

Eating Snake

There is a commotion in the pool. The kids shout at the attendant, who shouts back. The maid can't speak English and I can't speak Chinese, but she puts her hand on her head and flails her arms to suggest a drowning.

I light a cigarette when my husband calls to tell me he will be home in exactly one hour; we are dining out and I need to dress up.

Net curtains flower through the balcony doors of our apartment in the light breeze. October is pleasantly warm in southern China, even for a gweilo like me. Kids from the international school race across the swimming pool and jump into the arms of adults with towels. The maid flaps a duster and pretends to ignore the gin and tonic in my hand.

'Shirley?' I realise my husband is still talking to me. 'Are you there?' He tries again. 'Are you smoking?'

The line is bad and I pretend not to hear him. 'I'm outside. On the balcony. I'll wear the dress I got in Jakarta.'

'It's not that kinda place Shirley. And don't start drinking.'

Fraser and I met when he picked me up on a plane spearing its way to Kuala Lumpur from Malacca. Twenty-eight years ago tomorrow. He was thirty and I was an eighteen-year-old runaway. He wore a navy blue Italian suit, and sat twisting a gold ring on his finger. His skin was smooth and tanned, as though he had just been painted and polished. His cologne smelled so strongly of cinnamon and cloves, I could taste it. Whenever I looked out of the airplane window, I felt his eyes on me. He smiled as though we had met before and he thought he would never see

me again. We travelled the world, marrying the minute his divorce came through, in a registry office in Toronto, where Fraser is from.

The maid and I stare in silence from the balcony as an ambulance arrives and the limp body of a child is lifted from the pool. Water seeps from his trunks, oozes across the mosaic tiles and spills under a sun lounger. A crowd of European and American mothers gather. Young, scared looking Chinese attendants try to hold them back. The noise level rises. The maid chatters at me. Fraser is talking to someone else on another phone, telling them to book him a flight to Germany, tomorrow, before he's told me. Children are crying and being comforted by the mothers. The boy's head is turned to one side and his mouth open, as though still shouting for help; his skin already losing its sheen.

'Are you still there?' Fraser asks.

'You didn't tell me you were going to Germany.'

'It's not confirmed.'

'You just asked someone to book you a flight.'

'Well I can ask them to unbook it. I'm leaving soon. Wear the dress I got you in Nairobi.'

After we got married, back in the hotel, Fraser played a game: he made calls and did deals which altered share prices on the Bloomberg Channel depending on where he put his money. He did those deals with great confidence, but he looked at me like he wasn't sure whether or not he had me. Later that evening we strolled to a bar and ordered calamari and red wine. We got drunk, and Fraser flirted with the waitress as I stared at a line of ants crawling across the dirt floor.

The Chinese police arrive in grey uniforms with scarlet arm bands covered in gold writing. They shout at everyone and gather around the boy. The duty manager arrives and stands with the

police, away from his hotel staff. Men pour out of the ambulance and one kneels to pump the boy's chest. Water gushes from his mouth and down the side of his cheek.

As they get ready to pump again, a door crashes against the wall on the far side of the courtyard. A woman emerges, sees the crowd of mothers and begins to run. The police shout and wave their arms as she squeezes past them to the boy. The medics push down on his chest, mouth to mouth, push down, mouth to mouth.

After a minute they stop, stand back and shake their heads. A petal drifts down to the pool, lands and floats on the surface. The woman falls to her knees. I think about the beige trousers and blue shirt that she put on this morning when everything was different. She leans forward to rest her head on her son's chest and emits a low wail. It is a sound of unimaginable sadness: a glimpse of the raw pain that is only just beginning to open up inside her.

The duty manager glances up to our balcony and the maid darts inside. She is about my age with hair cut neatly under her ears. Mine is long, blonde and awkward. I wear it tied high on my head like my mother used to.

The maid shouts over, 'Bye, bye' to me and I say, 'Bye, bye' back. Fraser could have told her in Chinese to clean the fridge or not bother to give us new towels every day. It's not my forte. Fraser makes it look so easy.

I open the wardrobe and try to remember which is the dress from Nairobi.

An hour later I'm on the couch filing my nails when Fraser walks in. He's on the phone and closes the door, eyes fixed on the coffee table where he rests his briefcase and pulls off his tie.

'Jesus Christ,' he says coming off the call, checking his phone and unbuttoning his shirt. 'What the hell is going on down there?'

‘A child drowned. In the pool.’

His phone rings.

‘Klaus? What did they say? I knew it. I knew it. Don’t take their bullshit. I know. They try stuff like that all the time. It is *bullshit* I tell you.’

He walks into the bedroom, pinching the phone between his ear and his shoulder as he removes his cufflinks.

A breeze curls around my legs. I step out on the balcony for a cigarette. The pool is sealed with yellow tape and guarded by several Chinese police in uniforms that are too big for them. I suddenly feel the urge to rush down there and scatter orchids.

‘Are you ready?’ Fraser calls from inside.

‘Almost.’

‘We need to be at the restaurant at eight.’

‘Did you hear what I said?’ I raise my voice slightly.

‘I did. A child drowned in the pool. Jesus Christ, Shirl. What do you want me to do?’

‘I don’t know. Nothing.’

‘Who was it?’

