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THE VINEGAR TASTERS

ONE

Leo Rinehart woke up in a brothel in Shanghai.

He woke up in Kuan Hung-Chang's kitchen, stretched out on the floor with his camera bag and his jacket tucked underneath his head. Even though he'd only slept for an hour, he still felt refreshed, at least enough to make his way back home now. His eyes shone placidly up at Kuan out of the dimness of the corner, and Kuan smiled back at him, his wrinkled mouth barely lifting

as he brought him a cup of tea and turned back towards the ancient, Western-style stove where he was frying up some snake meat from the night before. Leo leaned up on one elbow and drank the scalding liquid, which burned away the last fumes of second-hand opium.

“Have they gone yet?” He raised his eyes as the aged Chinese turned, and they both glanced in the direction of the stairs.

“They’re going.” Kuan shook his head, wiping a trace of spittle from his toothless gums, which happened whenever he laughed. “It’s the girl. She didn’t understand. She thought you wanted to buy her.”

“I can’t afford her.”

“I know. Chiang-Mei knows that too. Don’t worry. It’s one of those misunderstandings. She won’t mind you coming around again.”

“I didn’t mean to offend her.”

“It’s all right.”

Kuan smiled, appreciating the foreigner’s tact. Not every Westerner would have thought to beg pardon for being attacked by a group of rivals for a girl he didn’t want, especially when he’d been specifically invited there by the madam herself to take photographs. The girls found it a novelty, and copies of the pictures were for sale at the counter as well as lining the walls of the bar. Kuan chuckled, turning back to stir the greasy lumps of meat from the snakes that had been skinned the night before, their fresh blood poured into the mouths of customers to increase their potency, as was a specialty of all the houses on this street. Chiang-Mei probably wished this strange man would take racier pictures, but she was too polite to say so. And as it was, the girls loved them and sent them home proudly to their parents and sweethearts.

Leo finished his tea and stood up, his head nearly grazing the ceiling of the low, smoke-filled kitchen. He placed the teacup back down on the table so gently it barely made a sound. For a big man he moved like a dancer or a fighter, Kuan thought, his weight centered in his *tan tien*. The photographer smiled, his face suddenly looking boyish, a tanned, freckled face with pale gray eyes and a strand of yellow hair that hung loose over his forehead.

He said formally, "May you sire a hundred sons, Kuan Hung-Chang, if you haven't done so already," and Kuan laughed again and pushed him out the door. Then Leo found himself in a rutted alley with an opalescent dawn spreading itself pink and blue over a tiny patch of sky, and he set off whistling through the Old City of Shanghai in the autumn of 1932, to walk back to the room he rented off Soochow Creek.

He was outrageously happy. China had fallen into his lap like a gift after two years of bumming around Europe, and for the past four years he'd spent his time insinuating himself into its strange and violent beauty, taking photographs of whatever he could find and doing whatever else he had to do to keep body and soul together. He was thirty-three years old, an American by birth, with a French passport, a German name, an emigrant's temperament and the profession of a freelance man of the world. That meant he'd worked as a deck hand in his time as well as a stevedore and a circus roustabout and a police sketch-artist and a short-order cook before finding the love of his life ten years before in a battered old Kodak camera. He worked off and on now for the *North China Daily News*, supplementing his income with whatever else turned up. He did wedding photographs of Shanghai couples and portraits of the sing-song girls who minced along the Loh-Ka Pang Road in their skin-tight silk dresses. He took crime-scene photographs and tourists' souvenir postcards, and performed part-time repairs for the Anglo-Asian Bible

Company which shared the bottom floor of his house. The confluence of cultures and revolutions that were currently tearing China apart had touched him without overwhelming him, sluicing over him like water and merely leaving him fascinated and alive and alert. He observed the daily skirmishes between the Japanese and the Chinese, and Chiang Kai-shek's on-going skirmishes with the communists, with equal detachment. In fact he generally thought no more about them than he did about the paper flowers swirling in the waters of the Whangpoo River, bearing in their garlands the coffins launched from the funeral piers at Nantao.

He'd fallen in love with China, but at the same time he hadn't lost his mind. Always a controlling instant lay between him and everything he saw, the instantaneous pause before he captured it all in a photograph. He'd used to worry about that once. Now it didn't bother him anymore, the world was too varied and strange, too beautiful and immediate for anything to bother him for long once he was looking through a lens. He didn't even mind that he was unattached, his life passing him by and the usual encumbrances of wife, family, children and friends as foreign to him as the subtle minutiae of Chinese society. Some people were joiners, and some people weren't, and he was generally well satisfied with his lot.

