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Fortunate Slaves

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1. Buenos Aires

WHAT WOULD MR. BO XIANG THINK OF THIS? Tony wonders anxiously in San Telmo, as he presses the soles of his feet against the bedpost, bracing to give his labour of love more traction and depth. With good results. The hitherto polite, restrained panting of the matron beneath him turns into moaning. Something low and bestial. Unreserved.

In social intercourse, Mrs. Bo Xiang is the picture of reserve. The eternal smile that people ascribe to Orientals has been bestowed upon her. The grainy layer of pale make-up she smears on her face each morning, over her shaven eyebrows, shows more and more cracks as the day progresses, as fine as the veins in an antique tile. They follow a double pattern: her age lines and the craquelure of her smile. A double map, a palimpsest of an eventful life.

God knows what that poor thing has had to go through in that outsized country of hers, thought Tony, a little less than a week earlier, in the plane on the way over, as he observed his benefactress from close up. She lay next to him in her reclined seat, hanging crookedly in her seat belt, an insect caught in a web, her eyes closed, her small mouth obscenely open. From time to time, she snored or smacked her lips. The Boeing thundered through the freezing, anoxic atmosphere in a composed, almost noble manner.

It was Tony's first opportunity to inspect Mrs. Bo Xiang undisturbed from this close up. There were several holes in her earlobes. Just before falling asleep, she'd removed her latest purchase—a pair of silver butterflies with a diamond on each wing—

and put them away in her Louis Vuitton handbag, along with her rings, her bracelets, and her Breitling watch. What was she afraid of? Pickpockets in first class? Her breath smelled of peppermints and her teeth looked like ivory jacks that had seen too much use. Tony had to stop himself from putting his hand over the obscene, wrinkled mouth until the breathing stopped.

A hell of a life, he thought at the same time, not without compassion—to be born in China, shortly after the war, a woman. He inhaled through his mouth to escape the odour of peppermints. Starvation, refugees, propaganda. Days and days of banging on pots and pans until the sparrows fell out of the sky in exhaustion. Now and again, a purge, or a week of euphoria. How many bullet-riddled bodies had she seen, how many show trials and rapes? And still she carried on smiling from early in the morning until late at night. Perhaps she was already growing senile. And that's the person giving me orders, that's the person responsible for my fate. His hand itched again.

But he turned his gaze away from her and asked the stewardess for a gin and tonic. Bombay Sapphire, please. A double.

In daylight, observed from a distance, Mrs. Bo Xiang resembled a flawless porcelain doll, as white as gristle. She drew on new eyebrows, blacker than engine oil. She painted her lips with a red that shone like the bodywork of an Italian sports car. She had everything her heart desired. She bought her clothes in Paris, her shoes and handbags in Singapore, her smartphones and cameras in Tokyo. Plastic surgery was the only thing she didn't subscribe to. The one time her smile vanished was when Tony cautiously enquired about it.

Four days ago, as they strolled along the widest boulevard on earth, the Avenida 9 de Julio, her countenance had already cracked by mid-morning. She had burst into peals of laughter.

Just like that. All Chinese people had that affliction, Tony knew by now, and the women most of all. A high-pitched, hiccupping laugh with a vengeance. He wondered whether there was a reason for it. Usually, there wasn't.

That same morning, during their very first breakfast on Argentinian soil, Mrs. Bo Xiang had explained her plans. This short trip would be no beach holiday, she'd warned. Idleness was the privilege of the young. She had no time to lose. She wanted to tick off as many sights as possible, with Tony as her guide. She was giving him a free hand. Wherever he went, she would go. It was all the same to her. Even so, she handed him a brochure with the top attractions circled in red pen. And, oh yes! Dear Tony! She laid her small, ringed hand on his. The claw was heavier than expected and felt cold and clammy—a bunch of wilted asparagus just out of the fridge, pale against the Prussian-blue breakfast linen, the little vase containing a rose, the bowl of fresh strawberries. At the time, they were still staying in the Hilton on the Puerto Madero, the spectacularly modernized harbour district. Don't worry, dear Tony! The claw gave a couple of soothing pats and then remained on his hand. She'd pay for everything! As though she didn't always pick up the bill. There were more credit cards than banknotes in her purse, but there were a lot of banknotes, all the same. A whole range of currencies. She showed them off like a pimply boy with a handful of football stickers. Her complete collection—at home in Guangzhou—included a banknote in the largest denomination from every country she'd ever shopped in.