‘No one we know. A kid. I couldn’t understand the maid. I wasn’t sure if she was trying to tell me another child drowned him.’

‘That’s disgusting.’

I tilt my head up to exhale smoke, then look down at the pool. ‘It’s sad.’

‘Alright. Sad *and* disgusting. Are you ready? We’ll wait for the car in the lobby.’

The reflection of the moon turns the swimming pool white, and I stand on the balcony for a few moments to watch it.

Fraser has a driver, a man around fifty with short spiky hair who opens the door for me. He can't speak English and Fraser doesn't have the patience to translate for me. A Chinese New Year charm dangles from his wing mirror. I can never remember which it is – the year of the rabbit, dog, monkey? Fraser chats to the driver, showing him his phone where he has the name of the restaurant written in Mandarin.

'What's he saying?' I ask.

'Oh the usual stuff. The traffic's bad, there's been an accident, like there is every evening.'

We zip in and out of traffic lanes, the claxon firing. Our driver has important cargo and other drivers should get out of his way.

'There, that wasn't too difficult was it?' I say.

'Well what do you think we're talking about? Where's a good massage parlour or what do you think of my wife?'

'Of course not.' I close my eyes and turn away from him. 'I just don't like it when I don't understand.'

My husband carries on talking to the driver as I stare out of the window, at the traffic on the Binhai Road, the McDonald's, Kentucky Fried Chicken, a Prada superstore, the nail parlours and the Chinese with their stalls selling bits of skewered meat fried in garlic.

Don is already at the table by the time we arrive, in one of the booths next to a Chinese girl who looks half his age. Maybe less. She is pretty and thin, her hair scraped into a doughnut bun, boobs barely covered by a pale halterneck dress, big silver hoops twisting at her ears. Don has

bought her a cocktail and she is drinking it through a straw as we approach. A waiter passes and I order a gin and tonic. The restaurant is low-lit with deep red, spongy seats and smooth white tables set with black napkins. I smell garlic, spring onions and spice; it mixes with Fraser's cologne and the taste of cigarettes in my mouth.

Don stands up and runs a hand down the front of his jacket. 'Shirley, you look fantastic.'

I lean over and he kisses me on the cheek. Fraser shakes his hand and we sit on the two seats opposite.

'This is Marina,' he says. 'Marina these are old friends of mine, Shirley and Fraser.'

The girl drops the straw and we all shake hands. From this gesture, the way she takes my hand, I assume she speaks only a little English. I wonder if Don picked her up on his way in from Hong Kong and how much he is paying her.

'Lighten up,' Fraser whispers from the corner of his mouth as the waiter delivers my gin and tonic and takes a drinks order for the others. I smile and straighten my back, push out my breasts. I imagine I'm driving a car, the top is down and the wind is beating my face, hot on my knees, my toes punching the pedals in high heels.

Fraser is telling Don about a restaurant he went to recently where they serve snake. The live reptiles slide over each other in glass tanks that line the walls so you can pick the one you want to eat. The girl makes a face at me.

'How long have you been living in Shenzhen?' she asks in good English.

'About five years. How about you?'

'I'm from here.'

'Wow. You're the first person I've met who's said that.'

She shrugs and stirs her cocktail. 'Now, since the developments, since Shenzhen was given special status, there's more opportunity. It's not so bad. Too hot in the summer.'

'Unbearable.'

Marina is a good name for her. I wonder where she got it.

'I like your dress,' she says.

'Thank you. I bought it in Madrid.' I massage my earlobe. Something about her makes me want to lie.

'Do you have children?'

I swirl the clear liquid in my glass, glowing white-blue, the green lime an electric slice of colour. 'No.'

'I think I'd like to be a mother some day.'

The waiter lays another gin and tonic in front of me as I reach for a cigarette.

'Do you have to?' Fraser snaps.

'Leave her,' Don says. 'It's fine.'

The girl checks her phone on her lap, under the table.

'A child died today,' I say, and Fraser bristles. 'In the pool at the apartments. He drowned.'

No one speaks, but Marina reaches out to me from across the table.

'I'm sorry, Shirley,' she says, and I actually think she means it. 'Are you OK?'

'She's fine,' Fraser cuts in, and grabs my gin and tonic. 'She's not supposed to be drinking.'

I snatch it back. 'There are lots of things we aren't supposed to be doing.'

I drag long on my cigarette, blowing smoke towards Don.

'Jesus Christ Shirley, what did I say?' Fraser spits. 'You're drunk.'

‘At least tomorrow I’ll be sober.’ I flash a grin at Marina who smiles shyly into her cocktail.

Fraser starts talking to Don about business as I crush my cigarette in a glass ashtray the waiter just put on the table. As Marina smiles at me, I see something flicker in her eyes or in the way she squeezes Don’s arm. I can’t be sure, but I think it’s pity. A tightness burns in my chest. I want to float above them; look down at the restaurant, the apartment block, the pool and the dead child.

Sometimes, when Fraser’s working late and I eat alone, I think that I would have liked the company of children. I think of them now, in this nondescript restaurant in China with Fraser’s friend and this woman I will never see again. My gaze falls on an orchid, on a low table at the back of the restaurant that used to get the sun.

©Rebecca Kemp