

Spies

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They'd be puffy and pale. They'd stay in a fancy hotel and eat only Western food; they'd go everywhere in taxis. They'd cling to each other as they walked down Silk Alley, wincing whenever a vendor called out, "Hello! Hello!" as though being pelted by pieces of jade. That was why Ben had to go with them, Caroline's parents; to protect them, to lead them away and tell the vendors' the laowai didn't want to buy, to bear the brunt of the vendors' curses, their cries of traitor, snob.

"What about Caroline?" Maggie asked, but she knew the answer. Even after a year of teaching English at their school and now in nearby Beijing, Caroline didn't know a speck of Chinese. She didn't understand when the natives called her fat.

"It's my duty," Ben explained. They were in bed, the tiny one in her living room, not the big one upstairs. "Due to my relationship with their daughter."

His relationship. His plane ticket was more like it. She pressed a cheek to his bare shoulder. "So do you call them Mama and Baba Laowai?" she teased.

He poked her in the side. "Why? Will you call your husband old foreigner? 'Hey, Old Foreigner Husband, drive me to the store.'"

"I can drive myself to the store. Besides, I'm an old foreigner, too."

"Not old." He wrapped his limbs around her. He was almost as tall as Keith but thinner, more wiry. "Young. Younger than me."

She tucked her head under his chin. She liked how the colors of their skin matched, varying shades of the same hue, his golden-brown, hers ivory. Keith was pinkish, like uncooked pork.

He looked at his watch. "I must go."

"Now?"

"It's almost three. The farmers are here by four."

She sighed. He was referring to the workers constructing the building across the way. She hated the way they always seemed to be staring at her, squatting on their haunches and sipping their tea. She watched him as he dressed. Even back home he'd be considered good-looking: thick hair, high cheekbones, a white smile. "What will you do?" Maggie asked. "Climb the Great Wall? Have a duck dinner?"

"Maybe." He sat on the edge of the bed and buttoned his shirt. "They want to go to Peking Opera. And Liulichang Lu. They would like to buy some paintings."

She pulled herself to her knees. “Will you hold Caroline’s hand in front of them? Will you kiss her goodnight while they’re there?”

“Little Gem,” he said, calling her by her Chinese nickname, the way her family did. “That would not be proper.”

“And you’re such a proper young gentleman, aren’t you?” She entwined her arms about his neck and pressed her breasts against his back. He turned and kissed her, urgently, the way he always did, like a man dying of thirst. After a moment he pulled away.

“Little Gem,” he said. “I have to go.”

“Oh, all right.” She released him and fell back onto the bed. “Don’t let the door hit you on the way out.”

He peered at her. “What?”

“Never mind. Good night.”

“Good night, Little Gem. Maggie.” He picked up his shoes and coat. She heard the front door close with a bang.

Draping a blanket across her shoulders, she went up to her room. As always she was disappointed when he first left, but afterwards, as always, she was glad. She had never liked having someone in bed with her while she slept, not even Keith. She didn’t like the heavy arm across her chest, the hot air from nostrils blowing onto her face. She had always preferred sleeping by herself, in the center, with no one on either side. She could turn any way she wanted; she could go wherever she wanted to go.

#

Maggie had come to China because of her grandmother. Almost fifty years passed till Puo-puo was able to return, forbidden before then by her husband. You know the story: a rich family, Mao and his Communists, the peasant revolution. There weren’t even any pictures left from that time when her grandmother still wore chipaos, her grandfather’s hair was black, and her mother a baby. Eight years ago her grandfather died; her grandmother waited five, then decided it was time to go back.

Puo-puo, accompanied by Maggie’s mother, stayed at the hotel on campus while they were in Changping, receiving a discount because Zhou Li, Hong Hua’s husband, was a teacher there. He and Hong Hua – a granddaughter of Puo-puo’s eldest sister – took them everywhere: the Forbidden City, the Summer Palace, the Great Wall at Badaling. It was Zhou Li who told Maggie’s mother about the teaching position and who arranged everything with the foreign affairs office, and although Maggie had no teaching experience, somehow she got the job.

Did her mother and grandmother ever see Caroline while they were here? Did they ever see Ben? To Caroline Maggie’s mother and grandmother were just two other Chinese ladies while to Ben maybe they were from Japan, Taiwan, or Hong Kong. None of them probably gave one another a second glance. Now here was Maggie instead of Caroline; now here was Maggie with Ben.

The voice on the loudspeaker snapped on.

“All right, everybody!” it boomed. “Time to wake up! Exercise! Yi, er, shan, si! One, two, three, four! Everybody up! Exercise!”

Maggie wasn't entirely sure what the voice was saying. She recognized the numbers and the word for “exercise,” but she didn't know the rest. What she did know was the loudspeaker went on every morning at seven on the dot, and again at two, playing modern Chinese or American pop songs, to wake everyone from their siestas. In the mornings the only music they played was vaguely patriotic. They played it now.