They don't have the same sense of pride as we do, Tony thought, nodding amicably as he carefully extracted his hand from under the claw. They imitate us. They imitate everything. They are delighted to forsake who and what they are, and they don't feel threatened for a second, because they are convinced they'll win in the long run. We think in centuries, they think in millennia.

We swear by the loner, they know better. They believe in hordes. In billions. No one is closer to the cockroach. He startled himself with his vitriol, but didn't tone down his thoughts. He quickly stuffed two strawberries into his mouth and stood up, shoving his chair away with the backs of his knees.

When she started to laugh on the Avenida 9 de Julio, Mrs. Bo Xiang was hanging on his arm. Her chubby flank was pressed against him as she pointed, gasping like an overgrown adolescent, at the Obelisco—a tall, chubby memorial column which rose up pontifically in the middle of the boulevard, as misplaced as a strap-on penis on a child's belly. Patriotic borders and lawns had been laid around the foot of the obelisk, full of flowers and dog shit. This was it, then, the famous Plaza de la República. The obelisk was not rounded off at the top, but crowned with a small, comical pyramid. If you felt compelled to worship a penis as a totem of your fatherland, Tony groaned—sullen and pale from the jet lag—at least do it right. Chop off that pyramid and put a proper bell end on top. He had woken up with a headache and a nauseated feeling, neither of which had subsided after the much-too-saccharine breakfast coffee, the strawberries, and the croissants that had been cloyingly sweet, too.

On either side of the Obelisco, hundreds of cars came and went along a full twenty lanes of traffic, most of them honking angrily. It wouldn't take much more to turn his headache into a migraine. He had lived in Jakarta for a few years during his peregrinations, and in Cairo, and Bangkok, so he was used to infernal traffic, but this was different. This exuded menace. He didn't belong here. He knew it, and this city knew it. It was already about to turn on him.

None of the hundreds of passers-by gave the unusual couple a second glance. Businessmen, young mothers, begging Falklands War vets, skateboarders, cops in short-sleeved shirts with sweat

rings under their armpits and truncheons in their belts... No one gave anyone a funny look here, Tony chuckled to himself. Harried indifference is an asset. Or not. This was it, of course: the famous Argentinian cool. The gaucho's unflappability, the baccy-spitting cowboy who still believed he was descended from the conquistadores. The Indian-killer with his bow legs and his unshaven chin, his leather hat, his metal yerba maté cup, his incomprehensible Spanish. Perhaps they'd learned from their cattle to wear that indifferent expression. Socializing or flirting was for later, for after work, after the heat, in the new heat of the wood fires in the grill rooms where they would devour half a bull each, just for starters.

After that, they'd withdraw, as pissed as newts, to their shady *milongas*, with their cheap wine, their sweaty accordion music, and their spastic dance steps, until daylight dawned. Ridiculous. What were tango dancers but a pair of tangled-up flamingos with epilepsy? Tony felt a surge of deep animosity, bordering on disgust. He'd already felt it the week before, when he'd opened his first tourist guide. 'City of roasted sweetbreads with Malbec!' 'Mysticism and romance immortalized in timeless music!' Each article came down to the same thing: glorified folk dancing and glorified barbecuing. Nobody mentioned the dictators and their coups, though they drooled all the more over their wives.

The only one on the Avenida who seemed bothered by this odd couple—a young gringo in designer jeans accompanied by a Chinese pygmy woman, hung with jewels and laughing like a lunatic—was a barking poodle. Clearly a creature with a pedigree. That's just perfect, Tony groaned. As he'd predicted, this place was 'Europe squared'. Even a dog was a status symbol. Yelpers like that didn't go down well with Muslims or Asians. Let alone blacks. They knew what a dog was for: to ignore or kick. The beginning of all civilization.

The poodle tugged, barking peevishly, at its incredibly long

lead. The lead kept being pulled taut between the collar around its neck and the belt around the midriff of its escort: a sturdy, bespectacled girl barely twenty years old in a lemon-yellow top, lime-green hot pants, and dirty gym shoes. A princess from the upper middle classes, Tony guessed. Today a prissy student, tomorrow the petulant wife of an oil baron or a meat millionaire. She was wearing a pair of showy white headphones, the jewellery of contemporary youth, and her unbound breasts bobbed around boldly. There were four more leashed show dogs attached to her belt: the biggest was a pure-bred German shepherd, the smallest, a kind of chihuahua. It might also have been a rat. She was already the third of this type of dog walker they had encountered. Most of them were walking. This bespectacled girl was jogging, surrounded by her pack like a heavenly body with insane satellites. Only the poodle remained behind, barking angrily at Tony, bracing against the tugging lead each time: a mutineer, an Argentinian rebel, a four-legged gaucho.

