

THE RABBIT ABC



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2021, July

爱你, so strong, sweet Rabbit!

Rabbit ABC is a piece of memory. It was necessary to recount a happiness whose promised climax was scratched by the surreptitious darts of the crowned virus before its reality inexorably slips through whichever fingers.

There is an unmissable recipe for those who want to relate without either omitting the details or getting lost in too much daily interlacing: to fix a rigid frame on which to nail the canvas of existence, with the oulipo¹ cutter to adjust the fringes.

The Rabbit-Tiger life will therefore be spread over twenty-six slices, one salient feature per slice. To keep a semblance of logic in this eleven o'clock broth, the letters are mixed as in this plate that the child contemplates, Sunday evening soup, let us dream a little more in front of the consomme.

For whom who would not know: the author is past his seventies. He was married for almost fifty years, a widower on the eve of a golden wedding jubilee, a sentimental vagabond by temperament weakly attached to matrimony bond, he has a dizziness in the heart which makes him fear the fall as soon as he starts moving.

He wandered a lot in the course of his office life. During a stopover in China, while he was preparing another marriage breach to celebrate his passage of the Forties, he fell under the slanting spell of a young colleague.

The fresh attendant resolved to let herself be seduced by the mature man, holder of authority, who did not expect so much.

In short, nothing but banal, flash in the pan, a romance at the corner of a mission lasting for a few days. Except that this will be, at the incoming Easter, thirty very precise years that this straw, phoenix of transcontinental love, is being consumed with a flame eager for an oxygen which, from now on, seems to be scarce for those who want to experience the eternal love of a Tiger and his Rabbit.

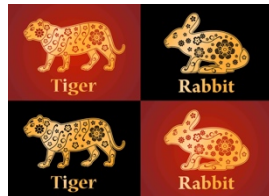
Plougasnou, January-July 2021.

¹ Oulipo is a loose gathering of (mainly) French-speaking writers and mathematicians who seek to create works using constrained writing techniques.

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Z AS ZODIAC



Tiger that I am, 1950 is my vintage. Lapin is from 1963, hence her name. These animals do not mix well or bad in the Chinese zodiacal bestiary. The great race for precedence organized a long time ago by the Jade Emperor just made it possible to establish that the Rabbit had to follow the Tiger in the totemic litany, hence the thirteen years that separate us.

Otherwise, East meets West, we are two small fish. That is good, astral iconography has chosen the duo for this sign, a crisp head to tail with a sixty-nine look. What is more, and at this stage we are no longer talking about chance, our respective dates are Martian. Better still, Lapin is registered under March 10 in her civil status, following me by a cycle, a year and a day. This to stick to the official.

But reality flirts with the improbable. From what her mother tells her, Rabbit was actually born around 11:30 p.m., but a power outage like China frequently experienced in these early times of the Revolution implied that midnight passed before her birth could actually be recorded.

Rabbit is therefore borne on March 9 like her Tiger! This coincidence with the scent of impossible makes our anniversaries even more fusional. Zodiacal refinement, her Scorpio ascendant adds spice to mine whose duality is confirmed under Gemini.

Of course, in real life we do not give any real importance to this starry jumble. However, we pay attention to zodiac festivals. Not to the sometimes abstruse lunar enumeration of Catholic ephemeris - Easter, Assumption, Ascension, Pentecost do not unite us. But the Chinese variations hold our full attention, with their processions of rites, dishes and holidays.

Just as it feels good to be from somewhere, it is heart-warming to know how to anchor memories. We therefore decided that

the anniversary of our merger would be celebrated with the Qingming Festival, Purity and Light, because it was then that we exchanged our first strawberries, in mid-April 1992.

Qingming is Chinese All Saints Day.

Graves are cleaned then and the dead are honoured. Qingming falls around Easter time, the Catholic rebirth chime. A celebration that ultimately suits the love of the Tiger and the Rabbit - sometimes in great peril, always resuscitated ...

E AS EYES



The company doctor whom I have to meet before my posting in Beijing becomes official can only confirm: I already have, he said, slanted eyes.

Was he kidding? Even today I do not really know what to say. Admittedly, I had chosen for myself as an avatar on discussion forums where I was already perorating on China, a portrait of a chubby Genghis Khan, with moustache and slanted eyes. Admittedly, I hardly suffer from excess light, even on the snowy slopes overlooking Geneva, and the invention by Inuit hunters of the mask protecting the eyes from reverberation was not very useful to me.

But slanted, still ...

Then, slanted eyes, what does that mean, in short? I ruminated on this for a few decades, until that day when the chances of a language course made me discover that in Chinese, slanted eyes were called "tilted eyes", that to unleash them was to open them wide, and that young and old generations, men or women, were adding to the fortune of clinics specializing in express operations of this kind.

I carelessly asked Rabbit to on occasion point out to me such specimen of de-slanting, so that I visualize rectified forms for the almond. She looked at me, mentally sighed, and suggested that I in turn look at her.

Rabbit has been de-slanted since her teens.

The funds were lacking in the pockets of the Mao collar jacket, so she operated herself using scissors flambéed with rice alcohol. On the other hand, for slanted eyes, she said, look at my daughter a little better, whose twenty-five Spring seasons refuse the scalpel.

The subtlety of the passage from rhombus to ellipse thus appeared to me.

Slanted, unslanted, it is in any case via her eyes that Rabbit conquered me. Her eyes she knew how to keep them closed when, languishing on a nap sofa, waiting for the departure to

the return plane, she consented to the furtive pressures unbuttoning one then the other of her bodice fasteners. The buttons popped off their silk halters. Rabbit opened her eyes, wet, eager. And it did not matter whether those eyes were almond or olive shaped !

C AS CLANDESTINES



To live happy, live hidden. The saying has its limits, though. These decades of clandestine relationship, if not exclusive at least continuous, could not be totally love in the desert. The circumstances of our meetings made our trail cross others. Moreover, the need for recognition, to make our harmonic resonate in social reality, pushed us to reveal a part of the secret to those who could keep it.

Claiming there was reciprocity in indiscretion would however distort reality. The Rabbit side is actually very little opened. If it happened on a few occasions that she took me behind the scenes of meetings where she attended, in Washington, Shanghai, Bangkok or Istanbul, I had to remain discreet - I never had the honour to be introduced, under any label whatsoever, to the fellow workers of the International Rabbit.

Only once, it was in July 2006, did I organize a Parisian vacation for her in which one of her work colleagues participated. From Beijing, their daughters - one each - accompanied, we lived two days in semi-publicity, walking hand in hand through the corridors of the Louvre or the Quai Branly museum, adding our warmth to that of the metro leading to Paris Beach. No ambiguity in these moments on the intimacy uniting the Tiger and his Rabbit - but I needed more.

My Chinese hostesses each occupied their room with offspring in the hotel I had found for us near Parc Montsouris. I had dreamed of a stay where Rabbit would share her colleague's room, the children having fun in theirs. Complicity between adults, she would desert the partner couch to come and join me in the heart of scorching nights. Alas, the feline fantasies did not materialize - and by the third day, mulling over my frustration, I wrestled my tail back down to summer Brittany while my tourists had fun at Disney's. In the evening, Rabbit running back towards our haven in joy to see me again found only one sheet

of paper at the reception desk providing the excuse of pressing family reasons to justify my desertion - Madenn close to giving birth became my alibi. A few weeks followed when she gave me cold shoulder ...

So her colleague knew - the three of us have met since then in Beijing. The thirteen-year-old Rabbit girl had probably understood everything. We never mention it when meeting each other.

Once by chance or almost we ran into Rabbit parents, at the entrance to the building where I was bringing her back. Another time I managed to cross the road she was tracing with her younger sister for an afternoon in a Beijing tourist place she had revealed to me in advance. I hoped but it did not materialize that this fortuitous tete-a-tete would spark introduction, questioning and progression. Likewise, it was in 2019, she consented to visit on my arm a Beijing celebration for the centenary of the ILO. I had hoped that our Parousia would open the eyes of so many former colleagues who did not imagine that our singularities had re-joined across so many years.

Alas, there again, it was not the case. We arrived late, the protocol took me from her side to show me off in the stands while she slipped to the benches of all comers. No one to be surprised at the remarkable pair of the Tiger and his Rabbit.

Otherwise, social sharing was my deed. Rabbit was known at the gatherings parallel to the big meetings in New York or Montreal where she was able to join me. We visited friends, colleagues, in Vienna as well as in Lisbon. Many who know me will have seen the joy she radiates in our moments together.

However, these displayed carelessness had hardly any reactive or catalytic effect. The worlds are probably well sealed, where we stay in our plural bubbles. Each universe in which I participated spreads out in hiatus from the neighbouring one, as if the Venn diagrams of my existence only intersected in an inner forum.

The Tiger is now loosed by widowhood from the constraints of partitioning to which a common desire, or common cowardice not to precipitate anything that would be irremediable and risk to hurt others constrained us over the course of these thirty years of schizophrenic love.

On the feline side, the Rabbit is official, at least in the Western part of my life. But the secret remains for the Rabbit family as well as on Beijing soil. Shadow and light, two-sided is the Janus love of the Tiger and the Rabbit.

B AS BIGAMY



It was in September 2004 that Rabbit and I stopped being lovers to each become a bigamist.

Our liaison had then passed its first cycle of twelve years. A meeting brought me to Beijing from Geneva, organized by the top of international social security, which had put my foot in the stirrup to ride in the big leagues in the late 1970s. Monique, my wife, wanted to accompany me for the occasion, wishing to relive memories by renewing contact with the Geneva part as well as with the small people of Beijing that we had left for ten years.

For me, it was about reconciling water and fire - supporting the wife and pampering the mistress while being present at official events as much as necessary to justify my mission. In retrospect, I must admit that I did not do too badly. True, the munificence of the UN payroll helps greatly to inventiveness. I had rented a second room in a hotel conveniently located on a metro route serving both the Rabbit office and the conference site, while taking me back without too many detours to the nightlife of the Swissôtel.

Rabbit, who was beginning to enjoy a certain professional autonomy, had taken a leave of absence every afternoon of the decade. As soon as I had been able to confirm my availability - what could be easier than to slip away from the bosom of a thousand delegates scattered upon half a dozen parallel sessions - we found ourselves in adultery at the stroke of noon at the Novotel. Lunching, frolicking, napping - we still had time to discover each other better.

