



## “The Tomb of Brushes” – C. Cormier

The paint was peeling and the wires hung sagging from the walls. A cold draught came through the broken window in front of her. She couldn't see very far, the fog enveloped most of the surroundings, even the tall camphor trees in the park across the street were but a blurred greyish mass. The building in which she stood would be torn down in a few weeks' time and a brand new one would soon emerge. Taller, more modern, warmer against the winter's chilly humidity, cooler during Shanghai's stiflingly muggy summer months.

She had spent so many hours in this classroom, sweating in spite of the ceiling fan, trying to learn the art of Chinese calligraphy. Locked in every day for three hours in a row, for a one-to-one encounter with Master Wang who, surprisingly, had agreed to give her *shufa* lessons. Though himself a grateful and devout disciple of three renowned calligraphy masters, he had always refused to take on an apprentice, let alone near-beginners. And yet, he had agreed to meet her daily, not in his home but here at Shanghai University of Foreign Languages. She, a complete stranger, and a foreigner into the bargain who could hardly speak Chinese. He had certainly not been spurred by the need for money. A fairly famous calligrapher and seal-engraving professional, he lived a rather comfortable life. He had not dared announce the lessons would be gratis so as not to arouse sudden envy or suspicion, but the amount he had come up with was far too low. This, at least, had not escaped her. So what had prompted him to accept? And why her?

Their very first class had left him deeply puzzled. Of course, she had arrived late and she had imposed a handshake on him from which he had tried to not too obviously recoil. Of course, she was blue-eyed, light-skinned, long-nosed and big-breasted. It was funny how her nose in profile looked like a *wan* stroke whose bent curve would be upside-down. And her breasts when she was sitting tracing characters seemed to be in the way. Till then he had believed that foreign women were either very fat, clad in shapeless T-shirts and oversize jeans, or very sophisticated—the French particularly—elegantly dressed in fancy brand-name clothes and nicely made-up like the girls you saw on giant posters and digital screens all over the city. But this one was neither. Although chesty and rather muscular, she was of the same build as his own late wife. She wore a Chinese-cut dress but not the sexy *qipao* style which you see on the backs of all female tourists visiting Shanghai. It was a style that reminded him of his childhood in rural Zhejiang but the flowery fabric clashed with the traditional dark blue version he remembered. He could see she deprived herself of the help of make-up to cover her wrinkles even though she looked much older than she said she was when he had asked her her age. And the smell. It was the smell that had confused him the most. As expected, being French, she smelled of perfume. The fragrance of a blossom of some kind, which again took him back to his childhood, back to the hills and their blooming fruit trees in spring time. Later into the course, he had perceived another odor, not sweet yet not acrid, more musky, not unpleasant but unsettlingly redolent of intimacy. Of course, *laowai* are like steam-machines, heat makes them sweat, and on this typically hot early-summer day she was no exception to her kind. Beauty-wise, he did not know what to make of her, she certainly did not fit the Chinese canons and he wasn't sure about the Western standards but he could feel that he liked her, though of course he knew that he would never entertain any fanciful thoughts, he was too old for that. And she was a foreigner.

She had landed at Pudong Airport the evening before, had been tossing in her bed all night long and had eventually crashed an hour before her alarm clock had buzzed her awake. But she had fallen back into a deep sleep seconds later. It was the phone call from Fang Heping, her professor friend, who had arranged for the calligraphy lessons with Master Wang, which had woken her up: ten minutes to the appointed time for the class and she was still not here, was everything OK? She had rushed into the shower, had dressed hurriedly, had gobbled a bun and had tried to wash it down with some still burning tea. Seventeen floors down. Out of the elevator. She had run across the campus to the shabby pale-pink-tiled building. Elevator out-of-order. Five floors up the stairway. Once in the unlit hallway, she had walked, dabbing at her perspiring face with a Kleenex, trying to get her breath back and to compose herself. Well, she did arrive late, ten minutes past the appointed time actually, and she hated herself for it, knowing full well that her lack of punctuality, though accidental, would be deemed disrespectful. Her friend was already in the class with Master Wang, both men were smoking, chatting about Shanghai traffic from what she could understand. She could see that Master Wang was trying hard not to show his annoyance at her being late and at her totally stupid and impulsive attempt at shaking hands with him. As if she didn't know better! Heping shot her an amused look, thanked Master Wang for accepting to give her calligraphy lessons, announced that he would now take leave but would be in his office down the hallway grading papers if they needed him, and advised them to lock the door behind him so as not to be disturbed during the lesson.

Master Wang had spared her all the questions that are usually addressed to foreigners within the first five minutes of any encounter—Do you love China How much do you make? Etc.—except for her age. As she was preparing the ink, unfolding the felt square mat and the brown gridded paper she felt his gaze and when she was all set, she asked him what he wanted her to do. He answered by asking her age. He did not seem convinced by the figure she gave him. Well, she guessed she probably looked horrific, being jetlagged and hardly awake, and she knew that foreigners always look older to Chinese eyes. But she didn't care. So she smiled and asked again, “Master Wang, how should we start the lesson?”

“Which style do you want to learn?”

“*Kaishu*, the regular script.”

“I prefer *caoshu*, the cursive script.”

