

Writing sample for John Gu.

This writing sample consists of a short stories (“Some Reflections...”) and an excerpt from a longer work (“excerpt from: The High Castle”). These texts comprise approximately 8,000 words.

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## Some Reflections Occasioned by the Publication of the Revised Edition of the Practical Chinese Reader

*In the fall of 2012, the Peking University Foreign Language Press announced the release of a revised edition of the Practical Chinese Reader, a Chinese language textbook and reader for English-speaking students whose first edition, published in 1981, progressed by telling a series of stories about Gubo and Palanka, two university students studying Mandarin Chinese, and their Chinese friend, Ding Yun. It follows their experiences as students, first in Gubo and Palanka's home country, and then in China. As a widely popular and surprisingly engaging textbook and reader, it was a beloved and instrumental part of the education of nearly an entire generation of anglophone students of the Chinese language.*

The unexpected, bittersweet pleasure of a letter or an e-mail whose sender you haven't heard from in years. The serendipity of a chance meet-ing in the street, its loud-laughed happiness, the unguarded, guileless desire to embrace, and what you sought to embrace was not just the person, but something past her, something larger, fuller, the whole part of a lost life, the entirety of your time together.

It's something like this you feel when coming across for the first time the "revised" edition (in fact, a near complete rewrite) of the *Practical Chinese Reader*, released just this fall by the Peking University Press. It's a book whose title and subject will be instantly recognizable to a certain kind of student of the Chinese language, one who studied the language in the early eighties and nineties, before the language became in vogue here at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

And how can certain kinds of objects be blamed if they unhinge the floodgates of certain kinds of memories? Objects always begin as themselves, simple and shapeless, and then accrue our associations. You think, upon taking up this successor in your hands, of wooden desks, of certain slanted sunbeams alighting on blackboards dusty with chalk, of the skylines of foreign capitals. You think of the people you have known and the people you have only ever read about. Such associations, swollen with narrative and memory, are apropos: the first edition of the Practical Chinese Reader always felt like a collection of stories first and a textbook second, centering, as it did, around the adventures of Gubo and Palanka, two Canadian students trying to learn Chinese (Gubo and Palanka are their adopted Chinese names, we never do learn their English names). In a way, it was almost a sort of alternate reality whose inhabitants could live a life that was stylized and simple, but also vibrant and real, closer to the conception of life that you held as a young man. And how appropriate, it strikes you, to remember that the Reader began with a reunion, Gubo and Palanka's meeting at the train station, the kind of reunion that could occur only in the bounds of fiction: the lovers embracing after defeating the exigencies of time and distance. It's only after the lessons of painful experience that one learns that what was normal to youth becomes miraculous in adult life. Nothing would have struck you as more normal or more honest: she climbs off the train, sees him, and then leaps to embrace him (in the original textbook, the scene is given a three-panel illustration ending with Palanka tearfully pressing her head into Gubo's shoulder). All this drama, just for a lesson on how to say *Ni hao* (Hello) and *Ni hao ma?* (How are you?), when the adult part of yourself understands that it so rarely happens that way, that love is fragile enough to be defeated by something as simple as separation.

Or else think of the book as a sort of refuge where youth could be preserved, its mistakes left

unpunished, an ultimately kind place that evoked a sort of boundless, endless summer: think of the chapter where Gubo and Palanka go to the beach with Ding Yun, the Chinese girl, a cheerfully complaisant third wheel accompanying them on all their adventures together. As if nothing could be simpler than to take a day off to leave for the beach, and the sun, the shore, the ocean, and the waves that broke upon it were reduced to items in a vocabulary list.

In the subsequent chapter, lying on that perfect beach, the three discuss their dreams. A clever way to create a list of professions. What perfect and perfectly suited careers awaited? Engineer? Doctor? Teacher? Gubo explains that he would like to be a writer. Palanka and Ding Yun's enthusiasm for the idea was boundless; if he said such a thing, it was assured.

What comes across most surprisingly in the book was the depth of the characters:

Gubo, whose wit never fully masked the depth of his idealism, so that his confession on that beach never seemed surprising; if he was the gentle, athletic layabout (the "Sports and Athletics" chapter finds him playing basketball at the gym) stepping on to the beach, it was not essentially surprising to discover the soulful writer leaving it.

And Palanka, whose decisiveness—it was always she who introduced so many chapters with the phrase *Women qu nar ba* (Let's go there), and who, at the end of the chapter on "Time Expressions," had cried out, *Women gai wanle!* (We're going to be late!)—always drove the narrative and presaged so perfectly the depth of her ambitions (she wanted to be a *yi sheng*, a doctor).

