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**Becoming One Breath**

JASMINE MADE HER WAY through the crowded Nanjing airport. Her black cashmere clothed body flashed back in glassy cinematic clips, and unknown Chinese languages undulated in waves around her. Swept up in the throng, she followed words and icons signing together. She felt altered, not like herself in this place, and she loved experiences that took her out of herself. She felt conspicuous being the only blonde in the airport. She had flown twenty hours from Phoenix to San Francisco and then on to Nanjing. Her ankles chafed in her new black leather boots, and her calves felt like they were in a vise. Her feet and legs bothered her more than if she'd been serving drinks and dancing all night.

Security guards patrolled outside the door, and she wrapped a black velvet silk scarf around her head and neck. She exited in a wash of people, and her suitcase rolled behind. The cool breath of the night blew through her. Jasmine hugged Beth tight, leaving pink lipstick traces on her cheek. Her sister was laced with Chanel and her dark hair poufed on top of her head. Beth wore a red wool coat, black leggings, and boots. Jasmine rested her gloved leather hand in her coat pocket, and she was grateful to have found her exquisite calf length cashmere coat at a North Scottsdale estate sale.

"Let's do breakfast in Nanjing before the gallery soirée in Shanghai."

"Sweet, I need to pick up some more boots. I might have a blister on my heel."

A car pulled up to the curb, a dark-tinted window rolled down, and a man made eye contact.

"No," Beth whispered. "It's a black market taxi."

The window rolled up as he drove away. Anyone could be arrested for taking an unapproved taxi or kidnapped by the driver. Jasmine linked her arm in Beth's, and Jasmine's velvet silks fluttered behind her like wings. A thin, bundled-up man slid out of a marked car. Beth and he spoke Mandarin as he opened the trunk. The cab smelled like smoke, and the sisters scooted across hygienic white fabric-covered seats with no seatbelts. Jasmine unzipped her boots, relieved to let her calves breathe, regretting not having any band aids.

Color gleams of shops and restaurant calligraphy glided past. Jasmine relaxed into the seat, unconsciously floreoing her leather gloved hands in a waking dance dream. Mentally, she revisited the airport, remembering handing over her passport as customs took her photo with a web cam and temperature at the same time. If she'd had a temperature, she would've been quarantined for weeks. Jasmine had never felt so foreign, and thinking about the street food and public bathrooms made her nauseous.

Beth called her boyfriend, Zhou, who was showing his revolutionary Modern Art mixed media paintings at a gallery in the Shanghai arts district. Then she called his friend, a American photographer, who was also showing his work with Zhou. *He wants to talk to you.* Jasmine slid away from her, but Beth held the phone. After Jasmine heard his beautiful voice,

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her body warmed, and she felt her emerald dragon tattoo wave across her belly and back. He was an older, accomplished Brooklyn/Manhattan artist. She was intrigued, but tried to shake off her desire. She missed the children in her classroom and now volunteered teaching belly dancing classes at a downtown Phoenix art-therapy adult rehab center. Jasmine's thoughts drifted beyond the taxi across the world. She just got tired of working 60-70 hours a week and didn't sign her contract, contributing to Arizona's "teacher shortage." Jasmine was sort of out on her ass, living in her parents' *casita*.

The taxi pulled over to a Nanjing corner in front of a dimly lit sprawling, squat apartment building cloaked with ancient wintered trees. She slowly zipped her boots. Outside, in the biting wind, Jasmine could smell fish and other fried food, and newspaper pages spun at their feet, taking flight with other debris. Beth handed the cabbie bills that looked like monopoly money, only bigger. One-hundred-fifty *quai* or about \$20.00 dollars. Tipping would be insulting. Jasmine couldn't imagine making it in the Western world without tips from cocktailng or dancing.

They walked to a rising narrow building with cats yowling by the apartments' rusty, beat-down mailboxes. She took some comfort that guns were illegal. Inside the flickering lit staircase, Beth clicked on a flashlight. Jasmine shivered, slipping off her boots, dropping them in her handbag. She stepped on the concrete stair in her stocking feet with a cold shock. Jasmine's heart pounded, gripping the cold metal railing, she ascended, as her suitcase bumped behind. Breathless, seven flights up, they clattered across wooden floors.

Jasmine warmed in Beth's apartment, unbuttoning her coat. Chairman Mao hovered above her smoking in a mixed media of opiates and oils painted by Zhou.

"Beth, the water's so freaking cold," she yelled from the bathroom.

"I turned the water heater on hours ago."

