

One



IN THE COLD NIGHT AIR, Seth strolled along the *waitan*, the tree-lined promenade that ran along the western bank of the blackened Huangpu River in the city center. Up ahead, just past the entrance to the floating coffee bar, he saw a crowd of people gathered. A lone performer was standing up on the concrete ledge, just a step away from falling into the river's icy flow.

Seth approached the crowd, self-consciously slinking up next to a group of laughing peasants leaning lazily on one another's shoulders. He glanced at the peasant next to him, the young man's

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empty stare intermittently broken by cackles of laughter and rows of straight white teeth. Seth smiled at him, but awkwardly turned away as their eyes briefly met, the peasant's smile twisting into a cautious gape. Seth looked up to the performer, stripped down to his undershirt in the winter wind. And Seth, standing on his toes, now noticed that the man was not alone up on the ledge. A bird was perched gingerly on his shoe. With a little snap of the man's toe, the bird would hop, first from one foot, and back again. He then reached down, and the bird hopped on to his extended finger.

"I'm from Shanghai," the bird suddenly blurted out in Shanghai dialect, and the crowd burst out in laughter and applause, the peasant next to Seth calling out, "It can talk! It can talk!"

Seth laughed too, enjoying the peasant's outburst as much as the bird's.

He turned and continued along the promenade. It was here at the *waitan* where lovers would come at the height of a summer day to seek a moment's privacy on a shaded length of bench, where students would arrive in the evening to practice their English with foreign tourists, where groups of young boys would gather for talk or a little bit of troublemaking, and where the ever-looming *Gong An Ju*—the Public Security Bureau—would patrol, keeping a watchful eye that order be maintained.

Staring across the Huangpu to the giant neon "Casio" sign punctuating the Pudong farmland beyond, Seth sensed somebody walking beside him. He stole a quick look. Oftentimes he could tell just by a glance what kind of conversation would take place, should his eyes meet a passing stranger's. Sometimes it was a peasant, like the one Seth was just standing next to, with glazed eyes and blank expression. He might smile with a fearful caution in Seth's direction, but rarely would he summon the courage to actually address a foreigner. If he was wearing a standard blue or green cloth jacket and baggy pants, chances are he was a worker, seeking the cheap thrill of talking to a foreigner. "What country are you from?" he might inquire in a squeaky voice through his sparkling smile. When Seth would answer "America," he might

give the thumbs up sign. "Oh, very good! America is a very strong country!" And the questions would continue. "I teach English at the university," "I'm from New York," "I'm twenty-two," "I just graduated from university," "I'm not married yet." Sometimes it would be a student, more timid because he would want to try out his English. With a hesitant acknowledgment of his bespectacled eyes, he might ask in English, "Do you speak English?" "Yes." "Where are you from?" "America." And his eyes would light up. He would confide that he really hopes to be able to study in America someday. He might ask for advice on how to make out his university application, or how to improve his spoken English.

But this time, a quick glance did not seem sufficient for Seth to suss out the person beside him. This boy walked with a sprightly confidence. He was dressed not in blues and greens, but in browns and tans that complimented each other far better than was the norm for the clothes of a Chinese. But it was his eyes that truly kept Seth guessing. Not the vacant eyes of a peasant, not the seductive eyes of a worker, not the weary eyes of a student; these eyes were livelier, sharper, and had a knowing sophistication. And just as Seth turned his head back to the water, he noticed the bright, urban eyes perk up and twist in his direction.

"*Nihao!*" the boy said.

Seth looked toward him, pretending to be taken completely by surprise at his greeting, perhaps overcompensating for his actual curiosity. And when the boy broke into a smile that conveyed the same knowing awareness as did his eyes, it was as if he were telling Seth, "You don't need to play aloof with me. There's nothing to be afraid of." He might as well have stopped dead, put his hands on his hips and started shaking his head in disappointment at Seth's dishonesty.

"Did you like the bird?"

"Yeah, I did!" Seth answered with guarded enthusiasm.

The boy smiled. "Sometimes the audience is as much fun to watch as the performance, don't you think?"

Seth was hesitant to answer. "Um, sometimes, yeah," he

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confessed with reserve.

“Where are you from?”

“America.”

His eyes lit up. “Oh! San Francisco?”

“San Francisco? Why San Francisco?! I’m from New York.”

“I see,” he said, pausing, and then “I hear there are a lot of gays in San Francisco. Is that true?”

Seth laughed awkwardly, “Yeah, I guess so...” he answered with a roll of his eyes.

Seth suddenly heard a commotion behind him. He turned around, back toward the crowd and the talking bird, to see two *Gong An* waving and shooing the people away, the performer climbing from the ledge with resignation, the bird fluttering its wings as it tried to stay perched upon his shoulder.

“Oh, it’s so terrible,” the boy whispered, shaking his head, “What are they doing wrong?”

“Who knows? Nothing!”

