



Ho Lin

Ghost Wife

It started with the stray dog and the woman with the missing scalp. This was over fifteen years ago, when he was fresh in Beijing, back when he was pretending to be a journalist but preferred to think of himself as a *wanderer*, writing for the first in a succession of expat newsweeklies, content with the change of pace and the cheap beer. His photographer buddy had gotten word of a woman who had been attacked by a dog: *Dude, her skull was literally ripped off*. Perfect fodder for a piece he was writing about the wild dogs in the city, and the attendant health and safety risks. A favor in return for a paid lunch later, he was in her room at Haidian Hospital, at the corner of Zhongguancun Street. This was long before the Olympics, and Zhongguancun was a pretty two-lane road with a line of trees down the middle instead of the four-lane asphalt beast it is today.

He was prepared for gruesome: missing eyebrows, a cocoon of bandages, maybe. Instead he saw square little glasses perched under intact eyebrows, a full mahogany head of hair (dyed red two weeks before). Her English name was Mercedes -- like the car, she explained with great seriousness -- and once she learned his family was originally from Sichuan, she was happy to talk. Yes, a stray dog had attacked, and bitten her scalp clean off. She had to chase it for two blocks to get it back. After that she'd walked into the hospital, scalp in hand, calm as anything, and asked if someone could sew it back on. One of the nurses, probably thinking she was a ghost, had fainted dead on sight.

That would have been that, except Mercedes then asked him about post-1966 Beatles and Bob Dylan. Due to the Cultural Revolution, none of that stuff had made it out to China, so she'd completely missed out on Dylan going electric. Her question had to be a sign, because earlier that day he had been thinking of rewriting "Back in the USSR" as "Back in the PRC": *That Mao-Mao-Mao-Mao-Mao is always on my m-m-m-mind...* He was only a dabbler when it came to music, and yet as he explicated *Blonde on Blonde*, *The White Album* and *Abbey Road*, something clicked in place inside him. That was the thing about living somewhere else -- you get to be someone who isn't yourself, someone that maybe even someone else wants you to be, and like magic you become that someone.

Every time they met after that she would come up with an off-balance greeting. *I think I might move to a cave. I haven't done that yet. Or: I'd like to get a tan and get too dark, and see how people react to me.* It was as if she reserved the right to be silly with him. She had the Buddhist thing where she was certain she was being punished for a previous life. Father? Hit by an official's car when she was a kid, all but crippled, and in the messed-up way these

things can go, the local court ordered him to pay the official a huge fine. Her mom? Went crazy a while back, but the local asylums weren't fit for a wild dog, so she was confined to her bedroom at home, screaming and stomping all the time. And of course, living in a city where monitoring the smog was an international pastime, She had asthma. *A Mercedes with a bad engine*, she said. He told her he wasn't going to be scared off. He was happy to absorb some of her bad luck. Where did this sickly sweet gallantry come from? Damned if he knew.

She was a grad student, pinched and almost spindly, and she missed nothing. He learned to take notice, too: the smell of the city at night as they walked, all dizzying with gas and charcoal, or how Canto-pop songs would echo across Houhai Lake from the new beer bars on the other side. She had a habit of smacking her lips when she chewed gum, and before long he realized she got it from him. Sometimes he would tease her by suggesting she was after him for the green card. No, she was too principled for that. No marriage for her anyway. She was reading de Beauvoir and wanted to be everything, man and woman, selfish and unselfish. How can wanting to be everything be unselfish? he would counter. And back and forth they went. Once she asked him point-blank: *If you hate this country, why do you stay here?* He was tempted to bring up the F. Scott Fitzgerald line about two opposing ideas and being able to function, but decided against it, because then he'd be treated to her rant about how much she hated Daisy Buchanan.

On a late October night, just after the summer heat broke, they raided a party in the courtyard of the Friendship Hotel. It was an anniversary celebration of some important something or other, but the true nexus of the event was the buffet table, resplendent with plates of roast chicken, baguettes and other Western bounties. He had two plastic bags with

him, the filmy kind street vendors use to chuck items into, and when people were occupied with a dignitary's speech they both stuffed them with as much food as they could carry. Too much: within seconds her bag burst, and bits of jelly and baguette and chicken spilled. Laughing, they ran, morsels on the ground marking their progress like Hansel and Gretel.

They wandered through back alleys: a barber conducting his business on the street with just his scissors, a shaving knife and a foldout chair; a restaurant run by former ballet dancers who specialized in a tomato omelet. They had grown familiar with these people. In the beginning he was too cautious to interact, but Mercedes would always spare a smile and a wave, and soon they were all like neighbors, asking *How goes it* and giving them both significant looks, as if they were certain of what would happen in the future. Further down the road, just beyond Beijing University, was a wooden shack. The Moon Café, they called it. Old newspapers were pasted all over the walls, a clear fire hazard with all the cigarettes going on, but they were a decent conversation starter because he could find recent articles under his name. *My first piece -- a language lesson. That advice column "Ask Ayi"?* *We took turns on that. I did the one about proper etiquette when fighting over the dinner bill.*

Tipsy and cozy on the bar's picnic bench, she said: *Do you know about ghost brides?* She went on to explain: In previous centuries, rich families with sons who died early would sometimes recruit young women to marry the son posthumously, so he wouldn't be alone in the afterlife. The woman would stay with the family the rest of her life, but would want for nothing. Nobody did that anymore -- or almost no one, because a family had contacted her with a proposal.

You're joking, he said.

Not a bad idea. Maybe I sacrifice, and it helps my karma.

That's ridiculous. Even if I believe you, which I don't.

She sighed. You know China is so big that every story you hear must be true, somewhere?

