

Flesh

It is flesh that remembers the longest. The nose is hopelessly, even dramatically forgetful, left the following day with only a faint trace to work with, nothing but an errant particle perhaps, as if whatever it was poking around for, at first apparently engraved for posterity, had never existed in the first place. Nor are the taste buds terribly reliable either, being in constant need of reminders. Eyes and ears are admittedly capable of a certain measure of independent function and possessed of a degree of recollective power, with their own more or less functional reality that requires no constant outside reinforcement. Still, both of them, and particularly the eye, tend to portray themselves as having no equals, no rivals in the realm of memory, even of sensation itself, and our thoughtless world is duped into accepting this in full, unquestioning belief. But the flesh is silent, and will always win out in the end.

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As the two of them entered the place, it was obvious they were at cross purposes. The petite, fragile young woman would have rather been snuggling up to the man, who had on a leather jacket with a suit underneath. Her eyes, her every movement, and the way she pulled her jacket collar up around her neck against the cold – all were pleas that everything remain as is was, that they stay together whatever the arrangement. You've got to understand, said the man in the voice of one sweeping a shamefully poor business proposition off the table, it's over, and that's that. He already has another woman. And you, he said to the girl, shouldn't go imagining some kind of Hollywood love story. They'd had a few good screws, sure, even a few really good ones, the rare kind where you are lying there practically in a coma for hours afterward, as if every form of life had been pumped out and all that was left of you was a messy pile of buzzing molecules that took a while to reconstitute themselves into skin, then flesh under the skin, then flesh turning into a person, but to go around imagining all sorts of things just because of that, to think she wanted a child from him, to keep a child that happened to get lodged in her, and start a family and live happily ever after until they kicked off, no, he wasn't going to get suckered into that at 30 and have all his buddies at the office snickering at him. But looking at the girl you could see that without this she had nothing at all, that without the man, she wouldn't exist. Evening was coming on, and, under the yellowish pool of light shed by a streetlamp, she informed him of this. In the feeble light she only looked more beautiful and more defenseless, which softened him up again. His flesh began practically to burn from the lack of her, only quenched when he felt the girl's body press close to his if, like some junkie, he got his daily fix, but it was just this dependency he wanted to avoid, on anyone or anything, woman or child, and now he couldn't handle his captivity any longer. Even so, he stopped short of any calm, impersonal announcement that might come across as a threat, already envisioning the lingering unpleasantness of, say, looking her mother in the eye, who'd taken a liking to him and regularly fed him every weekend, even sometimes helping him out

with money, so now he decided to stop in somewhere with the girl for one last time to settle this matter properly once and for all.

As they stepped in from the run-down November street lined with crumbling facades shot up during the war and never restored, the Golden Dragon Chinese Restaurant seemed to want to make some kind of restitution for the world outside and the mildewed hopelessness that lingered from the six previous decades. All four walls of the place were lined with mirrors, leaving the guests awash in a deep red-and-gold sea of multiple reflections from its décor. The furniture itself was simple: flower-studded waxed canvas tablecloths, red paper lamps, plastic chopsticks, and the like. The silence in the room was palpable, though they were not the only guests. A smooth-faced young waiter, not Chinese, led them to a table and took their drink orders. He had something in his face and features that stirred uncertainty, coming across alternately as oddly handsome and somehow flawed.

"Do you have any Unicum?" the man asked.

"Yes we do," responded the waiter.

"Then bring me a Unicum and a mug of beer. You? A coke?"

The girl nodded and the waiter dashed off with the order. While waiting for the beer to be tapped by the bartender, he had a good look at her via the mirror behind the bar, while arranging his gelled hairdo. He had on a spotless white shirt, black pants, a black jacket with a shiny lapel, and a black silk tie, which is a typical waiter's outfit, at least as to the color scheme, but here in this fairly simple Chinese restaurant seemed a little over the top, as if he had just come from a tango bar and his every movement was part of some refined dance. Besides the man and young woman was a large party of Chinese sitting at a long pushed-together table at the far end of the place. They ate silently. All you could hear was the clicking of chopsticks. The man, seated where the party was in his line of sight, instinctively focused on the odd atmosphere of the place and scrutinized the party, first only stealing the occasional glance, then positively staring. The girl, using all her efforts to capture the man's attention, ultimately realized there was something in the place she could not compete with, something the man just couldn't keep his eyes off of, so she too began to observe the Chinese party in the mirror behind the man's back.

