Rita Wong and the Jade Mask

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Mark Jones



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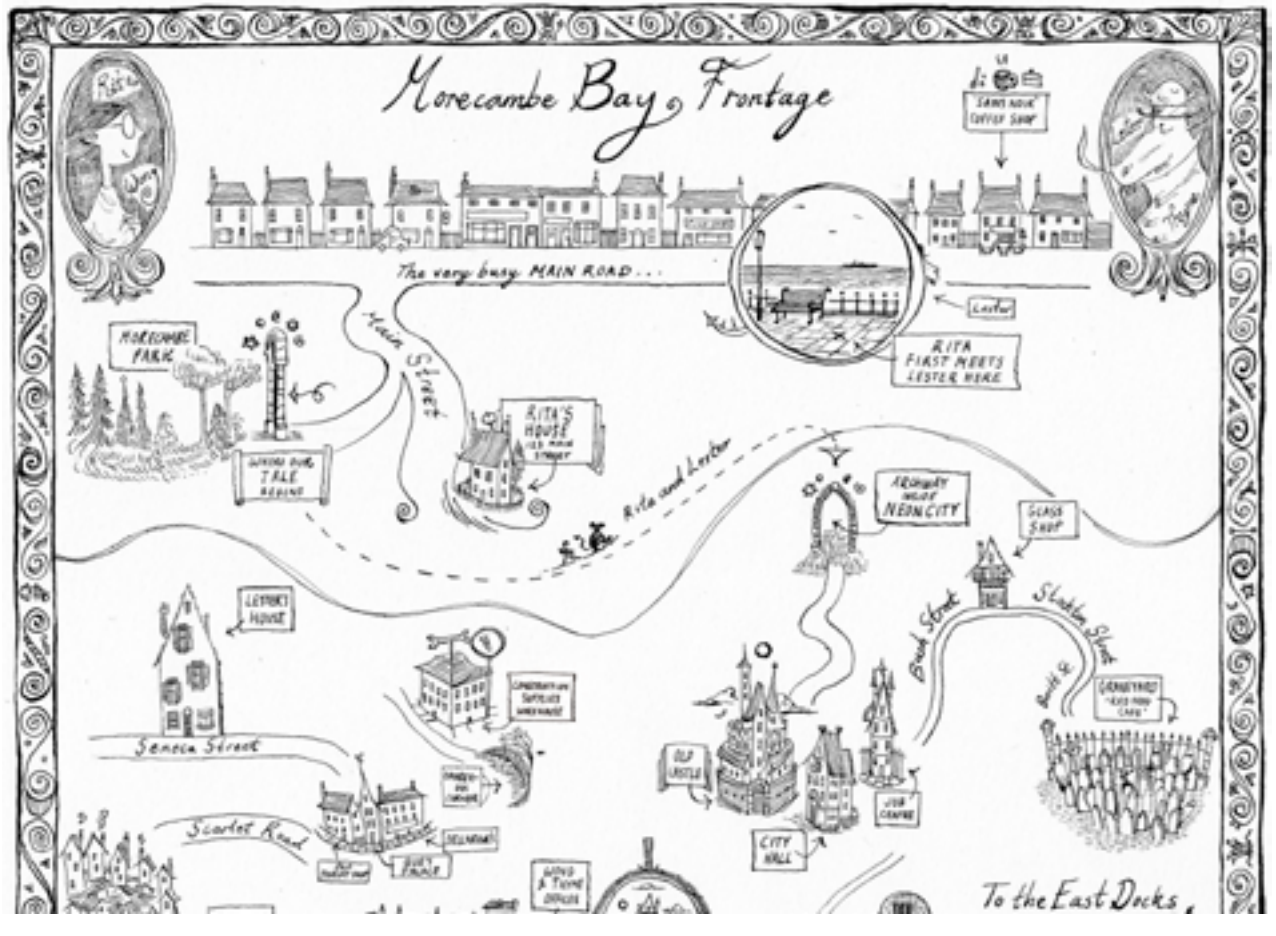
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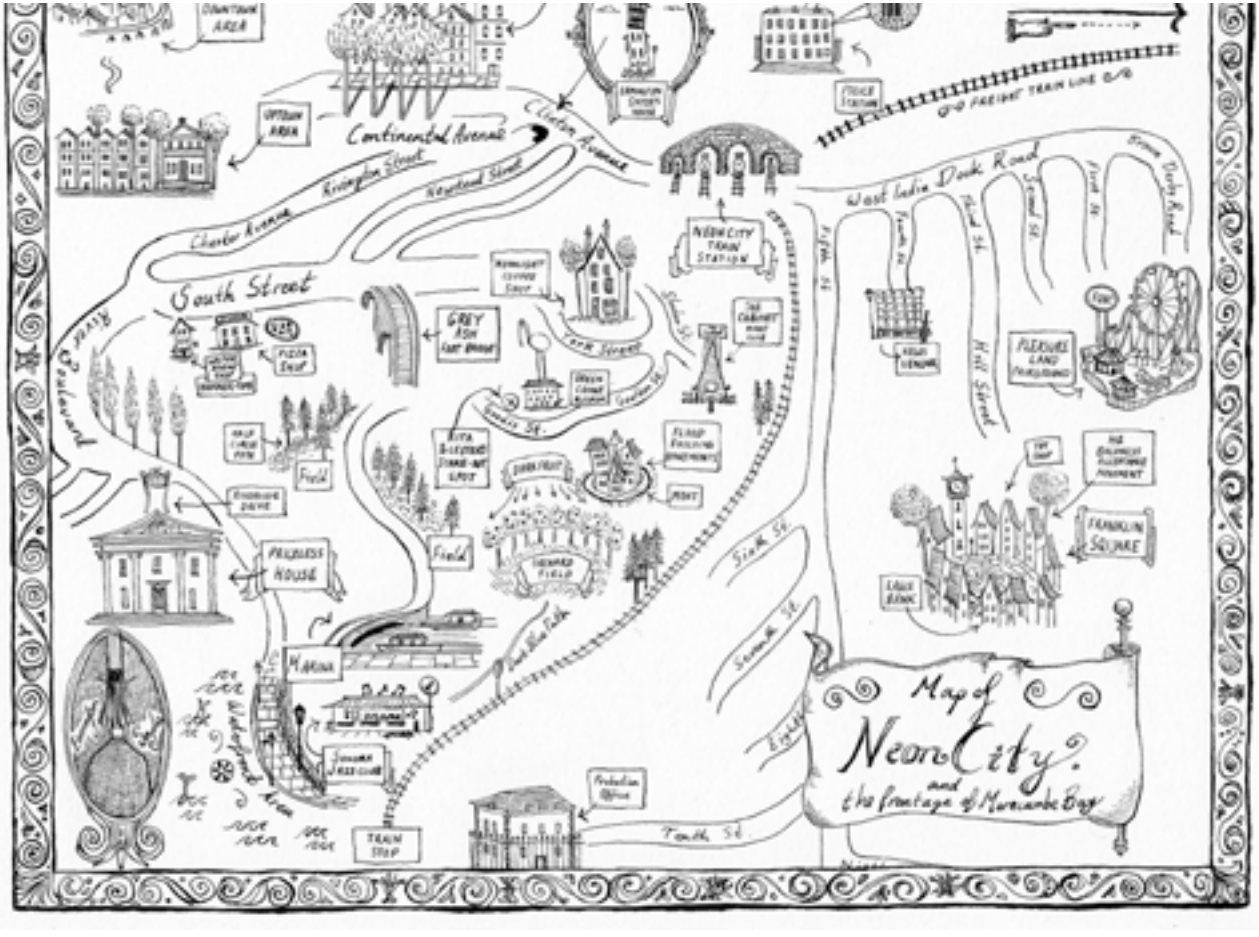
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Morecambe Bay Frontage
The very busy MAIN ROAD...
Main Street
MORECAMBE PARK
TALE READING
RITA'S HOUSE
Rita and Lester
RITA FIRST MEETS LESTER HERE
Lester
NEON CITY
GLASS SHOP
LESTER'S HOUSE
Seneca Street
Scarlet Road
Broad Street
Sladden Street
OLD CASTLE
CITY HALL
To the East Docks