And Ding Yun, whose undemanding happiness and gameness—she followed the other two everywhere: the cafeteria, the library, the cinema, and the "discotheque" (how utterly standard and beautifully old-fashioned the settings of each chapter were!), always there to ask the questions (*Na shi*

*shenme?*, What is that?) that would elicit the enrichment of vocabulary—bespoke an almost preternatural kindness, with an amiability and low-key drive that seemed a closer match to Gubo's than Palanka's was.

What united them, perhaps, was their assuredness, in the world, in their futures, and (could it not ever be the case?) in China, which was always, in their estimation, on the verge of its advancement to the league of great nations (this is something of a reflection of the inevitably politicized creation process of the first edition of the Reader, which still referred to the Communist Revolution as a matter of recent memory).

Even the airport scene (and who these days still believes in airport scenes?), where Gubo and Palanka leave for Beijing, together, has a self-assured quality, imbued as it is with all the hope and optimism of their perpetual youth. Taking leave of their tearful parents and of Ding Yun (she was a foreign exchange student and didn't return to Beijing until the Reader's end), Gubo and Palanka were nevertheless filled with an excitement that you might have understood immediately as a young man.

And it's a scene whose poignance and power is magnified if you yourself ever went to Beijing; what it held for you was a sort of promise, what you'd held was a kind of conviction. About the size of the world, about its fullness. Who after reading the two volumes of this book, who could turn around and say no, I don't want to go to Beijing? If only for a year. You would grab all your things, bid all your farewells, make all your rash, youthful promises, and then fly off—if you'd read the book.

If you were in Beijing, if you were in Beijing once, especially if you were there in the early eighties, you would remember a cold, gray city warmed in the winter by the steam of food carts, how the colors returned in the spring, and in the summer, when you walked from the Peking University campus to

the Summer Palace, all the people were out, a sea of kites fluttering above them like reflections in the heavens of their own earthly dreams.

Your memories would be tied up with the memories of classrooms: a shifting prism of haloed dust, as the light slipped in through the window. Or the darkness of the dorms at Peking University, the frailty of your electric lamp and its yellow light, barely sufficient to light all the words you wanted to write down.

Memories which would alight with the restful finality of migratory birds at the moment of arrival—if you as much as touch this book. For the first edition of the Practical Chinese Reader was equal to and coeval with your youth. Tied up with all the places you'd traveled, with every girl you'd ever been in love with, as a young man. Even if you were in Beijing, you would want to know why. Its cover was the cover that your hands and her hands reached across one day, and seeing the cover of its successor, it is not some completely unreasonable instinct that expects in the succeeding instant for a pair of piercing blue eyes to turn up to yours; the expression that gave that fierceness to their color was the mystery you spent a semester attempting to unravel.

How powerful narrative is!

You remember the words for writer, doctor, and engineer as if they were your own professions, instead of Gubo, Palanka, and Ding Yun's respective dreams. You know the word for blue, and the word for eyes.

You know how to say "I love you" in Chinese because once, on a rainy day in Beijing, Gubo had made this declaration to Palanka. And not just because you had said the same thing over a staticy line to a girl who was nothing like Palanka or Ding Yun and yet who is, somehow, inseparable in your mind

from both.

And so when you pick up this new book, what will happen? Will time freeze and stand still? Flipping through its crisp, white, acid-free pages, it comes not as a surprise to find the new edition of the Practical Chinese Reader peopled by new characters and set in the present age. The characters no longer referring to each other as *tong zhi* (comrade), the skylines dotted with skyscrapers, everyone shuttled about in bullet trains. The glory of communism tucked quietly away, as into a dustbin, before your arrival.

The world needs new stories, and better to leave Gubo, Palanka, and Ding Yun in peace. Only, not. Only, in skimming the pages of this revised edition of the Practical Chinese Reader, you discover a quiet miracle, a sentence that is capable of rewriting all your ideas about the characters and people you thought you knew in your youth:

Cast of Characters

Ding Dao—*age 21, A university student from Montreal, Canada, majoring in Chinese Language and Literature. Son of Gubo and Ding Yun.*

Thus we find the fate of the two lovers and their friend. It was Ding Yun whom Gubo ended up marrying, not Palanka! And this despite all the protestations made in that beautiful language that he would love her forever. And a child! Older now than you were when you first opened the pages of the Reader. You shout with amazement and slap your knee, as at a dinner with a long-lost friend where, drunk with happiness, you stand up too quickly to propose too loudly a toast, moved by the ability of people to defy any and all of your expectations, overcome with bitter, unbearable happiness at the news of people from your own wasted youth, laugh-ing because you are so in love with something—is it

love? is it humanity?—you'd almost forgotten could bring you such joy.

