

Buy One Get One

There he is, her big white man.

He has chosen a seat against the wall that faces east, another bank of windows. The sun will set behind them, leaving night outside and in. She steps over the black carpet, past glossy black chairs, black furnishings, under the low black ceiling with its tube-like metal light fixtures. Jay is the only person in the room aside from the bartender, but Janet is sure that even if it were dark and crowded she would spot him easily – his six feet four, his wide shoulders. Good solid mid-western stock. Viking roots.

All the way up she had been wondering where her big businessman husband was – or father perhaps? does she look mature enough to be a wife in this get-up in this place? The lobby all white marble, the furniture slick and hard-looking, as if the negative space of the room had been chiseled out of a large solid block, leaving just the chairs and flat couches and the smooth floor. Little tables balancing sparse flower arrangements – blush pink, grey, black – and neatly buttoned up Chinese staff scattered tastefully along her path. She was waiting for one of them to approach and ask her for identification. A peek at her bank book.

She felt pure relief when she hit the four carpeted steps leading up to the elevators. She had to take one elevator up to the nineteenth floor and then switch to another elevator to go all the way up to the twenty-sixth for the bar. It looked as if this second elevator was supposed to be pass-operated. Maybe with your room key-card. There was a flat piece of plastic screwed into the wall above the buttons that looked like a sensor. But when she pressed the up button, the doors pinged open agreeably and she stepped right in.

Now that she sees Jay across the bar she feels easier. He wears a green T-shirt and certainly jeans. It matches well with her own little kid's tee, the one she has cut the collar out of, and her black and white check skirt. Her hair unstyled, hanging loose to her shoulders. Her red shoes both ripping along the soles.

The two of them look rag-tag enough, she thinks, for an American bartender in just such an American hotel bar to ask them to leave. To at least ask about their rooms.

But she has been in China long enough, this time and the last, to know that they won't be asked. When she was living in Beijing they had snuck eleven people into one fancy hotel room by looking straight ahead and walking with purpose. If you are a *waiguoren* you are allowed to dress like you've been shopping in the Target dumpster. You are allowed to come and go as you please. If you are *waiguoren*, you are like *happily ever after* – full of endless possibility, open to a million interpretations, but always and forever safely out of reach.

This makes her feel both bold and unsteady.

“Jay,” she calls so he won't be startled. She places her bag on the floor and Jay stands. A narrow, black lacquered ledge runs around two thirds of the room, cutting

through the wall of windows. This is their table. The black chairs are leathery, fat like overripe berries, but sleeker, less inviting. Giant beetles, she thinks, flipped so their soft underbellies show. She goes to sit and thumps down heavily, the chair lower than she had expected. She crosses her legs as Jay signals to the waiter.

So this is buy-one-get-one at the Marriot.

They each order a gin martini after Jay confirms the deal. He asks in English and then again in Chinese. They don't want any space for misunderstanding. It is so easy to cheat at things here. And to be cheated.

"Yes, sir," the waiter replies to Jay's adequate but fat-thumbed Chinese. Janet has a much better accent than he does, but she lets him do the talking. He has lived in China, really lived there, with a job and an apartment, and although she'd been there before it had been with a university then, too, and had an expiration date, and so China seems like his turf somehow. He has a Chinese girlfriend. That trumps her well-modulated accent and the ability to read more than menus.

They chat about nothing in particular as they wait for their drinks. Feeling one another out. Her class had been funny that week, a student criticizing her teaching in a way American students would never do, and he tells her for the three-hundredth time that if someone had told his younger self he'd be singing "Itsy-Bitsy Spider" to pre-school kids, hand motions and all, he would never have etc.

Etc.

The drinks come, along with a small black bowl of assorted rice crackers, and she gulps the gin thankfully. It is good, it tastes like home and the summer and a girl she had dated once. She had met the girl here in China, only the first time around, and that was actually how she had picked up her taste for gin. From this half-Chinese girl who hated her rich parents and followed Janet out onto the balcony off their dorm one night, pushed her up against the concrete and kissed her before all of the *baijiu* they'd been drinking caught up with her and she let Janet loose so she could puke over the railing.

That was the night they first slept together.