Continental Avenue
Clinton Avenue
Kensington Street
Newland Street
Charles Avenue
South Street
West India Dock Road
Front St
Third St
Second St
First St
Stone Docks Road
Hill Street
Sink St
Seventh St
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Map of
Neon City
and the frontage of Morecambe Bay


BALDNESS
ACCEPTANCE
Movement

CHAPTER ONE

A Bad Night at the Toy Shop

A small lithe man in a big top hat was carrying an enormous sheet of copper. He looked over his shoulder and opened the door to a toy shop. Inside the shop was warm and carried the scent of orange chocolate. Looking around, the man spotted a shelf containing an arrangement of dusty figures. He smiled at a vampire doll in a white bridal gown but frowned at the sight of a toy tiger with black stripes and brown eyes.

Adjusting his top hat, the man turned and made his way to the back of the shop. There he descended a staircase that led to a basement. He stepped through

a pair of black silk curtains at the bottom of the stairs. A clock in the basement chimed thirteen but no one was counting.

'Is this the headquarters of the *Baldness Acceptance Movement*?' the man asked.

A friendly balding werewolf stood up. He had been seated behind a circular walnut table that took up half of the basement and was littered with sweet wrappers.

'It certainly is,' answered the werewolf. 'And we're always happy to have new members.'

The man bowed deeply, hiding his face with the brim of his hat. He dropped the sheet of copper he had been carrying to the floor. A loud clang passed through the room. He removed his top hat to reveal a glossy, brown, full head of hair. His young striking profile was defined by an emerald spotlight. His eyes looked at the occupants of the basement, while his mouth stretched into a smile.

'My, my,' he said. 'I always wondered what a room full of giant hard-boiled eggs would look like.'

A nine-foot troll stood up from behind the table. The eyes in his face bulged more than his muscles.

'Buddy, I don't think I like your sense of humour,' he said.

'Sorry,' the man in the top hat replied. 'I've survived a dangerous night, and I just wanted a chuckle. I'm just practising being social. But don't you worry. I'll be *hair* today and gone tomorrow,' he said, before leaning forward and letting out a laugh.

'Another wisecrack like that, and you'll be sorry,' the werewolf announced, his hands balling into fists.

The man in the top hat smiled and approached the table. He walked briskly across a black and white marble floor.

'If you try and make me sorry,' he whispered, 'I'll polish your head like a filthy window. You have a temper like a tiger snake, my friend. But my bite is more lethal than yours. Now you and your friends should take a seat while I explain why I'm here.'

The troll picked up the table and threw it across the room. The impact ripped a yellow pipe from the wall which began to hiss steam. Above, a red strobe light began to blink.

'I think it's time for you to leave,' said the troll.

'How are you going to make me, Mr Shampoo Dodger?'

The troll charged across the room. He grunted and snorted as he lowered his head to attack.

The man in the top hat neatly sidestepped out of the way. Instead of meeting his opponent head-on, the man threw a volley of quick punches into the troll's back. He followed them up with an arm twist and a powerful back kick.

The troll was lifted cleanly off his feet. He felt himself fly across the room, and land back on his chair. The expression on his face was one of surprise and fear.

'My name is Ermington Snyde,' the man in the top hat announced. He squatted down on the floor to pick up the metal sheet. He removed a hammer from his pocket and nailed the copper layer to a wall. An atmosphere of evil then entered the room, and he left the occupants of the basement to endure it.

Glancing out of the toy shop's front window, Ermington heard a crack of thunder and watched the heavens open. The pavement, now slick with a deluge of rain, reflected a harmony of colours coming from neon lights in the street. As he stepped into the mist saturated night, he turned to face the front door.

Turning the key in the Chubb lock twice,

Ermington smiled to himself. The second rotation pushed the deadbolt further into the jamb. No one would be entering or leaving the toy shop ever again. He then snapped the key between his fingers, before disappearing into the jagged carbon black shadows of Neon City.



CHAPTER TWO

A Few Days Earlier in a Lonely Place

Tillotama Kumar had met a lot of serious children and teenagers in her time. None, however, were quite as serious as Rita Wong.

For the last hour in the coffee shop, Rita had never looked up. She had buried her head in a book about Art Deco, stopping only to sketch in her notepad.

