

The King of Ningxia

People change. So do countries.

By

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1. The Big Ask in The Big Apple

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Duke Amici, a failed businessman, sat in a coffee shop at New York's Waldorf Astoria and shared nostalgic half-smiles with a woman wearing designer clothes and carrying a \$43,000 Hermes red pink crocodile handbag. In just a few minutes, Duke would ask her for money. Lots of money. For now, both worked hard to control their expressions, exhibiting some past affection while maintaining distance and discretion. For more than a moment, while she talked of cabs and city traffic, he imagined her as she once was, not as one of the richest women on Earth, not as the person who recently bought the American landmark they sat in. No, he saw a young college student, an aspiring poet wearing the faded blue clothes of a worker and standing in a dank, dusty dormitory hallway lit by a single bulb.

It was a vivid mental picture, that dormitory at the Foreign Languages Institute in Beijing, China, a modest mess, considering the college's great prestige. At that time, in 1984, the Communist revolution was 35 years old; market reforms were beginning, Western investment was happening, production was up, modernization was evident. Even so, the dormitory looked like a third-world prison.

"I want you to meet my roommates," he recalled her saying.

He felt so foreign, so out of place, yet he was excited to be there, in a place few Americans had been. Seeing and learning. Getting the truth. Bridging the distance and the distortion between them and us. China's new cadre of leaders wanted this, and that's why he was there as a guest worker. If it also happened that he met a few women, well, that would be fine, too. And he had.

Her name was Song Mei. At the Waldorf, she went by Emily Song, the American name she had taken, with "Emily" a

nod to her favorite American poet. At the dorm, he and Song Mei squeezed into a room no bigger than a tool shed. There was hardly a place to stand. On opposite sides of the room were triple-tier bunk beds made of unfinished wood. The mattresses were thin and shoddy. A fine dust covered everything. Freshly washed underwear hung on a line to dry. It dried quickly in Beijing, a city with almost no humidity. This little den of poverty was part of the reward for the top language students in a nation of 1 billion people. Who knew that one of them, maybe more, would conquer Manhattan.

In Beijing in the '80s, when guest workers like Duke wandered off into places they were not expected, they were treated like visitors from outside the galaxy. In the dorm, the other five women looked at him with intense curiosity and a degree of fear.

There were introductions, some very small talk, and then an exit by Duke and his poet friend into the concrete hallway and down eight flights of concrete steps. As they descended, with her leading the way, Duke wondered how she felt about him. He assumed any ambitious English major would be drawn to any American who could help with her English and be a gateway into an American university. Was there a secondary attraction? Did she like his looks, which weren't bad for a Caucasian? Did his personality translate? Chatty. A little jokey. A mix of upbeat and serious and – like her – an appreciation for literature, films, and art.

It was difficult to know. She had been his tour guide on a journey through the unknown and strange. He believed she had been honest and sincere with him, not a manipulative arm of something unseen. He felt she liked him, and, in an act of balance, he would try to make sure she didn't start liking him too much. When his two-year contract at the New China News Agency ended, he intended to go home, alone.

To her disappointment and tears, he did go home alone. Two decades later, here she is again, not a poet but a commanding force, a representative of something that had not existed when he first met her. In Beijing, he was the catch. No longer. Time and circumstance made him the supplicant. Once,

she thought her future depended on him. His future now depended on her.

In the beginning, he called her Song Mei. Toward the end, he used the more affectionate Mei-Mei, but only for a short time.

Now what would he call her?

“You’re Emily, right?” he asked.

“From Emily Dickenson,” she said. “But I haven’t written poetry in years. The name is the only poetic thing about me.”

“You’ve been too busy accumulating a fortune,” he said, moving the unmentioned to the forefront. “And you’re drinking coffee, not tea.” Emily Song also ordered a pork dumpling appetizer.

“I think it’s better. Easy to get, with so many coffee shops, even in China.”

“You’re no longer a vegetarian?” he asked.

“No. How did you remember that?”

“I still feel bad about you wasting that Big Mac and going hungry at the embassy party. Well, how do I look?” he asked. He wore a striped dress shirt, gray wool slacks, and black shoes, which he shined. In China, he mostly wore sneakers, jeans, and khaki Banana Republic shirts. Clean and tidy now, back then his hair was long and shaggy and he had a beard.

With a cold stare, Emily Song focused on his eyes and the theatrics they were performing. She pulled back a few inches.