If there was anything that struck him, it was just a faint curiosity, sometimes, a little wistfulness, that he'd never been able to love one particular person more than he loved the world as a whole. He knew, however, that such thoughts were partly a consequence of exhaustion, and a man ought to know enough to lie down before he fell down. He staggered up the stairs now to his rooming house, ignoring the bustle of the city waking up all around him: old women coming to the doors to throw out slops and the barrowmen trundling through the streets with their collection of nightsoil and refuse. Slipping his Do Not Disturb sign on the door he stretched out fully

clothed on the bed and shut his eyes gratefully, a puckery, tapping excitement at his temples letting him know that he had done good work, and it was time to rest if he wanted to do more good work later. He opened his eyes and glanced around his disordered room, thinking he really ought to clean this place up...he had laundry piled on chairs and newspapers strewn everywhere, and lines of drying prints strung up like washing...he shut his eyes again for the sheer pleasure of saying the hell with it, and within two minutes he was asleep.

He was awakened some time later, but still too soon for his body to respond with anything but an unconscious groan. The cause of his disturbance was his landlord's Chinese wife, which at least brought him partially awake through curiosity. This lady was normally so diffident around Westerners that Leo had barely exchanged half a dozen words with her in the two years he'd lived there. Now she stood trembling with distress at having to bother him, holding out a bowl containing his lunch in one hand and the evident cause of her dismay in the other. This was a stiff business card which Leo registered, even as he took it and threw it on the table, as being far too expensive for any of his low-class friends.

"Excuse please, this gentleman say very urgent, he say you come now, you come soon as you awake, you come chop chop--"

"I'm not awake," Leo said, as he abandoned any further attempt at being angry and picked up the card again and glanced at it. What he saw made him look up at her once more in some surprise, and then down again, his mouth forming a silent whistle.

"Did he leave any other message, besides that I should come and see him when I woke up?"

His Chinese was fluent, and his landlady relaxed at once into the Shanghai dialect. No, he

hadn't said anything else, but he'd seemed very impatient, she said. Very tall and very very thin, he looked like a cormorant, she added giggling. He looked like it would take a lot of fish to fill him up. Dark hair and dark face, and a scar, like this, she said, showing with her fingers against her forehead. She thought maybe he was a soldier?

Well, it was him all right. John Halland White. The man who had appeared on the scene twelve years ago with nothing but a cheap rag of a tabloid newspaper, the *New York Standard*, and broke the story of the Boyer kidnapping. The man who had subsequently been hauled into court by the Boyers and accused of thwarting the ransom attempt. The man who had turned around then and interviewed himself as the defendant in a notorious libel trial, and won, and went on to buy up the *San Francisco Bugle* and the *Los Angeles Mirror* and the *Detroit Banner* and the *Washington Morning Star*, all rags, all near-bankruptcy, and make them monuments of sensationalism and sob-sister sentiment. He'd used faked pictures and lurid exposes and publicity stunts and headlines four inches tall, and he'd become in the past ten years a synonym for everything loud and cheap and tasty and unhealthy in America, a kind of human Nathan's hotdog. He'd gone on to acquire two newsreels, four syndicated gossip columnists, part ownership in a stringer service, and a dying Hollywood studio. He flew his own plane, drove a race car, and was photographed every day in the pages of his own newspapers with starlets and debutantes and murderesses and lady wrestlers. He had an art collection to rival the Whitneys', and he was forty-six, unmarried, and had been claimed as a correspondent in eight divorces and three paternity suits, all of which he had won.

The card was plain thick vellum and read simply, "John Halland White" without embellishment. Turning it over, Leo saw scribbled on the back, "Come to my office if you're

awake by one o'clock," signed with the initials "J.H.W." in a single impatient stroke.

There was no address, but Leo knew enough to know White's offices were on the top floor of the Broadway Mansions building, the tallest building in Shanghai. He shook his head and said, "Well, you certainly don't get summoned to have tea with the Emperor every day," and when his landlady merely looked puzzled, he smiled and said, "Skip it. No, leave the bowl, I'd better eat something," and forked a piece of steamed fish into his mouth with his fingers, which made her laugh as if he had done something naughty.

