

The Asian Heroine Who Seduced Me

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Excerpt from Section One

At the next rally, I looked for her in the audience but didn't spot her. To my surprise, I felt a keen disappointment that our mystery woman hadn't come. But I was wrong.

As I was stowing the microphone and speaker in our van, Coltrane interrupted me. "She asked me to photograph her," she exclaimed. "The mystery woman."

Startled by her approach, he naturally agreed to her request. She'd removed her sunglasses and hat, and stood so City Hall was the backdrop. Coltrane showed me the photos and I saw her face for the first time. She was attractive, not beautiful, and her smile was sincere but pensive. Her hair was tied in a ponytail and she wore a fetching sunflower-yellow sundress.

She'd given him two slips of paper, one with her email so he could send her the photos, and a sealed one for me. I glanced at the hand-written note and by instinct pocketed it before he could read it. "It just says she admires my work, blah-de-blah," I told him.

The note was more interesting than I let on.

"Would you be so kind as to meet me at The Black Cat tonight at 9? Please ask for Christine C."

If she was from Asia, she'd probably chosen a Western name to ease communication. The note sounded like a non-native speaker, but this was just a guess.

The awkward formal tone of her note was at odds with the sketchy nature of The Black Cat, an invitation-only club reputedly favored by the criminal element. It was the last place I would expect a fresh-faced young Asian woman would pick for a first date—and that's if she could get an invitation.

Her block letters were equally noteworthy, as each letter was more cursive than angular.

The meeting mixed anticipation and trepidation. Naturally I wanted to appear to be everything I'm not: good-looking, charming, erudite, impressive—but would settle for not looking like a fool. I was intensely curious how she would explain her interest in our lackluster rallies.

The venue was equally mixed. To experience such a mysterious club was definitely a draw, but being out of my depth was also on my mind. Fear is good in healthy doses. So is being ready to react.

My only paying job was night watchman for an eccentric property owner who'd inherited a marginal used-book store and the building that housed it. The bookstore remained marginal but the building was well-sited and valuable. I think he hired us not because he needed security but because he wanted to support what we were doing in our daytime lives.

My fellow watchman was a veteran, an interesting fellow for multiple reasons. His way of staying awake was martial arts training, which required my participation. He enjoyed teaching me by beating me in no-contact sparring, where he'd explain each move after he'd demonstrated it on me. Clearing away boxes of old encyclopedias, we set up a heavy punching bag in the basement and kept ourselves awake until we split sleeping shifts.

On our rounds we carried a length of stout bamboo—better than a knife or firearm, my partner said, and after a few months of training, I could see why. You can't undo pulling the trigger, he explained, and a knife or gun can be used against you. The bamboo length extended your range and was very quick and hard to defend against.

Was I a match for a trained fighter? Of course not. But I wasn't going to stand there and get punched in the face, either.

The watchman job was minimum pay, and so I shared a group house and kept minimal belongings and expenses. My wardrobe offered few choices. I decided on black jeans and a dark-gray designer-labeled jacket I'd picked up at a jumble sale. It had a few small moth holes but was presentable in a dark nightclub.

Wishful thinking is human nature, and I am not immune. I told myself to enjoy this meeting for what it is, a novelty. I fancy myself a realist. I'm not dangerous enough or successful enough to be attractive to women, and not willing to suffer the grinding wheel of online romance. In other words, I was alone.

My fellow watchman grumbled at my request to find a replacement, but the truth was it was not a job requiring two people other than to provide company.

The Black Cat entrance was down a dimly lit alley off Sleazy Sixth. Denizens of the district clustered at the entrance to accost passersby as they hurried their pace. The employee at the entrance was not oversized, but he looked capable. His suit looked good on him.

He sized me up. "I'm here at the invitation of Christine C.," I said. A hint of skepticism enlivened his impassive gaze, and he said, "Wait here."

A resident of the area shuffled past and mumbled, "Good evening, Officer," to my amusement. Did I really look like Vice Squad?

The trim bouncer emerged from the subdued interior and said, "Follow me, sir."

The "sir" was instructive.

The club combined the scents and sensibility of a Chinese restaurant with a wayward artist's touch and someone's notion of a British club: the front of the space was dark paneled walls and leather chairs, fronting a small stage where a suitably hirsute musician put his upright bass through its paces and a female guitarist with pink-tinged blond locks fiddled with the tone controls of her sunburst hollow-body electric guitar.

