

Shanghai Nights

S. C. Gordon

It was mid-afternoon when the doorbell rang, in that idle hour after three o'clock, between the flurries of mealtimes, before the schools let out. I hadn't been expecting guests but often a student or friend would drop by after lunch to borrow a book or drink tea in the garden. I had a basement flat in a Georgian terrace off the Old Brompton Road; my little trellised yard made me a popular prospect in the summertime.

When I opened the door there was a young man standing at the bottom of the steps. He looked about twenty-five – old enough to be working but too clean-faced to have married yet. He wore a white shirt open at the collar, dust-red trousers, and beige deck shoes with messy leather laces. A lock of pale hair grazed his eyebrows.

“Good afternoon,” I said.

“Oh, good afternoon.”

His voice was proud but careful. From those three words I guessed his provenance: a good school, a boisterous family of brothers, a wealthy father and a nervous mother who was happier in the countryside.

“Pardon me for disturbing you,” he said. “But are you Miss Milne?”

“I am.”

“Miss Victoria Milne?”

“Vicky to my friends, although we aren’t yet, are we?”

The shift in my stance was proof of my impatience. It made him stand up straighter.

“I’m Ed,” he said.

“Hello, Ed.”

Such a blunt name, like a doorstep or a block of cheese.

“Ed Moreau,” he said.

My vision suddenly contracted like a zoom lens. “Oh, I see.”

He lowered his head a little, but not his gaze.

“I believe you knew my great-aunt Monica.”

It had been so long since I’d heard her name spoken aloud that for a moment I was speechless. I sensed more keenly the hum of the bees in the wisteria that grew around the door. I smelled the fug of distant traffic and felt the texture of the sun on the silk scarf I’d wrapped my hair in so I didn’t have to wash it.

And then I laughed. I laughed for the relief of it, of knowing I hadn’t imagined it after all; that there had, indeed, been a Monica Moreau who breathed and lived and walked the earth.

“I don’t mean to intrude —” Ed said. He looked concerned, as if he suspected I was senile from the tone of my laughter.

“No, no. I’m delighted you’re here. But how did you find me? That was all such a long time ago.”

He brightened, bolstered by my levity, freed from the initial risk embedded in his mission.

“We have a mutual friend – Dr. Pargeter,” he said.

“Sam, you mean?”

“Yes.”

Immediately this connected us in a way more tangible than Monica.

“And how is he?” I asked.

“He’s well,” Ed said, then paused, unsure whether to toe this path and deepen our amity, or to press on. “Shanghai came up in conversation. Daddy mentioned that his aunt had lived there in the 1930s. My great-aunt. Dr. Pargeter didn’t know her, but he gave us your name.”

“How kind of him. And you’re hoping I’ll – what? Tell you all about her?”

“Well, yes.” He gave an oddly unappealing little laugh. “You knew her, didn’t you?”

“I did,” I said, inclining my head with a wistfulness I thought would suit the moment.

“Yes, I did.”

“I’d like very much to hear about her,” Ed said. “If it wouldn’t trouble you.”

Already it was clear I fit the bill. So far I hadn’t disappointed him. With my gaudy turban, the cigarette in my hand, and what he could see of my home from the doorway – Chinese screens, dusty dried flowers in vases, legions of books on listing shelves – I was precisely what he’d expected from a friend of the long-lost black ewe of his clan.

I invited him in. When he passed me in the narrow porch the air turned with a mannish smell: cut grass, a slow game of cricket played earlier in the day, a faint reminder of the cologne he'd tapped onto his cheeks with flat palms in the bathroom mirror.

There was nothing of Monica in him at all. He was as pale and neat as a peeled boiled egg, where she had been all sultry brown and rangy – the trace of her Ceylonese grandmother, which had evidently been bred out before Ed's generation.

I tucked my cigarette into the nearest ashtray and led him into the kitchen. His pace slowed with mannered curiosity at the pictures on my walls, the cabinets and mirrors and coat stands – things I'd picked up along the way as the daughter of a diplomat. My father was dead now; he'd been gone ten years, but he was everywhere still, just as Monica was, several layers below.

