

Shanghai Longing

THEA LIM

IN JANUARY 2005, I AM 23 AND LIVING IN TORONTO. THE WINTER IS SO barren, smeary, and icebound that even happy people consider climbing into the bathtub with the radio, and I slither into the dark and dank mouth of a cosmic depression.

I am inconsolable. If friends invite me out for coffee, I describe my state of mind in such awful, unflinching terms that it brings them to tears. If I go to the bookstore, I pore over books by Noam Chomsky and CrimethInc and anyone else who can make a cogent argument that the world is ending. If a friend takes me shopping, I slip away and quietly rifle through stacks of skirts and blouses, reading their “Made In” tags until I vibrate with anxiety because in the first world everything we consume is the product of an infinite supply chain of human suffering. I know how it sounds when I say this out loud, so I don’t talk about it, and then I turn bitter because no one asks. If left unsupervised, I call my old boyfriend and invite myself over, and then I lie in his bed and weep, gasping that I don’t belong anywhere—I have no place. This is awkward since he has a new girlfriend.

I am infected with the feeling that the world is an unliveable place and there is nowhere for me in it, and my depression spins on this axis. No matter what, this idea festers under my skin. When nothing else works, I do the most drastic thing I can think of: I quit my restaurant job, empty my savings account, and fly halfway across the world to my parents in Singapore.

I travel thousands of miles, switch airline carriers, and make four stopovers in the hopes of shaking that mood, but it manages to barnacle on. I try to relax by watching *Lilo & Stitch* on the plane’s newfangled individual viewing screens. But the film turns unexpectedly bleak; during the climax one cartoon alien disables another by saying, “You were built to destroy; you can never belong. Now come quietly and we’ll take you apart,” and I become apoplectic with grief.

In Singapore it is monsoon season. I gaze for hours at the rain, trees buckling under the weight of the downpours, and move my bedroom furniture around constantly.

“Why do you keep doing that?” my mother asks one day, as I am getting aggressive with a bedside table.

“I keep trying for a fresh start,” I say. At this, my mother bursts into tears. She doesn’t know how to fix my unhappiness. But later, while she is noisily flipping through *O Magazine* and I am reading some tome by an anarcho-primitivist

revolutionary about the coming Armageddon, she says without looking up, “Why don’t you go live with Fei in China?”

It becomes instantly, undeniably clear that the answer to my problems is to go to China. My father’s parents are from China. Their country is where I might belong. In a flash I am in line at the Chinese Embassy. As I wait for a visa, wild glee spreads through me. I am escaping from what I first jokingly, but now seriously, call the White Supremacist Capitalist Heteropatriarchy, the centre from which all catastrophes leading to the end of the world issue. My visa is only for 90 days, but I imagine extending it to one year, or even two. When I get on a plane to Shanghai less than a week later, my mother says, “I didn’t think you’d actually go. It was just a suggestion.”

But it’s too late. I am off.



THE SHANGHAI AIRPORT LOOKS LIKE A TIDAL WAVE OF GLASS. AT CUSTOMS the passengers all stand behind a long yellow line to wait their turn. When I cross the line, I look down and say to myself: All the things I do not want, I leave behind this line.

Everyone I will meet in Shanghai—coming from Rotterdam or Buenos Aires or Bombay or Philadelphia—is seeking refuge from something that has driven them across the globe: failed careers, secret families, embezzlement schemes. When we are asked why we came, something glibber and more articulatable than the truth comes out, until the day comes when we cannot remember which version is the original and which is the redacted.

This is the problem that I have when I meet my friend Fei on the other side of baggage control. On our minibus journey into the heart of the city, the highways clump like a funnel cake of on-ramps. There are so many high-rise buildings packed side by side that at first glance the city looks like a mosaic of sooty windows.

“The breakup made me see the morally corrupt nature of the Western world, where every day we bear witness to the suffering of millions of people around the world and at our front door, but we don’t care as long as we can have sushi and dollar avocados, and I think this has actually made us lacking in empathy all over, even in our personal lives, so much so that someone can leave you for another person, and not even notice how much pain they are causing you, I think.”

Fei smiles stiffly and knits her brows. I have come to recognize this look on others.

“You could just be sad,” my friend says, “breaking up is hard to do.”