They continued walking along, Seth hesitant to speak again, fearing that doing so would trivialize the injustice they had just witnessed. Perhaps this boy felt the same, for it was several moments before he spoke again.

“So where are you headed?” the boy finally asked with a warm yet mischievous smile.

“Just walking around. Why?”

It was Seth’s asking “why” that was the true insult to the boy’s eyes, eyes that blatantly conveyed his awareness of Seth’s attempt to seek the safety of ambiguity.

“Would you like to sit and talk for a while?”

Seth nodded with an affected nonchalance, and they crossed Zhongshan Lu to the Peace Hotel. “The Peace” was one of the grandest old European buildings that lined the waterfront. Situated right across from the *waitan* at the base of Nanjing Lu, the gloomy lobby, with its high cathedral ceiling and its stained and chipped marble floor, provided a comfortable space to recuperate after the grueling bus ride into town, or after the maddening pace of

the city streets, where foreigners could buy train tickets from the officious concierge just inside the lobby to the left of the revolving door, or could sip a cocktail in the evening listening to the sounds of the ancient house jazz band in the club behind the elevators.

They walked through the revolving door and sat down on the worn leather chairs in the lobby. “Where are you from?” Seth asked.

“I stay in Guangzhou. What’s your name?”

“Seth.”

He giggled as he tried to pronounce the foreign name, “Se-su.”

Seth laughed. “Seth Rosenfeld,” he baited.

“Se-su-ruo-xin-fu-er-da!”

“Seth’ is good enough. How about yours?” Seth asked through his smile.

“Lan Ming.”

“Lan Ming,” Seth repeated coolly.

Lan Ming leaned across toward Seth’s face as he whispered, “I know a place we can go!”

“What are you talking about!?”

“You know what I’m talking about!” he smiled back.

“I do?”

He laughed. “I know you do!”

“You just can’t do that kind of stuff! Not here—it’s too dangerous!”

“Is that right?” he asked with a quizzical look in his eyes. Glancing again at his eyes, Seth could not tell whether Lan Ming was questioning the sincerity of his fears, or their legitimacy.

“Of course it’s right! How do I know who you are? How do I know you’re not with the *Gong An Ju*?”

“*Gong An!*” he scoffed, “That’s ridiculous! What does the *Gong An* have to do with me and you? I’m just me, and you’re just you. What’s wrong with that?”

“You just can’t do that kind of thing! It probably isn’t legal. Do you want to be sent off to Qinghai?”

“Qinghai!?”

“Isn’t that where they send criminals? To Qinghai?”

“Criminal? Who’s a criminal? Two people aren’t allowed to do what they want with each other?” He paused, and looked across the lobby to two men engaged in talk, “Look at them. Are they doing anything illegal? They’re allowed to talk? And maybe shake hands, or even hold hands if they’re good friends, right?”

Seth nodded. He understood the point, indicating with a smile and a raised hand that Lan Ming need go no further. He looked at Lan Ming’s face, his closely cropped hair, the gentle curve of his neck that disappeared under his jacket collar. When he noticed Lan Ming’s awareness of his gaze, Seth lowered his eyes with attempted subtlety.

Lan Ming suddenly stood up. “Come with me, okay? I want to show you something.”

Seth felt compelled to listen to the boy, letting his attraction outweigh his fear, at least for the moment. And so Seth followed Lan Ming out the door of the Peace into the cold night, keeping several steps behind, in case he felt the need to suddenly dissociate himself from the boy. He followed him up Nanjing Lu to the next block, where Lan Ming turned into Shashi Alley. By day, the alley was packed with shoppers purchasing clothing and sundries from the many booths that lined its narrow length. Now, the metal and corrugated plastic stalls were still and empty in the darkened evening.

“Where are we going?” Seth asked.

“Just follow me. Don’t worry,” Lan Ming said as he slipped into a narrow passage between two of the booths. “Come on!” he whispered, and disappeared into the silent darkness.

Seth followed the boy who called himself Lan Ming through the black passageway between the empty stalls, hiding as best he could his fear, his suspicion, his arousal.



He squeezed the black winter mushroom between his two

chopsticks. With a few firm bobs of his hand, he rid the mushroom of its excess sauce, and in a swooping arc brought it over to his rice bowl. With one more bob, letting the mushroom actually graze the top few grains, the last dribbles of liquid oozed into the rice, slowly meandering their way to the bottom of the bowl. Lifting the chopsticks to his mouth, the steaming bowl of rice faithfully following underneath with the guidance of his left hand, he gently set the pungent fungus on to his tongue, and bit into its smooth black surface. He chewed, wiggling his tongue through the shredded flesh, extracting as much flavor as he could from the combination of the mushroom's rustic earthiness and the sauce's delicate refinement.

After shoveling in a mouthful of rice to clear his palate, he reached for a sip of beer. The rich woody taste filled him with satisfaction.

