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Extract from Chapter 1

(pp 19-26)

For me, the story of this summer begins that night in Shanghai when I sat wide awake at the desk in my room, equipped with paper and pen, but for the first time no longer knew what more I could promise Christopher. My e-mails kept bouncing back to me as spam, and so I had taken to sending faxes instead, but all the faxes went to our shared address, and it was quite possible he hadn't been back there. I sat at the secretary in front of the paper with the letterhead of the Xi Yuan Hotel, and here, only now, at this great distance from Frankfurt and my life there did I begin to admit to myself that this time it really was over. My wristwatch lay on the desk, just caught in the milky cone of light cast by the lamp on the nightstand. I didn't have to look to see how late it was; my inner clock told me. I turned away from the desk. In the broad wall of windows that extended almost the entire width of the room, I saw the city and the night. A ship was gliding past on the Huangpu River. Yellow rays fell in a spinning wreath from the Jin Mao building, making it look as though the building was dressed in a dancing, futuristic skirt. Beside it stood the pink-illuminated Oriental Pearl Tower and the Shanghai World Financial Center – it was a view that was hardly bearable even in the smallest doses, and so I didn't even bother to draw the curtains when I went to sleep. Every evening this view brought home to me the fact that during these very minutes I was standing at the window, satellite cities filled with just the same skyscrapers were sprouting up all around Shanghai at an incredible clip—it felt as if they really were growing on their own rather than being constructed—expanding it at breakneck speed as if someone down below, in the realm of the dead, were effortlessly pushing sharp-pointed nails up through the earth and the asphalt.

I gazed at the spectacle behind the glass, trying not to think about the future. The noise had not let up, even at this hour and on the seventeenth floor of the hotel it could be heard, the steady drone of traffic on several levels. Noisetrotopolis, I thought. There were over one hundred cities with more than one million inhabitants in China. This was difficult to imagine.

There is never particularly much to do in hotel rooms. I looked at the telephone. Paced up and down a few times. In the bathroom, I held a damp washcloth against the back of my neck. My face in the mirror was the color of dried thyme leaves and pointy at the bottom like a goat's head, and here, during my first sleepless Shanghai night and in the face of my disconcerting, not to say distasteful appearance, I was suddenly reminded of the picture of Dorian Gray and at the same time of the possibility that in the course of the past few weeks I had squandered my last chance of ever becoming a decent human being, and that there was perhaps no turning back now, as the errors I'd committed had long since become part of my character, such that it was no longer even necessary to think of them as errors, as they had become one with my very being, malicious and inescapable, one of the most evil among millions of souls, lost like a hair down the drain.

Today, here and now, however, I could still feel that I had reached a nadir, but soon I would no longer even notice what a bad character I had developed, I would go on enjoying life, believing myself capable of passing judgment on other people and deciding what was right and wrong while holding myself to an entirely different standard. I tossed the damp washcloth on the neon lamp above the mirror, but it didn't stay where I had thrown it, instead it splatted to the tile floor. Beside the sink, on the black marble, at least twenty miniscule toiletry articles packed in dark blue

cardboard lay in a row. Even on later days room service continued to make me gifts of additional toothbrushes, pieces of soap, little bottles of shampoo, shower caps, combs and so forth, everything had to be represented in duplicate, which I found highly puzzling and markedly generous.

I got dressed slowly, with little interruptions. I was keeping my options open, free to stop anytime something better occurred to me. But the one thing I was capable of doing at this hour was sitting for a bit at the hotel bar.

The corridor was filled with glaring light, it made me squint when I left the room. Silently I traversed the soft carpet, everything was so quiet that I thought I could sense the people sleeping through the doors; their sleep permeated the long, narrow space and seemed to be reaching out for me from all sides to whisper something to me, something mysterious, in incomprehensible, sing-song tongues. A cleaning woman glided around the corner behind her cart covered with cleaning products, as matter-of-factly as a blood cell slipping through the veins of some enormous creature.

