That’s where I ran into her.

2.

The streetlights were dim around here. I noticed her as she approached, her steps unsteady. But when I realized she wasn’t wearing shoes, I looked more closely: she was wrapped in a towel, barefoot, wandering alone in the middle of the night. Something must be wrong.

I hurried over. Seeing this, she started stumbling faster too. I sped up, and she crashed right into me, breathing hard as she gabbled some words, then fainted dead away.

Her pronunciation was off, and she mixed accented English with Chinese. That, plus her light brown skin and features made me guess she was from Southeast Asia. Perhaps the Philippines, where English was an official language? Was she an overseas bride who’d just moved here? Or a foreign domestic worker? She repeated certain words over and over, like “Help,” “Terrible” and “I’ve been attacked.” A dispute with her in-laws or employer? How had she ended up so badly beaten, even her ears sliced off? Or was this unrelated to her marriage or work, and she’d just been unlucky enough to encounter some bad guy?

I looked around. No blood on the road, so it was hard to say which building she’d run from. This neighborhood was full of old apartment buildings, packed close together. The alleyway was silent; no one was chasing her, and if her tormentor hid nearby, I couldn’t spot him. Frowning my brows, I noticed she was suddenly shivering much harder as I held her – convulsing, rather. Her injuries were probably worse than they looked; the vicious attack must have left less visible wounds too.

This was dangerous. I swept aside the questions popping into my brain, pulled out my phone, and dialed 119. Talking fast, I said there was a seriously injured person and told them roughly where we were.

“We’ll send a vehicle right away,” said the operator calmly. “Your location is close to the protest, so the ambulance might take a while to get through.”

“How long?”

“Twenty to thirty minutes.”

Half an hour? Given her condition, every second was precious. “Where’s the nearest hospital?” I asked.

He told me the address. I quickly calculated that going all out, I could get there in ten minutes.

No time to waste. I scooped her up in my arms, and took off at a sprint.

*

There weren’t many cars or people around at this time of night, so I ran six red lights on the way, and made straight for the ER.

The duty nurse was clearly startled by me showing up after midnight wearing dark glasses, and breathing so hard I couldn’t speak; I must have looked like a maniac. Then her professionalism kicked in, and the injured woman in my arms got all her attention. She grabbed the phone, and two medics appeared wheeling a bed. They got her into an examination room right away.

I hadn’t looked at my watch, so couldn’t say how long it had taken me, but probably longer than I’d expected. Though I had ignored traffic rules and red lights, she was much heavier than I thought. Freed of my burden, I bent over, panting, almost too weak to stand upright. Trying to slow down my heart as it beat hard against my chest, I wondered: should I spend more time on the treadmill, and increase my weight training?

A funny line of thought, because I wouldn’t encounter situations like this very often. Yet now that I’d stopped running and my brain could work again, scrambled images from my mad dash kept coming into focus.

3.

Two years ago, I was in a train derailment.

The middle two carriages buckled violently, flinging many passengers from the train, myself included. I flew the farthest, and landed face down; then I rolled a few times and slid, face in the dirt, down a slope. My anti-social separation from the group kept the rescue workers from finding me. If the boss hadn’t happened to pass along the low road and seen me there, I might have breathed my last on that grassy verge.

When I woke up, I had no idea who I was – and had no ID on me. Apart from the boss, no one came to visit me the whole time I was in the hospital. The boss paid for my medical expenses, and arranged for me to work at the night club after I was discharged, so I could pay my debt back in installments. The boss even cleared a space for me to live in the night club’s cellar. As far as I was concerned, the boss had not only saved my life, but also given me the help I needed to go on living.

After leaving the hospital, I often felt as if my body wasn’t obeying orders, so I started exercising more. My injuries from crashing through the train window and rolling down the slope had more or less healed, leaving my face crisscrossed with scars and a damaged throat, as my neck had hit something when I fell. I dealt with both. I wore sports sunglasses whenever I left the house, day or night, to hide my facial injuries, and I spoke less often to avoid frightening people with the terrifying low rumble that my voice had become.

Fortunately, I’ve never been a man of many words.

The strangest thing about that accident was that afterwards I found I could see other people’s memories.

*

I'm not sure whether this is a latent ability I was born with, or something that I gained after the accident. All I had to do was touch another person with my finger, and I could draw out their memories, crystallized into a glittering thread. Initially, I found that by straightening out the tangles in these threads, I could give people pleasant dreams, and so I started calling them "dream threads." It took me a while to realize that if I concentrated hard enough, I could also read the memories within.