Never until these days had we enjoyed so much privacy. The closed door could have weighed on us - I hardly dared to leave the room for fear of meeting some acquaintance among congressmen - it sublimated us. It was one of those afternoons that we decided that our future would be joint and exclusive.

Once formulated, this prospect struck us with an obviousness evaded for too many years.

Mass was quickly said: we were to meet together again after three weeks for a fortnight stay in Washington. Rabbit would then be on mission, and I would be on leave. If this rehashing confirmed us in the happy desire for togetherness, then we would each take the necessary steps, inform the spouses, break their bridges to build ours, and settle each at one's home waiting that, when my retirement came - it was only a few months away, my service allowed me to access a well-paid freedom from the age of 55 - together we found a Beijing home.

Our stay at Dupont Circle kept all of its promises. Nothing could dislodge us from the cloud where henceforth we would nestle permanently. The Beijing oath was therefore validated, and we were now ready to cross our respective Rubicons.

There was only one step left. But while at the same time we felt ready for the longest strides, the solitary step was too high for each individually. Tomorrow, I promise, I'll talk to him, to her, if not, the day after ...

After a few days of procrastination - we kept each other informed by email of our respective retreats - we had to admit it: Rabbit or Tiger, we were not ready for the fight, the tears, the cries, the stupors and the tremors required for our assumption.

The Great Conjugal Explanations were therefore put aside. Nothing, however, was denied from our discovery of the desire for togetherness.

From then on, our relationship became, at least for us, a parallel legitimacy. We were now much more than lovers and no longer altogether adulterous, we became two spouses who continued to have others.

H AS HUSBAND AND WIFE



Poly-, bi-, mono-... Whatever the prefix, the * gamy requires one or more spouses. If from my side things seemed relatively simple - a very present wife, known to Rabbit at least during the first days of our love, a wife whose suspicion I tried not to arouse by maintaining our communication channel open whatever the circumstances -, the other spouse generated many uncertainties.

Up to the happy-few were astonished, noting the frequency of our fusional episodes. How can it be that a Rabbit's husband would not question the repeated absences, overseas or domestic, the more than late returns to a marital home blithely abandoned during so many weekends ?

I only saw once, I believe, the spouse of the Rabbit. He had accompanied her to visit an ailing colleague on a hospital bed as I retreated after my own visit. I remember a tall, elegant man, still young but somewhat bald, with a silhouette much better suited to the refinement of the Rabbit than the bearded-pot-bellied of my shaggy quintal.

This husband, she confided to me, Rabbit had chosen him during her university years. Having set her sights on this fellow student, she knew how to conquer and then marry him. When we first fell for each other, no connection other than marriage held her back - and Chinese divorce isn't really an obstacle. Yet she chose to become a mother through her deceived husband, the only child to which she would be entitled, and not to unhang the barely fertilized egg.

It is true that we had - we are then in the second half of 1992 - hardly any prospects of going well beyond our first dazzling. I had become entangled in marital separation-reunion with a third-party mistress, which will certainly have helped to

persuade Lapin of our lack of future - to the point of causing her to change employer to better burn the vessels where we could not embark.

When finally my marital upheavals apparently calmed down, when Rabbit, informed by her former colleagues of my return to a kind of social normality, was able to attempt a rapprochement on the occasion of my birthday, by the time I was in a position to respond, it was already too late. The child who was born to her in mid-December 1993 was conceived during this period when we were still no more and not yet again.

For thirty years soon, this husband whom I do not know has continued to hinder us. He must have many assets to survive in that way. However, Rabbit painted him as brutal, described him as a heavy drinker, banished from her bed by strict cubicular apartheid.

He nonetheless remains. Discreet, but present. With episodes of family vacations, company celebrations, formal visits that remind me, by the resulting forced absence, that the union of the Tiger and the Rabbit remains second in the reality of her daily life.

Rabbit once told me that with her husband they "stay together because of the kid", the so selective nature of the Chinese education system not allowing children to study serenely amid family tensions.

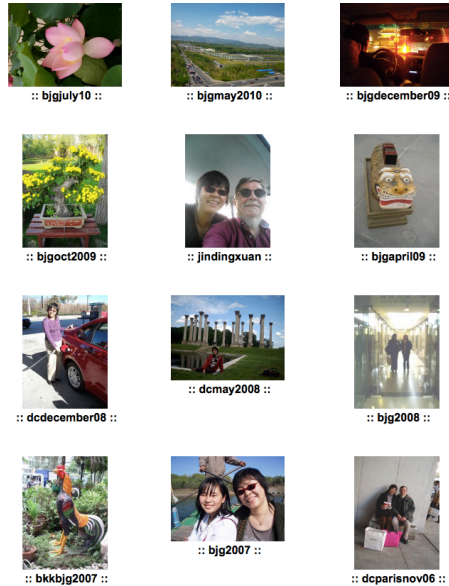
The child has succeeded in its own launching into orbit, and no longer constitutes a very solid alibi. Rabbit now has to manage her mother, a newly born widow with a loss of autonomy. Then there is this virus which blurs the horizon.

In short, this quasi-virtual husband always encumbers as much as a real one. And no sign of a crack, even if on my side the departure of the wife has cleared the way. We had agreed, when ten years ago happy professional circumstances had anchored me alone in Beijing - I had convinced Monique that her state of health did not allow her expatriation - to continue not to force things to avoid marital tensions and suffering.

Cowardice, or benevolence?

The husband, in any case, will have taken advantage of this suspended implementation ...

F AS FAMILY



Is it the passing of time and the accustoming that accompany it? Lapin and I have formed a more than credible couple for years, bearing on the forehead the peaceful and honourable mark of a true family.

On the occasion of health restrictions on travel, the French representations abroad had set up a special device allowing de facto if not de jure spouses to obtain a derogatory visa called "Love is not tourism".

To provide tangible proof of the relationship affected by a lasting separation, it was necessary to submit "objective elements that could attest to the existence of a sentimental relationship for more than six months before the closure of France's borders (passport pages which may attest to a shared stay, reservation under both names, family photos) ”.

We could have pretended to, and obtained without difficulty, this sweet sesame. Rabbit was ready for it and who cares about the husband if she disappeared for a month of transgression. The surge of COVID on the French-speaking side, the mother's demands for the Beijing side, have however not yet allowed implementation.

Objective, however, we are. For so many years we have conducted trips and stays one after another, compiled hundreds of photos gathered in a sanctuary website under the

self-contained title of RabbitTiger. Photos together, alone, with children, in Beijing, in Paris, in the Americas, at sea, in the air, on the rails, in the car ...

Such a real family, a lasting family, a tight-knit family. But not, and this is the whole problem, not a unique family. Or rather, because that's how I live it, a family whose existence ends at the confines of another daily life, where other ties are laced, where other homes are hatched.

To be even more precise, for two years and something, a Lapin-Tigre family whose existence for Lapin goes underground as soon as she crosses the doors of one of its two other parallel universes, that of the official conjugal, and that of where, with her younger sister, she tries to coax Alzheimer's disease that threatens their mother.

I now exclude myself from schizophrenia, since the Rabbit family is the only one I have to worry about. The children when they are present, Ulysses the dog when Rabbit rings the bell for me during the walk, my friends on coffee-shops when they are open know it well: apart from Lapin, no salvation.

But the distance is long. Our separation reduces to a few handfuls of minutes with interposed screen the pre-eminence of the world where the Rabbit-Tiger family acquires for her who joins me there a physical existence.

Our poor family is dislocated by a viral exile. For the moment it resists, braces itself in its virtuality, feeds on the hopes of better tomorrows. But I, whose existence depends only on this thread, I see it withering, fading, flaking - family suffering from absence, reserved prognosis.

A AS ABSENCE



时光如梭，度日如年- time flies as fast as the shuttle on the loom, a day is worth a year. This Chinese proverb bears witness to the harshness of absences. It seems that dogs have no notion of the passage of time - whether their owner abandons them for ten minutes or two hours, they will have suffered from the same emotional deprivation.

The absences of the Rabbit or the absences to the Rabbit generate suffering, whatever the duration. This suffering, however, will not necessarily have the same substrate depending on whether the absence will be circumstantial, for a weekend, for an evening taken out of the living together during a mission, or structural, in times of a segregationist pandemic or diverging occupational assignments. The short absence generates a kind of jealousy - what does she do, with whom, does she miss me... -, when the longest one is a factor of anxiety - another six months, another year, hold on, can I stand it, over and over again, we do not know for how long, I feel decayed ...

We will have known many episodes of absence during our decades of life together. In fact, until the last years, our common life was made up of alternations. There was more absence than presence during those active periods when I was officiating in Geneva or in Moscow - those Russian five years were even void of any meeting. We survived during these times without too many crises. As those who cultivate frugality and know how to feast with a grape then an olive, we salivated in the hope of reuniting. Rarity provided our moments together with all their flavour. Short and infrequent, they were all ours, the exceptional allowing for the exception. Lapin could make herself available to fully meet our expectations.

These periods, it is true - we are talking about the end of last or beginning of current centuries - were better suited for availability. Parents still able to take care of the child then in

infancy. For me, union mandates providing all the cover needed to be absent almost at leisure. Turning now the obsolete pages of my last passports, I in fact realize that, if the visas catch the eye, they are not that many after all that involve Rabbit, let's say one per quarter for each time a big week or a short fortnight.

Our canvas had many holes in it. However, it turned out to be strong enough to keep us valiant until the years of prosperity, those when, young hearty retiree, I finally reached this status where the absence of the Rabbit became the exception. Twenty years later I was once again a permanent resident in the same city as her.

And it was then, when I could have enjoyed the fullness of our coexistence, that paradoxically the pain of absence became more significant to me. Every day was in fact hosting a separation or, even worse, included no meeting. While I was master of my time and my places during my stays in China, Rabbit always lived at the borders of three worlds, the one who welcomed her as a spouse of the Tiger, that of the official wife, also a worried mother and head of an office team that is sometimes very demanding, that of the daughter devoted to aging parents eager for support.

During all these years, another dozen, I was angry at having to be confined to a priority rank which is not first. Rabbit whom the husband asks to accompany him for a formal outing, Rabbit whose weekend is caught between choir school and watercolour painting, Rabbit who is sent to foreign lands while the prestige of her rank now prohibits accompaniment by Clandestine Tiger, everything is known, everything can be peddled, Rabbit whose call for help from the father or the mother disrupts the plans that we were building, Rabbit who no longer knows where to look, where to run, where to drive, Rabbit who forgets the phone call that would reassure me, the love note that calms the bitterness, the messenger wink that tells "See you soon!" ".