In the hotel bar I at once felt at home. There's something disjointed, random about all life in bars of this sort. It wasn't exactly peak hours. In a corner, two Asian men in white shirts with a blue sheen bent over their whiskey glasses, their pitch-black shocks of hair pointing at one another. They weren't talking, but it seemed to me as though their very posture, half furtive, half submissive, already contained all that needed saying. A man with a baseball cap whose face I couldn't see was toppled over the bar like an upturned Parcheesi piece; the drinks appeared to pack some punch. I ordered watermelon juice. The waiter didn't understand English; I pointed to a little picture of the fruit on the menu. It was annoying.

I don't know why I sat down in the very back of the room, in a dark corner behind an ugly room divider filled with plants and crowned with a smugly smiling Buddha, but this underbrush was the reason Margot didn't see me when she came into the bar with rapid little steps. I saw a flash of her burgundy silk jersey dress through the greenery and recognized her at once. I was pretty confused. Margot places a great deal of importance on sleep; she is in possession of a sleeping draught mixed up specially for her by an herbalist to guarantee her eight hours of unconsciousness every night; she swears by it, and the remedy costs a fortune. My first impulse was to get up and go over to her, but she pulled out her cell phone, and so I stopped. I could see her face clearly in the light of the small candle burning next to the ashtray on her table. Margot read a message and then placed the phone on the table in front of her.

If the text message had just arrived—and that was my impression—it must have come from Europe, at such an hour. As Margot bent forward with her slender frame, in this dark red dress with a hint of blue, she looked like a girl of twenty, and I saw the bartender, an athletic, intelligent-looking man who seemed to glide as he moved, stop for a moment to look at her. He made a calm, self-possessed impression, perhaps the bar belonged to him. He surely must have been accustomed to seeing unaccompanied women here who were neither expecting nor hoping to meet a man. They had traveled across the globe and were tired and wouldn't have enjoyed being approached; on the contrary, it would have felt like harassment. I was once more surprised at how young Margot sometimes appeared. She had girlishly cinched her short hair with a headband, and her clothes looked sinfully expensive—the silk dress delicate as onion skin. Perhaps the hotel wasn't regal, but it was a good one, and judging by her appearance one might have mistaken Margot for a movie star, because

you could always tell just by looking at them that they were constantly conscious of the impression they were making—the significance of their being surrounded them like a bell jar. My boss was completely relaxed, absolutely in harmony with her surroundings. Elbows propped on the table, chin in her hands, she was listening to the unobtrusively soft music, sipping at her straw. Every few minutes she glanced at the door, and a few times she looked in my direction as well, and I ducked down a little, although I was concealed behind the plants.

And then all at once an older—or rather already quite old—Chinese man was standing in the room. He looked around and then made right for her table. They greeted each other quite formally, but something about the exchange made me think this wasn't the first time they were meeting. The man was tall and haggard and had striking ice-gray hair. I found this middle-of-the-night meeting astonishing, but for the time being my only response was to observe them with interest, as if watching a movie that was taking an unexpected turn. The two bent toward each other as though they had something intimate to discuss, or rather it was just Margot who was speaking, but what she was saying seemed to displease the old man, he shook his head a few times, and Margot, who apparently hadn't reckoned with this possibility, sucked nervously at her straw, quickly finishing her fruit juice. The man didn't touch his glass. His body language was so obviously dismissive that I found it almost unseemly. Shouldn't an old fart like that be happy a beautiful woman had consented to meet him? Besides which, why wasn't he asleep at such an hour? He shook his head slowly one more time, then stood up and, already standing, took his wallet out of his jacket pocket and placed a banknote on the table. Since the bartender now approached, blocking my view, I couldn't see whether they even shook hands in

parting, all I saw was that he was in a hurry to get away, clearly he'd just put an unpleasant obligation behind him, an attitude that in my eyes so deprecated Margot's beauty and her impatient waiting that really someone ought to have leapt up and demanded he account for his behavior.

