

Flowers

By Vanessa Crowley

Hutongs have a way of taking you as you wander deeper into one of labyrinthine alleyways of old Beijing. They never do it all at once; it's always in sips so small you barely notice the loss. There's a sense of being out of place, too far off the main road echoes in every step. Maybe it's the dark; there are no streetlights here. For that matter there aren't any directions either. The surrounding shadows have an ethereal quality, there are certainly buildings and perhaps even people beneath them, but they are not on the same plane. I am a ghost, a *laowai*. This is not my place.

Ahead this vein of pavement comes to an abrupt end, only to be cut by another artery going deeper still into maze. A decrepit building stands opposite the mouth of the ally. Is this the destination? Surely not, there is just a neon sign proclaiming BAR —only the A glows red. Going in seems as good an option as continuing to wander the streets. I open the door. Like outside, everything is abandoned, covered in neglect.

Music slinks down the stairs and beckons seductively. A winking star on the wall whispers "Memory Island." It barely registers. The stairs give a tenuous squish that suggests there is little beneath the carpet. The music bears me up. Suddenly the ground is again solid, in a small dark room, filled with twenty men and their cigarettes. All are local. I am the last shadow to arrive.

My breath stops when the lights dim. A techno pulse emerges from the darkness and reminds my heart to beat. When just enough tension has built, the multicolored spots over the small stage lights erupt. Nine drag queens line the back of the stage. Queens! All exuding auras of such feminine confidence that even Cixi—the long dead empress-dowager of the Qing—would surely blush. But the queens waste no time with such thoughts. The men at the tables are transfixed. A sultry voice proclaims, "I saw you and her. Walking in the rain. You were holding hands. And I will never be the same." One-by-one they catwalk downstage. As the last queen reaches the, all are eating out of her hands. She is beautiful in a way that the others aren't. Beautiful in that be-with-me, be-me, be-baby-be, being-and-nothingness sort of way. The waiter must shake me back to reality momentarily. I think I mumble "*Tsing Tsao*." I'm lost again, between what is and what is not, between what I am and what I want to be. She raises a microphone. A beer appears. Her strut stops. I am desperate; I have to know. I grab the waiter before he leaves. She begins to sing, her voice gentle, unforced, astounding. She sings of sorrow in a way that needs no language. "*Ta jiao shemme mingzi?*" Who is she? Her name ... is Flower.

After the show, I wait. Surely I'm here for sex? Why else would a ghost stray this far from home? I protest. She doubts. "Research," I tell her, a half-truth at this point that only I half-believe. I'm writing an ethnography on Beijing's LGTB community, I tell her, the first I know of—all true, I swear—will she talk with me? She wearily relents. It's a new line if nothing else.

We must be the same age or thereabouts. Or she's a bit older. She sees me, but she doesn't *see* me yet; perhaps she senses it? The conversation bumbles forward. What's her hometown? Does she like Beijing? She answers slowly. The queen persona slips away, but a transwoman remains. She laments working as a queen, the only job that pays the bills. "There are other ways, but..." Suddenly, her cell phone interrupts. "It's late," she says, excusing herself.

Of course, I return the next night. And the next night. As soon as she steps on stage, she sees me. I sit near the stage where I can't be missed among the shadows. She knows I'm there for her. She pushes down a small smile. But what do I want? This is what she asks me after the show. "Why are you here?" Research, I reply. I can't even convince myself anymore. "No really, why are you here?" I study her face and the wall between us. I hold my breath. She touches my hand. "Breathe," she whispers... I do. I sigh. I halt. I stumble. I babble. "You know, I begin, you *know*..." I tell her about alcohol. About a pair of scissors at the age of twelve. About the pushups and high heels stashed under my bed. About the eyeliner in my backpack. About long nights stoned in cornfields, looking up at the stars. About attempted suicide. My story, half-whispered, leaves us alone among the empty tables. My Chinese breaks down. Her English picks up. We meet somewhere in the middle. She hugs me and I weep. We weep together.

I still collect data during the days, but my nights belong to Flower. We talk for hours. The sun comes up. We laugh at it. We laugh at ourselves. We know more about each other than anyone else does. I admire her. I love her. I draw strength from her. On our last night together she calls me her "*meimei*," her little sister. Again I weep, but joyously. Before I left, I swore to her that I would come back, someday in the summer, after the Olympics.

Life changes when I land back in the States. It has to. I start to remake myself, trying to hold onto that feeling of being authentic. In Beijing, Flower dances. And I dance with her. She walks with me. We talk every so often, she teaches me a Chinese Proverb: "You'll have to find yourself before you can find your way home." I think of her and know I am not alone. I found family. I found myself. And I will never be the same.