She bowed herself out without another word, and he took the bowl over to the window and watched the traffic of sampans and motor launches and delicate, fan-sailed ships that plied Soochow Creek day and night. What was he to make of this, he wondered? He'd been vaguely aware of White for some time now: everyone in the business had heard the stories, about the girls and the boys, about the connoisseur's knowledge of Shang bronzes and Ming porcelain, about the money being thrown around and the astronomical salaries to be made if you were lucky enough to work for him...and also about the friends and associates in low places and lower professions, men like Tung Li and Elephant Woo who controlled the gambling dens and armed gangs of Shanghai. White had bureaus all over the world of course, but he came to Shanghai often: he was said to be "interested" in China, whatever that meant. Leo thought he sounded like Kurtz, the best and the brightest off in some heart of darkness with his severed heads, except White didn't exist in a jungle, but on the front pages in New York City, as visible as a neon sign.

Leo wiped his hands as he picked up the card again, running his fingers over the expensive lettering and looking again at the sharp, impatient scrawl across the back and wondering what someone of White's purported taste must have made of the ramshackle tenement in which he

lived. Well, he thought, at least it must have given him a clue as to what kind of a disreputable character he was dealing with, when he came slumming in Soochow. Good, then he wouldn't have to put on a clean shirt just to impress someone who couldn't possibly be impressed with him. Leo smiled. He had to admit he was curious to meet this *arbiter elegantiarum* of the world of tabloid journalism face to face.

He put down the bowl and splashed some water on his face, tucked his shirt in (he'd go that far) and then swung back down the outside stairs to the street. The roads were jammed now with beggars and fishermen and toothless old women and men--children who waved to him and called out the latest worthless piece of news--rickshaw men and porters in filthy straw hats yelling for the right of way against automobiles and handcarts and knots of dark-gowned students, and girls in *cheong-sams* walking to work in the neighborhood called Happiness Concentrated. He threaded his way between them smiling and joking, made noticeable by his light hair and his height but otherwise just one more beggar among beggars, and gained the higher street which led, by a surprisingly direct route, to the most rarified quarters of the city: the International Settlement and the beautiful French Concession. There, lovely streets of dappled shade and round-gated walls gave way to Western-style parks fronted by massive, marble-columned buildings, the houses and banks of the great *taipans* who'd bled China white for eighty years, bringing their greed with them from Paris and New York and London and the Middle East to create an empire of opium and avarice as graceful as the plane trees along the Nanking Road that led out to the Shanghai Racecourse. As he walked along briskly, he watched the costumes change from padded cotton to delicate patterned silks, and the faces change as well from the pinched, battered countenances of China's most abject poor to the lovely faces of Shanghai maidens, with smooth-combed jet-black

hair and peaches and cream complexions. They were accompanied by ramrod stiff soldiers, with their hair clipped short in emulation of China's newest warlord, and well-dressed foreigners in straw hats and business suits, strolling along Peking Road or heading out in their Packards to Hongkew Park or the countryside around Hungjao. He smiled, thinking how much they were missing, these Westernized Chinese who continued to regard their city as "backward"; and how American it was of him to think that. And then he turned onto the wide paved expanse of the Bund that faced the Whangpoo River and saw it stretched out in front of him, Shanghai's lifeline to the sea.

The Bund was an open thoroughfare, like a beach, with a cliff of buildings on one side and grass fronting the river on the other, where the old men practiced their *Tai Chi* in the morning and nannies walked their prams. Here there were elegant carriages, along with cars and the ubiquitous rickshaw men, their calves straining and their heads bowed with the effort of speeding their charges long at the appropriate chop chop pace. Bright flags flew over the masts of the ships that lay at anchor, the Stars and Stripes and the Union Jack side by side with the flags that identified the ships of the great trading companies: Jardine and Matheson, Russell and Company, and lately Massey-Harris and Standard Oil anchored cheek by jowl with Korean freighters and Japanese gunboats. The sprawling port lay spread out before the great hotels that faced it, places like the Cathay Hotel and the Palace Hotel and the British Club with its celebrated Long Bar: all 19th and 20th century China arrayed for its portrait beneath the sparkling innocence of a blue October sky. He looked up at the monuments of wealth and statecraft, the modern citadels of the forces that had always ruled Shanghai, money and drugs and crime, and thought that somewhere in there was a man who was "interested" in China. He wondered what this was all about. He smoothed his hair

and tried to settle his features into some semblance of seriousness before he crossed the street...and then he walked into the lobby of the Broadway Mansions and told the mildly astonished doorman that his name was Leo Rinehart and he had an appointment at one o'clock to see Mr. John Halland White.

