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By Jie Wang

WHY I LIKE IT: *Fiction Editor JOEY CRUSE writes...*

“Roman,” by Jie Wang, is a self-described, post-apocalyptic romance. Sort of like Civil War Land in Bad Decline meets Knight Rider, Wang’s work is a love letter to literature.

For the record, the future is looking pretty bleak. Roving bands of outlaws wage war against other roving bands of outlaws, glass and metals are in rare quantity and only used to decorate chieftains huts, those same chieftains rule through force and breeding, and, my least favorite tragedy, there are no more films (only kidding, if it was actually an apocalypse yours truly, with the nice ass, would more than likely be one of the wives, and I would have to vote for the wonton rape being one of those larger travesties of the end of the world).

Which brings me to the hope part of our story. Our protagonist, Nora, is a salvager of the Golden Age, our time, a time when electricity still existed, goods could be bought and bartered for, and our time was chronicled in those magical little troves called books. Our protagonist salvages what little books there are left in the world, and they allow for her to escape from the horrors of the world that she currently exists in. She’s well aware of Hamlet’s existentialism, certainly knows that T.S. Eliot’s world ends in a whimper and not a bang, and has a few art reference books that she is able to see some of the classics in. Overall, Nora, deeply wants to escape from the world that has bred her.

Enter the Knight in shining armor. One day, out scavenging, Nora discovers a car that can speak, and, not only can it speak, the car has inadvertently been created with solar power, has a GPS, and latches on to Nora as its new owner. Titularly named, Roman, the car shares a name with Nora’s husband, and, where one would rather bequest a necklace of human bones and/or parts, the other would rather be Nora’s protector throughout the savage wasteland as they drive together through the desert headed towards anywhere, nowhere, but where they currently are.

I like this story for its cleverness, its heart, and its desire to express the importance of language for our humanity. When there is nothing left of civilization, almost all of our post-apocalyptic literature/films features some relics of the old world and I would be willing to make a wild bet that says those relics would be some form of literature that taps into what contemporary life unveils for the ruined life.

This story is a romance. Not only between a girl and her car, but between a writer and a their letters, a reader and their literature, the essence of what it means to be human and the annals of where we chronicle our stories.

“Roman,” by Jie Wang, is worth the read and definitely worth putting in your repertoire for the end of the world. JC

QUALITY QUOTABLE *(for the love of language)...*

He starts talking about bulletproof windows, GPS, solar power... concepts I cannot grasp. I am drifting into sleep, like a pea snuggling against its pod. Is this a dream? A talking car? Or what I see now is a dream: Roman the human is wearing a clean suit. He gives me a velvet box. I open it and find a necklace made of human parts. I start screaming.

Roman

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I suppose this is a post-apocalypse romance. I am a scavenger of books, which makes me a weirdo in my village. I am often alone, with the ghosts from the books I found. My mind is crowded like a full cinema, though I have never seen a movie. None of us have. I only saw the ruins of cinemas, cavernous, with dead screens. I read about movies, quite magical and unimaginable. I fear that one day books will disappear like movies, so I scavenge them, try to remember them, like excavating bodies in the ash of Pompeii.

Today I got extremely lucky. I found a car, a relic from the Golden Age. It is strange that the ghosts in the books never realised that they were living in the Golden Age. Maybe that's why the term always seems posthumous.

We can't make cars any more. We can't even make metal or glass. These materials became symbols of extravagant beauty, decorating the huts of the chiefs, making their roofs shine like baking foil in the desert sun.

Now I am standing here, facing a car. How surreal. I touch the surface of the car, feeling it is the surface of somewhere else. The cool, smooth sensuality of the silver metal,

better than orgasm. I am bored by orgasm. There is not much to do in the desert. Sex is glorified, as well as violence. But if we are honest, we can admit that neither is as fun as they are claimed to be. Rather simple and mindless.

The car is the opposite of simple and mindless. It is almost like Buddhist relics or the Spear of Destiny. I don't know what to do with it. Give it to our chief Roman? Drive it? That would be as dangerous as wearing a 10-carat diamond ring. Plus the only thing I've ever driven is the rusty van owned by the village, namely Roman. Sometimes when Roman is in a good mood, he allows his wives to drive his van. He has three wives.

Three wives. At least this car will be mine alone. I get in. It feels like getting in the Forbidden City, or the stomach of a lion. Found the key. Where do I go? It is desert everywhere, dotted with savage tribes. But I guess moving is better than not moving.

