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short story

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Blue Limitless Emptiness

They’ve agreed to meet in the lobby of her campus hotel. Anna waits on one of the sagging leather sofas, leaning into the darkened headrest. She watches the door, and then she watches the pretty desk attendant, the one who explained on the phone to Xiaowei in Chinese how to find the hotel. The upright air conditioning unit in the far corner spews out chilled air, the humidity so dense Anna can see the dampness cascade to the floor. Each person who enters, she looks to see if it might be Xiaowei. Maybe she won’t recognize him.

A man in dark pants and a light short-sleeve shirt sits on a nearby sofa, lights a cigarette, and answers a call on his cell phone. “*Wei*?” he says. He’s loud. Anna listens. She checks her watch again.

There’s a young man standing in the doorway, looking at her. He’s thin, like a teenage boy might be thin in the States. He has freckles. His hair juts out from his head in sharp angles. She’s forgotten these things.

“Anna,” he says.

“Xiaowei.” They hug, clumsy, as if neither knows which side to press or how close to stand. It’s been so long since Vermont, the snow, the old mill overlooking the frozen river.

“You’re having a good trip?” he says. He pulls away and looks at her face.

She says yes. She wants to look him over, but her hands shake as she checks her bag again for a bottle of water and an umbrella and that extra pack of tissues in case she needs to use a public toilet while they’re in the city. They walk out into the heat and leave behind the pitiful A/C of the hotel lobby. He asks questions about her classes, her plans in China. She answers, saying anything that comes to her mind. Everything. It’s been a week and a half since she arrived in his country, but it was only two days ago she got up the courage to let him know.

When there’s a lull in the conversation, Xiaowei says he’s sorry about her fiancé. She says thank you. She notices the clumps of black hair already gathering in a pile near the front steps of the barbershop, the two lazy dogs resting in their usual spot on the sidewalk. Anna is glad to be in China. She wants to forget the coffee shop at home, her mother’s house, the early mornings of watching the poets labor over their tired, precise notebooks. *Take it slow,* her mother said. *Give yourself time. You’ve always been so shy—are you sure you’re ready?* Anna stayed eight months with her mother after Dave died, and nothing changed. The mornings at the coffee shop had been torture, because yes, she is shy, but the customers were better than the silence.

It’s only her first week of teaching in Wuhan, and already Anna is falling in love with China, with her students, with the boy at the dining hall who works at the soymilk counter, with the old men and women who fan themselves on low wooden stools in the mornings, talking and laughing, playing *xiangqi* in the evenings, shouting and taking it all quite seriously.

Xiaowei and Anna pass the vendor near the campus wall where Anna buys fruit each morning, and the woman smiles, fanning herself in the shade. She points at the bananas, and Anna says, “*Bu xiexie*,” one of the phrases she learned in an intensive Chinese class for travelers. A horn sounds behind them and Anna accidentally stumbles into Xiaowei. The motorbikes are battery-operated, and their silence still unnerves her. They watch the driver disappear through an opening in the campus wall, an unadorned tall cement barrier that merely seems an inconvenience to the locals squeezing past. Another horn sounds, this time from the far side.

“Very busy in Wuhan,” Xiaowei says. He’s only a little taller than she is, and so thin. He steps through the wall and she follows, and they walk along a tree-lined street that leads down to East Lake. The sidewalks are filling with cars parked between sycamore trees planted in the openings between paving stones. She wants to stop and look at Xiaowei, touch him to make sure he’s real. He steps off the sidewalk and she does, too. They walk in the street because it’s the better place to walk in China, which is just beginning to make sense to Anna.

At the base of the hill, they wait. Xiaowei puts his arm on Anna’s elbow, and they venture into the middle of East Lake Road together, standing on the yellow stripes. A trickle of sweat makes its way down Anna’s back. Her sundress feels tight. It’s limp. It clings to her, as do the strands of hair on her neck.

“It seems you know how to cross the street like a Chinese.”

Anna smiles. “Yes,” she says. She’s watched the Chinese, how they weave around each other, the cars, the motorbikes, the bicycles and pedestrians. There are three-wheeled work vehicles she doesn’t know the name for yet, and there are workers who pull squared-off metal wheelbarrows. It seems to Anna that as long as you keep moving slowly, everyone eventually figures it out. It’s when you hesitate or go too fast, when you surprise someone, that problems arise and voices raise.

The fishermen near the water with their long retractable poles barely notice Anna and Xiaowei, but the crowds gathered round the old fishermen do, and they stare. The old women talk as they pass; the young couples smile.

“Why do they stare?” Anna asks.

“*Mei*.”

She looks at him, and he looks away. “*Meiguoren*?” she says. *American?*

“No,” he says. “Just *mei*.”