Jasmine took a quick sponge bath with heated stove water, soaking and massaging her feet and calves. She indulged herself momentarily with hot tub memories with her former fiancée, Neil, then letting the images slowly slip away like steam. She applied medicine and band-aids to her ankles. After, Jasmine sat on Beth's living room sofa with her laptop. The government censored sites and monitored everything. She deleted an unread email from Neil, and soothed herself by listening to "Somebody I Used To Know" sang by Goyte and Kimbra. Beth unclipped her pouf, brushed out her long, dark hair, and sat down beside Jasmine. Beth showed her the photographer's site, and she took a deep breath, falling in love with his photography. He flashed a beautiful smile.

Jasmine messaged some former work friends. One teacher friend had gone back to India. Another, an American, taught in Abu Dhabi, and now veiled and draped her voluptuous body with flowing silk headscarves and modest clothes. Jasmine had considered Abu Dhabi, but Neil didn't want her to leave him.

When Beth quit her job in Phoenix, she got in touch with someone she knew from university Chinese studies' classes who had moved back to

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Nanjing. If Jasmine wanted to apply for a work visa to teach English, she'd have to find a job first, and Beth had some referrals. She thought it would be interesting to check it out.

Jasmine switched on the Beats Antique's "Dope Crunk." The glass reflected her playing in the mirror, warming up with yoga stretches and breathing, wearing a black lace brassiere and tights. Becoming entranced, she slowly snaked her arms, and the magenta eyes of her emerald dragon tat flashed in slow body waves. The Yangtze and local fishing boats flowed through her. She floated with the river and hovered by Purple Mountain, temple dancing. She splashed black and white in the colors of the music, a double exposed photo. She transitioned, framing herself in graceful arms, feet pivoting, slowly unwinding her tribal spins. In her temple trance, she slowly withdrew from the other world, snaking and shimmying in gentle undulations, and came back to herself in the sweet smoky breath of dizzy incense.

During performing, she loved connecting to the audience and becoming one breath with them. They breathed with her as she danced. Jasmine longed to go dancing with the photographer after the gallery soiree. She dressed, pulling on leggings, a black cashmere sweater, and black leggings. Jasmine rummaged through Beth's closet, trying on shoes, which were always and still too small. She carefully stepped her bandaged feet into her boots, looking forward to shopping for shoes before catching the train to the gallery. Beth pulled her red coat over a sweater and jeans.

The sky washed with gray clouds and a flock of cranes, and there was no sun or snow. Jasmine's velvet scarf rippled in the wind, and she kept her hands in her coat. Ancient thick-trunked *wutong* trees framed the streets, breaking the earth and concrete. Fried food wafted. Older men smoked, women puffed up in heavy coats, not smoking, wearing beanies. Some wore surgical masks. Cats with unusual and wild eyes were everywhere, and small to medium unleashed dogs walked alongside their masters. There were no strollers, and parents carried their toddler or baby. Jasmine snapped photos of laundry that hung on public fences, draped bicycles, and playground equipment. Cameras and unarmed uniformed police patrolled the streets, and lanes rolled with cars. One lane rolled with bicyclists, and some parents shared scooters with a child and sometimes a dog.

Jasmine limped alongside Beth on the broken concrete path. She envied women wearing flat shoes. A woman washed restaurant dishes outside with a hose and bucket, fried eggs stuck on the concrete, and someone else washed raw meat. Jasmine gagged and looked the other way. An older woman wearing a beanie pinched tight enough on her head to pull a heist got into Jasmine's space, and Jasmine flinched. Others stared at the foreigners.

The sisters stepped up the stairs to an American food café. It was the only place in Nanjing that served French toast. Light splashed through the windows. Two cats with intense green eyes lazed on the wooden floor. Jasmine sat down and unzipped her boots half way. A gray-haired woman gave them glasses of steaming hot water. Jasmine smiled and nodded, warming her hands with the glass. She pulled some American money out of her bag for Beth. After breakfast, Beth talked to Zhou. Jasmine's phone

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rang. The photographer's voice flowed through her, and she took a deep breath. Brooklynese accent, like her father's side of the family. He had seen some of her photos and belly dance performances on line and wanted to see her. Desire warmed through her spine, she released her breath, visualizing his black and white photos. Then she invited him to go dancing after the show.

They walked past a tree lined mix of Chinese and American fast food restaurants and shops with electronics and clothes. Jasmine's calves throbbed, and they found a shoe store. The smiling clerk carried out boxes of boots. Nothing fit. Too short or tight across the toes, made of plastic, no traction, and the ones without zippers she couldn't even pull on. Fake designer labels.

"She says these are the biggest."

"Damn, my feet are only a 7 1/2."