Oh, in Beijing you spent entire nights writing letters! There was so much, so much more than you could ever explain in a letter, more than you knew how to say to her. You wanted to recapture the magic of the first night you'd spent together, talking into the early hours of the morning until the sun came up, not as a glow, you'd discovered, but like the unclenching of the night's darkness. You wrote about the acerbic, anti-party wit of your classmates at Peking University, what it was like to study in the park by the Temple of Heaven, about the life and beauty of the sight of the thousands of people who gathered every evening at Tiananmen Square.

You wrote until one day one of you said: "I've found someone else." And it doesn't even matter who, who said it, who meant it, who wanted this more (a year is a very long time, you should never promise anyone anything about forever). It's all been written already. It's all there already.

So what remains after two decades whose passage was like that of slumber? Even a night that feels like it could last forever is broken eventually by the dawn. What, in some grand search for lost time, can you return to, ultimately? A few things only, perhaps, a few things that remain whole, firm, and fresh, studded in your memory like seashells in the wet sand of a beach that will lie forever on the bounds of your youth, where it is always summer, where you will always have all the time in the world:

The two of you reaching for the same green book, covered in beautiful Chinese script. The way her piercing blue eyes looked up at you, with an expression of innocent amusement, and how you had paused for one exact moment before you could think of what to say.

Or the feeling of her hand in yours that first morning as you walked to class together from her dorm.



Or the small, wet stain on the shoulder of your shirt as she walked out of the airport. You should have dropped your bags right there. Told her you didn't want to go to Beijing anymore. Told her she was reason enough to stay. But, ah, it's all there already, she's gone already, and you've already turned around, an act printed in the indelible ink of the past, something you could never erase or undo, save perhaps in the wrinkled palimpsest of your own regret.

Which is why you place the book back, ultimately. The adult world, with its set routines, its lockstep finality, is a hostile place for lovers of language. It's only in some eternal, time-removed youth that one can fall in love for the first time, move to Canada or China, learn Chinese, have your heart broken, or break someone else's. The past is a nice place to visit, but you can't live there. Time for someone else to learn Chinese. Time for someone else to fall in love. The thought of this lifting your lips into the faintest smile as you walk out of the university bookstore, into the evening.

## excerpt from: **The High Castle**

*The one thing that might save us is a new heresy that could topple all the ideological institutions, all of the churches, all of the political parties, all of the nations of our wretched, barbaric world.*

– Milan Barajano, in an interview conducted during  
the filming of *In the Shadows of our Ancestors*

On the hill above the city sat the ruins of an ancient castle, and I would occasionally bring girls there to walk with me in the evenings. The castle had fallen or else had simply been abandoned centuries ago, and it existed now only as a scatter of evocative remnants: a crumbling wall of primitive masonry along the site's southern flank, a raised bed of flattish stones which had once sat underneath the keep, and, most castle-ishly, the hobbled remains of a cylindrical tower whose disassembly had been abandoned only partway through.

The hill was fairly tall, but its summit was easily accessible, less than an hour's walk from the city's central piazza. A series of outdoor steps followed the hill's rise, and these sections were not particularly strenuous, so that the castle site was heavily trafficked in the summertime, both by tourists and local visitors. The stream of this traffic began to flow shortly after dawn, ebbed in the heat of early afternoon (the place was often empty at the siesta hour), and then swelled in the evening as the air grew cooler. In the run-up to sunset, the atmosphere was festive: people uncorked bottles of wine and passed around paper cups (a kiosk that sold beer and laid out the rudiments of a beer garden in the form of a handful of plastic chairs and tables also did brisk business here), families posed for

photographs, a portable radio or cassette stereo might be brought out, and the sound of music drift above the hubbub.

The castle site sat on a small promontory which jutted towards the city, and from this high up, the view it afforded of the city and its environs was impressive: One's eye would first be drawn to the buildings of the historical part of the city, which centered around the central piazza and the ivory cube of the mayor's building that rose out of it. The apartment buildings that framed the square were painted in pale, pleasant pastels: carnation pinks, canary yellows, dawn-bright blues, their slanted tile roofs a deeply-kilned ochre or a charcoal-dark grey. About the piazza, grim, granite churches weighted down the scene like stones at the corners of a picnic blanket. The roofs of some of the other finer buildings that surrounded the piazza, the overturned half-barrel that surmounted the opera house, the ribbed dome of a basilica, were colored a sumptuous verdigris, and out of this pleasing arrangement of intersecting planes of color there rose various spires, chimney shafts, bell towers, and cupolae.

