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骷髏樓

‘The Skeletor’

(non-fiction)

Translated by Darryl Sterk

For a while there, every time I got homesick I would run to the Tadeusz Bór-Komorowski Expressway, perhaps the widest road in Kraków, and one of its few raised thoroughfares. For a moment, I would feel like I was back in Taipei, at a Civic Expressway intersection.

Strange, isn't it? That it wasn't oyster omelets and other night-market fare that I missed, or the convenience stores open 24-7, or the all night A&E programming that got better the later you watched, but the Civic Expressway: a landmark of all the commotion of urban civilization, which I usually craved to escape.

I guess it's the incorrigible urbanite in me, and the nostalgia feel for a childhood in Taipei. I grew up near the Jen-ai Roundabout. Jen-ai Elementary School was a three-minute walk from my house, across a crowded street of cram schools. We would always say: "Let's go to Eslite Books! The one right outside our front door." Or: "Let's go to the Far Eastern Department Store! The one right across the way." Living in the cultural heart of the city was really convenient. Nowhere seemed far away, as if the most distant land were close at hand, as if whatever I wanted I could just reach out and take.

I never lived in downtown Kraków. Even when I lived closest, I would still have to walk fifteen minutes to get to a place with an 'urban vibe' (somewhere with cafés, bookstores, restaurants, and banks): the Rynek Główny, the Main Square in the old city. Kraków is a very European city, replete with a graceful, profoundly classical beauty. But classical beauty did nothing for my homesickness.

What about the bookstores? There are indeed bookstores, but only chain stores without much character. And the antiquarian shops are so austere I feel I can only look on from afar. There are only a couple of independent bookstores. And the cafés? Yes, there are cafés, and they're really interesting. But the cafés here all double as bars, so while they're good places to go for fun or to have a chat, the mood isn't right if you want a quiet place to work. Restaurants don't sell snacks. And when you

go to the bank, the step-motherly lady who handles your business is nothing like the xiaojie who bows, smiles and serves you tea in Taiwan. The convenience stores aren't open all night. The only way for a typical Taipei kid to relieve homesickness is to go gaze at a raised roadway.

There's only one other place I can go to soothe my soul, the Skel-etor Tower, by the Mogilskie Roundabout. It wasn't supposed to be called Skeletor. It was supposed to be a twenty-four story building. Construction began in 1975 and stopped four years later when the money ran out. It's been standing there ever since, a ruin in the middle of the city. For a while it was a giant billboard, advertising *Avatar* or whatever the latest Hollywood blockbuster was for miles around. To be perfectly honest, whenever I went past on the bus, the Navi princess on the side of Skeletor looked truly ghastly.

Why would I pass such a forbidding old building to indulge nostalgia? Just because it reminds me of the Hotel Fortuna I would pass as a kid whenever I went around the Jenai Roundabout. It had a better fate than the Skeletor. For a while it hosted 'glittering official gatherings' and was 'a place of pomp and circumstance,' according to the Taipei municipal government website. But in 1982, financial problems forced the Hotel Fortuna to close, and everything was moved out except the skeletal frame. Later on, when its stakeholders were unable to reach a consensus, the frame of the Hotel Fortuna sat empty, and this is how it stood all through my childhood and adolescence.

My most vivid memory of Taipei, in fact, is from the night before I went off to school in England. After an all-night karaoke marathon at the Holiday KTV in Danshui with all my theater friends, I came home at dawn with sleepy eyes. Going around the Jenai Roundabout, I looked up and—Wow! Incredible! Under wraps for the longest time, the ruined Fortuna was newly unveiled, and perched on its head, haloed in the morning light, a crane wielding a wrecking ball.

That was the last time I saw the ruined mien of the Fortuna Hotel.

When I came home for winter vacation, the Fortuna Hotel had gone the way of the proverbial river of springwater that flows to the east: in its place was a construction site and a half completed edifice. One summer, several years later, it had turned into a 'glittering' glass-plated skyscraper, the headquarters of Taishin Financial Holding Co., The strange thing is that whenever I see that shiny new building I feel: *Ah! I'm not at home here anymore.*