

## A Shanghai Concession

A winding road in Shanghai, Fuxing Lu, cuts through the city's charming French Concession. Ninety-foot deciduous Plane trees line the curbs of Fuxing Lu. The trees curl toward one another and in the summers, they sprout green clusters of maple-like leaves that weave a verdant canopy over the residents. During this single season, a lush shield protects the Shanghainese from flashing neon lights and ever growing skyscrapers that dominate the city.

Once controlled by France, this segment of the city earned Shanghai the moniker "Paris of the East." Echoes of grandeur call out from the remaining Deco façades. But as the decades passed, other, more contemporary cultures encroached the building interiors. One summer in the early aughts, Starbucks planted its roots in an old structure on Fuxing Lu, and started serving up microwavable sweets and coffee in cups the size of wine bottles. At the time, I was renting an apartment nearby and this garish reminder of the States couldn't have been more welcome. Though I'd avoided the franchise before travelling abroad, I now relished this insolent emblem of home. In mangled Mandarin, I'd order the largest coffee possible, sit by the window and watch the locals move up and down the block.

I shared my apartment on Fuxing Lu with Olivier, a 33-year old French-Swiss lawyer. I was looking for a place in the French Concession and a friend put me in touch with Olivier, who had a spare room. Over the phone, Olivier told me to meet him on the street, a block from his apartment. Tall and broad with a poof of blond hair, Olivier was easy to spot in a mostly Chinese crowd. His eyes were sky-blue, half-closed and inattentive. I had assumed Olivier would

show me the apartment straight away, but instead he sauntered up and down Fuxing Lu in an apparent daze. Every so often he'd lob a question in my general direction. Olivier spoke a muddled variant of English – it was a version of the language where he always knew exactly what he was expressing and found it inconceivable that native speakers would ask him to repeat himself.

“So, tell me, Hana, why do you want to live in China? What is so wrong with these United States?” Olivier asked me.

I explained to Olivier that I had studied Mandarin in college and wanted to hone my language skills while immersed in the Culture. I was fascinated by China's long history and wanted to get to know the people. This oft-repeated speech generally went over well with the Western crowd. Olivier responded to my explanation with a long, spaced-out stare. Nothing in his expression changed and he remained silent. I looked at him askance, wondering if this man might be hard of hearing. A full minute passed and then he looked me straight in the eye.

“This? This is what you want to learn?” He gestured to the street. Two middle aged Chinese men sat on stubby stools, hunched over a game of checkers. Neither wore a shirt and both sucked deeply on cigarettes. There was something about Olivier's attitude that bothered me. He seemed close-minded to a world that wasn't his own and so sure of his own critiques. In any event, I remember thinking I'd better not sound too enthusiastic about living in China.

“So, what is your job in the U.S.?” Olivier wanted to know.

“Well, I left my job to come to China,” I explained cautiously. “But, right after college I worked on Wall Street – it was not the type of thing I wanted to do for a lifetime. So, last December I took my bonus and moved to Shanghai.”

“Wall Street, really?” Olivier said skeptically. “And could you wear this outfit to your Wall Street job?”

I looked down. I was wearing baggy jeans that flared at the bottom and a peasant blouse. Suddenly, I felt sloppy. “No. I had other clothes.” I said. I wrinkled my nose. What a fancy pants, I thought to myself.

“And what is it that you do here in China, to learn about the culture?” Olivier said. Was he being snide or just making sure I had a means to pay rent? I wasn’t sure.

“I’m a student at Jiao Tong university,” I said. “But, I also translate articles from Mandarin to English on a freelance basis. Translating happens to pay nicely.”

Olivier nodded. “Yes, I have heard that. So, you speak Chinese?”

“Not very well,” I admitted. “I’m much better with reading and writing.”

“One last question,” Olivier said. Something knowing and arch crept into his expression. “What are you running from?”

I remained silent but my nerves started firing.

“In my experience,” Olivier said, with a broad, teasing smile, “all Westerners in China are running from something.”

Anxiety swept over me as I dug deep for a smart aleck answer. Alas, I couldn’t come up with anything in the moment. So, I turned the inquiry around – an avoidance tactic with which I’ve had a surprising rate of success.

