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YOU GET A LITTLE TOUGHER EVERY TIME, DON'T YOU?

Okay, here we go. 8-9-5, 9-9-3-1, and ring, ring goes the phone. Why am I doing this? I only put the ad in because Nick wouldn't do one by himself. Too many weirdos over the last year. Time to have a rest, time to sort out just what I want. Besides, nobody replies to "f/ship only." Or so I thought.

"Hello." Oh, shit, he's home.

"Hi. Can I speak to Michael, please?"

"This is Michael."

That's how it all began.

I'm trying to put more effort into my book right now. Delving deep into revolutionary China. Twenty years ago, there were plenty of serious Maoists around, but now all that seems further away than ever. Everyone striving to transform themselves after the revolution. Movies, novels, cartoon strips, newspaper articles, revolutionary songs. A pantheon of socialist heroes and revolutionary martyrs. Models for the masses to emulate. I'm surrounded by them, surrounding myself with them. "Strive to be like Comrade Lei Feng." "We must create New Socialist Man." No time for the pleasure zone. "Remember past bitterness." "Learn from experience." Yes, learn from experience. But what should I learn from mine?

"So, maybe we should get together for a coffee or something."

"Yeah. When are you free?"

"Let me go get my diary."

"Oh, a busy man!" I'm teasing him.

"Well, the end of the week would be good for me. How about Friday?"

"Fine."

"Your side of town or mine?"

"Your side. Let's have dinner." What am I doing? We could have coffee in the afternoon. We could meet somewhere neutral. But at least we're not meeting here. It took me forever to shake Simon.

When Nick rings, he wants to know if I've had any responses.

"Oh, no. F/ship only, you know. Nobody goes for that." Why am I lying? But Nick is all excited about some pharmacist.

"So, what do you think?"

"Huh?"

"He's got his own business. He says he can't stand the bars. He sounds really stable and together. I think there might be something there."

"I suppose so." Sounds like a closet case to me, but I guess Nick wants his heart to belong to daddy. I couldn't imagine anything worse myself.

"So, should I meet him or not?"

"You don't want to rush into anything."

We talked for over an hour, and it was only when I put the phone down that I remembered I meant to ask about "f/ship only". Nigel, his name was. I can't stand that name! I should have stopped right there. But then, what's in a name? And besides, how often do I meet a guy I can talk to for over an hour straight off? A guy who actually says interesting things? Although I cannot remember any of the interesting things he said right now.

"A Sincere Love and Selfless Devotion to the Party." Li Xia was sent to work in Japanese-occupied Shanghai as an underground radio operator in the forties. Pick-up points. Secret assignments. Relaying messages through the night. He was on a mission from Mao.

A girl from a textile mill was assigned to pose as his wife and provide him with cover. The archetypal proletarian heroine, she feels embarrassed at first. How can she share a home with a man she barely knows? But his dedication to his mission impresses her and their vital work draws them together. The Party approves their marriage application. A model relationship. Learn from Comrades Li Xia and He Lanfang. My

parents would approve. Mutual respect is the only basis for real fulfilment. Of course, Li Xia dies soon afterwards, leaving Lanfang a widow, but maybe that's fulfilment for some. At least there was no time for the magic to wear off. In China, they called him a revolutionary martyr. Everyone should learn from him.

All that stuff about Chinese history over dinner. Normally, I'd find it boring, but it's a long way from copy editing, and it makes a change from Madonna and doesn't that waiter have a cute bum. Work's a safe topic, I suppose. I like his slight nervousness. He won't look me in the eye.

"So, what does 'f/ship only' mean?"

Christ, we're barely in the door, barely got the coffee on.

"Oh, you know." I explain about Nick, and how I hadn't really expected any replies.

"I just wondered."

Well, at least he's not pushy. And he's cute. Tall, elegant. But I don't know if I really want to get into something with an academic. In fact, I don't know if I want to get into anything at all.

