

Ledge of Opportunity

I answered the doorbell on the second ring. “Joan?”

“You know me?” Joan’s penciled eyebrows arched.

“Yes. But I expected your husband.” I peered over her shoulder.

“Richard?” Joan straightened her dirt-encrusted skirt and inspected the run in her nylon.

“Dick and I go way back. I’m afraid *his* room is ready. Not yours.”

A chunk of plaster fell from Joan’s hair.

For the past three hundred years, as general manager of Almost There, I welcome weary and bewildered guests that arrive around the clock. I’ve seen musket wounds, severed limbs from swords, and victims of plane crashes. Each guest is granted twenty-four hours to unwind at the heavenly halfway house and hospitality center. If the end is unplanned or unexpected, and if they request, I fill in details of their earthly departures.

Joan’s pink painted toenails poked through the torn stocking of one shoeless foot.

I swung open the heavy oak door. “Where are my manners? Enter.”

A flurry of dried leaves followed in Joan’s wake. She scanned the foyer. “Where am I?”

I met Dick in Shanghai, China. My boss, G.R., summoned me to the hotel sauna as Dick wondered out loud, “Do humans roast at the same temperature as pork or poultry?”

That day we discussed Dick cooking his own goose. It wasn’t my place to encourage or discourage. After six months of dialogue, Dick settled on a plan he would carry out after his wife’s visit to Shanghai.

In the executive lounge I checked on Dick. After a short chat he shoed me away, his wife was due to arrive any minute from Connecticut. His office closed for the Chinese New Year, and Joan insisted she visit Dick in China during the break.

I hovered near the cheese tray. No need to hide. Only Dick could see me.

Dick gazed at the massive ships and ferryboats twenty-seven floors below on the Huangpu River. The lights sparkled on that famous stretch of waterfront.

“Richard!” Joan blasted his name like a foghorn.

“Joan. Dear. Welcome to Shanghai.” Dick pulled out a plush velvet chair.

“I can’t sit another minute. Thirteen wretched hours in a crowded plane.” She swiped her red lips across Dick’s forehead.

“Crowded in first class?” Dick patted her shoulder. “Did your chauffeured drive prove pleasant?”

“The driver hit every pothole in this filthy city. Why not hire a rickshaw?” Joan headed toward the buffet. “I’m starved.”

“Glad nothing’s changed,” Dick mumbled.

Joan adjusted her beaded purse and wandered toward the curried shrimp and rice. She opened every chafing dish before scooping several steaming mounds onto her plate. “Richard!”

Dick jumped.

She shouted across the room, “Curry or sweet and sour?”

“Neither.” He offered an apologetic smile to customers in the quiet room.

Joan returned with two full plates and placed one in front of her husband. “Oopsy. I forgot utensils.” She waddled back to the sideboard.

That's when I spied the screwdriver in Dick’s hand.

Joan's three chins danced as she wiggled into the armchair. "No forks. We have to use chopsticks."

"This *is* China after all." Dick eyed the window.

"Eat, Richard." Joan pulled the paper sleeve from her chopsticks.

"Not hungry."

"A diet of bamboo shoots and water chestnuts has turned you into a skeleton." She struggled to position the sticks between her fingers. They somersaulted to the floor.

"It's called the chopsticks diet." Dick attempted a rare chuckle.

She snatched her husband's unused chopsticks.

During our chats, Dick confessed to a wallet of maxed-out credit cards. He led his wife of thirty years to believe he was the CFO, not the assistant to the assistant manager, of Jones Financial. Shanghai was not a reward. Dick drew the short straw. With every conversation, he mentioned ending his life. I did not encourage or discourage.

"Don't laugh. I'm dying of hunger." Joan stabbed at her pile of sticky rice.

"You said you wanted to lose weight." A thin Chinese woman with a waist-length curtain of black hair passed their table. Joan's jealous streak forced Dick to look the other way.

For the past year, faithful Dick found himself in the land of exotic beauties. For a price, many performed favors for American businessmen. Tempted, but unable to break wedding vows, Dick shared with me a story by Winston Graham. A married man fell into an affair with a Japanese woman, contrary from his anemic wife. He described lovemaking as impulsively warm and welcoming. Had Joan ever truly welcomed him? His daily routine felt like heavy sedation, not always an unpleasant sensation. But certain days were like waking up during open-heart surgery.

