

Some call it a romantic tale, others deem it a romantic tragedy. This is a story of an unlikely bond borne of the pandemic between a silver-haired businessman and a spritely young woman half of his age.

RAYS OF HOPE

By Holly Shea

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A romantic couple is shown in a close embrace on a cobblestone path at night. The woman is wearing a red dress and the man is in a dark suit. They are positioned to the right of a tall, black street lamp that has a glowing white lantern. The scene is dimly lit, with the primary light source being the street lamp, which casts a warm glow on the couple and the ground. The background is dark, suggesting a building or garden setting.

Rays of Hope

H O L L Y S H E A

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Chapter 1: Text from a Ghost

It was an ordinary Tuesday evening in Southern California. Heiko, an international tourism promoter and special events producer, was sprawled on the hardwood floor in the living room of his hillside home. Sitting atop a lone hill, the ambient glows from the 1970s' stand-alone house shone like a beacon in the sparsely populated neighborhood. The two-level structure yielded panoramic view of the town below. This was Heiko's sanctuary away from the hustle and bustle of his hectic office.

Head propped up against two large cushions, Heiko was engrossed in another episode of NCIS. Rerun or not, Heiko would watch any episode featuring the popular Israeli character Ziva David.

"Still time for you to change your mind..." Said Agent Dinozzo to agent David.

Ziva paused...

"What am I gonna tell people?" Dinozzo asked.

"...that you were right... I have to start over..." Ziva replied.

A hopeless romantic, the entrepreneur adored the chemistry between agents Dinozzo and David. Heiko loved how the show's writer didn't rush the characters into a

cheesy love story. Instead, the writer afforded them time to grow and developed into one of the most cherished television romances appreciate by both men and women.

“Have you fed Pal yet?” Heiko’s wife Linda, asked.

Heiko gently stroked his chunky bull dog as he curled up next to him like a pile of wrinkly blankets. “Give me a minute. I’ll feed him later,” he replied.

“Tony, you’re so...” Ziva’s lips quivered as she placed her hands on her partner’s face.

“Handsome? Funny? What?” Dinozzo teased.

“...you’re so...”

Suddenly Heiko’s cell phone vibrated against the wooden floor, interrupting the romantic exchange between two of his favorite NCIS characters. He glanced at the text message:

"Hi Heiko, I have a Russian friend, she’s a dancer as well. Her name is Olya. She speaks fluent Chinese. I thought to introduce her to you if you ever need a Russian girl to speak Mandarin for any of your tourism promotion projects. Let me know if you would like her contact☺"

It was from Nadya, the former captain of the Heiko’s Zorya Combat Demonstration Team, an all-female simulated war game unit in his popular extreme sports series. Originally from Yekatalinburg, the Russian ballerina

once held a very special place in Heiko's heart; but that was a lifetime ago.

"Yes!!!" Heiko texted her back. There was always work for Mandarin-speaking Anglos.

"@olgastagequeen" Nadya texted a profile of her friend.

"A stage performer? Like you?" Heiko was baffled. In addition to being a ballerina, Nadya was a model and an aerial acrobat before she stumbled onto simulated wargames and subsequently became a member of the Zorya Team some ten years earlier.

"No, not exactly like me," Nadya texted back.

"But of course," Heiko paused, "No one can ever replace you." The events producer uncaged his true sentiment. But Nadya avoided the subject and texted a phone number instead.

Heiko noticed the 415 area code. "NorCal?" He asked.

"What does NorCal mean?" Nadya asked.

"Northern California. 415 area code is SFO." He replied.

"She is here in LA," Nadya responded.

“Good. Is she fun like you or an old lady? LoL” Heiko asked. After all, what attractive young women in their right mind would study Chinese?

“☺ She is young and sweet... And a redhead ☺” Heiko’s former on-screen “wife” replied.

“Good to know ☺” Although Heiko never had a proclivity for hair color in women, he recalled Nadya revealing her natural hair color being “strawberry blonde”. “What’s her name? Can’t just call her stage queen! LoL” Heiko asked.

“Olya. Olga.” Nadya responded with a nickname and proper name of her friend.

“I meant FB ID? Facebook” Heiko asked.

“Yes. Olga Nickels,” Nadya replied.

“Nickels doesn’t sound very Russian! LoL”

“You will ask her the details...” Nadya texted.

Details which Heiko already knew. There were very limited paths to America for a young Russian woman; lucky ones would jump at the convenient opportunity to gain citizenship through marriage.