“What are *you* running from, Olivier,” I asked. I raised a single eyebrow, a trick that had taken countless hours in front of the mirror to perfect.

“Ughhh.” Olivier sighed and ran an agitated hand through the unruly explosion of hair.

“In my case, it is a who that I run from,” he replied. “I moved to China to get away from a girlfriend. From a very crazy woman.”

“Men always call a girl ‘crazy’ when they’ve dumped a lovely woman for no good reason,” I shot back.

He laughed. “Maybe.”

I had successfully steered him off topic. “So, what – did she want to get married? Settle down? Have kids?”

He laughed again. “Why don’t I show you the apartment now? Follow me.”

Olivier led me down an alley. Despite a lovely Deco exterior, the building was in shambles. I walked past trash heaps to get to the narrow, dank and dungeon-like staircase that led to the second-floor landing. Olivier pointed out the fuse box in the outdoor corridor. It was rusty and the door dangled by a single hinge. “This regulates electricity for the entire building,” he said. We walked to end of the hall past a row of apartment doors all of which had heaps of rancid shoes piled at the entrance. I could hear the shrill pitch of domestic discontent in one apartment – a woman shrieking at her husband in Shanghainese dialect. Despite the surrounding squalor, the interior of Olivier’s apartment bordered on lovely. Olivier showed me his master bedroom, the small room that would be mine, and the large tree outside the living room window. The trunk of the tree was as round as a barrel and pale branches sprouted from every direction.

“This tree gives me peace,” Olivier said. A wistful shadow passed over his face. “It is very special. Some days I come home from work and stare at this tree for an hour. Then I can function again.”

It was a very pretty tree. Most Shanghai apartment windows faced other Shanghai apartment windows.

“My parents can’t believe that I am living here,” Olivier told me. “They visited last year and my mother felt faint in the staircase. She said, ‘Olivier, we put you through the nicest schools in Switzerland, we paid for your law school. And now you live in this slum? What did we do wrong?’ I was laughing when she says these things but she was so serious. She kept putting the back of her hand on her cheeks and mumbling about ‘wasted skiing lessons.’”

#

Despite some initial reservations, I loved living with Olivier. He told me he had a younger sister my age who he had always ignored. To atone for this transgression against his flesh and blood, Olivier vowed to dote upon me as an elder brother should. On Saturday afternoons, Olivier and I would sit on the fake wooden floor drinking Rosé and watching pirated DVDs of various American television series. The television was old and small and rested on a rickety IKEA stand in front of the living room window. Olivier loved American television, but he especially loved the show *24* and we both adored the main character, Jack Bauer. We agreed Jack Bauer was Kiefer Sutherland’s finest role to date. On one occasion, our wine bottle ran dry at the same time as Jack’s emotional breakdown in the *Season 3* cliffhanger. We looked at one another in despair.

“What should we do now?” Olivier asked. He was distraught.

“I don’t know,” I said. I guess we should get our acts together.” Although I wasn’t quite sure what that phrase meant it was something I had often heard my mother say.

“How about this,” Olivier suggested. “I will open another bottle of this wine and you will go down to the street and find *Season 4* of this wonderful American television show.”

I smiled and agreed to the plan. Olivier was infinitely wiser than my mother. “Here, here, take this.” Olivier tried to give me renminbi to buy the next season but I waved him off. The entire season would cost the equivalent of five dollars.

Downstairs and outside I knew why Olivier wanted me to retrieve the next season. Olivier disdained chaos and generally avoided outdoor excursions. The air was sweltering, bicycles whizzed by and the street teemed with people yelling in Mandarin. An overwhelming smell of rotten eggs assaulted my senses. Where was that smell coming from? At the corner, I spotted the DVD salesman, his wares spread on a ramshackle, plastic table. At the very tip top of his lungs he shouted in English, “Watch! Bag! DVD! Watch! Bag! DVD!” Then he saw me approaching and his excitement soared. “Lady! Lady! Watch! Bag! DVD!” I crossed the street amidst honking horns and swerving taxicabs to exchange some basic greetings with the street vendor. He steered me toward the pile of conspicuously fake Louis Vuitton handbags. But, my eyes rested on the treasure I sought. Tucked underneath *The Best of Jean-Claude Van Damme*, I spotted a flimsy cardboard box stamped with the image of Keifer Sutherland’s hardened mug. Across Keifer’s bulky chest I read the printed words, *Sweaty Four. Season 4*. I paid for the set and returned upstairs where Olivier was waiting for me with a freshly poured glass of Rosé.

