

Age Matters

“Scotch on the rocks. Large one!” Han was already on his second and it wasn’t even seven o’clock. He propped his head in his hand at the prospect of another week in a hotel he couldn’t remember the name of. It was only Wednesday night and he was already drinking alone. God, he felt suicidal. He had everything materially his contemporaries would spend a lifetime chasing; yet he was too proud to admit his drinking could undermine it all. He became aware of the scent of perfume, *peonies* if he wasn’t mistaken, and a woman sitting on the adjacent barstool. He discreetly looked over, noticed her tiny feet, such slender ankles and a cleavage; perfectly sculptured like an alabaster statue. He sat up straighter. Her porcelain skin showed a hint of freckles, barely visible in the darkness, and he couldn’t stop himself from staring at her long ‘Titian’ hair. She was slowly circling the drinks stirrer in a tall gin and tonic, nails perfectly manicured painted to match her grey silk dress.

“Is it the hair?” she asked, looking across.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to stare,” Han said. “Can I get you another one?”

“Thanks, a gin and tonic would be lovely... Sarah.”

“Han.”

He beckoned to the waiter and pointed at Sarah’s glass.

“I hope I haven’t offended you Sarah...”

“Not at all. I’m used to being stared at over here. It’s not as bad as it used to be.”

“It’s the combination of hair... small feet... reminds me of someone,” Han said.

“Interesting, I thought that was history now. I haven’t seen you before Han and I’ve been staying in this hotel, on and off, for over twenty years.”

“My last place went down-hill. Chef left. Time for a change.”

“The food here is excellent. Authentic Chinese and Thai, fresh ingredients, not a microwave to be seen.”

“Then why not join me for dinner?”

Sarah hesitated before leaning in to whisper. “Are you sure that’s not the drink talking?”

Han thought for a moment, lost in Sarah’s green eyes. “Absolutely, I’m sure. So, like I say, you join me for dinner, yes?”

Sarah swung the bar stool around to reveal her slender legs, let the silk from her wrap-over dress fall to one side. Crossed one knee over the other and started tapping the air with the toe-point of her stiletto shoe. Rested her elbow on the bar, brought her gin and tonic to her lips, buying a little time to inspect Han more closely. There was no denying that life had removed the boy, worldly-wise beyond his years. Yet beneath the façade, Han’s confident smile, she suspected he was... unhappy? His designer suit in black silk and matching shirt gave his Asian skin an ethereal look. Or maybe it was the subdued lighting playing tricks on her eyesight, couldn’t be the drink, it was only her first.

“Love to join you,” she said.

They left the bar and headed for the elevator. Leaned in close to watch the skyscrapers whizz by as they ascended to the rooftop restaurant. The ‘ching’ of the doors opening drew them inside and the waiter showed them to a private corner. Han pulled out a chair for Sarah to take a seat.

“Champagne?” he asked.

“Why not.”

The waiter returned with a bottle of Moët and minutes later they were sipping drinks in a restaurant devoid of people except for a couple of businessmen dining alone. The tea-lights flickered on the table and to one side a crystal vase held the single stem of a red rose.

“What is it that you do for a living?” Sarah asked.

“My company, the family company, we manufacture silk and ship internationally.”

“I thought you must be successful, if your image is anything to go by, Armani?”

“Personal tailor. Prefer my suits handsewn. Better fit.”

“Looks good. And how are you surviving the recession?”

“Turnover up by twenty percent, for us, recession not a problem.”

“I imagine your family must be very proud?”

Han smiled showing his dimples, reminded Sarah of a younger Jet Li and just as cute. She reached out to run her fingers through his thick black hair, swept it over his ear.

“For your information, third child!” he replied “I might have been the youngest, but believe me, older brother apple of my mother eye, middle sister apple of my father eye, and me left to compete for whatever attention left over. Never enough to go around.” Han gestured as if to imply he’d always been at the bottom of the pecking order.

Sarah laughed. “I believe you, although I’m an only child. I imagine success is very important to your family though?”

“Oh yes, all very important things in Chinese family. What about you Sarah, what brings you to Shanghai?”

“Shipping family. My grandfather started the business, originally a deep-sea fisherman then diversified into shipping. My father runs the company now, transports oil, sometimes cargo. I’m an economist by profession, run the financial side of things. First started coming over as a child.”

“And you’re from?”

“The Northeast of Scotland. I’ve spent the past twenty years commuting between Aberdeen and Shanghai. And what about you Han?”

“Born in Hong Kong, educated at public school and University in Scotland.”

“Imagine the chances.”

“I know, although I have to confess, sometime I wish... be nice to get out from under the pressure, be free of it.”

“Then I think we should do something about that,” Sarah said, playfully pointing her finger in Han’s direction. “Tell me, if you could get out from under your life, right now, go anywhere on the planet; what would your destination be?”

Han leaned back in his chair responding to Sarah’s playful spirit. Stroked his chin whilst he thought for a moment.

“Hawaii!”

“Hmm... excellent choice,” Sarah replied, looking into the middle distance. “White sandy beaches, aquamarine sea, brightly coloured cocktails.”

They seemed to guess each other’s thoughts and turned to watch the rain teeming down the windows.

“Do you think, if we dream hard enough, we can make it happen?”

Han laughed. “You know, you keep talking like this, you might even cheer me up,” he said.

“That was the general idea. Do you believe in fate?”

“Chinese, superstition in the blood.”

“Do you think we were meant to meet tonight, in this hotel, during one of the wettest winters I can remember?”