“Retirement will be wonderful.” Joan speared the pointed end of her chopstick into a shrimp.

“We’ll be together. Every day.”

Under the table Dick fingered the screwdriver like a worry rock.

“Take a world cruise and buy that beach bungalow.” She dabbed sauce from her cleavage.

“And my diamond is due for an upgrade.”

Dick stowed the tool and took out his phone. He snapped a photo of Joan. Then he pointed the camera toward the window.

“Okay, silly. Take your little pictures while I peruse the dessert counter.”

When Joan extricated her plus-size bottom from the chair, Dick stood to get a better view of the city. Then he turned the screwdriver and pocketed the first of three screws.

Most large windows in towering hotels of China were screwed shut after distraught people tried to fly.

G.R. had confidence in my counseling skills. This meant taking on complicated cases that required patience and understanding. Dick’s decision to shed this mortal coil, as I mentioned before, was not for me to encourage or discourage. But he promised, not until after Joan’s visit.

“Richard!”

The second screw in the middle of the window popped out.

“Fruit? Truffles? Cake?” Joan held a pyramid of petit fours.

The crowd had thinned so Dick apologized to no one and shook his head. The third screw on the window frame was unreachable from the ground.

He lifted his leg to stand on the window seat when Joan waved a wedge of pungent durian fruit under his nose. “Take a whiff! Simply yummy!”

Dick grimaced. “All for you, my dear.”

Joan poked a chopstick into three squares and inserted the cake-kebab into her mouth. I admired Dick's wife for managing an entire meal with two uncooperative twigs.

"The place is empty. It's a shame to leave such luscious food." Joan returned to platters of pastries and tarts.

Tourists often stepped up onto the window seat to get the postcard perfect shot of the Shanghai skyline. Dick planted both feet on the ledge.

"Richard! Get down from there!"

Dick unscrewed the last screw with his left hand while he snapped photos with his right.

"Richard! You'll twist your ankle." Joan offered her chubby hand and wiggled her ringed fingers.

Dick shook his head. "One last photo of the ferry. Eat your cake." The screwdriver and three screws clinked in his coat pocket. He gave the window a gentle nudge.

Convenient for Dick's purposes, the window opened out. After a sucking sound, humid air billowed into the room.

Joan hoisted her short legs and joined Dick on the ledge. "I can do this too."

Dick's eyes darted over to me and then to Joan. "Do what?" His voice squeaked.

Joan pushed Dick to the side. "Take pretty pictures." She took the camera from her husband.

Dick gripped the window's handle. He looked toward the busy street that ran along the river.

In a matter of seconds Dick would achieve his goal. Intervention was not permitted. I left the lounge to prepare his room.

"Richard!"

I slipped a pair of cushioned cloth slippers under Joan's feet. "Care for a drink?"

Joan paced the marble floor as she examined a crushed and bruised cheek in her compact mirror. “Jasmine tea?” An embroidered handkerchief absorbed blood from a broken nose. The force of the fall embedded her beaded purse to her shoulder.

“Wouldn’t you prefer something stronger?” I pulled the crystal plug from a whiskey decanter. “After your ordeal.”

The compact snapped shut. “*My* ordeal? What about poor Richard?”

“Well, he’s still *there*.”

She twisted a tube of red lipstick and painted swollen lips. “Richard must be devastated without me.” Her reflection showed several missing teeth.

“I’ll check on him for you.” This went against protocol but I had a few choice words for Dick. “In the meantime, why don’t we watch the video?” A screen floated down from the ceiling. High-resolution images of the evening’s events crackled to life. Dick and Joan stood on the window seat, side by side.

“Dick’s firm warm hand pressed to my back aroused parts of my body I thought were dead.” Joan sighed. “I hoped we’d make love this evening.” Wind swirled through the room. Joan tugged on the hem of her skirt. “I should have worn slacks. And who knew I could scream so loud?” She sniffed.

I patted Joan’s dislocated shoulder.

“And that man on the fifteenth floor should keep his drapes shut.” Joan opened Almost There’s extensive dine-in menu. “Is it too late to order the Around the World sampler and the angel food cake?” Joan picked glass shards from her elbow. “No whipped cream. I’m on a diet.”

~ *Published Page and Spine* www.pagespineficshowcase.com

~ *Semi-finalist Royal Palm Literary Award*