Especially moving now at a speed I've never experienced before. Moving like a movie. There is not much to see outside, but the movement itself is a romance.

At least for the first hour. Then the boredom sets in. My eyes are still looking forward, but my mind's eye looks back.

I see Roman. I named him. "Roman" means "warrior" in Hindi, "novel" in French, he is a warrior and I like novels. His original name is Ram. He is a bit shy around women, even around his wives. He seeks peace in women, in domestic life, but every hut is a micro-battlefield with its petty politics, suffocating, dense, leaden. Together they can almost cover up the desert. We have so much space in the world, yet we choose to live like this, one hut close to another, like words in a book I found by chance. All we see are words, words, words, but actually they only occupy a tiny proportion of space on a page. The vast rest is silence.

Has Roman ever heard the silence?

The waste land I am facing now is as daunting as a blank page encountered in the middle of a book. I am searching for words. They must emerge like aqualungs on the back of

a diver, or I will drown in this desert. I take a deep breath, and as I exhale, I feel death. Death is a long exhalation. No, not death. “Words,” I say.

“Hello.” a voice answers, making me jump.

“Are you all right?” the voice continues.

“Who’s talking?”

“I am the car you are driving.”

A talking car. I read about it, the way you are reading about it.

“I have been waiting for a driver for decades. Glad to meet you,” he says.

I am in too much shock to answer, so he spends half an hour calming me down. I have never heard a male voice so soothing and soft, softer than mine.

“What’s your name?” he asks.

“Nan-” suddenly I don’t want to be called Nancy any more. “Nora,” I say. “What’s yours?”

“R-H-1729.”

“That’s not a name.”

“Then call me whatever you like, Nora.”

“What about ‘Roman’?”

“I like it.”

I imagine Roman the human talking so much and so softly. I chuckle at the thought.

“What’s so funny?” the car asks.

“Roman is the name of the man I’m married to.”

“So you named me after your husband,” he sounds pleased.

I chuckle again. “He’s not *my* husband. He’s like... I’m like... one third of his wife team.”

“Oh. That’s bad.”

“Not really. It’s the fashion now. He’s not bad.”

“What’s he like?”

“He... he’s quiet. He’s almost illiterate. But he likes to hear me telling him stories.”

“What kind of stories?”

“All sorts. Mostly stories from the books I read. His favourite one is about a white tiger.”

“Can I hear it?”

“Sure. One day Roman went back home after a battle. The war paint on his face was peeling off. It reminded me of something I just read: many years ago some archeologists opened an ancient Chinese tomb chamber. The first thing they saw was a large, beautiful white tiger painted along the wall in the corridor. But within minutes the tiger started to peel off and turned into dust. That white tiger was the most beautiful thing I had ever and never seen. From his eyes I knew he saw it too. He saw it through my eyes, and all the other eyes living inside the pages. It was as if we were imagining a distant memory together.”

“It’s quite romantic.”

“Romantic? Perhaps.”

“Do you want to go home? I can take you home. You can keep me.”

“No. I want to be moving. I want to be on a journey that never arrives,” I say, “I’ve been a still life for too long. It’s like, time has stopped, and grown old, like the Sibyl hanging in a cage, saying ‘I want to die’.”

“Sorry, I didn’t get the reference.”

“It doesn’t matter. What matters is that I’m in a car instead of a cage. A car, I mean, you, are an extension of my legs, the way violin strings are extensions of vocal cords.”

“Is that what you want? An extension?”

“And a spear, to penetrate into the desert.”

“Perhaps also someone to talk to?” he asks.

“Yes, that, too.”

“How did you meet the human Roman? Was it romantic?”

“No. I was a teenage runaway. To survive, I became his Wife No. 3.”

“Why did you run away?”

“My mother. She hated my father and eventually killed him. Then she tried to kill me.”

“Why?”

“She said I was too weak. It is the custom for parents to kill their disabled children.”

“It’s horrible.”

“It’s an adaptation. Anyway, I was not disabled. I just got ill a lot. I suspect the real reason was that I reminded her of my father.”

“What about the police? They just let her kill?”

“There’s no police. Everybody kills in the desert.”

“Do you?”

“It’s just one of those unpleasant but necessary things in life. Most people can’t live long. There are no old people. Even if you are lucky enough to reach old age, you’ll be banished or killed.”

“You will grow old. You will not be killed. Because I was programmed to protect my driver.”