At the same moment, John Halland White stood in his office twenty stories above Shanghai, and tried to imagine what would happen to him if he jumped.

He wasn't contemplating suicide, but wondering which of two photographs best illustrated the plunge to death of socialite Connie Wagenstaff which had happened in New York eight hours before. He had the wire-service photos of her intact body lying on the ground, in the four hundred dollar evening dress she'd purchased for the occasion, but he didn't think his readers would feel they'd gotten their money's worth if they didn't see more blood. Suicides, especially suicides from the roofs of private homes, didn't splatter as spectacularly as you might expect. He made a mental note to tell his editors to look for people who jumped from taller buildings, even while he picked up the telephone and dialed New York.

It was 12:30 A.M. there and Chick Dennis answered on the first ring. Chick was White's editor-in-absentia and general right-hand man, if a lapdog could be said to function like a man.

"Chick, it's me. Tell the print boys to doctor up the Wagenstaff photo, it looks like she's taking a nap on the goddamn sewer grate."

Chick gulped. "We already ran the photo, John. I mean we already got the front page plated, it's gonna take us hours to replate--"

"You have exactly fifteen minutes to replate, and fire the son of a bitch who made the

decision to run the picture as is. If it was you, consider yourself fired. I run my papers, and the last time I checked I seemed to be rather good at it, so don't try and outthink me. Tell them I want to see at least one inch of blood around that bitch's head and air-brush the dress off her shoulders. Christ, do I have to think of everything? What was that moron Fenhagen thinking anyway, couldn't he even turn her the hell over?"

Mokey Fenhagen was in fact one of White's top crime-scene photographer, and one of the best evidence-tamperers in the business, but White expected the same level of perfectionism from his staff as he did from himself. He hung up and sighed, stretching to his full height of six foot two and pressing his fingers into the knot at the small of his back which he lived with every waking moment of his life. He'd tried massages and chiropractors, but nevertheless by the end of the day he was a taut coil of restless energy, and no amount of tranquilizing activities ever really made a dent. He smiled, not necessarily displeased: the production of crap was harder than it looked, like everything else the skill lay in making it look easy. He turned back to the window, looking out not at the busy street but at the river, lined with garden-levees on the one side and sagging *godowns* on the other. A broad band of sewage sparkling in the sunlight, blue and crimped with waves this morning into the appearance of a wind-whipped lake.

Shanghai. My God, he thought, will I ever be free of you? This early in the fall, the grass was still green and the trees were just turning into gold around the city. The air still seemed gilded and even the wickedness looked pretty. Well, that was the point, wasn't it? Hell wouldn't be so tempting if it weren't so achingly beautiful. He leaned his hand against the pane of glass in front of him and felt the blood beat through his fingertips, as if it were the sun-warmed pulse of the city beating back into his palm. Shanghai was his lure and his constant goad, his humiliation,

and then later on his prize. Here he'd first tasted the dregs and gall of shame and the drug of victory, the pleasures of cruelty and the heady freedom of disgrace, and now that he'd gained them all, he thought, was it enough? Did it matter? Of course not. He felt no surcease, but only a restless, impatient hunger like a man eating candy with the wrapper on, you kept biting and biting thinking each next bite would finally assuage that inner, aching void. One more autumn, he thought, and the race which he'd run against himself was that much closer to being won, either by the self who was pleased or the self who was appalled by the things he'd gotten away with. Shanghai was the symbol of everything he despised, and he loved it.

He smiled, his lips lifting in the grimace his employees would have recognized from a hundred board meetings and labor disputes and political knife-fights and back alley negotiations. His face was too gaunt and uncompromising for handsomeness, but just barely. His dark hair was streaked with gray, brushed back from a high, scarred forehead, the livid slash that crossed the bone just above his right eye a legacy from his late father. His hands were surprisingly beautiful, long and graceful despite their large strength and bony knuckles. His eyes were large, of a peculiar light hazel that appeared almost green, and his mouth was long and thin. It was a face that contained both patrician arrogance and dangerous intelligence at the same moment, much as White's manner could be relaxed and gracious one minute and ruthlessly demanding the next.