A large plaster sculpture of a female breast, a good meter high, took pride of place beside the stage. Strings of red paper lanterns adorned the space above the sculpture and the stage. A few inflated blowfish dangled above an aquarium on the other side of the stage.

The sculpture's prominent nipple looked well-worn from human caresses.

A coatroom and discreet bar occupied the corner opposite the stage. A waiter in a classic white jacket served the guests in the chairs. The chocolate-skinned female bartender was similarly uniformed.

A hidden kitchen served the premises, as hot oil and Ma-Po tofu scented the air.

The leather chairs were grouped to enable conversations. The chairs' occupants were mostly middle-aged men and women with an air of comfortably prosperous influence. If a criminal element was present, it was of the collusion type in which understandings were reached without being recorded.

Maybe the reputation and the seedy location were covers for more genteel forms of larceny, or maybe they gave the members an enjoyable sensation of slumming.

The bouncer led me through this lounge area to a space lined with large booths a step above the floor, each made private with red velvet curtains. Muted laughter and conversations were audible; it didn't take much to imagine various intimacies in the quiet booths.

Despite my pep talk about enjoying the novelty, my heartrate increased when the bouncer pulled the curtain aside and ushered me into a Japanese-style space with tatami mats, a low table and zabuton cushions for seating. Christine C. arose to greet me, and her smile was welcoming and free of the nervousness I felt.

She was not model-beautiful or beautifully made up, but beautiful for reasons that are more challenging to describe, the sort enhanced by what might otherwise be modest flaws: freckled cheeks, her mouth a bit too wide, slight dimples when she smiled. Her sun-burnished skin was smooth and healthy, her eyebrows were straight and fine, and her teak-colored eyes intelligent and quick. There's an attractiveness unique to mixed blood and she had it, perhaps a quarter of this and the rest of that.

For our first meeting she'd chosen to wear a plain black halter blouse that showed her figure and bare shoulders to good effect and a peasant-style skirt of multi-colored, mixed-texture fabrics. Her dark cascade of hair was pinned up in a chignon, revealing her graceful neck. Her smile revealed even white teeth. She had the glow of the well-off and an unself-conscious confidence. She was poised, slightly shy and visibly curious about me.

In other words, she was stunning.

And needless to say, out of my league.

"Thank you for accepting my invitation," she said as we shook hands. My hand looked huge and rough compared to hers. Her accent was the BBC-tinged standard of former British colonies and of private schools on the English model. Her voice was even and warm, like a note on the low string of a violin.

"It was a great surprise," I replied. Following her lead, I sat down, grateful for the flexibility won by my evenings of martial arts. She smiled and said, "I owe you an explanation. I'm here for a program at the university, and my parents have forbidden me from dating. They're afraid I might meet an American and not return home."

This clicked with her behavior at the rallies, and I asked, "You mean you're followed?"

The answer embarrassed her. "Yes."

"Do they monitor your email and phone?"

She nodded affirmatively. That explained the hand-written note. I said, "Your parents know you're attractive and are understandably fearful."

"Needlessly," she said, and her expression was hard to read.

"How did you choose this place, and get here undetected?"

Tilting her head playfully, she replied, "Girls have secrets."

"Is why you're at our rallies a secret, too?"

"That's why you're here," she said. "I'm interested in you and your work."

Surprised by this open admission, I said, "I'm honored, but you've seen the low attendance. Nobody's interested in our work."

"Then why do you do it?"

"Because it's important."

"Even if nobody cares?"

"Especially if nobody cares."

Her eyes widened and she gave me a dimpled smile. "Many people are idealistic until money is involved."

"I'm safe from temptation, as there's no money involved."

She opened her black clasp purse and removed a cashier's check drawn on a Swiss bank. The sum was about five times my annual income. The check was made out to me.

Who offers you this much money other than someone who has multiples of this amount? And who offers it in a first meeting? People offering large sums of money right off the bat have something other than your best interests in mind.

"It's not fake," she assured me. "You can deposit this tomorrow and see it's real."

I glanced at the check and had to smile. "And what's this for?"

"Suppose it was for giving up your work on inequality."

My incredulity must have been obvious. "Are we really this much of a threat?"

She shook her head. "It's not for your group, it's for you. Just you."

What was she getting out of this? Was this some sort of grand Dickensian gesture of alms to the poor, in which I touch my cap and promise eternal gratitude to my better?

My smile broadened. "Oh, I see. A test of my idealism." I slid the check back to her. "I'm not trying to be saint. I don't really have any use for this much money."