Nadya understood Heiko more than any other members on the Zorya Team. Attractive, athletic, sensual, and observant, the Russian ballerina had unintentionally

captured Heiko's heart during their first commercial project when she played Heiko's trophy wife. Although it had been years since Heiko and Nadya communicated, this text was a sign that Nadya hadn't completely forsaken their friendship. Their weekly hill top rendezvous where the two shared heart-felt conversations were imprinted in both of their memories.

"How've you been?" Heiko texted.

"I'm okay," Nadya replied. "How's your wife?" She asked.

Surprised, Heiko replied, "She got a handsome retirement package and started her own consulting business."

"You know that's not what I meant..." Nadya continued, "You posted lots of happy family pictures on your social media... or are those just a façade?"

Fate had a way to resurrect long-forgotten torments. "How do you know what I post on my social media? I mean, I never saw you... oh, I see, stalking? Ha... ha..." Heiko asked.

Nadya replied with a smiling emoji.

"Well, we're excellent house mates..." Heiko replied.

"I'm sorry to hear that..." Nadya responded. "But eventually that is all there is in a marriage, don't you agree?" She asked.

Heiko couldn't carry on the conversation. His forgotten fling had injected his dormant passion with a dose of romance. The elegant and playful ballerina was once Heiko's universe. It took three years for the creative businessman to wipe Nadya from his daily thoughts and another three years before he could erase all her images from his phone. Heiko even once pondered the possibility of relinquishing his household and venturing into the unknown with the captivating woman. But the platonic courtship came to an unceremonious end. "Why haven't I ever seen you angry?" Nadya once asked the perpetual professional; she most likely meant outward display of raw passion... something Heiko could ill afford. Perhaps Nadya's deeply rooted Slavic lineage favored brute force, or maybe it was Heiko's subliminal reluctance to advance, the lack of physical interaction, that eventually shattered his hope of sharing a sunset with the orange blonde at the foot of Mamayev Kurgan.

But why now? It had been six years since they last communicated. Why bother?

"Thanks for the lead. I'll give her a call," Heiko wrapped up their text conversation.

Mandarin-speaking Anglos would always be a desirable commodity for as long as China and Taiwan, two major sources of US inbound tourism, continued to worship Chinese-speaking Caucasians.

"Who was that?" Linda asked since Heiko rarely answered his phone in the evenings.

Heiko casually set his phone down next to Pal. "It was Nadya," he replied while gently scratched his beloved bulldog's neck.

"Nadya? What did she want?"

"She gave me a lead on a Chinese-speaking Russian girl," Heiko paused. "Probably some babushka," he chuckled.

"That's very nice of Nadya to pass on the lead, especially it's been what? Eight years since you last contacted her?" Wives had a sixth sense about their husbands' infatuations and Linda was no exception. "Are you going to call her?"

"Who? Nadya?"

"No, the Chinese-speaking girl," Linda clarified.

Turning up the television volume, an annoyed Heiko replied, "Yeah, after the show."

"...okay... this is not easy..." Agent Dinozzo said as he slowly backed away from Ziva.

The teary-eyed Ziva looked on as she forced a smile for her departing partner...

Wanting his dinner, Pal nudged Heiko's hand with his moist nose. The rescued bulldog had served as Heiko's emotional support animal for five years and the two had developed an unbreakable bond. Pal helped calm the

stressed business man by napping by his side while he worked from his home office. One should never underestimate the healing power of a loving pet.

“Here you go boy,” Heiko pour some kibbles into Pal’s doggy bowl before dialing up the 415 area code.

A young woman answered, “Hello?”

“Hi, qing’wen Olga zai’ma?” The multilingual businessman asked for Olga in Mandarin.

“Un, wo’shi,” she acknowledged.

“Wo’shi Heiko,” Heiko introduced himself before continuing. “Nadya gei’wo ni’de tian’hua.” (Mandarin: Nadya gave me your phone number).

“Ni’hao,” (Mandarin: How are you?) Olga replied.

“Itak, vy govorite po-kitayski,” (Russian: So, you do speaking Chinese!) Heiko said in his limited Russian.

“Ni’de er’yu sho’de bu’cuo,” (Madarin: Your Russian is not bad,) the Russian linguist praised.

Heiko chuckled, “Nah, I only know a few phrases, but your Chinese is pretty good!”

“Nadya said you’re always looking for someone who can speak Mandarin for tourism projects?” She asked.

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“Yeah. Say, if you have time, we can meet tomorrow morning at 11:00 o’clock to get acquainted,” Heiko suggested.

“Sure, that works!”

Heiko waited for the young Russian woman at Coffee Junction the next morning and Olga arrived right on time.

“Hey, ni’hao,” Heiko greeted Ms. Nickels, “Wo’shi Heiko.”

