

CHAPTER 4: BALLROOM SWANS, DANCING DUCKS

"Everything in the world is about sex except sex. Sex is about power."

Oscar Wilde

The last days leading into New Year 2008 passed by in a wet and wintry blur. The cold in Shanghai cuts famously close to the bone. At home, Fela and I had the standard air conditioning unit that emitted stagnant dryness in its futile attempt to generate warmth. On top of that, the hot water system was croaking its way to an early grave. Our Jacuzzi bath was a lukewarm pond- rendering any function to enliven romance within its bubble making capacity utterly redundant. Luckily, during those first few weeks of reunion, Fela and I were still too busy making up for lost time in the bedroom to care about our handicapped hot tub.

When Fela and I did deign to leave the house, I tagged along as yoga *tai tai** to his classes. Being a prized "foreigner", he was a rising star in a yoga enterprise that was fast becoming a luxury brand name in town. Its state of the art studios functioned as a slick urban temple above a Rolls Royce showroom. Classes cost the same as the daily income earned by a rural Chinese worker, about ¥200*. It was more day spa than yoga studio, more lavish than lean. In his packed classes, Fela benevolently held court amongst the city's economic and genetically blessed, passing on the wisdom of ancient India through physical demonstrations on his own visually resplendent form. I stared at him, agog, along with all the other women and gay men in the room.

On New Year's Eve, Lucy, Fela and I attended dinner at Club Shanghai, the majestic French restaurant above the Shanghai Concert Hall where Frank created his culinary magic as head chef. The building was a heritage listed, Renaissance style showpiece and stepping inside was like stepping into the belly of Shanghai's 1930s heyday. The long dining room boasted shiny mirrored marble before a sharp turn through an intimate alcove opened out into a grand ballroom and Big Band stage.

We were the only customers inside the cavernous space as Frank proudly came out of the kitchen to preside over our starters of Gratinée de Coquilles St Jacques. As the lid was lifted off our fragrant delicacies with a theatrical flourish, I couldn't understand why the restaurant was so quiet on the biggest night of the year.

"Club Shanghai is the best-kept secret in town," Lucy explained. The restaurant was the pet project of a fading Hong Kong movie star married to a multi-millionaire. When her husband's

mistress fell pregnant, the movie star decided to exact revenge by investing her husband's money in opening Club Shanghai. Large amounts were spent on everything - except promotion. The less successful the restaurant was, the bigger the waste of money and therefore the sweeter the revenge. The project delivered a simple and deadly message from wife to husband: you screw behind my back, I'll screw your bank account.

Just as dessert was being served, a second group of diners walked in. They were three immaculate looking Chinese women with six much younger men. They sat at a table on the other side of the room, looking as if they had been painted into the gilded backdrop. I noticed that they didn't order anything to eat but the women pulled out long, thin cigarettes that the men bent to deferentially light before lighting their own Marlboro Reds. The jazz band was now in full swing, performing suite after suite of elegantly upbeat ragtime. I began tapping my feet.

"They must be the movie star's friends," Lucy whispered to me. I watched one of the men expertly lead a woman into a foxtrot, long languid limbs slicing through the smoky air in a buoyant tempo. I suddenly wanted to be inside that picture.

"I'm going to ask one of those guys to dance," I announced. Fela and Lucy smiled. In my tea dress and finger curls, my vintage penchant was out in full force.

As I boldly walked across the dance floor to the other table, I gave my most winning smile and asked the nearest man, "*Yao bu yao tiao wu?*" Will you dance with me? I offered up my hand with coy European camaraderie.

An awkward silence hung in the air as the man stared at my hand like a dog's paw.

"Dance? Um, that's a little complicated..."

The Chinese are rarely direct at saying no. Instead, intricate layers of euphemisms and polite excuses are constructed, leading the conversation down a manicured garden path.

"Wait a moment," he pressed back.

The group conferred in hushed tones. The female leader of the pack eventually got up and strode toward me with catwalk precision.

We introduced ourselves, offering surnames first and then giving the opportunity for the other party to correctly guess the other's preferred title. I therefore became *Zhang Xiao Jie* (literally, little sister Zhang). Her surname was Huang.

"*Huang Tai-tai?*" *Tai-tai* is the Chinese colloquial term for wife, but also infers the status of a wealthy married woman who does not work. Which was a good thing.

Huang Tai-tai smiled approvingly. "My boys tell me you would like a dance."

"If that is alright with you, of course. My husband doesn't want to dance and I couldn't help but notice how skilled the dancers are at your table." I bowed my head deferentially, silently communicating my acknowledgement of her status in our conversation.

"Yes, they're very talented, aren't they? Which one would you like? Did you want to dance with Xiao Yu?" She gestured to the first man. "He'll cost 500 yuan for 3 songs."

I tried to conceal my shock.

"I wasn't after a dance lesson. I already know how to dance. I was just looking for a partner. There are more men than women in your group, so I thought ..."

"I understand," Huang Tai tai cut in. "But you see, these boys are professional."

I nodded meekly and retreated back to my end of the ballroom.

"What happened?"

