

The fifth annual short story competition

The Mogford Prize for Food & Drink Writing 2017

‘Dine with the devil’

by Johnny Reed

...a huge success! Over 1000 entries
were received for the 2017 prize...



old parsonage



GEE'S



‘Dine with the devil’

Terminal 3 teemed with frustrated travellers. Long queues had formed at Check-in and Security. Most were fleeing from the dank January weather to warm holiday destinations but James was not so lucky. Shanghai was likely to be even colder and greyer than London and there was no pleasure in his visit. Travelling in the mid section of the plane was not enough to ensure an effortless passage to his seat on the plane. As the passengers trudged slowly towards the security scanners, dragging their feet and cabin luggage, the long line snaked back and forth over a wide area.

As the line approached the inspection hall, two lines merged and James fell in step with a tall Chinese girl dressed all in black apart from a pair of short red leather boots with high heels. The contrast of the bright red with her otherwise sombre garb made her stand out, to James at least. She just

had one small bag trailing behind her and exuded a feeling of confidence.

Many passengers were seated when James finally got on the plane. He had an aisle seat and next to the window a small black figure was already curled up in a blanket, two red leather boots lying on the floor between the seats.

As the plane headed east towards the Urals, James was thinking a lot about fate. He was dragged back into the present by a young air hostess who looked genuinely concerned about his wellbeing.

“Can I get you anything?” she referred to the list of passengers in her hand with pen poised “Mr Booth”.

James paused a moment for reflection. He was not sure what time zone he was on at that point but wine would probably make him sleep better, or at least feel better, assuming it was drinkable. “Red wine, please.”

“Red wine. And how about you Miss” she referred to her list again and looked a bit perplexed for a moment “Li?”

The black figure and blanket uncurled slightly. “Red wine good” and immediately recurred.

When the wine came, the black figure sat up, rubbed her hair and looked scornfully at the small bottle with a screw top that had been placed in front of her. She filled her glass and turned to James.

“You go Shanghai for business?”

“Yes,” he hesitated, “mainly.”

“What business you do?” She looked enquiringly at him while taking a sip of wine.

“Computers. My brother has a business which I help with from time to time. But mainly I am a researcher, an academic.” He paused for some wine. “How about you?”

“Also computer. At Oxford. Doctorate in computer science, AI and machine learning. Back for Chinese New Year. See family.” Her English was economical but it worked. And she had answered all small talk in one go. So it was James’s turn again. “Your brother have good business?”

“Yes. It was very good. In fact a Chinese company was very keen to buy it. But now I ‘m not so sure.”

“Family business good. Why a problem not sell?”

Where to start and how much to tell? The story was not a happy one and James was not sure he wanted to discuss the events of the last few days with a complete stranger, especially one who was in a similar field and might have connections in Shanghai. She might even know the company involved. At that point he was saved by the arrival of the meal service.

“Have you decided what you would like to eat Miss Li?”

It turned out that Miss Li was from Shandong province in the north of China, which probably explained both her height and

her fondness for red wine. Miss Li also knew Shanghai well as she had studied there. She also spoke the Shanghainese dialect.

“Will you stay in Shanghai or go up to Shandong for Chinese New Year?” James asked as the trays were cleared and they were left with their wine again.

“Shanghai. With my aunt. Parents both dead.”

Before James could respond with the usual commiserations, she returned to the question that was clearly still uppermost in her mind that remained unanswered.

“So why sell business now a problem?”

James looked at his glass and made a decision. He would tell her. He had not spoken to anyone since his brother had been taken ill and it might help to clarify things in his own mind. She was a stranger, she didn't seem to be connected in any way and she was obviously highly intelligent.

“It's a slightly strange story. I don't really understand it myself but here goes.”

Over the next twenty minutes James described to the strange young lady how his life had suddenly been turned upside down. He and his brother had worked together off and on for a number of years. The core business was cyber security, which was also James's specialisation. His brother had a strong computer background as well but his interests lay in running and developing a business. They had seen the cyber security

market expand dramatically over the last few years and had positioned themselves at the forefront of the industry.

The company had been going for 5 years and in the last 12 months they had received a number of offers from rival security firms, some of which were known to have government links. James didn't know why his brother had decided to have discussions with Taifeng. Although James was a director of his brother's company with an equal 50% shareholding, he was not involved in its management. None of the employees seemed to have any idea either.

The previous week, James's brother had gone to Shanghai to see Taifeng's Chairman, Mr Wu, who was also the founder and owner of the company. Here the picture was far from clear. He seems to have had a meeting but was taken ill on the way back to his hotel. He was rushed to the Shanghai Rui Jin hospital where he fell into a coma and was put on a life support machine. The doctors were still undertaking tests but they had not yet determined the cause of the problem.

“When I got the news, I was devastated. I had a call from the Taifeng Chairman's interpreter to express his concern and invite me to call on the Chairman as soon as I arrived in Shanghai. He had obviously assumed that I would come.” Miss Li did not wait for more. “You see him?”

“I don't particularly want to but he was the last person to

see my brother. I think they had had dinner together so he might know if there was something in the meal that might have produced an allergic reaction. I assume his intentions are honourable but he may also know that I can commit the company if the other shareholder is incapacitated. It's in our Shareholder Agreement which I am sure he will have received from my brother."

Miss Li sucked in her breath and looked concerned. "Seems not good" and bit her lower lip slightly. "You speak Chinese? You speak Shanghainese? You have staff in Shanghai?"

"No, no and no" said James with a weary look.

"What about car?"

"Another no. But there are plenty of taxis."