Olga cordially introduced herself, “Ni’hao. Wo shi Ao’Er’Jia,” (Mandarin: How are you. I am Olga,).

Ms. Nickles didn’t dress to impress. With a fair complexion, Olga stood approximately five foot five inches tall with a petite frame. She had on a front buttoned black sweater and a pair of loose-fitting pants. There was no trace of makeup or perfume on the young woman. But at least she was a redhead.

“So why Chinese?” Heiko asked.

“It was available as a foreign language selection in high school back in Russia,” she said. “Since China’s economy was booming I knew the language would become useful someday,” the plain Jane explained.

Heiko took a sip of his black coffee and asked, “What made you want to live in China?”

“It started as a cultural immersion school trip to further my Chinese language studies.” The young woman continued, “I fell in love with China after the initial visit.”

“Na’ni Zhong’guo zhu’nar?” (Mandarin: Where did you live in China?)

“Wo’zai Shanghai zhu’le san’nien duo,” she replied. (Mandarin: I lived in Shanghai for over three years).

Ms. Nickels’ Mandarin was rusty, but her intonation was indicative of Mainland China.

“Where did you learn Chinese?” The Russian linguist was surprised by Heiko’s Eurasian completion.

“Oh, my father was from Taiwan and my mother was from Germany,” he continued, “Growing up I had to take Chinese lessons after school while mom would teach me German at home.”

“That’s so interesting! I loved German but never had the chance to study it,” Ms. Nickles said.

“It’s never too late,” Heiko said before taking another sip of coffee. “So what’s your full time gig?” He asked, needing to know if she could work weekends.

“I’m a dancer and a tour guide,” she said.

“Tour guide? Really?” Heiko was surprised. “What do you do?” He asked.

The multilingual young women explained, “I do the basic Hollywood tours for a company and I handle private hiking tours myself.”

“Hiking tours?” Heiko was intrigued.

“I take couples and small groups on hikes through either Griffith Park or Hollywood hills,” she said.

Amused, he pressed on, “Are these Chinese? Russians? Domestic travelers?”

“Mostly domestic, some Russians, and at times Australians or British tourists,” Ms. Nickels explained.

Heiko was unsure how she would even have time for his projects. “So you guide in the morning and dance at restaurants in the evenings, especially over weekends; what else do you do?” He asked.

“I also teach ESL online to students in Russia,” she added, as if her plate wasn’t full enough.

While her motivation was admirable, but her schedule simply didn’t yield any room for the ambitious woman to branch out further. “Well, I have two ideas. First, we will first look into tourism promotion gigs, but as you’re aware, this Hong Kong riot is not going to end well and China’s tourism will suffer dearly. Second, if you have interest in guns at all, we could potentially have you trained in mock combat tactics and be a part of our all-female combat demonstration team.” He laid all the cards out for Ms.

Nickles. "I assumed Nadya told you what she did for the team from a few years ago?"

"No, she didn't. But I think I can do both," She replied. "I'm a slow learner, but I'm eager to learn," she said.

While Heiko recognized Ms. Nickle's linguistic talent, his CTS (China Travel Service) associates would prefer Sarah, his go-to model. Blonde hair, blue eyes, and five-foot seven inches tall, Sarah was an actress, model, and a former Zorya Team sniper who had accompanied the popular businessman to countless social functions ranging from tourism galas to trade shows. However, foreign language was not Sarah's strong suit.

"I want you to say a greeting phrase in Mandarin to Cindy, the General Manager of CTS," Heiko pointed his iPhone at Ms. Nickels.

"Hi Cindy ni'hao, wo'shi Ao'Er'Jia. Xi'wang you'ji'hui gen'ni ren'shi." (Mandarin: Hi Cindy how are you? I'm Olga. Hope to meet you someday).

"One more time. Say it like you mean it," Heiko encouraged.

Ms. Nickels sounded less timid the second time. And after the third take, the tourism promoter was finally satisfied. "Good. I'll send this to CITS and see what transpires."

“Well, thank you for seeing me and it was nice meeting you,” Olga was cordial and formal as they both got up to leave.

“We’ll stay in touch,” Heiko gave Ms. Nickel a parting handshake.

“Hey, I met with Olga this morning,” Heiko texted Nadya.

“Oh? How did it go?” The ballerina asked.

“Meh, kinda quiet, unremarkable girl, but she did speak Chinese like you said.”

“Give her a chance. She’ll blossom like she did on stage,” Nadya urged.

“We’ll see. I’m having lunch with Benny in a couple of days. Remember Benny?” Heiko asked. Of course Nadya would remember Benny who also appeared in the ground breaking tourism marketing video in which Nadya played Heiko’s trophy wife.