The apartment buildings that spread out from the square were painted a conservative beige that shone gold in the late afternoon, reddened in the evening as the sun set, purpled with the twilight, resolving finally into a powdery grey slate as night fell. Dark trees interleaved themselves amongst these buildings, a huddle of these trees indicated a municipal park, and as the city stretched outward these trees grew denser, the buildings thinned. Beyond the city, the druidic woods, which extended towards the horizon as a completed field of black and variously shaded dark green, out of which the newer housing developments, brutalist apartment blocks lumbered like castaway giants. These woods, their far reaches, made me think of the films of Barajano, those long, still shots of rain falling in primeval woods. They existed, these woods, it seemed, only in this part of the world, and the sight of them

brought to mind arboreal rites, the interstices of forest cover lit by pagan fires.

One made the ascent to the castle through a wooded park of larger and smaller trails that criss-crossed the hill, large sections of which had been terraced to accommodate the multiplicity of gravel paths, and then united at the summit. On the descent, it was not difficult, abetted by the advancing crepuscule, to find a secluded spot to kiss without the possibility of being discovered, and I was very pleased with myself at that time that I had been able to devise out of the raw elements of this city an effective romantic program whose final leg led from an alcove formed by the trees of that darkening hill to my room at the boarding house on B\_\_\_\_nyv street.

My landlady was a stout, diamond-haired woman in her sixties and her home was the only free-standing house at the end of a row of apartments on this street, which led to the city center. The house was well-appointed, bore a lifetime's accumulation of furniture, maintained spotlessly, with enough rooms to accommodate a clique of permanent boarders as well as a rotating cast of tourists in the summer.

On my first visit to her place (this was during the waning days of the summer tourist season, and I'd found relief from the heat of the street in the cool, dark hallways of her house), Vira had shown me the rooms with the practiced, confident air of a seasoned hostess, moving and speaking like the docent of an under-visited museum, the script of her tour excitedly given, as though it was the highlight of her day, her words flying quickly as I nodded along with the best impression I could muster of comprehension as she enumerated the various merits of the house: central heating, hot water available at all hours, a spacious backyard garden, etc., etc., without, it seemed, any awareness that I might have

some difficulty in parsing her quick, colloquial Varrenian.

There was really only one major issue that I was especially concerned about, but the subject took some delicacy to broach, and as we advanced up and down a series of pine-floored hallways and she showed me the living room (a little dark and cramped, cluttered with glass knick-knacks) or laid out the terms of the board (breakfast and dinner included in the rent, a little bit extra if I wanted to take lunch at the house), I wracked my brain with how to approach the question, the difficulty lying in being forced to think across two axes: what to say, and then how to translate it, while also keeping the barest appearance of comprehension as she explained to me when I should come for dinner or speculated aloud to herself whether it would be possible to bring a television into my room.

“Yes,” she looked at me solicitously, stopping mid-sentence to do so, catching through the preparatory shift in my body language that I was about to ask her something.

“Would it be possible,” I stumbled a bit in forming the Varrenian subjunctive, unpracticed in the language, “to invite friends over?”

“But of course!,” she replied. “This house is your home in our country. And your friends can stay overnight if they need to. Now, the trams stop running at midnight, but we have two lines that run out here, one on the corner of K\_\_\_ian street, and the other at ...”

When she gave me this reply, it was as though I had been trying to disentangle a very complicated and deeply woven knot, and Vira had swooped in to slice the thing clean through, as unperturbed by it as any other question about what kind of food was to be expected at breakfast or the status of spare keys, smoothing any trace of discomfort over by gliding effortlessly into a discussion of the tram schedule. Later on, I would come to understand that her grandmotherly looks belied a view of and

experience with sexuality that was more modern than anyone would have thought, but that she so quickly understood that a young man might want to bring a girl over to his place of an evening rendered me almost blushing speechless.

The room that she showed me was small but neat, and contained three pieces of furniture: a modestly-sized bed, a wooden writing desk laden with drawers, and a large, wooden wardrobe, stuffed in its lower compartments with heavy blankets. In compensation for its modesty and size, the room had the luxury of a window that overlooked the house's backyard, and in looking out over the summery patch of greenery that extended from the house, as she showed me the room, I adopted a stance I would repeat many times over the course of my stay there.