While I should have blessed each of our moments of presence, so rich and numerous compared to their small apportionment in the past, I scowled at the missed opportunities, I was embittered at what I felt were holes in our map of tender. So I shut myself up, I sulk, Rabbit suffers, is saddened, blames herself - in my turn remorse seizes me because I know I am unfai, and I mew around her who takes me back with our happiness ...

There is, however, a pain of absence to which I hardly paid any attention during these years of Rabbit residence, the pain suffered by the other half moping alone in the Monts d'Arrée or in Trégor. Monique, it is true, has never complained of being

left behind, having to tinker with a social life with fewer and fewer neighbours and less and less autonomy. I believe that she had sensed that the charms attracting me more and more inexorably towards Beijing were not only urban or professional.

Never, however, or so rarely did she blame me. So I did not have to face the choice that perhaps could have in turn provoked that of my Rabbit - on the condition for her to face her share of truth among presences and absences, almost thirty years of dissimulation to be assumed in front of the parents, the husband, the daughter.

Y AS YOUNGSTER



The only child to whom Lapin was entitled was born on December 22, 1993. Hence her petty name of 冬冬, DongDong, Winter-Winter. Chinese children are endowed from their birth with a name representing the circumstances of their birth, the ambitions nurtured for them or the destiny that the family tradition anticipates. Use of this name is restricted to the close circle. Chinese children have of course a "post-name" building up their civil status when attached to the surname. Winter-Winter is therefore called 钱诗鸿 Qian Shihong, her first name roughly meaning The great poetess, "great" being here signified by the character 鸿 used for the Swan. Had I been asked for my opinion on a Westernized first name, I would have suggested Leda, Sappho or Bilitis² - fortunately for Winter-Winter no one asked me!

Her mother and I, when we mention her, name her Rooster - from the totem animal of her year of birth. We had, during her mid-childhood, a few exchanges on the way in which it would be appropriate for her to address me, when we had become a stepfamily. The fantasized imminence made it urgent to choose a title. There was 后爸, After Dad, or 继父 Continued Father. As this did not happen, neither of them was chosen. For Winter-Winter, I became Teacher - laoshi - just because I had the privilege of assisting her once or twice via Skype, for math homework where her accountant mother, my lover, was floundering.

² Leda was a princess in Ancient Greece who was seduced by the King of the Gods, Zeus, under disguise of a swan. Sappho and Bilitis were two women poets, also from Ancient Greece.

I knew Winter-Winter before she was born, even if I took no part in it – at the time of fertilization, I counted and recounted, Rabbit and I had not yet started again to intercourse, after the cold spell and change of employer, when she was irritated by the irruption in our fresh love of another mistress followed by the unexpected return of the wife who had hardly been dismissed. It was not until the end of April, a month after the small seed, that Rabbit and her Tiger were restored to bodily interaction, a fusion that we had not experienced since June of the previous year.

But the pregnant Rabbit welcomed her Tiger in the afternoons we stole from our schedules. I saw her rounding off from Hilton to Novotel. Winter-Winter rushed through my hands affixed to her large amniotic bath.

From then on I followed every step in the life of this non-mine child. Winter-Winter quickly got used to meeting me around the corner of the corridors leading to her mother's office. I accompanied her to her extracurricular lessons when Rabbit could not, I shared their meal in the absence of the father in the apartments where the family moved to follow the school curriculum. I wandered around on weekends, escorted to Paris, invited or hosted in many restaurants where the fork was no longer a secret for Winter-Winter.

The child grew up. She passed all obstacles, bachelor, graduate from Bordeaux financial school, master of HEC, Winter-Winter has become this beautiful young woman, trilingual, fan of life and pop music, in the process of building her career in finance, again in Beijing and still with Mom and Dad.

In fact, Winter-Winter, whom I have known for so long, who cannot ignore the very special ties that bind me to her mother, who has more than once surprised connivances, cuddles, hands that abandon to each other, should have been a formidable ally to encourage the definitive jump bringing together the Tiger and his Rabbit.

It was not the case, almost to the contrary. The concern to do nothing that could risk disturbing a spirit entirely devoted to academic success, so hard to obtain but so essential for the Chinese gentry, excluded, from cycle to cycle, the radicalism that our union would have deserved. When Winter-Winter entered working life, I do not know what modesty, what fear of blame, held back Rabbit who did not dare to open up to her daughter about our overall plans; she confessed it to me, the young adult intimidates her loving mother.

Winter-Winter who as a teenager, Rabbit said, appreciated our relationship since it carried visible maternal happiness, has thus become, without knowing of it or really wanting it, the last wedge between Tiger and Rabbit.

At now 28 years old, however, Winter-Winter should soon be leaving her courtyard. We do not know any of her lovers - I inquire regularly with the Rabbit, convinced that only the exile of the Rooster will free the waves carrying us together to the shores for good, to the shores for real.

Unless, on the contrary, the arrival of a chick reinforces Rabbit in her endless role of family caretaker.

“ So, the whole secret of your singing?
It is because I dare
To be afraid that without me the Orient will rest! ”³

³ From Chantecler (author Edmond Rostand) a French theatrical play from early XXth Century featuring a Rooster anxious that its song might not make the Sun raise again.

S AS SLEEP



The carnal union of the Tiger and the Rabbit immediately placed itself under the protection of Hypnos⁴. After a first and short evening in a ball dance on the occasion of a mission leading them first to Xi'An - the terracotta army -, they continued towards Chengdu - Sichuan and its good souls⁵.

The return plane was scheduled for early afternoon. Rabbit had to vacate her room, Tiger's rank was worth a half-suite and the privilege of a late check out. He had therefore suggested that the Rabbit take advantage of this munificence to wait with him for the time of departure under more comfortable conditions than the armchairs in the lobby. While he gets ready in the bedroom, Rabbit is resting on the living room sofa. And when, his suitcase packed, he finally comes to join her, he finds her asleep, languid in a ray of the soft April sun. Rabbit is so beautiful, so offered, that he could not resist the desire to explore. Awakening Rabbit claimed his fingers to confirm the ecstasy.

Sleeping together was not always the easiest. Morality was no joking matter, in the China of Jiang Zemin - the Chinese President who took Bernadette Chirac, the wife of the French president, for a few dance steps. When Rabbit and her Tiger stayed in private, appearances wanted that two rooms be booked, and security preferred that the rooms looked like having been occupied. I still remember a vacation night in a sort of clubhouse in Miyun, a suburb of Beijing, where Rabbit had thought it possible not to let me go after the evening embrace. It was a long night, watching for the slightest noise in the hallway, in the anguished fear of an eruption of the militia in pursuit of adultery.

⁴ Hypnos is the God of Sleep in Ancient Greece

⁵ The Good Soul of Sichuan is a famous play by communist German author Bertold Brecht

Rabbit, however, quickly found a way out of social prudishness. As it was her who handled the stewardship, she used to book a suite for us - appearances were safe, since each member of the illegitimate couple could claim their private alcove.

Then came the era of Hu Jintao, when China, sure of its newfound power, practiced as a corollary a softening in social constraints. Rabbit and Tiger could then stay together without fear of a Cerberus, sharing beds sometimes as wide as long, voluptuously centred in more and more starry hotel rooms.

Knowing where you sleep does not at all say how. To really love is to really sleep. The duration of the couple, their ease in finding each other, in overcoming all obstacles, in filling all the gaps of absence, undoubtedly depends at least in part on the quality of their sleeping together. Even now, let's rather say until recently, it has been too long since they could not practice, they perform the same ritual as at their beginnings thirty years ago.

Whenever there is a shared bed, there is coitus. And each coitus results in their falling asleep. Their loss of consciousness is simultaneous, irrepressible, they do not fall asleep entwined, but tangled up. Then, half an hour, three quarters of an hour later, they wake up, they notice each other, the sex of one sometimes always on the other's lower lips, they fit into and hug each other, curl up, him on the left - the character 左 bears the yang mark of labour 工 -, her on his right - the joined hands 又 of 友. They stay like this for minutes or for hours, until the moment when Rabbit returns to her official family, or the moment of her tiptoed departure in the early morning to take her duties, or that of their peaceful stretch in unhurried mornings when awakening smiles.

They are far from the primary anxieties of their clandestine nights. The Tiger and his Rabbit sleep even more than they need. So much so that whenever together they have the chance to plan leisure activities, the plans they have drawn, to get up early, say eight o'clock, we will leave still in the cool to before noon join this botanical garden, this flea market, this portion of the Great Wall, this Summer Palace, these Fragrant Hills which require the day for a thorough visit, are quickly abandoned. Get up ? Maybe when the stomach starts to growl. But once sated, consider each other in their dressing gowns, draw the cord, remove the sides ... and immediately re-join on the bed the welcoming realm of smells, juices and sleep.

O AS OMNIBUS



It was the time of the first 1992 strawberries in Shandong.

The night train takes us, Rabbit and Tiger, official interpreter and his office manager, from the provincial capital to Yantai, the city of Riesling wine during the German protectorate. There we have to inaugurate a local structure.

I had used my prerogatives to introduce a new rule: any directorial move had to include one of the three secretaries - Tigress, Monkey and of course Rabbit. Official and very laudable motive, to motivate the troops, whose remuneration then was almost symbolic, by making them discover their country. Travel was rare in that epoch for the mainstream Chinese. Real reason: at least once out of three, to recreate with Rabbit the conditions of our tender discovery of Sichuan - without constraints of decorum, no need of an auxiliary to complete the delegation.

This is not the first time Tiger and Rabbit travel by train. In December of the previous year we had already crossed the countryside, from Beijing to Anhui Province. A night trip delayed by snow. But I had not taken advantage of that privacy. I was discovering my new world, Monique was accompanying us in this initiation and I had not yet realized the pearl of the Orient sitting opposite. My Rabbit remembrance of this first transportation therefore remain incomplete.

By contrast, the persistence of memory for this other wagon is lively and so pervasive.

Rabbit and I, in the corridor facing the compartment, whispering the words of our discovery while the outside inky black imperturbably scrolls its stately pace, high speed on rails was a distant future. But we are not really alone. An official took care of us as soon as we got off the plane and escorts us to our final destination. He soon politely but firmly lets us know that

the gangway chatter cannot continue - it interferes with travellers' sleep and is not part of the code of good morals.