#

It is a universal truth, not often enough acknowledged, that all excellent roommates rarely occupy the shared living space. Olivier was almost never around. His law firm kept him busy, he travelled frequently and he had a fiancée, Nicola. During the first few months of living together I hadn't met Nicola, but one evening she dropped by unexpectedly. I remember being impressed by this stylish, dark-haired Croatian beauty in her shimmering mini-dress. I, on the other hand, was splayed on the couch in my favorite sundress – the one Olivier referred to as “the nightgown” – and he was sitting on the floor. We were deep into *Season 4*. A passenger train had just collided with an explosive-laden truck. Nicola greeted me politely, but I sensed that she wasn't as friendly as most expats. Or maybe she was in a bad mood. She informed Olivier she had a work function and that his presence was requested.

“No, Olivier, I won't get fired if I don't go, but it would make a bad impression. Would you please get up off the floor and come with me? My co-workers are starting to doubt that I even have a fiancée.”

Olivier didn't turn away from the television. “You want that I should go dressed like this?” he said, face glued to the tiny screen. He was wearing pristinely pressed slacks and a blue button-down shirt. “Nicola, I need more notice for a party. I'm in the middle of a program here.” As much as I liked Olivier, he sounded like a child whining to his mother. I tried to quell the swelling tension.

“Olivier, we can just watch this tomorrow,” I said.

“No, I will have to work late tomorrow. I wish to watch tonight.”

“Ok, that's just great, Olivier,” Nicola said. “You do understand that we are engaged to be married, right? Part of what that means is that we do things for each other. Another part of

what that means is living together. You need to move in with me – you need to grow up and extract yourself from this weird roommate situation. Living with someone ten years younger than you are doesn't make you ten years younger."

"Um, seven years younger," I said. I was starting to think less of Nicola. Also, I felt that her comment was the sort of remark that should have been made behind my back. What's more, I had always enjoyed pointing out people's mistakes to them.

"I didn't mean any offense to you," Nicola said. "It's not personal, it's just embarrassing that Olivier refuses to live with his fiancée."

Truth be told, I thought she might be right. It *was* weird that Olivier was living with me. I know it will sound self-centered, but this was the first moment it had occurred to me Olivier might be afraid of marriage. Or at least, that he might not want to marry Nicola.

Olivier rubbed his eyes. "How about this, Nicola. I will finish 24 tonight and tomorrow I will take off early and we will have a romantic dinner. Would it be okay? We will discuss our wedding. I'm sorry, I am just not in the mood for a party."

Nicola crossed her arms over her chest and looked away.

"Fine, Olivier," she said. "We'll have dinner tomorrow. I'll go to the party alone tonight." Nicola turned and walked to the door. Her high heels clacked in anger on the fake wooden floor.

"It was nice meeting you," I called out from the couch as she stomped out.

Olivier smiled at me with a roll of his eyes.

"Wow, Olivier," I said. "I've never seen an eye roll where the iris completely disappears into the socket."



#

As I was falling asleep that night, I thought about Olivier and Nicola's upcoming dinner. I wondered where he would take her, how he would make her feel better and what they would talk about. Would they laugh together? I realized I didn't want him to go to the dinner with her. I wanted him to take me instead. But I could understand why he would marry Nicola. She was a successful professional, very beautiful and presentable. Without ever having met Olivier's mother, I could guess that she adored Nicola.

Time has a way of drawing itself out slowly when you're a westerner burrowed Shanghai, like a piece of pink taffy stretching out to a filmy transparency. A week feels like a month and a month feels like a year. In fact, no one considers a Shanghai expatriate fully seasoned until she has lasted an entire year in this city of twenty million human beings.