“You’re older than I expected. Hair grayer than I expected. You’re not as charming as you once were, and you carry the imprint of defeat. You looked better with a beard, more artistic.”

“Brutal but accurate. You, however, look regal, a fixture in the heavens.” He liked the way she smelled, a rich perfume of – what was it? – roses? In Beijing, sometimes – not always – Song Mei carried the unpleasant scent of cheap rapeseed oil commonly used for cooking. “What’s that perfume you’re wearing?”

“Jo Malone London, Rose and White Musk Absolu. I know you’ll ask. It’s \$300 for 100 milliliters.”

In between the rapeseed oil and the Jo Malone, there had been the rare letter and the even rarer phone call. Without letting on, they followed each other in the news and, more recently, online. Without his help or knowledge, Song Mei had come to the U.S. as a Ph.D candidate at the University of Pennsylvania, near his family's home. In a surprise phone call, she asked him to visit her in Philadelphia over a Labor Day weekend. It was the first Duke had heard from her since the goodbye at the airport. He was caught totally off guard by the call.

"But I'm in Florida now," he told her. "And ... I'm engaged."

She ignored or didn't hear the last part.

"You have a car, don't you?"

"I'm eight hundred miles away."

"We have three days. That's enough time. You must be off for the holiday."

"I don't think you understand how far away you are," he said.

The call ended unpleasantly. He didn't even get her number.

In some respect, in the Waldorf, it was as if that phone call had just ended. Her English, always good, was now almost perfect. Her slight British accent, imparted by teachers who learned British English, remained, adding to her natural charm. The charm still came through, only with a hardness. Duke Amici sensed that hardness, and when he looked at her, he thought mostly of money, her money, and whether he could get some of it. In an unvisited mental recess, however, there was a faded, jaded, whimsical thought: Did I ever love her?

Probably not. But he liked her. The idea of an off-limits, exotic girlfriend had put him in a trance that did not break until the day he left.

Did she love him? Again, probably not. He was like some prince, a special person with intrinsic powers from a special place that was far away and beyond the reach of people like her. Her plan, thought through night after night in her crowded dorm room, was to have him rescue her, uplift her, open her world. Song Mei felt she needed him to secure her

destiny, and that fate had supplied him. Time proved she didn't. Time proved that her strength, assisted by the rushing tide of history and the wild success of Chinese commerce and industry, would be enough to get her almost anything and take her almost anywhere.

And so, with everything on her side, the person who was arguably the third richest woman in China agreed to this coffee shop reunion. In old times, she would have written a poem – in English – about the anxiety and anticipation, about the expectations and the chance for either disappointment or exhilaration. But, as she admitted to Duke, she no longer wrote poetry, and the outcome of their meeting was not in the balance. It was strictly her decision, and that decision had been made.

Song Mei, as Emily Song, decided to give him the money needed to save his bankrupt company. Years ago, Duke had, for all practical purposes, saved her father's life. She was in his debt. This would make them even. In return, however, she would take a controlling interest in his company. If he didn't like the terms, she didn't care.

"How did you come to name your company ... your failed company?" she asked.

"Do you like the name?"

"I don't understand it. Why that name?"

The name of the business was Ningxia Enterprises. Ningxia was Song Mei's home province. Her family roots were there in that heavily Muslim, mostly backward desert province. As a young man, her father, working through a rigid meritocracy, fought his way out of Ningxia to cosmopolitan Shanghai, where Song Mei was raised and learned to speak Shanghai dialect. Then came a setback. During the Cultural Revolution, her father, a top surgeon, was deemed a counter-revolutionary and exiled back to Ningxia. Schools were closed and Song Mei, like millions of young city people, was sent to work on a farm, an attempt to reeducate and reignite revolutionary spirit. Because of her father, Song Mei held a low status on the farm.

"Maybe the company name was a way to remember you," he said. "Also, because of you and your sick father, I did

some ridiculous things to help him out that in the end, unexpectedly, netted me the seed money for my company.”

Song Mei swallowed hard, looked off to a far wall and said, “What you did was the most touching thing anyone has ever done for me.”

In truth, the name for Ningxia Enterprises was directly related to Song Mei’s plea on the day in 1986 when Duke left China. They went to the airport together and she begged him to stay, telling him that together they could have a great life in China. They could move back to Ningxia, where there are no foreigners. He would be unique, special, in demand, respected beyond all others, elevated to a status he could not imagine.

“I will make you the king of Ningxia,” she said, in tears.

