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Shanghai Blue

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Shanghai smells of mildew. Muggy air assaults as I step off the plane. I remember only the monsoon season having this smell. Now it is August, a month after the monsoon, but the smell is everywhere—passport control, luggage hall, people's clothes, taxi seats ... The city reeks of decay. Everything in it rots—even modern, glittery, chic young men and women.

This familiar smell upsets and soothes me. My mind says my hometown should be clean, bright, fashionable, modern, proud. But my senses tell me it is not: I smell the walls of my childhood home in the monsoon season—walls that sweated gray-green mildew spots and stank of wet plaster.

I arrive at midnight on 7 August. Wishing not to disturb my elderly aunt and uncle, I told them I would arrive the next morning. Tonight I stay downtown at the South Ocean Hotel. After checking in, settling into the room, and taking a bath, I feel no urge to sleep and go downstairs to the bar.

This bar called Mask is more popular than the hotel itself. Most customers are not hotel guests. In summer the garden is open. I choose a table beside a tree and order a glass of white wine. The night air is summer sticky and smells of dark green plants. A breeze now and then lightens the air, making the humidity bearable.

Crickets chirp shrilly in the bushes. I cannot remember how long ago I last heard them—ten years at least. I came home

several times to visit meanwhile but somehow missed this season. I cannot even remember hearing crickets since I grew up. Too busy? Too distracted? Crickets chirping recall the long uneventful autumn nights of my childhood. I thought these little creatures might go extinct, but they endure as if to remind me I am home for good.

Candlelight reflects in the sunglasses of a man at the table opposite. I have been studying him. His lion nose and peach-flower mouth, which make his face at once harsh and gentle, are familiar. He seems to be observing me as well though I cannot tell for sure—I cannot see his eyes. Why wear sunglasses at night? He is sitting under a lamp; insects dance above his head, but he seems not to mind or even notice. He wears a silk shirt; the light gives it a distorted purple color. The collar is open; around his neck is a red string, probably suspending a jade talisman. He looks about forty, a businessman—maybe a restaurant owner or seafood dealer. Did I meet him somewhere?

As I rack my brain guessing who he might be he stands up, swills the rest of his drink, and walks away. I stop guessing. If I really know him the name will come back when I am not thinking about it. Most likely I do not know him at all—he could be just a passerby from years ago.

A loud motor howls, a scarlet Lamborghini pulls away, the man in sunglasses at the wheel. The rear license plate reads: Shanghai A-88888. Above the number it says: FUK U.

Damn jet lag! I oversleep. I promised my aunt I would arrive in the morning but get there at one in the afternoon. My aunt and uncle are waiting for me. An untouched banquet covers the dining table—pork marinated in salt and rice wine, fried river fish stewed in soy sauce, fried tomatoes and zucchini, cu-

cumber salad in vinegar, plus a pork chop and winter melon soup.

They always treat me like their own child—they are one reason I decided to come home to Shanghai from Amsterdam. They are healthy but well into their seventies with nobody to take care of them. Two years ago on a visit I hired a country-woman to clean house, shop, and cook for them, but they soon let her go. ‘We are not used to food cooked by other people,’ they said, but in fact did not want me to waste money. When I worked at the bank in Amsterdam my salary was generous by Chinese standards. Frugal their whole life they find my expenditures painfully exorbitant.

My aunt is tender and solicitous. She loves and cares for me, and sometimes I feel she loves me even more than her daughter, my cousin. My uncle is kind and quiet. Wearing thick glasses, he bent for years over a desk stacked with papers. His back is now hunched. As a child I was proud of them because they were trilingual in Chinese, Korean, and Vietnamese. They were translators for the factory they worked at and met in Vietnam when sent there to learn the language. Retired twenty years now they stay home with nothing to do—every day is aimless but comfortable and relaxing.

After lunch my uncle slices a watermelon.

‘I can’t eat another bite,’ I say.

‘Today autumn begins,’ he replies. ‘Eating watermelon is our custom.’

I have no idea how the custom originated. Perhaps when autumn begins watermelons get scarce so one must eat them quickly. It was only while abroad that I discovered how ignorant I am of tradition, as if my first twenty-two years of life were wasted.

I went abroad ten years ago, first to study for two years, then to work at a multinational bank. My job from a Chinese point of view was a golden rice bowl whereas to me it was golden handcuffs—nice to see but not to wear. In the eight years I worked at the bank I was promoted only once: the new task differed little from the old and the pay raise was negligible. I tried to change jobs several times but the new offers were worse and I soon got too lazy to keep looking. Sitting on a permanent contract, I did the same thing day after day. Often, watching my youth slip away, I was seized with panic—I saw death pressing closer and closer. One day I decided to go home and start a new life. I had nothing to lose but a boring job—no property, no family, no steady boyfriend. To me it meant no burden though most Chinese would consider it proof of failure.

‘Are your classmates all married now?’ my aunt asks.

‘Some are, some aren’t.’

‘Do the married ones have children?’