It was the face and manner of a born aristocrat, and it was all an act: White came from the gutter, and in the right mood he even boasted about it. He told about his father dragging him from gin hell to flop house to crap game to jail in New York City, dragging him halfway around the world in his job as a sketch artist, first for the New York *Globe*, and then later on for Hearst and Pulitzer and finally for any rag that would still hire him. White had vague memories of Lhasa,

where his mother had died, and clearer memories of Hong Kong and Singapore and Hokkaido and Canton, all the cities his father had taken them to in the intervening years of booze and brutality and brawling till he'd had the good or bad fortune to step in front of a sniper's bullet at Port Arthur and get his brains blown out. White had been eighteen years old at the time, and left to his own devices. He had his father's height, arrogance and corrosive intelligence, his mother's eyes, and just enough of his father's talent to recognize his own more limited skills as an artist. He had no such respect for the printed word, so he became a journalist.

He'd worked his way to Shanghai, where his real education began. He'd studied the opium trade and ended up an addict at twenty-one, a taste which had never really left him. He'd also studied the rotten shell of the Manchu government, and was there when it fell to the seething worms of revolution. He'd made deals with the *hungs* and the *triads* and brought news of China to the world, which was how he'd worked his way back to America and first caught the attention of the man powerful enough to help him. Then--well, then he'd done what he had to do, and ended up twenty years later with the largest circulation, if not the respect of his profession, a bitter brilliant lonely cynic who enjoyed breaking people for the satisfaction of seeing them crack. Of course, there was always the hope that he'd meet somebody he couldn't smash, but so far he hadn't met them.

He turned around and sat back down at his desk. What else was happening this morning? New labor riots in Pittsburgh (instigated by his goons) and war rumblings in Ethiopia...his mind wandered. He looked up when Leo entered the room. There are moments when the shared hesitation of two people becomes obvious: when each man becomes so aware of his own stillness, he's aware of the other man's stillness as a kind of echo. That happened just then.

White recovered first, moving not merely to stand but to come around the desk and shake Leo's hand, a courtesy he rarely extended to anyone. Leo thought yes, he does look like a cormorant, like a tall gawky bird with blazing light eyes. And also, quite clearly, here's the unhappiest man I've ever met. He wasn't quite sure why he thought that, but he knew at the same instant that it was unquestionably true.

White grimaced. "You're either memorizing me or interrogating me, Mr. Rinehart. Please stop it."

Leo said, "You're not at all what I expected."

"You're exactly what I expected." White sat down. "Mr. Rinehart, I think I want you to come and work for me."

Leo focused on the word *think*. "Why, Mr. White? Don't you know for certain?"

"No. Actually, I've never seen your work myself, but I've heard some good reports. And you have to be better than the blind pigs and stumble-bums I have working for me now." He indicated the photographs spread out on his desk. "Look at them, Mr. Rinehart. Help yourself. You ever see such trash?" Leo politely scanned the typical carnage of White's *New York Standard*-ized view of the world, street brawls, cripples and bathing beauties, photo montages of "Ace" Bates and Boopsie Carmody, the Headless Torso, the Woo-Woo Girl... "They're very nice," Leo said, laying the pile back down again.

"They're swill, Mr. Rinehart. That's the point. They're perfectly adequate for my newspapers, and it'd be a waste to offer people anything else. Why wrap fish in art?"

White opened a lacquer box on his desk and took out a jet black cigarette. He flipped open a gold lighter and lit it while pushing the box across the desk with his other hand. "Help

yourself.”

Leo did, thinking he smelled a little hashish in the mix, but he didn't mind. White said, “I've want something different this time. A news magazine. Mostly photographs, short text. A kind of printed newsreel, showing the world to the world, a receptacle for sensation, of course, sensation is news, but also for reflection. I want people to buy something at the newsstand that they might want to look at more than once, something they might want to save, in fact, something they might want to linger over. Oh, call it middle-aged rue, if you like...a man reaches a point where he'd like to create something more permanent than ephemera. And...” He flicked his fingers at the pile of photographs in front of him, and sent it skidding across his desk onto the floor. “I can't very well create permanence with something as forgettable as these.”

