

SECOND-HAND DREAMS

There wasn't a soul around except someone deep in the forest using a chainsaw. The narrow two-lane road was leading straight to the woods and the sky above was full of dark clouds. Civilization was far behind—when her cellphone had started begging for power miles ago, she was already in a zero-bar dead zone.

Yet, for once, Niña was exactly where she was supposed to be. She shrugged. Humans were illogical, life was unpredictable and things aren't always as they seem. She had chosen a path and she was glad she had abandoned the other.

She took a sip of water from the bottle in her bag and resumed walking. Every morning, she was waking up in the wrong life as one of those millions of Americans who, for seventeen, nineteen or twenty hours, performed the daily mundane tasks required to survive and prosper. This afternoon she was making her way from nowhere to its proverbial middle and she had almost reached her destination.

Her jeans stuck to her sweaty legs, the frayed ends sweeping the gravel road. Her red sandals were covered with dust and she had three fresh mosquito bites on her right arm, a spot she had been scratching since the beginning of the hike. No bus service reached this far into the countryside and her old car had been sold on Craigslist weeks ago. She was real bait for predators, she thought, a status officially worse than the one of a hitchhiker who at least acknowledged that walking along the side of a deserted road was a terrible choice and that the sensible thing to do was to hop into a vehicle.

It shouldn't be much further now. Just as she was starting to hum the last song that had played before her phone battery gave up, she spotted the rusty wheelbarrow, the flat rock and the empty wooden produce wagon parked in a large clearing between the road and a sunflower field. You had to give it to Matheus, he had described the meeting spot very well.

Niña inspected the wheelbarrow—not a good place to sit, there was an inch of wet dirt at the bottom. She chose the flat rock and loosened the straps of her sandals. She wasn't tired but the shoes were worn out and the buckle was rubbing against the soft and sensitive instep. She checked her feet for blisters—none to report—then got up to stretch her hamstrings properly. After all, fitness was one of her gigs. She worked three evenings a week as a personal trainer after her office job as a call centre supervisor and before the dinner rush at the pizza restaurant where she was a waitress. She was fit alright, just psychologically exhausted from living several lives every day of the week.

Niña was the first one to arrive because she was the angriest and the most impatient—and also, to be honest, because she had quit all of her jobs the day before and this was her first twenty-four hours without any commitment, when she had all the time in the world. Lili and Peter would join her any minute now. As for Matheus, it depended on how things were going in the big building sitting a mile from here.

The woodcutter was done. Niña, who rarely had the luxury to enjoy time off in the country, noted the absence of the general hum of noise from people living. She had grown up in a fast-paced area and was instilled with a sense of urgency in everything she did. When was the last time she had sat alone with only her thoughts for company?

She gazed at the 855,000 square-foot logistics centre, an eyesore in this otherwise bucolic scenery far from the city. The fact that affording car payments, insurance, gas and maintenance

on a minimum-wage salary would be impossible for most workers wasn't even considered until the location was picked and the deal done. The huge patch of land offered by the city was part of the incentive package and the mayor had promised to eventually extend bus service. It was wishful thinking, of course—the city was broke and raising taxes was out of question. Meanwhile, during the first Q&A with the media, the company's CEO had stated the rural location would help filter out applicants who weren't motivated to work because when there's a will, there's a way.

That comment alone was a spectacular red flag right there—a twenty feet tall and literally on fire sort of red flag. Why hadn't anyone forced the company to at least run a free commuter shuttle program? Niña shook her head. People just weren't angry enough, she thought.

To add insult to injury, most of the parking space built was for distribution vehicles and employees had to pay a hefty monthly fee for a spot. Tonight's meeting place, where Niña was waiting, was what Matheus had described as the new informal bus stop. As usual, a mix of entrepreneurship, innovation and a desire to profit had closed the gap and offered a solution. In town, several residents had partnered to launch a private service using old school buses—so far, there was no competition.

She scratched her left leg—how did mosquitoes bite through jeans?—and noticed that someone had written the name of the company on one side of the rock. Under it, several hands had etched tally marks. When a workplace was managed like a prison it was no wonder employees started acting like inmates.

The poor sunflowers had no sun to dance to and a dark cloud was looming on the horizon. Just as well. The day called for a major storm, thunderous change and diluvian rain. Still, hopefully, Lili and Peter would show up before the possible downpour. She wasn't a masochist—no point in getting soaked for the sake of a theatrical metaphor.

Niña, Lili, Peter and Matheus had met the way people meet after high school or university—randomly, through seemingly inconsequential events that would somehow define the months to come.