She doesn't tell Jay this, however. She is not sure how intimate they are, despite the sudden frenetic desire those first few mouthfuls of gin have planted in her stomach. The desire to open her mouth and tell him everything. Everything she's ever done or thought. She feels it pushing up with a real pressure. Now that's she's been here almost two months. Two months and two friend – no native English speakers. She is starting to forget what she looks like. The mirror doesn't help. She is starting to forget how the inside of her looks and that is the real shape over which her outside is draped. If she tells him things, she will see the shape of her inside reflected in his face, and she thinks it will look right there.

But she is not certain. This is the first time they have been alone together. Instead, she takes another sip and says, "I wish my mouth always tasted this way."

He had mentioned it a few weeks earlier, the second of their weekly sessions at the wall. They'd been climbing hard, playing add-on with the Australian for warm-up, and then attacking the inside of the cave one after the other for two hours. Her technique

was good. Precise. Meaning they never quite got a move past her in add-on, even when they added holds that appeared to beg a comic book-esque reach, but in the cave it was harder for her to keep up. Upper-body strength, the Australian said. He was short and thick and flushed red like the stub end of a carrot. He had no technique, but could haul himself up the wall and part way across the ceiling relying purely on brute strength. He had wrestled in high school.

She sat on the thick mats drinking water and waving her turn away. She was done with the goddamn overhang and was about to go cool off on an easy traverse in the other room when Jay fell straight off the ceiling and landed next to her on his back.

“Oof,” he said and smiled at her.

“You alright?” she asked him.

“No prob,” he replied and reached out a hand.

She handed him the bottle. “It might taste funny,” she warned him. “I used to put all kinds of things in it back in the states. Like hot tea in the mornings so I’d have something to keep me awake in my early classes. That’s why it’s brown like that. I even put gin in it to carry to shows and parties and things.”

Whatever the bottle smelled or tasted like, Jay didn’t seem bothered. “I love gin,” he said. “Gin’s my drink.”

It is hers, too, and it made her much happier than it should have to hear him say it. “It’s one of the things I miss most in China,” she replied.

Not that there was no gin in China, but it wasn’t really worth it. Gin drinks at a bar were generally lousy, and gin in a bottle at a store was too expensive, especially when beer was so cheap it was actually cheaper than water and you could buy it anywhere. Just

outside the gates of the university where she taught, in fact. So she had become very adept at drinking beer. To the point where she had finally learned how to open a bottle with nothing but a lighter – and a flimsy Chinese lighter at that! The first time she tried, the lighter she'd been using had actually shattered in her palm in a burst of pink-plastic splinters and lighter-fluid. She'd found a good one since then. A regular.

“The Marriot has a buy-one-get-one martini night on Tuesdays,” Jay said. “I used to go all the time but Xiao Wei doesn't like it. She says she feels like a prostitute. Or, actually, she says she feels like a *fucking whore*. She's really into American slang right now.”

Janet has never met Xiao Wei, but she knows she exists. Jay speaks about her the way he speaks about his one-bedroom apartment and his charcoal grill. Things he has acquired since coming to Shanghai.

“I'm not afraid of the Marriot,” she said. “Pick a week and I'm there.”

And here she is. She realizes she doesn't know how long she's been silent, lost in the comforting taste of the gin. She can feel her face smiling stupidly and attempts to draw Jay's attention elsewhere.

“Wow, look at the city,” she says. And she means it.

The sun has sunk well behind the Marriot tower and there is a grainy quality to the light. Something to do with the low angle of the sun and the high percentage of pollutants in the air, she thinks. Everything is all greyed and peach-y, like the flower arrangements in the lobby, but smudgy, dirtier, more capable of infecting. It is a good view of the strangely designed business towers that are displayed around the edges of

Renmin Park. Each of these skyscrapers is topped with some absurd architectural bauble. As if several spaceships from several different 1950s sci-fi flicks had gotten lost in space and time and suddenly burst out of the cosmos right there above Renmin Park, impaling themselves on the top of these Shanghai business buildings. They look like someone's out-of-date, aluminum and neon idea of: The Future.

She loves these buildings almost as much as she is frightened by the miles and miles of many-windowed apartment complexes that stretch out beyond them to the end of sight.

"I miss the outside," Jay replies.

Jay is from Minnesota, but he spent time in Montana and then working at Yosemite and WOOF-ing across Australia, which was not where he'd met the Australian. He's been in China now almost five years and what he misses the most, he has told her many times in the five weeks they have known each other, is the wilderness.

"Nearly everything in China," he says, "has steps and unused garbage cans."