Maggie pushed herself out of bed. On Fridays she had no classes. Usually she went with Sally and Herb, the other American teachers on campus, into the city, but that day they were doing some extra teaching at a private primary school on the other side of town. She and Hong Hua went with them once, and Hong Hua had been impressed with the clean grounds and the shining marble floors in the foyers. But as they left she had wrinkled her nose with disdain.

“Rich,” she whispered to Maggie, like it was a disease. “The children's families are rich.”

Maggie glanced at her calendar. How long had it been since she spent a weekend with her cousin? Three weeks? The night they went dancing, that was the last time; the night she bumped into Ben smoking outside. She had run out to escape all the men asking her to dance. It had been endless, one after the other, till she felt like an exotic dish being passed around, everyone given the chance to dip into her his sweat-stained chopsticks. Hong Hua, herself with no lack of dance partners, had been too busy to notice Maggie leave.

It wasn't the first time she met Ben. The first time was on the steps of the foreign affairs office, where he had called to her in Chinese, thinking she was someone else, and when she turned around, he had looked surprised and yet not surprised. She had introduced herself in Chinese, and he had in turn introduced himself in English.

“You can call me Ben,” he said, not bothering to give his Chinese name. The first thing she noticed was that he was handsome and the second the mole on his cheek. Embarrassed she had dropped her eyes, as though having glimpsed something private.

It was because everyone was at the dance that they were able to sneak to her house undetected, and why he could leave, hours later, the same way. When Hong Hua came banging on her door, Maggie told her that she had felt sick, and Hong Hua, taking in Maggie's flushed cheeks and sweat-lined brow, had shaken her head at such a delicate American cousin.

Maggie's mother would have been furious to know that she had been neglecting Hong Hua all this time, especially after everything Hong Hua and Zhou Li had done for her, and now that Zhou Li had gone on his year-long Moscow sabbatical, now that Hong Hua was alone.

Hong Hua answered on the third ring. “Wei?” she said, sounding breathless.

“Little Red,” Maggie said, calling Hong Hua by her nickname.

“Little Gem!” Hong Hua said, sounding surprised, then concerned. “Are you all right? Is something wrong?”

“No, no. Everything’s fine.” It was still early, not even 7:30. “I just wanted to see if you were busy this afternoon.”

No, she wasn’t, and sounded elated to have Maggie over. Maggie had been afraid that Hong Hua would say no, out of resentment and spite, but her cousin wasn’t that type of person. Then Hong Hua asked, more carefully, “Little Gem is less busy now?”

A cold breeze blew through the crack in the front door. Maggie shivered and laughed. “Uh, yes. I’m less busy now. I just finished grading a lot of papers.” The breeze fluttered the edges of a stack of notebooks on her desk.

“Good!” Hong Hua cried. “We can have some fun. What time? Three o’clock?”

“Fine, three. *Zai jian.*” With relief she hung up. Usually Maggie didn’t like to lie. Only when it was absolutely necessary.

#

Keith proposed to Maggie a week before her departure.

“I was going to ask you in October,” he said, sliding across the café table a makeshift token of engagement. “Your favorite month. But now you’re leaving.” He smiled sheepishly. “I didn’t have time to get you a ring.”

Carefully she unwrapped the tissue. She had brought him to the café to tell him she got the job, that she was definitely leaving, and that if he didn’t have to wait for her if he didn’t want to – a year was a long a time – but she didn’t get that far.

It was a cameo, but instead of a lady’s portrait or sprig of flowers, the carving was of two hearts. She ran her thumb over it.

“Keith,” she said. “It’s beautiful.”

He took the pin from her. “It’s one of those optical illusions. This way it’s two hearts, and this way two faces. You see?”

She did. Adjusting her eyes like a telescope, she saw two faces in profile, then two hearts. Two faces, two hearts.

“Like us,” he said, pressing the cameo back into her hand and taking the other. “Maggie. You still haven’t answered my question.”

She looked up at him. Like the cameo he was beautiful. In their Chinese class in college, he had been the most desired boy. His Mandarin was the best of all the non-Chinese students, and better even than some of the native speakers'. All the girls wanted him, those nitwit goody-two-shoe Chinese girls who'd later become bankers and lawyers, shopping at Hermes and eating at places with names like perfumes; and of all those girls, Keith had wanted her. She wrapped her fingers around the cameo.

"Yes, Keith," she said. "Yes."

He would be coming soon. She had told him to save his money; she'd be home in February anyway. But he insisted. "I want to see China," he told her. "I want to see you in China. I want to see China in you."

Ben knew that Keith was coming, but he didn't seem to care. "So your boyfriend is American," he said, American meaning white. He smiled, amused, his smooth yellow feet clicking together. "Does he smell like butter and milk?"

Maggie turned onto her stomach. "You can see for yourself," she told him. "How about a double date?"

He drew characters on her back: man, woman, winter, snow. "A double date," he repeated. "What is it?"

