

BPM

Leung Suet Mui is an incorrigible optimist, whose solution to not being able to afford recording her first EP in a proper studio is to get me to do it. Away from the cars and construction, maybe on a hill. If she can't get that creamy, heavily-produced sound, she's going all the way past the pale. Lots of wind. The elements. Something rough and organic. Can't go wrong with organic. Maybe we can get some shots too while we're up there, she says, for the cover jacket.

We're on top of Lion Rock. From here, the old Kai Tak area looks like a bald spot on the residential gray of Kowloon. I'm seated cross-legged, sipping from my water bottle and keeping my audio interface from being blown off. My shirt is still damp from the hike and I'm trying not to lose anything into the cliff.

I say Suet Mui's incorrigible just because she gives the impression of that. I've known her only for a few hours. She found my website and said she was interested in hiring a sound guy for a solo musical project, so I met her this morning at the station in Tai Po with my equipment and my hiking shoes on. I'm charging her a premium for making me do this on the top of a hill. She wanted everything wind-swept because that's what she was titling the first song. Wind-swept vocals, wind-swept strings, because what else does she play but the guitar.

I plug Suet's acoustic into the interface and keep my laptop still between my two legs. Unless she wants to go through the trouble of miking the guitar and making my mixing session later twice as expensive, nothing about her guitar playing is going to sound ethereal until I put some effects on it. She doesn't know this. She's standing a few meters away from me against a boulder, tuning her guitar and looking content with my headphones on her head, the right ear pad on her cheek, the other one on her ear.

The wind dies a little, like a baby taking a break. I'm surrounded by my cables; I'm in a Taiji circle, a pentagram, embodying everything. I switch on the click track in my laptop, a nice and warm 65 BPM, because the first song is supposed to be slow. She perks up from the sound in her headphones.

"It's how my heart sounds," she says.

I give her a lip smile and tell her we're ready to go.

"I haven't heard that in a while."

I turn everything off, including the click. "Nervous?"

I didn't think she would be, if she really had played in all the open mics in town and got a drunken ovation at Handover Hallelujah last year, but I don't know what else to ask. She shakes her head and adjust the headphones. "Put it back on," she says. "The metronome."

There we go. Deep breath was all she needed. I put on the click again but she doesn't play. She drops the neck of the guitar and lets the instrument hang on her from the strap while she presses the left ear pad closer. I didn't know a click track could sound so good to someone.

This goes on for a few more minutes until my left leg starts cramping. I put the laptop down next to the interface and stand up to stretch. It's her money.

Lion Rock Hill looks like it was carved away clean from a block of concrete and painted a very realistic green, and all that's left of the original slab are the apartments. I had never hiked up here before. I move closer to the edge of the cliff and feel the nervous tingle on the bottom of my pants that frightens me into thinking I might jump.

She leaves the guitar next to the boulder and joins me, the headphones still on her head, the click still playing. I can hear it coming from the right ear pad. "I want to call the EP *Heartsong*," she says, and I can already imagine the cover jacket, a washed-out shot of Victoria Harbour from here and the title printed out in gaudy Papyrus font. She'll make three hundred copies from a manufacturer in Fo Tan and have a hard time getting rid of them.

"Why are you doing this?" I ask. If I could give you dollar for each client who've asked me to do this. The official press release is always something about chasing dreams. The real answer, I've never figured out, and the isolation up here makes me bold enough to ask her.

"It's my birthday," she says. "Really."

Which she's spending with me instead of her family or friends. I'm afraid to ask why because it might introduce to a new degree of intimacy that I'd still be billing her for.

"My father's dead," she says anyway. "I don't know where my stepmother is. My boyfriend slit me up and took my heart out of me one night and I left him."

The afternoon sun behind her creates a thin, flinty halo of flaming gold around her hair. Her eyelashes are tiny, upturned curtains over her eyes. They're real. Her denim blouse falls on her shoulders in straight, handsome angles. Maybe I was too busy earlier heaving my equipment up the trail and trying not to choke on her complicated perfume but I've only noticed now how striking she looks. Striking enough to put on a pedestal and have an unhealthy, lopsided relationship with.

I look at her hands. Anyone can look young in the face but your hands never lie.

Her hands are beautiful.

"He took my heart," she said, "chopped it up with a cleaver and made noodle soup with it. Chili oil on the top. Have you had anything like that?"

