

THE CURRENT STATE OF THINGS

Written by

Dellin Zhang

FADE IN:

EXT. CHO'S DINER - NIGHT

SUPER: TORONTO, NOVEMBER 1997

Orange light pools from large diner windows. Business bustles inside. The sound of muffled CHATTER and CLINKING grows --

INT. CHO'S DINER - NIGHT

Double doors swing wide as 8-month pregnant ZHILAN (Chinese, 26) rushes out balancing four burger plates on a tray. Loose strands of dark hair stick to her sweaty forehead.

She arrives at a table of THREE TEENS sporting skater garb and tacky jewelry. Zhilan bends sideways to set their plates down.

The GIRL (14) hunched in the corner eyes Zhilan's belly. Her two guy friends pay no attention, already scarfing down their food.

Zhilan smooths her uniform apron, adjusts her name tag.

ZHILAN
(Chinese accent)
Hope you enjoy.

TEEN 2
(food in mouth)
Yeah, grab me a Coke, will ya --
ow!

GIRL
Trevor.

Teen 2 snickers.

TEEN 2/TREVOR
What? An extra pop won't hurt.

GIRL
(re: Trevor)
Guys, we don't have time --

TEEN 1
Oh, and more water for the table.

Zhilan nods, whisks the tray away.

GIRL
 (hushed)
 Pat, she's pregnant.

TEEN 1/PAT
 I'm not blind, Susie. Eat your
 food.

Zhilan rushes back through the double doors into --

INT. CHO'S DINER - KITCHEN - CONTINUOUS

CHAOS. COOKS shout above the SIZZLING grease and CLATTERING tools.

Zhilan reaches for the last water pitcher right as it's snatched by RUE (Korean Canadian, 21), uniformed waitress.

RUE
 You know I would Z, they're just
 all so goddamn mean tonight.

ZHILAN
 When are they not?

Rue flashes a cheeky grin before disappearing through the doors. Zhilan turns on the sink, watches the water slowly fill a pitcher.

INT. CHO'S DINER - NIGHT

Zhilan bursts out the double doors with a full pitcher and a Coke, beelines for the table of teens... it's empty.

She pans over to the front door, locks eyes with Trevor who's still chewing his food. He eyes the Coke.

PAT
 (across the room)
 Go go go go!

The teens dash.

ZHILAN
 Hey! No!

Rue notices, races out the door.

Zhilan attempts to chase after -- CRASH. Another WAITER's plates of burgers shatter. Zhilan's water pitcher has emptied onto her apron, pooling the tiled floor.

CUSTOMERS watch in hushed aftermath. The Waiter shoots daggers at Zhilan, empty tray in hand. He kneels and scoops up soggy burger carnage onto the tray.

ZHILAN (CONT'D)

I -- I... sorry.

Zhilan slowly bends down to help but the Waiter's done.

WAITER

(under his breath)

Why are you still working here?

Zhilan winces as he bumps her shoulder on the way to the kitchen.

Conversations resume.

Front door CHIMES as Rue returns, out of breath and empty-handed.

DAVID (O.S.)

Jillian.

Zhilan looks up to see a stern DAVID (White, 30s), manager, sharply nod his head towards the double doors.

She hangs her head, sighs.

INT. CHO'S DINER - BREAK ROOM - NIGHT

Zhilan leans against a wall of rusty lockers, lifts the wet apron and airs it out.

Next to her, Rue lifts her uniform polo, a bruise purples by her shoulder. Rue catches Zhilan staring.

RUE

So, what'd manager man say this time?

Rue pulls on a tee, covering the bruise from sight.

ZHILAN

Mister David, he says he trying to help me, but I need to be... more respectful of his time.

RUE

(snorts)

When's he going to get your name right?

Rue tosses her uniform into a locker.

RUE (CONT'D)

David just said that to boost his ego. All talk. People like us don't fit their fancy little party guest lists. We don't get any actual help.

