

Judith Caesar

Book of Changes

One would think that the only three Americans in a city of three million Chinese could at least be civil to each other. Indeed, one might even expect them to be friends. It was almost enough to make me agree with my Chinese colleagues about the deficient social instincts of Westerners. In fact, though, I think it was due to the particular type of social misfit attracted to teaching in China. I speak as one myself.

Linda and Joe, seated opposite me at the foreign experts' dining table, were nevertheless an improvement over Bob and Rich, last year's foreign teachers, who, two months into the school year, weren't speaking to one another or to me.

I didn't like Joe, but his wife Linda was pretty and had enough of a sense of humor to make her and Mr. Ma my only close friends there. At first, I restrained my dislike of Joe and found his cynicism mildly amusing, even though it was directed only at the Chinese. Then I learned that Linda had accepted the job in China as a way of getting away from Joe, but that he had decided to come with her and she had not objected, a lapse which she frequently rued. She hadn't actually told me much of this, but since I live in the other half of a thin-walled duplex and their weekly fights were of a certain volume, I learned more about their marital history than even I, nosy as I am, cared to know. My war with Joe began after the first fight I overheard, when I had the tactlessness, the next morning, to let my opinion of him show all over my face.

So there we all sat in the little cement block dining room that had all the charm of a lower-class laundromat but that was at least warm, not speaking to each other. Linda was a morning person and I could have been chatting

happily to her if Joe weren't there, but Joe, who was there and was not a morning person, would have interpreted any replies she might have made to me as treasonous. There was nothing to do but sit there and listen to the V.O.A. announcer on Joe's short wave defend the presence of the U. S. fleet in the Bay of Sidra. Since I had been in the Peace Corps in Libya in the 1960s, I viewed the situation differently in ways nobody really cared to hear about, although Linda did give me a look of some concern when I got up, slipped a boiled egg and some fried peanuts into my coat pocket, and left early for my office.

Walking made me feel better, but I was still absorbed in my thoughts when Mr. Ma whizzed by me on his bike, stopped, and waited for me to catch up.

"Good morning, Teacher John," he said. "Where are you going?" Actually, my name is Joan, but after the first couple of months I got tired of correcting people. When Linda wants to be funny she calls me Teacher John too. "To my office," I said.

He dismounted and walked his bicycle. "We will go together," he said. Mr. Ma is a frail little man in early middle age, and walking with him always makes me feel like an Amazon.

"You seem distressed, Miss John," he observed.

"I am concerned about political developments in my country," I said. For some reason, one can say things like that in China and not sound like a dolt. Mr. Ma was sympathetically silent. He too had frequently been concerned about political developments in his country, perhaps with more cause. We had talked about all of this, his political history and mine. In China, politics is almost as intimate as sex, since either can end you up in jail. Personal matters, however, are items for social chit-chat. When I first met Mr. Ma four years ago, one of the first questions he asked me was why I wasn't married. I, less frank than he, simply told him that I didn't think men were very nice, which he took to mean that none of them had been nice enough to propose to me. I left it at that. But Mr. Ma, over the years, had told me everything, or so I thought.

Mr. Ma was from the Huei People, the descendants of the Persian merchants who had followed the Silk Road into China during the eighth and ninth centuries. He looked Chinese to me, but evidently he didn't look Chinese to the Chinese. At any rate, eager to prove his patriotism, he had joined the Red Guards at the beginning of the Cultural Revolution. However, while he was a Red Guard, he had seen and heard things that had

disturbed him enough to require his reeducation for almost ten years. He might have been released sooner if he hadn't had relatives in Hong Kong. Now, his position in the department was somewhat ambiguous. The official line was that his English was very good, but that he was silly and muddle-headed. This was a way of dealing with the fact that most of the department distrusted him for having been a Red Guard, while the rest suspected him of Rightist tendencies. His position had been further compromised by the incident with the foreign teacher a few years back, a dreadful man who had written a scathing article about China as soon as he got home, little thinking that the quaint foreigners he had been living among might read the article and take retaliatory action against his informants. Mr. Ma was rumored to have been the source of much of the information, as indeed he was, as he candidly told me. What truly annoyed Mr. Ma was that the foreign traitor had left out the part about the massacre of Chinese Moslems in Yunan province. If he had mentioned it, Mr. Ma felt, the subsequent public criticism and disciplinary action would have been worthwhile. For an intelligent man who had seen so much, Mr. Ma had remarkably poor survival skills.