"That's not good." She paused for a moment. "OK, I arrange everything. I have time in Shanghai. I am your assistant interpreter. My uncle your driver. He retired but still has company limo. I doctoral student so you pay me £20 an hour if we successful, just uncle's expenses if not successful. Yes or not yes?" She looked James straight in the eye and something told him she meant it.

"What is your definition of success?" he asked.

"Brother fixed and company sold to right person."

"OK. I'll shake on that." James extended his hand to Miss Li.

"Now sleep. Long flight. Lots to do when arrive." With that she curled up again with her blanket.

Eight hours later they landed in Shanghai. James had slept surprisingly well. The strain of the last few days had exhausted him. But the arrangement with Miss Li, although not of much tangible value as yet, had given him the confidence to sleep.

Neither had baggage to collect so they walked straight through customs and out onto the concourse, the red boots clicking on the marble. They were greeted by a crowd of people with name boards. Amongst them, standing slightly apart was a driver in a blue uniform with a peaked hat. It was Miss Li's uncle, beaming with joy to see his niece, hardly noticing James in the process.

"This my uncle, Chen Jun." James shook his hand which was firm and strong, although the uncle looked nearer 80 than 60. "Call him Chen."

"Uncle, this Mr Brooks. We look after him." Mr Chen nodded and beamed some more. "Uncle was driver for US Consul General many years. Speaks American." From then on things moved quickly. The Chen car, bequeathed to him by his former employer, was a large black Lincoln Continental, almost as old as Chen. Miss Li had changed James's hotel to one she said was better, and cheaper with the US Consular discount. It was certainly bigger and smarter than

the one that had been booked by Taifeng.

By this time it was late morning Shanghai time and Miss Li said they should rest for two hours before going to visit James's brother in hospital. After that, she had arranged a meeting with Taifeng, which at the suggestion of the Chairman would be held in a private room of a restaurant near their offices.

The hospital visit depressed James. His brother was fixed up to a range of machines and was obviously not aware of anything. The doctors were polite and tried to be encouraging but it was clear that they had no idea what was wrong with him. There was the unspoken message that at some point the machines might have to be switched off.

Miss Li had left him to see his brother alone. Chen was waiting outside and would take James to dinner, picking up Miss Li en route.

James sat in the back of the car and thought gloomy thoughts. The car slowed and Chen turned to James in the back seat. "We stop here for Miss Li." Chen got out and opened the back door. It was Miss Li. But completely transformed into a slightly awkward gangly student.

"How was brother?" She asked in a quiet voice.

"Not good." James replied. He couldn't bring himself to ask about the transformation.

They quickly arrived at the restaurant and were led into the private room. The Chairman was waiting for them with a fixed smile that had no warmth. He asked them to be seated, in perfect English.

"Mr Brooks, I am sorry to hear about your brother. Most unfortunate. He had dinner here with us but after that who knows. But let us sit down and discuss what can be done. As you see, I have a good command of English so I don't think you will need your young interpreter." With that he sat down and indicated to the waiters to start serving the cold dishes.

"Thank you for your concern Chairman Wu at this difficult time. The whole company has been devastated by the news and we are all hoping for some miracle." James looked at Miss Li. "This is also my assistant so I would like her to remain if possible. She has my complete confidence."

"Very well" said the Chairman. "I would like to offer you a few unusual delicacies at this meal while we talk." The plates in the centre of the table filled the revolving lazy Susan. They were a glistening mixture of Shanghai's culinary delicacies.

"As you know, your brother was a great gourmet and his interests extended to some of the earliest known delicacies of traditional Chinese cuisine. That night he came here we had an elaborate banquet, much of which you see here tonight. He was delighted. He sampled everything. And then I told him a

fact which he chose not to believe.”

The Chairman paused as the cold dishes were replaced and a steaming array of further delicacies presented. James and Miss Li had only picked at the plates so far.

“I told him that he had just eaten a dish from the Tang dynasty which had been one of the favourites of the second Tang Emperor. It was not a dish for the faint hearted. Central in the ingredients was an extract from the swim bladder of a fish found only off Hainan Island. This contained a deadly toxin which was fatal unless the antidote was administered within three hours. The second Tang emperor knew the antidote and took it after sharing this dish with the first tang Emperor, who didn’t.”

“Of course modern medical science means that someone who has been poisoned can be kept alive for much longer. But not indefinitely. I told your brother this after he had sampled all the dishes, as had I. He refused to sell the company on the terms I required, part of which would have provided him with the antidote.” James was speechless as he looked at the plates of food, one of which was deadly, and at the face of the Chairman.

“I know the structure of your company. I know you have the power to sell it to me. I am offering you a fair price, in the circumstances, as you have to add the value of your brother’s

life and, as importantly, yours. Miss Li, I regret, is not part of the bargain but you refused to let her leave.”

“Do I have your answer?” As he spoke, strong hands gripped James from behind and dragged him off his chair. He could see that Miss Li had also been immobilised.

“Go to hell, Wu,” said James as he felt the prick of a hypodermic needle in his right arm.

“You first,” replied Wu.

At that point James began to lose consciousness. He remembered seeing Miss Li roll out of the hands of her captors and deliver a blow with some form of stick that she produced from her jacket. After that the room swam and was filled with blue uniformed people carrying batons.

When James awoke some time later, he was told that he had been in a coma for three days. However, he was now out of danger, as was his brother. On the fourth day he received two visitors. One was wearing the uniform of a consular driver with a grin as wide as his car and the other wore the uniform of a Captain in the Public Security Bureau, this time with her hair firmly tucked under her peaked cap.