I know that it sounds like I am making it all up, to rationalize away a wounded ego.

“But it’s really how I feel,” I say. Then she squeezes my hand, and I am horrified when my throat goes tight with tears.

I am unprepared for the view from Fei’s window: Everything is on a surreal, heart-stopping scale. The buildings, many less than 10 years old, are shaped like vertical cream horns, like spark plugs, like ancient Roman citadels, like mutant

flowers in full bloom. I learn that the population is between 17 million and 21 million: 4 million people are unaccounted for.

Fei and I get into a routine quickly. During the day, I go to the library and think about getting a job. Fei goes to her office and does make-work jobs involving the photocopying of textbooks, while her bosses assure her they are lining up a position. Fei is Chinese and it is difficult for Chinese people to find English teaching jobs, even if they are native speakers. In the evenings, Fei and I watch American movies on pirated DVDs that we buy from a man on the corner. His is a thriving business of slapdash quality. Sometimes the blurb for one movie winds up on the case for another, and so *Dodgeball* is described as “a sweeping romance spanning generations.” It is cold and we live mostly on Fei’s futon underneath the swing of her heater, surrounded by makeshift ashtrays from chip bags and clamshell containers, because Fei is trying to quit smoking and throwing out all her ashtrays seemed like a good idea at the time. She eyes me drinking green tea as we watch *Mean Girls* for the third time, and when I am within an inch of finishing, she asks—unable to keep the urgency out of her voice—if she can have the bottle.



FEI GETS HER AUSTRIAN FRIENDS KARL AND KLEMENS TO HELP ME FIND an apartment. They have mastered Mandarin in two months, and set up an intermediary real estate agency that liaises with Shanghai real estate agencies. To their local partners, the sight of two six-foot blond men speaking Mandarin is hilarious, and Karl and Klemens know how to harness this to get results. They’re even able to joke me into a furnished second-floor apartment above a photo developing store called True Love Wedding Serving Studio. To get home I walk through True Love Wedding Serving Studio’s backroom of hooded photography lamps and rustic romantic backdrops, up an unreliable staircase, and past the accounting office where the boss nods at me, surrounded by piles of dusty papers and bottles sludged with tea leaves. I have three rooms: a front room that overlooks the babble of the street, a hallway with a hot plate that I use as a kitchen, and a bathroom. The tub doubles as a kitchen sink.

To celebrate we go to an expat party where everyone is given jumbo bottles of Tsingtao at the door. I have decided that if Klemens tries anything with me, I will turn him down, but as soon as we arrive he makes a beeline for an aspiring interior designer who clearly does not share my qualms about the potential toxicity of high-gloss hair serum. A teacher from Brighton is holding court about what it is like to furnish an apartment in China. The Chinese are cheats, she says, as soon as they see you are an expat, they will charge you twice as much for everything.

“But even at twice the price, most things are still cheaper than home, right?” I ask, hoping to maintain the illusion that the White Supremacist Capitalist Heteropatriarchy hasn’t followed me to China.

"That stuff adds up," her friend from Nairobi busts in. "You must be nuts."

I turn away in dismay, because the illusion has been shattered, and because clearly, from their free assaults on the Chinese, neither of them have noticed that I'm Chinese.

"Where are you from?" An amateur DJ from Virginia asks Fei and me. We pause, trying to muster an answer that is both short and true.

"Singapore," I say.

"Canada," she says.

"Why do you keep looking at each other?" he asks.

"We're from Canada but we know each other from going to school in Singapore," I say.

"So you were born in Singapore and met in Canada?"

"No, we were born in Canada and met in Singapore."

"Are you sisters?"

"No."

"So you went to college in Singapore?"

"No, we both went in Canada."

"Where did you say you met again?"

"At the Canadian school in Singapore."

"Is this like a comedy routine? You're mixed, aren't you. You're Asian and white, right?" He says this to me, and then he looks at Fei. "But you're not mixed. You're Japanese. No, Chinese. Am I right?"

"You got it, buddy," she says.

He misses the sarcasm in her voice and says, "Awesome! High five," and we high five him in confusion. I will spend the next week regretting it.