“You know maybe we were.” Han leaned in and took hold of Sarah’s hand. He was interrupted by the waiter who placed menus on the table.

“Have you seen much of China?” Han asked, as the waiter refilled their glasses.

“Yes, got a chance to see it before major tourism and then the hand back by the British. Been very fortunate really. It was my mother who was the intrepid traveller, an artistic spirit. I can remember accompanying her to some of the more obscure palaces in the name of research. My father’s a workaholic and she always had time on her hands. Been dead a few years now, but every day I still miss her... I wish I’d had the same success with Mandarin as you have with English though, which is excellent by the way.”

“Thank you. Not an easy language to master, I could teach you a few words?”

“And could I repeat them in polite company?”

Han grinned, showing his dimples again.

“You have a beautiful smile.”

“Not had much to smile about. Difficult to fathom why someone like me who has everything most people dream about feels empty? Maybe it been too easy, inheriting it all.”

“Keep me right Han, but it seems to me that if it wasn’t for *duty* you’d be elsewhere right now. Or have I caught you on an off day?”

“I confess to feeling off my game. Punishing workload but beside that I’ve got nothing to complain about, successful career, plenty money.”

“And if you had a choice; what would you be?” Sarah asked, leaning in to straighten the knot of his tie. She could smell the woody tones of his aftershave. “If duty hadn’t led you to running the family business.”

“Racing driver. I love fast cars. Own a Porsche.”

“Then become a racing driver!”

Han laughed. “No, I have obligation to my family. Before, when I study business and management at Glasgow University, must be fifteen years ago now, I take extra subject, study western religion. Like to see both sides.”

“I take it you’re not from a religious family?”

“Atheists. Maybe that what make me curious you know, perhaps something spiritual is missing from my life?”

“Then I prescribe one week in Hawaii, a minimum of three cocktails a day, and the company of at least *one* member of the opposite sex at all times.”

Han laughed. “I like you Sarah, you just the tonic I been needing.”

“Don’t tell anyone,” Sarah said, furtively looking left and right, “but I take my tonic with a good measure of gin. What can I say to make you feel better, but in my experience life will *destroy* your faith in human nature, *restore* your faith in human nature, and every once-in-

a-while it 'gifts' you the company of a young man who captivates your attention for a few hours and all the other 'stuff' seems irrelevant."

Han looked away. For the first time since meeting him he seemed shy.

"If it helps at all I became disillusioned with religion in my twenties, it never made any sense to me and I gave up on it. Don't get me wrong, I'm not averse to the notion of the Divine I just wish there was a bit more evidence. I'd like to believe in miracles. It's one of the downsides to travelling, no matter what the culture, wherever you are in the world, the grass seems greener. It's the perverse aspect of human nature, now I try and live in the moment," Sarah said, crossing her eyes. "Correct me if I'm wrong, but I thought China, especially ancient China, had a unique heritage when it comes to spirituality?"

"Yes, I am aware of this," Han said. "My grandparents were keen for me to know something of the Taoist ways, but now it's all about money, and I have plenty."

"I have made a point of studying Chinese culture, particularly its ancient history, and sex was always viewed as a spiritual quality. An essential component of a long and healthy life, yin/yang balance, I'm sure you're familiar?"

Han nodded.

"It's one of the aspects that draws me to the culture, the absence of guilt. Whereas in the West, especially for my mother's generation, well, a different view."

"Why feel guilty about pleasure?"

"Let's drink to that." They clinked their glasses together.

"Life too short for denial. I can't believe I don't see wedding ring on your finger."

Sarah laughed. “Divorced now. We fell out over children, it was one of many things that I won’t bore you with. I didn’t want any, he did, we couldn’t agree to differ and went our separate ways. I’m free to please myself.”

Han lifted Sarah’s hand to his lips and kissed her wrist.

“You’re not intimidated, are you?”

“Why should I be? Prefer older women. There are others, for when a conversation is not required.”

“Interesting viewpoint. On the scale of ‘political correctness’ somewhere between borderline ‘sexist’ and almost definitely ‘ageist’, although I’m flattered.”

Han grinned. “Can I tell you a secret Sarah?”

“Of course.”

“My grandfather had love affair with Scottish woman.”

“Oh, do tell me more...” Sarah said, leaning in close.

“Quite unusual at the time. They met in Hong Kong at Chinese New Year party. She was a writer, husband a businessman, always working, didn’t pay her enough attention. Can still hear him telling me the story, never forgotten it.”

“How romantic and how before its time were they! Is that what’s missing from your life?”

Han placed his fingers inside Sarah’s, stroked them softly, the candlelight reflecting in his eyes. Maybe he was lonely and Sarah knew all there was to know about loneliness. Years in a loveless marriage and since then in pursuit of the soul mate that ‘Romantics’ loved to ‘write-on’ about, although now she was past caring.

“To think that all those years ago, like a symbolic rainbow bridging East and West, Heaven and Earth, they fell in love. Did they stay in touch, meet up again?”

“I don’t know. He was busy establishing the business and travel wasn’t easy, not like now. They exchanged love letters, which my grandfather left to me when he died. I treasure them. Still miss him. I wonder about her every day, what became of her...”

Later, as they stood by the elevator, Sarah whispered. “Room 212 – if you want to call me.”

As he watched her disappear inside Han contemplated whether history might repeat itself, at the prospect of discovering Sarah’s porcelain skin for the first time. Or was it the *idea* that appealed more than the reality? Tonight, he would be raising a glass to his grandfather and the memory of his love story. And he didn’t feel suicidal anymore.