I don't know exactly what passed between Olivier and Nicola at their "romantic dinner" but it must have been significant. Not long after, Olivier moved out of our apartment. I remember it was fall when he moved out because I was picking bits of leaves and twigs off my jacket when he delivered the news.

"So, Hana," he said, "I am going to move in with Nicola in a few weeks. It is the right thing to do."

I looked away from him and said nothing. As he yakked away about wedding plans, I focused on plucking the autumn debris from my coat and scarf.

"Well do you?" he asked.

"Do I what?" I said.

“Do you want to take over my lease? As I’ve been explaining it should be a simple transition. I get along with the landlord.”

“Yes. I’ll take it over,” I said. “I love this apartment.”

“And you are sure you can pay for it?”

I attempted to mimic his zombie eye roll.

I hated to see Olivier go, but I loved moving into the master bedroom. From the window upstairs, I could look down onto Olivier’s tree. I spread my belongings throughout the flat; I simply could not bring myself to search for another roommate.

My first Shanghai fall merged into my first Shanghai winter, one of the coldest in recorded history. Natives and expats alike saw snow hit the city for the first time in decades. It was during the winter I realized that the apartment I loved was cheaply constructed. There was nothing I could do to keep warm in my home. A single heating and cooling unit stood in the corner of the living room by the television set. The unit was about six feet tall, plastic and shiny. It was capable of violent bursts of heat for very short periods of time.

On a frigid January evening, I trudged home through a light flurry from the teahouse where I’d been working. My cheeks burned with winter wind as I turned the long silver key in the lock. Fool that I was, I’d expected to encounter a blast of heat, but inside felt as raw as the outside. The insulation in Communist-era buildings was laughable. A half-eaten peanut butter and jelly sandwich I’d made that morning rested by the sink. I poked it with my gloved finger – the thing had frozen to a solid. I hurried over to the ogre-sized heater and set the goal temperature to seventy-eight degrees, a number I associated with good weather. The machine started to grumble and sputter out heat. I gathered myself on the couch with a blanket to

watch the numbers tick upwards. My nose had just begun to defrost when the overworked heater heaved an exasperated sigh and shut itself off with a vexed clunk, taking all the other electricity with it.

For minutes, I sat in a dark puddle of self-pity. Propelled by the possibility of freezing to death, I shed the blanket, grabbed a lighter to serve as a flashlight and stumbled down the dark hall to the decrepit fuse box. My cracked, frozen fingers struggled against the wind to flick on the lighter. When the flame eventually caught, I flipped every switch stuck in the off position. Sparks flew from the fuse box as I snapped switches by the fistful. I thought I heard someone shout upstairs, but I couldn't be sure. The frenzy continued until I saw a warm light from the crack underneath my front door. When that signal finally arrived, I hurried back into an apartment brimming with lights and blaring television chatter.

I rubbed my hands together. They were chapped and scaly. The familiarity of my own hands in this miserable setting made me long for home. A hollow feeling rose from my stomach to my throat – I desperately wanted my family. At that moment, my flip phone buzzed. The small device hopped excitedly on the desk from the vibrations. I looked over with hope at the inch-long digital screen. The screen lit up and black letters flashed “Olivier.”

“Hello?”

After long pause he responded, “Ciao, Hana. It’s Olivier. How are you?”

“I’m good,” And now that Olivier had called, I felt good.

“Great.”

I heard mumbling in the background.

“Nicola and I want to invite you over to our new place next week for dinner. We will make pasta. You will come?”

“Yes, of course!”

“Excellent, do you have paper? I will tell you the address. Wait. Never mind. I will email you the address. Print it and give it your cab driver, ok? You can take a cab. I am still in French Concession. Ciao, Hana.”

#

“Qù nǎlǎ?”

I handed the cabbie Olivier’s address.

The cabbie jolted down Huai Hai Lu, stopping for some of the red lights and ploughing through others with abandon. I cracked the window and closed my eyes as we zigzagged through traffic at breakneck speed. The cab took a sharp right into an alley and then another right under a stone gate onto a small, unpaved road. We pulled to a stop at one of a many brick townhouses on the lane. Olivier’s home was straight out of 1920s Shanghai. A stone frame and columns opened into a narrow courtyard, where a skinny two-story townhouse intimidated me with its looming brick walls. I paid my fare and exited.