Finishing his last mushroom, scraping the last grains of rice swimming in the sweet vinegar, and, best of all, gulping down the end of his beer, he looked up and saw several sets of eyes staring at him from the other tables. His acknowledging the smile of a particularly attractive face was taken as an invitation to call out over the din. "Are you sure you're not a Chinese?" the man called, hand cupped to the side of his mouth.

"Yes, I'm sure."

"He speaks Chinese!" the young man called out, and Seth left the Songshan restaurant—one of his favorites in the city—to walk in the cold twilight air.

He rambled along the street, passing with a self-conscious aloofness many scenes that only a few months earlier would have piqued his curiosity enough so that he would manipulate himself into the thick of them.

A rickety old man sitting on a tiny wooden stool held a circular straw tray displaying wooden combs which Seth knew came from the nearby city of Changzhou. He knew because he had once asked one of these street vendors, seemingly interchangeable in their dusty blue jackets and undisciplined wispy beards, where

he had gotten the combs. The man had smiled, picked up the fanciest comb he had—a two-sided fine-tooth comb—and with his shaking, aged finger pointed to the golden characters inscribed on the wood. “I can’t read yet,” Seth confessed, and the old man laughed, “Oh! You can’t read. It’s from Changzhou! Changzhou!”

Down the road he passed another private vendor, this one industriously engaged in the making of *buxie*, the black cotton-wadded shoes that were popular among the elderly, but shunned as old fashioned by the young.

Once early that fall, Seth was in the city with a student of his who took the English name “Watson”, a gangly fellow with long hair who studied economics. They passed one of these rather disheveled shoemakers, folded angularly on his stool, his head stooped over his bony exposed knees, elbows mechanically jerking back and forth like pistons as he was shearing the heavy fabric out of which the shoes’ soles were fashioned. As Seth strolled by, his big foreign feet entered the vendor’s field of vision, and the man immediately lifted his head, his bangs falling into his eyes, and shouted, “Hey! Come on! Let me make you a pair of shoes!”

Seth smiled back, “I don’t need any, thank you.”

“Well come and sit with me a bit. Let’s talk!” He slid off his stool and sat square on his haunches, patting his now free seat as an invitation for Seth to join him. Seth knew that the man would have leaned into Seth, resting his bare arm on Seth’s shoulder in an innocent gesture of intimacy. But since he was with a student and not alone, Seth reluctantly declined the offer to sit. He leaned over, setting his hands on his knees, and through his smile answered the standard battery of questions about himself. “What are you doing in Shanghai?” “How old are you?” “Are you married?”

As Seth said goodbye and he and Watson carried on down the road, Watson touched his arm and said, “Seth, you really shouldn’t talk with people like that. They are usually not very trustworthy.”

Seth felt it would be ridiculous to worry about the man’s trustworthiness when he was hardly about to place himself in a

position of dependence. His students would often have such attitudes about the very poor, the peasants. They looked down upon them, but also, in a self-hating way, were seemingly embarrassed by their lack of sophistication, their provinciality, their “Chineseness”.

Watson laughed awkwardly, “These people who work in the street often can’t find jobs. Many are ex-convicts who aren’t allowed to hold regular jobs, and so they go into business for themselves,” and then, with a subtle sneer he added, “Sometimes they make more money than other people.”

And so besides arrogance and embarrassment, it seemed Watson’s view of these people was tainted with envy and resentment.

Although it was dinner hour, the streets were still vibrant with activity. Women were washing clothes in the frigid communal tap water, hanging them up on bamboo poles strung over the sidewalk, the wet wash dripping down on the pedestrians below. An old woman was encouraging her baby grandson to urinate down a grated sewer. She squatted with difficulty, her padded trousers preventing the full bend of her knees. Setting the baby between her legs and aiming him in the right direction, she started making a “pshwshpshwsh” sound to encourage the flow. Nearby, another woman was beating the cotton-wadded filling of a giant *beizi*—the super-heavy bed quilts used to keep out sub-freezing winter temperatures.

Dodging the dripping bamboo lines as best he could, Seth ducked into a nearby sundries shop. Face towels in pastel pinks, yellows, and blues that said “Shanghai” and featured the city skyline, covered one entire wall behind the glass counter. Against another wall were stacks and stacks of long underwear in electric blue, shocking pink, day-glow green. Seth approached the third wall. The two *fumuyuan*—attendants—remained seated on their tall wooden stools behind the wood and glass counter engrossed in their magazines as Seth gently leaned his elbows on the glass surface, looking around at the display of toiletries and kitchen

items. "Excuse me, I'd like to buy a thermos," he said.

One of the *funnyuan* lethargically looked up from her magazine. When she saw that the customer was a foreigner, she immediately perked up, hopped off her stool, and with a smile asked which color he would like.

"Red, please."