We return to the compartment, berths above the other. In the persistent night our communion continues in silence, performed through gentle dabbing of phalangeal pulp and entwining fingers.

Since then, Tiger Rabbit trips, there have been of all kinds, metro, bus, car, ship, plane, must be tactile, with two hands overlapping around the same bar, knees approaching on a tight curve, shoulders in friction on boarding queues, sitting with fingers intertwined, sleepy smiles of the race for happiness.

Q AS QUESTIONABLE



Exclusive fidelity has never been part of my original marriage mix. Matter of times, undoubtedly and of libertarian manners. This does not mean, however, that we were unfaithful. Paradox of those who know how to love, we could explore elsewhere without in any way questioning the fundamental commitment.

Thus, as soon as the wedding was pronounced, the Tiger in the making went to sniff here and there without ever really moving away from its lair. There was one exception, however, partly contemporary with the Rabbit, which almost undermined the dogma of "and at the same time." This quest for another conjugality ended badly, with a frustrated return to normality. A failure that will have influenced the early Rabbit period, justifying procrastination relegating the future to uncertain times. Fear of failing again preventing progress while at the same time founding duration, the Rabbit was never public or even allusive for my official home.

Yet infidelity then there was. It lasted for ages, languishing after an elsewhere that could only be lived through dotted lines of time. Infidelity without guilt, no remorse, just the worry of being discovered with a coming out occurring without Rabbit's assent, a spotlight ruining the edifice of dark energy housing our love. The wife confronted to my inclination would not have taken it for granted, and not have endured in silence - at least that is how she reacted the few times before when my escapades seemed to her to create danger. Confront danger, stand up to it until it retreats and moves away to give legitimacy back its full place.

There was no confrontation with the Rabbit, and suspicions remained guesses. If there was no exploration of the hidden face of Tiger's commitments when, the last years, I mean those after 2005 when a camp had been established in Beijing as a

permanent residence, it was not hard to guess that something fishy was going on, it is undoubtedly because the wife had the presentiment that this fight could well be the one too many. I then had enough resources to survive without her, even if this autonomy had been long to build up. The future, alas, will have shown that this hypothesis was valid, since here I am alone, bitter, disillusioned, but in no way deconstructed.

Unfaithful without being so while being so, I was also unfaithful to the Rabbit. Our intermissions left me too much leisure - and there were a few side events. I have so far refrained from telling her. I fear Rabbit jealousy. Not that she cries or gets carried away, but annoyed she frowns, she sheds tears of silence, and then I feel the weight of being guilty that a flaming anger would have allowed to evacuate. The loss of the Rabbit by an unfaithful Tiger, I do not know if I could endure it.

Unfaithful, I am not sure the Rabbit feels she has been, she is so careful to avoid any risk of disclosure of her Tiger engagement. An approach in fact not too far from mine, not having to fight waves that we would have provoked by talking too much or through badly hiding, because we do not really know where and in what state the marital tide could beach us.

Throughout our thirty years, Lapin may have sometimes visited other else-whereabouts. Of course she never talks about it, and I have no reason to rumble around. Neither does she question my moments of interlude - sometimes, I just feel a little scratch about to reappear, jealousy of supposed attractions that she once thought I had, to the point that adventures Rabbit attributed to her Tiger, which did not, were not and would not have been, materialized for the sole reason that she believed them possible. Thus there are names that in front of his Rabbit the Tiger avoids pronouncing ...

These multiple and variegated infidelities, real or supposed, form an element of our parallel lives. Our universe knows of intersecting parallels. The art of the Tiger Rabbit is to prevent intersections from being too numerous, sources of Gordian knots that we do not want to cut.

X AS XOXO



If one wants change but also wants to avoid confrontation, one solution would be to shift the struggling arena - in short, to find refuge, Rabbit – Tiger acting in official capacity, in a land where neither husband nor wife can claim primacy, a land from which silent or vocal reproaches, from the society or the family, would be ignored, a land exempt from accountability, virgin of the heavy past and the bonds of marriage.

This place, where there were neither Peking bridles nor traditional laces, Rabbit knows it well, the Tiger was invited there. When she left the office where I spread out as a director and uncertain lover, Lapin joined the local representation of another international organization which headquarters are in Washington. Over the years, she has become known there, she has climbed a lot of steps and now meets the conditions required to aspire to the Holy Grail on American soil.

The opportunity must still present itself. Slots are scarce, few offers in her managerial specialty, and many applicants. Little chance to win one of these precious sesame on a fair basis - there will always be a candidate to take precedence who is better qualified, better introduced, better trained, better suited linguistically or culturally. However, the organization has an alternative to circumvent the unfairness of competition rules. Under the guise of training, it offers its decentralized executives two-year secondments within central services which can lead to longer-term assignments, with the applicant being responsible for developing the appropriate interpersonal skills.

Not every year are such positions opened in a suitable specialty. Even if the interval between two possibilities is not quite the orbital period of a comet, it is better to try to grab the opportunity when it comes.

Here is one - Tiger has just retired, we are at the end of 2006, an official transferred from Beijing to Washington remembers the Rabbit, points out to her a quite suitable chance of secondment, encourages her to apply. Everything is fine,

everything is rolling, interview via Skype, Rabbit is accepted ... Proud, happy, she is coming to the Tiger, ready to plan everything, she has almost started to pack her bags.

What fly stung the inconsistent Tiger? Here he is raising formal objections - he will have to leave America every three months, beware of the cost of living, a rewarding grade in Beijing can appear almost subordinate at headquarters, schools are not free, Winter-Winter will not necessarily have the right level of English, but all that, what I say, does not count - choose, I will uphold you!

In the evening, at home, it is not her husband who raises the obstacles, but Winter-Winter herself from the height of her thirteen years, abandonment of friends, loss of grandparents, no more landmarks, land of savages ...

Rabbit is stunned. Double blow, astonishing abandonment, she gives up. And I too have just given up, on happiness. All these years later, I still try to understand out of which cowardice I then refused us.

No doubt we were then too close to my Parisian rout in the summer of 2006 ⁶, when I was frustrated at having to share our time with decency constraints. I was afraid that this feeling of inadequacy would repeat itself - to spare Winter-Winter let us live in hiding, we will find you a small apartment not too far from our main mother-daughter residence, we will see each other often, we will go on weekends, little by little she will get used to our Rabbit-Tigerhood - with no possibility of returning from across the Atlantic as it could be from Parc Montsouris to Brittany, because it would be difficult for me to move on the sly to the District of Columbia.

No doubt I was not yet convinced that we were viable over time. My extended residences in Beijing had not yet started, the Rabbit-Tiger couple was still intermittent, the bitter memory of a previous failure made me fear other burns. In short, I scuttled us ...

It took ten years for the comet to return. No more Winter-Winter obstacles, she flew on her own between the People's University a few hundred kilometres from Beijing, the KEDGE high school program in Bordeaux and the HEC campus. On the Tiger side, reluctance was over, the holy spirit had blessed me, I cherished every Rabbit moment, languid, insatiable, anxious of

⁶ See C as Clandestines page 9.

all the following time intervals, Zeno⁷-like love building through discontinuity in imperceptible steps.

The evening is there for the crucial interview. Time difference being of twelve hours between Washington and Beijing, the Skype will take place from 8 pm. Of course I cannot attend the interview. I circle around the shopping ground floor of the office building, purchasing to pass the time and ward off the fate a bouquet of crocuses - joy, in floral language - and a couple of little plastic monkeys, symbol of the Rabbit-Tiger unity - they look like Monchhichi Kikis de tous les Kikis, here they are simply called XoXo.

Finally Rabbit appears - I immediately see in her poor smile that the omens are not good. Times are different. Her grade is now too high for the position offered, her protectors have changed sector and no longer intervene in this selection, there are younger and longer teeth eager to bite the apple. She welcomes the flowers, she hugs the XoXo. Rabbit does not cry. But she is sad. We would have liked so much for fate to cut off for us the wires from which we definitely do not know how to extricate ourselves.

⁷ Zeno is a philosopher from Ancient Greece, famous for his paradox intending to show that a running hare cannot overtake a walking turtle – this Zeno paradox is based on measuring time as discontinued.

G AS GO, RABBIT, GO



The bicycle is inseparable from the image of Beijing. The city is admittedly an ideal setting for the bike, an immense plain practically without the slightest slope except when modernity forces you to use an interchange.

Certainly a few meteorological obstacles, with the gusty northerly winds of Gobi, the particles of coal heating, the downpours in early summer or the decades of icy cold on the eve of Spring festival, but nothing insurmountable for the millions of everyday cyclists - even if the impressive development of public transport has made cycling less essential for travel, riders still seem to be numerous along the thirty thousand kilometres of the capital road network.

Among these cyclists, the Tiger is more diligent than his Rabbit - she drives more since she migrated to the suburbs a dozen years ago, prefers the taxi seat to the padded saddle, the bicycle is for her more of a hobby rather than a means of transport.

We have nevertheless lived together the evolutions of cycling comfort in Beijing, from rentals in stations along the two metro lines, to the purchase of our first bicycles together - dark green for me, pink for her. It was in September 1999, the celebrations of the fiftieth anniversary of the People's Republic of China having led to the administrative closure of the rental spots located on the horizontal axis of the city, we urgently had to find an alternative solution. The purchase was made at the supermarket only a quarter of an hour before it closed for the ten days of festivities.

During my intermittences Rabbit housed my bike in the rack of her building. Then, with the rise of portable computing, the revolution of shared bicycles without fixed anchors put our locks in the obsolete accessories department after ten years of faithful service. Ofo, Mobike, Didi, blue, orange, green bicycles,

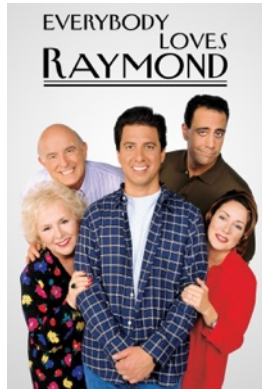
we straddled at leisure, for five minutes, for an hour, merging into the mass of nine million Beijing riders.

We rediscovered cycling freedom almost on every step of our way. Rabbit and Tiger on two wheels visited all of Southern Manhattan, the banks of the Potomac, the port of Montreal, the intricacies of Kowloon, the parks of Zhuhai opposite Macao. Only one failure, in Paris, where the test of the vélib ' did not last longer than what it took to be convinced that these heavy machines having to struggle with the automobile flow to gain a place for themselves promised too many dangers to derive pleasure from their use.

