

# Youth In Asia

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When Mr. Shaughnessy, my seventh grade social studies teacher, talked about “euthanasia,” I thought about thousands of Chinese kids who didn’t have enough to eat, crowded on the streets of Peking (that’s what they called it then), walking around with no shoes. I remember seeing a picture of a little kid with a slit in his pants so he could go to the bathroom, right there, in the street. Kate laughed when I asked Mr. Shaughnessy why he was talking about youth in Asia. She said maybe I could try paying attention and maybe not miss so much school.

My embarrassment didn’t diminish the gravitational force I felt pulling me toward Kate, like Ms. Beverly—our science teacher who always wore a long, gold chain that ended up draped around one breast by the end of class—taught us about the moon and the tides. That was one of the days when I was paying attention, because I was amazed that the moon could have such a strong effect from so far away and keep pulling without getting any closer.

Some days I would take a chance and go over Kate’s house where she was almost always doing homework—her mother in the kitchen and her five siblings doing puzzles, running around in their underwear, watching TV, and everyone loud and happy. Kate would clear a space on her floor or on her bed for me to work if I wanted to, and sometimes I did and other times I sat there and looked at her CDs and books while she hummed quietly as she leaned over her math or LA notebook, her jaw-length straight brown hair falling in front of her face and her pencil making incessant scratching sounds. I tried to impress her with whatever I was reading at the time, and she would listen and nod and tell me I might be smart, but I still had to do my homework and show up in class more often; following her around like a puppy was not going to make me succeed in life. Then, she would laugh and shake her head, perhaps to take the sting out of her words.

I hoped that, just once, we would end up with so little space between us that we would

kiss. I hadn't quite worked out how I would do that, but I figured that the gravitational force would just take over and, like other natural things in the universe, it would just happen. The boldest declaration of affection that I ever made was the time I blurted out, without any obvious reason, that I would do anything for her; whatever she needed, she just had to ask. After I said that, she smiled and looked back down at her books.

The week before Kate went off to college, her parents threw her a party and, of course, I went, and it was then that I realized what I had known all along: that the gravitational field that had drawn me into her orbit was not going to bring us any closer. I stayed in town, starting what would be a lifetime of low-earning jobs, never quite believing everyone who said I was smart and should go to college. Instead, I walked the path laid out by my father, who declared college a waste of money, a glorified camp for pampered kids afraid of hard work.

In the four years she was in college, I saw her occasionally when she was in town to visit her parents. She would smile and wave, and sometimes she would stop and ask me how I was and say how nice it was to see me. Once, around Christmas time, about three years after she left, I saw her walking into her house with a tall young man, both dressed in sweaters with snowflakes and reindeer.

So, I was surprised when I picked up the phone one Saturday at a late morning hour to hear her voice, soft and measured, unlike the vibrant tone I had associated with Kate. Despite the strange cadence and tone, I knew it was her right away, maybe by the way she said my name. I could tell from the hollow, echoey clatter that she was far away, yet I found myself imagining her standing right there with me, as our younger selves, almost close enough to touch. She asked how I was, with no concession to the fifteen years or the miles that separated us. Then she told me that she was in China, working for a company that made ball-bearings, and asked if I had ever been, which was like asking me if I had ever been to the moon, which she must have known, because she just continued before I got a chance to respond. She said she'd like to see me, that she needed some help and thought of me. Did I remember when I told her I would do anything for her? She chuckled, at least it sounded like a chuckle coming through our tin can of a connection, and mentioned

something about the things we say when we're young. She was willing to fly me out there, if I had the time, and I could, of course, stay with her for a few days. I could see this as my "Youth in Asia" trip. I laughed with surprise that she would remember that moment, a moment I had held onto without the embarrassment I had felt at the time. I was between jobs and bored of the hamster wheel I perpetually seemed to be on, with no romantic prospects and not enough in savings for even a weekend at the beach, let alone a trip to China, so I consented and waited for the plane ticket to show up a few days later. I noticed that there was no return flight but figured that Kate would work that out since she couldn't expect me to stay in China forever. The destination on the ticket was Beijing, so I looked that up and learned that that was what they called Peking now and wondered why the Chinese decided to change the name and why the place down the street still served Peking Duck and Peking Ravioli.

When I arrived at Beijing airport, I was overwhelmed by what looked like thousands of faces and moving bodies, strange, high pitched chatter, shouting, and the hum of unseen machines. The air smelled of grease, sweat and earth. I looked for Kate, imagining her face as through one of those time-lapse photo montages that police sketch artists use to project what a missing person would look like years later. I turned myself in a half-circle until I saw my name written in large, black Sharpie letters on a white sign held by a middle-aged Chinese man dressed in black pants and white shirt, with his hair slicked back in a pompadour, Ronald Reagan style.