Although he was only purchasing one item, and although the price was very clearly displayed, and was in fact clearly communicated verbally by the *funnyuan* to Seth, her fingers danced across the abacus sitting on the counter, and after a sudden click-click-click of the beads shifting position, again she said, "Yes, three *kuai*, five *mao*, seven." Paying, he stashed the flask into his day pack, half of it clumsily sticking out the top.

As he turned to leave the shop, he was suddenly struck by a huge popping explosion and the sound of shattering glass behind him. He darted around with a start, but saw nothing.

The store was now silent, every face turned toward him. What did they think he had done? He looked from face to face, yet not one moved from its frozen stare. One woman's face then softened noticeably, and her hand slowly rose from her side, two fingers gently pointing at the ground by Seth's feet.

There, in ten thousand slivers of glittering glass, lay the thermos he had just purchased, fallen from his pack. He put his hand to his mouth in shock. "Don't worry about it," the *funnyuan* said gently. He leaned down, and from the center of the glistening mass he picked up the red plastic casing, but then awkwardly set it back down amidst the glass, and slowly backed away. He turned to the *funnyuan*.

She smiled warmly at him. "It doesn't matter," she said, "I'll sell you another for half price, okay?"

He did not say a word. A man came over with a broom and dustpan and dutifully began sweeping the debris from around Seth's feet.

The entire shop continued to look on, but now without a sense of shock so much as one of kindness and empathy, as if he were a

little boy who had just made a mistake all over the floor. "No, that's all right, forget it. I'm sorry," and he quickly walked out of the shop, not turning back to see what he was sure were the continuing smiles of a strange, awkward understanding for the frightened foreigner.

He walked to the nearest bus stop, and, as the bus pulled up, in local fashion, he pushed and shoved everyone around him for a position in front of one of the doors. As the door squeezed open and the human cargo spilled out, he slid his way up the steps and squeezed into the packed car, others behind him pushing and squeezing him further. He groped his left hand into the air in search of a few spare inches of pale green metal tubing on which to hold. He momentarily set his things down and fished some coins out of his pocket. Stretching his arm through the sea of black hair toward the ticket seller's station, he called out "Jinling Lu!" Soon, a hand grabbed the coins, putting in their place a tiny cancelled newsprint ticket. A boy of about twenty was pressed up against him, his warm breath catching the curl of Seth's ear. Seth's nose brushed the boy's silken hair as the bus jolted forward. A middle-aged woman sitting in the seat next to Seth reached down to the floor, and from beneath her chair produced two live chickens that suddenly fluttered their wings upon being disturbed. "*Oyo! Oyo!*" the woman called out as she slowly began to rise. Her stocky frame pushed through the packed mass of blue wadded cotton.

Seth squeezed into the seat just as it was being vacated, and the young boy was pushed against him once again. This time, while he was holding on tightly to the metal tubing of the chair in the next row, the boy's crotch was pressed up almost against Seth's face. Upon a closer inspection of his midsection, he noticed with embarrassment and excitement that the boy was aroused. Seth slowly peered upward to the boy's face, which was trying its best not to betray his secret. But his eyes, glancing furtively at the nape of a young woman only inches from his lips, gave him away. Seth's embarrassment turned to disappointment as he fought the temptation to stare more.

Stealing one more glance at the activity beside him, Seth turned with an anxious emptiness toward the window, watching the city creep slowly by.

He thought back to a crisp Wednesday morning of that previous autumn. His eight o'clock class was held in the windowless basement of Classroom Building Number Four. He had been told by teacher Xu of the Foreign Languages Department, a smiling, bespectacled, intellectual sort who spoke a cultivated English, and who doubled as a liaison for the *waiban*, the Foreign Affairs Office, "This is a very convenient classroom. It is cooler in the summer, and warmer in the winter." In fact, it was full of mildew and must.

His lesson plan that day included a discussion of letters to an advice column. Each student was to write an anonymous letter that would be collected and randomly redistributed among discussion groups. Now Seth was listening to the discussions. "If he likes her, he should have a friend tell her, I think," Jody volunteered after considerable pondering. "I think he should tell her himself. He's the man. He should tell her he wants to be her boyfriend," said Davis. Seth asked Jill how she would approach the problem. She thought for a moment, then a smile crept across her face, and breaking out in feminine giggles, she fell into Hyacinth's shoulder.

There was a commotion in one of the other groups. The girls were laughing, convulsing, shaking their heads, faces scrunched into their hands. The boys were more serious. "This must be wrong!" said James. "Impossible!" said Smith. Just the week before, Smith had silenced the entire room with his solemn words. The class had been discussing the notion that, for all its proletarian rhetoric, the Cultural Revolution could only be the product of a bourgeois mind, for it is only the bourgeois who have the free time to cultivate such lofty goals for the restructuring of society. Smith, in a choked voice, stood up and protested the idea. "My family are peasants! But we have worked hard for the revolution! We believe in building a new China! It offends me if someone thinks the peasants cannot feel committed to changing society!"