“Tea?” I said.

“Please.”

“You're not sick of the stuff?”

“Pardon me? Oh – I see. No. No, I'm not sick of it.”

In his carefully controlled hesitancy I saw how he was when at ease – prone to laughter, amenable, with a sense of humour that wasn't quite sharp enough to be sarcastic.

“You're not in the family business, then?” I asked, pointing for him to sit down at the kitchen table while I laid the tea things out.

“I am, as it happens,” he said. “Although we’re a far more humble enterprise nowadays. Daddy has a boutique in Hampstead.”

“Is that so?” I said, faintly charmed. “A boutique. I had no clue. Although it’s not often I venture north.”

“What do you do?” Ed asked in a dinner party voice.

“Many things,” I said. “I teach the piano. I read books. Such a lot of them. And I have plenty of friends to pass the time with. It’s a boon to come from wealth, as you’ll know,” I said. “It means not having to strive particularly hard at any one thing. Here, look –”

I had lifted down a canary-yellow tea caddy from the back of a cupboard. It was darkened with rust at the corners.

Ed took it. It looked much smaller in his hands. He eyed it, confused, still digesting my musings on money. It discomfits some people to talk openly of it.

Moreau & Co.

1936

Traders in fine tea

China, India, Ceylon

“This is marvellous,” Ed said, holding it closer to his face. “I’ve never seen one in such good condition.”

“Keep it,” I said. “I have plenty of them. Put it in your shop window, for posterity.”

“I couldn’t possibly.”

He was holding it like a rare fossil.

“You must,” I said. “Or I’ll be mortally offended.”

“Thank you.” He smiled, cautious with the first inklings of having gained the measure of me. “Daddy will be delighted.”

“Your daddy is David’s son, am I right?”

“Yes. David was my grandfather. Did you know him?”

“Yes, I did.”

“I never met him. He died before I was born,” Ed said with the practiced regret of inherited grief. “What was he like?”

I wrestled for the right words, determined to remain truthful while affording this young man a hero’s memory of his grandsire.

“Strident,” I said finally.

I busied myself filling the kettle, remembering my hand on Monica’s dead hand at her bedside, then David’s hand coming down from my shoulder to rest on my arm, not in sympathy or comfort – no – but to unclasp Mo’s gold watch from my wrist and slide it into his pocket.

“And what was my great-aunt like?” Ed asked.

As he spoke I was caught unawares by a dismal tug at the back of my throat, like the warning tannoy beside the canal before the lock begins to fill. I ignored it. Four decades had passed since 1936. More. Four decades and four years. I could be frank without it setting me back. Nevertheless I lowered my voice.

“Ed, it is a very long story about a very short period of time, and I don’t wish to bore you, but I will tell you – and I hope this won’t strike you in any way as frightening or appalling – that everything you see here, everything about me, if you ever come to know me better, is a result of Momo.”

His eyebrows lifted in a dumb smile.

“Is that what you called her?”

I nodded, deflated at his refusal to thank me in some way for my candour.

“How funny,” he said. “I must remember to tell Daddy.”

“Yes, you must.”

I went to the stove so I wouldn’t have to watch him turning the canary-yellow caddy over in his hands, – *Moreau & Co. Traders in fine tea* – lolling in my kitchen chair, flushed with summer, happy to have this quaint nugget of family history to share at his dinner parties.

“It’s a pity she died so young,” he said at the end of a yawn.

I stared down at the tealeaves spinning in the pot and made a grim noise of agreement.

“How old was she, exactly, when she passed?”

“Forty,” I said.

“My... That’s no age, is it? Even back then. And how old was she when you met her?”

“Forty.”

I heard the feet of his chair touch the floor. He must have been leaning back.

“Gosh, then you barely knew her at all.”

I turned and placed the teapot down on the table with all the fortitude I could muster.

“I’d say it really isn’t up to you, Ed, to speculate like that.”

He shrugged his shoulders equably, childishly, and I wanted to shove the teapot into his lap for his unwillingness to see me as anything more than a cipher in his tepid investigations.