Leo sat still and looked at him. He thought, is this some kind of a trick? White was smiling, a taut, mocking smile ripe with bone-dry pleasure as he dangled this opportunity in front of him, and Leo had the vague feeling it was a similar smile to that with which a child molester might offer a tot a poisoned apple. White said, “Take all the time you want, Mr. Rinehart,” and waited, smoke curling from his cigarette.

“I-I can't,” Leo stammered, surprised even himself as he said it. He added quickly, “I--I mean I'd truly like to, and I'm sure the price is right, but you see...I'm afraid I don't entirely trust you.”

“I beg your pardon?”

Leo went on, knowing he was too far gone to stop. “I'm afraid you'd eat me alive, Mr. White, and I'm afraid I couldn't stand that. I'm not a snob, don't get me wrong, I don't mind the content of your papers, but I can't work on a leash. I've tried, and it drives me crazy. I've got to

be free to do my own work.”

“That’s exactly what I want,” White snapped, surprising himself, because that wasn’t what he’d meant at all. He had too much scorn for the rest of the world to trust anyone to dictate what he published, aside from him, but something about this young man’s attitude, his cocksure sloppiness (which wasn’t really cocksure at all, was it, but simply careless?) made him want to see what he could do. And at the same time he wanted to tempt him and confirm how quickly he’d crawl on all fours and bark like a dog. I can’t offer you muck, he thought, but I can offer you your heart’s desire and you’ll lick my backside like any other cur, so let’s see how fast you’ll get down on your knees. He smiled at Leo and said, “Why do you think I’d eat you alive?”

“Because...” Leo frowned, trying to get the words right. “Because you’re so famished.”

“Explain yourself.”

“I’m not sure I can. These...” He indicated the pictures. “They’re fine for what they are. Really. They’re not awful, but you think they are. You want something else, something more, something different, and that’s wonderful in a way, it’s something that’s never been done before--mass produced art--but that’s not why you’re doing it. You’re doing it to prove something to yourself, or to the world, or to me, I don’t know--maybe that you can buy me as easily as you’d buy a ham sandwich, and then you don’t have to pay any more attention to me than you’d do to your lunch. I’d be nothing, you could forget about me. Except you don’t want that either, you want me to refuse. You want me to be a shining exception to the people who work for you. And I can’t be that either. I’m just me.”

White looked at him. “Did anyone ever tell you you’re a fool, Mr. Rinehart?”

“Oh, all the time. But you see, it doesn’t matter. Look, I’ve been told all my life that I

was crazy, all right? I mean, maybe not quite so obviously, but people have always said what's the matter with you, why aren't you more ambitious, why don't you care more what people think, and so on and so forth. And it's not that I don't care, you understand, but that's really not what I'm interested in." Leo shook his head and rubbed his hand across his stubbled chin, thinking I really ought to have shaved. "If I worked for you, and let's say you gave me a free hand, just for the sake of argument, I'd be in seventh heaven. But I'd be in the same seventh heaven if I didn't work for you and just kept on doing as I am now. It's the same thing. Either way, the work is what's important."

"Even though I could make it impossible for you to do it?"

"No, you couldn't. Not really. Oh, you could buy up all my negatives I suppose and destroy them, burn them, wipe...well, you know what I mean, you could do what you liked with them, but I'd still have had them, you see? I'd still have made them. Even if you made it so no one would hire me, which is practically true already, I'd still work for my own enjoyment. Whatever I had to do to buy film would still be worthwhile."

"You're an idealist."

"I'm a realist, Mr. White. And realistically, I know what I can and can't stand." He made a face. "I can stand looking like a bum. I can stand living like one, and living and dying unknown," he added smiling, "even though I know if I went to work for you I'd be famous to everybody in Manhattan with a nickel."

"Two bits," White said. "This new magazine will be higher priced."

"Whatever. You know," he added, smiling to himself, "if you'd really wanted to torture me, I suppose you could offer me a million dollars not to take photographs. That would be hard."

But you didn't offer me that. I guess I ought to be flattered."

White toyed with the lighter on his desk, opening and closing it with his long, nervous fingers without ever quite setting it alight. "I want your talent, Mr. Rinehart. And I'm prepared to pay for it."

"Yes, I know, I'm sorry I--"

"And I'm quite capable of destroying you if you refuse."

"Yes, but I'd still win. You see I'm not risking anything--while you are."

"What?"

"Revealing this much of yourself to me."

"You are either the most impertinent young man I've ever met or a stone cold idiot."