She gazed after him for quite some time. Then at last she picked up her bag and got down from her barstool. It was almost four in the morning when she left. I suddenly felt empty, as if the room had sucked all the memories out of me—without, to be sure, providing me some new suggestion or vision in exchange. Why was I so troubled by this encounter, which hadn't even been one? There was no point expecting Margot to announce her every move to me in advance. And if it had nothing to do with our project, then it was none of my business to begin with. On the other hand, Margot never did anything that did not pertain at least tangentially to her art. But should she have asked me for company at so late an hour? No doubt the real cause of my dissatisfaction was my unhappiness at being left alone. When Anna arrived the day after next, I would surely not have to go out on my own any longer—Anna was a great lover of nightlife.

Barely three hours later we met again in the breakfast room; Margot was leaning back in her chair, holding her cigarette as far as possible from the table as she observed with interest the hot Chinese breakfast in front of her, which she wasn't eating. She gave a start when I appeared before her, asking, "Did you sleep well?"

She smiled broadly: "Of course, my dear. But you don't look as though you did."

(...)

Extract from Chapter 1

(pp 83-89)

Behind the screen someone was talking; and little columns of smoke were rising into the air, it looked as if the room divider were on fire. Behind it sat Linfei, Tian—with a lavender-colored thermos bottle—as well as a Chinese man I didn't know, who was apparently quite tall, for he sat as if folded up on the delicate seat beside Tian looking as if he wasn't finding this particularly comfortable. When he glanced up, our eyes met, and his expression was a cross between considerable surprise and curiosity. Embarrassed, I looked down. He was expensively dressed—I had an eye for that—and in his summer suit looked as though he had come directly from some other engagement. As I remarked the elegant clothing of the young woman sitting beside him—she was perched regally at the center of the sofa, her legs stretched out before her on a stool beneath a Logomania blanket, I assumed the two were a couple and had just come from some dinner or reception. As always in such cases when the man interests me but is not alone, I threw myself immediately at his companion so as to befriend her and thus dispel all suspicion.

“Winona, hello,” she responded when I introduced myself. “And this is Andrew.”

I nodded in the direction of the tall Chinese man. He was about to say something, but Tian plucked at his sleeve and went on talking to him. Tian's eyes—this much I had noticed—were brown today, so he wasn't wearing contact lenses.

“Tian needs tips because he wants to audition for a role in a series about doctors,” Winona said to me, suppressing a smile. Since she gave no sign of being about to move over on the sofa, I sat down in the armchair beside her.

She was still quite young—I put her at sixteen—but after my recent miscalculations with regard to Asians and their ages, I knew she might well be considerably older. She wore a shiny black silk top and blue earrings that were splendidly luminous. Her narrow, long face was so delicate that she looked almost unwell, but she was beautiful. Although thanks to the casting sessions I now had set my bar quite high with respect to female beauty, I found she cut a striking figure. Her black hair gave her skin a faintly blue sheen, and while her eyes were narrow, their size revealed a European influence that didn’t look to me like the result of surgery. Probably she was half Asian.

“Would you like to have a drink too?” she asked, already reaching for the bottle of wine and a glass for me, and it struck me that her thin arm held a quite considerable strand of muscle. I glanced around for Linfei and Lian who were now standing behind me, apparently immersed in heated conversation.

“Thank you. Do you work in a gallery too?” I randomly asked, although she struck me as rather too young for this.

She shook her head. “I’m doing research on art history,” she said. “I wrote my dissertation on the use of rust as a material for 20th century art.” She spoke this last sentence in German with a very strong American accent.

“You speak German?”

“Ein bisschen leider nur. My mother is German.”

Since she had switched back into English, I followed her lead.

“Goodness,” I said, “what a coincidence.”

She raised her eyebrows and smiled. I ventured a brief glance at her boyfriend, an inconspicuous rotation of my head, just a few degrees, or so I thought—I wanted to have another look at him—and he must have had just the same idea at the very same moment: We were both staring at each other and burst out laughing at just the same time.