Seth waded through the desks to Smith's group. "What's impossible?" he asked. Smith was about to talk, but paused to look around at the other faces. "No! No!" cried Sandra, waving her hand back and forth in front of her face as if encountering a foul odor. Smith paused, picked up a piece of paper, and handed it to Seth. In a masculine scrawl, it read, "I want to kiss my boyfriend, but he does not want me to. What should I do?"

He stared for several seconds at the piece of paper, fearing if he moved his eyes, they would land somewhere they did not belong. Who could have written this note? Had all Seth's precautions been so transparent that someone had set this up as some sort of humiliating trap? Could the whole class have known all along, laughing behind his back? Or could the note possibly be real? Maybe one lonely student, living in fear and secrecy, was finally inspired to take a chance. Maybe he felt Seth would support him. Who could it be? Seth would not let himself consider the possibilities, lest his eyes drift from boy to boy in a telling search.

The girls shrieked as Seth read the note in silence. He stared blankly at them, afraid to react. Swallowing, Seth felt the heat in his face as he forced himself to speak. "Why are you reacting this way?" he finally said, trying to hide the fact that he understood their disgust. "What's wrong with this problem?" Protests erupted at his apparent acceptance of such an idea.

When the groups broke up and class re-assembled, Seth read several of the more interesting problems aloud, including the letter about the reluctant boyfriend. "Who would like to help the person who has this problem?" He paused. "No one?" The entire class remained silent.

"Okay," he continued, "I'll try to offer my own advice." He took a breath, careful not to look at any of the boys, all the while hoping he could somehow reach out beyond his intellect, touching the note's author. "If you want something from your boyfriend that he doesn't want to give you, I think you should try to accept him for the person he is. If he feels he can't kiss you, then that's just another aspect of his personality. He obviously has other

good qualities.” He paused momentarily, almost deathly fearful to express his next thought. “But...if kissing your boyfriend is very important to you, more important than other things, maybe you should try to find a new boyfriend—one who wants to be kissed by you.”

The class was silent. Seth was silent. He did not know where to look, so afraid his eyes would give him away.

“But this is not the Chinese way!” Dean protested, “In the West you have this custom, but it doesn’t exist here.”

Some nodded in agreement. Some averted their attention from the entire issue. Others, the girls, could not contain their nervous laughter.

Later, after the bell rang, Dean approached Seth. His usually anxious manner gave way to an instructive one. Dean genuinely thought that Seth did not understand the implications of the note, that it perhaps had been written by a girl. “Look,” Seth said, “Someone wrote that note. Maybe it was intended as a joke, maybe it wasn’t. No matter what, whoever wrote it is probably confused on some level. It was important for me to show that some people accept different ways. But Dean, don’t think I misunderstood, okay?”

Dean suddenly turned humble. He was embarrassed at his own presumptuousness, and perhaps also, his naïveté. Dean had a pockmarked face, and his hair was thin and greasy. He was very eager to befriend Seth from the very first day of class. He sat right up in front, and as Seth leaned over the podium and spoke to him for the first time, Dean’s upper lip quivered with nervousness. He had invited Seth to lunch, had invited him to movies.

“I’ll see you later?” Seth said.

“Okay. See ya!” Dean said with a self-conscious smile. Seth had taught the class “see ya” just a few weeks earlier. Dean remembered just about everything Seth ever said to him.



In the still nighttime space behind the booths of Shashi Alley, Seth and Lan Ming stood in silence. "What is it?" Seth asked with an innocence he knew rang false. He could hear only the sound of his own unsteady breath, and the rub of pebbles beneath his shoes as he shifted his weight from foot to foot. He suddenly felt hands resting on his nervous shoulders. "Steady, steady," he heard whispered gently in his ear. He felt heated breath against his cheek, and a soft pressure.

"Wait," Seth whispered tensely as he turned away, "I'm sorry."

"But I thought you wanted to!" Lan Ming whispered, "I thought you liked me."

"But I don't even know you."

He could now see Lan Ming's confused smile as his eyes began to adjust to the darkness.

"I'm sorry. I thought you wanted to."

Seth looked at him in silence. "I do. I do," he confessed.

"So what's wrong?"

Seth folded his arms, trying to hold his body still from shaking. There was nothing to hold on to, nothing to lean against. There was only darkness and Lan Ming.

"Didn't it feel good?"

Seth stood staring at the rotted metal tubing of the flimsy stall, absent-mindedly picking at its rust.

The memory of the fleeting moment during which he was held close made his knees grow weak, his breath run short. "Yes," he finally let out, "It felt good." He turned and began through the narrow passage, back out to the alley.

"Where are you going?" Lan Ming asked, following Seth back into the alley.

"We're going to my room."