“I don’t suppose you have any pictures of her,” he said “Or any of her things?”

“Not much,” I said. “Your grandfather saw to it that her worldly goods were taken care of. And the rest of her.”

Ed sat up straighter.

“Oh – I’ve visited her grave.”

“Her grave?”

Even after all these years there were words I still found impossible to associate with Mo. *Her death. Her funeral. And now her grave.*

“Yes,” Ed said, happy that the tables were turned and he could offer me something.

“It’s just close to here, at the Brompton Cemetery.”

It was the worst and most alarming thing he could possibly have said – the fact of Mo’s bones lying just two streets away, when all this time I’d believed her to be on the other side of the world, in a damp corner of some treaty port columbarium. It was so desperately startling that it made me laugh. I shook with bright billows of black

glee. Ed joined in, hesitantly at first, then heartily. It was so uniquely morbid as to be delicious.

“Didn’t you know?” he said, keen for the moment to continue.

“I had no idea at all.”

“Then you must visit. We’ll go together sometime.”

He mistook my subsiding chuckles for assent. In fact I had no desire to see him again, or his father, or their boutique in Hampstead. At first it felt cruel to deprive them of a link to Mo, but I knew there would be no truth in it, in any case – in their idea of me as a mere passing acquaintance. I asked myself quickly if Mo would have held my reluctance against me. For all her bluster she’d possessed a charming sense of duty that made her love the folk she was supposed to, in spite of their flaws: her distant father, her venal brother and, it stood to reason, this pallid oaf of a great-nephew who was sitting in front of me. But as much as I tried, I couldn’t countenance the idea of involving myself any further than this. To make up for it I offered to play Ed some songs on my old gramophone – two of Momo’s favourites in particular.

“Yes, please,” he said cheerfully, as if I’d suggested a steak pie or some such – one of the deeply ordinary pleasures I assumed he enjoyed.

“They’re old Chinese songs,” I said, hauling the contraption out of the cupboard. Ed made only a lame show of helping, raising a lazy inch off his chair but sitting back down straight away.

“Listen first, then I’ll translate,” I said.

“You know Chinese?”

“Of course.”

I rummaged among the brittle record covers for the one I was looking for. It was close to the top of the pile; I listened to it every once in a while.

“I lived in many places in my youth,” I said. “It always struck me as the least I could do to learn their languages.”

“I speak French,” Ed offered.

“Yes, I’m sure you do.”

With the gramophone wound up I laid the record down and lowered the stylus. Then I sat to drink my tea while it played. It was a Zhou Xuan song, jumpy and bright below the scratchy overtones of age. Just one verse in and I was back at the cocktail bar at the Cathay Hotel, the memory of Momo’s hair pinned with two opal combs, the dull and brutal pull of love, just as strong as it always had been.

“That’s a fine tune,” Ed said when it finished. “Quite jolly.”

“Isn't it?”

“What’s it about?”

He caught my eye over the rim of his teacup and seemed to regret asking; I hadn’t changed my expression quickly enough.

“It goes like this,” I said. “It goes *Shanghai nights, Shanghai nights. Lift the lanterns to the music of the streetcars –*”

“How lovely.”

“*Let’s sing and dance.*”

Ed looked pleased with himself, as if he'd finally settled on a satisfying image of his great-aunt, singing, dancing among the lanterns in a tableau of the Orient.

I carried on. "*Let's pretend we're still happy and rich...*"

His face fell.

"Is that what it says?"

"Yes."

"Well, that's rather depressing."

"Is it?" I said. "Why?"

He glowered. "Pretending to be happy and rich."

"Is it really so bad to pretend?"

He had nothing to say to that. He surely thought I was senile now, if he hadn't before.

Dear boy, I thought. Just wait until life disappoints you so much that pretending is the cleanest option.

We listened to the second song in silence – a mournful Bai Guang dirge with a trudging bass and wailing clarinets.

The darkening of my mood became apparent to Ed as the verses drew on. He fidgeted, and drained his teacup as if pre-empting a swift egress just as soon as politeness permitted.

"You'll find this one even more depressing," I said.