She laughs. She knows what he means, although she has forgotten to get upset about it until right now. She remembers taking silly pictures posing with one particular garbage can on a trip she and that same girlfriend had taken through the Three Gorges.

This is a good story, the blue-garbage-can-bird-in-the-middle-of-a-temple story, she thinks. Something that will show her personality, her sense of humor, the two poles of her sense of wonder, and it will let Jay in via one of the only routes they have in common: China. But then, why on earth would she want to talk about her ex-girlfriend?

No, she doesn't want to talk about that. Among other things.

What she wants is to keep Jay's attention. She looks up at him through her lashes and changes the subject back to the outdoors. To the Boundary Waters, a place she knows he's been and a place she likes to say she wants to go canoe.

"I do," she says. "I want to go up there for weeks. One of those trips where you forget what you look like." The simple, shallow skin of your face. "Not like here." She tries to look out at the buildings with a sneer, but her heart isn't in it. She is still giddy over those garbage cans. Big blue birds with yellow beaks! In a temple!

She drinks more gin as Jay regales her with his own Boundary Waters tales.

It sounds lovely, all of that water and quiet, but the city before them distracts her. Here in Shanghai, she spends whole days roving around alone, lost in its ugly-pretty buildings and the honking and shouting and the smells of burnt cooking oil and perfume and sewage. She likes bargaining with people over every little purchase, like special scissors to thin her hair and a little tea pot with tomatoes painted on the side. When you get down to it, the city is her best friend right now. And for Jay, it might be the enemy.

She looks at this boy sitting beside her out of the corner of her eye. One of his tattoos is partially showing under his sleeve. Something like a lion leaping out of his parted skin, but not. A flutter of panic in her stomach. They are not so similar are they.

What could she possibly have in common with that tattoo?

But then, "We'll go camping," he says. "I know a Chinese guy who can act as guide. Take us out to this island with climbing and everything. The real deal."

"Oh," Janet says. "That would be amazing." It would be, and she feels happy again. She can't put her finger on what it is that they share – being American, she supposes. Who would have guessed that would be enough! – but she feels comfortable

with this boy. There is a simplicity to the conversation that she never feels with her Chinese friends or even her German or her Austrian. So he is blue-eyed and a little muscle bound and has barbed wire tattooed on his forearm. So he would find blue bird garbage cans merely depressing. Easier to point out their differences, but isn't that always the case? In this big foreign country, they are next of kin.

The first martini is gone in minutes. Conversation shifts to the inevitable subject of Chinese mishaps – sleeper buses, stumbling into the wrong kind of massage parlor, accidentally asking for a child instead of a to-go box – then to rock climbing, then the concept of home. First, how for both of them the climbing wall is a sort of Godsend, a place where they forget that they are alone, and then they are talking about their families and how they both ended up in China and whether or not it is also home. To him, no but yes. To her, yes but no.

“What is home, really?” he asks. “When you've moved around so much.”

“Right,” she says. “It's something you have to carry with you, but not stuff. It's an idea you use as an overlay. To change the what? cultural topography? of a place. Any place. So you can see how to fit yourself into it.”

He is nodding as she swallows the last mouthful of martini number two, and then she out and asks him about his girlfriend. “That seems like really making home to me,” she says. “Like you've passed through your idea and entered China Actual.”

He tells her about meeting Xiao Wei at a bar. The girl's mother would die if she knew they were living together, but it doesn't matter to Xiao Wei, she is very modern. She hates her job and can only cook two dishes. Their relationship sounds very practical.

They don't want kids. Even marriage is out. His voice, which was excited when he talked about meeting her and deciding to live together, drops a little here. There is something in his face, something the gin lets leak out, that is dark and bunched when he speaks of Xiao Wei in the present.

“Sometimes she just doesn't get it, you know?” he says. “She says she doesn't believe in marriage, but I'm not sure she knows what she's saying.”

Janet nods her head. This is a problem she has had too, although not with a Chinese man. She has never managed to feel close enough to any Chinese person to end up in the same ballpark as a marriage conversation. Hardly even blow-job territory. She wonders if that's what Jay is getting at, too. He may not even know it. That he and Xiao Wei will always be together but apart. Moving in a sort of parallel, as if on opposite sides of a glass wall. At least, that is how she feels when she begins to get close to a Chinese person. Like they can do the same things, agree on some things, openly discuss their differences, but every time they go to reach out to each other, to clasp hands, they find they are pressing their palms against opposite sides of a solid pane of glass.

