

Extract: *Shanghai Dancing* by Brian Castro

It's hard to track my father down. He stayed once at this hotel...the Peace, it's called now. As if anyone believes in it. No such person can live in a state of aspiration day in and out, except perhaps over at the mental ward beyond the tourist line where you see them smiling back and forth slipping dances between chain wire, exorcising their pain. Peace, peace. They are the blessed. I know them like my own heart.

But in my father's day it was the Cathay on the Bund. Filthy rich, a humidior of Havanas in his breast pocket, he rented the penthouse suite three months at a time so he could watch his ships through opera glasses, noting them in a leather-bound book as they ploughed through day and night. Night and Day. His tune. Looking across the Soochow he could check on his company steam-yacht, wooden, gaff-rigged for show, his Sikh captain idling on deck polishing brass. This was his territory: an implausible wealth built on treacle; his coolies waxing the floors of godowns with blood and sweat and polishing the ramps with bales of rice they dragged from end to end; he knew when to go legitimate. And then his son; and then his other son. One generation will always destroy something. You can count on that.

So my father looks out across the Whangpoo and the Soochow and it is already midday, 1932. He bathes in tepid water, rinsing and wincing at a pain in his genitals and donning his cream linen suit and knitted tie, repairs for brunch in the hotel restaurant. He plans his trip next season, on the President Line, to Vancouver, maybe the Great Lakes and home via Japan. Calls for the candlestick telephone and rings his friends. Waves for a car and he's on his way to the Cercle Sportif where he meets Joao and Meme and Carlinho da Silva and two French girls and they play tennis and swim for an hour or so. Tiffin at three at the American Club and then a few rounds of ten-pin along polished alleys tingling with wax and the layered air of ripe cigars. Then a siesta in the Reading Room with the day's paper upon his face, stuttered breath calibrating the hard canons of perfect billiard shots until the Boy wakes him at six for a shave, massage and then back to the Cathay to change for a tea-dance the Sassoons are holding; a casual slow-waltzing affair before cocktails out on dappled verandahs marking dates for future business. By nine it's drinks on board his launch, jokes rippling across the water while they snack on crisp Peking duck folded into crepes, Meme tossing his Moet over the transom on account of his cirrhosis. But death, too, passes by ten when the cabarets are starting to jump. So onto the Ambassador, then the Canidrome, or perhaps the Venus Cafe and then by rickshaw convoy to back-street speak-easies, the high class, low class and no class at all, each boasting of hostesses at a dollar a dance for taxi-dancing. The wheedling voice of the Maitre'D: Take your choice; that wide-eyed one, Small-bird, her name, she pines for you. So he lavished upon her ten books of tickets. Early next morning, he rolls home to the Cathay smelling of perfume and women and orders from the lingerie shop a boxed set of silken underwear and a bouquet of roses to be sent up to the Avenue Joffre. Then it all begins again. Midday; the opera glasses; all this work. Shanghai-dancing.

But it was up to me to listen for his anxieties, many years later; hear his breathlessness when he lost everything and was on the street and then suddenly, in his borrowed suit filled with racing stubs he dropped dead in a gutter in Sydney, and I was in a far-off place milking cows on a grey dawn hunching over a bucket. They came and told me, my friends, their fingers deep in pockets, leaning like cattle over a rail, staring the other way. Then I rode my motorcycle back through a string of thunderstorms, singing at the top of my voice for no reason at all, the whole length of a dark mountain road.