Niña didn't believe in destiny but lately, she had been wondering how life would have turned out if she had remembered to dump the stack of restaurant flyers in the recycling bin as she promised herself every week. Forever, the biggest decision of her life would be traced back to a Chinese takeout craving at some ungodly hour and a walk-in special promotion.

When she had shown up at the Dragon of Fortune shortly before closing time, she was a starving, angry 30-year-old. As she was waiting for combo C88 extra spicy, an unusually tall Asian woman had stormed out of the kitchen, followed by the owner who was attempting to untie her soy sauce-stained apron. Even without subtitles, it was easy to understand that the woman was getting fired. Indeed, she was shoved out of the restaurant under Niña's incredulous eyes—she wouldn't have bet on the owner in a physical fight and she couldn't believe the argument had gotten physical in the first place.

When in doubt, Niña always erred on the side of the powerless. She walked out of the restaurant, slamming the door behind her. Even in an at-will state like here, employees weren't literally pushed out of a job—this was a new low.

Niña caught up with the woman, who introduced herself as Lili Wu and assured her that she was fine. Niña never found out the exact nature of the argument that had led to the screaming match and even Lili claimed she wasn't quite sure because it turned out she was shouting in Mandarin and the owner only spoke Cantonese so essentially, all the insults traded were lost in translation. But none of this mattered, Lili had explained, because memories were mostly made

up of things you wanted to remember and the past fifteen minutes were already forgotten. Besides, this was just a temporary job.

That was Lili in a nutshell. She was motivated, optimistic and flexible. And, as Niña would acknowledge later, once acquainted with her new friend's philosophy, this was a hell of a lot more productive than being angry all the time.

Niña hadn't picked up her food—and she planned on boycotting the restaurant until the inevitable change of ownership—and since Lili no longer had a shift to complete, they both walked to the nearest diner. Over scrambled eggs, Lili explained she was saving money for her new life. Soon, she was moving to China, going back to the country her parents had left years ago. It just made sense, she argued. China was booming and opportunities abounded.

Lili's project was new enough that she detailed her rationales at length, as if she needed to convince herself she was making the right move. It had been awhile since Niña had met someone with a plan. And listening to Lili with attention, she felt something she had almost never experienced—hope. There she was now, enthusiastically angry with the seed of an idea germinating in her mind.

Niña was always angry. If she had had a talent for music, she would have been the guitarist smashing the instrument on the stage after each show, just because. She was angry on behalf of her parents, who were too often told to “go back to Mexico,” which made absolutely sense considering they were Chilean with Mapuche blood and that if they ever had the chance to go South, they'd book a seven-day all-inclusive trip to Cancún like everyone else. She was also angry that despite working hard all their life, they still weren't able to retire. She was angry because she felt stuck and she was too cynical about the world, people and her future. Niña lacked the drive, sense of competition and can-do attitude so many American millennials were apparently born with. Maybe it was her Latin roots. She was fatalistic about the future and was often overwhelmed by what Matheus would later call *saudade*—a somewhat melancholic feeling of incompleteness.

But what Lili had stated was so damn obvious. Just because she was born in America didn't mean she had to stay there. Why hadn't she thought of it earlier? Paris, Rome or some desert island were appealing destinations but as the child of two immigrants, she knew that you just couldn't hop on a plane and expect to work and live abroad without proper documentation. However, she could claim Chilean citizenship by descent and unlock new opportunities on another continent. Lili was right. The world had changed. Today's China wasn't the country Lili's parents had left. In Chile, the military dictatorship Niña's parents had escaped from was long gone.

Most Americans had a side gig to survive. Lili and Niña worked several of those to finance a side dream. For months, they met regularly like a niche support group. Believing that the earth was flat, that 9/11 was an inside job or that a reptilian elite was ruling the government at the highest level were perfectly acceptable ways to express your freedom of speech. However, deciding to leave the US was surprisingly controversial among Americans and completely taboo among immigrants. Defecting from the wealthiest country on the planet was understood as pointing out there were plot holes in the American dream story. They were told they were ungrateful for the sacrifices their parents had made and they were reminded that they were enjoying a high standard of living. They were even accused of supporting a political agenda, like the deportation of second-generation immigrants. But mostly, people thought they were stupid—you had to be if you weren't fulfilled in a country the rest of the world saw as a blueprint for success and a glorious bastion of liberty.

Meanwhile, every week, the two women shared their progress. Lili was born in the US and her parents had given up their Chinese passports when they had become US citizens decades earlier, so settling in China involved a visa and an influential network Lili called “guānxi.” The process wasn’t much easier for Niña. Her parents had left the country soon after the coup, leaving important paperwork behind. She was also taking Spanish classes because embarrassingly, she was probably the only American of Hispanic descent who wasn’t fluent in her parents’ mother tongue. The grass was unlikely to be greener down there—after all, Chile was mostly a desert—but for the first time in her life, Niña felt in control. Her anger had morphed into unflinching determination.

