

# One



**I**N 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