But perhaps I was not one to talk. After I came back from Libya in 1968, I went to grad school and then to Iran, where I taught quite happily until I suddenly found myself unemployed, and, when I returned to the United States, curiously unemployable. My colleagues and countrymen, shaky on recent Middle East history, didn't seem to realize that I had been working in those countries before Satan I and Satan II came to power. However, it wouldn't have made much difference anyway, given my lack of tact. When interviewers would ask me if I weren't happy to be away from all those crazy people, I was at first genuinely puzzled. I'd think of my polite, earnest students and mutter something about stereotypes and oversimplification. After the third or fourth time, I started remarking that I hadn't had the chance to watch very much American television while I was out of the country so I wasn't sure whom I was supposed to hate these days. Remarks like this are not conducive to employment in the United States, so I ended up in China.

But I wasn't sure I wanted to stay in China.

"Do you know anything about Korea?" I asked Mr. Ma.

"I think it is very much like here."

"I mean South Korea."

He thought it over, and then said, "I think it must be better than here, because we hear nothing but bad things about it. This is a sure sign that there is something good there that the government doesn't want us to know."

I said I wished my own countrymen would catch on to this ploy, but he was following his own thought and didn't pay any attention to me.

"You know," he went on, smiling slightly, "they had to stop showing the films here of the South Korean students being beaten by the police. They thought our people would say, 'Oh, look at that poor student being beaten by the police. What a terrible government they have there!' But instead they said, 'What a fashionable sweater is being worn by the student who is being beaten by the police! Why cannot I afford to dress so elegantly when I am being beaten?'"

We were now almost to the classroom building, and a few students turned their heads to try to catch what we were laughing about. Suddenly, he asked me if I were going to Hong Kong for the spring holiday. Actually, I had planned to go to Beijing and stay with my friend, but Mr. Ma wouldn't have asked this if there weren't something he wanted me to do for him.

"We can discuss it tonight," I said, which was an invitation for him to join me on my postprandial stroll around the campus. He didn't like to come to my flat, either because he thought it might be bugged or because he feared for my reputation. He would never specify. Therefore, our only opportunities to talk at length were during these walks, which created a situation appealing to my sense of irony. Despite the fact that Linda almost always accompanied me on these walks, the students nevertheless thought that Mr. Ma was courting me and that Linda's presence was a crafty attempt to conceal this. They found this extremely comic, given our ages and the differences in our heights and ethnicity. As far as I could make out, the dean regarded it in much the same light, a position he would not have taken if we were younger or if Mr. Ma had occupied a more prominent position.

Linda was ailing—bronchitis, I think,—but nevertheless agreed to go with me, to contribute to our aural noticeability, she said. "Besides," she added, "I sound like a seal barking. Someone might throw me a fish and add some protein to my diet." This was an apt remark, since we had just undergone one of the infamous tofu and cabbage repasts and had reached the point in the year when we were beginning to look as ill-nourished as our students and colleagues. Linda was going into a thing about the training of

seals in China—they didn't reward them with fish for doing their tricks, they sent them off to the countryside to be reeducated—I believe that was the core of it. It was mildly amusing, but I wasn't in the mood and didn't pay much attention.

We stopped by the sports grounds, where a group of weedy youths were kicking a soccer ball around in the fading light. I thought about Linda pining away like Camille and started to get angry.

"It's your fault you're sick all the time," I said. "It's because you give Joe all the vitamin pills."

"Good grief, Joan," she said with a sigh. "We're not going to get into this again. I know what's wrong with life." She told me once that she wished I would think of her life as a novel. Did I take Ursula aside and tell her how much happier she would be without Birkin? Did I tell Elizabeth Bennet to forget about Darcy and write novels instead?