Kate was waiting outside her apartment building on the outskirts of the city. The years that we had not seen each other were certainly marked on her face, and on the slowness of her gait and the restrained way she kept her arms close to her body. The glimmer of excitement in her eyes when she saw me, however briefly it burned, allayed the unease I had felt in my stomach the entire flight. She apologized for not meeting me in person and said that she had come to hate cars and avoided them whenever possible. She loved looking at pictures of the old China, of about twenty years ago, when cars were scarce and everyone traveled by foot or by bicycle. Kate's apartment was in a concrete building painted faded green and orange, a now-stale bow toward modernization some time ago. We

entered a courtyard with a stone fountain, which held several-days-old rainwater, now a muckish gray, surrounded by an overgrowth of weeds and broad-leafed plantings, mostly bromeliads and zebra plants. Kate lived on the third floor, and I was happy enough to climb those stairs after sitting for twenty hours. The apartment walls were white-painted cinder blocks and reminded me of pictures I had seen of college dorm rooms. Kate had done what she could to brighten it up, with colorful rugs, throw pillows and bedspreads, but everything still ended in those walls. I put my things where she showed me and, not knowing what else to say, I picked up what looked like a silver and ivory antique that Kate told me was an ancient pistol, about 300 years old, which was used by traders on the Silk Road to protect themselves from smugglers. She said it still worked and, if I were interested, she could teach me to shoot it. I put it down and picked up another artifact while Kate went into the kitchen to prepare lunch.

We ate at a small, square table, with our heads nearly as close as they used to get sitting on Kate's bed doing homework. I noticed then the puffiness under her eyes and the way her eyes flitted from side to side rather than holding a steady gaze. She said she had to go to work in the morning, but she would leave me the keys and I was free to explore the area and the market nearby, just to be mindful of where I was going so I could find my way back. She helped me sort through the money I had exchanged at the airport before my departure, so I wouldn't be too confused if I wanted to buy something. She wrote down her address in Chinese in case I lost my way. I mentioned that she had said that she needed help with something and she said she was glad I had come and that she would tell me about it later; it was complicated, and she was tired. Kate told me that she got off work at four, but she wouldn't be home until five because she walked everywhere. She mainly asked about my life, about which there wasn't much to say, but she pressed me with enough questions that we did not get around to talking much about hers, except that ball-bearings were useful but boring. I managed to ask her about the young man she was with the last time I had seen her, and she blushed and a far-away look clouded over her eyes. She said that was a long story that didn't end well and that was for another day, after I had settled in.

The sun was already high in the sky when I awoke. There was a pot of tea on the stove,

and the table was set with rolls, cheese and fruit. A dog was barking in the distance, and I heard the squeals of children playing in the courtyard. On the table was a note, in the neat, rounded cursive that I remembered from childhood: "I'm glad you're here." I walked to the market. I don't know what I expected, but, at the sight of scores of people, from the very young to the very old, sitting in front of blankets spread out with fruits and vegetables, some unrecognizable, caged chickens, ducks and rabbits, household goods and carved statues, I stopped and stared, needing to absorb it before venturing in. I remembered that Kate liked omelets, so I bought some eggs, communicating with the merchant through hand gestures and smiles. When she came home, it was still light, and she said that she didn't mind walking more, so we set out for a nearby park. A breeze had kicked up, and Kate's loose-fitting brown pants billowed behind her, and she pulled the hood of her navy zippered sweatshirt over her head. The same intense inquisitiveness had remained with her since childhood, but I told her that there was not much else to say about my life besides it being boring and headed nowhere. She said that maybe boring and nowhere weren't so bad and we both became silent. We sat on a bench in the park, and Kate looked at me and asked, if I could do one good thing in my life, would that one thing make my whole life worthwhile, no matter how boring or how empty of consequence my life might seem? I said that I supposed it would depend on what that thing was.

As I brushed my teeth that evening, Kate tapped me on the shoulder. "Would you like to see the factory where I work? Not that it's really exciting, but, if you want, you could meet me there after work tomorrow."

"How far is it?" I asked.

"Not far, if you don't mind a little walking. It's in the same direction as the market, just a little further. After that, we could get a late dinner at a local noodle shop close by."