He never forgot that. As CEO of Ningxia Enterprises, he fancied himself its king. Song Mei’s prophecy realized. If she invested, that would make her the queen.

Duke drank the last of his coffee. “The company name is to help remember you,” he insisted.

“My impression is you don’t remember enough,” she said.

“I remember you looking good in the shabbiest of clothes. Your clothes didn’t matter. It was the way you walked that caught my attention. In designer clothes, you’re another person. Still, even today, the way you walk, you could stroll into Saks wearing peasant garb and they’d still sell you that purse.”

“I never buy such things.”

“And yet, there it is.”

“This was a gift. I had three more just like it. Also gifts. I didn’t need them, so I gave them to the wives of important officials whose approval was needed for my projects. In China, relationships are the key to success. Relationships are built on free dinners, lavish vacations, non-stop giving, and favors for favors. You haven’t reached that point in America, or at least haven’t acknowledged it. You keep it in the shadows.”

“The smart ones understand,” Duke said. “The dumb ones like me don’t. We learn the hard way.”

“May I hear your version of how you went broke?”

How to tell it without looking like a fool?

“You know I’m a journalist by trade,” he said. “I knew nothing about business, what it requires. When I got home from China, I met an old friend, Jimmie. An odd fellow. He was a high school dropout, a former heroin addict. Mostly homeless. He slept on the street or on people’s couches, did some jail time, joined a religious cult. He has the gift of an over-active, inventive mind. He has a natural understanding of mechanical engineering, heat transfer, and refrigeration. In effect, he is a genius. No one could guess this from his appearance. I was one of the few. As kids we’d play baseball. He’d explain the game in terms of physics and geometry. He was 12 years old.”

“You feel quite comfortable among the lower classes, don’t you?” she said.

“Right, a member of the Chinese Communist party insulting a working man. How fitting.”

“This you misunderstand,” Emily Song said. “The party is run by and for the elite. The ideology is a ruse.”

“Anyway, I felt sorry for my old friend Jimmie. I was single then and let him work in my garage. After months of tinkering, he produced a remarkable machine. It takes in air and removes the moisture. Using minimal energy, it produces enough drinking water for an entire family. The machine is ideal for the developing world, for places in Africa where women trek three or four hours each day for drinking water they carry home on their heads.”

“And someone stole your machine because you didn’t have enough *guan xi* to protect it,” Emily Song said, using the Chinese term for “connections.” “You had a patent and felt safe, didn’t you? People today, especially in high-tech, say patents are worthless. Things move too fast.”

Duke had not expected this kind of conversation with this particular person. This particular person once spoke in images and metaphors, colors and shapes, of dream-like worlds that could never exist outside the mind. Her words now were too real. She had been a woman living apart from reality. This new specter was anchored in it.

“I’m going to take care of the ‘guan xi’ problem,” he said, “after we are re-funded and fully operating again. I’ve got a connection that will work. For us, the patent probably was the proper move. What I didn’t know then was that a patent must be successfully defended in court. We didn’t have the money for that.”

“Is it true you gave your machine to Menlo Industries?”

“We didn’t give them the machine,” Duke said, offended. “They stole it. One of their representatives saw it at a trade show and wanted to license the technology. Naturally, we loaned them our prototype ... a prototype is a ...”

“You no longer have to explain words to me,” Emily Song said.

“Really. Out the wazoo. Do you know what ‘out the wazoo’ means?”

“No.”

“Then I still have to explain.”

Emily Song appeared impatient and unnerved, but interested in Duke. Her inconsequential gestures told him: I’m happy to be here, I’m happy to see you again. “Can you please continue?” she said.

“So, we lent Menlo the prototype. They were going to evaluate it and decide whether to license the technology and build their own machine, which would have been great for us. Then they returned the machine, said it lacked the proper sophistication, were unwilling to license it and built their own -- based, we claim, on our design. Menlo used its massive marketing and distribution networks to sell their machine cheaper than us. Then they buried us in lawsuits. Bankruptcy followed.”

Emily Song put her hand up and requested the check.

“And what will it take to get you out of bankruptcy?”

Duke had his number, yet hesitated.

“Modestly, I think, after some changes, we could do it with 1.2 mill.”

Emily Song’s expression was blank. She rolled on.

“What is your plan for the ‘guan xi?’”

The last thing he wanted was to get his wife involved in anything remotely related to Song Mei, but this was necessary.