“Oh, wow! Please tell Benny I say hello!” Nadya responded. “Thank you for the update, I gotta go make dinner for the family.”

Heiko nonchalantly put the phone away and continued to channel surf, yet no television shows caught his fancy on that nights.

“Who was that?” Linda asked.

“Oh, just gave Nadya an update on the interview this morning.”

“With the Chinese speaking Russian girl?” Linda asked.

Flipping through cable channels, Heiko replied, “Yep! Kind of a boring girl actually, but she did speak Chinese.”

“Well, give her a chance. Maybe she was nervous?” Linda always thought the better of people.

“I want Benny to meet her since he can evaluate her from Mainland China’s perspective,” Heiko said.

Linda leaned back into the sofa and resume her game on her iPhone. “She’ll be fine. They all work out!”

But of course. After all, Linda had handpicked Nadya from Heiko’s casting call to play his wife for the promotional travel film.

Wanting to reaffirm his evaluation on Ms. Nickles, Heiko phoned his long-time tourism partner. “Dude, wanna come have lunch with me and a young Russian girl who speaks fluent Mandarin?”

“Really? She’s fluent?” Benny was intrigued.

“Yeah!” Heiko replied.

Unimpressed, “Is she ugly like Kathy?” Benny asked. “Why else would she learn Chinese?” He snickered.

“Ha... ha... you’re such a dick!” Heiko laughed.

Spunky and quick-witted, Kathy studied Asian languages at one of the nation’s top linguistic institutes. The young Minnesota native mastered both Mandarin and Korean by the time she graduated and subsequently worked in both China and Korea for extended periods.

“C’mon bro, yeah, Kathy was talented but can’t you find someone who is pretty and talented?” Benny was not wrong. After all, there was no shortage of attractive Chinese-speaking Belarussian, Russian and Ukrainian women working in Beijing and Shanghai.

Heiko sighed. “Dude, in all fairness, what Kathy lacked in traditional beauty she made up with her perky personality in the production, right?” The tourism promoter defended the young talent. “Besides, this one is Russian, so, you do the math,” Heiko said.

“Oooh, is she beautiful like Nadya?” Benny asked.

Not wanting to revisit the past, Heiko replied, “Why don’t you join us for lunch and find out?”

Chapter 10: **Marina Vladimirovna Kuzmina**

The humming sound from the airplane engine on Aeroflot flight 3388 gently rocked Olga to sleep. The eighteen-year-old lone traveler gradually drifted back to the days before her departure...

Despite disapproving of their daughter's decision, Oksana and Vladimir grudgingly indulged their child's wish and helped arrange her travel documents for China.

"You're so stupid! Why couldn't you get into the German language school like your friend Irina?" Olga's father belittled. "She's probably fucking her way to a German passport by now! And what do you have to show for?" Vlad took another gulp from his stale beer.

Olga continued to pack in silence.

Mr. Kuzmin blew a puff from his cigarette toward the ailing ceiling fan, but the fading fixture had no effect on the rising smoke. "Suka, nu khot' ty yey skazhi!" (Russian: Bitch! Why don't you talk some sense into your daughter?) Vlad shouted. "She should at least be able to get into the British language school like you did," the drunk tossed his emptied beer bottle toward Olga. "Worthless little bitch! Can't even be a good little whore to the English like your mother..."

“Khvatit!” (Russian: Enough!) Oksana stood up to her husband. “Ty p'yan!” (Russian: You're drunk!) Mrs. Kuzmina came to her daughter's defense. “Vlad, please...”

Andrey, Olga's younger brother, brought Vlad another bottle of beer from the kitchen. “Are you coming back,” the teenage boy asked his sister.

Olga didn't answer.

“It may be better if you don't come back so I can have the room to myself,” the boy said.

Oksana leered at her son. “Nonsense, of course Olga will come back!”

“Sighed. Well, maybe she can marry a Chinaman and have some yellow babies,” Vlad laughed.

“Vlad, stop it!” Mrs. Kuzmina shouted at her husband.

Cigarette dangling from the corner of his mouth, Vladimir Kuzmin got off the couch and waddled toward his daughter. “Bitch! Maybe you can put this to good use!” He groped Olga on the buttocks and wobbled toward the bathroom.

Olga didn't respond, but she felt streams of warm liquid trickled down her cheeks. “Olya, big girls don't cry, remember?” Marina reminded her. “We'll show them. This family means nothing to us,” the survival-focused persona assured herself.