The night was warm, and I must have kicked off my blankets, as I woke suddenly, uncovered, to the sound of Kate gasping in the next room, like there wasn't enough air to force into her lungs. I got out of bed and opened Kate's door without knocking. She was sitting on the side of her bed inhaling deeply. She looked up and smiled and said it was just a bad dream.

When I awoke the next morning, there was another note on the table telling me that she was excited to see me later and would I pick up two medium-sized melons, of any variety, at the market on the way. She left some paper money and added not to worry about getting change.

Kate was waiting for me outside the factory. I arrived when the sun was low in the sky but generous enough to give us two more hours of light. She smiled, which made me realize that this was the first time she had done so since I had arrived. The factory was a gray, imposing building built by the Soviets in the '70s. It was so ugly that you would never want to look at it, and so solid that it could sit there forever. Kate brought me around the back where I saw the ever-familiar cracked concrete and weed assemblage. Scattered around the lot were rotting yellow and green melon rinds, seeds and multi-colored splatter. I noticed Kate watching me take it all in. She said, "I remember you were in Mr. Richardson's skeet shooting club." I stared at her blankly. "I used to sneak around the range some days and watch. You were pretty good." Kate took one of the melons out of my hand and set it on a large, flat rock, a rock which had evidently seen its share of melons. She reached into her shoulder bag and brought out the silver and ivory pistol I had seen when I arrived in her apartment. "Like I said, this still shoots."

"How do you get ammo for it, though?"

"The Chinese are really into preserving their culture. If something's antique, you can usually find a craftsman to repair or service it. What it needs is gunpowder and projectiles of a certain size, both of which are available."

"So, you come here...to shoot?"

Kate shrugged. "Not much else to do, I guess." She wrapped cellophane around the handle and handed me the gun. "Locked and loaded. Just hold it steady, it's not as stable as modern weapons." She pointed to the melon and nodded. I adjusted my stance, and Kate put her hand on my shoulder and said, "A little closer," as she applied light pressure, and I moved in a few feet. "That's good," she said. I fired a round and missed. I steeled myself against the recoil and fired a second round, hitting the melon near the top and shearing off some rind and some seeds.

“Not bad,” said Kate. “You need some practice.” She set up the second melon, looked at me and smiled a smile that failed to cover up the air of grim seriousness that had taken over her demeanor.

“This one’s a little bigger. It should be easier.” I looked at her and she nodded. My first round went through the center of the melon and the top flew off, scattering red gush several feet in all directions, some of it hitting me in the face and some staining my shirt and pants. “I guess you need to stand a bit further away,” she said.

By the time we walked to dinner, the air had cooled. We passed through the gray rubble around the factory and several squat houses on small lots, with chipped paint, each with a carefully tended flower bed out front. Some streets were paved, and some looked like you would surely pop a tire or bend an axle if you were foolish enough to drive a car over them. Kate walked with her hands in her pockets, not at the brisk pace with freely swinging arms that I remembered. I commented on this, and she asked me if I ever wished that I were young, not young like we are now, but young like when we knew each other. I said that I was never good at being young, but I guess it was no worse than it was now. She said she sort of envied me. I laughed. She said that I had not complicated my life too much. Sure, she knew I had adult responsibilities—work, bills and probably insurance—but most adults felt compelled to complicate things past the point that they could be controlled. I asked her if that was what it had been like for her. Kate sighed, put her hand on my arm, and led me into the restaurant. In the dim lighting, I could make out about five wooden tables covered in yellow cloth. The windows—square holes in the walls—let in the late day air and the chirping of the cicadas as dusk descended. The smell of garlic, ginger and chili oil filled the room. Kate led me to a table, then went up to a woman standing near the entrance and seemed to exchange some pleasantries.

“You know her?” I asked.

“Yeah, she owns the place. I come here fairly often. I don’t really like cooking for myself. She’s one of the few people I talk to, with the little Mandarin I know.”

“You don’t have any friends? Fellow Westerners?”

“Nah. I don’t bother. I don’t want to get into anything with anyone.”

“What does that mean?”

“Remember what I said about making my life too complicated?” Kate brushed some hair away from her face and put her hand on top of mine. “I can’t tell you how much I appreciate you coming. I didn’t know if you would. It’s been so long, and I haven’t been a good friend.”

I shifted in my seat. “Are you sick?” I asked.

“What do you mean?”

“I don’t mean to pry, but, last night, it sounded like you were struggling to breathe.”

Kate looked away. I became aware of other customers in the restaurant, men and women dressed in loose-fitting white button-down shirts, bending like reeds over their bowls, lifting noodles with chopsticks and slurping, without so much as one splatter onto their clothes.