White's voice wasn't kind. "Would you like to have lunch?"

Leo was taken aback. He'd rather expected, after that exchange, to be shown the door.

He said, "Sure. I'm not exactly dressed..."

"Don't worry, the people I associate with have sometimes been far less properly dressed than you are."

White didn't bother to elaborate on this, but held the door open for him, and pressed the button for his private elevator. As they walked out onto the street, he added, "Really, Mr. Rinehart, your photographs must be quite something, or else perfectly awful, I can't imagine which. Most of your *confreres* would jump at the chance to take pictures of Bet-A-Million Gates and the Hoboken acid murderer. What make you so different?"

Leo laughed. "I'm not! I'd love to take pictures of the Hoboken acid murderer, but on my own terms."

“Well, we’ll see. Do you like prawns?”

“Yes.”

“Good. They do them rather well here, along with a decent lobster.”

“Here” turned out to be the Shanghai Hotel, aged and gracious with white lattice-work and antique Turkish carpets, one of the most elegant landmarks in the city and a place Leo which had only visited previously to take pictures in the back alley. This time, they were shown to a private table in the garden, deserted at that season, with chestnut trees shading winding paths and fishponds full of *koi* snapping for lazy autumn flies. The waiters hurried to set places for them, and White ordered without glancing at a menu: crispy fish, prawns, lobster, and spiced shredded duck *a la Hunan*. He sat backed and sipped the wine when it came, allowing the silence to fill itself between them. He held up his cup and said, “*Kam-pei*” which meant “bottoms up,” and Leo raised his own cup to his lips and drank.

“Mr. Rinehart, how old are you?”

“I’m thirty-three.”

“Thirty-three...I can’t believe it. You have all the practicality of a two-year-old. Has anyone ever told you that?”

“Frequently.”

White frowned. “Have you ever been hurt, Mr. Rinehart? I mean seriously hurt?”

Leo had to stop for a moment to consider that. “No,” he said finally, “I guess not so it really mattered. I mean if you’re planning on hitting me, I’ll fall down, but I don’t think that’s what you meant.”

“No. That’s not what I meant.”

White was silent again, and Leo took the opportunity to study him more closely, noticing the marks of weariness and dissipation on his face, the brackets at the corners of his mouth. Here was a man who smiled frequently, apparently, but without the ease that would have softened those incised lines. Some men shrug off bad dreams, he thought, while some men hug them to their breasts, and I can guess which category you fall into. He watched as White drank his wine, a wonderful Shantung, fragrant and strong, and the impatient muscles in his throat seemed to begrudge him even the distraction of swallowing. Leo decided he kind of liked this act of bored carelessness, since this man was about as careless as a cat with a mouse.

He said, "I'm sorry, Mr. White, but I still feel like you're entertaining me under false pretenses. How...how do you propose to do it?"

"Do' what?"

"Use what I can give you? I mean...some things don't translate well from one medium to another."

He glanced around the beautiful, blowing garden as the wind drifted the yellowing leaves down through the fragile trees. It was a sad garden, perfectly and exquisitely Chinese in its way, mortal and fleeting. "Are you familiar with the gardens of Soochow?"

"Of course."

"Well, what if I told you I wanted to move the Garden of the Forest of Lions to Central Park, or the Pavilion of Gentle Perfume to Coney Island? What would you say?"

"I'd say you were out of your goddamn mind."

"Well, isn't that what you're proposing? I mean look at it this way. I've shot news, Mr. White, and I know I'll shoot it again, but I'm not a photojournalist. I don't know what I am,

really. I've taken pictures of some terrible people, and pictures of some wonderful people, and it's really come down to the same thing so long as I've liked their faces. Now you tell me. What kind of a newspaper or magazine can use that? You'd have to trust people to make up their own minds. You'd have to devote it to nothing but photographs. You'd fly in the face of everything that says 'Make it nice' or 'Make it easy' or 'Make it second-hand' or 'Spoon feed everyone' and, well...something like that just doesn't exist."

"Precisely," White said. "Until now."

"You've got it all figured out."

"Pretty much."

"And you really mean it?"

"I've never been more serious in my life."

"Huh." Leo smiled.

White looked at him. "What do you mean by that?"

"Just thinking. I've spent my whole life not believing in fairy godmothers."

"I assure you I'm not a fairy godmother." White smiled as the waiter served them. "Let's leave the question of your belief in me aside for the moment. What do you think of these prawns?"