"I like to get to know people," I continue while he pours the coffee. "I don't believe in rushing into things. After all, it takes time to figure out where things are going. And besides, we all need friends, don't we?"

"Sure we do."

I even start telling him about Darryl. I swore I wouldn't do that! It's been over a year now. But, still, we do stay in touch, and I prefer to be honest.

"What about you, Michael?"

"Well, I was involved with someone two years ago, but we're not in touch anymore." He's embarrassed. "In fact, it ended really badly. I guess I didn't want him to go."

I can sympathise with that.

In 1927 Rou Shi wrote a novel called *February* about a young teacher who comes to a small town. He has determined that education is

the way to save China from its backwardness. The headmaster's daughter thinks he's the best thing she's ever seen. Someone she can talk to at last. Someone really inspiring and admirable. She hangs out in his room, reading all the journals he has brought with him; journals with uplifting titles like *New China* and *New Youth*.

The teacher helps a poor widow in the village, but gossip begins to spread. In China, widows are supposed to remain chaste to their dead husbands. Nobody wants anything to do with the widow, and she becomes destitute. The headmaster tells him to stay away from her. The headmaster's daughter admires his selfless dedication. She determines to become a teacher, too. They play Chopin together deep into the night. He tells her he has made his mind up what to do. Her heart misses a beat. But he tells her he will marry the widow to save her from poverty.

I should have been able to see the signals. I mean, "f/ship only." It was there right from the start. But somehow he wasn't playing it that way. After all, why tell me about his ex and the guy who ran away as soon as he got close and wouldn't even tell him why when he tried to phone? And why keep describing his type to me, especially when, on a dark night without his glasses, I sort of fit the bill?

We moaned about the scene together, and how badly people treat each other. Were we trying to include ourselves out? And then there were the little remarks, they're the things I remember now.

"I'm a very sexual person." Oh, yeah?

"Sit over here. I won't bite, you know." But I might.

"You don't look like you're thirty. You could pass for nineteen, you know."

"In your dreams," I said, and we both laughed.

We didn't do anything last week, but now it's dinner at his place. Why his place again? Normally, I like to play on my own territory. But I'm telling him about the guy I was on with a couple of months ago again, and there's no time to think anything through.

"He was the only person I've got serious about since Darryl. But suddenly he stopped seeing me. He hung up on me when I tried to call him. I really don't know what happened."

"That must have been difficult."

“Well, that’s the gay scene for you. It’s a tough, youth-oriented culture. You never have time to talk, you never have time to get to know people.” Michael and I must have talked for twenty-four hours already, but I’m still not sure if I’m really getting to know him, or why I would want to. Now he’s saying he likes to know where he stands.

“I can pretty much tell whether someone could be a friend only or whether I might want to go to bed with them as soon as I meet them.” I think I know what that means.

And, sure enough, even though I’ve only had one glass of wine because, as I explained straight off, I’m driving home, I’m taking my glasses off and I’m in his arms. We could all do with a little fun.

I was all over him in no time at all, nibbling his ear, kissing him hard.

“I’m not the greatest kisser,” he mumbled.

“Don’t you want me to kiss you?”

“Oh, no, it’s fine.”

I wanted to make him feel good. His nipples were hard, like two brown rubber buttons, and I was moving fast. Old patterns repeating themselves. In retrospect, I realise I was doing what I always did with Joey all those years ago.

“I thought you hadn’t done this for a long time?”

“It’s like riding a bicycle,” I said, coming up for air. “You never forget.”

It had been a while, and he felt good. Warm, smooth and hard. Comforting, almost familiar. I was away, but after a while, I suddenly realised he wasn’t reaching for my cock anymore, he was just lying there. He wasn’t pulling away, but it didn’t feel right, so I rolled off him.

“What is it, Nigel?”

“I don’t know.” And, after a pause, “Do you want me to pull you off?” He almost forced the words out.