He takes a cigarette from a pack in his front shorts pocket and lights it, then turns his head to exhale toward the lake. She decides she doesn’t want to ask just yet what *mei* means. She lets herself keep the single syllable of it, pressing it from her lips in silence. They pass into sunshine, and she opens her umbrella, holding it above them. “Is Beijing like here?” she asks.

“Not so hot,” he says. “Not so humid.” He holds his cigarette between his thumb and first finger. She likes that. It reminds her of Vermont, walking from her writer’s studio overlooking the Gihon River through the ice and snow to his white-washed, wide artist’s studio up the hill. They were interested in each other’s ideas about art, poetry, and the world. It’d been a relief to talk about art and poetry, to contemplate something other than test results and health insurance co-pays. “Beijing is dry. Crowded,” he says. “Very bad traffic.” He reaches for the umbrella and holds it above her head.

A grandmother and grandfather pass, pushing a small child on a tricycle. The boy’s split pants are open at the crotch, and she catches the barest glimpse of his small penis and spongy testicles resting on the plastic seat.

“If you come to Beijing, I’ll show you my friends’ studios, my studio,” Xiaowei says. “My friends have renovated a factory into art galleries.” He smokes his cigarette as they walk. The sun is behind them, sliding up into the trees. Unlike her American self, she’s not so shy in China. She tries out new phrases on Xiaowei, and he laughs. She tilts her head and watches his mouth as he pronounces the words for her, and then she practices. They switch to English, and she babbles as Xiaowei nods his head and says yes, but she has no idea how much he really understands. It’s not like the emails, his kind responses to the updates about Dave’s hospitalizations and surgeries.

They pass the concrete stairs that always smell of urine, the trees where she first saw the blue birds with the long tails and black heads. Another fisherman is near the low wall, affixing a lump of ground meat to the array of hooks at the end of his line. Xiaowei finishes his cigarette and drops it on the wooden walkway, stepping on it so it’s extinguished before it tumbles into a crack and falls among the debris below.

On the other side of the bridge that crosses East Lake, he hails a taxi with his hand held out, palm down. They slide across the back seat, neither bothering to wear belts. It’s impossible to buckle up in China—the seats are covered with scratchy cloth stretched tight over the belts and clasps. Still, every time she gets in a taxi, Anna can’t break her American habit. Her hand reaches for a belt.

As they pass the new park and the lotus pond, Xiaowei talks to the driver. Anna stares out the window, wanting to watch him speak. She listens, hearing how his voice sounds like an instrument because she can’t understand the words. “I’m asking where is a good restaurant,” he tells her. “He says this one has very good fish.” Xiaowei looks out the window. “Tonight, maybe we eat here.” He looks at her.

“Of course,” she says. “Of course.” She’ll eat anything. She’ll try anything, she tells herself. Everything.

Xiaowei puts his hand on her arm. “You sure?”

“Yes,” she says, smiling. The driver says something from behind his plexi-glass enclosure, and Xiaowei leans forward. She turns, reaching for a tissue in her purse. It happens, the crying. On her second morning in Wuhan, one of the veteran teachers saw a former student on the sidewalk. The student stood there, his eyes big, and grabbed the teacher’s hand and just stared at him. *I miss you*, the boy’s face said. *I can’t believe I am seeing you right here, right now.*

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The day the ice broke on the Gihon River in Vermont was the day Anna visited Xiaowei’s studio. It was March. She first met him in the shuttle in Burlington; he was jet-lagged and disoriented. Her little writing studio faced the river, and she kept watch over its banks each day as the water began to thaw and the liquid flow chewed away the edges of the crusted ice. Each morning she ate in the dining hall with the Asian artists because she couldn’t face conversation with the poets. At lunch one day, Xiaowei asked her to come to his studio with an artist from Thailand who would help translate. They sat on stools and talked of art and politics and whether or not it mattered if there was a god. She lingered over his pen-and-ink drawings.

That seems so long ago.

In the back seat of the taxi, when Xiaowei asks her about her work in China, she says she likes teaching. Xiaowei nods. He says, “It’s different than writing—brings you out of your shell.” He looks at her. “I think maybe you’ve changed.”

Anna looks at him, her eyes skirting his face. She wants to tell him yes, she’s changed. Everything has changed. Of course. But instead, she says, “You look the same.”

“No. I am old man now,” he says. He laughs. “In Vermont, very difficult for me to go from pen-and-ink to full color, but I paint better now.”

In Vermont, she’d waited and waited for the cracks that would split the thick bands of ice, and when it happened, it was over within minutes. Then it was time to go home. The morning she left, he’d gotten up early to see her off. The artist from Thailand who’d translated for them and another artist from Beijing waited for her in the parking lot. She didn’t understand how they could be so kind, how they could wait in the early morning hours to tell her goodbye, but it meant something to her. It felt like the last day of summer camp, like she was a child saying goodbye to her new best friends, and she had to go home and face life again with Mommy and Daddy. But it was Dave she had to face, Dave and his body, which was slowly shrinking to the size of a child’s.

