

A Conversation

The narrow gauge train crept up the mountain. At the sea-level station where he had got on, the morning air had been swelteringly hot and humid in the old wooden carriage with its hard wooden benches. They had passed from rice paddies with patient water buffalos silhouetted against the hazy sky, through a bamboo forest where the wind played with the soaring bamboo stalks making a low drumming sound as they struck each other, and then through the cool fresh air of a pine forest.

He followed the crowd as they got off the train at the final station on top of the mountain. He didn't know where to find the hotel he had read about in his guidebook. There were signs pointing in all directions, it seemed. He struggled to compare the strange and beautiful Chinese script of the signposts with the road names on his map. Making a choice, not that he was sure, he shouldered his backpack and started off down one of the paths between the pine trees.

It was nearing noon and the thin air was tiring him before he came upon a small group of buildings. On one of them, in big letters, the word *HOTEL* greeted him in his own language. It was a roughly-built wooden structure with a sagging roof, but all he needed was a bed for the night so he went in. A small woman with a friendly wrinkled face stood behind the counter of the darkly paneled lobby. She bobbed a bow as he walked through the door and, to his surprise, asked in understandable English if he wanted a room.

“Wonderful! You speak English. You are the first person I’ve met in two weeks who I could talk to!” The words came flooding out of him in his relief. Then he noticed the blank look on her smiling, wrinkled face.

“You want room?” she asked again.

“You don’t understand me, do you?”

“You want room?”

He nodded in resignation and she held out her hand.

“Fife dolla’ for night.”

He gave her the money and she came around the counter to lead him through a narrow, strange smelling corridor. The thin door she opened showed a tiny room with a neatly made bed. There was no other furniture. She stood aside to let him pass and he tossed his backpack on the cleanly swept wooden floor. The window was open and a cool breeze brought the smell of the pines. She handed him a key and left him alone.

It was too late for lunch and too early for a lonely supper at the restaurant he had noticed across from the hotel. He dug a light jacket out of his pack and left the room. He had decided to ignore the guidebook’s recommended hikes and let chance choose one of the forest roads.

He was alone on the packed earth path as he walked through the tall trees. Every so often, he caught a glimpse of a clear blue sky with brilliantly white clouds above him but it was pleasantly dim beneath the pines. He wondered where everyone was. The train had been full of chattering families, but there was no one here in the forest.

The clearing surprised him. It was just a small area, almost perfectly round, that appeared suddenly around a curve in the trail. In its center, on a stone pedestal, stood a wood and brass tablet with a tile roof protecting it. He went closer to look at it and found that, on its back, there was a translation in several languages of the inscription: "Erected in memory of the spirits of the trees cut during the long Japanese occupation."

He smiled with affection for these people who, despite his desire, he so little understood. He continued on his walk and the forest thinned. A vista of farmland in a little protected valley opened before him. He wandered down the winding path toward one of the farmhouses, wondering what plants were growing in such orderly and well tended rows. As he got closer, he saw that he was approaching a few acres of roses. Each row of green was crowned by red blossoms.

He was nearing the whitewashed house with its upsweeping roof when, without warning, it started to rain heavily. He ran for the cover of its eaves, hoping that this storm would be brief. He pulled out a pack of 'Long Life' cigarettes, still amused by the name and the picture of the sage on the box, and lit one. He stood watching the rain fall and the wind blow through the flowers.

The rain kept falling and he thought he would have to make a run for the shelter of the trees. An old man, wearing worn but clean white shirt and trousers, came through the door of the building.

"Ni hao ma."

"Ni hao. But I'm sorry, I don't speak Chinese."

He thought the man had come out to chase him from the farm. He was, after all, very much an alien on this mountain. But the man came over to him, smiled, and took his wrist in his rough sun-browned hand to lead him out of the rain and into the house. He was bowed into a small room with a couch, a couple of chairs, a small table, a cabinet, and a beautiful view of the valley, the waving roses with the rain clouds above.

The old man indicated that he should sit, and left the room. He sat and looked around. The furniture was old and looked like it would have been as much at home in a rent-to-buy store in an American town. The pictures on the walls were bad reproductions of the type on sale at a K-Mart. Everything was impeccably clean and he started to wonder if there was a wife or other family who took such loving care of this home.

His host came back and set a black lacquer tray with a delicate porcelain teapot, two cups, and a plate of unfamiliar and brightly colored cookies on the table in front of the couch. Talking continuously in an incomprehensible singsong voice, he pulled a chair opposite and poured steaming pale liquid into the cups. He picked one up in both hands and bowed again from the waist before sitting in one of the chairs.

The old man kept the cups filled until the teapot was empty, then stood up and walked softly to the cabinet. He returned with a large black book. Taking a seat next to his guest he put the book on the table. The cover was embossed in gold with a single word in English: Photographs. Nodding and smiling, the host opened the book and, still talking, carefully turned the pages. It was full of snapshots of people. Some were young, some old, some outside the house, and some in front of other houses. Some were partially obscured by a careless photographer's thumb; some had their legs or heads cut off by

poor framing. The farmer pointed to each photograph, one after the other, with a nicotine and earth stained finger while making impenetrable comments.

He didn't know who they were and the old man couldn't tell him but it didn't matter. The act of sharing the photographs passed the time and the rain gradually stopped. They looked up from the book and smiled at each other, then stood and walked together to the door. When he got outside, the departing guest turned and bowed to the farmer. He recalled the Chinese words and thanked his host.

“Shieh, shieh.”

“Shieh, shieh,” the old man responded with a bow. “Shieh, shieh.”

Still smiling, he walked back through the roses toward the dripping trees. He wondered what he would have for dinner.