She explained, "We all go out together. Me and Keith, and you and Caroline."

His hand stopped. "You would like that?"

She turned her cheek against her hand. His face was so pale, his mouth like an O. She laughed. "I'm only joking. It's a joke."

She wore the cameo every day and told everyone it was from her fiancée. One of the first words she taught her students was "engaged," that although she wasn't married, she was engaged and would be married within a year. She made sure the boys who eyed her up and down during class understood this. Sometimes they learned words incorrectly. "When I see a pretty girl," they wrote in their essays on blind dates, "I accost her." You approach, she had had to tell them. If she were white, they wouldn't have been bold enough to approach.

#

Maggie had never known a cold like that of Beijing, even after having grown up in the Northeast with its three foot snowfalls and states of emergency and sub-zero temperatures. The west wind here brought with it the frigid air of the Gobi desert, and in the mornings the sun hung like a frozen drop of blood in the blanched sky. But that day in early December the weather had suddenly turned warmer, the most recent snowfall having already melted away. The streets were still empty as she rode along. People often slept well past three, despite the two o'clock loudspeaker, and didn't rouse themselves from their homes till at least four.

Hong Hua lived in one of several buildings at the military school down the road. Her father was once a

dean there and Hong Hua and Zhou Li still lived in that apartment. As an American Maggie shouldn't have been allowed on campus, but for several months now she was. Only once was she stopped, asked by a pubescent guard who she was and who she had come to see. Nervous she spat out her own and Hong Hua's names like a fart, and after squinting importantly at her, the guard let her pass.

In front of Hong Hua's building, Maggie parked her bike and locked it. Kids ran in and out of the courtyard, shouting and kicking a deflated soccer ball. A grandmother walked by with a baby, still bundled in layers of clothes despite the warmth, except for his bottom, bare with an open slit.

Hong Hua opened the door on the first knock. "Hi!" she said in her tiny voice. "Welcome to my home!" as though it were the first time Maggie had been there.

They studied on a foldout table in the living room where the sun was strongest. The concrete walls and floor made the apartment cold and so they drank constantly from the thermos, wrapping their hands around the warm mugs. Maggie helped Hong Hua read aloud from her English primer. Alexandra was a foreign exchange student. Jane's husband was running late. Mrs. Van went to the grocery store. Hong Hua had trouble pronouncing the V. "Mrs. Wan," she kept saying. "Mrs. Wan."

Hong Hua also taught Maggie some Chinese, words and phrases that she'd have never learned in a classroom. *Guang gun* was a bachelor, an empty stick, while *lao cu nu* was an old maid or old virgin. *Tiao qing* meant to flirt, *yi jian zhong qing* was love at first sight, and *chi cu*, eating vinegar, meant to be jealous. "*Ta chi ta de chu.*" She ate her vinegar; she was jealous of her.

At five o'clock they took a break, eating pears and listening to music. Afterwards they should have gotten ready for dinner, picking up some potstickers and bing from the old lady down the street, but, full of water and fruit, neither of them were hungry.

"What shall we do, Little Gem?" Hong Hua asked. "Take a walk?" From the kitchen they peered out the narrow window. Rows of soldiers had begun to line up for dinner. Maggie tried to find Hong Hua's friends, but everyone in their drab olive uniforms with their caps and short black hair looked the same to her. Funny how back home she'd get so insulted whenever anyone confused her with another Asian woman and now she couldn't even tell apart the Chinese.

Hong Hua didn't want to go outside. She hated the way the male soldiers stared and sometimes whistled whenever she and Maggie walked by. Maggie didn't know if it was because they were two young women in civilian clothing, or because somehow they knew she was a foreigner. After the soldiers were gone, Hong Hua told Maggie, then they'd go out. For now they'd wait.

Maggie wandered back into the living room. It was less warm now that the sun was setting. Outside the window was a tree, bare now, but sometimes birds still roosted there. Clack clack, clackclackclack. A lone magpie bounced there now. Magpies were good luck birds, Hong Hua had told her. Sometimes Ben called her that, magpie, teasingly, when they argued. "Oh, noisy magpie," he'd say. "When will you fly south for the winter? Will you go away?"

What was he doing now? Sitting down to a duck dinner perhaps, Caroline on one side, her parents on the other. Or perhaps they had backed out at the last minute, deeming *kaoya* too exotic for their tastes, and were having meatloaf and mashed potatoes instead at the restaurant in their hotel; and then

afterwards they'd walk the city streets, Caroline pointing out every place she had been with Ben, the tea houses and noodle shops, the hutongs where vendors sold steamed buns on open wagons. Clack, clack, went the birds. *Clackclackclack*. Perhaps he would hold her hand anyway, despite what he had said. Perhaps he would brush her pale hair off her face.

Maggie called over her shoulder, "Little Red!"

Hong Hua emerged from the kitchen, cracking a watermelon seed between her teeth. "What is it, Little Gem?"

"Let's go into the city."