It was a strange sight indeed. Perhaps that is not the right word for the ominous scene to which she was now an indirect witness: Only men sat at the long table, except in the middle where, next to a big fat Chinese man there sat a thin, long-haired girl whose delicately featured face revealed an icy fear. She ate slowly, very slowly, or rather tried to eat, for her hands barely managed to lift her plastic chopsticks to her mouth for the tremors, scarcely visible to the casual observer. The men at the table watched her as she ate.

"Can you give me a smoke?" the young woman asked. Her tongue was cottony, her throat dry. Without taking his eyes off the Chinese party, the man flicked the pack over to her, from which a lone cigarette protruded. Her hand, like that of the girl at

the long table, trembled slightly as she lifted the cigarette to her mouth. Seemingly materializing out of nowhere, the waiter held her a light from his Zippo with a motion obviously learned from some film or other. Clearly he had practiced it before a mirror a thousand times; now the execution was nothing short of perfect. The woman tossed her head up in surprise and gazed at the young waiter for a moment as he smiled in satisfaction. *Thanks*, she said, and as she observed him, a hint of a smile appeared on her pale face, the light of sudden recognition. The boy appeared to hesitate, then hastily, but quietly, added *Don't*, and almost imperceptibly nodded towards the Chinese party.

The man abruptly came to life. "What about my beer? What's taking so long?" "Right away, sir." The waiter bowed and, with an elegant motion befitting his words, turned on his heels and made for the bar where, indeed, the drinks sat waiting. The man knocked back his Unicum with a nervous flick, grabbed his stein of beer, and focused on the Chinese group's table. Opening the woman's bottle of cola, then slowly and professionally pouring the drink into her glass – another no doubt well-rehearsed motion that required no special attention on his part – the waiter did not take his eyes off her for a moment. His eyes held a mixture of desire and concern that eclipsed each other by turns, and he was at a loss to know which he felt more strongly. "Shall I bring the menu? Will you be having dinner?" The man looked up peevishly like one interrupted at important work, then with an unexpected sudden softening, like one who can allow himself such largesse, looked at the young woman: "Shall we order something?" She shook her head. "I'm not hungry. But you go ahead." He paused for a moment, feeling he should show some solidarity with the girl, at least in such a trifling question, something he had previously never been able to communicate, having avoided at all costs tying himself down to her. He had never felt so close to anyone, but at the same time this feeling made him so anxious that he was unable to do work at the office when he thought of her, when he realized he had no idea where she was at that moment, what she was doing, and with whom – all creating in him an unbearable anxiety that made him find some excuse to call the cosmetician's where she worked. Then he looked over at the other table and made his decision. "Bring me some spicy chicken and an order of rice. Oh – and a fork," he told the waiter. "Yes sir, right away." The waiter spun around and set off back to the bar, handed in the order, then leaned back against the counter. Again his eye settled on the girl, which smoothed his features and suffused his face with tranquility, except that a hint of something like alarm remained, giving him the look of one on constant guard, awaiting the inevitable.

The young woman put her hand on the man's, which rested on the table. It looked, given the difference in their sizes, as if a sparrow had alighted there. The man pulled his hand away.

"I won't keep it if you don't want me to. Just please let things stay as they are."

"You really don't understand, do you? How can I put it then? In Chinese? Can't you comprehend what I'm saying, or do you just have to keep provoking me? Afterwards

you'll be sobbing about how cruel I am, and putting me through another guilt trip. I've had enough of this. I'm fed up," he said quietly, with reserve, seemingly relieved. He took another look over her head at the other table. The Chinese girl, trying as she might to finish the food on her plate, was silently sobbing.

The man's eyes filled with pity, mixed with something like tenderness. He was attracted to the Chinese girl; the young woman clearly perceived that the waves of expression on his face had nothing to do with her. He tightened his jaw, setting a muscle twitching, infuriated by his helplessness to intervene, to rush in as savior to the Chinese girl, liberating her from her shackles, which would obviously earn him her eternal gratefulness. Again the young woman glanced in the mirror and, upon seeing the face of the Chinese girl, felt a sudden release at which she let her tears flow. The waiter brought the man his dinner and, having arranged his plates, asked the woman, "Are you sure I can't bring you something?" She shook her head and asked "Which way is the restroom?" "Come this way," said the waiter, "and I'll show you."