When Vira showed me the lock on the room's door, she took great pains to assure me that it was only for the sake of privacy that the door had a lock, and that I should not feel obliged to use it (the lock), or to take its existence as evidence that I should harbor any feeling of suspicion regarding the other boarders. She emphasized that "we only have good people here," and as such, I should feel secure in my possessions, and could feel free to leave my room unlocked if I wished! Only (she explained), yes, some of her boarders, perhaps coming from places where there was more crime, where people could not be as trusted or trusting, felt the need to have a lock on their door, and, while she herself did not ever feel it necessary to lock a room in her own house, who was she to judge if someone else did?

This talk of "good people" was, I would come to decide, characteristic of her, and later on I would be able to garner from my experiences with her speech a collection of parallel phrases, which would go some way in forming my view of her: "the good politicians," "the good foreigners," to which phrase she quickly added "like you!" leaving me both flattered and bemused, and finally, a phrase which would

be relevant to me: “good girls,” which occurred in sentences of the form, “You have such good taste, you only date good girls.”

During the time that I lived in her house, I also thought in a very binary way with regard to people, but my binary was divided by the question of conventionality. It was this question that cleaved the world in the most consequential way for me at that time, and it was this question: whether or not a person was “conventional” that determined my friendships and romantic relationships, and which would also guide the choices and decisions that I made. In the case of Vira, that she had no qualms about my bringing girls over to my room should have been ample evidence to place her in the unconventional group, but her talk of “good people” and so on, so drove her into the camp of the conventional that at that time I couldn’t help but see her only in this way. This prejudice against her was not diminished by the other ways in which she seemed to express an irredeemable conventionality: I winced whenever she sing-songed the propaganda from state television: “Thank goodness for the monarchy, or we would end up just like the Moravians!” (In this period, Moravia had fallen into civil war, and the state news showed bloody bodies in the streets of besieged cities, guerrillas in balaclavas denouncing the ceasefires that their own representatives had negotiated and pledging to carry on the fight, artillery pieces lugged into the hills.) Of the anti-monarchial protestors who occasionally cropped up in the capital, she leveled the formulation taught to her by state media: “irresponsible agitators.”

Of course, in this instance, I made the conventional choice, which was to take the room, and this hypocrisy was also characteristic of myself at that time. In doing so, I would learn that the terms of the room and board at Vira’s boardinghouse were even more generous than she had initially described to

me, that in addition to three home-cooked meals a day, housekeeping was also included in the laughably small sum that I paid her each week to stay there, and Vira would enter into my room at, it seemed, purely random (and hence unpredictable) intervals to change the sheets, sweep the floor, and right the (in my mind) charming disarray that I let the room fall into. The sheafs of paper and stacks of notebooks that I had scattered with geological haphazardness on my desk, she would set into neat stacks in the (to me) repulsive approximation of a government clerk's desk. The spill of books that I let linger on the floor by my bed she stacked in size order on my writing desk, and the hand's grab of prophylactics that I'd lazily hidden underneath these books, I would later find, to my horror, tucked discreetly in the desk's upper drawer.

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I'd come to the city on an academic post, teaching Amarguese language at the *Varrennian National Cultural University*, the largest and, I believed, most prestigious institution outside of the capital. A two-year contract seemed a slice of eternity, and I felt a kind of anticipatory dismay that I would be thirty at the time of my contract's expiration.

I'd imagined naively that I had finagled my way into the position on the thinnest set of credentials, had crowed to my friends about my feat when I received my offer letter, and gone so far as to daydream about recounting the story years later (fast-forwarding through my stay in the country, which was for me, prospectively, an unknowable but, I was sure, adventurous blur), where I would portray myself as a sort of picaresque hero: *Once in my late twenties, I tricked one of the national universities of a foreign country into giving me a paid post as a professor...*, not realizing that the university of an impoverished eastern country might be desperate for any warm body to round out the vampiric ranks of its aging



professoriat and would hire more or less anyone foolish enough to accept a salary paid in the form of icy dorm rooms and meal vouchers. (It was the squalidness of the faculty dormitory, with its rust-streaked communal bathrooms that had driven me to seek out Vira's boarding house.)

I was vague to Vira about what it was I did at the university (to my credit, the university was also vague about what it was that I was doing there), and through this vagueness I may have inadvertently caused to expand her estimation of me, so that, for example, at a first dinner whenever a new boarder arrived, she would introduce me as "our resident scholar," explaining that I was "doing important linguistic research at the university," leaving me to beam like a cow-licked grandson. I was nominally attached to and sponsored by the university's philology department, but the department's administration was evasive about what my research program should consist in, and suspecting that trying to pin this question down would lead to awkward conversations for both parties involved, I left the matter unpursued. The other professors guarded their classes jealously (I understood why later), and I was relegated to teaching a single section of Amarguese conversation, which met twice a week and in which, I had to do little more than prod my students along with a few prompts during the occasional lull in the conversation to shepherd us through the hour.