But she doesn't want to talk about her pane of glass feeling either. It might be a deficiency on her part. Her own inability to make a connection, to cross cultures. Even if Jay does feel this way, he might not admit it. And what if he doesn't? If it is just her? He is living with Xiao Wei, after all.

But marriage! That is something she can talk about. Even back in the states: God! Never! She watches herself get heated about it, spinning her hands out to emphasize her point so that she has to put her third drink down to keep from sloshing it all over her own lap.

“Or, it’s not that I’m against marriage exactly,” she is saying, “it’s more the idea of ownership that goes along with it. Or not even that. It’s the *melding*. Like, I can’t just be me being me anymore. Like, every time I’m in a relationship for oh more than three months it starts to get about how we do everything together and like the same things and even if we don’t, we pretend we like the same things. For example that I want to eat eggs for breakfast because that’s all he eats, and so that’s all he keeps at his place, and I don’t even like eggs that much, but suddenly I do, I *have* to, and then when I’m not at his place and there aren’t any eggs I get confused and stand at the sink staring out the window for, like, five minutes before I can just settle on something else and eat, you know?”

“Exactly,” Jay replies, nodding his head vigorously. “Or, it sounds like what you’re saying is that: if you want to be alone with our without eggs it’s somehow not your choice anymore. You can’t be alone with them or without them. You’re not allowed to be alone period. First of all, because that somehow implies you *don’t want* to be with the other person and therefore *dislike* them. And, secondly, whether you want eggs or not it’s no longer something you’ve decided solely for yourself. It has all of this other stuff attached to it. Such as, did you like eggs before you met him and if so was it this much? And would you be eating them right then if you hadn’t met him, or are you choosing the eggs because he’s gotten you to that point? Or are you choosing them maybe to prove that you can still like eggs on your own, even though you partly only like them because he does. Or are they just fucking eggs and you have to eat already.”

“Yeah.” She picks up her martini and takes a sip. “I mean, it’s not like eggs aren’t good for you. It’s not like I’d never eaten eggs before. All of a sudden they’re just so *fraught*.”

“*Fraught*,” he repeats to himself and scrapes his chair around until he’s facing her more directly.

“I was an only child,” she says, chewing on the end of the toothpick, wishing it held another olive. “I need a lot of space.”

“I have a sister,” he says, “but I know what you mean exactly. Xiao Wei doesn’t have a problem being in the same room with me all the time constantly, but I can’t take it. Sometimes I have to go into the bathroom and close the door and just sit there on the floor. She wants to know what I’m doing in there. I’m not doing anything. I’m not even in there, in a way.”

They lean together, looking into each other’s eyes as they talk. This is what she wanted out of this evening. Out of the martinis. This *connecting*.

She feels herself slip. Not on the outside, but inside herself. It is partly a drunk feeling but also something more specific and dangerous. A feeling that has to do with talking to someone like this, when everything you both say makes absolute sense no matter what it is. A feeling of wanting.

This is that damn melding, she realizes. What she, only a second ago, was disparaging. This is the way it all starts, because it feels like a haven. When it seems natural, as if they do agree on all of it, as if they are, at last, perfectly matched. Thinking this time is different! This time! This is what they talk about when they talk about *the one!*

It never is, but she can’t help herself bending forward, her body canted toward his.

It is as if she is two selves – the one self, the neat, climbing-wall-self, who knows exactly where to place her hands and feet and when to laugh so she doesn't seem too gullible. The cynic who knows she is drunk and she is lonely and here is all of China to make her feel small.

And then, another self.

A soft, amorphous, blue-green sea-creature-self that is always gazing out of the proper self through eyes like bottle green glass. Alcohol can knock this belly-soft self loose. She can feel it washing around inside of her, banging up against the first self as she talks. It is drawn to Jay, drawn out by their eager conversation, their mad rush of words, his eyes on hers. To let it out? If she does, everything will be so lovely at first, fresh and tingling, and it will pour all through her like spring rain. But that self doesn't see very well when you come down to it, and will soon be walking into things, right into things that it shouldn't. Put her hand directly onto the hot stove.