ZHILAN

People like us...

Zhilan holds her belly. Rue softens.

RUE

Hey, have you received your -- um, your acceptance letter?

Zhilan purses her lips, shakes head.

RUE (CONT'D)

It'll come soon. Then you can get out of here.

ZHILAN

We don't know it yet, accepted or not.

RUE

(enunciating every word)

You will get in and you will go.

(normal)

You're a fuckin' genius!

Zhilan shakes her head, smiling this time. Rue changes out of her slacks.

RUE (CONT'D)

Have you told him?

ZHILAN

Who?

RUE

You know who.

Zhilan's silent, grabbing a tattered tote from her locker. Rue pulls on jeans.

RUE (CONT'D)

You should tell him before that -- you know...

(MORE)

RUE (CONT'D)
 (gestures at Zhilan's
 belly)
 Pops out.

ZHILAN
 Yeah.

Rue glances at the clock behind Zhilan, scrambles.

RUE
 Shit! My bus. You're working
 Tuesday, yeah? We still doing the
 study thing after? Got that test on
 Friday.

ZHILAN
 (nods)
 Boyfriend no pick up?

Rue grabs her belongings, shuts her locker.

RUE
 Busy.

ZHILAN
 Again?

RUE
 Yep.

Rue hugs Zhilan from the side, then heads out.

RUE (CONT'D)
 (without turning)
 Tell Xing tonight, Z. Just rip the
 bandaid off!

EXT. STREET - NIGHT

Tungsten street lights illuminate Zhilan's back as she holds her damp uniform apron out to the side, lightly waving it back and forth. She enters a dark neighborhood.

INT. APARTMENT - LOBBY - NIGHT

Wall of metal mailboxes glisten in dim, flickering light. Apron slung over a shoulder, Zhilan unlocks a mailbox.

She pulls out mail. A bit too hastily as a thick packet envelope THUDS onto the floor.

Zhilan takes a breath and slowly bends down, reaches for the packet. Her fingers gloss over a university seal stamped on the corner.

She picks the envelope up.

INSERT ENVELOPE: "Wayne State University... Admission's Office... Detroit, Michigan, USA."

Zhilan sucks a breath in, anticipation.

INT. APARTMENT - LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

BINH and MY (both 30s), a weary Vietnamese couple, sit in the kitchen, heads buried in heated discussion. A pile of receipts are sprawled across the table.

Zhilan shuts the front door, the couple look up. Zhilan smiles, nods, and waves. They offer half smiles, resume a hushed conversation.

Zhilan mounts the stairs, slowly.

INT. APARTMENT - ROOM - NIGHT

Moonlight slides from horizontal window slats into the sparsely furnished shoebox room. A sheeted mattress occupies the majority of the floor, a short table squeezes between the bed and the wall.

Two small suitcases lay open in the remaining space.

Framed images sit on the table: a few black & white photos of a CHINESE FAMILY, one of Zhilan embracing a CHINESE MAN.

A makeshift laundry line hovers above the bed. A small discolored patch of water damage looms in the corner.

Zhilan enters, switching on a yellow light that simultaneously comes to life with the rickety ceiling fan.

INT. APARTMENT - ROOM - NIGHT

The apron sways gently on the laundry line. The now opened packet envelope lays on the mattress. Zhilan, in loose pajamas, sits next to it holding a paper letter.

She reads... then grins. Wiggles in excitement.

ZHILAN
 (to herself)
 School of... Engineering.

INSERT LETTER: "deposit of \$200... please email us a decision by November 21, 1997."

Zhilan exhales. She tucks the letter back into the envelope.

Zhilan slowly gets on her knees, rummages through clothes in her suitcase, reaches to pull out a bulky manila envelope. She turns it upside down and shakes.

Canadian dollars wrapped in thin bundles PLOP onto hardwood. Zhilan counts \$200 -- the majority of the stash -- wraps the bundle with elastic.