“Damy i gospoda, pozhaluysta pristegnite remni i prigotov'tes' k posadke...” (Russian: Ladies and gentlemen please fasten your seat belt in preparation for landing...) The pre arrival announcement pulled Olga out of her emotional quicksand. “We’re okay, Olya, we will do great,” Marina exclaimed.

Ignoring the flight attendants, unruly passengers began to retrieve bags from overhead bins while the airbus fast approaching Pu Dong International Airport at airspeed of 158 knots. The plane’s wheels emitted a sharp squeal as it touched down on the runway, signaling the new beginning of Marina’s new adventure.

Clinging on to her worn out purse, Marina elbowed her way through the crowd as the massive herd lined up for customs and immigrations.

“Kakova tsel' vashego vizita?” (Russian: What is your purpose of visit?) The Chinese immigration officer asked in fluent Russian.

Marina smiled and answered, “Wo’shi lai’xue zhong’wen de,” (Mandarin: I’m here to study Chinese).

Surprised, the customs cadre took a second look at Marina’s passport. “Zhelayu udachi” (Russian: Good luck!) He replied and waved her through.

There was no fanfare or welcome party waiting for her on the other side of the sliding doors. However, she was familiar with Shanghai from her previous visit through the

language school a year ago. With her wheeled suitcase in tow, the petite girl flagged down a taxi. “Shi’fu, Fu’dan Da Xue,” Marina gave the driver her destination in Mandarin.

“Ai’yo, lao’wai hai’hui shuo pu’tong’hua!” (Mandarin: Wow, the foreigner speaks Mandarin!). The driver was pleasantly surprised. “Hao’lei,” (Mandarin: Very well) the driver set the meter and steered the vehicle southbound.

Sounds of car horns combined with smoky air spawned a sense of excitement for the new arrival. Marina felt at home amidst the familiar cityscape as the taxi wove through the chaotic traffic. Countless sky scrapers sprouted between winding motorways like majestic limestone hills along the Li River. Inspired by this cosmopolitan city during her first visit, Marina vowed to use Shanghai as her springing board to leap into a brighter future. For the Russian transplant, anything was better than enduring the vituperative emotional squalor in Moscow. “This is our ticket to America, Olya! Shanghai is full of foreigners and we’ll prevail!” Marina grinned. She knew that there will be struggles and obstacles along the way, but anywhere was better than rotting away in the two-bedroom apartment shared by her parents, grandmother and younger brother.

“Hello! Can I help you?” The clerk behind the admissions window asked in English.

Marina presented her travel and university acceptance documents to friendly receptionist. “Ni’hao, wo’shi ma’li’na.

Wo shi mo'si'ke lai de." (Mandarin: Hi. I'm Marina. I came from Moscow).

Surprised by the white girl's linguistic ability, the clerk took a closer look at her documents. "Dui'bu'qi. Hai dang'ni'shi mei'guo'ren." (Mandarin: Sorry to mistaken you for an American). The friendly receptionist keyed in Marina's information and printed out a name badge. "Lai, zheg'shi ni'de ming'pai. Jin'wan you'ge xin'sheng huwan'ying jou'hui," (Mandarin: Here's your name tape. There's a new student welcoming party tonight) the administrative clerk said. "Zheg dai'zi li shi xin'sheng ru'xue de wen'jien." (Mandarin: This bag contains new student admission documents).

"Xie'xie," Marina thanked the clerk. Before she walked away from the desk she realized that she hadn't received her dormitory assignment. "Qing'wen wo'zhu na'ge su'she?" (Mandarin: Which dormitory do I live in?).

The helpful young woman explained to the new arrival that she would have to visit the student affairs office to sort out her living arrangement. "Mei shi, hen jian'dan'de," (Mandarin: No problem. It's easy), the clerk said.

Within the first hour of her arrival to the University Marina had reported to the admissions office, picked up her class schedules and secured her dorm room assignment.

"Hello, my name is Ping. How do you do?" A Chinese girl greeted the new arrival.

“Ni’hao, wo’shi Ma’li’na,” (Mandarin: Hi, I am Marina)
The Russian girl replied.

“Ni’hui suo pu’tong’hua! Tai’hao la!” (Mandarin: You
speak Mandarin! That’s great!)

Ping soon took her Russian roommate under her wing
by showing her around the campus and its nearby
neighborhood.

Being the only white girl in her class, Marina received an
undue amount of flattery from male students, but the
mission-focused Russian made a point to hang out only
with expats from the West since her goal was to secure a
path to the United States. Within three months the
tenacious girl had settled into her new environment.

“Ma’li’na, ni zheg zhou’liu hai qu Shanghai Tan ma?”
(Mandarin: Marina, are you still going to Club Shanghai Bun
this Saturday?) Ping asked.