FOREIGNERS COME TO SHANGHAI TO TAP INTO THE CHINESE MARKET, BUT in a stroke of entrepreneurial genius we just tap into ourselves. The English language magazines read like directories to services offered by foreigners, for foreigners: middlemen realtors like Karl and Klemens, yoga in English, a bilingual telephone service that you call when you need a Mandarin speaker to explain your orders to your maid and driver. We make a living off each other, like an endless chain of sausages. I even hate the word expat. Why aren't we just immigrants, like everywhere else in the world?

Undoubtedly, my apartment is an office masquerading as an apartment, but I have found a way to live among Shanghainese people, which seems a rare and lucky thing. When I can't figure out how to work my hot plate, I call Klemens from the library for help, but when I get home, the entire staff of True Love Wedding Serving Studio is in my hallway kitchen. They shout in excitement when I come up the stairs and force me to take a diagram they have drawn, making me practice turning on the hot plate until they are sure I understand.

In Singapore everyone trash-talks China, and my Chinese father is no exception. Those people are cunning, he says, count your change twice, they'll try to cheat you. Yet the few Shanghainese people I meet seem more interested in caretaking than swindling. My neighbours spend the entire day in their doorways with their toddlers, talking to each other. A mobile shopping centre passes down the avenue daily: carts selling brooms, baked yams, every kind of hairbrush, rainbow-dyed feather dusters, and fat coils of cord roll up and down, and all the vendors know all the residents. China stretches multiple time zones, but every clock in China is on Beijing time.

I come to believe that, as remote and diluted as I am, I have an innate understanding of this Chinese need for togetherness, right in my bones. Living in Shanghai fills me simultaneously with deep delight and piercing longing. I'm terrified whenever my neighbours try to speak to me.



FEI HAS A FRIEND WORKING AT *CHINA DAILY* WHO LIKES TO CALL HIMSELF a Social Electrician. We meet at the Old Film Cafe on Duolun Lu, and he tells me he can help me find a job, no problem. I am shocked when he actually calls a week later—except the job is in childcare, not journalism. But I am a month into that three-month visa and I'm still unemployed, so I agree to meet his friend at Starbucks. All important expat business meetings take place at Starbucks. The friend is Scandinavian and she wears a skinny belt over a plush, cream sweater. She and her husband work long hours, but her 5-year-old daughter Lulu requires special needs attention that the maid can't provide. I tell her I have no childcare experience. I can't afford to say so, but at this point in my life I still haven't accepted this concept. Still, she presses until I agree to meet her daughter. She doesn't get home until after Lulu has been put to bed, but the maid can let me in. The way the woman has come down from an upstairs office holding a fat, glossy wallet in her hand, speaks of a secure, permanent life in Shanghai that every day seems further and further away. If I get closer to her, maybe it will come closer to me.

I have to take a bus on a highway with two cars to a lane, and then a train to get to the neighbourhood of Pudong, which my *Lonely Planet* book informs me “had nothing but fields and pig farms a decade ago.” From the bus, the rows of construction sites one after the other look like a staircase, each unfinished building a little higher than the next. On the subway you don't need grab bars—the cars are so tightly packed with people that it's impossible to fall over. The walk from the station to my destination is in weird contrast to this crush. I pass through a ghost town of fancy condos on Las Vegas-length lots, everything the colour of powder detergent, so new that few people have had the chance to move in. It is 5 p.m. and getting dark.

They live in the penthouse and the elevator opens right into the apartment. This excites me until I meet Lulu. She is a solid little thing in yellow pajamas with

a big head and one eye that looks where you'd expect, while the other one roves. She places one small hand on my pant leg and says, "na." Lulu's mother has left a note and a stack of math and language board books. I sit on a lime green stool and try to get Lulu to look at the books, but she is distracted.

"Lulu," I say, "can you see the 'apple'? Do you like the 'dog'?"

"Na," she says, and knocks the book out of my hands. She gets up and toddles to her dresser and begins reaching up her too-short arms, making desperate, quiet noises.

"What's wrong? You don't like the books?" I say uselessly as Lulu becomes more and more distressed, wordlessly smacking the drawers as hard as she can. The maid comes to see what the noise is. She gives Lulu what she wants: the orange, foam soccer ball from McDonald's that has been placed out of reach, on top of the dresser.

