

Year of the Horse

short stories

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Year of the Horse

(Short Stories)

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Introduction

The two stories in this book are based on true events that occurred during the year I lived in China, although I have taken some creative liberties in order to keep each story on point and under 1000 words.

Year of the Horse

It is winter, 2002. I'm in Daqing, Heilongjiang Province in northern China, working as an English teacher in a top senior high school. I'm barely hanging on.

I have lunch with Sarah. It's the first time I've seen another foreigner in two months. We chat about work, mutual friends, and the upcoming holidays. She's going back to Canada for three weeks and is surprised to learn that I don't have any plans for winter vacation.

"Where can I go alone?" I ask her. "The one time I took a train to Harbin by myself I was swamped with people all touching my hair and asking me for money. I've hardly learned any Chinese because no-one has time to teach me. And the weather - it's minus ten or lower everyday!"

What I don't say is that I want to go home. It's not just winter that's depressing; it's the thought of staying in Daqing for another semester.

It's dangerous in my neighborhood, my classes are really hard, and there's nothing to do on weekends. I'm completely isolated, and don't know how to continue.

Something good happens; a friend from work, Qiu Yun, offers to travel with me during winter vacation. I perk up. "That's fantastic!"

"I've never been on a plane!" She hugs me, just as excited.

Two weeks later, we set off on our adventure. We fly to Hanzhou for a few days, and then take a train to Anhui province to climb Yellow Mountain.

This is why I came to China! But there's still that feeling of dread inside me; I still have to go back to Daqing for another 4 months. .

A few days later in a small village, we visit a market. There are many stalls selling cheap antiques from the Qing Dynasty (1644 - 1912).

A ring catches my eye. It's a man's ring, made of solid silver. It is square cut, and has a horse engraved on the surface. There's something magical about it; I can't put it down.

The seller points to two Chinese characters on the ring.

"See these? They mean 'power' and 'success'. Also it's the Year of the Horse - very good luck."

I pay him and slip it on my forefinger. Qiu Yun can't understand my fascination with it.

"Why do you want a man's ring?" she asks, clearly puzzled.

In shamanism, the horse represents strength, freedom, and travel. Horse shows us what we've achieved, and how far we still have to go. The ring becomes my totem; wearing it I can see my way forward. I remind myself that this year in China is my dream. It's tough, but I'll be strong and see it through.

I go back to Daqing and I work. It's still hard, but I value what I learn everyday. Years later, I wear the ring when I travel or need guidance, to remind me where I can go if I believe in myself.

The Girl from Xinjiang

I look out the window, the Saturday afternoon traffic is whizzing by. It's mostly taxis and a few cars, but there are also trucks, pedi-cabs, and even a donkey cart. I've been living in Daqing, northern China for about two months, and it still feels strange.

I'm happy when there's a knock at the door – it might be one of the Chinese English teachers I'm friends with. I open the door but I don't recognize the woman behind it. She greets me in Mandarin, and keeps talking. I ask her to speak slower. She looks puzzled and seems to repeat what she said first. I apologize and tell her I don't understand her well.

"You don't understand?" she asks.

"I'm Australian, I don't speak much Chinese." I try to explain but she mustn't understand the way I say 'Australian' in Mandarin, because she then asks, "Are you from Xinjiang?"

This completely shocks me. Xinjiang is a large province in the west of China and as far from Daqing as you can get within the country.

I shake my head and tell her in simple Chinese that I'm a foreigner. Finally she nods and says goodbye.

After she leaves, I got to the tiny bathroom and look at my reflection. I dyed my hair brown before I came here, so my hair is dark enough to pass for Chinese from behind, but I still have fair skin with freckles across my cheeks, a pointy nose, and green almond-shaped eyes. My eyes do look a bit Asian; maybe Chinese people wouldn't notice the different color.

When I tell my friends they laugh.

"You don't look like Han Chinese, that's why she guessed you're from Xinjiang." Linda says. (My Chinese friends use English nicknames).

Anyway I forget about it for a few months. Until it happens again.

It's early March. I'm walking home from school and I go into a little grocery shop I've never seen before. The owner greets me, and I say "ni hao!" back.

She comes over for a chat, and looks closely at my face.

"Are you from Xinjiang?" she asks.

I laugh. No, I tell her, I'm Australian. We chat for a few minutes and I buy some snacks.

The next day, I meet Julia to go shopping. I tell her what happened as we ride in the taxi. She has a good laugh again.

"Let's see if more people believe it." She tells the taxi-driver that I'm her sister-in-law from Xinjiang. He nods, and asks if I can speak Mandarin or not. Julia tells him I can understand, but prefer to speak English.

"That's really interesting," he replies.

“See Kelly, next time you take a taxi somewhere tell them you’re not a foreigner, you are Xinjiangren, and they won’t charge you so much!” Julia says.

I try this several times, and although some drivers look a bit skeptical, I always get a discount.

It’s July. My job has finished, and I leave Daqing. It’s hard to say goodbye to my friends, I know I won’t see them again for many years.

Before going back to Australia, I visit Xian and then Beijing. In Xian, I see the Terracotta Warriors, Palace Gardens, and the old city walls. I take taxis alone. ‘I’m from Xinjiang’ works here too.

In Beijing, I’m shown around by my Chinese friend, Judy. We go to the art gallery one afternoon with her daughter. The price board has a family ticket, and I tell her about Julia always saying I’m her sister-in-law. Judy grins and comes back with our discounted ticket.

“No problem!” She giggles.

On my last day in Beijing, also my last day in China, we go to the Tibetan Buddhist Temple. While looking around, I chat with a young Chinese man in English. I learn he is a student in Beijing, but is from Urumqi.

“Oh! You’re from Xinjiang!” It’s the first time I’ve actually met a Xinjiangren. I tell him my story.

“Yes, actually you do look like a minority nationality from Xinjiang Province!” he confirms.

I was glad to meet him, it seems a fitting ending to my stay. While I can’t wait to get home and get back to western life again, I know that my memories of China, like this one, will always bring a smile to my face and a feeling of gratitude that I had such an amazing experience.

Thank you for reading!