The sisters tried other shops with no luck. Jasmine felt ridiculous about not packing any other shoes, and didn't want to be uncomfortable walking when she met the photographer. Unarmed police patrolled and vendors sold fruit, vegetables, and bootleg American DVDs and CDs on the street. Some people flashed photos of knock off things for sale, which could be viewed at their apartments.

Beth talked to a cabbie, a middle-aged man, and Jasmine and Beth jumped in. The traffic was thick, and he sped along. He stopped at a light, a camera winked, and Jasmine snapped photos through her window. The taxi shot ahead and scraped against a bus. The drivers jumped out of their vehicles. Traffic slowed, the bus driver yelled, pointed to his nicked mirror, and argued with the cabbie. Then the bus driver jumped on the taxi hood, crossing his arms.

"The cabbie said he wouldn't charge us," Beth giggled.

Jasmine's scarf fluttered as she buttoned her coat, and turned up her collar, hurrying across the busy street with Beth. *Wutong* trees wind breathed with wafting stir-fry. An older woman fried food outside. Raw chicken parts lay on a pan along with severed chicken heads. Jasmine recoiled and forced herself to pick out some wings. Middle-aged working women played cards at another outside table; while at another, women played *mah-jonng*. One woman ate chicken with a claw clinging to the leg. Jasmine had wanted pita and hummus or chicken *shawarma* and fruit. Bagels and cream cheese. She wanted to share a Middle-Eastern meal with the photographer.

Beth spotted a parked taxi, but he was not going their way. Another cabbie dropped them off in the middle of nowhere at the station. Vendors sold food and random things. Jasmine kept her eye out for shoes. The sisters went through security with a rush of people, and their bags rolled through an x-ray machine. They sat in soft, expensive seats; other cars had hard seats and standing. Chinese voices floated through the train, and Jasmine's thoughts drifted back to the photographer in a double exposed photo montage. A few hours to Shanghai. Jasmine unzipped her boots,

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leaned back and circled her feet and shoulders, then discretely shimmied her chest.

Outside the station, the blue gray Shanghai sky enveloped them. The back of a salt and peppered haired man caught Jasmine's eye. Shanghai bustled. Decades older, wealthier men accompanied younger women. Older folks wore Chinese pajamas. Someone hand- cranked a grinding machine, making juice from sugarcane. People sold knock-off toys, watches, slippers, and everything imaginable. A woman sold puppies dyed with stars and stripes in the midst of scary looking dolls. A street Musician played an instrument with three strings, and his primal music made her miss hand drumming her goat-skinned African *djembe*.

They taxied through the Shanghai streets. Jasmine breathed in the Futuristic buildings towering and scraping above them, a kaleidoscopic glitz; tangling with freeways, cranes, juxtaposing with older buildings, international businesses and restaurants, and iconic Western fast food. Hong Kong was the star at one time, but under the British. Shanghai was now the apple of China's eye. The sisters freshened up in a Western coffee shop bathroom. They meandered down narrow streets and alleyways, still looking for boots. In the midst of clothes hanging from makeshift lines, a nude chicken dangled from a hanger. Jasmine stepped back and her stomach lurched, and her boot heel caught in a crack in the concrete.

Boots, strappy stilettos, and kitten heels glimmered in a boutique. After trying on several pairs, Jasmine gave up on boots. She knelt down, slipped on some strappy kitten heels, and forgiving elastic crisscrossed her feet and calves. She wiggled her toes, and her bandaged ankles breathed. She found some tennis shoes that fit, bought them also, and wore them out of the store.

The cabbie dropped the sisters off at Moganshan Lu road along the Suzhou Creek, a block from M50 galleries. Jasmine loved the graffiti concrete walls. They quickly snapped photos of themselves posing in front of the walls. Afterwards, they made their way to the upstairs soirée, wandering through blocks of renovated 1930's warehouse and clothing mills spaces and art workshops mixed with clothing, furniture, and expensive cafes and teahouses. The galleries reminded Jasmine of SoHo's Lower Manhattan exhibition spaces as they looked at modern art paintings and sculptures, Chinese antiques, jewelry, pottery, and glass. Being in these experimental art spaces, it was hard to believe they were in a Communist country.

Before they reached the upstairs soirée gallery, Jasmine heard violin music, and slipped into her kitten heels. Cool gusts of silk snowflakes brushed against their faces. In the dusk, the windows cast warm and cool colors of mouth blown glass. Inside, people dazzled beneath the lights, and many foreign tongues wove with laughter. Jasmine's heels echoed across wooden floors. All around her, sculpted and painted women cupped wine. She felt her dragon tattoo coil through her body as she reflected into framed glassy black- and- white double exposures, and his voice waved behind her on the warm breath of wine. She unbuttoned her coat and stepped out of herself into his mindscapes, breathing with his Manhattan black- and- white photographs.