"Na!" Lulu runs triumphantly into the hallway. She drops into a crouch and puts the ball down. She reaches up for my hand and tugs with surprising force, until I am level with her. Then she rolls the ball to me. The maid mimes the action of rolling it back, so I do. Lulu rolls it back. I roll it back. Lulu is so focused on the ball that she pays no mind to the saliva escaping from her bottom lip. Every time the ball comes back, she laughs with pure, stuttery surprise.

This place is probably three times the size of the average Chinese dwelling and there is an oversized sofa that must have been shipped from home at great expense. Yet now that it is fully night, the darkness outside is so dense and final that the harsh fluorescents seem to pulse as they light up the walls and tiles in stark, clinical white. It is like being in an institution where Lulu has been left, and then forgotten.

She has even less of a place in the world than me, this tiny person in yellow pajamas, and this makes everything come back: How unliveable life is, that feeling like my oesophagus is trying to turn itself inside out, and the desire not to die but simply just not to be alive.

I call to the maid in the kitchen and say, "I'm sorry, I have to go."

Lulu has the ball carefully trapped between her feet. When I get up, her round face creases with the worry that I might not sit down again and resume this, her favourite thing.

"You cannot stay? The ma'am said you would have dinner with us?" The maid frowns.

Lulu throws the ball to me. It hits my foot and rolls away. She falls back onto her bum and starts to cry, at first sad little whimpers, and then full-grown, inconsolable wails.

"Never mind. Never mind, Lulu," the maid picks her up, and Lulu reaches her arms toward me in despair. I back away, and when the elevator doors close, I can still hear her cry.

As soon as I get home I send Lulu's mother an email. "Sorry," I write, "I found another job. Good luck with your search!"

When Fei asks me why I didn't take the job, I bombard her with righteousness. I say, I can't believe those parents leave her alone all the time. She needs a special teacher, if they have money, why did they hire me? I could be anybody! When Fei says, I think you could have done some good, I disagree, but I don't look her in the eye.

When I return to Canada, I will tell all sorts of self-deprecating stories about Shanghai. How I couldn't even turn on my hot plate, how I tried to buy sugar cane thinking it was a laundry pole, how even though I was in Mandarin classes three days a week, the taxi drivers would laugh and laugh when I tried to give directions in Chinese. But I won't tell anyone about Lulu.



INSTEAD OF LOOKING FOR WORK, I PROCRASTINATE. I SIT IN BOONNA Café and look at the grey, leafless trees with their intricate branches, lining every street. I walk everywhere, partly to save money, partly so that I can feel like a member of the city without actually talking to anyone. I never get lost in Toronto, but if Shanghai is on a grid, it follows some advanced level of fractions I can never grasp, and every walk I take, I get entirely, liberatingly lost. I get carried along by the crowds on Nanjing Lu, past the stores I want to visit, as if our bodies are cars on a gridlocked freeway. On the way to the 446-year-old Yuyuan Gardens, I see a half-demolished row of houses—dry wall, steel rods and abandoned crockery on one end, and families living in intact apartments on the other. Outside the garden gates, I buy a *Best of Bowie* double CD from a woman with a whole box of them. Winter is over and I leave the windows in my apartment open and sing along with David Bowie: *I've never done good things/I've never done bad things/I never did anything out of the blue*. All of my neighbours smile and wave now when they see me, except the man who runs an entire cobbling business out of an office desk in the alleyway. At the end of each afternoon he closes up shop by locking the drawers and covering the desk with a tarp.

There are bicycles everywhere. Some streets are for bicycles only. People use their bicycles like moving vans, carting propane tanks, dressers, whole families on one two-wheeler. I follow their routes to see how it is that they don't fall, and I pass a travel agency called Shanghai Longing. Electronic Mandarin-to-English dictionaries have created a new dialect: collisions of language that are unexpectedly blunt and poignant. You can buy moisturiser that promises "skinless skin." Codes of conduct posted in the taxis are translated as "Psychos and drunkards are prohibited from travelling without guardians." In the thick of the business district, there is a skyscraper shaped like Isengard named Tomorrow Square.