Generation bike!

Tiger peacock-proud when his Chinese colleagues praise the virtuoso assiduity with which he rides his bike like a true son of the sky. And the amused Rabbit, who accompanies him around on mutinous wheels, sometimes even, assuming they are married or at least fiancés, jumping on the luggage rack to, like an Amazon, travel a short distance, sharing the shared bicycle.

R AS RAYMOND



The Rabbit-Tiger had other symbols than the bicycle to embody their thirst for rituals, stability, family life.

During their stays in Washington, which kept them busy for a substantial portion of their togetherness, the one when Rabbit's employer let her move from training to symposium at a pleasant frequency, CBS, Columbia (not China) Broadcasting System, a large American television channel, provided them with a remarkable anchoring.

Tigre had been unsuccessful searching through the drugstores on the Watergate side, they lodged in this area, the local equivalent of French TV magazines. No publication of this type among the cathodic precursors, just tiny inserts in the daily press with no details other than the channel, the schedule and the title of the program.

It is thus randomly zapping that one evening around 6:30 pm Rabbit discovered the family adventures of Ray Barrone, this Raymond whom everyone liked - "Everybody Loves Raymond". And she fell for this family crammed into their suburb, father, mother, two sons and daughters-in-law.

When she realized that the protagonists returned to air every working day for 22 minutes, no more dawdling back home through Foggy Bottom. If unfortunately the meeting of the day had lasted a little longer than expected, it was at a rapid pace that she repatriated us so as not to lose a second of the humiliations inflicted by the mother-in-law to poor Raymond's wife.

I still do not know where Rabbit's fascination for Raymond's small world comes from, nor in what character she could best fancy herself.

But, as we did not stay in DC long enough to absorb the 210 episodes, I made it my duty once we got back to our separate residences to find the DVD boxes of the complete set that I managed to have delivered to her. So Rabbit was able to get fully satisfied with Raymond's nectar. I believe, ultimately, that it was to him, pragmatic, dreamer, good son, good brother, but always on the lookout for possible transgressions, that she identified the best.

By our next stay, CBS had changed its programs - Family Guy occupied the time slot, but not Rabbit's heart or mind. Those turned us then towards another routine, even more cultural and, from the point of view of schedules, even tighter.

Every evening, at six o'clock sharp, the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts offers a free one-hour show to the audience that finds a seat on the chairs installed in front of the Millennium Stage, at the end of the large foyer gallery.

All genres are enjoyed there, jazz, classical music, ballet, folklore ... Spectators are brought to this cultural jewel on the banks of the Potomac river by equally free shuttles picking up fans at neighbouring subway entrances, blue line, orange line, silver line .

That fortnight, we did not miss a single one of the daily performances. Some days the pressure was low, few candidates for the Wyoming Bassoon Orchestra, we could easily find chairs. Other times, it was the small big crowd for such a soloist, such trio, such quintet. We then congregated in the wings to hopefully access the privilege of being admitted by ushers beyond the red velvet cord surrounding the space hosting a few dozen chairs. Anyway, we could see and hear just as well standing, at the edge of the magic square, where we were counting on chance, a family leaving the show halfway through so as not to miss another appointment, to access, if only for ten minutes, the holy of holies.

The hour passed, the few applause died down. Rabbit mentally shaking awake, we returned, passing by the shop in the foyer, then the shuttle back to Logan or Dupont Circle, unless a gentle path brought us to Georgetown just there for dinner time.

Joy of belonging to somewhere - and the Tiger in the shade of his Rabbit, accompanied companion ...

P AS PI ER DONG



When one impatiently waits for the other to take a step in the direction of a fusional rupture, there are acts in everyday life that cast doubts on how bright the future may be.

When Rabbit noticed in a photo shared in 2012 that the vehicle driving my dogs was no longer the hell-red Laguna welcoming her in Roissy airport in Summer 2006, I dared not admit to her that I had changed car - fearing that this investment would be taken as a Breton rooting. I therefore attributed the ownership of the sedan to one of my daughters. Hardly half a lie, since she is the one who drives it during my stays in Beijing.

When I learned at the end of 2004 that Rabbit had acquired in joint possession with her husband a triplex apartment with terrace in the trendy suburbs of Beijing to stay away from the miasma of city center, the omen did not seem good to me.

Thereafter, the arrival the following year of Pi Er Dong could only comfort my concerns. Pi Er Dong is a Chinese cocker spaniel - it possesses everything of the type except the size, below European standards. A genetic creation applied to many breeds of dogs, to comply with the requirements of the Beijing legislation of the time which imposed a maximum height on domestic animals. You do not welcome a new guest into a home that you expect to leave shortly. Pi Er Dong sounded the death knell of our hopes, of our Dupont Circle oaths ⁸.

Rabbit is afraid of dogs, like many of her compatriots. No doubt the effect of lack of habit, since Maoist concern for clean and healthy cities had banished four-legged companions so frequent on Western sidewalks. It took a lot of self-sacrifice for her to accept the fait accompli, one evening when she was returning to her suburb out of Tiger clutches. Winter-Winter's

⁸ See B as Bigamy, page 11.

whim in complicity with her father, or the latter's cunning to chain to the hearth a wife whose inclinations he perhaps sensed.

Of course, Winter-Winter would take care of Pi Er Dong ... and of course Rabbit immediately inherited the chores. Pi Er Dong, an extended name, means Mischievous second Winter. This reflects the dynamism of the puppy and is reminiscent of the jokes of the child whose totem he thus became.

Pi Er Dong's life hasn't necessarily been the happiest. Not that Rabbit balked at the task, but circumstances were indeed unfavourable.

Weaned too early, the puppy struggled to hold on to life.

Rabbit literally brooded it, bottle-fed it, provided the best of veterinary care, so that the almost moribund larva recovered its place in the world of glossy hairs, big ears and fresh noses.

The difficulties arose, in short, from societal demands. Very quickly, Winter-Winter took a step forward in her education by entering college. Her brilliant primary studies opened the doors of prestigious establishments, the royal road to the great universities, one does not play games in China with education, selection is fierce from an early age.

The college to host Winter-Winter was located in the city center. Too far at that time for a daily transhumance which would have stolen so many hours otherwise to devote to homework and revisions. Rabbit could have made a young boarder of her daughter, or entrusted her to the grandparents, whom their Ministry of origin housed in the upper quarters. She did not, however, have complete confidence in the rigor of education under such auspices of parental guardianship delegation. So she did what many Chinese parents do: the Rabbit family changed hutches to get as close as possible to the school. These were furnished rentals, a change every year, at best biennial, sometimes according to Winter-Winter wanderings, going up to the next class she also changed college, then it was high school, sometimes according to the owners' requirements, eager to change tenant as often as possible so as to be able to shamelessly increase the rent by the 20 or 30% justified by a dizzying increase in demand.

Pi Er Dong could not follow. Landlords who only rented while waiting to house their own school-leaving children did not want a pet in their homes. Or, if they accepted it, it was the neighbours who complained about the moans of the animal whose masters left early and returned late. The grandparents also did not want a dog, too dynamic and too demanding for their routine.

Pi Er Dong thus became the sole occupant of the suburban triplex. He lived as a recluse, relegated to the terrace measuring about twenty square meters, provided with a makeshift shelter to get a little protection from the rain, the snow, the wind or the sleet. It only received a visit once a week, Rabbit - the sole driver of the family - coming to renew the stock of kibble, refresh the water bowls, sweep up organic waste, sometimes give a bath and walk on a small leash for one hour in the compound the animal which, finding its mistress, almost immediately lost her again back to ridge jail.

I participated on various occasions in these reunion-abandonment sessions. I lavished encouragement and expressions of sympathy to Pi Er Dong, I combed it, I showed Rabbit how to prick its long ears. Then I suggested taking it to a refuge, we had identified one in the middle of nature who would have welcomed it, but Winter-Winter refused - to give up Pi Er Dong would have been like refusing herself.

One does not discuss the diktats of the Emperor child, so Pi Er Dong endured many years in prison. I do not know how it survived the bad weather, the loneliness, the acrimony of a few neighbours on the terrace affected by its tears.

It was years - until, Winter-Winter finally joining college, in 2011 or 2012, the family moved back to the suburbs, allowing the grizzled dog to regain some semblance of normality. Pi Er Dong still spent its days on the terrace during the week, but it could at least each day indulge in displays of affection and cavalcades worthy of its name when Rabbit came back in the evening.

Pi Er Dong left this world at an age which is all in all respectable for the sufferings it has endured. Rabbit, I think, cried it. And I enveloped thee in a touched thought, brave little cocker spaniel, you who witnessed the love of Tiger and his Rabbit.

T AS THAILAND



Bangkok is the capital for East or South East Asia of virtually all international organizations. I made relatively frequent visits to it even before Rabbit, freshly dressed as team leader, began to have her entries there as well.

Bangkok, however, was almost fatal to us. It goes back to the time of my in-between, between Beijing 95 and Moscow 99. The occasions were not so frequent for the Rabbit - Tiger couple. I still had to take a hierarchy into account, the days off were not indefinitely extensible, the flights had not yet started the deflationary spiral of low-cost.

One month of December when a mission brought me to Thailand for I forgot what symposium, the desire took me to prolong a little, to find Rabbit on her grounds. I still had at the time strong connections with the Chinese bureaucracy, so I was able to obtain a courtesy visa by the Thai representation. Rabbit's husband was overseas, parents diligent at Winter-Winter's bedside, yet no Pi Er Dong to care after. She would be waiting for me at the airport as soon as I got off the five-hour night flight by China Airlines. We would then dash for a long love weekend in Tianjin, 100 kilometres at the wheel of her brand new Passat, imported by pieces from Wolfsburg to be assembled in Shanghai.

At the appointed time, ten o'clock in the evening, taxi ordered from the Royal Princess. At the last moment, the refusal which overwhelms me again⁹ - the fear of unhappy ending, that of disappointing or of being disappointed, Rabbit and I had hardly seen each other since the end of my official stay in Beijing three years earlier, and emails are not quite a substitute for the carnal. As the days were not yet with cell phones, no way to get a message across, and it was impossible to reach the landline without waking up her parents in the middle of the night. So, when at Bangkok airport I embark on an inglorious conjugal

⁹ See C as Clandestines, page 9.

return by Swissair, it is to let Rabbit wait in vain for me in Beijing in the day which turns blue with cold and sorrow.