"When, tomorrow? All right, if the weather is still warm."

"No, tonight. Now."

"Now?" Hong Hua came into the living room. "Take the bus now?"

"There will be fewer people. Everyone is returning from the city at this time. We could walk around – it's warm enough – and then have dinner. My treat."

Jiggling the seeds in her hand, Hong Hua thought this over. "The bus would be less crowded. We could go in for a couple of hours and be home by nine or ten."

"And tomorrow's Saturday. We can sleep in if we get back late."

Hong Hua's face broke into a smile. "Let's go."

After the soldiers had filed into the canteen, Hong Hua and Maggie ran downstairs and scurried across the courtyard. Hong Hua didn't want to run into anybody she knew. The bus arrived just as they got there, and Maggie was right – it was almost empty – and they were able to find two seats together.

The bus sped down the highway, past the desiccated fields on one side and the dry brown mountains on the other. When Hong Hua and Zhou Li picked up Maggie from the airport and as they drove down this very road towards Changping, Hong Hua asked Maggie what she thought of China. On the new and modern highway, they could have been anywhere. "It looks like home," Maggie had said. Then Zhou Li had thrown an empty soda can out the window, as though he had every right.

Soon they were pulling into Jishuitang. A trio of old ladies hawked their wares. "*Tang hu ler!*" they called, advertising candied crab apples on a stick. "*Tang hu ler!*" The line to get onto the bus back to Changping stretched down the sidewalk, past the *youtiao* stand.

"See?" Maggie said as they headed towards the subway. "Everybody's going home now."

The sidewalk teemed with people and the streets with vehicles caught in a snarl of traffic, pedestrians and cyclists weaving easily in and out of the maze of cars. In front of the subway were parked what looked like to Maggie a million bicycles while downstairs there was already a throng of people at the

ticket stand.

“I’ll get them!” Maggie chirped, and hurried down the steps.

She had long ago learned that there were no lines in China, not in the subway nor the post office nor the department stores. Everyone simply swarmed around and took turns thrusting their money at the seemingly unfazed young man or woman behind the register window.

“Two!” she shouted now, waving her fingers in a V in the woman’s face. Miraculously two tickets appeared, the woman took her money, and they were on their way.

They had no real plan. They’d disembark somewhere, walk around, shop, and eat. Hong Hua seemed happy, gazing around with a small smile, while Maggie relaxed in her seat. The car was only half full. Across from them was a young woman with yellowish skin, amber lips, and hair swept carefully up and dyed a brittle red. Beside her were two older men, state officials perhaps, in fake-looking burgundy leather jackets and holding in their laps the strapless purses that men in China all seemed to carry. At the other end of the car were a group of countryside people, their wares in large bags at their feet, all in handknit sweaters, the men in suit jackets and pants, the women in puffy, Mao-type coats. Next to Hong Hua and Maggie were two skinny punk boys with long tresses of hair that hung over their eyes. One boy held in his mouth an unlit cigarette; the other wore in his earlobe one pearl earring stud.

They deboarded at Qianmen. They pushed to get off, pushed to walk up the stairs, and pushed to exit the station. At half past seven, the streets were still full. A bluish veil had fallen over the city, and to the west a vermilion sliver of the sun still hovered while to the east the quarter moon had begun to rise. In front of them was Tiananmen Square, and in the distance, barely a smudge, the peaks of the temples of the Forbidden City. They walked parallel to the Square and the City, towards the vendors under the rising moon.

Blouses and silk scarves and handbags. Mongolian sweaters, army boots, and Beanie Babies. A tablecloth with a giant *fou* in the center, ancient coins to wear on a string around your neck. There wasn’t anything Maggie needed, but still she looked and touched and inquired. Hong Hua haggled over a pair of \$5 gloves.

“Forty yuan!” she cried, as though she had been stabbed. “Too expensive!”

The vendor was unfazed. “You say how much, miss.”

“Forty is too much.”

“You say how much.”

“Fifteen!”

“Ai, fifteen! Do you want to eat me out of house and home?”

Hong Hua eventually got the vendor down to twenty. When she put the gloves on, she threw the plastic wrapping on the street, already littered with used tissues, seed shells, and sticks from *tang hu ler*. Hong

Hua flexed her hands in front of Maggie. “Pretty!” Hong Hua proclaimed.

The vendors had no idea that Maggie was American. When she walked with Sally and Herb, they called out, “Hello, hello,” and when you made eye contact, sometimes they grabbed your sleeve. Now they said nothing unless you approached them.

Hong Hua and Maggie emerged onto Dazhalan, the oldest street in Beijing. It was less congested and more picturesque, but the shops, which sold tea, scroll paintings, and antiques, were already closed. So they crossed back onto Qianmen and walked west. They passed a restaurant that sold “homely” food. They passed a man selling deep-fried baby chicks on a stick. They passed a tree full of styrofoam take-out containers, each stuck on a branch like a Christmas ornament.