Winona had noticed this, I was quite sure of it, but she reacted with composure, as though nothing had happened. I took a sip of wine, counting silently to ten and looking at my hands. If only it had been something like this that had put an end to my life with Christopher. Something special, almost like a force of Nature. I looked over at Winona and silently added: something impossible.

I cleared my throat. “Rust,” I said then, “quite a lot of work, no? As a material for art it played such an important role in the second half of the 20th century.”

“Does that really interest you? I mean, it’s my dissertation.” She sounded cool but not at all unfriendly.

“I wouldn’t have asked otherwise. American researchers recently discovered, by the way, that people who make less small talk are happier. I mean—you know: They talk about real things, or at least they have the feeling they are doing so, and this makes them feel better.”

“I know what you mean. But don’t you think there are parties where the topics of doctoral dissertations count as small talk? She gave me a mischievous look, but then made a dismissive gesture as I was about to respond.

“I investigated the change in the meaning of rust over the past forty years. What do you think of when you think of rust? Iron, of course. Richard Serra. He’s

an important chapter. Then I worked my way backward to de Chirico and Tinguely. The usual suspects. Picasso made a start in 1912 with his Guitar. That was early on. I'm concentrating on the material's heyday from the 70s to the 90s of the past century, paying particular attention to the combination of iron – steel – blood – rust. There were a couple of interesting Germans in there as well. At the moment I'm in the process of expanding the dissertation; I want to write my habilitation on the role of material in art."

Wow, I thought, she's already working on her habilitation. What a clever child.

"In Germany," I thought aloud, "does someone there work explicitly with rust?"

Meanwhile Linfei and Tian had made tea and were bringing over a tray; I took a glass, Winona demurred, and the two men pulled over an armchair on whose back Linfei perched like an elegant dwarf while Lian sat in the middle. Winona began to talk about an artist named Volker Kohlen who made self-portraits.

"He photographs himself in various states of mind, from hysterical laughter to pensive to deathly sad. He uses a photochemical process to project the images on steel plates and then fixes them with a very fine layer of clear lacquer before submerging the whole thing in a water bath for a certain length of time. As soon as they dry, the steel plates begin to rust in the areas where they were not treated. The rust keeps spreading across the plates. The process of immortalizing these states of mind in photographs basically gets undone in this way, or is pursued to the point of absurdity."

"I understand," I said. "He isn't interested in the portraits as such..."

"...but rather the corrosion that is taking place, the transformation from one formal and material state to another. Precisely."

Winona took a sheet of paper and sketched a bathtub with a sail floating in it. Once again I noticed the muscularity of her slender arm.

“You must be athletic, right?”

She was taken aback until I pointed to her upper arm; then she laughed and said: “I do yoga.” She frowned and looked at her sketch. “Here, one more example, okay? Take the artist Horst Hellinger and his *Entwurf einer Seeschlacht* from the mid 1980s. The work consists of a bathtub filled with dirty water and a steel plate that’s been cut in two. One half of the plate is leaning against the bathtub, the other lies on the bottom. The steel plate comes from the side of an old boat—so taken together with the water, it suggests a ship that’s exploded. The fragments of the plate in the water and at the bottom of the bathtub, on the other hand, make one think of the detritus following a battle at sea. Hence the title.” She handed me the sheet of paper.

“The bathtub filled with water and flanked by the two pieces of nautical steel looks like a movie prop. Hellinger is using it here as a means to dramatize this battle—allowing him to create a setting for this story using minimal means.”

She regarded her sketch pensively.

“The ancients,” I said, “didn’t give much thought to the material their works of art were made of.”

She nodded: “They teach us that material in and of itself has no value, all it’s good for is being transformed, being given artistic form—a second creation, as it were ...”

She sighed, took her sketch of the *Seeschlacht*, crumpled it and threw it in the wastepaper basket. I glanced at the blanket that shifted over her legs as she did so.

This embarrassed me; I hadn't even been here two hours yet and already the sight of these logos was driving me crazy.

Winona was watching me: "Someone who's really good is a friend of his."

She raised her chin slightly, indicating Andrew. "And I mean really good."

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