But sometimes I was on the verge of losing my sense of humor about it all, which would have been a disaster, since there's nothing underneath but the mushiest sentimentality. Even sick, Linda still looked beautiful. Her pallor made her skin look almost translucent, pulled taut over those perfect bones, and the languor of her movements had an unselfconscious grace. If my life were a novel, it would be one of those Russian ones where the protagonist is torn between a spiritual affinity and an unrequited passion. You know, where he spends his days in prayer with the soulful maiden and then goes off in the night to throw diamonds at the feet of a gypsy dancer. Except that Linda would be extremely puzzled if I threw diamonds at her feet. Indeed, I suspect that she felt about me rather as I did about Mr. Ma, which gave it all a fiendish symmetry.

We were now joined by Mr. Ma, who leaned with us against the fence and gazed critically at the soccer players. "They are not skilful," he announced. I glanced at them myself and noted that he was right. I don't know what possessed them to go thundering around after a soccer ball, unless it were the hope of keeping warm.

We started walking, in part to restore the circulation to our hands and feet. Mr. Ma was nervous, and it took him two cigarettes to get down to what he wanted to say even though Linda stayed behind and pretended to be deaf.

"I believe teacher Linda knows that I have relatives in Hong Kong," he told me. "It is very important to me that you deliver this letter to my father's brother. It is in the nature of a debt."

"You want me to take some money to him," I said quickly. "Of course, I'd be glad to."

He hesitated and didn't look at me. Behind us, Linda was coughing. "It's not that kind of a debt," he said finally. He pulled an unsealed letter out of the inside pocket of his jacket. I looked at the address and saw it was to Reverend Ma of the Lutheran Church in Kowloon.

I took me a little while to process this, but I managed. I knew that Mr. Ma was not exactly a Moslem but not exactly not one either. The family had a *Qu'ran* which they had kept hidden all during the Cultural Revolution—no mean feat—but it was in Arabic or Persian (Mr. Ma didn't know which) and no one had been able to read it for several generations. Indeed, I couldn't read it either; it was in a squarish script—perhaps Indian or Southeast Asian—that most definitely wasn't Arabic script, whatever the language was. At any rate, Mr. Ma was some sort of monotheist, or he had become one as he got older, and knew garbled versions of some of the stories common to both the *Old Testament* and *The Qu'ran*—the sort of thing that had made the nineteenth-century missionaries think they'd found the lost kingdom of Prester John. So I wasn't exactly astonished to learn that one of Mr. Ma's relatives was a Christian minister.

We were now heading back toward the foreigners' compound, which was just as well, since I had just realized that Linda was lagging behind from exhaustion as much as from discretion. It was almost completely dark, and Mr. Ma lit another cigarette before turning off toward his house. I could see the end of it glowing like a firefly as he made his way down the alley. Linda was too tired to ask me any questions, and we walked back to the compound in silence.

I was soon on the train for Hong Kong with Linda and Joe, having acquired still more information I would have to forget if I were ever going to live contendedly among my countrymen. As for the travel arrangements, none of us was pleased, except perhaps Linda. I had tried to think of some way I could just give the letter to Linda and go off to Beijing as planned, but I couldn't. He wanted me to deliver the letter. Then I tried to leave on a different day. No luck. I had thought that I could at least get a different compartment, though. But no, not even that. Unused to foreign women travelling alone, the railway personnel had thought that the best way to preserve my privacy and my virtue was to put me in a compartment with a foreign married couple. My vigorous protestations brought only cheerful

rejoinders of "No bother, no bother." The conductoresses thought I was being exceptionally polite.

Joe did not. He greeted me with "What are you doing here?" despite the fact that he'd just seen me trying to explain to a swarm of women in blue and red uniforms that I would really be fine among the workers and farmers in "hard berth." Of course, Joe didn't know Chinese, so he may well have imagined that I had bullied my way into his compartment for the joy of spending the next thirty hours in his company.