They passed a man wearing a Titanic jacket. They passed two dirty-looking foreign boys with huge exhausted eyes. They passed a frenzied crowd frothing around a man. They shouted and pushed and pulled, and walked away calmly with white plastic bags. What were they selling? Hong Hua went to investigate. Shampoo! For cheap.

They passed a girl offering free crickets on a ceramic tray. Maggie tried one: it tasted spicy; she could feel the legs on her tongue. They passed an old man selling plastic goldfish in round jars, his eyes blue with cataracts. They passed an old lady walking, as tiny as a girl, on bound feet and with a cane in each hand. Hong Hua’s grandmother’s feet were like that. “As big as this,” Hong Hua said, making a fist. Maggie’s grandmother’s feet were not. She was so ornery, people said, that she had removed the bandages herself.

They reached a stone footbridge, and as they crossed it, passing a man selling bootleg VCDs spread on a dirty blanket, a woman selling plastic Buddhas, a beggar boy with crooked legs, at last they began to feel hungry. And as they reached the end of the footbridge, they looked up and saw before them a complex of American fast food restaurants, each sign neon bright, a cloud of meat and oil aroma hanging overhead.

“*Tai hao*,” Hong Hua said. It was too good to be true.

#

They decided to eat at a chicken rotisserie place. The chain was owned by an American country-western singer, and last Maggie heard, it had gone bankrupt back home. But here business was still good, and somehow Hong Hua was able to find the end of the line, buried like a snake in a throng of scurrying black-haired mice.

“I like that little cake,” Hong Hua said. She was talking about the cornbread. “I would like a little cake.”

“Is there something besides chicken?” Maggie asked. Missing red meat, she was hoping for a burger and craned her neck to look at the menus behind the registers, but their high peaked paper hats blocked the way. She glanced around for another sign.

In front of them a white man smiled. He was older and portly and had a handlebar mustache. His teeth

were crooked and slightly yellow.

Maggie turned away. At home she never responded to strange men who smiled at her. No reason to start now. “We need a menu,” she said to Hong Hua in Chinese.

Promptly the man turned and plucked a menu from a counter in the corner. He handed it to them like a gift.

Startled Hong Hua laughed. “Thank you,” she said in English.

The man nodded. “You should say *bu xie*,” a Chinese man beside him said in English. “It’s like, ‘You’re welcome.’”

“No need to thank,” added another Chinese man in English as well.

The mustached man continued to smile but didn’t answer.

Maggie pretended to read the menu. So he understood Chinese, and it seemed to be the only thing he wanted to speak. Maggie hoped this wouldn’t go on much further, but then Hong Hua was asking in English, “Where are you from?”

The white man beamed, delighted to be spoken to. “Beijing,” he said, again in Chinese. “I’m from Beijing.”

Hong Hua laughed. “No!”

“Yes. *Wo shi Beijing-ren.*” Hands tucked behind his back, he leaned forward. “Where are you from?”

“America!” Hong Hua answered.

“No!” the man said. “Really!”

“Really!” Hong Hua laughed again. She was having a ball. Ever since Sally and Herb, she couldn’t get enough of any friendly foreigner.

The man continued. “So you’re American,” he said. “*Hao de.* Which city are you from?”

“Uh, uh –” Hong Hua stammered till finally she broke into embarrassed laughter and fell back into Chinese. “I’m not American.”

“I thought so!” he sang. “So where are you really from? Beijing, like me?”

Pursing her lips Hong Hua shook her head. She didn’t like native Beijingers, deeming them lazy and snobbish. “I’m from Shandong. Weihai.”

“Oh, Shandong! Qingdao! *Qingdao pi jiu.*”

“Right!” She laughed some more. The capital of her home province was indeed home to the famous beer.

Now the white man turned to Maggie. “How about you? Are you from Beijing?”

There was the kind of foreigner who wanted to absorb himself in the culture completely, to forget his own nationality and become one of the natives. There was the kind who enjoyed being the only foreigner around, a man in an ape’s world. Then there was the kind who liked Chinese girls. In another life Maggie could have been a spy, eluding swindling street vendors and duping tourists into thinking she was just another stupid Chinese.

The man smiled, his mustache bristling like a sea plant. “What’s the matter? Too shy?”

Maggie looked him in the eye and parted her lips to reveal straight, white teeth. “I’m from Weihai, too.”

#

“What are you doing?” Hong Hua whispered to her when they were out of earshot. “Why didn’t you tell the laowai you’re American?”

“Shhh.” Maggie glanced over her shoulder. The man and his Chinese companions were coming close. “I’m pretending to be Chinese. *Haowan.*”

Hong Hua perked up then. She always loved to have fun.

The man was beside them, his tray loaded with barbecue chicken and ears of corn. “Will you two beautiful girls please eat with me? I am here all alone in China without any friends.”

Maggie asked, “What about those two?” nodding at the two Chinese men. She felt bolder now. The white man wouldn’t be able to detect her American accent.