Standing outside the door I felt utterly serene. There were enough fragrant plane trees to mask the street smells and muffle the honks and cries from the main road. There were no skyscrapers in sight. I banged my fist on Olivier’s grand front door. Inside, some metal object clattered to the floor bringing with it an avalanche of French swears. The door swung open. A white apron splattered in red sauce greeted me warmly. Olivier’s hands were covered in oil and the thin blond waves spewed in all directions.

“Hana! So, happy you are here,” he said, giving me kisses on both cheeks. “I am just having a terrible accident in the kitchen.”

“You look like you’ve been electrocuted,” I observed.

“Olivier, get in here,” I heard Nicola yell from the kitchen. He shrugged at me with the look of a man who has become domesticated.

“Here, sit here,” he said gesturing to a large, modern looking chair. “Be comfortable. We are almost ready with the dinner.”

From the living room, I had a glimpse into a kitchen that could barely squeeze two people who were getting along with one another. Nicola and Olivier bickered in audible whispers about the current condition of the pasta and how one defined “al dente.” A few minutes later the couple emerged, smiling. Nicola carried a steaming platter of Rigatoni. Olivier followed behind her with the meat sauce, bowls and forks for everyone. We sat on the floor around the coffee table. Nicola tugged her skirt as low as it would go and bent her knees demurely, arriving on the floor without revealing a thing.

“I’m so sorry we don’t have any normal chairs yet, Hana,” Nicola said. “We ordered them from Europe about a month ago but obviously, they haven’t arrived. And, I’m also sorry about the way I acted the last time we met,” she said.

“Please don’t worry about it,” I said to her. “I understand why you were upset. And it’s big of you to apologize – most people don’t.”

“How about some wines for everyone?” Olivier asked.

I was about to agree when Nicola said, “Olivier, no. Not on a weeknight.”

“Water’s fine,” I said. “I can get it.”

“Thank you, Hana,” Olivier said. “Nicola threatens to make me healthy.”

Nicola smiled a little smile. She pulled her thick black hair away from her face and braided it back with long, practiced fingers. Then, with silver tongs, she served us each a hill of pasta and drizzled sauce over the noodles in an elegant spiral.

“Your house is such a classic,” I said to her.

She beamed under the bright lights of flattery. “Yes, I love it.”

“Is it a Shikumen?” I asked.

“Yes. How did you know?”

“I’ve been helping write the English portion of a book called *Modern Interiors of Old Shanghai*. I’ve toured a couple of Shikumen with the author, Zoe. Apparently, the word translates to ‘stone gate.’”

“Oh – that is totally fascinating,” said Nicola.

Olivier sucked a noodle into his mouth loudly. “Yes, fascinating,” he said.

“Olivier!” Nicola was all indignation. “I’m really interested in interior design,” Nicola said.

I paused and looked around the barren interior.

“I know it looks empty now, but we are hoping to get our dream furniture as wedding gifts.”

“When are you guys getting married?” I asked.

“We just set the date for February 18!” Nicola said.

“Oh soon!” I uttered automatically. Then I felt stupid.

“Yes, so very soon,” Olivier said.

“What about you, Hana? What else is new with you?” Olivier asked. “Are you still enjoying my apartment?”

“Yes, I still enjoy *your* apartment, Olivier.” I told him I’d been freelancing at a visual arts magazine in Pudong.

“Oh, what a pain,” Nicola sympathized. Pudong was a district of Shanghai located across the Huangpu river, home to all the newest, tallest skyscrapers. The region offered a mixture of cheap office space and expensive gated communities. Some expats referred to it “Pu-Jersey.” Nicola rolled her black eyes and tugged at her skirt, which had been inching up incrementally. “I can’t stand Pudong. I know it’s part of Shanghai but it seems so culturally bleak compared to Puxi. Don’t you think?”

I happened to agree but Olivier snorted.