Zhilan slips the university packet into the manila envelope, followed by the bundles of cash. She tucks the manila envelope away to the bottom her suitcase.

She leans against the wall, tilts her head back, eyes the water damage...

The clock on the wall ticks past 10 PM.

INT. APARTMENT - ROOM - MIDNIGHT

Zhilan lays on the mattress in pajamas, asleep. A gentle breeze brushes past the window curtains.

The door CREAKS open and shut, waking Zhilan.

XINGBIN (27), overgrown hair but handsome nonetheless, removes his jacket at the doorway. Zhilan, bleary-eyed, points at his dress shoes.

All italicized dialogue is in Mandarin, subtitled.

ZHILAN
You're going to damage those at the site.

Xingbin chuckles, sets his cross-body bag down on the table. He walks over to Zhilan and kisses the top of her head.

XINGBIN
 Sorry I woke you.

She notices a crinkled notepad paper peeking out of his trouser pockets, grabs it.

Printed at the top: "SKILLS FOR CHANGE." The paper is filled with handwritten English practice words and Chinese translations. Jotted at the bottom is a number and an address for "NEW WEBB TECH."

ZHILAN

I thought you were working overtime.

Xingbin takes the paper and tucks it into his bag.

XINGBIN

I said I'd be home late.

Zhilan sits up, spots construction boots hiding behind Xingbin's suitcase. He catches this.

XINGBIN (CONT'D)

The site's... been providing gear.

Xingbin exhales, sits down. Zhilan pinches her nose.

ZHILAN

*(teasingly)
You smell.*

XINGBIN

*Hey! This stink pays the bills.
(then)
Until I get a professional job...*

ZHILAN

You'll find one.

Xingbin raises a brow.

ZHILAN (CONT'D)

I believe you will find professional job.

XINGBIN

Your English sounds good.

ZHILAN

Xingbin... if I had a university degree, maybe one from America, I could secure a tech job.

Xingbin flops down onto the mattress. Zhilan looks over.

ZHILAN (CONT'D)

Our studies from China aren't worth anything here.

XINGBIN

You don't have to worry about this.

Xingbin grabs Zhilan's hand and gently pulls her down to lay next to him.

XINGBIN (CONT'D)

It'll be fine. I will find a way.

They stare up at the laundry line, silent. Xingbin reaches up and touches Zhilan's drying apron uniform.

ZHILAN

My boss cut my hours again.

XINGBIN

Our baby must've had a conversation with him, doesn't like the stress.

ZHILAN

(laughs)

Please be serious. We're scraping by this month, if he cuts more --

XINGBIN

Then you'll be better for it. You have to trust me, Zhilan. I have an interview lined up and I've got a good feeling about this one.

ZHILAN

You can't ask your site supervisor for a raise or bonus or something?

Xingbin sighs.

A moment passes.

ZHILAN (CONT'D)

This -- it all feels too risky.

Xingbin gazes at Zhilan.

XINGBIN

There was no future in China, you know this. Look around us, we have everything we need right here.

Xingbin holds Zhilan's belly, Zhilan holds his hand. She moves closer, their faces almost touching.

Xingbin's eyelids droop closed. He snuggles closer.

ZHILAN

*The Vietnamese couple downstairs
still won't talk to me...*

XINGBIN

They just moved in, be patient.

ZHILAN

*I think three months is patient
enough. The wine I gave them is
gathering dust.*

XINGBIN

I could --

ZHILAN

Don't even think about drinking it.

XINGBIN

*Why did we spend our hard-earned
money on it then?*

ZHILAN

It would be good to have friends.

XINGBIN

*(sleepy mumble)
You can't... buy friends.*

Zhilan chuckles.

ZHILAN

*Yeah, maybe you're right.
(whispers)
Good night, love.*

Together, they drift into sleep.

INT. POLLING CENTER - MORNING

Bright walls, the center is decked out in election posters and signs for Toronto's 1997 Municipal Election.