He followed her gaze. “They are only my co-workers. Not my friends.” He smiled at her, at Hong Hua. “I like to make new friends.”

I’ll bet you do, Maggie thought, and glanced at her cousin. “What do you think? Shall we eat lunch with our new friend?”

Hong Hua beamed. “*Haode.*”

The restaurant was crowded, but the man was able to find them an empty table. The people around them stared. Maggie knew what they were thinking – what were these two young Chinese girls doing with this older white man? – and ignored them while Hong Hua looked self-conscious. There was room for the two Chinese men, but they sat in an empty booth across the aisle instead. Hong Hua saw this, and leaned over.

“Elder Brothers,” she said. “Won’t you eat with us too?”

They didn't answer, and hunching over their trays, began to eat. Hong Hua started to ask her question again, but the white man waved at her.

"Never mind them," he said. "They don't even understand Mandarin!"

At first Hong Hua looked puzzled, then realized he was joking. She gave the Chinese men one more annoyed glance before turning away.

The white man looked pleased. "Are you two sisters?" he asked, picking up a drumstick.

Now Hong Hua smiled and answered in English, "Cousins."

"She is my older cousin," Maggie said in Chinese. "But we're like sisters."

He stretched his greasy lips. "Your cousin's English is very good. How about yours?"

Sadly Maggie shook her head. "My English is really terrible. It's very embarrassing. Her English has always been better than mine."

"Little Gem," Hong Hua reprimanded, but Maggie could tell she was pleased. Once, she told Maggie, she forgot that Maggie was American and thought, I want to speak English as well as her.

"We live in Changping," Hong Hua was saying now. She vacillated between English and Chinese. "Maybe one hour, by bus. From Beijing."

"Changping," the man said, his eyes steady on Hong Hua's face. "It must be a beautiful place."

Hong Hua shook her head. "Not so beautiful," she said. "But air clean." She waved her hands. "Mountains. Trees."

"Maybe I should come there," the man said. "Maybe I should visit you and your cousin."

Hong Hua smiled carefully. She didn't want to give the man any wrong ideas. Nibbling on a piece of corn bread, she absently put an arm around Maggie's waist and leaned her temple against Maggie's shoulder. Maggie touched her cheek to her cousin's hair.

For a moment the man stopped chewing. A piece of chicken skin clung to his mustache. The air from his nose made it shiver.

The man wouldn't talk about himself. Hong Hua complimented him on his Chinese and asked how it was so good, but he only reiterated that he was from Beijing so of course he could speak *putong hua*. In Mandarin Maggie couldn't tell what he was, European, Canadian, or American. He, like his companions, wore a suit with his tie loosened, as though they had just come from a meeting. He was there because of his job, he said, and his job was nothing to speak of. Maggie glanced at his left hand: no ring, no tan line.

Afterwards they walked out of the restaurant together, the Chinese men slightly ahead. Maggie tried to listen in on them, but they were too far away. Everyone still thought she was a native, and it was time to let them know they had been fooled. Night had fallen and the lights of the city had snapped on. Outside they hovered on the sidewalk.

“Young misses,” the white man said. “What will you do now?”

Hong Hua smiled and shrugged. “Go home?” she said, looking at Maggie.

Maggie nodded. Her heart was pounding. She was getting to ready speak.

“Changping is far,” he said. “I have a car. Perhaps I can drive you.” He smiled and opened his arms. “A ride for my new friends.”

Maggie paused. How to rebuff him? The words rearranged themselves in her head. *You’ve got to be fucking kidding me*, she could say. Or, *No fucking way*. She opened her mouth.

“*Haode!*” Hong Hua chirped. “Thank you very much!”

Maggie tasted the night air. Her cousin was giving the white man a dazzling smile. “We hate the bus,” she said. “The smell, the cold. Sometimes we have to stand.” The man nodded with understanding.

Maggie laughed nervously. “Just a moment, please,” she said, and took Hong Hua aside. “Little Red, we don’t even know this man. We can’t just get into his car.”

“Why not? He seems all right.” Hong Hua’s forehead crinkled. “Doesn’t he?”

Maggie’s fingers loosened on Hong Hua’s sleeve. She still surprised Maggie with her innocence. Just weeks ago she had failed to recognize an obscene phone call. “Do you think he’s all right?” she asked Maggie of the heavy breather. “Do you think he’s dying?”

“You’re right to be nervous.”

Maggie jumped. The man had appeared beside them. “I’m a stranger,” he went on. “It’s dangerous to get into a stranger’s car. But we’re friends now, aren’t we? And besides.” He straightened his coat; on his finger a gold wedding ring flashed. “My wife is back at the hotel. I certainly can’t keep her waiting too long.”

Hong Hua smiled with relief. See? she seemed to say as she looked at Maggie. He’s all right.

Maggie’s eyes narrowed. She swore he hadn’t been wearing the ring before. In the restaurant she had especially looked. But there it was. She felt doubts creeping over her. Had she looked carefully enough? Had she somehow missed it?