“This is what I wanted to tell you, so all this would make sense,” she said. I started to speak, but she held her hand up to silence me.

“I have this dream, every night. Not the exact same dream, but pretty close. I’m somewhere—a car, under water, a small room, a basement—and the air, the air is gone, sucked out, and I can’t...I can’t breathe. I look around, but there’s no way out. I struggle...I try to inhale huge gobs of air, I suck and suck in, but my lungs won’t expand. My heart starts racing. That’s when I wake up, soaked, confused, not knowing where I am.”

Kate looked at me and held her gaze for the first time since I had arrived. She squeezed my hand tighter. “There’s more,” she said, and released my hand and leaned back in her chair as the owner brought over two warm bottles of cola. I took a sip while Kate ran her finger over the rim of the bottle. Then she reached over and touched my hand again.

“That young man, Seth,” she said. “We were in love. A great guy. He made me think all things were possible. I married him. A year later I was pregnant and had Michael.” Kate paused and covered her mouth. Her head turned like she was looking for something or someone in the room. She cleared her throat. “One day, one of Seth’s days to bring Michael to day care—he was three—before going to the hospital, to work, I was rushing to get to the mall to run an errand before heading off to work myself. I was in the car when



Seth came rushing out. He said there was an emergency and they needed all medical staff on board immediately. He said that I would have to take Michael and bring him to day care after the mall, on my way to work. He quickly put Michael's car seat in the back of my car and strapped Michael in. It all happened so fast. It was a hot day, early August, so hot I put the air conditioning in the car on full blast."

The cicadas were quiet now, and a mild breeze made the lanterns hanging from the ceiling sway slowly, keeping rhythm with the diners' delicate hand motions as they lowered their chopsticks and brought them up to their mouths. Kate lowered her head.

"I was thinking of all that I had to do—at the mall and at work that day. I forgot...I forgot that Michael was in the car...I forgot until I heard my car described over the PA system in the mall...the third time they announced it. Then...then I realized...oh God...oh God. I dropped my packages and ran out to the lot. The ambulance, the EMTs were all there. They had smashed the car window. Broken glass was all over. And I saw...I saw Michael on a stretcher...limp, pale. The EMTs looked at me. They asked me for my ID as they took Michael...took Michael to the hospital. They took me in another car but, by the time I got there...Michael...didn't make it."

Kate's lips were trembling. She was choking, gasping. Her cheeks were wet with tears and mucus. "I couldn't...I couldn't call Seth. How do you tell someone you just killed their baby?" She was swallowing air, huge gulps of air, as her throat constricted and her words expelled themselves in sharp bursts. Kate's shoulders shook and she squeezed my hand hard, as if trying to anchor herself to something that would pull her out of wherever she was. She bit her lower lip, trying to regain control.

"I...I," Kate breathed in suddenly, "couldn't stay. What do you do in that case? Everyone tried to act supportive, but how could they be? I got tired of sitting around with everyone watching me grieve, blaming me or pretending not to. So, I came here."

Kate released my hand and scratched the side of her face. "You were always a good friend. I wasn't deserving of your friendship. I knew how you felt about me." Kate's eyes met mine, then she looked away. "I'm sorry, I'm so, so sorry. You see, it would have been simple, too simple to wrap my brain around." I wanted to tell her that we could make a new

start. Together. But I knew that the idea was as hopeless as it was selfish.

“But that’s...that’s why I called you.” Kate paused and looked at the bowls of soup, which I hadn’t noticed being served, getting cold next to us.

“I...I have opium,” she said, looking past me, into the past or the future, I could not tell.

“Isn’t that illegal?”

Kate nodded. “The authorities are more concerned about their own people. They tend to leave foreigners alone. Anyway, I was doing it occasionally, and then it got to be a regular habit. It made me feel better, until it didn’t. No matter how much I did, it didn’t take away my anguish. Is that how I want to live? The same despair, every minute of every day, just at tolerable levels? Last month, I decided to do it, to take a lot, to go off and not come back. The problem is, I did come back. I must have developed a tolerance for it. So, this time...this time...I want to make sure I don’t come back.”

My mouth must have dropped open because Kate suddenly looked worried.

“You don’t have to try to talk me out of it. I just want you to help me. I knew you’d be merciful.” Kate smiled again, but it was the smile of catching something that once was, for a moment, something that had escaped and couldn’t be owned again. I had a rushing feeling in my head, like I had boarded a bus that was barreling down a highway, barreling to nowhere, a bus I couldn’t command but one I couldn’t get off of either.