I said nothing to disabuse him of this. Joe glared at me and then buried himself in the copy of *Gravity's Rainbow* that he carries around like a sacred text. Linda looked even sicker than usual and didn't want to talk much for fear of disturbing Joe. Her only topic of conversation, when she did speak, was that her ears hurt.

So I had little to do but brood about Mr. Ma's letter, which I had figured out was about the Yunan massacres. This brought back bitter memories for me and a sense of despair I thought I had gotten rid of a long time ago. I remembered coming back from Libya with stories about how Mussolini had massacred hundreds of thousands of Bedouins back in the 1920s and 1930s. I was somewhat naïve then, and I thought that mass murder was something the "free world" ultimately condemned. I hadn't realized yet that there were groups of people whose deaths were considered not even worth mentioning. Nobody believed me, anyway, because they looked up Libya in the encyclopedia and there wasn't any mention of the massacre. Even my friends thought that I must have gotten a little crazy, no doubt from living among such strange people. I had sat in adobe cottages listening to my students' grandmothers talking about what had happened to them, and then I came back and sat around in bars listening to people tell me I was liar. Finally, I decided to shut up about it and go and teach in Iran. I wouldn't say it was a turning point in my life—that's too melodramatic—but it was one of my changes.

To take my mind off these depressing things, I called the conductoress and ordered a bottle of Tsing-tao beer, which Linda and Joe eyed so covetously that I ordered a bottle for each of them too. It's amazing how an atmosphere can be transformed when you buy people a drink; I won't say that it became relaxed and expansive, but Joe did put down his book and make literary chit-chat with me, while Linda remarked that it had been scientifically proven that Chinese beer cured earaches. Outside the window, fields of winter wheat flashed by in the late afternoon sunlight, and it

seemed as if our trip were not going to be so horrible after all. And so it might have been if the topic hadn't shifted from literature to current events, or if Joe had not decided to share with me some newspaper clippings sent by a friend of his, all gleaned from *The New York Times* and all about the horribleness of Arabs. Now, I might give the impression of being a somewhat abrasive person, but in fact I generally prefer flight to confrontation. However, when one is in a compartment on a moving train, this is not a practical option. About ten minutes later, all the conductoresses were sticking their heads in the compartment to verify for themselves that the foreign barbarians had no self-control, even when they were educated. We rolled through the heart of China with Joe and I screaming at each other about whether *The New York Times* was a respectable newspaper or an instrument of hate propaganda, while Linda guzzled her beer and rubbed her ears.

I think it was Linda's crying that woke me up in the middle of the night. At least, I believe I heard her crying before I heard Joe yelling, "God damn it, will you stop that God damn whimpering so I can sleep?" I considered for a moment whether to ignore it or to remind them that there was a third party present, and then switched on the light, making Joe curse some more. Linda was sitting up on the bunk under me holding both ears and crying, and Joe was on the lower bunk opposite her with the quilt over his head, although this may have been a recent development, consequent to my turning on the light. I clambered down from my bunk and sat beside Linda. I had hoped that she was crying because she had suddenly realized that she was married to a jackass, but I had to admit that this didn't explain why she was holding her ears. It's not a usual gesture of despair, outside of Munch paintings. No, she was crying because she had a fever and her ears hurt and she was holding her ears because they were oozing a disgusting fluid.

I found the conductoress and explained to her that the Foreign Friend of China was very ill and needed a doctor. Then I resumed my protective arm around Linda and glared at Joe, who in turn glared at us, which certainly put him in the wrong. Imagine glaring like that at his poor sick wife and her devoted friend. The conductoress finally returned with a sleepy-looking kid I thought couldn't possibly be a doctor, until I reflected that no one had gotten any medical education during the Cultural Revolution and many of the doctor-age doctors had been killed. That left China's medical needs to be cared for by people who had been too old to bother with during the C. R. or who had begun their education after 1978. So this personage who looked

like a high school kid might indeed have been a doctor or, more likely, a medical student. He felt Linda's forehead, peered in her ears, and then attempted to communicate with me what was wrong.