"Yes – I'm not sure I like it."

“Your great-aunt did. She liked it very much. It was her favourite.”

Ed cleared his throat.

“I’ll tell you what the words mean,” I said. “That way you’ll know us both a little better.”

“There’s no need, really. I oughtn’t take up any more of your time. You’ve been very generous as it is.”

“But I insist.”

His cheeks had coloured. He was uncomfortable but I went on regardless.

“It means, more or less, this:” I held his gaze staunchly as I spoke, willing him to keep it, daring him to look away.

“I’m waiting for you to come back. I want you to come back.”

He blinked steadily.

“Waiting makes me happy. Waiting means I still love you after all.”

His jaw tightened.

“Beautiful, no?” I said. “Mo used to sing it to me, when we were to be apart. She went on trips, you see. To the plantations down at Yunnan. I sang it to her, as well. I still do, even. Still, sometimes.”

Ed moved as if to rise.

“No, there’s more,” I said. “Listen. It only grows more beautiful.”

His shoulders tensed but he obeyed.

“Until you come back there’ll be no springtime,” I recited. *“Only hot tears on my cheeks.”*

He gave a prim cough. “Miss Milne...”

“The original Chinese is lovely here,” I said. “‘Hot tears’ is *re lei*. Isn’t that wonderful? *Re lei*. So haunting.”

Ed stood up. “I really ought to be leaving. Thank you for your time. And for this.” He tucked the caddy under his arm. *Moreau & Co. Traders in fine tea.*

I didn’t stop him this time. I was listening to the last lines of the song as they faded.

The swallows have returned to the roof beam. Around the door, the flowers bloom to welcome you back.

The year I knew the Moreaus was the beginning of my life in earnest. I was twenty-one and new to Shanghai. Before, it had been one boarding school after another, the only difference being the view from the window – Nairobi, Bulawayo, Batavia, Lausanne.

I met Monica at an afternoon gala for expatriate wives. She wasn’t like the rest of the women in their pale gowns and neat hair. She was wearing black velvet dress that was all wrong for the season, and a grim look that proved she didn’t care, and had possibly selected it on purpose. I found myself standing beside her at the drinks trestle waiting for a fresh bowl of punch to be brought out.

“I oughtn’t really be here, you know,” she said in low tones. She was chewing something.

I glanced around to make sure she was, in fact, talking to me.

“No?”

“I’m not an expatriate wife, as such.” She took a peach stone from her mouth and cast her eyes about for somewhere to discard it. Almost without thinking I held my empty punch glass out. The wizened stone, whiskered with yellow flesh, toppled in with a muted thwack.

She grinned at me.

“Thank you,” she said. “You see, I’m actually –” She leaned to whisper in my ear.

“An expatriate mistress.”

“Oh...”

“At least, I was,” she said with a bitter little frown that was purely for show. “But that’s my expatriate’s actual wife over there in the awful gingham skirt. So, possibly I shouldn’t be here at all.”

“Nor should I,” I said. “If it’s only for wives. I’m an expatriate’s daughter.”

“Are you?”

“My father is the new vice-consul.”

“You poor thing. The diplomatic services are a bore, aren’t they? I’ll wager you haven’t spent more than two years in a single place.”

“Barely.”

“Well, not to worry. You’re of age now, I presume.”

“Yes. Twenty-one. Just.”

She beamed at me.

“Then you can go – or stay – where you please. How liberating.”

I had met a lot of people in my life but none like her. She glowed with something – a vibrant commonality that made her seem at once wholly foreign and altogether familiar. She was the nameless and ineffable thing I had always wanted to be.

Her family sold tea to China, she told me. “Would you believe? Just as the saying goes. We’re chancers, really. Mavericks.” And they – her father and her brother, both named David – were a thousand times more witty and germane than my own dour tribe.