“N,” Busy managing her social notebook, Marina
replied without looking at her roommate.

Featuring foreign DJs and foreign bands, Club Shanghai
Bun was a trendy spot for expats and affluent young
Chinese; a fertile ground for anyone seeking to make a
connection with the West.

“Ni zheg’ge da mei’reu gen ding hun’kwai jo gei
diao’dao ge mei’guo lao’gong,” Ping teased. (Mandarin:

You're so beautiful that you'll soon catch yourself an American husband).

Determined, Marina frequented the club as she sought that illusive ticket to America.

Hit songs from the era could be heard outside of the club as young expats lined up to get in. The vibe was not unlike that of any night club in the West on a Saturday night. The brawny bouncer scoured the long line for qualified patrons to bypass the wait-patrons who could enhance the club's image.

"Good evening Marina, how good to see you again!" The muscular bouncer continued down the line. "Tatiana, you look very beautiful tonight!" "Guten abend frau Eva, du bist wunderschon!" One by one, the gate keeper escorted white girls who were deemed "reasonably attractive" into the club. "Enjoy your evening, ladies."

A night club was only as popular as the attractive patrons it hosted. In the eyes of the Chinese elite, a club full of beautiful white women was the place to socialize and to be seen. After all, in Shanghai image reigned supreme.

Marina worked her way to the bar, but before she could order a drink, a Chinese woman leaned over and commented, "Hello, you're so beautiful!" Jing Jing complimented Marina over the blaring music. A sales manager from China's export capitol of Sheng Zheng, Jing Jing was no stranger to partying with foreigners. In her early thirties, the single woman was accustomed to entertaining

the company's visiting VIPs from the West. Unusually curvaceous and well-endowed for a Southern Chinese woman, the oval-faced beauty was able to combine her wit and physique to carve a path in Sheng Zheng's bustling corporate scene.

"Ni suo'she'meg? Mei ting'qing'cu?" (Mandarin: What did you say? Wasn't clear?) Marina responded in Mandarin, mistook the Chinese woman for a wait staff.

Jing Jing leaned into Marina and hollered, "Wo'suo'ni mei'ji la!" (Mandarin: I said you are very beautiful!) The slightly intoxicated woman nudged Marina. "Let's dance!" She shouted.

Not one to back down from an adventure, Marina grinned at the salacious woman and followed her on to the dance floor. Lost in the blasting tune, both women slid against each other like two intertwining serpents. And when their skins touched, the two women peered into each other eyes as they relished in "Ready to Fall in Love" by singer Anna Grace.

"Hey hey
Come over here look in my eyes
Can't you see the way I feel
Come over here look in my eyes..."

The deafening music pulsated through the club, pairing with the heartbeat of every reveler on the dance floor. Nationalities were replaced by vogue, alcohol, and a touch of "high" in the bubble of ecstasy. Revolving atop the dance

floor were multi-color stage lights, striking through clouds of cigarette smoke, like jagged rainbows, stabbing every sinner in their God forsaken soul.

“Just know that love won’t hurt no more
If you learn how to love yourself
Now hear me I came at your door...”

The occasional brushing of the hands between Jing Jing and Marina grew more lecherous as they inched toward one another.

“Ni’tiao de hen’hao,” Jing Jing commented. (Mandarin: You dance very well.)

Entranced in the rhythm, Marina slithered around to her dance partner like a boa toying with its prey; her bright green eyes emitted a sensuous glow. The lascivious Russian girl pressed her chest against that of the equally endowed Chinese woman and took a whiff of Jing Jing’s perfume... Versace Crystal Noir... not an affordable brand to the average Chinese, Marina thought.

“Zai’tiao liang’so ma...” (Mandarin: Let’s dance two more songs...) Jing Jing was not ready to retreat from the dance floor. “Bie’zou, zai tiao yi...---“Ni’ju’le,” (Mandarin: Don’t go, one more...---You’re drunk,) Marina helped steady her new friend and made a mental note of Jing Jing’s Milano Silk blouse and her Bulova gold watch; another hint of her new-found friend’s social status. Despite the Chinese woman’s best effort, she couldn’t outdrink the Moskova.

“Do you live far?” Marina asked.

“My hotel is only one block from here,” Jing Jing grinned. “You come to my hotel?”

Always up for a good time, Marina agreed to accompany Jing Jing to her hotel. The streets of Shanghai was just as safe for two women to traverse during wee hours of the night as it would be during the day; a luxury provided under the watchful eyes of closed circuit camera and the People’s Police.

“Why are you staying in a hotel?” Marina asked.