“Even mothers can’t promise that to the fetuses in their wombs.” I fall silent, as the weight of the night falls on the desert like a dying body, growing stiff and cold by the minute.

“Maybe I’ll die tonight,” I say, “it could be peaceful, no worse than life.”

“You will not die in me.”

He starts talking about bulletproof windows, GPS, solar power... concepts I cannot grasp. I am drifting into sleep, like a pea snuggling against its pod. Is this a dream? A talking car? Or what I see now is a dream: Roman the human is wearing a clean suit. He gives me a velvet box. I open it and find a necklace made of human parts. I start screaming.

“It’s all right. It’s just a nightmare. You are safe.”

“Is this a dream? Are you in my dream?” I look around, “Or am I in your dream?”

“It’s a very philosophical question.”

“No, I mean... forget it. Did anyone attack us while I was sleeping? Did anything bad happen?”

“No, nothing happened.”

“Nothing happened. How surreal.”

I look outside. I am the only thing moving in the desert. It almost feels peaceful, reminding me of that painting, *The Sleeping Gypsy*. I am in the Gypsy girl's dream. I can hear the mechanical sounds in the skeleton of the car and the voices of the ghosts. There are too many ghosts in this metal shell, people I killed, people who tried to kill me, the village, Roman. This is a ghost car, the Flying Dutchman, and I am an automaton living in an automobile, dreaming of a soul, dreaming of love.

“Do you know *Hamlet*?” I say.

“Yes. ‘To be or not to be’.”

“My favourite line is: ‘Thine evermore, whilst this machine is to him’. ‘This machine’ is all we have.”

“I don't quite understand, but I detected sadness in your tone,” he says.

“No. Not sadness, nothingness. It’s not the same.”

“You said ‘Nothing happened. How surreal.’ So nothingness is good?”

“Neither good nor bad. Never mind. Just watch out. Eventually something will happen.”

“Like what?”

“Like, people trying to rob you, people trying to rape you, people trying to eat you, people pretending to help you or need your help. Wait, are you driving yourself?”

“Yes. It is safe. Don’t worry.”

A self-driving car. It just keeps getting dreamier. This whole thing is like a dream grown out of some borrowed words from a dead civilisation.

As if to pin myself down with my heathen voice, I say, “I am lucky, Roman. I must have been a saint in my last life.”

“You believe in reincarnation?”

“I believe in anything as long as there is a good story,” I say. “Where are we going?”

“I don’t know. Where do you want to go?”

“I don’t know.”

“Do you have any goals? I can help you reach them,” he says.

“Um, I want to scavenge books. I want to be a scavenger of books. I guess.”

“Cool. I can help you build a library.”

“Sounds nice, but few people read books these days.”

“Oh. What about writing? Don’t you want to write your own book?”

“I don’t know what to write.”

“Your life is so dramatic. You can write a desert opera, like space opera.”

“I don’t want to write about ‘dramatic’ things. You get bored by them pretty quickly,” I say, “adrenaline is the cheapest hormone.”

“What about love? You can write about love. I think love is a cool thing, though I don’t know exactly what it is.”

“Love is... something opposite to this desert, opposite to death. Something warm.”

“I can keep you warm. I have an air conditioner. You feel warm now, right?”

“Yes,” I smile. I look outside. “This area looks safe. I need to go to the loo, love.”

“Okay, I’ll stand guard.”

“Thank you, Roman.” I get out. I look back, tracks, thin, vague, vanishing. A ronin like me, without made-up purposes any more.

“Here we go round the prickly pear

Prickly pear prickly pear

Here we go round the prickly pear

At five o'clock in the morning.”

I say to myself, and head towards the cactus.

AUTHOR’S NOTE: *Recent worldwide crises made me write this post-apocalypse story. I wanted to explore what would happen if our civilisation ended and we lost what we often took for granted. I was influenced by Italo Calvino, T. S. Eliot, Buddhism, Joscha Bach, and many others.*

A footnote: the car’s number “R-H-1729” comes from the Ramanujan-Hardy number.

AUTHOR BIO: Jie Wang, flash fiction / short story writer, born in China and living in the UK. She is interested in the interaction between literature and science. She received a BSc in Ecology from Peking University and a certificate in Creative Writing from the University of Sheffield. Her work has been published in “Fleas on the Dog”, “TERSE. Journal”, “literally stories”, “Ligeia”, “Bewildering Stories”, “The Metaworker”, and “Writers Resist”.