At the Guiyuan temple, the beggars press and the old women selling fans yell at her. Xiaowei pulls her toward the entrance, and they step over the high threshold. Smoke from burning incense plumes out from the building on the right, its once-white walls now dingy. Shiny red ceramic tiles line the rooftops, sweeping into a curl at each corner. They visit a square sunken pond with turtles paddling around inside, and Anna sighs. She and Dave kept pet water turtles—she knows they need a place to rest.

“Would you like to go this way?” Xiaowei holds out his hand, asking in his polite Chinese way. They walk toward a golden statue of the Buddha, easily twenty feet tall. There’s a low bench, six round, flat prayer cushions in bright yellow and red stitching placed on it in a row. She watches as several women come up to the statue, kneel on the bench, and then bow their heads low. They place money in a box just before they step away.

Xiaowei holds out his arm, his hand open to the Buddha. “You can move closer.”

Yes, of course, she can move closer. She kneels alone on the bench and looks up. She’s meditated before, and she’s prayed, but this feels different. She lowers her head and asks for something, anything. Her forehead is all the way to the cushion. She and Dave would have come to a place like this for their honeymoon. Maybe it would have been Malaysia or Thailand, but it would have been somewhere strange and hot and with an alphabet she couldn’t recognize.

Someone sits on the cushion next to her, and Anna is aware how long she’s been folded over. She sits up and opens her eyes and takes a breath, seeing how the eyes of the Buddha are nearly closed, how he is relaxed and happy. She stands and wipes her cheeks, feeling how small she is. This is the intention, which she accepts. Anna wants to feel something.

They walk to another pond on the temple grounds full of swimming turtles, but this one contains two large lotus flowers made of stone. The turtles can rest on the petals when they want. Anna and Xiaowei lean against the railing along with other visitors, watching the turtles swim. One is not moving, his head and feet slightly white. Maybe he’s dead—he doesn’t move for several minutes. A bigger turtle swims toward him, with some speed for a turtle, and he knocks into the smaller one, which finally starts to move. Anna and Xiaowei clap and so do several others, all of them surprised and happy the little turtle is still alive.

They leave the pond and Xiaowei shows her the room of 500 statues.

She glides along, mesmerized by the many, many *luohan*. Some look old, with jowls and hanging skin; others are young and strong. She stops at one that is smiling, mouth open, toes showing beneath his robe. Slowly, like a treasure hunt, she begins counting.

In the shade of a wizened tree, she sits with Xiaowei. He turns her shiny metal fortune card to catch the light. The image of her *luohan’s* shaved head is encircled by a ringlet of hair. “He’s called something like, ‘Conqueror of Evils,’” Xiaowei says. He concentrates on the Chinese characters. “It’s a kind of poem.”

*Ah,* Anna thinks. *A poem.*

“It’s very hard to translate. Very old style.” He squints. “The first line… this *luohan* is more intelligent than Zhu Ge Liang, a great Chinese military strategist.” He stops, looking at the card again, rubbing his chin. He’s so handsome.

“Maybe,” he says, “the second line is that you have thirty-six plans in your mind, all at one time, which is represented by the basket—the basket is like your mind, which can hold all of these strategies at one time.”

She writes Xiaowei’s words on one of the index cards from her purse. “Thirty-six ideas in my basket?”

“Yes,” Xiaowei says. He laughs. Oh, that laugh. She finds her water bottle and takes a long drink.

“I have one more place to bring you,” he says. “You’re too tired? I could bring you to the hotel so you can rest?”

Anna looks at the gold card, thinking her thirty-six ideas. She’s only been with one man since Dave passed. It was too soon, only weeks after the funeral. He was strange, an overweight, older man who somehow brought her to orgasm four times in one afternoon. She never wanted to see him again.

“Maybe you need rest?”

“No.” Anna rubs her hands up and down her legs. Stands.

“You sure?”

“Of course,” she says, though she’s not sure. She’s tired. She puts the gold *luohan* card in her purse and wipes her eyes.

“Anna.”

“I’m okay,” she says. “This is so nice.” She indicates the temple grounds, the statues. “*You* are so nice.” She looks in her purse and finds a hairband and pulls her hair through the elastic, sweeping it off her neck and smoothing the last sticky strands away from her face.

“I just try to be a good host,” he says. “You come to my country. Of course I bring you to the temple you ask me about.” He touches her arm. “I think you will like this next place. It is special for poets.”

She closes her eyes and nods. “Okay,” she says. And they go.

In the taxi, she wants to remind him she’s stopped writing poetry, but she knows he won’t understand. Because she doesn’t understand.

