
**shanghai
baby**

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**shanghai
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1 encounter with my lover

Well, there's a wide wide world of noble causes
And lovely landscapes to discover
But all I really want to do right now
Is find another lover!

—Joni Mitchell

My name is Nikki but my friends all call me Coco after Coco Chanel, a French lady who lived to be almost ninety. She's my idol, after Henry Miller. Every morning when I open my eyes I wonder what I can do to make myself famous. It's become my ambition, almost my *raison d'être*, to burst upon the city like fireworks.

This has a lot to do with the fact that I live in Shanghai. A mystical fog envelops the city, mixed with continual rumors and an air of superiority, a hangover from the time of the *shili yangchang*, the foreign concessions. This hint of smugness affects me: I both love it and hate it.

Anyway, I'm just twenty-five, and a year ago I published a collection of short stories that didn't make any money but got me attention. (Male readers sent me letters enclosing erotic photos.) Three months ago I left my job as a magazine journalist, and now I'm a bare-legged, miniskirted waitress at a joint called the Green Stalk Café.

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There was a tall, handsome young man, a regular at the Green Stalk, who would stay for hours drinking coffee and reading his book. I liked to watch his changes of expression, his every move. He seemed to know I was watching him, but he never said a word.

Until, that is, the day he gave me a note that said "I love you," along with his name and address.

Born in the Year of the Rabbit, and a year younger than me, this man enchanted me. It's hard to put a finger on what made him so good looking in my eyes, but it had something to do with his air of world-weariness and his thirst for love.

On the surface we're two utterly different types. I'm full of energy and ambition and see the world as a ripe fruit just waiting to be eaten. He is introspective and romantic, and for him life is a cake laced with arsenic—every bite poisons him a little more. But our differences only increased our mutual attraction, like the inseparable north and south magnetic poles. We rapidly fell in love.

•

Not long after we met, he told me a family secret. His mother was living in a small town in Spain, with a local man, running a Chinese restaurant. It seems you can make a lot of money in Spain by selling lobster and wonton.

His father had died young, suddenly, out there, less than a month after going to Spain to visit his mother. The death certificate said “myocardial infarction,” and his ashes were flown home in a McDonnell Douglas jet. Tian Tian still remembered that sunny day, and how his tiny grandmother, his father’s mother, cried, tears streaming down her wrinkled face like water dripping off a wet rag.

“Grandmother was convinced it was murder. My dad didn’t have any history of heart disease; she said my mother killed him. That she had another man over there, and they plotted it together.”

Staring at me with a strange look in his eyes, Tian Tian said, “Can you believe it? I still can’t work it out. Maybe Grandmother was right. But whatever—Mother sends me a lot of money every year to live on.”

He watched me in silence. His strange story grabbed me immediately, because I’m drawn to tragedy and intrigue. When I was studying Chinese at Fudan University in Shanghai, I’d wanted to become a writer of really exciting thrillers: *evil omen, conspiracy, dagger, lust, poison, madness*, and *moonlight* were all words that sprang readily to my mind. Looking tenderly into his fragile, beautiful face, I understood the root of Tian Tian’s sadness.

“Death’s shadow only fades little by little as time passes. There will never be more than a thin glass barrier between your present and the wreckage of your past,” I told him.

His eyes grew wet, and he clenched his hands tightly. “But I’ve found you and decided to put my faith in you,” he said. “Don’t stay with me just out of curiosity, but don’t leave me straightaway.”

I moved into Tian Tian’s place, a big three-bedroom apartment on the western outskirts of the city. He had decorated the living room simply and comfortably, with a sectional fabric sofa from Ikea along one wall and a Strauss piano. Above the piano hung his self-portrait, in which his head looked as if he’d just surfaced from a pool.

To be honest, I didn’t much like the area. Almost all the roads were full of potholes and were lined on both sides with cramped, shabby houses, peeling billboards, and reeking piles of rubbish. There was a public phone box that leaked like the *Titanic* whenever it rained. Looking out of the window, I couldn’t see a single green tree or smartly dressed person or a clear patch of sky. It was not a place where I was able to see the future.