As far as I could understand, she wasn't really seriously ill, but she needed antibiotics and the doctor didn't have any. If I could have found a way of reassuring Linda while scaring the hell out of Joe, I certainly would have employed it, but as it was I was forced to be truthful.

By the time we reached Hong Kong, Linda and I were the only ones still speaking to each other, but since she couldn't hear me unless I bellowed, this was something of a Phyrric victory.

I put off delivering Mr. Ma's letter until our last day in Hong Kong. I could say it was because I was busy taking care of Linda, but this wasn't really true. She was so mad at Joe that she stayed with me, and I did go with her to the out-patient clinic at the Seventh Day Adventist Hospital. But all she did was take her medicine, eat roomservice meals, and sleep, none of which required my supervision. When she started to recover her hearing, we did talk some about our independent or mutual professional futures. I talked about teaching in South Korea, she talked about staying on in China and letting Joe go back to the States by himself, and then I talked about staying on in China too. I talked casually, but my mind was spinning out fantasies which are not to the point here, but were far more pleasant than Mr. Ma's letter. To keep from scaring her off, I turned myself into such a model of cheery flippancy that I became tiresome even to myself. But the letter was there and I had no excuse. The reason I didn't look up Pastor Ma and give him the letter was that I didn't want to do it. I didn't want to think about it, or what was in it, because it hurt too much to think about it without drinking, and if I drank I would say things to Linda that would send her fleeing back to Joe. Of course, the situation was impossible and I knew it, but people aren't reasonable creatures. I opened the letter and looked at it, as I am sure Mr. Ma had anticipated, but half of the characters I had never seen before in my life and the only thing I could gather was that it was about Yunan, which I knew anyway.

The day we left Hong Kong was the day the United States bombed Libya. Nevertheless, I called Reverend Mr. Ma, made an appointment to meet him at four, and then, finding myself early, stopped in at the hotel bar down the street from the church. There I drank bloody Marys and assessed my life and the state of the world. Actually, the world inside the bar wasn't bad, except that the waitress stood by my table until I paid, which I

considered insultingly suspicious. On the other hand, my worn wool slacks and lumpy sweater, sensible by the standards of the People's Republic, did look rather shabby here. No one would be likely to mistake me for a capitalist running dog, which was apparently why the waitress wanted to make sure I had the price of a drink.

I got out Mr. Ma's letter, but I couldn't make any more sense out of it now than I had a few days ago. Still, I more or less knew the story. I knew that the Red Guards, of whom Mr. Ma had been one, had gone into Yunan to free the backward people of their superstition by tearing down their mosques, but the ungrateful Yunanese were so mired in feudal thinking that they had beaten up the Red Guards and chased them out of the villages with stones and farm implements. The Beijing government decided that these people needed to be taught a lesson, and the instructional method chosen was the time-honored pedagogical device of moving in with tanks and machine guns and killing everyone in sight.

I wondered what an elderly Hong Kongese clergyman would make of the story. I have always feared the clergy, possibly because they disapprove of the existence of people like me. For some reason, I pictured Reverend Ma wearing a long black gown and a funny-looking cap, a sort of combination Catholic priest and T'ang Dynasty courtier. It was only with a struggle that I replaced this image with something more sensible. What would he say? Would he care about his relatives in China at all? A few years ago, I'd looked up one of my student's Hong Kong aunts for her, only to hear the lady sigh and say, "What does she want this time?" I could imagine Reverend Ma having much the same reaction. Another image I had was of Reverend Ma studying the letter, looking at me over his bifocals, and announcing in a perplexed but shocked voice, "But these people were Mohammedans." I ordered another drink from the haughty waitress and contemplated the prospect of improving the morals of the human race. Who was going to give a damn about the deaths of people who had their poverty, their religion, and their race all against them?

The next thing I knew, I was ten minutes late and in no fit condition to meet clergy. I dashed across the street, put the envelope into the hands of an astonished elderly man whom I had at least ascertained was Mr. Ma's uncle, and dashed out again.