“I’m from Shenzhen,” Jing Jing said. “I have to meet with a client from America tomorrow,” the sales executive continued, “You know, show him around Shanghai, show him our products, and maybe fuck him to seal the deal... ha... ha...”

Marina chuckled. There’s nothing wrong with utilizing one’s natural gifts and talents to achieve one’s goal, she thought. The streetwise survivor contemplated her new-found friend’s business status and thought she could play the same game.

“Does your company hire foreigners?” the Russian student asked.

“Dang’ran. Ke’shi dei’dong suo pu’tong’hua,” Jing Jing said. (Mandarin: Of course. But has to speak Mandarin).

There was no one in the lobby when Marina and Jing Jing staggered into the hotel. Marina waved at the duty clerk at the front desk who was preoccupied by some variety show on a hand-held television.

“Xiao’jie, mei’shi’ba?” (Mandarin: Miss, everything all right?) The clerk asked.

“Mei’shi. Ta he’duo’le,” (Mandarin: It’s fine. She had too much to drink.) Marina replied in fluent Mandarin as they swayed toward the elevator.

The salacious woman rested her chin on the Russian girl’s shoulder and whispered: “Ni hao’xiang.” (Mandarin: You smell pretty).

While Jing Jing certainly wasn’t the expat Marina hoped to meet on this night, but she was reasonably aroused by the atypical Chinese woman’s sensuality. “Ba fang’jian yao’shi gei’wo,” Marina reached for the room key while allowing the intoxicated woman to gently fondle her.

Jing Jing’s room was up to Western standards with plush bed spreads, fluffy pillow cases, a flat screen television, an armchair, and a desk that served both as a dining table and work station. The bay view window caught the Russian girl’s eyes; she had never seen the panoramic view of Bu Dong before. “Wow, it’s beautiful,” she muttered.

“Hai’hao,” (Mandarin: It’s okay.) Jing Jing commented as she teetered toward the window.

Marina caught the intoxicated woman in time before she could trip over and gently settled her into bed.

“Come, beautiful girl,” she reached for Marina’s hand.

“I should go,” Marina muttered as she softly let go of Jing Jing’s grasp.

“Bie’zou,” (Mandarin: Don’t leave) the drunken woman latched her arms around Marina’s neck, bringing her face close.

The bold Russian girl planted her moist lips on Jing Jing’s mouth.

“Mmm...” The libidinous woman rested her hands on Marina’s hips while opening herself up to accommodate the Russian redhead’s advancement. “Mmm...” both women moaned softly as they caressed each other.

Ping was worried when Marina failed to return to their dorm room on Saturday night. But knowing her roommate’s fearless nature and her wit, Ping decided to wait until noon before she file a report with the resident cadre. The caring girl waited patiently. An hour passed, no word from her fearless roommate. Two hours passed, there were no calls from Marina. When the alarm clock on her desk hit noon, Ping decided to file a missing person’s report to the dorm officials.

“Hey,” Marina opened the door to her worrisome roommate’s relief.

“Ni’pao na’li qu le? Ji si wo’le!” (Mandarin: Where did you go? I was worried sick!)

“Wo zai yi ge nu’re n de jou’dian guo’ye,” (Mandarin: I overnighted in a woman’s hotel room) the Russian student exclaimed.

Not completely understanding her roommate’s grammar, Ping asked, “She’meg? Ni gen shemeg ren guo’ye?” (Mandarin: What? Who did you sleep with?) Ping was confused.

“Look, and she gave me all this jewelry, too!” Marina showed off the 14-karat gold bracelet and the 18-karat gold locket Jing Jing gave her. “Eto bylo veselo!” (Russian: It’s so fun!). Marina exclaimed.

Coming from a conservative upbringing, Ping’s curiosity got the better of her. “Ni gen ge nu’re n shang’chuan?” (Mandarin: You slept with a woman?) She asked.

Fidgeting with gifts from her new friend, Marina replied nonchalantly: “Mei’xi. Wo gao’zhong de shi’hou jou gen wo nu’tong’xue shang guo chuang le!” (Mandarin: It’s nothing. I slept with my female classmates back in high school). The sexually accomplished redhead glanced at her roommate. “Zhe’meg yang? Yao’bu’yao shi’yi’shi? Ha... ha... ha...” (Mandarin: Well? Wanna try it?) She taunted the small town Chinese girl.

“Qu, qu, ni bie hu’nau’le!” (Mandarin: Scram. Stop messing around!) Ping shooed her mischievous roommate away.

Marina grabbed her backpack and headed out the door. “Wo shang’ke qu le! Xia’wu’jian. Pakha!” (Mandarin: I’m going to class. See you this afternoon. Russian: See ya!).