What I had, then, was a vast hoard of free time, which seemed an obscene luxury in Vira's house. On those days when I had no classes to teach, no business at the university, when Vira bade me goodbye as I set out from the house after breakfast, I felt a little bit like those tragic husbands who, after being sacked, still put on a suit every day ("Have a good day at work today!"), still march out with a briefcase ("Don't forget to take your lunch!"), to put on the appearance that they are still employed because they are too ashamed to inform their families that they no longer have any gainful dealings

with the world.

In spite of the fact that Vira's hours were constantly occupied (or perhaps because of this), she seemed to be possessed of a constant, beatific serenity and moved about the house — her house — with a tireless, humming energy. Her hours were devoted largely to the kitchen, waking at some indeterminate hour while I and the other boarders still existed in a state of sleepful oblivion to fire the stove and prepare pancakes, oat porridge, and coffee for her boarders' breakfasts, and staying there through noon to begin preparations for lunch and dinner, her only excursions from this post made to sweep the hallways or do the laundry, her only rest a lonely post-prandial siesta in the afternoons, which would give her the energy to mount to the kitchen in preparation to cook our dinner.

This serenity of hers was married to a solicitousness that combined the professional hyper-courtesy of a maitre d' with the almost suffocating concern of a grandmother. If I so much as hesitated when she asked me, "Are you hungry?" (if, say, I'd stumbled upon her sweeping in the hallway in the afternoon), I was sure to find, moments later, on the dining room's majestic oak table, a heavy plate laden with cold cuts, dense, dark breads, sliced peppers and tomatoes tossed with onions and vinaigrette into a quick salad.

"How was work today?" / "How were the students today?", she would ask me when I returned to the house in the afternoon or evening. And because these were conventional questions, I could give only conventional answers.

"Oh, quite good," I would say, instead of correcting her misprision by admitting that I hadn't taught a single section that day, nor had had any dealings at the university, that while she had toiled in a state of near constant work, I had spent my day as freely as a *rentier* or a vagrant.

Vira's solicitousness extended to my relationships with women. Out of a grandmotherly instinct towards the possibility of procreation or a maitresse d's habitual discretion, she failed to do anything that would endanger my relations with the girls I brought home, including, what I would have feared most, mentioning to any of these girls that they were not the first that I had brought over, going so far as to tell one of them once, "I'm glad that he found you, he seemed so lonely." If I brought a girl over whom I'd snuck in overnight, I was liable to find her laughing over coffee in the garden with Vira in the morning, charmed by this matronly force.

Hard to know what to read in her expression when Vira smiled at me, the maitresse d' in her seemed to prevail over all other aspects of her personality, she was the soul of discretion, although I detected in the looks that she gave me a wryness that was both indulgence and chastisement, encouragement and a finger-wagging disapproval.

Although she was my landlady, I seemed to always come upon her in a physical arrangement that delevelled our relationship, that put her in the cast of servility: stepping past her as she mopped the hallway that led to my room, or seeking her out in the kitchen where she was rolling out dumplings, and a slight hesitation in my body language prompted her to ask me: "Yes! Tell me what you need."

Later on when I tried to correct the dilettantism that I had so well-cultivated in my youth, and I began lingering in the sections of bookstores devoted to books about correcting the mistakes one has made in life (so many!), I would find repeated the assertion of the psychological principle that action, behavior, drives personality, that in acting a certain way sufficiently numerous times, a person adopts the thought patterns, the frame of mind, that correspond to that pattern of actions, and in a similar

way, because I was always running into her at a moment when she was doing something for me, poised in a servile state that was closer to that of washerwoman or private cook, because the physical form of our relationship took on that form, if only momentarily (but repeatedly), our relationship strained itself in that direction, as slowly, but as surely, as a heavy-headed flower directing itself towards the rays of the sun, and this may have compelled her, whatever her personal feelings, whatever her compunctions, to aid me in a womanizing that a woman of her age and generation should naturally have disapproved of.

Partly out of a desire to understand her better, and partly out of simple boredom, I studied the photographs in her living room. A stern-faced, square-jawed man with a sweep of thinning hair could have been none other than her late husband Yanosek, whom she would occasionally invoke in an affectionate diminutive, “If only my Yashik could see this...” In another, a buxom, curvaceous blonde in an evening dress, stunningly beautiful, and as voluptuous as a fertility goddess. The smile was the same, the serene beam that emanated from her countenance the one I saw wishing me a good day at work every morning.