The bus was now approaching Jinling Lu, a major east-west artery toward the north of the city center, in close view of the one

building in all of Shanghai that might be considered a skyscraper, the imposing *Lianhe Dasha*—the Union Building—over on Yanan Lu. Though the main streets of Shanghai were usually packed with people, the pressed crowding subsided considerably in the evening, and Seth could walk without pushing or being pushed as much, with less cigarette smoke wafting smack up his nose from the peasant in front of him, without the unabating blare of taxi and bus horns, with fewer enormous transport trucks belching their black smoke over the helpless throng.

Seth rose from his seat and began to squeeze between the boy and the young woman in his effort to get near the exit. The young woman slinked gracefully by him, her body rubbing against Seth's as she effortlessly slid into the chair.

As he emerged from the press of people pushing to board, Seth suddenly saw a familiar face in front of him.

"Oh! Seth!"

"Einstein!"

Einstein was a quiet physics student who nevertheless insisted upon taking this rather ostentatious English name. "I don't think I'm like Einstein, but I wish I were," he had explained to Seth at the beginning of term.

"Seth?! What are you doing here?" Einstein asked in English.

"I'm...I'm just coming from dinner. I ate out tonight," Seth informed him, somewhat embarrassed at his being alone in the city night, "How about you?"

"Oh, I...Seth, this is my girlfriend," he said with a shy pride, introducing a girl who had been standing off to one side, seemingly not in Einstein's company. The girl awkwardly smiled as Seth nodded.

"How are you!?"

They stood in awkward silence for a moment. "Well, I'll see you in class?"

"Okay,"

"Nice to meet you," Seth offered to the girl, and turned, walking down Jinling Lu toward the riverfront, the *waitan*.

Leaving Einstein and his girlfriend to cope with the madness of the buses, Seth thought back to one unseasonably warm autumn evening when Einstein had come to his room. Seth was particularly curious as to why Einstein would ask to meet with him at his room. It was usually Seth's more outgoing students who would visit.

Einstein knocked, and entered hesitantly before Seth had the chance to invite him in. His longish hair fallen into his eyes, he constantly flicked his head back. His bangs would catch hold of the hair above, only to fall back down moments later.

Seth found himself a bit nervous as he excitedly stood to greet Einstein, inviting him to sit, serving him tea. They sat in awkward silence for several seconds, Seth diverting his attention to his hot tea, sipping with a self-conscious determination.

"So..." Seth said.

Einstein smiled. He was nervous too, Seth observed. "I enjoy our classes very much. It's helping my English very much."

Seth smiled back, pleased to hear such words, if not always sure how to react to them.

"Many of the students want to become your friend. We like you very much."

Seth turned his eyes away in embarrassment. He was not equipped to deal with such open affection. One time, one of the young boys who worked in Seth's building had sat down next to him as Seth was reading in the lobby. The boy, about nineteen with soft eyes and thin wrists, told Seth how much he enjoyed looking at him, spending time near him. "You're kind. You're gentle, not like the other foreigners," he said, stroking Seth's leg.

"That's silly," Seth responded, "Many of them are very nice."

"You look good in jeans," the boy continued, "I can't wear them. My ass is too big, don't you think?"

They were well within earshot of the old *shifu* sitting at the front desk, the cadaverous old man whom the foreign teachers referred to simply as the Dead Man. Seth turned away in embarrassment, in fear. "I've never noticed your ass."

The boy smiled as he stood to display his backside to Seth. “See? Too big, don’t you think?”

Seth thought of this incident often, well after the boy had told Seth that he would be transferred to a different building, and that they might not see each other anymore. “I’ll miss you,” the boy said. “I’ll miss you too,” Seth mustered.

He looked up from his teacup to Einstein. “Maybe they just want to improve their English,” he said.

“No. Maybe some people want improve their English, but most of us want to be your friend. We talk about you a lot. We like you. I like you.”

And so Seth was able to savor further Einstein’s affection, drawing more out of Einstein through the very fear that kept him distant.

“But some of us feel you don’t always speak your mind in class, that you don’t always express your feelings. We’d like to know more about what you think.”

Seth was taken aback. He had always felt that he was being quite honest with his students, or at least as honest as safety would allow. “Look,” he said, “I think I make it pretty clear how I feel about things. I don’t want to tell you everything right out. Of course I want you to think a little bit. But I really think what I feel should be coming through in our lessons.

“Look, when we did the American folk songs, remember? ‘Blowin’ In the Wind’, ‘We Shall Overcome’, ‘Who Killed Davey Moore?’? Those songs aren’t just for Americans, or blacks, or Jews. They’re for the whole world. You think when I criticize America that’s all I mean? Can’t what I say be applied to China also?”

“I have a lot of responsibility in class. It’s true, I’m not Chinese, and I can say whatever I want. But I don’t want to say exactly how I feel in class. It’s dangerous for you if people just start talking freely. It may be okay for now, but someday, things may change. I don’t want that responsibility. Nobody is going to hurt me, but I don’t want anybody hurting you.”