The soccer players had not become any more skilful, but the weather was a little warmer than when I had stood there just two weeks before. Across the soccer field, I could see Linda talking to Mr. Ma, or, to be accurate, since I didn't have my glasses on, I could see Linda's pink parka in conjunction with a little blue blur. We had only been back five hours, and Linda was staying with Joe again, so as not to scandalize the university with their marital problems. I did not want to tell Mr. Ma about my abrupt delivery of his letter, but on the other hand, I figured it was cowardly to hide from him and impractical too, since he would find me eventually. So I stood loitering and brooding and wishing Linda would finish describing the beauties of Hong Kong or the horrors of capitalism or whatever it was they were discussing at such length. I made another circuit around the foreigners' compound and tried to figure out how mad he was going to be at me and how long he would stay mad. Since Mr. Ma was much like me, I tried to figure out how mad I would be at me and how long it would take me to forgive me, and thus was somewhat reassured. No matter what he or she may have done, I've never been able to stay mad at someone who cares about me. Nevertheless, it was dark by the time he joined me and I was cold, cranky, tired, and ready to give up.

I didn't actually see him, in fact. I just heard his footsteps, beside me and then his voice.

"I'm sorry to have kept you waiting so long, Teacher John," he said quietly. "I wished to compose myself."

"Oh shit," I said. "Are you really that angry at me?"

"Angry at you?" he repeated, his voice puzzled and distant.

"I'm very sorry," I said.

I wished he would light a cigarette so I could see his face, but he didn't. I just heard his voice saying, "Teacher Linda told me that you didn't talk to my uncle because you were concerned that I would be disappointed with his response." This wasn't exactly true, but I let it go. Then he added, "She also told me that you had not read the letter, which explains much."

I apologized again, and this time it registered.

"Oh no, it wasn't you," he said quickly. "I should have known that my atonement could not be purchased so cheaply." He sighed. "And because of who you are, I forget how much there is that is not understood."

It began to fit into place even though I was trying to keep my mind blank. Not for what it revealed about him, but for what it revealed about me. I had thought I was so worldly-wise, yet I had never once asked myself how

Mr. Ma knew what he knew or why he needed so much to tell it. Of course, a Red Guard wouldn't have just been standing around watching. Yet, I had always imagined him as a witness, or even a person to whom stories were told. Someone like me.

"Your suffering will bring you forgiveness," I said, because I heard someone say it once.

"We can't be certain of that. But you will leave this place and my life will go on."

I didn't think through the implications of that at the time. I later realized that he was going through the same series of shocks that I was and I even had a sense of who I was to him, but I didn't think of that then. I just wondered why he thought I was leaving. It is strange that when you receive two shocks, one moral and universal, one personal and emotional, it is the second one that always takes precedence. Or at least it was so with me. When I asked him, he told me simply enough.

"Teacher Linda told me that she would go back to the United States with her husband, and you would go to South Korea."

Without my noticing, he had lit a cigarette, for I could see its glowing tip level with my shoulder and four feet away. It was eerie, like talking to some hovering spirit.

I didn't want to think about what I was to Linda, that she could do that to me. And I was lucky, because suddenly a memory came back to me as vividly as if it were happening right then.

I was boarding the plane from Tripoli to New York, and the flight was full of oil men headed home for R and R. A sunburnt Texan sat next to me and ordered a double bourbon for each of us while the plane was still on the ground.

As the plane took off, he clinked his glass against mine and said, "Well, honey, here's to getting shut of these sand niggers and back to someplace we can understand."

I wondered at the time what place the plane could possibly land that he and I could have the same understanding about anything. Smart alec college girl stuff, really. And then, as the plane started up, off across the desert of the most foreign place I had ever known, I suddenly felt that the plane could never land in a place any less foreign. I sat there with my drink in my hand and tried to make the idea grow smaller, the way the desert and the city beneath us were getting smaller. The memory came back like that one more time in my life, and that was when my plane left China.