‘Some do, some don’t.’

My one hesitation about coming home is my aunt’s penchant for matchmaking. Her discipline was always strict: I was forbidden boyfriends and had to be home by nine at night. The day I graduated from university, however, she started matchmaking. Then I went abroad. Too far away for micro-management, she switched to telephone consultancy. International phone calls were expensive but not enough to stop her: ‘I met an old colleague today who asked if you’re married and have a child ...’ I got annoyed once and said, ‘If anyone asks again you give her eight words—*no girl marry out, no child come out!*’ She spoke no more about it after that. I felt guilty but did not want to say so, fearing she might start up again. Now she

knows I am home to settle down. Her matchmaking passion rekindles.

‘The other day I ran into an old colleague who asked after you.’

‘Any news of my cousin?’ I redirect evasively.

‘How could we have any news?’ my uncle replies. ‘The police said last week they hadn’t found her in ten years and therefore closed the case.’

‘You mean that’s it?’

‘What else could we do? The police said it’s 99 percent certain she’s dead.’

This no-news news makes me forget about matchmaking. We all guessed she was dead, but the announcement shocks me.

She was their only child, fifteen years older than I. Paralyzed with polio at three, she was confined to a wheelchair. Her lower body was no bigger than a child’s, making her head and upper body look outsize. I remember her sequestered in her tiny room with an almost lightless view to the north, emerging only to heat water in the kitchen to wash her hair. I do not know why she liked washing her hair so much; maybe it was because she thought her shiny black hair was the one part of her body she could be proud of. My aunt and uncle always told me not to disturb her, saying she was preparing for the university entrance exams. She was always preparing for the exams but never passed. The year I went to junior high she gave up and worked at the local community council as a telephone operator. Once every household got a private phone she took small fees from illiterate Party members to ghostwrite reports they had to submit on what they thought about policy decrees. Shortly after I went abroad she went missing.

She and I were not close, but she taught me the good habit of reading. At age seven I read film magazines with her; at age nine, supermarket romances; at age eleven, travel adventures. In junior high I finished her World Classics collection. In senior high I lost interest in her books and bought my own.

Maybe because I liked reading I was good at school, which I hated. School made me anxious; I still feel the chill. I looked forward to vacation and growing up. But looking forward slows time—vacation always seemed to recede and growing up never to happen. Now, in no time, I am over thirty. This transformation was so quiet and seamless that I failed to notice it—like my cousin's disappearance and death.

I was born the day of Chairman Mao's funeral—18 September 1976. The wailing of millions, my aunt said, drowned out my feline cries. Everyone was weeping. The sobs betrayed grief, fear, relief, and worry. A new life came into the world as funeral music blared from loudspeakers throughout the city. That year people's eardrums went numb from funeral music. It was a year of mourning—for three founding fathers of the People's Republic and for hundreds of thousands killed by the great earthquake. They called me Lan—Blue—hoping I would have a tranquil mind, placid like the blue sky.

I spent my first twelve years in a southwest Shanghai suburb called 'countryside' in dialect. It had twenty-four apartment buildings, three abreast in eight rows. Due north was the main road beyond which stood the factory where my aunt and uncle worked. West was another paved road beyond which farm fields stretched off into the distance. East was a river beyond which endless farm fields also stretched. South was a small muddy road. Every morning and evening watchful farmers squatted beside it with plastic basins, sieves, and shoes piled up at their feet, asking passersby if they had ration coupons for cigarettes. The farmers bartered their goods for coupons to resell at a profit to cigarette addicts. When they saw policemen coming they packed up and dispersed in no time.

My aunt and uncle worked for that factory from the day

they were assigned there upon leaving school till the day they retired. The factory had a name, but everyone called it 416. My uncle said it was a code number—the government gave all military factories a code number. When my aunt and uncle talked about former schoolmates they also used code names: Old K worked at 409, Young K worked at 578, and so on.

Every morning at eight sharp military music blared from the factory loudspeaker. Still chewing their last mouthful of breakfast, workers emerged from the twenty-four buildings and bustled toward the factory gate. At twelve sharp the same music blared and workers from all factory departments streamed toward the dining hall. Those with schoolchildren or old parents living in went home to cook. Employees returned to their workstations at one and, exchanging rumors and gossip, waited for military music to blare at five. And so it went day in day out year after year. Over time the twenty-four buildings were repainted from gray to brown, brown to yellow, and back to gray again.

There were two schools for workers' children—Guangyuan Elementary School and Guangyuan Middle School. Children from the twenty-four buildings felt superior to children from the surrounding farm communities: they spoke accentless Shanghai dialect and knew they did not have peasants for parents. They wore key chains around their necks and when school let out at three they played outdoors like feral cats, but never with farm children from the villages. In summer they walked twenty minutes in scorching heat to the nearby university pool rather than swim in the river with them.

In those years of scarcity children were happy. Any piece of junk, any captive vermin, any abnormal person brought joy. They enjoyed harassing Loony Lulu, a lunatic in the building