

SHUHUA'S SUITE

By Brian Leung

—for Iris Chang

I.

Don't read this first part.

Shhhh.

No one will know, and you might not get it anyway.

They have not forgotten about the babies sliced in thirds, the disemboweled women, the Yangtze running thick with bodies and blood, prisoners buried waist deep and torn apart by attack dogs, men suspended by their tongues, heads of the living doused in gasoline and set on fire, women raped and raped again. No Chinese anywhere has forgotten.

The men were toys. Thousands transported to the edge of the city and shot down with machine guns. Some were tied to poles and used for bayonet practice. Others buried alive. There were slaughter contests to see how many men Japanese soldiers could kill in one day. Heads of the decapitated were kicked like balls, lined up like prizes. Some say the men had it easy.

The women were trophies. Many were stripped of their clothes and forced to pose for pictures next to the soldiers who raped them. Some were strapped naked into chairs, their hands tied down, their legs spread wide and bound to the armrests. This happened all over the city. It happened to thousands. Consider the women gathered for military prostitution, those whose breasts were cut from their bodies for sport while they were still alive. Think of the woman lying outside, prone, her dress flapping up over her face, exposing her mutilated body, a Japanese sword plunged

into her vagina and through to the ground. Think of women hiding in rooms. Think of any woman stepping onto the streets of Nanking after December 13, 1937.

II.

Shuhua woke to the sound of gunfire and breaking glass. She sat upright on her floor-mat. The room was completely dark except for small flecks of yellow light showing through the covered windows. Now she heard explosions, still more gunfire, and the sound of men running and yelling—soldiers. Shuhua remembered her father’s words not to look outside or make any unnecessary movements no matter what. She wondered if he’d returned but she could not see into the rest of the room and the noise outside was too loud to listen for his breathing.

It was still daylight when he left to see if he could find food. They were hiding in a small burned out building near Chungshan North Road because their own apartment was too close to where the Japanese were trying to break into the city. Shuhua squinted into the darkness again to see if her father had come back. “Papá?” she whispered, but there was no response. He had told her to rest and when she was sure she could not, he gave her a tablet of brown sugar laced with sedative and she fell asleep. Now, in the darkness, she didn’t know if he had returned or not.

Shuhua reached her small hand into the blackness to see if she could touch her father but she felt nothing. “Papá,” she said again, a little louder this time. She thought maybe he was keeping watch at the door. Despite his warnings not to move, Shuhua started slowly on her hands and knees toward the fragment of light that marked the entrance. Outside, the yelling continued and at every new explosion, the places where light got in flashed with pinpoint brightness. Shuhua froze in place nearly every time, trembling, then continuing tentatively through the sooty floor. She had stopped

thinking about the charred dust and broken glass she crawled over. It was a fact of existence. After their first day of hiding, she and her father were almost completely blackened.

When Shuhua had almost reached the door she was sure her father was there, leaning against the wall, sleeping. She paused, thinking she did not want to wake him and make him mad that she had broken her promise not to move. He would tell her that she could not act like a frightened child. But she knew he would not stay upset for long. Just yesterday he had given her a small piece of foil-wrapped chocolate for her fifteenth birthday. They were sitting in the dimness of their hiding place when he took it from his pocket.

“Where did you get this?” she asked.

“I’ve kept it since we left home, Jong yú,” he said, smiling, his teeth looking so white inside his blackened face. She liked it when he used this nickname, Goldfish.

Shuhua reached forward to wake her father. She touched the sleeve of his arm, which was strange to her because it felt like he was wearing wool. Where had he gotten such clothes? “Papá,” she said, giving him a slight shake.

The figure jumped up, startled, pushing Shuhua backward. “Who’s there,” he said. Shuhua was silent. It was a strange voice, a young man’s. “Who’s there,” he said again.

“Don’t hurt me,” Shuhua said.

“Are you alone?” the man whispered.

“Yes.”

“Don’t worry then, I’m just a soldier come to rest. I injured my arm.”

Shuhua backed up, sliding slowly across the floor. “But shouldn’t you still be fighting?”

“No,” the soldier said. “We’re in retreat. The army is trying to cross the Yangtze now.”