It didn't stand a chance and was dragged along, tug by tug, once almost choking, to the renewed merriment of Mrs. Bo Xiang, who, after the Obelisco, now pointed annoyingly at the animal. Chinese people point at absolutely everything, Tony sighed. Except other Chinese people.

The girl with the dogs bobbed off into the crowd and disappeared. Mrs. Bo Xiang shook her ornamental porcelain head and snickered something in Chinese. Tony nodded without asking what she meant. He was just glad she was still enjoying herself. The first attraction he'd wanted to take her to—a guided tour of the Teatro Colón, one of the largest opera buildings in the world—turned out to be closed due to a union protest. In front of the entrance, a delegation of enraged comrades was making a racket with cowbells, panpipes, Inca drums, and firecrackers. What was it with

this city and its cacophony? He apologized to Mrs. Bo Xiang, but she seemed to find the carry-on quite normal, even enjoyable, as though Tony had planned it all. She radiated happiness. Perhaps, Tony shuddered, she sees it as an homage to her communist origins. He quickly coaxed her away, before she got it into her head to go and shake the hands of the entire delegation of strikers, or hand out money to them. That woman was capable of anything.

She willingly let herself be guided away on his arm, smiling gratefully. He was almost convinced he could hear the layer of foundation cracking.

Her good humour stayed afloat even in the graveyard, a few hours later, when it turned out that Tony had made a mistake. Evita Perón was buried somewhere else.

He should have known. It had taken them half an hour to get there. Taxis were so cheap and so abundant here that the chauffeurs were all too eager to misunderstand you so that they could rack up a few extra kilometres. Or was it a genuine misunderstanding? Tony had asked for 'the cemetery with the famous dead people' because he'd forgotten the name of the neighbourhood. Perhaps the driver had liked music more than politics when it came to cadaverous heroes.

There was no lack of heroes in this sweeping boneyard: a genuine park with broad lanes, each one cobbled, each one bordered with graves that looked like miniature houses. They even had windows and ornamental doors—mausoleums custom-made to the dimensions of an extinct bourgeoisie. All of them built in the most flashy of materials, from marble to granite, topped off with a frieze of angelic hosts or a bust of the departed. The richest had had themselves anchored full length to the world they should have left behind. Fossils of bygone glory and self-importance. There were soldiers, eternally saluting in their dress uniforms

of *bronzo bombardà*, and there were musicians, seated on chairs with bandoneons on their knees, frozen in everlasting ambiance. Nostalgia on a pedestal.

The undisputed high point was the grave of Carlos Gardel, Tango King, singer-songwriter of '*Mi Noche Triste*' and '*Volver*', not to mention skirt-chaser, chain-smoker, and patron of Café Tortoni. He went down in a plane at the age of 45. His massively attended funeral disrupted traffic for an entire day. And that was in 1935. Tony remembered it all from his Michelin guide. He had still managed to hit a goddamn tourist jackpot!

And indeed, Mrs. Bo Xiang stood happily admiring the statue. Behold the eternally youthful, perpetually singing dandy, flaunting a bow tie and the smile of a Latin lover. He stared haughtily over their heads at the graves on the other side of the path, shining as though he had just been polished. There were fresh bouquets at his feet, and the wall behind him was adorned with copper plaques and enamel tiles covered in sayings, expressions of gratitude, and love poems written by admirers, most of whom had been born long after their idol's plane had crashed. Someone had threaded a white carnation through his bronze buttonhole. A real cigarette butt smouldered between the brownish-green fingers of his right hand.

Mrs. Bo Xiang got her compact red titanium Sigma camera out of her Louis Vuitton, peered through the lens, and gestured frantically with her free hand for Tony to stand closer and closer to the statue. She wouldn't calm down until he had climbed up onto the knee-high tomb and posed next to Gardel, mirroring his stance, right down to the cigarette in his left hand. Her gadget chirped like crazy—she had chosen an electronic bird sound for each snap. She had already taken shots of Tony at the gate of the Casa Rosada on the Plaza de Mayo, and next to the colourful houses on the Caminito in La Boca.