They spoke for the next hour about food and gardens, architecture and art, and afterwards strolled along the Bund while White commented on the character and bedroom habits of the business tycoons who inhabited its marble skyscrapers. Only as the sun was lengthening in lovely yellow light over the river did they take a cab back to Leo's apartment, where he showed White some of his most recent work.

The older man was silent as he examined the prints one after the other. Here was a photograph of a rickshaw puller, his face contorted with effort, so it contrasted in the stark particularity of each sweat droplet with the blurred faces of his passengers, two men in identical light suits. Here was a woman lying in an opium den, her face so relaxed she looked orgasmic or dead as she held out one languid hand, palm upwards, reaching for her pipe. A Buddhist monk laughed in the marketplace, while beside him, scowling, women haggled with a vendor of baby pigs. A well-dressed society matron screamed at the race track, cheering on her horse. A little girl picked up pebbles in a garden. A very old man curled up on a park bench. A gang of Japanese were seen kicking around something that turned out, on closer inspection, to be a severed human head. A duck preened itself in the street, its image perfectly reflected in a puddle of silvery water. There was a view of the Whangpoo River at twilight, junks and tankers steaming their endless way between the city and the sea.

People. Places. Things. News and nonentities, and White held each photograph up for some time, studying it, his brows drawn tightly together and then put it aside as he accepted the next one. His hands made their own rhythm, reach and pause, connection and distance, as Leo handed him things at random. Finally he said, "Please, no more," and Leo said, "You see my point, don't you? These aren't exactly commercial."

"Yes, Mr. Rinehart. I see your point." He walked sharply away to the window, turning his back on the untidy room and the piles of images he'd been looking at. Leo watched him carefully, seeing his groping fists press white-knuckled against his back, trying to find the knot there. His dark head was bowed, thoughtful, almost as if he were alone.

He said at last, "The Gardens of Soochow ought to be seen by the world. And for that I

need you. Please come and work for me.”

“I thought--”

“I know. These are quite beyond anything I expected, Mr. Rinehart. That’s true, but that doesn’t preclude my point. My father--“

He stopped and went on drily, “My father would have loved looking at these, if he’d been sober enough to see them. But that’s neither here nor there. If I can show work like this to the world...” He stopped and turned around and looked at Leo directly for a long moment. There wasn’t gentleness in his eyes, or even kindness: in fact he looked angry, defensive, and almost bruised. But he looked twenty years younger, and for an instant it was like they were facing each other at the same age. Leo thought, he was good-looking once. Of course he’s still good-looking, but it’s different now, icier, colder, certainly more calculating. Crueler? No, not really, but more self-protective. The proud eagle’s gaze of a man who says I was hurt once and I’ll never be hurt again.

But all that wasn’t there for a moment, and Leo felt a little self-conscious to have wrought this transformation. He looked at the photographs lying all over the bed and thought that here was a responsibility he’d always craved, and also always evaded: the responsibility of moving someone so deeply, so thoroughly, that you could take them to a place they’d never been before.

I know how I did this, he thought. I know the apertures and the stops, the use of collodion and nitrate, the old-fashioned techniques as well as the most recent ones, the waiting and the inspiration and the failed attempts and the endless repetition, sheer grunt work for the most part, but none of that matters. The mechanics are my business. The delight is his.

White said finally, “I suppose you know you’ve beaten me. And that doesn’t make me

particularly happy.”

“No, I imagine it doesn’t.”

“I don’t like seeing someone do something I can’t do.”

“Oh, well...” Leo made a half-hearted gesture, because he wasn’t sure if it was polite to accept that kind of a compliment.

“So do we have a deal?”

Leo shrugged. He realized they’d had a deal since he’d first laid eyes on him.

“Oh sure. I mean, what else have I got to do?” And then he had an inspiration and reached for his camera. “On one condition...”

“What?” White clearly wasn’t anticipating it and Leo snapped the picture before he could completely recover his poise. There it was, caught in mid-motion, the public face coming down over the private one, a naked, vivid, angry, unsmiling face as haunted as an anchorite’s and as open as a startled boy’s.

“Very funny,” White said. “Give me that camera this instant.”

“Not on your life,” Leo said. “You can use that on the masthead of your new magazine. At least that way everyone will know who’s responsible for the goddamn thing.”