“But it’s our responsibility what we say.”

“No. In my classroom, it’s my responsibility. I establish the topic, the atmosphere. You have all the time in the world to speak your mind if you want to risk it. Just please don’t feel I’m encouraging it in my class.”

Einstein smiled. “So what do you think of our government?”

Seth took a sip of tea. He looked at Einstein flicking his bangs out of his eyes once again. “I hate it,” Seth said.

Einstein leaned forward, smiling.

Seth continued. “This ‘Four Modernizations’ movement is such nonsense. You can’t have Four Modernizations without the Fifth Modernization, democracy. Of course it’s better than before. Everyone I speak to agrees it’s better than the Cultural Revolution. But it’s still the party saying exactly what you can and can’t do. So now, at least it’s productive instead of destructive. Of course it’s much better. But it can change back at any second, as long as they control things.”

Einstein spoke. “But we don’t think so. China is changing. Things really are different now. Everyone supports the Four Modernizations Program. No one believes in communism anymore. We just want to improve our lives.”

“And if I’d been talking to you fifteen years ago, you’d say the same thing about the Cultural Revolution, that everyone supports it!”

Einstein shook his head.

“As long as they’re telling you what you can and can’t do, how can things be good? Even if they say, ‘now you will be free,’ you’re still not free. Because whatever they give to you, they can just as easily take away,” Seth paused. “But of course now is so much better than before,” he added, in two minds about expressing such negative feelings to someone trapped within the system.

Einstein sat back in his chair and looked down at the floor, and twisted his head slightly, indicating a thoughtful question might follow. “Then maybe you can help me with something?”

“I can try...”

He leaned forward again, whispering intimately, “I want to

overthrow the government. How can I do it?”

Seth listened to Einstein’s words with a sudden comical disbelief that just as suddenly turned romantic. He tried his best to hold back his laughter—and his arousal—as he offered his advice. “Just be careful!” he said with a smile.

“I hate it! I hate it so much!” Einstein whispered with an intensity Seth had rarely been witness to in any student, and certainly not in someone as quiet and withdrawn Einstein. Seth found himself feeling, almost hoping, that Einstein might start to cry, that he could console him in his pain. “I knew I could tell you. I knew by your eyes, how sharp they are. Your eyelight is very bright.”

“Listen,” Seth said, afraid to place his hand on Einstein’s knee, “There are other students who are dissatisfied. Don’t you speak with them?”

“I dare not!”

“There are people you can trust. Right in our class. Right in your dorm room.”

“Who?”

Seth shook his head. “Would you want me to tell someone what you just told me, if they asked?”

Einstein smiled. “You’re the cleverest,” he said.

“Just be careful,” Seth said, “It takes only one person to keep everybody else unhappy. In our class, it takes only one student who believes in the system to ruin things for the rest of us. Because of that student, everyone else is afraid. Isn’t that how this whole place works? Just a few carefully placed terrible people, and everyone is scared to speak their mind, to tell the truth?”

“We all know who it is in our class!” Einstein said, “It’s Li Yuan Mei—Jody. I hate her! At my birthday party the other day, she stopped everyone and started talking about how important it is that we continue being faithful to the People’s Revolution and Mao Zedong Thought. I hate her!”

“Happy birthday,” Seth said sarcastically.

“I know who the Party members are! I hate them!”

“That’s why I don’t say what I feel in class. Okay?”

“Okay,” he said, as he reached into his pocket, and pulled out a small stone chop. “Seth, I want to give you this. When you pick a Chinese name for yourself, let me know, and I’ll have it engraved.”

Seth took the brown stone from Einstein. “Thank you so much,” he said. Looking up to his eyes, it became apparent to Seth that Einstein had nothing further to say.

As Seth walked down Jinling Lu toward the *waitan*, he remembered thinking at the time that Einstein was able to overcome his fear, to share his secret with Seth. Maybe, Seth had thought, he could someday share his own secret with Einstein. But now, after having been introduced to Einstein’s girlfriend, he had to put the idea out of his mind forever.

Expertly dodging the pushcarts and the taxis, the buses, trucks and buses, he crossed the street to the *waitan*, thinking how differently he handled everything now, compared to when he arrived in Shanghai in the peak of the August heat just six months earlier, only one week before teaching started. He’d flown from JFK to the impossible humidity of a Hong Kong noon, taking a flight that very evening to Shanghai, then a taxi clear across the city from Hongqiao Airport to the university. He looked out the cab into the rushing urban blur of the heated Shanghai evening, his skinny shoulder scraping up against the half-lowered window. Smack in the middle of the street old men were reclining on tattered lounge chairs. Others were playing cards in their pajamas around square wooden tables. Street lights would inexplicably turn off, calling a disruptive halt to the nighttime flow. Then, suddenly, they would turn back on. Young couples strolled aimlessly, oblivious to the activity around them.