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Summer evenings we would dine at a long wooden table set in Vira’s backyard, where she cultivated peppers, cucumbers, strawberries, their leaves punctured by insects. At the house’s maximum capacity, these dinners comprised nine, ten guests (at these times, a serving woman came in to assist with the cooking).

Although otherwise temperate, Vira would occasionally indulge in a tumbler of the moonshine that was brought in by guests or her family — the source of this moonshine was always “the village,”

evidencing that beyond the generation of Vira, there was a further rank of forebears who worked the lands, fermented potatoes and wheat, distilled their mashes in primitive stills, into which were thrown fennel, nettles, willow bark into a resultant drink that was both tonic and inebriant — and speak with a freeness that momentarily felled the walls that separated her from us as our landlady.

One evening in a discussion of the film director Barajano, I heard an exclamation in a remarkably Vira-like voice, “I met him! He kissed me!” but surely too loud to have been *our* Vira, until I looked over (she was sitting a knight’s move away from me, on the opposite side of the table, and a pair of seats over) and saw her eyes glistening with dreaminess and drink.

This evening we were hosting, *inter alia*, a young married couple, about my age, who were spending a few days in town as part of their summer holidays before they continued on their tour west to the mountains, and I was eating quickly in preparation for a date, tucking into a plate of roast chicken and peppers stuffed with spiced bulgur, waiting for the potato dumplings to come round.

The couple had taken an interest in me after Vira had introduced me as “our resident scholar,” and peppered me with questions that I answered hastily between bites, conscious that I had to be at the central piazza in less than an hour. By this time, my competence with the language had been much improved, and I could between answers, toss off the occasional “Would you kindly pass the dumplings?” or “If I might take another piece of chicken here,” as I hungrily devoured my meal.

“What was the source of your academic interest in our country?”, the husband asked me as I reached for a tureen of gravy (Vira had whisked the dumpling broth into a roux, into which she had added the drippings from the baked chicken, and then reduced into this mouthwatering sauce), and I replied that I’d always admired the films of Barajano, that the country portrayed in his films always

seemed so lovely, so romantic, and this had been the seed of my desire to see the country. Even this evening had a cinematic quality that reminded me of a scene in *Towards the End of a Life*, where the family ate dinner together outdoors on a similar summer evening.

“Yes, he’s a national treasure,” said the wife.

“Absolutely,” I said absentmindedly as I squinted to the far end of the table to see if, yes, the little jar there contained the pickled chestnuts that I liked so much, and indicated to one of the far diners that they would do well to pass it over.

Our conversation must have rippled towards Vira, and I imagine some exchange occurred which had prompted Vira’s outburst: “Now what are those young people speaking about down there?” / “Barajano. You know, the filmmaker.” / “Ah, him. I met him! He kissed me!”

Certainly this declaration deserved some elaboration, and I was scooping myself a generous portion of the fragrant chestnuts when she began her story:

“Well, this was many years ago when I was living in the capital, which was still only the provincial capital because we had not yet won our independence. And when I first came there, you could go to the labor bureau to find a job — it wasn’t like today where employment is so difficult to come across; everyone had work! Anyone who wanted it could find work, and it didn’t matter if you were just a girl from the village, there was no prejudice.

“They asked me: ‘What are your skills?’, and ‘What would you like to do?’, and at first I went white as a sheet because I had no skills! So I lied, thinking that I was being very tricky!, and said I had had some experience as a secretary at the village bureau and perhaps could do some work along those lines.

“And the clerk told me, well there is a position, and they are looking for a young woman. There was

a movie producer who needed a secretary, and would I be interested?

“And I said, yes!, I could do that, even though,” she lowered her voice as though invoking a conspiracy, “I had never had any experience in such work.

“This producer was a Mister H\_\_\_bev, and I worked for him for about one year and learned the movie business from him. Well, during the time that I was working for him, that was during the production of *In the Shadow of Our Ancestors*, and Mister H\_\_\_bev and Mister Barajano were meeting every week to plan out the production and the budget and everything involved.

“Mister Barajano, why he looked just the way he did in the magazines. You know, with that crew cut of his, and with that very intense stare, and he never smiled. And that was how he would always look at me whenever I saw him.

“Until one day he looked at me and said something like: ‘You, I must have you,’ and he came right up to me and grabbed me, and he kissed me, right then and there! Well, I pushed him right off me, and I said to him, ‘Mister Barajano! You may not treat me like this!’ And he was a married man! Because at that time he was married to the actress Marah Sharapín.”