Shuhua heard the man walking slowly across the room toward her. The soldier’s boots scot across

the floor, scraping over bits of wood and glass. Shuhua backed up as far against the wall as she could. "What are you doing?" she said.

"I just want to see you." Outside there was the largest explosion yet and the soldier flattened himself to the ground, sending dust and the smell of old fire into the air. The soldier coughed. "I don't think this is going to be a very safe place to hide," he said. "We should get out of here."

Shuhua thought the soldier sounded young, almost her age and she was less afraid. "I have to wait for my father," she said. "Besides, you are a soldier. Why are you hiding?"

The soldier sat up but did not move forward. She was sure he could not see her, but he talked in the direction of her voice. "I have family in Nanking," he said. "And the army is drowning in the river. They've been overloading barges all day and now everyone is just trying to save themselves."

"The Japanese will kill you if they find you."

"I'll steal some clothes." The soldier was quiet for a moment before speaking. "You should be more worried than me. I hear things about how they treat women."

Shuhua sat up on her knees. She'd heard stories too, but her father told her not to listen, the Japanese were not all bad people. They had bad leaders. "Papá will take care of me," she said.

"My arm needs attending. I have to go," the soldier said. "Can I see your face just once before I leave? Are you sure I can't take you somewhere safer?"

"I'm sure Papá will return soon," Shuhua said, but she was becoming frightened. She didn't want to ask this soldier why he thought this place was unsafe.

"My name is Ling," he said. "Maybe we'll meet again." He walked back to the door and when he opened it, dark yellow light flooded the room and over Shuhua in the very back, shining on her blackened skin. He offered a small bow and carefully made his exit.

Ling, Shuhua thought to herself. He seemed brave to her. He was staying in the city. She began writing the character in the dirty floor next to her even though she couldn't see it. As she finished, the sound of gunfire rose again outside. She wondered if her father was safe, if Ling was. What did the Japanese want with Nanking anyway? She felt a small pang in her stomach and realized she hadn't eaten or had a drink of water since the day before when her father gave her the chocolate. Maybe it was just too dangerous for him to return. It was better that he waited until things were safe.

Shuhua sat against the wall listening to the fall of Nanking. All night she heard the rumble of the war outside, great flashes of light shooting into the room, then leaving everything dark again. The air smelled smoky and sour from all the fire. Occasionally she heard someone run by and each time she was afraid the Japanese had finally overrun the city and they would burst into the room. She remained like this until she fell asleep, curled tightly into one corner of the room.

When Shuhua woke, it was morning. There was still little light, but she could see her father had not returned. Maybe he was hurt or captured. Maybe he had fallen and he was lying on the street somewhere in need of help. She stood up. Her knees were sore from being bent tightly to her body all night. Shuhua heard the rumbling sound of engines in the distance, but the morning was remarkably still. She walked to the door and opened it slightly. Debris lay everywhere, and far off there were plumes of black smoke. All Shuhua could think of was her father. She needed to find him. She didn't care how dangerous it was or what might happen to her. Besides, she thought, they would never hurt a girl as young as herself. Someday, she was sure, she and her father would look back and barely remember any of this.

Shuhua knew she should not take another step. For her father, she knew she must. It is just another room, she told herself, a room with an almost blue ceiling. She listened to the percussion of aftermath and named it music, a suite of rescue. Shuhua opened the door all the way and gathered

her long, black hair out of her face, pulling it back behind her shoulders. With a confident breath, she stepped onto the street and out of her prologue.

III.

But you want a happy ending. Shuhua makes it to the United States. You need not read further.

The man buys a latte. *Skim milk, please.* A small stack of books sits on the table next to a cranberry scone. The books are about China. The woman pulled her recommendations off the shelf for him because he is fascinated by the history and culture. That, and he likes black hair, Mao red, and the idea of dragons.

The Great Wall coffee table book is exquisite. *Such an ingenious people.*

The women of Shanghai are lovely. *So modern.*

Sucking cranberry skin off a molar, he picks up the book with the orange spine. It falls open to black and white photos in the center. Jesus. The young Chinese woman is naked and strapped to a chair. The man reads . . . *raped . . . tortured . . .* before snapping the book shut. He tosses it behind him onto the table littered with pink rectangles of artificial sweetener.

Why would she fucking recommend that? The man returns to the women of Shanghai.

Shuhua is shelved.