His taxi was zigzagging in and out of this mass of activity, incessantly honking its horn, crossing the double yellow line at will. Bicyclists would swerve for survival. The young lovers, like midtown pigeons, flurried out of the way at the last second to avoid being hit.

And the huge lumbering buses would lurch into gear, defiantly

plowing through the human-strewn streets, yielding to nothing in their way, except to the trucks. With their noxious fumes spewing forth, pouring over the bicyclists, the card players, the lovers, the trucks drove on.

He had noticed a lone couple, huddled in intimate talk, stepping off the sidewalk into the maddening pace of the street, and thought to himself, “My God! They’re just walking into this mess without even looking! They’re going to get themselves killed!”

Much later, he remarked to a student of his, an exceptionally bright girl with a round face and straight, stringy bangs, that he sometimes felt as if there were no order whatsoever in Chinese society, that all was just jumbled chaos. She disagreed. “There *is* order here!” she said, leaning into her elbows on the gouged wooden table in her fluorescent-lit dorm room, “Whatever the government tells us to do, that’s the order!”

Thinking back to the streets that greeted him upon his arrival in Shanghai that past summer, he now saw that this seemingly impossible mess was not disorder to the Chinese. It was the only order they knew.

The pedestrians are utterly powerless to challenge the authorities above, and so they just go on with their lives as best they can. They will disregard any rule they can to get what they want, because all they can get is so very little. But as soon as a higher authority approaches—a bicycle, say—they jump out of the way, wait until it passes, and then go about their business once again. And the bicyclists get their satisfaction. And the petty bureaucrats get their satisfaction.

But suddenly a taxi comes through, and it is now the bicyclists' turn to defer to the higher authority. And so it goes; through the buses, to the trucks. The Party has provided the trappings for a smoothly running society: traffic lights, stop signs, double yellow lines. They even provide small measures to accommodate the pedestrians: crosswalks. But despite these existing systems, society runs along power-play lines. So although it is the norm to yield to power, not to rules, those in power can enforce rules at their

discretion. Society moves along, everyone oblivious to the legal infrastructure, especially those monstrous trucks with their soot-emitting stacks. But anytime they want to, anytime they don't like someone's way, or someone's ideas, or someone's grandfather, they can nab you on a J-walking violation, and your life is in pieces.

Seth crossed Zhongshan Lu to the *waitan*, near the floating coffee bar.



Seth and the boy who called himself Lan Ming rode in silence to the university, stepping off the Fifty-Five bus at the nearby *wujiaochang*. “I don’t know Shanghai too well. I’ve never been out here before,” Lan Ming said. They walked through the mud and the ice and the puddles, weaving their way through the construction sites of half-completed apartment blocks and mountains of dirt and rubble, of twisted steel piping and slabs of concrete, and arrived at the gate of Seth’s building, the *Zhuanjialou*, “foreign experts’ building”. In silence, they passed the old *shifu* at the front gate, then the Dead Man at the front door, and climbed the stairs to Seth’s room.

“They’re terrible!” Seth whispered, “They’re always looking, always checking. You’re lucky they didn’t stop us, make you sign in.”

“I’m not afraid of some old fool like that. I’d just sign a fake name.”

As they sat in the darkness of Seth’s bedroom, lit only by the halogen bulbs of a nearby construction site, they looked at each other and smiled. Lan Ming walked over to Seth’s armchair and gently sat on his lap, stroking his arms and chest through his heavy woolen shirt. In the darkness, Lan Ming took Seth’s glasses off and gently laid them on the arm of the chair. Seth could still make out Lan Ming’s eyes, and he gently caressed his eyebrows with his thumbs. His cheeks were soft to the touch, and Lan Ming closed his eyes and leaned close, rubbing his cheek against Seth’s. And Seth brought his lips together, kissing Lan Ming’s neck, kissing his

face.

Lan Ming slowly unbuttoned Seth's shirt to touch Seth's body. Seth did the same, placing his glasses on the chair's stuffed arm. With his outstretched fingers he stroked his skin, and they slowly stood up and walked across to the bed.

They lay entangled in one another's bodies, kissing and touching in ways Seth had only dreamed of. Seth waited until Lan Ming began taking off his own pants before he did the same, and their naked legs touched, warming their skin.

Seth sat up and looked at the body lying beside him, the gentle rising and falling of his stomach as Lan Ming breathed, at his legs, and at where Lan Ming's underpants still fit snugly. "There's something I should tell you," Seth said.

"What is it?" Lan Ming asked gently.

"I'm Jewish."

"Ah...You don't have foreskin, right?"

"That's right," Seth answered with an embarrassed smile, "Is that okay?"

Lan Ming smiled as he brought Seth back down beside him, and they took off their underpants.

"Chinese-American Friendship," Seth whispered, parodying the saccharine comradery of Chinese officialdom.

"No," Lan Ming whispered back, "Lan Ming-Seth Friendship."