As often happened in expatriate circles we grew close quickly. She took me on with seasoned alacrity. She’d had dear friends before, she said, but none quite as fetching as me. What she meant, in fact, was *willing*. I did her bidding. I gave her all time she asked me for, sitting with her in cafés and walking with her among the frost-paled rockeries in the park. I listened, clucking with feigned understanding, to her rages and gripes about her former lover – a tycoon whose name I’d heard – which formed the basis of our earliest discussions. On observing her consummate social poise at the gatherings she took me to (parties at the Cathay, soirees at the clubs, *to show you what Shanghai is like*) I began to perceive the darling weaknesses she hid so well from other people.

She went with her brother and father almost weekly to tea plantations outside the city, to Wujing and Hangzhou, and as far afield as Fujian. It was in her absences that I first became aware that my fondness for her was sprawling in an uncharted direction. It was hotly confusing at first, but soon I grew wise of how to manage it even as it grew. I kept my own counsel. The agony of it was preferable to the scorn I would inevitably face if I admitted it. For months and months, the whole of the winter and spring, I said

nothing when she took my hand or laid her head in my lap – the tender trappings of close friendship that I valued too desperately to forfeit.

At parties, if she wasn't by my side I watched her from across the room, following the line of her throat as she laughed in her typical wide-mouthed wonder at the world and all it offered.

With two decades more than me on her side, she schooled me on how to behave, what to do (*Whatever you choose, my dear. There's pleasure to be had in almost everything, if only you can weed it out*) and how to avoid the mistakes she had made – close calls with men she hadn't loved, falling too madly for people who weren't expecting it.

I was sure that in her words lay a prescribed certainty of our respective roles – she as the mentor and I as the ingénue. I accepted it, but as it happened, I was wrong.

One night in June we had left the French Club after a party. It was raining. The rain was a blizzard; the trees were full of it. We ran the two long blocks to the Moreau villa in our dripping finery, hand in hand. When we reached the gate she stopped short and turned. Out of step, I fell against her. She laughed and drew me in for our usual farewell embrace. But this time neither of us let go. Perhaps it was the wine we'd drunk, or the particular closeness of a whispered joke we'd shared. Whatever it was, it acted as a force that kept us face to face and blinking, both of us smiling a little ruefully at the fact of this never having happened before. When I kissed her the wetness of her mouth was different from the rain on her face. It brought a memory up unbidden, of a time in Kenya when I'd watched a bare-armed man slit the taut gullet of a goat, and its innards had spilled in a skein onto its sweating hide.

I wondered if she would be less ebullient, less relentlessly joyful, in bed. *If you are, I thought, I think I shall never love anyone else.*

I woke the next morning to white sunlight. The trees outside had been cleansed and made greener by the rain.

There came a knock at the door and David was there, a straw fedora in his hands.

“Aren’t you up yet?” he said. “We’re to leave for Kunming in an hour.”

He was talking to Mo but it was me he looked at. I held the bed sheet to my chin.

“Alright,” Mo muttered beside me, still mostly asleep. “Yes, alright.”

Before he stepped back into the hallway David eyed me darkly, sucked his teeth, and shook his head.

They were away for three weeks to oversee the harvest on the Moreau plantations in the south. There was a telephone at the hill station from which she called me every evening.

She caught malaria there. We didn’t know for a month or two after they returned. It crept up slowly, weakening her spirit and sending her to sweating purdah in the back bedroom.

To my surprise, David allowed me to take care of her.

“It’s only because she said she’d sooner die than be without you,” he muttered to me one night at her bedside above the sick rasp of her sleeping breath. “Although I wonder if sooner wouldn’t be better, for the bother of it all.”

She died and it became me for a while – a layer of carbon paper that sat between me and anything I did. It was absurd. I'd known her hardly at all and still it ruled me for many years. Too many years.

After Ed left I cleared the teacups from the table and went to sit in the garden for a while. I wanted to recalibrate, to remind myself that I had breathed unceasingly since then, and would unceasingly until at last I didn't, whenever the day came for it.

Living, it seemed, was the only thing that kept me living. It was comical, in its way, for its very surety.

I pulled the old gramophone out onto the filigree table and played the record again. I laughed to myself as the lyrics made true around me in the chatter of early summer.

The swallows had returned to the roof beam. Around the door, the flowers bloomed to welcome her back.