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Red Poppy

She was standing at the bookstall at the Shanghai Literary Festival when you first saw her, flipping through the stacks of books by Chinese authors translated into English. She looked imperial against the backdrop of book covers embossed with gilded red and orange flames licking black borders, and she was so beautiful that she could have been on the covers herself, as a coy imperial concubine.

She wasn't young—you could see that at once. But there was that luminous Han skin (despite the crowsfeet creasing with every smile) and black silk tumbling on to her shoulders in unruly curls. You felt a vague curiosity about her, but you turned back to the book you were skimming through, the one that had been made into a vapid Hollywood movie last year.

Then she was there again, at the impossibly pretentious Glamour bar with its velvet chairs and gilt wine glasses, at the poetry reading by the Australian poet who seemed more than just slightly inebriated. It didn't matter, most people there seemed equally happy and she glowed with an inner fire as the English words tumbled out of his mouth about writing and liberty and death . . . and booze. You noticed the slight damp sheen on her upper lip, perhaps from the heady wine or just sweaty excitement. She seemed like an indolent sexy alien, so different from your normal life of three children and a husband and the full-time drudgery of a job.

When you were introduced, it surprised you to hear that she was a mother too, of a teenaged daughter. You talked about poetry's improbability in your daily lives and then decided to form a group with two other random poetically inclined people who were in that same spinning perfection of a bar, all people who had found each other by the divine destiny of having listened to drunken Australian poetry at the right place.

She would show up for every single poetry meeting in the tiny cafes off Huahai Lu or Fumin Lu. Little places, through the dusty Shanghai lanes where laundry hung like colorful awnings overhead, and the coffee was bitter on your tongue. You would show up work-weary and leached of all energy by the late evening but she would appear like a vision from *Vogue*, the highlights in her hair glinting in the faint dying light. You wondered bitchily about how much it cost, both in time and money, to always be so perfectly groomed. She was not a strong poet, bordering on solipsism more than transcendental truths, but there were sudden flashes in her poetry, like the image of red poppies blooming in the chill that caught you, and everyone else, with the force of an epiphany. Plus she wrote

more than anyone else, spurred on by an unflagging diligence for English, her beloved second language.

You would patronize her. Then go home and wonder why you wasted time on such inane praise. But she made you think about poetry and why people write and inner soul-food and all that touchy-feely stuff that you usually didn't make room for in your daily life. She would quote Li Bai and other ancients, the English lisping on her tongue.

One day, after exiting a Christmas binge at one of the five-star hotels in People's Park, you saw her through the festooned cottonwool and shiny red baubles on the Christmas tree, hanging on to the arm of a tall Caucasian man and nipping gently at his ear. They were snuggling into a corner of the dimly-lit bar and although you walked towards her automatically, you turned around. She had never mentioned a husband or a partner, and through the heavy pallor of the smoky room you felt you would be intruding.

You said nothing when you saw her again. While she struggled with a line that made her poetry unintelligible, you reminded her about a point in grammar, and asked if she could ask a native speaker for help. She bit helplessly on her pen and the slight line of red lipstick rimmed the grey base, but she said nothing.

You felt as if there were things about her that she would never reveal to you, that your year-long friendship had been one of poetic masks on words that revealed nothing. You, who wrote about things that were unspeakable, words that made you cry so that you had problems reading your own poetry aloud, felt betrayed. Suddenly you felt tired by it all, falling into the clichés of Chinese inscrutability like a fresh-off-the-boat expatriate deep in culture shock. There were things about writing, about the sanctity of words, that you believed in—you wanted to trust in this poet, your only friend in Shanghai, even as you knew you were too old to believe in truth and trust and easy friendships.

Then a newly married couple came to visit from Amsterdam and you took the two men bar-hopping one night. You started at the English pub with the amazing view of the Bund and worked your way down to the tiny joints hidden behind the glittering malls of Nanjing Xi Lu, where the party never ends. The women grew younger and hungrier, openly offering your newly married gay friends such a mind-blowing time that they would turn straight. You laughed at the absurdity of it all, suppressing a yawn at the lateness of the night and the seediness of this particular bar.

That's when you saw her, dancing alone, close to a table of drunken Caucasian men past their prime, most of whom were too far gone to notice their surroundings. She was wearing a tiny electric blue dress that seemed slashed to display most of her body, including her navel. As she swayed to an inner music, you could see how aged her body seemed next to the pretty young things draped around the Caucasian men. A vivid memory of red poppies blooming in the chill made you nauseous—and you had to step outside.

Swallowing the air outside, spiced with the smells of the late-night hawkers barbecuing meat under the night sky, you wondered what exactly it was preventing you from reaching out to your friend tonight, as you would have to any other, and saying a simple hello. A sinuous navel seen through a tacky blue dress, framed by the smoke and fumes of a seedy bar; is that all it took to make you crumble?

When your Dutch guests came looking for you, you pleaded a headache and apologized profusely, insisting they carry on exploring Shanghai even as you returned home. They reluctantly waved you into a taxi.

You watched the glittering steel-and-glass facades of Shanghai whiz past your window, feeling hollow inside, all the way home.