She and Jay are both leaning toward one another now. He rests one hand on the arm of her chair as she nods and nods and pushes her hair back from her face without even thinking what she must look like. The place is dim, the sun set who knows when behind them in an unseen blur of salmon and peach. She accidentally puts a hand on his where it rests on her chair, and snaps her arm back, apologizing. The touch was what one would call electric. It actually felt like a shock, a little spark passed from the back of his hand through her palm and she imagines what it would feel like to have that hand, that shock, touch her skin somewhere else, some softer, hidden part of her body as he says,

“Marriage is such an anachronism. Why can’t people just be together or not be together? Why does the government need a record? Because that’s really what it is, isn’t it?”

Why *can’t* people just be together, she wonders as he pauses to order them another round and she watches his Adam’s apple slide up and down beneath his square chin. She places her hand, the hand that touched his, against her belly. Rubs her back against the soft leather of the chair. It has been so long since anyone else has touched her.

Why can’t people just be together?

Jay turns back to her, very serious looking, very earnest, but also with a softening around the eyes that she thought she had caught a few glimpses of when they shared looks over the Australian’s head. She’d never known for sure if she’d seen it right, it was so fleeting and with the Australian around everything was very neat and well acted out, but there is nothing in between them now.

“Sometimes,” she whispers, almost to herself, “I think home is in people.” He cocks his head and then smiles a smile that goes straight through her.

“Yes,” he says. “That exactly.” And his eyes are even softer and also more urgent, his gaze almost hot on her face, and she simultaneously realizes that being naked with this boy is a possibility and also that she really has to pee.

Getting up and weaving her drunken way to the bathroom is not what she wants to happen right now. First off, she is sure she will look drunk and that he will see her looking drunk and find her less attractive. For another, she doesn’t want to be away from him. It is so thrilling, this connecting, the way he looks right into her eyes when he talks and they both say *yes, yes, yes* in hot little puffs of understanding.

And she knows that often when you go to the bathroom in the middle of a moment like this, the moment isn't there waiting for you when you get back. They are on the edge of something and their beautiful momentum could easily hurtle them over into – what? That perfect, blind togetherness that she has only experienced fleetingly. They could have that, she is sure.

If she goes to the bathroom, something will change. She will come back and they will both still be there, still sitting in the same seats, the same sharp taste of gin, but they will somehow no longer be in that magic place. Like the bathroom were some sort of warp zone; you're still playing the same game when you come out the other side, but you're no longer on the same board.

But there's no choice in the end. She has to pee. So she excuses herself and crosses the black carpeted floor, holding her arms out from her sides just a little for balance, and pushes through the large matte metal door into the ladies' room.

This bathroom is incredibly sleek for a bathroom in China. It has small silver bowls for sinks and everything else done in black and white tiling. Recently, she was in the bathroom of a bar down by the river where the sink was a large stainless steel trough in the center of the room. An endless sheet of water poured down from the ceiling and pulsed through a variety of colors thanks to a strip of lights tucked up at its source. As she was holding her hands under the redblueyellow spray, some other *waiguoren* came up to her asking if she spoke English and then sticking a camera in her face and prompting her to tell about her favorite China bathroom experience. The only thing she could think of that would rival the one she was in right then was kind of its opposite. The time she'd

been at a big store in Beijing and the stalls didn't have doors. When she and her girlfriend had gone to use the squat pot, all of the Chinese women had crowded around to watch them pee. She is certain, now that she thinks about it, that either she or the girlfriend had also had her period and was forced to manage a tampon under close scrutiny, although she can't remember which of them it was. Repressed trauma. She is glad she didn't blurt that out for the camera.

She goes into the stall and pees. Washing her hands in the sink, she thinks about that Carrefour bathroom, and how she and her girlfriend had laughed about it afterward, had told everyone back at the dorms. That and the garbage can birds and the zombie movie and that poor bunny they bought off the street that had died. Even that had become funny in a way. Of course, at the time her girlfriend had been devastated and while Janet hadn't really been too upset – they'd barely had the bunny two weeks – she'd comforted the girlfriend. Taken her out for drinks at one of the expensive foreign places down near the embassy district. Her girlfriend had reached for her across the table and Janet had taken her hand. They had ordered martinis then.

The space between then and now.

She pushes back out through the slab of a door. The room appears dimmer now, colder. She picks Jay out of the growing crowd. He is sitting up very straight, staring out of the window, eating cracker after cracker out of the little bowl that sat between them on the black ledge. She can see the tension in his neck, the comb lines in his hair at the back of his head. As she walks toward her seat, she has the feeling that she is observing him through a thin pane of glass.