Tian Tian always said that the future is a trap set right in the middle of your brain.

For a while after his father died, Tian Tian lost the power of speech. Then he dropped out of high school in his first year. His lonely childhood had already turned him into a nihilist. His aversion to the outside world meant he spent half his life in bed: reading, watching videos, smoking, musing on the pros and cons of life versus death, the spirit versus flesh, calling premium phone lines, playing computer games, and sleeping. The rest of the time he painted, walked with me, ate, shopped, browsed in book and record shops, sat in cafés, or went to the bank. When he needed money, he would go to the post office and send letters in beautiful blue envelopes to his mother.

He seldom visited his grandmother. He had moved out of her house when it became a nightmare.

She had sunk into a permanent state of delirium, fixated on that “murder” in Spain. Her heart was broken, her face ravaged and her spirit gone, but she wouldn’t die. She still lives in a western-style house in the city now, fuming with anger, cursing her destiny and her daughter-in-law.

•

Saturday. Clear weather. Pleasant indoor temperature. At exactly 8:30_{A.M.} I wake up, and beside me Tian Tian opens his eyes. We look at each other for a second, then begin to kiss silently. Our early morning kisses are tender, affectionate, smooth as little fishes wriggling in water. This is the compulsory start to our day—and the sole channel of sexual expression between us.

•

Tian Tian just couldn’t handle sex. I’m not sure if it was related to the tragedy that had caused his mental problems, but I remember the first time I held him in bed. When I discovered he was impotent I was devastated, so much so that I didn’t know if I could stay with him. Ever since college I had seen sex as a basic necessity (although I’ve since changed my mind about this).

Unable to enter me, he stared at me, speechless, his whole body in a cold sweat. It was his first time with a woman in all his twenty-four years.

In the male world, being able to perform sex normally is as important as life itself, and any shortcoming causes unbearable pain. He cried, and so did I. For the rest of the night we kissed, touched, and murmured to one another. I soon came to adore his sweet kiss and gentle touch. Kissing with the tip of the tongue feels like ice cream melting. It was he who taught me that a kiss has a soul and colors all its own.

He was kind, loving, and trusting as a dolphin. His temperament was what captured my wild heart. What he couldn’t give me—sharp cries or explosive pleasure, sexual pride or orgasm—lost significance.

In *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, Milan Kundera gives a classic definition of love: “Making love with a woman and sleeping with a woman are two separate passions, not merely different but opposite. Love does not make itself felt in the desire for copulation (a desire that extends to an infinite number of women) but in the desire for shared sleep (a desire limited to one woman).”

At the beginning of my time with Tian Tian, I had no idea that I would experience this for myself, until a series of events and the appearance of another man gave me the chance to understand it.

•

At nine o’clock we got up, and he got into the huge bathtub while I smoked my first Mild Seven cigarette. In the tiny kitchen I made corn congee, eggs, and milk. With the golden sunlight dripping outside the window like melted honey, summer mornings always seemed poetic. I felt totally relaxed listening to the sound of water gushing in the bathroom.

“Will you come to the Green Stalk Café with me?” I asked, taking a big glass of milk into the

steam-swirled bathroom. Tian Tian's eyes were closed, and he gave a long yawn, looking like a fish.

"Coco, I've got an idea," he said in a low voice.

"What idea?" I brought the milk right to him, but he didn't take it in his hand, just leaned forward and sipped a little.

"Why don't you give up your job at the café?"

"Then what would I do?"

"We've enough money not to have to work all the time. You could write your novel."

It turned out he had been brewing this idea for some time, that he wanted me to write a novel that would take the literary world by storm. "There's nothing worth reading in the bookshops these days, just empty stories," he said.

"Okay," I said, "but not right now. I want to work a bit longer. You sometimes meet interesting people in a café."

"Whatever," he mumbled. This was his pet phrase, meaning he had heard and taken in the comment but had no response.