For sure, that Bangkok mishap could have killed us - I deserved it. But we survived. How much she must have loved me to know how to forgive such a cowardly, so cruel desertion! And Bangkok, whose deleterious irruption in the Rabbit-Tiger realm had hardly been glorious, came back to us in a better light.

I think our first stay was in February 2004. Rabbit in training, Free Tiger joined her for a sumptuous decade.

While during the day she studied ethics, development, social clauses and other nonsense, I reappropriated the city. I was planning our leisure time with the Shangri-La concierge, the World Bank has never been stingy for the accommodation of its crew. So I cooked up elephant-back swings, klong-to-klong lapping and a romantic dinner for Valentine's Day, the first we could organize ourselves in all lust and pleasure.

This was Bangkok 2004, then there was 2005, 2006, and the last of the sequence, Bangkok 2007 - Rabbit was rising in rank, afterwards it was directly Washington.

For Bangkok 2007, my consulting activities in China had started. The organization was therefore different from that of previous vintages. We extended Rabbit's studious stay by a week there, a few Thai extra days, no more at the Shangri-La, too costly at own expense, but in one of the sleeping boxes near Pat-Pong, to follow a weekend of beach and boat to Pattaya, then back to Beijing.

We indulge in the luxury of a last night together in the Beijing apartment that Rabbit found me for the consultancy month ahead - those years were still those of short duration - before she had to bring herself together to join a legal domicile where husband and Winter-Winter were waiting, Winter-Winter just about to celebrate her 14th birthday.

I remember a sulky night for this Pekingese interlude. No doubt a rejection of the inevitable, we just emerged from a decade of spicy delicacies to fall back into the bland pot of separate coexistence. Perhaps also the toothache that was beginning to take hold of me and prevented me from duly appreciating the carnivorous meal later on invited in honour of Winter-Winter.

That evening, while I could barely chew, Winter-Winter lacerated steaks with sparkling canines. Carelessness and appetite of adolescence... I felt myself getting old.

K AS KILOS



There are two kinds of representation of the Buddha.

Buddha can be laughing and plump, or slenderer as befits someone who has lived a life of asceticism. The chubby Buddha symbolizes happiness and joy of living. It is by far the most popular in China where, when you want to flatter someone about his/her good looking, you tell that he or she gained weight.

Rabbit never aspired to the protuberance of the soul, even when lodged in the stomach. Very early on, she therefore began to worry about her aspect. During the months of separation she complained regularly to her Tiger about the pounds that loneliness and nostalgia made her gain.

Rabbit did not have the same demands on me, however.

When I review the photos of our romantic beginnings in the nineties, the contrast is striking between the thin young girl and the forty-something quintal that I was carrying. We are a bit better matched now from that angle - I melted a little, she feathered.

Our progress towards a kind of balance on the sets has not been carried out in a continuous and linear manner. The yo-yo so rightly associated with weight fluctuations did not spare us.

In this regard, 2005 was a spectacular year. Returning from a five-year assignment in Moscow, I had, under extreme strain on the pancreas, lost a good 40 pounds over a few weeks. Rabbit had been able to witness it through posted photos - we had had a long period of purely virtual relationship, attributable to our professional geography.

She did not want to be outdone.

A dietetic guru therefore cooked up a cure to match her ambitions - to lose ten kilogrammes over two or three weeks.

The goal was largely achieved when we met again in May 2005, but Rabbit wanted to continue a little further on the path to perfection.

I therefore attended in part this Way of the Cross. The regime was effective at the cost of much suffering. Most of the meals consisted of a bag of sticky porridge diluted with hot water, a few vegetables or fruits to ballast a little. Rabbit suffered while swallowing her decoction, I suffered with her by depriving myself out of solidarity of many delicacies from Chinese cuisine.

We looked away in front of the Häagen-Dazs, the Ben and Jerry, the Mövenpick that the beautiful season made even more attractive.

But the most attractive was the new Rabbit! She had rented us for the weekend a studio room in a spa resort in the Northern suburbs of Beijing, between the Ming tombs and a section of the Great Wall.

Our haven had the originality of hosting a basin in the main room, a sort of half-cube of three meters of edge, which one could fill at will with thermal water to leisurely wade. The modest swimsuits quickly waltzed, and the Nature Rabbit, light but so real, floating and dripping, wore the same splendour as when we first discovered each other, almost fifteen years earlier.

Regimes do keep their promises! I was the witness of a metamorphosis, that of the fruit so unctuous out of so much self-sacrifice.

I was not the only one to be disturbed by this return to the fountain of youth. Rabbit told me that when she was back home, on the morning following a night spent like every night there in separate rooms, she had to repel the insistence of her husband seeking to honour her on the kitchen table - he who, since the arrival of Winter-Winter, seemed to have forgotten the marital path.

However effective it may have been, a thwarted diet no longer has any effect.

With the slackness following my departure, the temptations of restaurants and pastry shops sprinkled on the ground floor of her office building, Rabbit resumed eating.

She tried again, after two or three years, the drastic experience of the regime.

I accompanied her to the first consultation in the lair of the guru, an apartment without much originality in a compound of the

Northern suburbs of Beijing. Rabbit resumed her fetid decoctions for a few days.

This time, however, the miracle did not take place. Her body, perhaps, had weakened, her will had blunted. Rabbit could not endure a full session of suffering and gave up the experience before it took full effect.

Since then, we have accepted our bodies natural as they are. Desire, pleasure remain, are confirmed and taken on, scales notwithstanding.

L AS LUBRICANT



It seems that men, beastly are they, for many of them feel an attraction for anal sex, the one they impose, not the one they undergo - while women would be in the same proportions reluctant to this penetration.

Tiger, I do not prove the stereotype wrong. As for Rabbit, worried as she was during our first days comparing her prenatal narrowness to my erect cylinder, she quickly understood my appetite and lent herself to it without restraint, hesitation or, she said, pain.

The knowledge of the thing by a young Chinese woman whose whereabouts were far from shameless while access to specialized literature was non-existent did not fail to stun me.

We were on our way from the airport where she had welcomed me in her brand new Passat, heading to the hotel where we were going to burn off some energy near the Workers' Stadium, when she double-parked in front of a pharmacy, instructing me to take care of the car if a cop was to pass by. Two minutes later she comes out and drives us again.

In the room that I like to each time baptize as nuptial, Rabbit, wrapped in a loincloth exuding steam and desire, places on the nightstand the small flask she bought a while ago. This is a lubricant specially made for what she knows I want to try. Rabbit does not suffer, she invites and incites ...

In fact, the back door is not the one we use most. Visits there are more dactylus than penile. When I ask her what game she prefers, anything, she replies, that will make you happy will give me pleasure. For a long time she nicknamed me her Tiger with fairy fingers.

Our first years, emotions were calibrated, intervening whenever we were alone in the presence of a couch. In our decades of experience, I remember only three or four nights together from which coitus was absent. There was this return from Bangkok where I sulked for no reason ¹⁰, that evening in Montreal ¹¹ where, exhausted by ten days of meeting, I fell asleep in front of the War of Fire, the flu episode when fever overcame my ambitions. And then there was this evening when, Winter-Winter having been entrusted to the grandparents, she was in her ten years, we were in the hotel room, in full anointing of the member and the duct, when her cell phone rang. She sees the number displayed, her picking up of the receiver is followed by long, audibly unpleasant exchanges.

Her husband had given up at the last moment on a study trip. When he came back to the suburban home to surprise her, the place was cold and deserted - neither the mother nor the child she was supposed to coach for her college entrance exam. Rabbit invents a friend in distress that she had to rescue. At the end of the line, the husband does not cool down, he has the pasty voice of vengeful liquors. Rabbit hangs up, wants to pick up where we left off, but I feel her worried, absent in her elsewhere.

It is not too difficult for me to convince her that the wisest way is undoubtedly that of repatriation, to appreciate on the spot the extent of the domestic drama and the possible remedies - we were not yet at the stage where we would have seized this crisis like a pole stretched out to take the big step. Rabbit nods, gets dressed and slips away, relieved to be able to march up to the front with chances of success. She will find her husband asleep from alcohol, quite unable upon waking up to remember the why or how.

Over the years, the lubricant became scarcer. The practice continued, however, one finger, two, sometimes three, until it was observed that too much mixing could lead to self-contamination.

Since then, Tiger's magic fingers have avoided the other door. Rabbit is not complaining. She took a liking to the vibrant accessory that I brought us from Europe for our jubilee and pretends to ignore the contribution of tadalafil to my constant vigour.

¹⁰ See T as Thailand, page 39.

¹¹ See M as Montreal, page 50.

J AS JASMINE



Modern as she is - must be, to fall in love with a foreign Tiger - Rabbit remains attached to many traditions. She knows her culture inside out. The tea ceremony figures prominently in the spectrum of rituals and entertainment, along with the wearing of masks, choral singing, watercolours or the way of flowers, 花道, it is the Chinese name for ikebana.

As she respects my right to be indifferent, we only had in my apartment that I called home the bare minimum to pretend to practice the gong fu cha ritual : a teapot not too large, teacups not too small, a source of water at the right temperature, a tray to carry the whole and of course the precious leaves.

Different packaging brought back from her forays to the source of production or unearthed in one of the many specialized markets of the capital, green teas preferably with evocative names of Longjing - Dragon well, Tieguanyin - Mercy of iron (sic), Oolong – Black Dragon, Huangshan maofen - Downy spikes of the yellow mountain, Biluochun - Jade spiral of Spring...

Often, while she was performing her evening ablutions, Rabbit would let me prepare the tea for us. She knew that the result would not be ingredients' worthy, my good will not being a decent substitute to my basic lack of culture, but that did not really matter, since fever took over us immediately after the first sip, exploring hands let the cups go and the tray lay at the end of the sofa before we made our way to the bedroom for another ritual.

I was careful not to be too ignorant, however. When we visited the specialised markets, like the one in Maliandao, Cart Crossing, the main tea street in the Southwest of the city, I patiently followed her from stall to stall. She knew what she wanted and where to find it. I took part in the endless tastings around a low table on which an always charming, always

literate attendant made us probe the grands crus one after the other.

I have about as much taste for tea in general as I do for wine in particular. Unable to blindly distinguish a grape variety, a terroir, a vintage, I am equally ignorant of teas. All, for me, are alike or equal, the only criteria I recognize being the colour, and the price - two elements which vary greatly!

