

# IN THE SPACES OF STRANGERS

*Identity crisis.*

BY L. P. LEE

Today, the mist lifted and revealed the sea. Green as my dad's eyes and full of fish. Far out to the horizon they floated, dead bellies bobbing on the surface of the water.

The pier was crowded with families. Kids looking out to sea, taking in little lungfuls of the magnificent stench.

I went into the arcade and played my favourite video game. It put you back in the old world, before the mist. Back when you had a clear view of things. The sky, the cars, the outline of your house.

When it was time, I marched back out to sit on the pier and wait for my guest.

I couldn't remember what she looked like. But I knew I'd recognize her when I saw her. She was from the city. I looked her up this morning. She'd written a lot about the seaside, the mist, the towns left behind.

Yes, she was easy to spot. Striding through the crowds, she glowed with good health. The air she'd grown up with was pure. She'd never had to live with the mist.

I watched her sit down on a bench and look out at the fish.

"No chance of a sushi joint," she sighed.

"Hello," I said.

"Oh!" She spun around. Her teeth shone. "Are you —?"

"Yes," I said. "I don't have much time. I have a lot of homework to do."

"Of course. This doesn't have to take long. First, can I check how old you are?"

"Fifteen," I said.

She paused. "That was younger than I was told," she said.

I didn't know what to say, so I looked down at my feet.

"I heard you'd be interested in getting away for a bit," she said.

"Yes, I'm always getting grounded," I said.

"How about today?"

"Today?"

"We could pop down to London and it'd be done in no time."

"Oh." It seemed like the kind of thing I should run past my parents, but I was worried that they'd say no. "OK," I said.

She drove us down to London, busy on the phone the whole time. Through the windows, I saw that there was no mist in the city. Everyone glowed.



I couldn't see why she'd want to give it all up. But when I looked at her, she smiled.

It was dinner time when she stopped the car. She had a friend who snuck us through the back door of a building. He wore expensive-looking glasses and squeezed her hand.

He led us down corridors, into a room filled with noisy equipment. He pointed me towards a bed, and attached cold wires to my head. He said: "In a moment you'll —" But I didn't catch what he said as I passed out.

I woke up to find a girl at the foot of my bed. She was familiar but also a stranger, as I had never seen myself from this angle before. "How are you feeling?" The girl asked.

Before I could reply, she said: "I have to dash, but I've arranged a driver who will take you to my house. I mean, your house. Make yourself

at home!" She flashed a smile and hurried out.

I got to my feet. I padded out of the room and down the corridors, hearing only the soft slap-slap-slap of ballet pumps on the concrete floor. Her handbag swung uncomfortably in my hands.

My feet had become longer, and my new height made me feel giddy. I thought that I was going to fall over, but after a while, being taller made me feel more powerful.

At the back door, the car was waiting. The driver smiled at me with an expression of respect that I had never seen before.

I opened the door to a nice flat in London. The carpet was cream-coloured and there were photos of other countries on the walls.

Now that there were no rules, I was going to stay up all night and order pizza.

But as I was settling in, a ringing sound filled the flat. I wanted to ignore it but it kept up, like an alarm. I followed it into her bedroom, where I'd left her handbag on the bed.

I picked up her phone and put on my best imitation.

"Hello?" I said. I giggled inside.

"Where are you?" The voice was urgent.

"I'm at home," I said.

"Christ, what are you doing at home?" The voice said.

I blinked. Had she done something wrong?

Even though it wasn't my problem, a coldness crept into the pit of my stomach.

"I'm playing a video game," I said.

There was a crash, somewhere in the building, or maybe closer by.

"If you want to save your skin, you need to disappear, and pronto."

The voice said something else but I didn't hear it, for the door creaking open behind me. ■

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