“Please don’t fret. I’m at peace. It’s what I want...no, it’s what I need.”

“So, you want me...you want me to be with you, to...?”

“Hopefully, that will be all, and that will be so much. But—and here’s the hard part, the part I’d ask only of you—I want you to be there in case I do come out of it, in case I survive the massive dose I’m going to take tomorrow. I want you to make sure I don’t survive.”

“Tomorrow? I don’t know...I don’t think...Jesus, what are you asking?”

“I’ve bought your return ticket. I didn’t arrange it immediately because I didn’t know...I didn’t know, after meeting you, again, if I would just go ahead with it or if...or if I...you... needed more time. But...now...now I’m sure. Your flight leaves tomorrow night. A driver will pick you up outside. I’ll leave you the ticket, and a note with all the times. Tomorrow morning I’ll get up, take a shower, have breakfast with you. Maybe you can make me an

omelet; I'd like that. I'll take the opium. I'll fall asleep. My breath will slow. If all goes as it should, I'll stop breathing within a few hours, before it's time for you to leave."

"How can you just talk ab—"

"Please, let me finish. There's just a little more. If I start coming to, or if I'm still breathing a half hour before you leave...the gun...the antique...I loaded it with one bullet. That time of day, there's no one around. Just use it...on me...like the melons. Keep the cellophane on the handle so my fingerprints will be the only ones on it and just drop it on the floor next to me. You'll be gone before anyone discovers me."

For a long time, we didn't say anything. Kate couldn't bring herself to look at me, nor I at her. I stood and walked back and forth across the restaurant, rubbing my scalp, with my teeth aching from clenching them so tightly. I sat back down. "How can you ask this of me? I...I can't do this. Not to you...not to anybody!"

I must have been talking too loudly because Kate quickly looked around and put her hand on top of mine. "All those feelings you had for me, the promise that you would do anything...this makes it all real, doesn't it?"

"That was just something I said...I was a kid...in love with..." and my voice trailed off as I looked back up at Kate.

"And I am asking you this out of love. I am going to do this anyway and, if I survive it, I may suffer permanent damage to my brain and my body. Ending it will be the most merciful thing. I understand if you can't do this. Still, you came, and that means the world to me."

"I can help you, Kate. Come back with me and we'll get you help. You have so much to live for. Please!" Kate shook her head and seemed to look at the wall behind me, but her eyes were focused inward at whatever images were being projected on the inside of her skull. I could have kept trying to talk her out of it, but I knew then that my words would have only been squandered to put a salve on my helplessness.

"I have to do this," said Kate, now looking straight at me.

"I just don't know if I can," I replied.

The next morning was overcast; the world outside silent. The apartment had that

musty smell that bleeds through damp concrete—some combination of household chemicals and wet socks. The only sound was the sizzle of the frying pan as I cooked Kate an omelet. I watched her eat as the scent of fried eggs competed with the damp concrete, and she smiled in appreciation but didn't say much. With the knot that was in my stomach, I didn't much care for food and, although I tried to talk, I could tell from experience that Kate was in command and that any plea to reconsider would gently, but firmly, be deflected. Kate washed her dishes and disappeared into the bathroom. She came out, handed me the gun, hugged me really hard, and told me whatever I decided was ok and that, if I was looking for one good thing that I had done in my life, it was being here for her. Then she laid down on her couch and drifted off to wherever the opium took her.

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I didn't understand the meaning of "euthanasia" until years after I had finished high school. I hadn't really thought about it until I heard a news story about some guy helping really sick people end their lives. I guess the association with Kate, rather than any real hunger for knowledge, led me to read up on it. From what I remember, I don't think anyone had in mind firing a gun at close range at a friend as she comes out of an opium fog. So, I'm watching a woman who might have seen me as a friend she could trust, or just as someone she could use. But, I don't feel betrayed or angry. Just an overwhelming sadness—for Kate, for me, for what never was and probably never could be. My life has been like a river flowing nowhere. And this moment is when Kate's and my rivers converge. Maybe for good, maybe only to part again. I realize that I am a poor substitute for what she once had and what she once looked forward to in her life, but I did tell her that I would do anything for her, and what she needs now is someone to keep her alive. So, if she trusts me or if she's used me, it doesn't really matter, because this is my chance to do one good thing in my life, as Kate put it. When we left the restaurant yesterday, I told Kate to wait while I went back and thanked the owner. She spoke passable English, and I was able to get her to tell me how to contact the hospital emergency room on the pretense that I worry, and it would give me peace of mind just in case anything happened.

I hear the sirens getting closer. I just hope they're in time. □