So I buy from time to time, without really knowing why, except that Rabbit or the attendant recommend. When I am alone and have to decide, I stick to the established values, as the one who fills his cellar with Côtes du Rhône village, because one knows what it is and bears no risk of being disappointed.

Or I indulge in a little fantasy, tea matured in orange peel, tea of giant flowers which, rehydrated, occupy the entire cup, pressed Pu Er'h cakes at extravagant prices, tea with jujube and ginger, remarkably efficient pepper tasting decoction against cold spells – all gift purchases for the happy few Westerners delighted with these drops of exoticism. Rarely jasmine tea, Molihua Cha, it has become too common since even Air France stewards know how to present it to passengers under its original name, or chrysanthemum tea, Jinhua Cha, which competes with hot water on restaurant tables.

One year when we were on a few days' getaway in Hangzhou, a former imperial city not far from Shanghai on the Great Lake - Great, that is the name of the lake -, enjoying leisure activities on days borrowed to the aftermath of Chinese New Year, we went to visit the village of Longjing, in the surrounding hills. Rabbit had booked us a taxi for the day, the one that had brought us from the airport to the hotel, which she found reliable enough to entrust him with our free time.

It was the moment when the freshly picked leaves were cooked to prepare the early March deliveries - a moment at least as important as the arrival of Beaujolais Nouveau.

I was there in this village of a few homes, inhaling the roasted scents, I had Rabbit for me and everyone saw us, I was happy.

D AS DELIGHTS



If there is another archetype of Chinese culture than tea, it is cuisine. Or rather the cuisines - tradition does not count less than eight main ones at the regional level, plus the imperial which unites them all.

If the Tiger had something to do with Rabbit's initiation to sexual journey, Rabbit was Tiger's great mentor in terms of culinary art.

Rabbit knows how to cook but has little time to practice. In general, therefore, we rely on the good makers for meals, who deliver to us or whom we visit.

Rabbit taste buds are not shy. Unlike many of her compatriots, she does not hold back in front of a dish on the grounds that she does not know.

But acceptance does not mean adoption. Wherever we go outside the Middle Kingdom, she knows how to find the Chinese family restaurant a stone's throw from our residence, a restaurant where they would speak real Chinese, the common language, what Westerners call "Mandarin", and where they would know how to prepare dishes "just like there". These are not necessarily very luxury canteens, but certainly places where the Rabbit quickly manages to be appreciated by guests, almost immediately acquiring the status of regular patron whose VIP treatment is shared with me "en passant", Tiger as a gastronomy consort.

In China itself, there are few occasions when we compromise with Western food.

Salads in summer, a pizza or a bruschetta once a week are enough to satisfy my desire for backwards exoticism. Otherwise, we scrupulously try the most tempting among the myriad of restaurants that populate the streets of

Beijing and elsewhere. Rabbit has her criteria for choosing. The table d'hôte must either be part of a famous chain, or its reputation must have rustled so loudly that it made her ears tremble.

Moreover, no incongruities. It was not with her that I was introduced to the subtleties of grilled scorpion or sea cucumber. Rabbit's choices are more classical, and I still wriggle at the memory of the invigorating noodles, of the donkey rolling on the ground - it is a dessert made from red beans -, of tofu in all sauces or ravioli banquets, starter, main course, dessert.

Rabbit even managed to convert me to Japanese or Korean cuisines - Pekingese are not prudish with their cousins' recipes. Only one bone of contention between us, the hot-pot or Chinese fondue. I find it hard to get satisfied when you have to spend an infinite amount of time around steaming pots, just to lose in a rather tasteless broth endless strips of pseudo bacon, river fish, cabbage or turnip.

My reluctance duly noted towards the traditional winter fumaroles, the offer remained sufficiently varied for her to in solidarity deprive itself of it.

Sometimes, when she knows she is going to be late, Rabbit asks me to order for both of us without waiting.

Anxiety of the neophyte - I am proud when, finally joining our table, she grabs the carbon where my choices have been cabalistically noted in the form of illegible scribbles, goes through the list, corrects it only marginally with the attendant to our service who, seeing her arrive, had immediately understood that the real ruler had just arrived and inquired about the confirmation of the Long Nose's desiderata.

M AS MONTREAL



The United Nations Pension Fund has at least two advantages over its national counterparts: the first is to provide benefits from the age of 55 at a level largely sufficient to free oneself from material concerns so as to devote time and energy to Rabbit -Tiger love; the second, to organize every year in late June early July meetings over a fortnight in a more or less exotic place, to which I participated, and which provided dreamed opportunities to meet in long duration complicity.

Among these escapades, the one to Montreal is particularly appealing to my Tiger heart. Montreal is the see of a United Nations agency, the International Civil Aviation Organization. I visited there from time to time as part of my union activities and already had the opportunity to get somehow familiar with the city when, in July 2004, I made the trip with Rabbit from Roissy where she had joined me to Mirabel airport.

It is no doubt because of the conjunction of Francophonie and the New World that Montreal meetings always have a special flavour.

The relatively modest size of the city - with 2 million inhabitants over less than 400 square kilometres, we are far from Shanghai or New York -, its structure around a few major axes or historical hubs, such as the St. Lawrence river of which it occupies an island, the old town, the metro network and its underground city, the calm and security of its main axis, its squares and its parks, the ambient cosmopolitanism, make Montreal much more than the eternal rivalry between French and English languages, a city gifted with all the assets for an idyllic stay.

It was in Montreal that Rabbit and Tiger truly discovered their capacity and their aspiration to fully live together. We were not taken care of by a hotel system that blows aside the worries of everyday life. Renting an apartment allowed all extravaganzas to the couple, but also required more rigour in everyday life -

we had to stockpile, to clean, to respect the neighbours, to find our means of transport without a concierge breaking the back of the work for us.

We survived all this, better, we liked to be in charge, to design a schedule of occupations, to lend ourselves as an ostentatious couple to the imperatives of social life. In Montreal where all social life takes place in three districts, the Village, the Latin Quarter and Old Town it is much less easy than in New York, Vienna, Paris or Geneva to escape from meeting colleagues.

We therefore interacted a lot more than usual. Was it the heat of summer, that of the food and of the French language, the fact that she was no longer a stranger to many colleagues since already in 2003, in New York, she had crossed paths with several Montreal protagonists, anyhow Rabbit was at ease with these groups of merry UN fellows, she whom on so many other occasions I have seen reluctant to expanded contacts.

Then the format of the meeting, with its two weekends, allowed us to earmark sumptuous time slots for our own construction. Bike, metro, boat, we crisscrossed the river and ploughed its banks.

The separation at Roissy was hard, she in return towards Beijing, me towards Geneva. Grandeur of Montreal, one-summer capital of happiness uniting the Tiger and the Rabbit, the base on which we initialled our life contract. Without Montreal we would not have been able, three months later, to take the oath of our unbreakable¹².

¹² See B as Bigamy, page 11.

U AS UBIQUOUS



Ubiquity is a precious ally for unfaithful couples. To avoid certain embarrassing questions, it is indeed sometimes very useful to be able to pretend that you are elsewhere.

At least that is Tiger's experience.

Rabbit does not seem to know of such concerns. However improbable where we went to hide, she never fails to bring back piles of pictures featuring landscapes, monuments, events, memories for Winter-Winter, trinkets for her office colleagues, sweets for her parents (never for her husband who must however witness the gifts lavished on others).

It requires a real confidence to justify a trip to Vienna, Lisbon, Paris or Hong Kong, not to mention Montreal, Zhuhai or Xiamen, places where her official duties have little reason to bring her.

There are journeys that are even less likely, such as our ride in five stages from Paris to Menton in November 2017, or our March 2019 circumnavigation. Rabbit may benefit from a prejudice of indifference on the part of her close relatives, accustomed as they are to the exoticism of her official mission destinations, between Washington, Seoul, Bangkok, Ulaan Baatar, Istanbul or Shanghai.

For me, I always managed to be cautious, when Rabbit coexistence brought me to places where attendance would provoke suspicion.

So when we were traveling I was carefully considering the plausible reasons why I could not, for a day or a week, comply as usual to the daily ritual of calling Europe via Skype - this includes the nights we scavenge in Beijing, for which Rabbit also sometimes invents alibis, especially family ones. It seems that

her husband is not considered the ideal son-in-law, little risk of the fuse be sold, except perhaps on the Winter-Winter side, but the child-woman guessed everything and chose to keep quiet.

I used a lot the pretext of stay in isolated training centres, with internet access strictly limited to core hours and to classrooms.

When we were traveling to the South of France, I had assigned myself an alleged mission to Mongolia, accompanying a group of trainees near Erdenet.

Therefore when I supposedly called from the steppe in the middle of December, I had to imagine and convey the atmosphere of polar cold instead of the comfortable twenty degrees on Avignon ramparts, while choosing for the phone call corners where there was no risk of a Provencal accent to resound, that would be difficult to mistake for Tatar gutturals.

During this time, Rabbit, to whom I had to sell other stories to escape over the time for a phone call, pay the bill, find an ATM, buy water for the road ... was waiting for me, packing her luggage, watching the Chinese channel that satellite TV spreads all over the world, sipping a second cappuccino.

She did not talk about that, but I do not think she was fooled by what motivated my short absences. She respected the obligation to communicate I had contracted, even if this seemed a little crazy to her.

From now on, I live like her without such constraints. But there are no longer trips which in the past justified my subterfuge, of which I could now enjoy every moment.

COVID has extinguished the gift of ubiquity ...

N AS NAVY



Going on a cruise with Rabbit, a dream coming true, almost a fantasy, that of a wife taking over from the other, the one for whom I had discovered hotel navigation, the one whose disappearance lifted all Tiger constraints.

Embark Rabbit and Tiger on a ship, for a week of intimacy stabilized by the isolation of the waves, under the responsibility of the captain, sole master on board, this conveyed all the public legitimacy of a couple that was now only half outlaw.

The cruise idea that trotted in my heart, I had to delve into it to give it an acceptable form.

The appropriate cruise had to meet at least five criteria: location - to reach for embarkation or leave for repatriation should not look like mission impossible; timing - it had to be early Spring 2019 so as not to interfere with the Earth Pig New Year celebrations or conflict with the year-end duties for Rabbit that fall in April of each year; duration - everything had to fit over a decade, the responsibilities of the Tiger or the Rabbit hardly allowing a longer absence; homogeneity - that the area covered does not require a profusion of visas; accessibility - that for a high but reasonable price we benefitted from quality services.