Expats call these examples of mashed-up language "English." The back page of *That's Shanghai* is devoted to English sightings and Karl and Klemens read them aloud at dinner, thrilled by all the failed efforts to harness this one gateway to financial success. I write down examples of mistranslated Chinese in my notebook,

but I feel protective of them. I admire the bravery of the attempts, because words, in English or Chinese, pose the risk of exposure. When someone speaks English to me, I know just how poorly Chinese I look. When someone speaks Mandarin to me, I am elated to have been identified as one of them, but then the moment passes when I can't reply. And I won't speak either English or Chinese to any Shanghaiese people. English involves complicity in the White Supremacist Capitalist Heteropatriarchy. Mandarin involves making errors of such heavy psychic weight. Mostly I try to act things out. When my mother, who is white, comes to visit, she can't understand this. My public silence annoys her to no end, especially as I try to act out things like "Band-Aid" or "cucumber."

On the side roads the stores sell a wild variety of goods out of a window to passersby—punch clocks, turtles, sesame seed dumplings. Sometimes if I am feeling bold, I step in among the rows of things I don't understand, fingering neon-coloured aerosol cans with Chinese labels until a shop owner appears to ask "你要什么?": "*Ni yao shenme?*": "What are you looking for?" At which point I duck my head and scurry out.



I GET A JOB AS A FREELANCER FOR AN EXPAT MAGAZINE CALLED *Shangbai Cool*. They even give me bilingual business cards, printed front and back. My boss is an enormous ex-goth from New Brunswick named Steve. When Shanghaiese street vendors try to get his attention, he waves a huge, pallid hand at them, saying: "Go away, bzzzz bzzzz bzzzz, get lost." My first assignment is to interview an Australian-Chinese woman who designs bed linen. She wears her hair in an impressive pompadour, and she answers my questions about machine-washable versus non-machine-washable fabrics with her head thrown back, blowing smoke rings at the ceiling, as if we are talking French philosophy.

Steve takes Fei and me to a high-rise party full of Canadian ESL teachers, hockey jocks from Prince Edward Island. One of my good friends is from PEI, and as a joke I ask them if they know her. I am slightly horrified when their faces spread with recognition and they say "You mean R.J.'s little sister? Of course!"

"Drop It Like It's Hot" is on loop and the women spend the evening winding aggressively with each other, while the men engage in various horsings-around in the kitchen, eventually escalating to a sword fight using \$5 baguettes from Carrefour. There is the regular conversation about the discriminatory price-gouging that Westerners suffer.

Feeling cranky, I say "Why don't you just speak Mandarin to them?"

"I don't speak Chinese," the drunk host says. "I can't be fucked to learn."

The party decides to move to a new club whose claim to fame is its entirely red interior. In the cab I sit between two Early Childhood Education majors. The one on my right is a chesty brunette in a Suzy Shier sweater. She winds the window all

the way down, and then uses the roof rack to pull herself up onto the window ledge, as we speed down the street. I recognize this as the poor man's version of standing up in a limo sun roof. She screams to the whole city of Shanghai, "I LOVE NON-CHILD-SAFETY WINDOWS!"

When we arrive at our destination, I claim to have a headache and slip away. As soon as I am separated from the group, a Chinese mother and child come running toward me, from out of nowhere. They look like they are wearing four or five sets of clothing on top of each other, each set grubby and torn. The mother pushes the child forward. She is about 3 or 4 years old. Her hands and face are blistered and red. She wants money. I have a 100 yuan note in my pocket, the equivalent of USD 20. I say "对不起": "*Dui bu qi*": "I'm sorry." We are in front of the Ritz Carlton and the sidewalk is tiled and pretty. I walk away quickly.

For a moment they stay back, then the child breaks away from her mother. She begins to run after me on her little legs, making the same plaintive request over and over. She gets close enough to touch. There is white crust around her eyes and her mouth.

I say what I always say. "我听不懂": "*Wo ting bu dong*": "I can't understand what you said."



I HAND IN THE STORY ABOUT THE BED LINEN DESIGNER, BUT STEVE SAYS it's just not up to standard. A few weeks later, I see the magazine on the stands. My article is in it, but with Steve's byline.