“A pig,” the husband in the young couple assessed.

“They do say that artistic men are more promiscuous,” his young wife declared philosophically, “that the creative gene seeks out variety in all things, including women.”

“That is no excuse. He grabbed her!”

Vira went on: “Well, he said all the things that a woman would want to hear. That I was beautiful, that he could not stop thinking about me. And he grabbed me and kissed me again, and I said ‘No!’ and I pushed him off again. Truthfully, I was not afraid of him. I told him that whatever he wanted,

he must treat me like a lady first, and we could begin a conversation from *that starting point*.

“So he took me out to a restaurant, and he offered me so many things. He would give me my own apartment in the city, he offered me an acting job, not a starring role, not immediately, but he could find a minor part for me that could give me a break into the industry. And I knew, because I had worked in the movies for a year already, how important that was, to have a break.

“And if he had offered to make me his mistress without an acting job, you know I probably would have said yes. He was handsome!, he was a genius!, he was Barajano!, but it spoiled things when he suggested that there should be an exchange. A great man’s mistress, I could be that!, but I couldn’t be a whore.”

The eyes that had been lifted by remembrance landed upon me when she spoke this final word, and it quieted the table when she said this, so that I felt a little bit self-conscious, as it rendered audible the sound of my mastication.

“So, I told him no. I was afraid to say no to him because I didn’t think anyone could say no to a man like him. But you know what? He was a gentleman about it. And he respected my wishes.

“And that is the story,” she declared smiling at us, “of how I almost got to be an actress.”

“Why, Madame Vira, what an amazing life you have led!”, the young wife declared.

The husband furrowed his brow. “I suppose I’ll never watch Barajano’s movies in the same way again.”

“Oh and he was such a terrible kisser! Not like my Yashik!”, Vira declared, smiling. “If only he had offered me the acting job without an exchange. I might have taken it. Could you imagine me as an actress?”



She put her hands at her hips, craned her neck into a three-quarter profile, a caricature of a movie-star pose (a photograph flashed in my mind). And we laughed, a little bit inebriated by the tonic of Vira's sudden turn of humor.

“Acting is a skill, you know! You have to go to school just like anything else. And work hard and apply yourself. And many great actors start off very young. By then, I think I would have been too old to learn, probably. Maybe I said no because I didn't want to embarrass myself in front of the cameras.”

“I think you would have been a lovely actress, Madame Vira,” the young wife countered.

“And it wasn't only that. When I was young, I thought that there were different kinds of people in the world, and I felt too simple to be the kind of person who could have an affair like the one he proposed to me; I was just a girl from the village. I was so inexperienced and naive, and I thought that even to be Barajano's mistress I had to be a different kind of person, that I had to be more sophisticated, or more 'artistic' or more of a 'bad girl.' But now I think that I was wrong about things then. Now I know that anyone can be anything. There are no classes and no types. There's only what you decide to do at any moment, and a person can decide to do whatever they want.”

She took another swig of moonshine, and there was a touch of brazenness to this gesture, as though it were the first thing they taught you in an acting class.

“Only, maybe you make some choices in your life, and when you are older, it's harder to take back those choices. And people might see you in a certain way.” She burped lightly, her hand moved to her upper chest, once again she was no longer looking at any of us, content to gaze at a point in space that was both far in the distance and deep within herself. “Not knowing that you were not always the way that you are now. And it's hard for them to see that a person is really very many people, and can never

be only one thing.”

She looked at us, unafraid to reveal that a sheath of moistness now clouded her pale eyes. “But look at me, now I’m sounding like a professor, just like Mister \_\_\_\_\_,” and here she spoke my name.

I would end up being late for my date that evening, and the recrimination that my lack of punctuality engendered spoiled not only the remainder of that evening but my relationship with the girl in question. As I wandered the central piazza feeling a little bit drunk and a little bit lonely amidst the crowds (it was the height of the summer tourist season) of nighttime revelers, evening strollers, buskers and street performers, I thought of Vira, laughing a little and shaking my head to think that Barajano, who existed for me only as a photograph in a magazine, or a line of credits over a rush of dark trees: *A film by Milan Barajano*, had once propositioned the very woman who now cooked my dinners and laundered my underwear and bade me goodbye every morning with the wish that I should have a good day at work, and from that day on, although I still never saw her face clouded by distress or melancholy, I would, at odd moments, if, say, our voluble hostess was quieted by a momentary shift of the dinner conversation’s center of gravity away from her end of the table, find in her countenance, a wistfulness that is the final stage in the life of a human regret.