'Hey, bookworm, you want another hot chocolate?'

'Well,' said Rita checking her mobile phone. 'The library doesn't open until nine o'clock. So, sure. I'd like another please, Miss Kumar.'

'Please call me Tilo. Saying "Miss Kumar" all the time reminds me I'm thirty-five.'

'Sorry, Tilo.'

'You know, you're far too efficient for this town.'

'How so?'

Tilo put a heavy coffee pot on the cherry-wood table between them. She took a seat and ran a hand through her dusky braided hair.

'This is Morecambe. English coastal towns are not like big cities. We do everything slow here. Relaxing with good food and drink is more important than being clockwise.'

'I just want to practise my drawing,' Rita replied, putting her book away.

'Ah, I see. You want to be a better artist than your father? That will take some doing. I hear he's a master with charcoal.'

'Oh, he is good,' Rita agreed. 'But I prefer Biro pens. They make nice clean lines.'

Tilo folded her arms across her chest. 'Morecambe is full of clean lines. And they will still be there tomorrow. But today is a Saturday. Are you sure you want to spend it alone in the library?'

'My father was going to take me to the movies. But he had to leave early this morning. Something about a bridge in Sunderland.'

'That's too bad,' Tilo said, her large brown eyes full of sympathy. 'He's a busy engineer, so there's not much he can do about it. Is his boss still making him drive all over England?' she asked, her small figure framed by a wall of jade-green tiles.

'Yes, he's busier than ever.'

'The library it is then I suppose. But maybe while you're there, can you do me a favour?'

'Of course,' Rita replied, her curiosity aroused.

'Good. But first I'll get that hot chocolate, then I'll tell you about the favour.' Tilo picked up the silver coffee pot and sauntered over to a rosewood counter. As she put the pot down, an espresso machine hissed at her like a resentful cobra.

Rita looked at the sunlight pouring in to the coffee shop. It divided neatly between the Venetian blinds, illuminating chrome, wood, and ceramics. Speakers in the ceiling above her poured out jazz music. The silky beats drifted through the air, relieving tension.

'Here's your assignment,' said Tilo, appearing from behind Rita. She briefly touched the tip of her nose as she sat down. 'I want you to draw this for me.' She placed a small blue striped box in front of Rita.

Inside the box was a gold ring in the shape of

a coiled snake. Set into the top of the ring was an emerald.

'Oh! That's so cool. Where did you get it, Tilo?'

'Someone I once loved gave it to me.'

'I like the snake,' said Rita, her green eyes lighting up in excitement.

'I thought you would. You like creepy stuff don't you?'

'Snakes aren't creepy.'

'Wait till a great big one bites you. Then you'll change your mind. Now,' Tilo gently placed the ring on Rita's index finger. 'Take good care of it. And bring it back only once you've drawn it. I'd better get back and fix that espresso machine. Who knows what else will break down today?'

Rita held her new ring up to the light and ran a finger across the emerald. The smooth gemstone had some kind of character engraved onto its surface. The marking was composed of thirty strokes. Rita did not know what the character meant, but somehow it seemed familiar.

Rita caught a glimpse of something across the road as she finished her hot chocolate. It was someone, or something, about eight feet in height.

'It' had decided to be brave, and was walking along Morecambe Bay in the numbing cold. It moved sturdily against the icy wind. Then it stopped to remove a hat from its head. It waved the hat in the air to shake the snow away.

Rita stood up and walked closer to the coffee shop's front window. She could now see that the thing had a large bald head. That would be nothing out of the ordinary. However, the head was not only large and bald but also green in colour.

Rita buttoned up her coat, picked up her backpack and stepped through the front door of the coffee shop. Her curiosity had overridden her caution. Outside, an ice-cold wind brushed against Rita's cheek and kept going. It saw no reason to stay.

Tilo watched Rita leave the warmth of the *Sans Noir* coffee shop. Her eyes tracked the movements of the teenage girl who was now putting on a pair of winter gloves.

As Tilo returned to repair her espresso machine, a mischievous smile danced across her face. 'Well, Ms Wong, I wonder if I'll ever see you again?' she said, under her breath.