“Don’t be silly. If you don’t want to do it, we won’t.” It was a relief actually. All that stuff about how sexual he was had made me feel I had to perform. All I wanted was to hold him now, to make him feel safe and secure, but he’d turned towards the wall, and curled up a little.

“I was thinking of Mark.”

“Who?”

“The guy who put the phone down on me. And Darryl. We still do it sometimes, you know. But we’re not lovers anymore.”

“I came on too strong, didn’t I?”

“I didn’t expect you to be so affectionate.” You’d think I’d told him I wanted to have his baby.

I can’t think of any scenes from the lives of Chinese revolutionary martyrs and models for the masses to go with this. In fact, I can’t think of any bed scenes at all. Or even of scenes where people kiss. But they must have done, mustn’t they? Or didn’t they need it? Did they have twelve-step programs to cure sex addiction back then?

When he left the next morning, I felt as bad as when Joe walked out on me. Why can’t I control those feelings? Why did I have to scare him off?

Every time the phone rings, I’m scared it’s going to be him. He said he wouldn’t call, and he seemed really definite about it, but I’m worried. I don’t want another situation like Simon.

“Hello.” Shit, it’s him.

“Hello, Nigel. I know I said I wouldn’t call,” he sounds a bit choked, and the sentences are all broken up. Just what I don’t need. “But I guess I got to thinking and I realised that maybe you were right. We all do need friends. And I think the fire’s out now. I was wondering, I was wondering whether we might get together for a coffee, or go see a movie.”

“Oh, well, I don’t know.” Shit, I really don’t want this to be happening. “I think you were right. Friends and lovers are two different things, and it’s best to keep it that way. Besides,” I say before he can say anything else, “we really don’t have that much in common. We lead very different lives. I mean, I can’t see myself going for a jog with you in the morning.”

“That’s true,” he tries to take it lightly, “but I thought we got on pretty well really. I mean, we talked for hours. We felt the same way about so many things. We both like David Leavitt novels.” For once, he’s running out of words. Who’s he kidding? Why is he doing this to me?

“Every gay man I know likes David Leavitt novels, Michael.” We go on around the bushes for a few more minutes, and I resist the temptation to tell him he was a disappointment with his clothes off.

“I’m really sorry you feel that way, Nigel.”

“Well, at least we’re talking about it. I didn’t get that opportunity with Mark, you know. But I do think I understand how he felt a little more now. I guess I was a little naive before, or maybe it’s because I always try to be nice. But sometimes there’s no point, and there’s no way of being nice about it. That’s the way the gay scene is. Easy come, easy go. It’s youth-oriented and obsessed with looks. But, hey, you get a little tougher every time, don’t you?”

I haven’t told anyone about Michael. Not even Nick. I think he’d tell me I was a fool because I shouldn’t let him go. But the only stupid thing I did was to put the ad in in the first place. Still, I learnt something about how I feel, and I realise I don’t want anything like that right now. I didn’t want him to phone, but I got a few things off my chest in the end. And I feel better now.

In the 1965 film, *Two Stage Sisters*, Chunhua and Yuehong are opera singers in the bad old days before the revolution. They grow up together on the road, one of them singing the male roles, the other the female ones, and both of them avoiding the lecherous intentions of the local gentry. As the song on the soundtrack says, they are like two vines that have twined together as they grow.

However, when success takes them to Shanghai, Yuehong is tempted by money and marries their manager. The two sisters have a terrible fight and split up. Years later, after the revolution, Chunhua has become a famous revolutionary opera singer with her own troupe. She sets out to find Yuehong again, and when she does, they have a tearful reunion.

The final scene in the film shows the two sisters together on a boat, cheek to cheek, gazing fervently off-screen into the middle distance. Yuehong says they will never be parted again.

“Yes,” says Chunhua. “From now on, we will devote our lives to singing for the revolution and ceaselessly remoulding ourselves.” Yes, but into what?