While there were no shortage of male suitors courting Marina among her Chinese classmates, the end-goal driven young woman would only party with boys from the West.

“So have you nailed an American yet?” Svetlana, Marina’s expat friend from Belarus, asked as the two women danced the night away in the club.

Taking a sip from her cocktail, the precocious young woman shook her head. “You see, Sveta, my first choice is an American.” She took another sip from her drink. “Canadian second,” Marina explained.

“And if you can’t hook either?” Svetlana asked.

The shrewd seductress shrugged, “Then maybe German,” Marina’s eyes lit up and purred, “nemetskiy menya vozbuzhdayet, ya uzhe vsya mokraya...” (Russian: German turns me on. It gets me wet). Marina took a gulp from her vodka mixed with orange juice.

“Then why not just find a German?” Sveta asked.

Rays of Hope

“But I want to live in America!” Marina raised her glass to her friend, “Na zapad!”

“To The West!” Svetlana’s cheer was muffled by the deafening club music.

As the pair danced into the night, Marina’s target selection grew more promising. “Turn Me On” by artist Ester Dean filled the air while blinding strobes heightened party goers’ senses.

“...Make me come alive, come on and turn me on
Touch me, save my life, come on and turn me on
I’m too young to die, come on and turn me on
Turn me on, turn me on, turn me on, turn me on...”

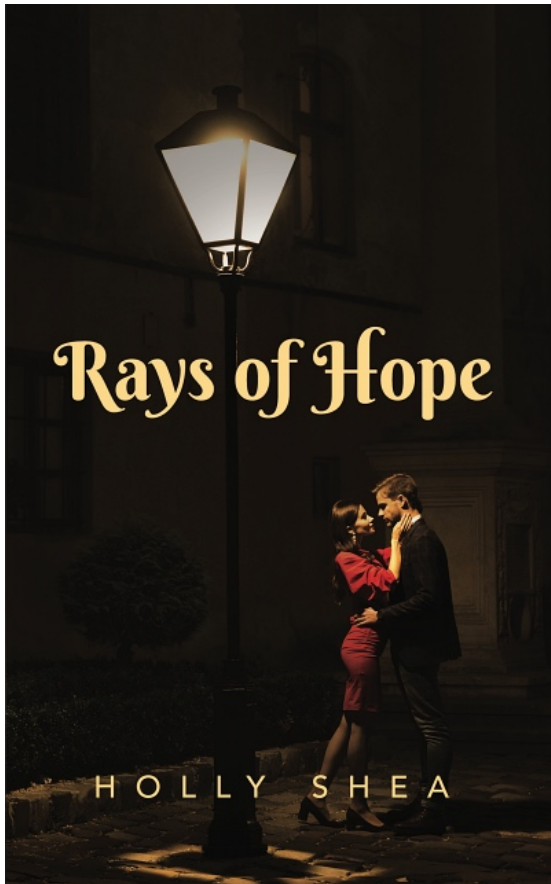
Fall classes soon adjourned in observation of the traditional Chinese New Year. Marina grew bolder as she weathered cultural and linguistic challenges in Shanghai’s social and economic webs. The young Russian woman knew she had to remain focused in order to reach her implausible goal since American expats she met were either couples or those who wanted to remain in China for full cultural emersion. After all, no Americans came to China with the hope of returning with a Russian bride. By her third year in Shanghai, Marina was fluent in Mandarin and even obtained a job teaching English at local ESL schools-yes, English, not Russian. Thanks to her mother who encouraged her from an early age to learn the world’s most prevalent tongue, the young woman quickly put her linguistic talent to use.

“Immigration police are here checking papers!” The ESL school receptionist phoned the third floor attendant.

The studious office clerk rushed to Marina’s classroom and motioned for her to evade. Chinese immigration police often raided language schools looking for those working without work visa. Life was full of unexpected turns during her stay in China, yet the strong-willed Russian girl rose to the occasion and met each obstacle with determination and tenacity; because returning to Moscow was not an option. Sometimes when the pressure became unbearable, Marina would look inward to her sensitive side, Olya, and recalled the immoral acts she had to endure as a child in the Moscow apartment. Whenever she felt the warmth of tears trickling down her cheeks, Marina would replay her drunken father’s parting insults; and for that alone, she must not fail.

“We’ll make it, Olya, we’ll make it! I won’t let us down!” Marina reassured herself.

As fate would have it, that winter the Russian huntress secured an American party goer at Club Shanghai Bun.



Some call it a romantic tale, others deem it a romantic tragedy. This is a story of an unlikely bond borne of the pandemic between a silver-haired businessman and a spritely young woman half of his age.

RAYS OF HOPE

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