"My wife," he said with an uncomfortable tone. "She has a very distant relative. She doesn't know him well, but we see him at least once a year at family gatherings. I've spoken with him. He's a nice guy. It's her mother's, brother's, ex-wife's second husband. The brother, fortunately, gets along well with the ex-wife and is friends with her new husband."

"Can you make this faster? I have to be somewhere." She didn't.

"Two years ago, this guy was elected as a United States senator from New York."

"That's promising. It's what you need. What does he get?"

"I'm assuming if you invest in Ningxia Enterprises, you'll require 51 percent ownership."

"You're not such a bad businessman after all," Emily Song said.

"Your 51 percent will come out of the 82 percent Jimmie and I own. That leaves us with 31 percent. From our share, we will give 11 percent to our friend in the U.S. Senate and put him on the board. There are rules in the Senate about gifts and board positions, but we can finesse them and make it all work. He will be our protector, looking out for our interests and his own. With his help, we can win against Menlo in court and maybe even open up markets abroad. This is something I should have done two years ago."

Emily Song's minimal nod was taken as approval.

"You were smart to think of Africa," she said. "Generally, Americans have not been smart about Africa. My country has been heavily involved for decades. First with modest aid, university scholarships, goodwill, and friendship. Since then, we've constructed high-speed railroads, bridges, dams, highways, power plants, irrigation systems. We've pulled Africa up. We buy raw materials from them. Someday soon you are going to need African cobalt for the batteries in electric cars. You won't get it. We will have it all."

Duke Amici felt stupid for himself and his country.

“Sure, but when African countries make war, they kill each other with American weapons. I take it then that you’re in, that you’re my new partner,” Duke said.

“I think I can convince the Chinese government to buy your – our – machines and distribute them in Africa as tokens of good will,” she said. “I’ll have my investment back in no time.”

“One mill two?”

For the first time, Emily Song looked directly at Duke, seeing him as she saw him once before.

“My father is 91 years old,” she said. “He lives because of you. Through your little intrigue with the Russians, you got him the heart medicine he needed. When you left China, my government, out of respect for your help against the Moscow crowd, awarded my father his medicine for life. Of course, now I could buy the company that makes it. Back then it saved him. A person who does what you did, risking your freedom and maybe your life, doesn’t do it casually. I know that. I just wish I knew a little bit more about why you did it. No matter. I’ll be putting in three million American dollars. That’s how much my people say you need to turn things around.”

A deep exhale. A huge grin. A string of humble thank yous. Even an apology for taking up her time. Duked softly grabbed her hands and shook them as a deal sealer. After five seconds she pulled away.

“No matter what you claim, the company’s name is ironic,” Emily Song said.

Duke was too happy to argue but said. “I didn’t mean to imply anything about us with that name. It’s just a good name. I like the x sound. It has a modern ring.”

“The irony has nothing to do with our relationship. The name is ironic because this machine, designed to bring water to the thirsty, is named ‘Ningxia’ yet it won’t work in Ningxia because Ningxia is too dry. A desert. That’s all. That’s the real irony.”

The meeting was coming to an end. She was slow in getting up and clutched her bag.

“You own this place, the Waldorf. Right?” he said, smiling like a young man trying to impress a first date with a gag. “Do

we have to pay for the coffee? Let's run out on the check and see if they stop us. Then tell them who you are."

"It's an investment group. I'm part of an investment group that owns the Waldorf."

Silence followed as Emily Song gathered up her things. Duke tried to reopen the conversation with something else.

"Do you remember when I first kissed you in the Friendship Hotel?" he said, then immediately wished he could take it back.

Emily Song reached into her \$43,000 Hermes red pink crocodile handbag and placed \$50 on the table. Paying cash was unusual for her, since a tech company she acquired had developed China's most successful pay-by-phone app.

"I'm an old woman now," she said. "I don't talk nonsense. My lawyers and my CFO will contact you in two weeks. They'll have all the details. I'll expect an office that is at least as nice as yours, hopefully better."

No longer poorly dressed, no longer without makeup, no longer a vegetarian, and no longer hopelessly infatuated with a young American, Emily Song walked through the hotel's grand golden lobby and out the opulent, art deco doors using the same engaging gait once displayed on the dirty, dusty streets of Beijing. In addition to the \$50, she left behind the smell of roses. Duke took a deep breath, not leaving until she was in a cab and out of sight. The roses were now a new way to remember her.

Five blocks away, on 45th Street, the corners of Emily Song's lips turned slightly upward, in a way only she could perceive. By 35th Street, they had returned to a more business-like position.