He led her past the swinging kitchen door, turned left, and pointed to a half-dark hallway. "It's that way, but I'd be glad to take you back. It's so dark you can't even see the tip of your nose." The waiter followed the young woman, her hair as black and long as the Chinese girl's, only bound into a ponytail. He was thinking (less a thought, perhaps, than a vague sentiment) that if the hallway never ended and led into the blackest realm of darkness, this would be his greatest joy. The scent that distilled off her skin pulled him like a rope. Once they stopped in front of the restroom door, only an inch or so separated his mouth from the down that shimmered at the nape of her neck. Feeling this, and before she turned the door handle, the woman closed her eyes for a moment as if in thrall to the memory of a caress to which she would gladly have abandoned herself. But then she half-turned and gave a smile that begged forgiveness, touched his face and shook her head almost imperceptibly. She disappeared behind the restroom door. He stood there motionless for a moment in the dark hallway, then opened the next door down, marked by the figure of a man in a top hat. He turned on the lights, stepped over to the sink, and looked into the mirror, then opened the faucet and buried his face in a palmful of cold water. He wrenched off his jacket, undid his tie, and unbuttoned his shirt at the neck. He took a deep breath, then another, and another. Almost suffocating, his skin on fire, his flesh dissolving – this is what he felt. Meanwhile he heard the woman coming out of the adjacent restroom, heading back. Hastily he adjusted his outfit, had another look in the mirror, straightened his hair, now a bit mussed up from the water, and headed back himself.

The situation that greeted him in the restaurant came as no surprise to him, though he had hoped to avoid it somehow. That was not to be. He had learned by now that you can't avoid anything. The heavy-set Chinese man had struggled up from his seat, grabbing the edge of the table with his fleshy hands, and shouted some curt Chinese words at the man at the other table, who remained seated, trying to ignore it all, but this was impossible given the Chinese man's dimension, volume, and unambiguous

intentions. Except for the Chinese girl, who in reaction to the unfolding scene had stopped eating and stared straight ahead, everyone at the long table had focused their gaze on the man. The young woman, returning from the ladies' room, stood dumbfounded beside their table, not daring to take her seat.

"Sit down," said the man to her in a restrained voice. But she remained standing, shifting from one leg to the other.

"You hear me? I said sit down!" he shouted, but since she still could not decide what to do, she merely stood there stunned. The man jumped from his seat and gave her a slap in the face, at which she stumbled and fell. This came as a complete surprise to the bellowing Chinaman, whose shouting abruptly stopped. Seizing the moment, the waiter dashed over to the young woman and helped her up off the floor.

"What the fuck are you doing, asshole?! Don't touch her! Hear me?!"

But the waiter remained attentive to the girl, collecting her things that had tumbled out of her purse in all directions on the floor. The girl asked him, almost imploringly, not to help, but the waiter persisted.

"What's your problem? Are you deaf? I said you're not touching her!" shouted the man, who by this time had stepped over to the waiter and begun punching and kicking him relentlessly. The girl tried to protect him with her body, shrieking at the man not to hurt him. Now the man began striking her, perhaps even harder than the waiter. The large Chinese man sat down at the table like one who had done his duty, and the party continued, now apparently oblivious to all the goings-on on the other side of the room. Two Chinese cooks rushed out of the kitchen, the Hungarian bartender emerged from his post, and all worked together to hold down the raving man.

"Don't touch her or I'll fuck you up," the man wheezed, with powerful kicks of his chestnut-brown Italian leather boots. He found only air, though, being restrained by the others. The woman looked at him with an expression of pity, and stepped towards him to stroke his face. But the man pulled back in rage. Then she turned towards the waiter, now lying on the floor, and helped him up. A rip in his shirt from the encounter offered a view of the bloodstained ace bandage, muddied from the floor, whose purpose was obviously to restrain a pair of breasts. The Chinese cooks also saw this and launched into loud and agitated debate.

"Come," said the girl. "Get up."

"Okay," whispered the waiter, scarcely able to speak from the bloody flesh where a mouth had been. Then, a thought: *I'm coming*. Managing somehow to bend over to pick up the Zippo that had flown out, the waiter stood up straight to see that the young woman had just stepped out the restaurant door. Now the man, having broken free of the two Chinese cooks and the barman, stared at the waiter, and was

apparently about to say something, but no. He, too, stepped out into the dark Budapest night, where the snow was dusting down.

Translated from the Hungarian by Jim Tucker