After much research, some procrastination, a pinch of final indecision, I set my sights on a Mediterranean journey.

There were three candidates in the last round: a tour of Japan, an epic cruise from the Maldives and a Marseille bound circumnavigation. The weather in the Sea of Japan was uncertain, getting to Mahé from Beijing was a real headache, so it would be the Phocaeen city.

A choice that I made the soul all the calmer as I already knew the company, my patronizing background allowing me to claim welcome upgrades, and as the route was largely familiar to me, Genoa, Barcelona, Palermo, Malta - in addition to Marseille, which Rabbit and I had tasted a year before.

Rabbit convinced, tickets bought, we both arrive in Marseille for a two-days warm-up tour before the big embarkation. A mine bad cold could have ruined everything, but fortunately the choice of a luxury hotel allowed easy access to a devoted and efficient doctor who knew how to perk me up almost immediately.

MUCEM, Iles du Frioul, Notre Dame de la Garde, La Canebière, the Old Port - and Meraveglia ship with her area reserved for distinguished guests, far from the hubbub of 4,500 other passengers.

Rabbit enjoyed I believe the discreet luxury of our reserved quarters, and I did not shy away from my pleasure either. A joy of navigation interspersed with stopovers, refinement on board, on land the daily life of the Mediterranean that I did my best to make her understand better.

Rabbit moved in luxury with the grace and ease of a red conqueror - her first name, 彤, is colourful, her surname 刘 evokes battles.

Return to Marseille, the ship docks in the morning, plane at the end of the afternoon, an extension of the South by car rental through the Alpes de Haute Provence, olive groves and mini-golf.

Embarkation for Brest, a sign of fate that this connection exists at the right point in time, all in all incongruous and uncrowded. The Tiger will over two days make the Rabbit discover a part of these lands of Brittany where his anchor was thrown - coastal encounter with younger daughter, a nice embroidery added to Rabbit-Tiger canvas.

Then the return to Beijing, and the sudden break in newly acquired habits.

We are Sunday very early. I imagined a smooth extension of our cocooning at least for this first day in Beijing. But Rabbit, barely the plane landed and the phone switched on, learns from her husband that he has come to wait for her at the airport despite the very early hour.

Has he sensed a flow of happiness that needed to be interrupted?

Here I am alone - until the next meal, until the next hugs.

When, to keep mind and heart busy, I remember the episodes of our prodigious decade, I blame myself for letting the dissatisfaction of our successive couches float in memory - the five-star Marseille hotel has a bulging mattress that makes us roll far away. The floating palace adjoins two box springs with an awkward in midst interval. In Plougasnou bedsheets that are too new prove rough to our love.

It is only here, in Beijing, that everything is day and night softness to us, pillows to bury the moaning of pleasure, drawer to draw from it vibrating ecstasy ...

AS ISOLATION



Whereas with Rabbit present Tiger knows how to behave, amicable, considerate, even tender, when she defaults, the less pleasant features of his character make their way towards the visible realm.

It does not matter then whether the emptiness is half a day, a weekend or a week, whatever the cause, family, professional, unknown. Worry, anxiety, jealousy arise as soon as the idle Tiger sets out in search for the absent Rabbit.

That day, we were in Beijing on our return from Bangkok where we experienced a stay of delight, Rabbit managed to make her family believe that she would not come home until the next day, we had one day, one more night than what her obligations allowed me to claim. There is a reason to be happy - but I am angry at her, because I know that tomorrow she will no longer be mine. And so I treat her coldly, sulkiness makes us spend our last night side by side, eyes to the sky, without touching or cuddling.

That month, we were in Istanbul where I had the privilege of accompanying her for a week of training. We spent the night on the plane from Beijing, an afternoon delight, the evening is approaching, tomorrow her meeting. Rabbit must get ready for a preliminary contact, a briefing to be followed by a dinner with the other trainees. I blame her for these very obligations that brought us here across the Sublime Porte. When she reaches the room back as early as she can, I clench my teeth and offer only silence.

That year, Rabbit went to attend a three-day meeting near Jakarta. Her plane was leaving very early, I could not accompany her to the airport. So I pout, I refuse the call she gives me as soon as she lands. Her number is displayed, it costs me, but I do not answer.

Or, that weekend, the last in my stay, Rabbit had to visit her parents, to purchase furniture for her new apartment, to take her car for a ten thousand miles service, in short, I won't see her. I am waiting, she does not call, she does not answer, she is busy in her world where I have no place. So I get angry against her, against me, against us, I anticipate my return date, since I am of no value, what is the point in delaying our separation ...

These rifts, these sufferings, these dizziness fortunately do not last long, fortunately Rabbit endured the offence that, bittern Tiger, I unleashed on us.

The following night without love, I embrace her in the morning, my eyes wet and ashamed, even before breakfast. Silence from Istanbul, while she is under the shower, I rush to the hotel lobby to buy her flowers to beg forgiveness for my feigned indifference.

She is coming back from Jakarta, I am at the airport to greet her, with a poor excuse on my lips explaining, awkwardly, why I did not pick up, Rabbit pretends to believe it.

I just changed my ticket, Rabbit calls, I stammer with joy, and instantly I replace the coupon I had just transformed - the cost of this double penalty is that of my blindness.

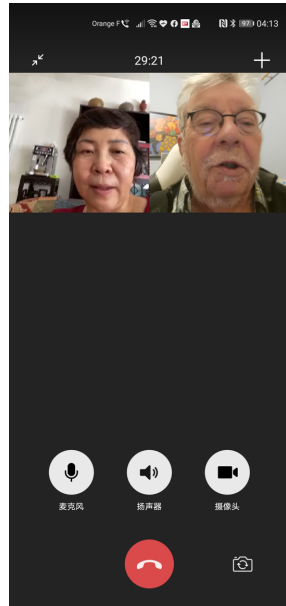
The lack, the frustration, the blinders of jealousy are the counterpart, I know, of my love for Rabbit, the suffering experienced when I miss her testifies to the happiness that I experience with us together.

I am now trying not to pull this rope too much. And sometimes I am surprised at the threshold beyond which absence, paradoxically, becomes tolerable again, because it is inevitable.

At the beginning of the 2000s, we thus survived the bitter abyss of post-Soviet separation, almost five years during which, I was residing in Moscow, we had no other contact than by email, Skype did not yet exist.

Now it's another chasm that keeps us away. We can see ourselves from one bank to the other, without a bridge to cross, an irremediable hiatus between the Cowherd boy and the Weaver girl.

W AS WHEN



As of this writing, in July 2021, Tiger and Rabbit have been separated for well over a year and a half.

Certainly there were in the past even longer periods when they did not touch each other - but this slough water we had sucked, we did not think we would ever have to taste it again.

During these separations of long ago, we had only very rustic tools to compensate for the absence. During the 5 years in Moscow it was the mail server alone that allowed us to maintain a contact in fact purely in writing. Contemporary tools, 微信 WeChat in the foreground, in their immediacy, image and sound, reach such a degree of intimate realism that they make it even more painful not to be able to get past them.

In January 2020, when I left Beijing as I usually did in order not to encumber Rabbit too much during major national holidays, we were going to pass into the year of the Metal Rat, as a Tiger I did not doubt about my return barely a fortnight later.

Rabbit had given me her shopping list - micellar water, coffee beans, Garnier shampoo. I had added two or three fantasies of my own, a new vibratory tool to diversify pleasures, a jigsaw puzzle of a thousand pieces composed of our quasi-official photo of the 2019 cruise¹³, a plaid to curl up together in front

¹³ See N as Navy, page 54.

of the television in the winter which would continue for a few more weeks.-

All this, along with new shirts and a pair of scratch shoes, was stored in the suitcase I was about to check in, Brest Bretagne airport for Beijing international via Roissy CDG.

It was then when the setbacks accumulated. The return of January 29 was postponed, by a few days, a few weeks, a few months ... An insolent virus blocked our calendar.

Little by little, the illusions have vanished. This return, at first barely staggered, is now no more envisaged than Greek calends¹⁴. The lease of Beijing apartment was terminated after six months of absence, that of the storage room that Lapin mobilised was renewed after another six months.

The suitcase is still there, in the bedroom-office of the Plougasnou Tiger.

One evening, when they had joined by teleconference as practically every day at least once for the last ten, twelve, fourteen, sixteen months ..., he hoisted the suitcase on the bed, and detailed its contents, to show that the devoted and careful Tiger was at the orders of his Rabbit, ready to leap at the first green flashing light.

Other times, they have explored the path of love over the phone, to recall through their bodies memories of ecstasy. This requires Rabbit to be available at home, without the risk of being surprised - it could be Monday morning, Sunday night for him, when personalized schedules allow her to have a half-day off. Rabbit undresses in the eyes of the Tiger who quickly springs up as she explores the entrance to a cave whose air he knows is humid. They each strive to keep the lens of the phone in the axis of pleasure, one hand to film, the other to reveal.

The sessions do not last long, just long enough to mutually remind how they love and miss each other, to confirm that they are flesh as well as soul, and that they are still waiting, a day, a horizon where the Rabbit fountain will flow again to the lips of her Tiger.

Time passes, and time weighs. Each month they miss takes away an increasing part of their hope. The rest of their age is now counted. Sometimes fate, pettily, whistles earlier than expected the end of a game we wanted eternal.

¹⁴ Calends were important seasonal landmarks in Roman calendar. Greeks did not have such events. The expression "postponed to Greek calends" therefore means "indefinitely postponed".

V AS VANQUISHED



These few pages as an antidote. The memory is not yet fragile, of those Rabbit years, of those years of hope, of those years of happiness, of those years of doubt sometimes but always in between, years in a row, years of waking.

The Tiger is however well aware that time is unravelling as teeth come loose, and that a year will come which will be the last.

So, smiling at his ivory yellowed by dint of biting into the fruits of living loves, he will reread these lines which combat oblivion.

And the Tiger will know how long he has lived.

The Tiger will cry for the happiness that was theirs, he will cry again for missed opportunities.

He will want to entwine with his tender routine the fingers of discoverer companion, discovery companion Rabbit, a thirty-year-old Rabbit with a scent of jasmine.

It is then that in a flash both will suddenly glimpse at the road that led to the undergrowth of love, havens of eternity to the Tiger and his Rabbit.

A discreet path, so quietly covert that they missed it. And here they are, too late ...