Nonplussed, she said, "Of course you do. Who wouldn't like a nice car, a vacation, maybe even a house?"

"More trouble than they're worth," I replied, and I was sincere. There was a time when I would have snatched the money with greedy gratitude, but now the burdens of possessions weighed heavily.

"This money is yours to spend, no strings attached."

The game was unexpected, and its purpose remained a mystery. "Some people don't believe in luck or coincidence. I don't believe in no strings attached money."

The white-jacketed waiter coughed to announce his presence and slid the curtain aside to deliver two glistening flutes of champagne. "Miss Christine, your champagne." As I took the proffered flutes, Christine thanked him as she slipped him a neatly folded bill, and he discreetly closed the curtain.

Whoever she was, Miss Christine had the respect of the staff.

I handed her one of the flutes, and our fingers touched. Neither of us moved, and something akin to an electrical current passed between us. "To Miss Christine's health," I said, raising my glass. "To no strings attached," she replied, and we each sipped the champagne. It was dry but not too dry. In other words, expensive.

"Let's say we only meet this once," she said. "Once you don't have to impress me with your idealism, wouldn't you take the money? Isn't it like finding a blank check on the sidewalk?"

Her urgency impressed me. Why was my refusal so unacceptable?

"All money has strings," I said. "I really don't want those attachments."

"Then you could spend it on your group," she insisted. "Buy better equipment, do more promotion."

I shook my head. "That's not how it works. The more you have, the less you do. The less you have, the more you do. Having all this money would destroy the group, not help it."

Her skepticism remained firm and I said, "Let's say this is all the money you have in the world, everything but next month's rent and food. Would you still offer it to me?"

Her eyes widened at this reversal and she had no response.

"You assume I'm a phony and as greedy as the next guy," I told her. "Fair enough. That describes most do-gooders. But I don't stand on a rock declaring my sainthood. I'd love success as much as anyone, but money isn't the success I want. It's a distraction."

Pouting, she said, "You may regret your pride later."

"You think that I'm not actually idealistic, I'm just prideful of looking idealistic."

She nodded. "It's possible, isn't it?"

"That could be," I acknowledged. "There's no way to prove idealism. Any gesture looks like pride."

She considered this, and I added, "If I tear up this check, you'd call it pride. If you want me to keep it in the hopes that I'll cash it and prove you're right, I'm a phony. If you think I'm just a phony Saint Francis, fine, I gain nothing by changing your mind. I didn't seek you out or ask for your approval."

I drained the champagne and said, "Thank you for the champagne and invitation."

She looked hurt and I said, "You're prideful, too, of your cynicism. You think everyone who isn't greedy and cynical is phony, but cynics are the ultimate phonies."

That stung, and her eyes flashed hot. I thought of a few more hurtful things to say but reckoned I'd done enough damage. After all, I could be a phony, someone good at being impassioned in public and greedy in private. So many were. I would probably think I was a phony, too.

Recovering, she said, "You don't like being challenged."

"What do the real phonies do? Protest the loudest and then have a good laugh in private after they've cashed the check?"

"Yes, they have a good laugh in private after they take the money," she said.

"And what would a saint do? Laugh the whole thing off? Do you know any saints we could put to the test? Give them this check and have them sleep with horny virgins?"

She didn't respond and I wanted to add, *I guess you only know phonies*, but that wasn't fair. I had no idea who she knew.

"I don't know any saints, either," I said. "I'm sorry, the whole topic is tiresome."

She looked worn as well. It was a poor showing by both of us.

Lifting her champagne glass, she poured half in my glass, as if her instinct was to share rather than waste.

Her gesture changed me, and I said, "I didn't mean to offend you. It was very kind of you to offer me a small fortune, no strings attached."

Sliding the check toward me, she said, "Would you please accept it as a gift? Maybe someday it will become useful, and you'll be glad you accepted it."

Put in terms of a gift and potential utility at a later date, I decided to accept. "Okay, I'll hold it uncashed." Folding the check, I placed it in my jacket pocket and raising my half-full champagne flute, I said, "A toast to your generous gift and the spirit behind it."

Her smile was wan, but she raised her glass and took a sip.

The faint sound of the upright bass seeped through the curtains, and we gazed awkwardly at one another.

"I've seen some of your life," she ventured. "Would you like to see some of mine?"

“Of course,” I said, and I hoped she sensed my sincerity. To lighten the conversation, I affected a conspiratorial tone. “Do you trust me with your secret?”

She replied in kind. “I already have.”

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