Peter had joined them the same way he had blended in America—by tricking people into believing he had always been there. His real name wasn’t Peter Smith unless his Nigerian parents had a weird sense of humour, but that was the one he was going by, so who was going to challenge him? The tall thirty-three-year-old—if this was his real age—had made his way to Europe by sea and by land, eventually reaching the infamous refugee camp in Calais, France, where he had spent months attempting to cross to the United Kingdom. One night, a Polish truck packed with tires and a French general strike that kept police forces busy elsewhere had offered the perfect opportunity.

Peter spent his years in the United Kingdom acquiring a British accent, a phlegmatic attitude and a passion for football. Then he had continued his journey to reach America because frankly, no one dreamed of a gloomy British suburb in Eastern Africa—it was a green card and Californian sunshine or nothing.

Once across the pond, Peter had assembled car parts in Detroit, flipped burgers for five different fast-food chains, watched over half a dozen of parking lots and helped build a new residential neighborhood in Florida. Somewhere between two American work experiences, he realized that without minimum-wage workers, the country would collapse because someone had to pick fruits, stock shelves, serve food and clean. He was that “someone” and it would thus likely be his life for the years to come.

So far, the only piece of American dream he owned was a sixth-generation Cadillac El Dorado bought on Craigslist from a repo guy who may or may not have acquired the vehicle legally. Peter featured it in all the pictures he sent to his relatives back home.

Lili met Peter when she was working as a banking representative. Peter was her last customer of the day and he attempted to open a checking account with ID documents so blatantly fake that she had just laughed. Then, after listening to an elaborated story involving a big, hungry dog and a chewed-up driver’s licence, she told him to wait for her at the gas station across the street. Half an hour later, she was giving him the name of a Chinese contact who would sort him out with more professional fakes and the phone number of a supervisor at a competing bank who was so desperate to meet his sales quota he would open accounts for imaginary friends.

It didn’t take long for Lili and Peter to become an unlikely item. If his life remained a mystery to Niña, Lili knew everything about him, even his real name. After all, she was expecting their child. In keeping with his motto “I have zero chance, may as well seize it,” Peter had just completed an ESL teacher certification. He was embracing fatherhood and a new life in China. To some extent, he had lived the American dream—then it had ended.

By the time Matheus had joined them, they were jokingly referring to themselves as the “second-hand dreamers” because they were reusing the same old dream that had brought their family to America, albeit for another destination, the one initially left behind.

Matheus's life was on track and he was never supposed to be a part of the project. He had graduated from an American university with honours and several loans he was trying to pay off. For now, he was mostly drowning in debt but he was doing so proudly, confident he would climb the corporate ladder and be rewarded for his hard work. A few months earlier, he had been hired at the new distribution centre as the general manager of logistic. It was unusual for someone so young and relatively inexperienced to be offered so much responsibility, yet Matheus was officially in charge of running the technical side of operations. Contrary to some executives who had no other skills than looking smug with their arms crossed, Matheus was knowledgeable, efficient, and involved. The company should have taken note. Sometimes, good people could be found in a shitty system.

The young engineer had signed up for a personal training program with Niña to stay in shape after securing his first professional job. As he had explained, the combination of some disposable income and unpaid overtime translated into being on first-name basis with a selected few takeout restaurant owners. Niña also suspected he was trying to socialize because he was always inviting her for a drink after their sessions. Once she established these weren't dates and that they were just hanging out, she started to appreciate him as a friend. Besides, Matheus was a precious source of information. Born in Curitiba, the blond-hair blue-eyed Brazilian of German descent had lived and studied in Uruguay and Chile. He seemed to find Niña's project amusing and he was happy to provide insight into South America.

This wasn't any job in any distribution centre. It was *the* distribution centre and *the* company that was saving the city. Like many other places across the country, Fairview Height was hit hard by the recession. When the company started scouting for a location, the city competed to host the new facility that would no doubt make a big impact on the community. For months, directors were given the red-carpet treatment, including economic incentive packages worth millions of dollars. Public funds were provided by all levels of government, as well as tax rebates and other incentives in cash. No one had protested across the political spectrum. The company had to be lured to the middle of nowhere and they would be a guaranteed payoff—job growth, employment gains, a boost for the local economy. Roughly 4,500 humans would be needed, with additional temporary workers during the holiday rush periods.

Matheus spoke proudly of the CEO, the directors and the team who were making it possible for Americans to earn a living again. He never once questioned the risky bet and neither did Niña nor Lili after he reported seeing 800 workers being hired in one day.