“Culture in Puxi,” he said blankly. He looked up at the ceiling in feigned contemplation and chewed deliberately on a piece of Rigatoni. By the time he finally swallowed, the pasta must have been liquid. “Hana, is an expert in Chinese cultures,” Olivier said with raised eyebrows. “I need some informations on the culture here – I seem to miss it all.”

“I thought I had just given you some ‘informations’, Olivier,” I joked.

If you looked carefully in Shanghai you could find stunning cultural gems tucked away in corners, like Shikumen houses in long quiet lanes. Yet, the way of life was so different, the longer I spent abroad the more empathy I developed for the jaded expat, my former roommate.

Olivier, chuckling to himself announced, “I’m going to get myself another plate of pastas. Anyone else?”

Nicola and I were both finished. After coffee, chalky Chinese mooncakes and some strained talk about the wedding, I mumbled something about having to head home.

“Wait, before you go, I have something to show you.” Nicola said. She stood up, pulled a stray black hair from her sweater and reached out to grab my hand. She led me down a corridor to a heavy wooden door. “This is the most special part of the house – maybe you should tell Zoe about it. She could put it in her book.” Nicola opened the door to reveal an enormous bathroom with a vaulted spa. Black, gleaming marble covered the entire floor and walls. Green tiles lined the shower area.

“What are those?” I asked, pointing at the tiles.

“I think jade, but I’m not sure. The owner had it refinished a couple of years ago.”

“Really beautiful,” I said.

“Please tell Zoe about it!” she said as she led me back to the front of the house.

“Ok, I will.”

“Yes, please tell your boss about our breathtaking toilet,” Olivier called out from the kitchen, where he was drying the dishes with a floral hand towel.

I arrived at home with a stomachache. Was it the pasta? As I tried to locate the source of the discomfort in my gut, I visualized Olivier and Nicola’s impending wedding. And then I knew. It was the very idea of those two spending forever together that I could not stomach. They were completely wrong for each other. Nicola was nice, sure. And she was a good hostess. But she was also a social climber, materialistic and a phony. Olivier, on the other hand, had a sense of humor and laissez-faire attitude toward existence that distinguished him from most of



the humans I knew. His ability to abstract himself from the silliness of life was a characteristic we shared. I thought he'd be much happier spending forever with me.

I wondered if I could get Olivier to see that that he was making a mistake.

From bed, I texted Olivier. "Hi! Dinner tonight was fun. Let's meet again soon."

"Yes, it was great to see you. We should not let so much time pass," he texted. I took this rapid response as a very good sign.

"Would you want to meet me at Cotton's for dinner next Monday?" I texted.

A good ten minutes went by before I received a response.

"Sure."

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Cotton's was a restaurant in the French Concession that catered to the expat crowd. Surrounded by eight-foot brick walls and Plane trees overhead, the space protected the urban-weary foreigner with a chilled-out villa atmosphere. It was the go-to place for anyone unused to Chinese food and not planning to become acclimated.

Over the past few days I concluded that I had been sending Oliver all the wrong messages. Walking around the house in my pajamas with knotty hair, wasting weekends drooling by the television and engaging in lively debates with him had sunk me into the sibling zone. Tonight, Olivier would make no mistake about the type of relationship I envisioned for us. I dressed for the occasion, arrived at Cotton's early and ordered two vodka martinis, up.

Olivier showed up at the restaurant in work clothes. I watched him scan all of Cotton's looking for me and then do a double take when he realized I was the woman in the black dress

with a plunging V-neck and a flawless blonde up-do. He hurried over to my table. I noted he forgot to kiss me on both cheeks.

“Hana, you are so dressed up,” he said. “I did not recognize you.” He slid into the chair across from me and nearly knocked over his glass of water in the process. “Really, I cannot get over this change in your appearance. Are you going to a party tonight?”

I felt Olivier’s gaze rest on my collarbone and in a fit of excitement I started to fiddle with the silver chain around my neck. “Olivier, I’m not going to a party. I got dressed up to see you.” I paused. The next part I had rehearsed. “I am not sure how to say this so I’ll be blunt. I think you and Nicola are totally wrong for each other.”