Fine, it's true. You still have better options.

Maybe I don't. Maybe I'm not as smart or interesting as you think.

Then you're just a liar. A lying fox spirit.

Then why do you spend time with me?

He said, Funny, I was going to ask you the same thing.

She replied in Mandarin: It's nice to spend time with someone who isn't tragic. This city is fucking tragic. He didn't know where to take that so he just drank some more.

Three college students, a few hairs sprouting where beards should be, were squeezed in the corner table with guitars, noodling out Beatles songs. Pre-1966, of course. Too drunk to sit still, he approached them with three full beer bottles in hand: instant friendship. He gave a rushed tutorial on "Come Together," and soon they were blues-ing it up, the bar patrons entranced by this burst of English song into their lives. He sang and hammed it, throwing screwy faces in her direction even though the lopsided candles on the tables didn't provide enough light for him to see her. It didn't matter. He had intention. Intention was now behind everything he did. He could hear her singing too, in far better mimicry of John Lennon than he could ever manage.

Time compressed and eluded him after that. There was clapping, a lot of clanking beer bottles, and he and Mercedes were hailing a *miandi* mini-van taxi, even though they had no idea if it had a seat in back or not -- some of them didn't. Luck of the draw, this one had a flat bench, and they had to hold onto each other as the taxi bounced and bounded. Her head was on his shoulder, then his was on hers, and then their heads would bonk and they would let out an exaggerated, laughing *Oh!* To her apartment first, except it was no longer her neighborhood, because the world around them was aglow with Soviet-style skyscrapers and sodium streetlamps. They were downtown, at a hotel; she was pulling him in. Fine, okay. He had to order a room. Show the U.S. passport. They wouldn't allow a Chinese citizen and a foreigner to share a room, so he rented two rooms. Both right next to each other. Somehow she piloted him in, and he was remarking very loudly that the place was quiet. CNN International on the TV, bed smelling of mothballs. Her hand was at his chest, steadying him. Actually it had somehow gotten under his shirt and she was massaging him and they were both lying on the bed next to each other, her red hair tickling his chin.

How are you feeling? she asked him,

He said, *I'm all right.*

Then you need more beer, she said.

Later, he asked her what she was reading these days. Bukowski. Not good. He didn't know a thing about Bukowski. And now she was reciting: *We're all going to die, all of us, what a circus! That alone should make us love each other but it doesn't.*

Wanting to ask something else, he says instead, What about a trip to Beidaihe? No one there this time of year, no Commie cadres on holiday to worry about --

That's not possible, she said.

Why? You gonna be busy marrying a ghost?

She stared at him. Then she said, slowly: *What would you say if I am a liar? Maybe the wild dog story is not true. Maybe I cut off my own scalp.*

I wouldn't believe you.

Some things are true, even if you don't want to believe.

Don't you know? You are what I say you are. You are what you think you are. That's how it works.

That's nice. But I can't believe that. Her hand was back under his shirt, fingers spread, moving up and down.

The next thing he knew: it was morning, his head hollowed out. No sign of her. The bedsheets in the room next door had been ruffled a bit. He had a fugitive notion that she had kissed him during the night, more than once. The TV had been on, because he was used to going to sleep with a TV on, and he remembered she was complaining about it because she needed complete dark and absence of noise to sleep. This was all he could recall.

She didn't have a phone at her family's apartment, and she never revealed her exact address (*I don't want you to visit, my parents would never stop asking questions if you did*), although he knew which building it was. For a few days after the Moon Café he toyed with the impulse to stand outside for a whole day, awaiting the moment he would see the flash of that red hair from behind the swinging front door. It would be something out of a Broadway musical. He wanted to compose a song about her, just for her amusement. He hadn't done that for someone since junior high, and even then he had merely stolen a Crowded House song and

improvised some lyrics. A name like Mercedes though -- that was just rife with possibilities.

A week later he heard about the fire at her building. No consensus about how it started -- a few people he interviewed later said a kitchen cooking accident had escalated. Others heard it had been started by a crazy old woman. Some believed it was a crazy young woman. Hard to be certain in all the confusion, and no one had witnessed the start of the fire first-hand. By the time he arrived on the scene nothing was left save a few shriveled beams, a choking black cloud of smoke. No forwarding address, no message, no karmic sign. The police weren't going to be helpful, especially to a foreign reporter. Crazy person might have started it? Impossible. Chinese people aren't crazy. He could have told them, *In China, every story is true. Don't you know that?*

Years later, the back alleys are no more. The ballet dancer restaurant and the street barber have long since departed. Yet the Moon Café still stands. The stereo may play Katy Perry now, but otherwise a lazy summer night is the same as it was back then. Young expat journalists -- make that *wanderers* -- are joined by local girlfriends and pals, gnashing on approximations of pizza, Mandarin and English spoken all around and between. Once a week the veteran reporter, his hair wild and his goatee a bit too bushy, sits in the corner. The young'uns look upon him with a mix of awe and suspicion, for although he is pleasant enough he never initiates conversation. He prefers rum and Cokes over the watered-down local beers, and as he stares at his table, the same thought sometimes runs through all the young journalists' heads: *That's us if we stick around too long.* If they took the trouble to ask him what he was staring at he would indicate a tissue-thin shard of newspaper preserved under the tabletop laminate, housing a photo taken at random

by a fellow journo. The photo was taken some time after a friend had gone missing in a fire: a Chinese woman sits on train tracks just outside town amid crumpled cans and bags, composed and looking skyward as if awaiting instructions, chestnut hair drifting in the breeze. The reporter would tell you in all honesty that he is not sure if it is a woman or a spirit in the photo, awaiting a local train that will take her either to the afterlife or another story.

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