“Little Gem,” Hong Hua said. “What do you think?”

She looked at the man. Maybe he was all right. Sally always said crazy things happened in China.

Strangers took you under their wing; you took trips with people you hardly knew; you had an affair with someone because he spoke good English, because he was already taken, because he was as good as you.

Under the neon lights the man's ring winked at her, a crimson spark.

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The man's car was a new and spacious minivan. The Chinese men rode in the front with the driver, Hong Hua, Maggie, and the man in the back. The man sat facing them, like in a limousine. The seats were soft and the heat warm. They removed their coats.

"Perhaps we should learn each other's names," the man said. "Since you are riding in my car." He laughed, for the first time Maggie realized, one loud ha.

"Rose," Hong Hua said. "You can call me Rose."

Maggie was surprised. She hadn't realized her cousin already had an English name picked out for herself. "And you?" the man asked.

"Mei Mei," Maggie answered. She had yet to meet a woman in China named Mei Mei, but it was a name she knew foreign men would like. Mei Mei? Hong Hua mouthed at her while the man's lip curled under his mustache. "And you?" Maggie asked.

"Wilhelm," the man said. Ah, so he was German, Maggie thought. He pronounced his name with a subtle V. "Vil-helm. Can you say that?"

"Wilhelm," Hong Hua said, pronouncing it with a W.

"No," Wilhelm said. "Vil-helm."

Hong Hua blinked with effort. "Wil-helm."

"No. Vil-helm." He placed his teeth on his lower lip. "Veh, Veh. Can't you pronounce the V?" He laughed.

"There is no V in Mandarin," one of the Chinese men explained. But Wilhelm already knew.

"Now you try," he said to Maggie. "Vil-helm."

"*Bu hao yisi*," Maggie murmured. She was too embarrassed to try. Hong Hua was still working her mouth; it opened and closed like a fish's.

Wilhelm stretched his arms across the back of his seat. "I love coming to China. Do you know why?"

Hong Hua nodded authoritatively. "It's a beautiful country."

“Yes, yes. But you know what is especially beautiful?” He leaned forward. “The women. Chinese women are very beautiful. The most beautiful women in the world.”

Maggie could feel her cousin stir. “What about French women?” Maggie asked. “French women are very beautiful. I’ve heard.”

His face wrinkled. “French women are too forceful. They think too highly of themselves.”

“I like French things,” Maggie went on. “I’ve seen pictures of Paris. Very beautiful. I would love to go there.” She raised her eyes to him. “I wish I could go.”

He returned her gaze and shifted in his seat. “Perhaps you can. Someday.”

Chinese women who went with older foreign men to get out of the country were called *dalū mei*. Hong Hua hated them, but Maggie could understand. How easily some white men were swayed by a pretty Oriental face, a soft voice, and proper hands. Of course she’d have to do more than flirt with him in his car. There would be the trip back to the hotel, the hand job under the sheet, the blow job in the bathroom. Then what? A massage? A guided tour of the Forbidden City, the ruins of the Old Summer Palace? What was the equivalent of *dalū mei* for a man?

Hong Hua looped her arm around Maggie’s and leaned over to whisper in her ear. “Little Gem, why are you talking about this stuff?”

He gazed at their limbs entwined. “You two are very close, aren’t you?” He didn’t wait for them to answer. “I like how Chinese girls hold hands as they walk. It’s very sweet.” He turned around to address his Chinese companions. “It’s true, isn’t it?” he said in English. It was startling; Maggie could hear his German accent. “Your Chinese girls are always touching each other. Holding hands, walking arm in arm. It’s lovely.”

The Chinese man shrugged. “It’s very common.”

“It’s lovely,” Wilhelm said again. He turned back around and looking at Hong Hua and Maggie continued in English. “Chinese girls are so comfortable with each other. Once I saw one touch another one on the behind. On the behind! In public! She touched it tenderly, rubbing it in circles. It was lovely, so lovely.” He caressed his thigh.

“Little Gem,” Hong Hua whispered. “What’s he saying?”

“Never mind,” Maggie whispered back. “*Feihua*.” It was nonsense.

“That is right,” Wilhelm said. “*Feihua*.” His eyebrows wrinkled. “Wait. Did you understand?”

Maggie tried to keep her face blank. She looked at Hong Hua as though for translation.

He leaned forward again. “No, you understood. *Ni dong*. I can see it.”

The Chinese men turned around to look at Maggie in the dark. “What do you mean she understood?”

She said she don't know English."

"He right," Maggie said. "Me know no English." Then she started to laugh. She started to laugh and couldn't stop.

They all stared at her, even the driver in the rearview mirror. She saw his eyes as they passed under a street light.

"You tricked us," Wilhelm said.

She took a breath. "That's right. I tricked you. I tricked you into getting us in your car. I tricked you into lying about your wife. I tricked you into telling us your dirty little fantasies, thinking we wouldn't understand. I tricked you."