I call him every day. He picks up the first time, and the second time, but after that he gets smart. This doesn't stop me from calling. Sometimes my phone doesn't work—it turns out that picking up the phone and hearing a dial tone every time is a First World luxury. Initially I'd found this quaint, cute, but with two weeks left on my visa and any savings I had from old jobs and worried relatives long depleted, now I throw the phone across the room. Then I pick up the phone, and try again. It still doesn't work.

My mother arrives. It has been raining for days. The first night, she insists on sleeping on the couch, even though it has the consistency of an upholstered stack of cinder blocks. Tourist coaches send red and green light into the room as they trundle down my narrow street, passing a few inches from the window.

I am woken up by the sound of a persistent drip. I wonder if we left the tub tap running, but the sound is too close. Then it stops. When I wake up again, the drip is louder, and somehow denser. Its speed quickens dangerously. And then comes a hideous thump. I turn on the light. The couch sits in a pool of water. My dresser, my television, my photos on the wall, and my mother are all striped with plaster. A huge section of the ceiling, two feet in diameter, has crashed onto the floor.

The next day I book a ticket to Canada. Even I can take a hint.



ON MY LAST MORNING, FEI PUTS ME IN A CAB. BYE!, WE SAY, AS IF I AM just going for the weekend, which is how we always say goodbye. The jolly taxi driver races down the empty 5 a.m. highway, his over-the-speed-limit alarm beeping hysterically. From a distance the bridge to Pudong looks like an extraterrestrial vessel, alarming in size. The city dropping away behind us already seems irrevocably distant, and all of a sudden Shanghai becomes the furthest I could ever travel, because I know I will never return again. We cross the bridge, and I have an epiphany.

What that epiphany is will change, over the years and depending upon who's listening to the story. If it is my ex-boyfriend, who will meet me at the Toronto airport 20 hours later having broken up with that new girlfriend, the epiphany on the bridge will be that forgiveness can be a revolutionary act. If it is the second generation Asian writers group that I will join two years later, the epiphany on the bridge will be that I may be mixed but I am 100% Me—even if the words are too easy to be true. If it is my husband almost a decade later, the epiphany (described as coming after the bridge, or in retrospect) will be that youthful ideals can disappear so completely that it becomes a puzzle how you ever believed them, as if it was someone else altogether who did the believing, and this is both a blessing and a curse.

The epiphany is that there is no epiphany. All that there is, is the anticlimactic realization that seeps in every day I live in Shanghai, which is that the world is fundamentally unknowable, and what I don't know goes for a million miles. It is embarrassing how obvious this is, and how much simple, tears-in-the-throat relief this brings me. So I don't tell anyone.



FEI TOOK ME TO DONGJIADU CLOTH MARKET TO GET SOME CURTAINS made. The market seemed to go for at least a square mile under a rickety awning, stall after stall brimming with rolls of kaleidoscopic fabrics. I chose some butter yellow cotton mix. Later, Fei would become entirely fluent in Chinese. She would move back to Toronto and then to Beijing and then I would lose track of her completely. But on this day she haggled in wonky Mandarin to a short, rotund woman in a flowered pantsuit like my great-aunt wore. Then the woman led us deeper and deeper into the maze of textiles. When I was sure we were lost forever among chenille and jersey, she turned sharply and we were suddenly out of the market, crossing a parking lot, a road, and then going up a water-stained staircase that led into the sky. In an open-air corridor, she pointed to a tiny room, only big enough for bunk beds and a sewing machine. "I think she is going to make your curtains?" Fei suggested. In my ridiculous expat way, I thought, is this a sweatshop? Is this morally okay?

The woman brought out two pink plastic children's chairs and beamed at us. "I think she wants us to wait here?" Fei interpreted.

And so we sat in our winter coats with our knees up to our chins, and waited. Eventually, four or five young men in grey suits came moseying down the corridor. The men in Shanghai always wore suits, no matter the weather. They saw us crouched in the corner and instantly identified us as far-flung Chinese, foreigners. They began to nod their heads at us, delighted, and said over and over Howdoyoudo? Howdoyoudo?

It was the Chinese equivalent of those American tourists who cheerfully scream *NI HAO NI HAO* at every shopkeeper, waiter, and customs official in sight.

So we responded, how do *you* do, how do *you* do? And the men in suits seemed to get happier and happier. For a minute, I was right where I was supposed to be. ☀