We ate breakfast together, then I dressed and put on my makeup and wandered elegantly around the room until I finally found my favorite leopard-spotted handbag. Sitting on the sofa, book in hand, he glanced up as I left. "I'll call you," he said.

•

This is the city at rush hour: All sorts of vehicles and pedestrians, all their invisible desires and countless secrets, merge with the flow like rapids plunging through a deep gorge. The sun shines down on the street, hemmed in on both sides by skyscrapers—the mad creations of humans—towering between sky and earth. The petty details of daily life are like dust suspended in the air. They are a monotonous theme of our materialistic age.

2 modern metropolis

I had seen the skyscrapers fading out in a flurry of snowflakes. I saw them looming up again in the same ghostly way as when I left.

I saw the lights creeping through their ribs. I saw the whole city spread out from Harlem to the Battery, the streets choked with ants, the elevated rushing by, the theaters emptying. I wondered in a vague way what had ever happened to my wife.

—Henry Miller

It was three-thirty in the afternoon, and the Green Stalk Café was empty. A sunbeam filtered in through the leaves of the parasol tree, and particles of dust floated in it. An odd pall hung over the magazines and the jazz music from the stereo, as if they were survivals from the 1930s.

I stood behind the bar with nothing to do. It's always boring when there's no business.

Old Yang, the headwaiter, was taking a nap in the back room. He was a trusted relative of the boss and camped out there day and night, managing the money and us.

My coworker, Spider, took advantage of the break to sneak off to the computer company on the corner in search of cheap parts. He was a problem teenager with only one thing on his mind. He wanted to be a superhacker. You could call him a half-graduate, because despite having an IQ of 150, he hadn't completed his degree in computing at Fudan U. He was thrown out because he kept hacking into *Shanghai Online* to rip off account numbers and surf the web at their expense.

There we were, a formerly promising journalist and a computer hit man with a reputation, both working in a café. It's hard to deny life's little ironies. Wrong place, wrong roles, but united in our commitment to life's young dream. And yet, our bodies were already tarnished and our minds beyond help.

I began to arrange the scented white lilies in a large jar of water. So delicate, that feeling when my fingers touched these seductive white petals. My love of flowers may be conventionally feminine, but I believe the day will come when I look in the mirror and compare my face to a poisonous plant. And my shocking bestselling novel will reveal the truth about humankind: violence, style, lust, joy, and then enigma, machines, power, and death.

The old rotary-dial telephone rang piercingly. It was Tian Tian. Almost every day he would call about now, just as we were both getting tired of our respective surroundings. "Same time, same place—I'll be waiting to have dinner with you," he said urgently, as if it were important.

At dusk I took off my uniform miniskirt and short Chinese silk jacket and changed into a tight-

fitting shirt and pants. Clutching my handbag, I walked light-footed out of the café. The colorful street lanterns had just come on, and the fluorescent lights of the shops shimmered like shards of gold. I walked along the street, blending with the thousands of people and vehicles shuttling back and forth, like the Milky Way blazing right here on earth. The most exciting moment of the city's day had arrived.

The Cotton Club is at the corner of Huaihai and Fuxing Roads, the equivalent of New York's Fifth Avenue or the Champs-Élysées in Paris. From a distance, the two-story French building has an air of distinction. Those who come here are either *laowai*—foreigners—with a lewd look in their eyes, or slim, foxy Asian belles. Its shimmering blue sign looks just the way Henry Miller described a syphilitic sore. It's because we enjoyed this metaphor that Tian Tian and I used to go there. (In addition to writing *Tropic of Cancer*, Miller lived to eighty-nine and married five times, and I've always seen him as my spiritual father.)

I pushed open the door, looked around, and saw Tian Tian waving to me from a corner. But what surprised me was that next to him sat a fashionable woman wearing what was obviously a wig, but a striking one, and a halter top in shiny black. Her tiny face was dusted with gold and silver powder, as if she'd just landed from some planet incredibly far away.