I related Huang Tai tai's odd exchange with me.

"Oops! Sounds like you just walked into a flock of *yazi*." Lucy gasped, chuckling.

"*Yazi*? As in ducks?"

"Yeah. That's what they call male prostitutes here. It's a booming industry for bored housewives spending their entertainment allowances while the husband's away on 'business trips.'"

I looked over at our New Year's Eve neighbours as if a veil had lifted. Each of the expensively turned out older ladies had two ducks for the night. The ducks wore tight clothing and spiked hair, strutted their assets on the dance floor and flocked around their food source, lighting cigarettes and pouring drinks. Naturally, I was expected to pay if I had the hide to request a loan – however brief that might be.

My husband read my mind and handed me ¥300. "Tell them you'll take 2 dances. Happy New Year, darling," he said, kissing me lightly.

Xiao Yu and I took to the dance floor as the band jauntily began their next song:

You make me feel so young

You make me feel there are songs to be sung

Bells to be rung

And a wonderful fling to be flung

Slow-slow, quick-quick. Slow-slow, quick-quick. Xiao Yu efficiently led me through a tension and release cluster of steps. I stared into his smooth and inscrutable face. He must've been barely 21. When the dance was over, I returned him to his flock.

By the time the clock heralded the advent of 2008, I was already miles away in a dimly lit, converted bomb shelter, surrounded by China's new guard of hipsters throbbing rhythmically to electro-beat. It was a very different thread in the tapestry of a once repressed order, where consumerism and social inequalities had now created insatiable appetites for nocturnal vice, Western entertainment, and commodified sex with strangers. As Fela and I kissed our way into 2008, I found myself wondering what Xiao Yu and the other ducks were doing at that moment.

*¥200 = \$30AUD that year

*ABC: Acronym for American or Australia Born Chinese

*Tai-tai: same euphemistic value as "lady" in English: sometimes flattery, sometimes subtle insult.

Chapter 5: SHANGHAI(ED)

shang-hai verb /'SHaNG,hī/

-Coerce or trick (someone) into a place or position or into doing something

It was 2 weeks into the New Year when Fela and I got evicted from our apartment.

Somehow, it was my fault. I had decided to take the not insignificant matter of our lack of heating into my own hands. When I called our landlord, he was less than helpful.

I had politely introduced myself in my Chinese name and carefully explained the problem. “What do you mean there’s a problem with the hot water system?” he snarled over the phone.

“There’s no hot water.”

“Dog’s fart.”

I heard the click on the other end of the line.

It rang again almost immediately. The landlord didn’t wait for my hello.

“I thought a foreigner lived in that apartment?”

“I’m his wife.”

There was a slight pause. “Alright fine. I’ll send someone to have a look at it tomorrow.”

Click.

When Fela came home that night, I explained what had happened with a wobble in my voice.

“He only agreed to help after I told him I was the wife of a foreigner! How can the Chinese treat each other like that?”

Fela shrugged. “He’s pretty good with me. I usually have ayi there to help translate. Maybe you should ask her to talk to him next time?”

When Fela first arrived in China, his resolution to not buy into the spoiled existence of expatriate life lasted roughly a month. By the time I arrived to join him, he had a maid, personal masseuse and a “Money Man” (a one man banking service that came straight to his door). Our maid’s name was Chen Nuo, but she preferred to be called Ayi – literally “Aunty” in Chinese, but also the standard term for all domestic helpers. Ayi’s story was emblematic of many: she supported her husband and daughter in the countryside by working six days a week for several people and twice a year she took the eight hour train ride home for a visit. As well as being the cleaner, she had become Fela’s personal assistant and translator by

default– the two sharing an elaborate physical code in lieu of a shared linguistic one. A week after my arrival, she doubled her rate – explaining that with the wife now in the house, her workload had doubled.

The next day, someone came to check our hot water system. After some deliberate tinkering, the handyman reported the results: if we kept the faucet power low enough, there would be five minutes of lukewarm water before it turned cold again. Long enough to have a shower, he rationalized in earnest.

I asked Ayi to call the landlord, hoping some Mandarin mediation would help. A hope that was quickly dashed as I watched Ayi's face turn red in frustration before she thrust the phone at me.

“What have you done to the hot water!” the landlord screamed.

“I haven't done anything! It's broken. You need to fix it!”

“Your husband has been living in that apartment for a year without any problems. I've just sent someone to fix it. If you're still not happy, you can fix it yourself!”

I grappled for ammunition before he could hang up again. I remembered the worst insult I was taught as a child and hurled it down the line.

“You....TURTLE EGG!” And hung up.

The next day, we were served an eviction notice. Fela came home from work with the news and was livid. Not at the landlord, but at me. *How could you cause so much trouble after having just arrived? You're from a Chinese family, you should know how to deal with other Chinese people...what's wrong with you?* I retorted indignantly that *I was happy about the eviction, as I'd rather live somewhere else without him than contribute another penny towards that bastard's wealth!*

I stormed off and Fela retreated to his study to consult a book called “*Anger: Wisdom for Cooling the Flames.*” And for 3 days and nights he read that book and studiously ignored me.