It didn't take much to change everything—just a damn Phoenix bird and some good old greed. The first glitch was a major one. Employees were told they would be paid monthly but the company had missed several payroll circles. Matheus, who wasn't affected, investigated the problem on behalf of his team. Technical issues, he was told. This was a new facility and a new system, growing pains were to be expected. Assuredly, the situation was inconvenient but that was what credit cards were for. Since the possibility of getting something was better than the certainty of getting nothing, few workers bailed out—and those who did were easily replaced. And after all, this wasn't some mom and pop shop with questionable illegal practices. It was a big company! It had an HR department!

But what did you expect from a corporation set up to maximize profit without individual responsibility? Ethics? Missing payroll wasn't a mistake, it was calculated greed. And this was just the beginning. Niña wasn't sure what kind of noise dreams made when they were shattered because Matheus lost faith gradually, over the span of a few weeks, but she was positive he never had that haunted look before. Indeed, as an executive, and mostly as someone who actually

knew what button to press to make the machines work, Matheus was privy to some information. His directors mistakenly believed that a young employee would be at best naïve and at worst easy to bribe. What he wasn't told explicitly, he dug it up.

What he found didn't make sense at first. It looked like the CEO was purposely running the company into the ground. Sales were up, profits were made yet debts were accumulating. It was Lili, who had a background in finance, who figured out they were dealing with a "Phoenix company." This company wasn't supposed to succeed. In fact, the sooner it failed the better, because this way, workers, creditors and taxes didn't have to be paid. While forcing the company into insolvency, the CEO was going to have the company assets transferred to a new company—at less than market value, of course—while absolving his responsibility for the liabilities.

It wasn't the first time the CEO and his trusted team of directors were going to create a new company rising from the ashes of the first, while escaping their obligations to pay creditors. Matheus had found out that the CEO's wife had controlled another Phoenix company in the same industry with a similar name across the country. Nobody had bothered to check because this new employer was a godsend opportunity for the region.

Matheus wanted to act fast before complete depletion of the assets, which would signal cessation of business. At his level, he could only attempt to pull the rug out from under the CEO and inform the workers. It would take months for the business to fail and they would never get paid. There was no time to lose.

Tomorrow, the El Dorado would take Niña to the airport where she would board a plane to Santiago, Chile. The day after, Matheus would drop Peter and Lili off for their flight to Beijing, China. Then it would be Matheus' turn to go. He wasn't flying, he needed time to think so he would drive the El Dorado as far as possible along the *Ruta Panamericana*. Mexico, Belize, Guatemala, Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, Panama...

Niña saw the car before she heard it. The red El Dorado was hard to miss on a desert country road. Lili got off and immediately dashed into the sunflower field, from which she emerged a minute later. Peter and Niña smiled—Lili's bathroom breaks were no joke these days.

Out of deference to the baby she was baking, even though she was barely showing, Niña got up and invited her to sit on the rock. She and Peter leaned against the hood of the car. The engine was still hot. She hoped the El Dorado would start on the first attempt if the need to drive off quickly arose.

Peter checked his cellphone again. Still no bars. Among the endless list of illegal practices, the company used several long-range cellphone jammers to control communication. Matheus would disable the units and this would be the signal that the plan was in motion.

Peter held one finger. One bar. Two bars. They all stared at the building in the distance. Yes, here they were! A crowd of thousands of workers—plus, no doubt, a few suppliers, creditors and managers—was flowing down the road. It would take them time to make their way to the meeting spot but Niña was already hearing the cacophony of voices and feeling the palpable excitement buzzing through the air.

Or maybe she was imagining it. After all, they didn't know how the workers had reacted. Matheus didn't have a silver bullet, wages were still unpaid and unemployment was likely. Most of the time, heads never rolled, wrists were simply slapped. The CEO might just get away with it. The four of them had debated the issue for hours. They had all agree on one thing—knowledge was power. Niña was hoping that walking out felt liberating to a degree, that the workers would, like her, realize that they had control over their destiny.

“Angry people work harder” was a management theory with some merit to it but it had a downfall—don’t betray people who have nothing to live for. Niña smiled when she saw that large trucks were following the crowd. The workers were walking out with company assets.

They would ask what exactly had happened and how later. For now, the crowd before them was enough to piece the events together and see that Matheus was treated as a hero, the brave soul who had brought heads up to see reality.

Niña, Lili and Peter started to walk up to him. There he was, at the front. Tears were rolling down his eyes. Relief, anger, sadness or everything at once? Niña hugged him before being hugged herself by an unknown worker. It was heartwarming to see a united, peaceful front.

They made their way through the crowd, and back to the El Dorado. There was no point in lingering there any longer. This wasn’t their show, only a very satisfying way to start a new life on the right foot.