"This is Madonna; we were at elementary school together," said Tian Tian. Perhaps thinking that inadequate, he added: "She's also been my only friend in Shanghai lately." Then he introduced me to her. "This is Nikki, my girlfriend," he said, and quite unself-consciously took my hand and held it on his lap.

We nodded and smiled, because the fact we were both friends of Tian Tian, who is as wholesome as a tiny butterfly, instantly disposed us to like and trust each other. But her first words startled me.

"Tian Tian has talked about you so often on the phone. He always goes on for hours. He adores you so much it makes me jealous." She laughed, low and husky, like an actress in one of those old Hollywood movies.

I glanced at Tian Tian, who was trying to look as though he'd done no such thing. "He likes chatting on the phone. You could buy a thirty-one-inch television with the money he spends on the monthly phone bill," I added thoughtlessly, and immediately I realized how tacky it was to see everything in terms of money.

"I hear you're a writer," said Madonna.

"Well, it's been a while since I wrote anything, and actually . . . I can't really call myself a writer." I felt a bit ashamed: Just wanting to be a writer isn't enough.

Tian Tian interrupted. "Oh, Coco's already published a collection of stories. It's cool. She's so observant. She's going to be very successful," he said calmly, not a hint of flattery on his face.

"I'm working as a waitress just now," I said matter-of-factly. "And you? You look like an actress."

“Didn’t Tian Tian tell you?” She looked briefly quizzical, as if she were trying to guess how I’d react. “I was *amami*[a madam] in Guangzhou. I got married, then my old man kicked the bucket and left me a bundle of money, so now I enjoy myself.”

I nodded, outwardly calm while an exclamation mark popped up in my mind. Right in front of me was a bona fide rich widow! And now I knew where those courtesan airs came from, and those alarmingly sharp eyes, which automatically made me think of an errant heroine.

We stopped talking for a moment, as the food Tian Tian had ordered arrived, one dish after the other—all my Shanghai favorites. “If you’d rather have something else, just order it,” he told Madonna.

She nodded. “Actually, I have a very small stomach,” she said, cupping her hands to make a fist-size shape. “The evening is the start of my day, so most people’s dinner is my breakfast. I don’t eat a lot. My screwed-up life has turned my body into a garbage dump.”

“I like your garbage,” said Tian Tian.

I watched her while I ate. She had the sort of face that only a woman whose life has been full of stories could have.

“Come over to my place when you have time. You’ll find singing, dancing, card games, drinking, and all sorts of weird people. I’ve just redecorated my apartment. I spent half a million Hong Kong dollars on the lighting and sound system alone. More fucking awesome than some Shanghai nightclubs,” she said, without a trace of smugness.

Her mobile phone rang. She took it out of her bag and switched to a grainy, sexy voice. “Where? I bet you’re at old Wu’s place. One day you’ll die at a mahjong table. I’m eating with friends right now. Let’s talk again at midnight,” teased Madonna, eyes sparkling.

“That was my new beau”—putting down the phone—“he’s a crazy painter. I’ll introduce you next time we meet. Guys today really know how to sweet-talk a woman. He just swore he’d die in my bed. She started laughing again. “True or not, it’s enough to keep me happy.”

Tian Tian was reading the *Xinmin Evening News* and ignored her. This paper, which he reads to remind himself that he still lives here, is the only thing that links him to the everyday side of Shanghai. And he was beginning to feel a bit inhibited in the face of the wild-talking Madonna.

“You’re really cute,” Madonna said, looking straight at me. “You’re not just pretty in a delicate way. You’ve got an aloofness, too, that turns men on. Too bad I’ve washed my hands of the business, or I could make you the hottest property around.”

Before I could react, she was laughing so hard she could hardly catch her breath. “Sorry, sorry—just kidding.” I could see her eyes darting back and forth all the time, avid with neurotic enthusiasm. She had the air of all practiced flirts, past and present, Chinese and foreign, who can mix well with any company but really get excited only when new faces appear.