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Yellow Crane Tower is a tall wooden structure, each story covered by an intricate rooftop of yellow-orange glazed ceramic tiles. Xiaowei stops at the small pagodas before the tower, reading her lines from Chinese poets long dead. He explains the wall of 100 cranes and the story of the 100th crane, which is missing.

At the base of the tower, Anna hesitates, listening to the ringing bell that Chinese tourists have paid to strike with a long mallet. As she and Xiaowei ascend the stairs, she hears the bell calling out, deep notes that cross the heat and humidity. On the second floor, they find the 100th crane, larger than life, suspended from the ceiling. Then they rise again along the circling steps, each worn from years of use.

At every floor, they slowly circle the outer terrace looking for recurring landmarks—the Yangtze River, the railroad tracks, the modern hi-rise buildings, the bright laundry hanging from windows and upper-story porches of lower apartment buildings. Finally, on the fifth floor, Xiaowei shows her the desks for the poets, the inkwells. “Would you like to stay? I can walk alone a few minutes.”

She rests her hand on the edge of one of the desks. Yes, she’d like to sit and look at the wall, the triptych mural of blues that soothes her. “Yes.” She sits and pats the bench. “Sit next to me, Xiaowei.”

He looks around. “I’ll walk,” he says. “Give you a moment.”

“I want to tell you something.” She touches the bench again. He sits next to her, but his posture is tight, his head fixed. She looks up at the scene on the wall, the many shades of blue. “Xiaowei,” she says. “You remember the drawings?”

He’s quiet a moment. “Yes,” he says.

If she can just keep looking at the blue wall, she can say it. She stares ahead, tracing the movement in each panel with her eyes, the flow from poet to poet, the lines sweeping up toward the tall open ceiling and back down to the floor. “When you said you would come visit me in Wuhan, I thought…” She can’t finish the sentence. She thinks of the nude, the Y of her legs, the nipples like the stems of floating pomegranates. Xiaowei told her pomegranates were a symbol of fertility. Anna never showed the drawings to Dave. It was too late when she got home. There was only time for the big things – talking to his parents about the insurance, the next round of treatment – and the little things – cleaning the hole in Dave’s side and attaching the thick plastic bag, buying the special lotion that soothed his cracked fingertips. There was so little time.

“Anna, I didn’t tell you, but I am married now. Last year.”

She’s still looking at the painted wall when he says this, looking at the figures kneeling and standing and walking. She doesn’t need to look at Xiaowei.

“I’m sorry I didn’t speak this earlier.” His hands are gripping the edge of the bench. “We’re good friends, Anna.” He stops. “You had very much pain. I thought, maybe, this year is not the right time to share my good news.”

She watches the others drifting through the room, the Chinese tourists, how they stare at the wall and then talk and wander in and out of the open doors, slowly, each of them figuring out where to go in a way she still doesn’t understand. For every strange thing she’s encountered in China, each thing she can’t explain, she’s thought to herself, *Xiaowei also does it this way. I will figure it out.*

But she hasn’t.

Dave’s illness meant a slow death at first. She’d gone to Vermont for a break. His mother and sister were taking care of him so Anna could have time to herself, time to write. In Vermont, she could forget for a little while. Everyone back home said it was okay for her to think about something else, to take a rest during the long haul of caring for Dave. Each day she would stare out her little window at the cold river, but she couldn’t write. And then when she got home, instead of taking months to die, Dave had slipped away within days. It was like she looked away a moment, and then, when she looked back, he was gone. She’d squandered her last days with him, sitting near a river, trying, but failing, to write a poem.

Xiaowei is still beside her. He’s looking at the triptych, quiet. Anna looks, too, but the tears don’t come.

“Long ago, a most famous Chinese poet visited this tower. He wrote a poem about saying goodbye to his friend.”

Anna looks around, nods.

“Li Bai is his name. The poem loses some meaning, but I try to translate.” He pulls a small piece of folded paper from his pocket. “‘Goodbye from Yellow Crane Tower.’”

Anna stares at the triptych, then closes her eyes.

“My old friend departs for Yangzhou/In the third month, in the flowers and the mist/As his single sail sets, distant, in the blue limitless emptiness/I see only the sky, the river, the horizon.” Xiaowei folds the paper and sits, his head lowered. Quiet. He presses the poem into her hand. “It is difficult, I think, to say goodbye.”

Anna looks at the little square in her palm. She waits. She watches the people, wandering, finding their way. She breathes out and watches everything. She feels the hot wind blowing through the open doors, the thrum of the city below going about its strange, Chinese ways. The distant bell rings out again, and then again. Maybe it will take a thousand afternoons watching the distant boats sailing on the blue limitless emptiness. It is so far away from her. All of it. Anna will look. She’ll watch the boats. And she’ll listen to the bell, calling.