

BRAIN FACTORY

PROLOGUE

I AWOKE TO THE HUM OF WHAT I GUESSED would have been a typical Beijing HuTong morning. Or maybe not. The night before was the commencement of the National Day Holiday, the most carefree of celebrations for the Chinese, one that promised to be a weekend replete with multitudes of revelers, pushing or shoving, or was it? Something they are singularly good at, no matter the venue.

I surveyed an unexpected bright patch of cerulean sky through the room's only window, which was high at street level, one and a half by two, covered with an overlay of steel mesh. Luminous mornings in northeastern China without a wisp of haze were extraordinarily rare. Blessed. Again. The twenty-four hours prior had started out with rain but ended its October parade in brilliant sun. A fitting salute to the grand holiday.

It was perhaps six a.m. after a restful sleep, an escape from the previous day's sensory onslaught. I lay on an austere futon-type mattress situated atop a wooden Swedish frame. The chilled porcelain floor was of an ordinary neutral hue, let's say *beige*. The unheated, shockingly overpriced rooms in the "upscale boutique hotel" should have been called "expensive Spartan accommodations, no heat, nor rugs, with a lucky private-but-basic shower and toilet, in an average hostel". This was off the main drag, located after weaving through half a dozen or so narrow alleys (none found on the general map) as I dragged my roomy wheeled leather briefcase turned into a suitcase, bumpity-bump over bricks that conveyed the impression of age with their mossy appearance, but weren't, as I would find out later.

Musty smells permeated the chamber as would be expected, perhaps the odor of old books or sheets. They weren't unwelcome, but something to be expected in HuTong — courtyard residences turned into some- what modern accommodations.

We'd arrived! Our first Beijing trip after six months of residence, despite living only a hundred miles away! Resplendent as twenty heavens, almost the United States on a sunny day.

Three long-earned days off. Glorious.

I turned back to the bed and contemplated my engineer husband Brian. He didn't agree with me, but he looked more than ten years younger with his hair tousled. He'd gone silver earlier than most. A thoroughly striking, tall and slender man, one who I called my (blankety-blank) hot cowboy, him being from New Mexico, and who the Chinese office girls nicknamed "new shwi shwi" (very handsome bull). The bull continued to sleep.

I heard the slow creak of a bike cart and the sounds of greetings. "Have you had your tea?" The cock-a-doodle-doo of a rooster. Linens being shaken. The innards were waking. A sweeper swept with the obligatory twigged broom. Lord knows it needed to be done after an evening of congested

streets, twelve-foot- wide, festooned with red lanterns strung in a zig-zag pattern gutter to gutter. Tossed cups, plastic plates, the patchy slop of discarded cooking oil and debris formed a magic carpet of sorts. How did the passageways handle water and refuse? How did the plumbing hold up on a normal day? Even the disgusting underbelly aroma of “stinky tofu” aptly labeled a cross between smelly feet and vomit, which interrupted a sightseer’s meanderings, suddenly seemed not so repulsive.

A mythic historic China clashed with the necessities and values of modernity. But no proliferation of skyscrapers could suppress the vein of ancient blood running deep, surging into the future, infused with the proud yesteryear.

A jewel. Mucked up. A band of small, close-set gems. The grime could easily be removed by an ammonia rinse and brush. Or a sonic cleansing.

The chasm between them and me narrowed.

Abruptly I’d made peace with the trauma of being back to back, side to side, face to face with the sea of humanity. My intolerance of auditory and olfactory stimulants, coupled with the crowds of the dark hours, dissipated. Why hadn’t I gotten there sooner? This amazing slice of exquisite history with courtyard homes hidden behind facades, concrete dragons on door lintels, and centuries-old roof tiles. An experience few ever had. One I hadn’t cared to have up to that point. That weekend, I received a first delicious taste. Present all along, I didn’t know, having become a hermit over the previous six months. I would not be kept down by the blister on my foot. I loved autumn. This was a new adventure. One that almost brought me back to my eighteen-year-old self. Not fragile, but bold. Not sad, but excited to live, to explore. Perhaps I might adapt and become flexible and stable.

“BRAIN FACTORY”. Yes, I observed through the wires. That’s what it said, the sign above the window. I hoped it wasn’t a literal translation, because if it was, I certainly didn’t want to be there.

Silly. Another benign phrase translated into Chinglish.

My thoughts went dark again, forgetting the extraordinary circumstances.

Yeah, I should have had my head examined for going to this shithole. That’s how some of Brian’s friends described the country. It wasn’t though. Not always. Only an apt expletive when describing a BCD (bad China day) that usually featured a low-hanging shroud of smog outside my fifteenth-story window back home. (At least that hole I lived in TEDA-TianJin, to the southeast, was a recently built fancy one.)

I had nothing by which to compare this Beijing. The true Beijing. I shouldn’t have been surprised, but there it was. A world-class city, despite its shortcomings.

Redolent HuTong, dirty alley and boutique hotel aside, Beijing had put on her radiant face, and she was a beauty.