After some experimentation, I learned the limits of this power: firstly, I had to be in contact with the other person's skin. If clothes were in the way, no matter the thickness or kind of fabric, it wouldn't work. Next, my subject had to be unconscious. If they were awake, I couldn't do it either.

Finally, and most ironically, I wasn't able to recover my own lost memories.

Perhaps this was a function of the second limitation, as I couldn't possibly read my own memories while I was unconscious myself.

Or perhaps that's just how this power operated.

No one else was able to see these dream threads. The whole thing sounded so preposterous, I never told another living soul. My colleagues at the night club had no idea I was a man without a past; only the boss knew about that, and even the boss didn't know about my strange power.

During the headlong dash with this woman in my arms, I had no time to waste, and didn't plan to read her past; that was private, after all, and I'd made it a rule not to read it unless absolutely necessary. Before we got to the hospital, though, disconnected shards of her memory embedded themselves in my brain. It might have been that torture filled her mind with an agitation and terror that stimulated my ability, or that she'd gone in and out of consciousness while I was running, which would account for why the images I'd received were so fragmentary.

Piecing together what I'd learned from those scraps, I thought there could be one more reason why her memory was so piecemeal: before being attacked, whether voluntarily or by force, she'd taken some sort of hallucinogenic drug.

Reading memories is like walking into a cinema halfway through a film. Not only would I see a context-less sequence of events, I would also hear, smell, and feel everything that person experienced – all five senses, plus stray thoughts like radio static.

Her recollections were like the trailer for a horror film, watched while unconscious.

4.

She was in a smallish room, the lighting dim but warm, with no windows. Several glass-fronted wooden frames hung from one wall, too deep to be paintings – more like specimen cases. Between the light reflecting off the glass and her blurry vision, she could barely make out what these contained: they were butterflies, wings outspread. She was lying on the floor, feeling fairly comfortable on the wall-to-wall carpeting. She didn't know where she was, and her hands and feet were bound, which made it impossible to stay calm.

Across the room from the butterfly specimens were several shelves holding a vast number of CDs and vinyl records. The wall behind them wasn't papered, but covered in thick, gray soundproofing material. She slowly turned her neck, and I saw a recliner. It sat opposite all the media equipment, including a huge flat-screen TV that practically filled the wall, and enormous name-brand speakers in the corners.

This was a state-of-the-art private screening room.

The tune coming from the speakers was a little melancholy, and a little tense: the occasional piano accompaniment urgently underscored a clear male voice's recitative. I couldn't understand the words, but they sounded like German.

This is what I managed to glean by piecing together the jumbled images. Her senses were sometimes clear and sometimes hazy, so the colors went from normal to weird. The air didn't smell of anything in particular, and it was the repeated chant that made the sharpest impression on her.

A silvery knob stuck out of the wall near the shelves. It took quite a while to work out that it was a door handle. Now it turned, and a gap appeared in the gray soundproofing. Someone walked into the room.

This person looked like a man of medium height and average build, with nothing distinctive about his appearance, and wearing the sort of cheap, disposable raincoat you could buy in any convenience store.

The strange thing was that he had a horse mask on.

Not the basic sort that just covered the face. This one encased his entire cranium, and even had a mane running down its chestnut head. Its horse's mouth was half-open, and the eyes bulged wide in a ridiculous expression that should have looked hilarious, yet took on a creepy, horrifying aspect in this setting.

The Horse Man was holding a roll of clear plastic. Even through the mask, I could hear him humming the same tune coming from the speakers. He set down the sheeting and got out some tape and scissors. She and I grew anxious at the same time. The Horse Man didn't even look at her, just rolled out the plastic and cut out a big piece.

She relaxed a little, then fainted again.

*

In the next stretch of memory, she felt herself being rolled around. Before she could work out what was happening, she was back in her original position, except that there was now a plastic sheet between her and the carpet. Opening her eyes wide, she saw the Horse Man with his back to her. Plastic covered the entire floor, and he was taping the edges tight against the wall. She blinked. In fact, the whole room was covered in plastic, including the record shelves, specimen boxes, screening equipment, and speakers.

When he'd finished, the Horse Man dusted off his hands, stood up, and turned around. Then he bent over so his face was close to hers.

She saw the bulging fake eyes of the mask staring blankly at the ceiling, while the dark nostrils faced directly at her. She opened her mouth, unable to stop herself screaming.

The Horse Man didn't seem surprised. She thought she heard a chuckle come from inside the mask.

The sort of dismissive laugh you'd expect from someone in complete control, someone with a plan.

She drew a deep breath, but before she had a chance to scream again, the Horse Man's fist came crashing down.