

Li's Step

By Peter Wood  
peterwood2@gmail.com

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The OLD MAN sits next to a hospital bed. He wears a dark suit and a fedora. He has a cane.

OLD MAN

It was. Breath-taking. Oh, there was grumbling here and there from the racists and Tea Party people that the first human to step foot on Mars was Chinese. And a woman at that. Xiu Li Tien. Captain Xiu Li Tien. But for most of us she was us. All of us. We had made it. A planet. 140 million miles away. We made it. I wish . . . you'd. Some days it feels like the whole world was watching as the first video came back, that first video of her stepping foot on different planet. Li's Step they call it. Don't know where it came from, but it spread through the media fast. Li's Step. Where were you for Li's Step, people ask. Near strangers. Excited to hear your story but there is something else, a compulsion almost to fix themselves in the universe, to claim their spot even as we have expanded our world to encompass two planets. I was here, at this place, at this time, with these people, they seem to need to say, when we stepped out there. Li's Step.

Pause.

OLD MAN

But of course not everyone saw those first images come back in as close to real-time as possible. There were people who couldn't stop, couldn't hold their lives still at that time. Couldn't say to the universe, don't. I have to watch this. It's important. So for some of us, we don't have a story to tell about where we were for Li's Step. We were surgeons or nurses or soldiers or cops or airline pilots or grocery check-out clerks or working in sweatshops in China building electronics for the world, the electronics and components that went into the *Embassy*, our first true space ship, or starving to death in a Sudanese refuge camp.

Long pause.

OLD MAN

Or a husband.

Pause.

OLD MAN

Watching you die.

Pause.

OLD MAN

And the thing of it is, you are the only person I could tell this to who would understand. Part of me is so angry at you for picking that day, those hours to die so that I don't have anything to say when people ask me where I was for Li's Step because I wasn't anywhere but watching you leave me and I had wanted to see this day, this step, this testament to humanity all my life and yes I have seen the video but I didn't see it live and so I am angry at you and you are the only person who would understand that anger and you would probably just nod and stroke my cheek and hold my hand and I would know that as selfish and stupid such anger is, that you understood and you forgave.

The Old Man stands. Looks at the hospital bed for a long moment. Walks, slowly, off.

Lights out.