Zhilan in a neat top; Xingbin in a white button-down. They wait in a line of POLL WORKERS. Scattered conversations all around.

The line moves and the couple shuffles forward with it, reaching the front desk. BARBARA (30s), navy blouse and official badge, warily eyes Zhilan's belly.

BARBARA

Name?

ZHILAN

Zhilan Fei and Xingbin Fei.

BARBARA

Jill-Ann and Sean-Bin Fei?

The couple glance at each other... nod.

BARBARA (CONT'D)

(gesturing)

Alright, Jill, you're going to follow this group down the hallway to pick up binders.

(then)

Sean, you're going to join the group outside to help people at the voting booths, alright?

ZHILAN

Yes, thank you.

Zhilan starts off in to the right. Xingbin follows.

BARBARA

Hey!

They stop. The Worker taps Xingbin's shoulder and points to the left.

BARBARA (CONT'D)

You go there. Your wife goes the other way. Got it?

Xingbin doesn't move. A few antsy Poll Workers behind them crowd forward.

XINGBIN

(Chinese accent)

Uh... why? No -- not together.

BARBARA

That's just how these things go, okay? We've already assigned...

Xingbin shoots Zhilan a look, hesitant.

BARBARA (CONT'D)

Sir, I'm just doing my job. You can either do yours or go home.

ZHILAN

Okay, yes. Thank you.

(to Xingbin)

It's fine. We'll meet at the end.

XINGBIN

Okay --

BARBARA

(claps her hands)

Okay, let's move people.

Zhilan and Xingbin look at each other as their respective groups part ways. Zhilan gives Xingbin a thumbs up. Xingbin forces a smile and nods.

EXT. POLLING STATION - DAY

Xingbin, now in a neon vest, stands a few feet away from an open polling booth in front of a line of VOTERS. From afar, a neon-vested Poll Worker points a voter to where Xingbin stands.

Xingbin shifts his feet, nerves.

ANA (18), striped shirt and low-rise jeans, moves her sunglasses up as she approaches Xingbin.

ANA

Hey, so how do I do this?

XINGBIN

Uh...

INT. POLLING OFFICE - DAY

A Poll Worker ahead of Zhilan picks up a stack of binders and moves to a desk area.

Zhilan follows suit and wraps her hands around a stack of binders. She heaves and immediately drops them. She looks behind her at MIKE (White, 40s), grizzled beard.

ZHILAN

Can you help, please?

MIKE

Yeah, no problem.

Mike lifts up a stack of binders and sets it on a desk.

MIKE (CONT'D)

Let me know if you need anymore help, now.

ZHILAN

Thank you, sir.

MIKE
 (winks)
 You got it.

She leans back in her chair for a breath, glances out the window to catch from afar: Xingbin in a safety vest awkwardly shifting his weight from leg to leg as he instructs a VOTER.

INT. POLLING STATION - BOOTH - DAY

Xingbin hovers over Ana as she fills out a voting form.

GREG (V.O.)
 (outside booth)
 Hey!

Xingbin turns to see GREG (White, 40s), official badge pinned to plaid polo, pop his head into the booth. He motions for Xingbin to come out.

EXT. POLLING STATION - CONTINUOUS

Xingbin exits the booth.

GREG
 You're not allowed to enter the booths.

XINGBIN
 The girl ask help.

GREG
 You give instructions outside. That was listed very clearly in the handbook.

XINGBIN
 Yes.

GREG
 Okay. Don't go into the booths.

Greg leaves. Ana peeps out.

ANA
 Hey, um, I'm not sure I'm doing this right. Could you come check?

XINGBIN
 Uh. What you need?

ANA

I can't really explain, paper's in there. It'll only take just a sec.

Xingbin stiffly shakes his head.

ANA (CONT'D)

(exasperated)

Whatever.

Ana scans the other Poll Workers, starts towards them.

ANA (CONT'D)

Thanks dude.

XINGBIN

Welcome.

Xingbin sighs.