Olivier burst out laughing. Laughter was not on the list of reactions I had anticipated.

“What’s so funny?” I said.

“Nothing. I just appreciate your interest in my personal well-being, Hana,” he said. “Yet another woman wants to tell me how poorly I have planned my life.” Olivier shook his head and looked to the depths of his martini. Two green olives impaled by a plastic sword drifted inside the glass. “And who out there is ‘right’ for me, Hana? Where shall I find my heart’s mate?”

“You mean soulmate,” I said.

“Yes, of course. Where do I find my soul’s mate?”

I gave him a long meaningful look. And then he understood. A sheen of sadness obscured his face.

“Oh, Hana. You do not wish to be with me. I am old. You are only twenty-five with many years ahead of you for having fun. Me, I am thirty-three. Old and finished.” He smiled. “I’m not

joking. All my friends are married except for me. Most of them have children. Are you ready to have a baby, Hana?"

"Are you, Olivier?" I asked.

He shrugged. "It doesn't matter. Nicola is thirty-two. She is ready. I cannot hang on to my youth forever."

"Olivier, that's crazy," I said. "You don't have to get married and have a baby because everyone you know had done it. Actually, it's not crazy. It's the stupidest thing I've ever heard."

Olivier grimaced and tipped back the rest of his drink.

"You really don't understand, Hana," he said to me. "Maybe you will someday." He placed a 100 Renminbi note down on the table.

"Have another drink or two on me," he said as he stood up. "And then please go find a party to dance at in that stunning dress. Forget about ancient Olivier. He has to return home so Nicola can yell at him."

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After that night at Cotton's, I saw Olivier only once more in Shanghai. I was walking through the French Concession on the way to meet a friend when he and Nicola passed me. The two were riding matching bicycles, adorned with bells and baskets. The farm-style two-wheelers were so outrageously out of place in Shanghai I had to laugh. But the two peddled along the road, beaming, with sunshine glinting off their bikes. They looked like newlyweds in love and so I hurried to turn a corner without being noticed.

"Hana!! Helllloo."

I'd been spotted.

Hi Olivier, Hi Nicola.” I waved from across the street.

We are going to try the new Patisserie on Zhengshan Lu. You will join us?” Olivier yelled over the traffic.

“I wish I could but I have to meet someone,” I said. “Have a great time and let me know how it is!”

“Ok, no problems. Well, we will make dinner plans very soon, okay?”

“Of course,” I said, smiling.

“Ciao, Hana!”

“Ciao, Olivier! Ciao, Nicola!” I waved again and watched their bikes disappear into the mass of people.

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Almost nine years later I ran into Olivier in Switzerland. I hadn't seen him since he was a biking newlywed. I had long since moved back to the States and was vacationing in the Alps with a boyfriend, who had insisted that I learn to ski. By the grace of God, an afternoon snowstorm had put an end to our lessons. We stopped in the lodge to unwind and rest our cold feet by the fireplace. My boyfriend was deep in discussion with another skier about the next day's forecast and I had just ordered a hot chocolate. Olivier sat at a table with six or seven other men his age. He had propped his legs on the empty chair to his left and an arm draped around the occupied chair to his right. The guys were all drinking red wine and talking loudly in French. I made my way over to the table, clutching the mug of cocoa.

Olivier looked the same only older. He had given up the law and divorced Nicola. He told me that he'd started an export business for wine and cheese. A high-end hotel in Shanghai was

his main customer and he returned to the city from time to time. His parents lived in a state of constant humiliation and referred to him only as “our son, the cheese salesman” when they dined out with friends. Then he made fun of me for drinking hot chocolate. For a second I felt like his kid sister and a gust of nostalgia for the Shanghai days overwhelmed me. But the feeling was short-lived and as Olivier chattered on I realized that his jovial wit had lost its twinkle. I kept thinking, why on earth does this forty-something man care what his mother thinks about his business ventures? I smiled politely but my mind drifted. I wondered if Olivier and I had each altered irrevocably over the last nine years. Or, if the blistering intensity of Shanghai had cast some sort of distorted filter over my perceptions during those twenty months. I supposed there was really no way to know for sure.