I'm still at the edge of the cliff and her voice is behind me. "No," I say, suddenly hungry. My stomach turns when I realize what picture I have in my head.

She points at the wooden sign that tells not to go past the point towards the cliffs. Danger, it says, like we wouldn't bother to listen if we weren't reminded of the nebulous idea of losing a life. "There," she says. "He put me against the sign and told me to stay still because he didn't want to hurt me."

I hear the click in my own head. 65 BPM is the resting rate for the human heart. It means everything's fine. It means you're spending a nice afternoon on the grass after hiking with your boyfriend and the light comes in columns through the pine tree you're under.

She tells me he was a medical student. He wanted to specialize in infectious diseases. He was a friend of her cousin and she met him at a party her stepmother threw for her fiftieth birthday in a yacht club in Sai Kung. They had smiled at the same time the first time she saw him, like she had known him from elsewhere before.

“He sent me pictures of the noodle soup from his phone and told me a heart chopped up looks like liver,” she says. “When he gave the soup with my heart to my stepmother, she asked him if it was just pig’s liver from a food stall in the streets.”

I haven’t had those in a long time. Most of the time I’m in my flat spending time on the video editor, with me and my best friend the pointing arrow watching my wristband catch lint on the screen’s reflection. The cocktail sausages from the 7-Eleven downstairs are good enough. I have a view of the mountains where I live but they’re just green walls, carved out from the concrete.

“Do you want to see it?” she asks, but I’m making up that intonation. There’s no question mark in her voice. She’s already pulling her shirt up and standing in front of me in her bra and her jeans. A tidy Y starts from her shoulders and goes all the way down. I can see the little muscles on her belly. The incisions have been sutured lovingly.

“You can touch it if you want to,” she says. “You won’t feel it.”

She means her heart. I put my hand out. I feel her goosebumps from the wind.

She pulls her shirt down and I leave the edge. I return to my equipment, slip into my sacred circle, and think of a doctor’s hands. Delicate, precise, like mine. Not meant for mountains or wind. Underneath us, the bush is thick with secrets.

“I tried to run away from him. I got off the path and went towards Shatin Pass but he caught up with me,” she says. “He sprained his ankle. I wanted to help him because that was what I was used to, not him running after me like that, you know?”

“That’s how he got you?”

“No. I took off but I think I took a wrong turn. I’ve never figured out where. I haven’t been up here since. He found me and he didn’t let go this time.”

“What did it feel like?”

“Cold. I wanted to tell him to breathe on the scalpel before he did it but I forgot.”

I turn the click off. The sky is taking the tinge of late-afternoon futility and I have some animation to edit for an architect. If we don’t leave now, the dusk will catch up with us. I start to pack up and Suet Mui slips off her headphones.

“What about you, what’s your family like?” she asks.

“Usual. *Yum cha* on Sundays. You and your stepmother, how did things go?”

“After my heart? Nothing. I can’t go back. She’d take my lungs next. Then my liver.” She hands the headphones back to me. “Thanks, I really liked that. And I’m still paying you so don’t worry. Are you free next week?”

I tell her I could make it. She puts her guitar back into the bag and helps me with the cables. Her hands are so white, if she ever breaks her skin and the bone comes through, you won’t see the difference.

“Do you hate your stepmother?” I ask.

“Yeah,” she says. She’s putting her arms under the loops of her gig bag. “But it washes over me so hard I don’t feel anything, so I’m not sure what it’s turned into. Right here, where I can’t see it.” She taps her chest. “It doesn’t make the most modern kind of story, you know? Stepmother thinks stepdaughter is prettier than her, gets the guy to take her heart out. It sounds so catty, everyone would think I’m making it up.”

“Everyone makes up something about their lives.”

She looks at me intently. “Have you?”

“I like to think having studied film and not knowing when the next check is coming is the stuff of my dreams. I’m gonna do this forever.”

She laughs. “Next week. From me.”

“Happy birthday, by the way.”

The sun is lingering above the haze, making second thoughts about leaving. The long shadows stretch and thin on her face as we take the trail down. Hours later, Kowloon will be lit by a million fluorescent bulbs and I’m thinking, if you put up mirrors, those two-faced truth-tellers who watch us jump into devastating conclusions and say nothing, and line them on the face of the hill that looks over the city, you can make a circle of light and in the middle of it will be Suet Mui, and somewhere over the harbor is her stepmother and behind this hill will be the predator, and in that last aerial shot, the camera zooms out and all you see is the spread of fire.