“Watch what you say; I’m getting jealous,” said Tian Tian, looking up amorously from his paper

and slipping his arm around my waist. We always sat that way, like Siamese twins, even if it was a bit inappropriate for some places.

Smiling faintly, I looked at Madonna. “You’re very beautiful, too. In a *linglei* [unconventional] sort of way; not fake *linglei*, but the real thing.”

When we parted at the door of the Cotton Club, she hugged me. “My dear, I’ve stories I’d love to tell you—if you really want to write that best-seller of yours, that is.”

Madonna hugged Tian Tian close, too. “My little good-for-nothing,” she said. “Take good care of your love. Love’s the most powerful thing on earth. It can make you fly and forget everything else. A child like you would be ruined in no time without love—you’ve no immunity against life. I’ll call you.”

She blew us a kiss, slipped into a white VW Santana 2000 at the curb, and sped off.

I thought about what she’d said. Buried in her words were fragments of philosophy, sparkling brighter than the lights, truer than truth. And the scent of her kiss lingered in the air.

“She’s a crazy woman,” said Tian Tian happily. “But she’s really something, isn’t she? She used to stop me from doing anything stupid when I’d been alone in my room too long, by taking me for a midnight spin on one of those raised highways. We’d drink a lot, smoke dope, and wander around on the highway until sunrise.

“Then I met you. It was all predestined,” he went on. “You’re not really like Madonna and me. We’re different types. You’re ambitious and full of faith in the future. You and your drive are what give me a reason to live. Do you believe me? I never lie.”

“Idiot,” I said, pinching his bottom.

“You’re a crazy woman, too!” He yelped in pain.

For Tian Tian, anyone who falls outside the bounds of normality, specially anyone in a mental hospital, is to be admired. In his opinion, crazy people are considered mad by the rest of society only because their intelligence isn’t understood. He thinks that beauty is reliable only when it’s linked to death or hopelessness, even to evil. Like epileptic Dostoevsky, ear-slicing Van Gogh, impotent Dalí, homosexual Allen Ginsberg, or movie starlet Frances Farmer, who was thrown into an asylum and lobotomized during the McCarthy witch hunts. Or Irish singer Gavin Friday, who wore thick layers of brightly colored makeup all his life. Or Henry Miller, who, at his poorest, would pace up and down in front of a restaurant to scrounge a scrap of steak, and wander the streets begging for a dime to take the subway. To Tian Tian, these people are like wildflowers, bursting with vigor and living and dying alone.

The night colors were soft. Pressing close together, Tian Tian and I strolled along Huaihai Road. The lights, tree shadows, and gothic roof of the Paris Printemps department store, and the people in autumn garb meandering among them, all seem adrift peacefully among the night colors. An atmosphere unique to Shanghai, lighthearted but refined, hung over the city.

I am forever absorbing that atmosphere, as if it were a magic potion of jade or rubies that would rid me of the contempt the young have for convention and help me get deep into the guts of the city, like an insect boring into an apple.

Thoughts like that cheer me up. I grabbed Tian Tian, my lover, and whirled him into a dance on the pavement.

“You’re a capricious romantic, like an attack of appendicitis,” he said softly.

“This is called ‘Lazy Steps to Paris,’ my favorite foxtrot,” I said earnestly.

As usual, we strolled slowly over to the Bund. At night, it becomes a place of heavenly quiet. We went up to the top floor of the Peace Hotel, where we’d discovered a secret passageway to the roof—through a narrow window in the women’s restroom and up the fire escape. We climbed up there often and were never caught.

Standing on the roof, we looked at the silhouettes of the buildings lit up by the streetlights on both sides of the Huangpu River, specially the Oriental Pearl TV Tower, Asia’s tallest. Its long, long steel column pierces the sky, proof of the city’s phallic worship. The ferries, the waves, the night-dark grass, the dazzling neon lights, and incredible structures—all these signs of material prosperity are aphrodisiacs the city uses to intoxicate itself. They have nothing to do with us, the people who live among them. A car accident or a disease can kill us, but the city’s prosperous, invincible silhouette is like a planet, in perpetual motion, eternal.