"You got into the car yourselves," he said hollowly. "We didn't force you." Then his face changed, melting like a bad soufflé. "You won't tell anyone, will you? Please don't tell anyone."

She shook her head and sucked her teeth, the way the natives did. "You couldn't even tell that I'm an American. And your co-workers up there." She switched to Chinese. "Two big brothers couldn't even tell that I'm not Chinese. Two big brothers willing to sell two Chinese girls for some foreign cash. *Ta ma de.*" She turned back to Wilhelm. "And fuck you too."

They were already halfway to Changping and so Maggie and Hong Hua were driven the rest of the way. The whole time Wilhelm begged them not to tell. Maggie remained silent, refusing to give a definite answer. The van slowed in front of Maggie's school, and as they stepped out, the vehicle sped off.

"Little Gem!" Hong Hua finally said. Until then she had been silent. "What happened?"

Maggie chuckled. "We caught them. I had a feeling they were bad men and we caught them."

"Trick, trick, trick," Hong Hua said in English. "What's this trick you kept saying?"

"*Pian,*" Maggie translated. "They said we tricked them."

Hong Hua's eyebrows lifted. "What? You're kidding." A bubble of laughter burst from her lips.

"Hong Hua, is that you?"

They turned. It was Tang Mei, one of Hong Hua's friends from the library. She scurried up to them, her cheeks pink from the cold. She asked, "What are you two doing getting out of a stranger's car?"

Maggie and Hong Hua looked at each other and started laughing all over again. "It's a long story," Hong Hua told her.

"I have a story too," Tang Mei said, and began jabbering to Hong Hua so quickly that Maggie couldn't understand.

Maggie smiled politely, then wandered away, still bursting with what had just happened. She wanted to tell someone. Her parents, her friends, Sally and Herb. Ben. She wanted to tell Ben. Maybe she'd call him; maybe she'd leave him a note.

Then she saw him. He was standing by the campus gates, talking with someone. Even from the back, in the dark, she could tell it was him.

"Ben!" she called, hurrying up to him. "Ben!"

He turned around, at first smiling, but when he saw her, his smile disappeared. Standing next to him was Caroline.

Maggie stopped in her tracks. Uh-oh, what to do now? Ben's eyes were so wide as to swallow the moon while Caroline regarded her curiously. They had met her once, months ago, but Caroline didn't seem to recognize her. She seemed to think Maggie was only another Chinese. Smirking Maggie stuck her hands in her pockets and sauntered up to them.

"Hello," she said.

Caroline didn't answer her, only looked at Ben, whose eyes had returned to normal size. He still hadn't spoken. What would he say? *Fiancee, here is my mistress. Mistress, my fiancee.* Maggie held her breath.

Finally he spoke. "Hello," he said, and smiling, Maggie stepped forward, expecting to be introduced, expecting to be allowed to speak.

Then he was turning away. He was taking Caroline's hand, and Maggie saw only their backs as they walked towards the campus gate.

Maggie's breath whooshed out in a cloud of smoke. "Do you know her?" Maggie heard Caroline ask.

He shrugged. "Maybe she is one of my students. I have so many, I can't keep track." He smiled down at her and smoothed a stray hair from her cheek. "But I have only one Caroline."

"Little Gem!" Hong Hua grabbed her arm. "There you are! I thought I lost you." With a hand at the small of her back, Hong Hua pushed Maggie along.

"Tang Mei just wouldn't stop talking," Hong Hua said. "On the bus there was a boy she likes, and she stood next to him the whole ride from Beijing. She was so excited to stand next to him on a bus! Imagine if they went on a real date. Surely she'd die."

Maggie watched Ben and Caroline pass through the campus gates. If she called after them in Chinese, Caroline wouldn't understand. *Hey, where are your Mother and Father Laowai? Where are Mama and Baba Plane Ticket? Why didn't you bring them home in your rickshaw?* Maggie realized she didn't know the Chinese word for rickshaw.

“Little Gem?” Hong Hua was peering at her. “Are you all right?”

“What? Yes, I’m fine. It’s nothing.” She walked faster.

Hong Hua jogged to keep up. “Are you upset about what happened? It was a little scary, but it wasn’t too bad. Besides, we tricked them, remember?”

Maggie tried to smile.

“That guy really thought you were Chinese. You had him convinced. And his Chinese friends too! I thought for sure they’d be able to tell.”

Maggie murmured, “People believe what they want to believe.”

“Hm? I suppose that’s true. I know some people have a hard time believing you’re American.” She laughed. “Maybe you should always carry around your passport. Tape the American flag to your forehead.”

Maggie didn’t answer. They were nearing the military school. No one looked at them as they walked by, not the boys jostling each other in loose groups, nor the old people strolling, nor the girls walking, yes, arm in arm, and Maggie knew that at the gate, under the cover of night and with Hong Hua by her side, she would be able to pass undetected.

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