When I thought about that, I felt as insignificant as an ant on the ground.

But the thought didn’t affect our mood as we stood on top of that historic building. As the sound of the hotel’s septuagenarian jazz band came and went, we surveyed the city yet distanced ourselves from it with love talk. I liked to undress right down to my bra and panties in the moist breeze from the Huangpu. Maybe I have a complex about underwear, or I’m a narcissist or an exhibitionist or something, but I hoped this would somehow stimulate Tian Tian’s desire.

“Don’t do that,” said Tian Tian painfully, turning his head away.

But I kept on undressing, like a stripper. A tiny blue flower began to burn my skin, and that odd sensation made me blind to my beauty, my self, my identity. Everything I did was designed to create a strange new fairy tale, a fairy tale meant just for me and the man I adored.

The man sat entranced against the railing, sad but grateful, watching the woman dance in the moonlight. Her body was smooth as a swan’s yet powerful as a leopard’s. To him, every feline crouch, leap, and turn was elegant yet madly seductive.

“Please try. Come into my body like a real lover, my darling— try.”

“No, I can’t,” he said, curling himself into a ball.

“Well then, I’ll jump off the roof,” said the woman, laughing and grabbing the rail as if to climb over it. He caught her and kissed her. But broken desire couldn’t find a way. Love was a miracle the flesh couldn’t copy, and the ghosts defeated us. . . . Dust covered us, closing my throat and my love’s

Three^{A.M.}Curled up on the big comfortable bed, I watched Tian Tian. He was already asleep, or pretending to be, and the room was strangely silent. His self-portrait hung above the piano. Who could help loving a flawless face like his?

Lying beside my love, again and again I used my slim fingers to masturbate, making myself fly, fling into the mire of orgasm. And in my mind's eye, I saw both crime and punishment.

3 i have a dream

And the good girls go to Heaven, but the bad girls go everywhere.

—*Jim Steinman*

A woman who chooses the writing profession often does so as to give herself a rank within male-dominated society.—*Erica Jong*

What sort of person am I? To my mother and father, I'm an evil little thing devoid of conscience. (By five I'd learned how to stomp out, haughtily clutching my lollipop.) To my teachers or ex-boss and colleagues at the magazine, I'm smart but hardheaded, a skilled professional with an unpredictable temperament who can guess how any film or a story will end from the way it begins. To most men, I qualify as a little beauty, as pleasing as spring light on a lake's rippling surface, with a pair of oversize eyes right out of a Japanese cartoon and a long Coco Chanelneck. But in my own eyes I'm just an ordinary woman, even if I become famous one of these days.

When my paternal great-grandmother was alive, she often said: "A person's fate is like a kite string. One end is here on the earth, and the other is in the heavens. There's nowhere to hide from fate." Or: "Which part of life is the part worth living for?"

This old lady with snow-white hair and a tiny frame would sit all day, like a ball of white wool, in her rocking chair. Many people believed she had second sight. She correctly predicted the 1987 Shanghai earthquake which registered 3.0 on the Richter scale, and told her relatives of her impending death three days before it happened. Her photograph still hangs on the wall of my parents' house, and they believe that she continues to protect them. In fact, it was my grandmother who predicted that I would be a writer. With a literary star shining down on me and a belly full of ink, I would, she said, make my mark one day.

At the university I often used to write letters to boys I was secretly in love with, rich in expression and affection, almost guaranteeing conquest. At the magazine, the interviews and stories I wrote were like something out of a novel, with their twisted plots and rarefied language, so that the real seemed false, and vice versa.

When I finally realized that everything I had done until then was just a waste of my talent, I gave up my highly paid job at the magazine. My parents despaired of me once again, because my father had had to pull a lot of strings to get me the job in the first place.

"Child, are you really my daughter? Why does your head grow horns and your feet grow thorns?" said Mother. "Tell me, why all these wasted efforts?" Mother is a pretty, frail woman who has spent

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