“I know you are a great master of *caoshu* and it is beautiful but I can't read the characters, I don't recognize them when they are written in the cursive script.”

She did not understand his reply and told him so.

“Whatever. Show me what you know. Let's start with the basic strokes.”

Hence had followed series of horizontal, vertical, hooked, curved, and slanted strokes along with a series of all the different dots. He would trace a model, she would replicate as best she could. She was tense and hot. Her right wrist felt stiff and her upper arm was growing strained from keeping her elbow off the table for so long. She should have practiced more before she came. He had come closer tentatively to readjust her posture a couple of times. She was not too happy with what she was doing and systematically pointed at what made the stroke a miss, and he would acquiesce. On a few occasions she had approached the perfection of Master Wang's model and had exclaimed, “not as beautiful as yours but not too bad!” and he had readily agreed with a benevolent smile. Her friend knocked, she rose to open the door, feeling numb and exhausted. It was eleven and today's class was over.

“How did the student do?”

“Well, I should not charge her anything really, I only traced a few strokes and she did all the rest,” Master Wang answered laughing. “She did the student’s work *and* the teacher’s work!” “No wonder, you know she is a teacher in her country. Didn’t she tell you?” “No, I didn’t ask, but she has a good eye and her hand is not too bad. She just needs to practice. Tomorrow, eight o’clock. I’ll bring *Kaishu* exercise booklets and we will trace characters.”

The next day, he had her work on a selection of simple and then much more complex characters. She would often struggle with the order of the strokes and ask him for guidance. And she definitely needed to improve her *shuhenggou* strokes. But he was pleased and relieved to see that she had a very sure eye for balance and structure, and an instinctive sense of rhythm. He did not regret his decision. He was confident. He suggested she go to the calligraphy bookstore on Fuzhou Road to choose a masterwork to copy. Unsurprisingly, she came back with Ouyang Xun’s *The Stele in the Jiucheng Palace*, the epitome of *kaishu*, whose ideal rendition was both delicate and vigorous. In the weeks that followed, she had toiled her way through the pages of *The Stele*, copying each character five, ten, fifteen, up to thirty times, seeking flawless imitation and aesthetic perfection. She would always point at what she thought was the source of an unsuccessful character, ask for his opinion, wait for some remedying advice, and resume her copying. He didn’t know foreigners could be so unrelenting in their efforts. And she was making fast and reassuring progress. Yet sometimes she would break the code of conduct, growl in frustration, or grimace or curse alternatively in what she said was French or in broken Chinese, and look at him with a spark of playful self-derision in her eye.

He enjoyed the glances they exchanged at those moments, the feeling of being complicit in taking pleasure in such an incongruous attitude. Still he wanted her to make even more rapid progress as she would soon go back to her country and he would have to wait a full year for her return to further her instruction. He was pressed for time. He knew that after class she wasted too many hours in the afternoon looking up the characters in her dictionary and trying to make sense of the different sections of the inscribed slab, sometimes with the help of Professor Fang. In his opinion, she could have made much better use of her time practicing and tracing characters. He had told her so on several occasions. Yet she insisted that she needed to understand what she was writing, so as to breathe the right energy into each stroke. Given her dogged determination to be able to read and understand the calligraphed characters, he felt increasingly apprehensive of the difficulty of convincing her to explore her way beyond the *kaishu* script and to try her brush at *caoshu*. He believed that the free floating, harmoniously and vividly dynamic nature of *caoshu* could be conveyed through her strong sense of balance and rhythm and energy, but her attachment to meaning and literality might turn out to be a hindrance.

For her last class, she had suggested having lunch with him and Professor Fang. Her friend had ordered various dishes, including one-hundred-year-old pickled eggs with fresh curd tofu which he said she liked very much. She had joked about how her favorite Chinese cold dish looked like her favorite hot insult in Chinese—*rotten egg*. They had laughed heartily at her rather bold pun. As they had started eating, Master Wang commented on the peculiar way she had of using her chopsticks. She held them vertically and very straight, with a grip between her thumb and her middle finger, and a space in her palm, the manner, but it seemed to him that it was somehow natural, that there would be no other possible way for her to hold her chopsticks. Her friend teased her about being destined to become a calligrapher. I could not have put it better, thought Master Wang. He asked Professor Fang to

translate exactly what he was about to tell her. He took out of a bag a brocade-bound rectangular box, opened it and handed it to her.

“These are your seals. There are three of them. I carved them for you. The small square one bears your name. This one, with a phoenix-shaped head, is engraved with a traditional blessing. And that one, with a lion, is engraved with my words to you. You can use the first two. Your work is now good enough to be signed. You have one year before we see each other again. I want you to practice, to practice every day. When you come back next year, I want you to be ready to learn *caoshu*, then you will know my words. I know you have prepared an envelope with money in it. I don’t want it. I want you to keep it and use it to buy yourself brushes, ink, rolls of exercise paper and white paper, and some seal paste.”

Master Wang was visibly shaken by his own solemn speech. He addressed Professor Fang, thanked him for having provided a classroom for their lessons and for today’s translation, then turned to her, grabbed her hand in a tense and awkward handshake, and abruptly hurried out of the restaurant. The two friends were utterly dumbfounded. What was that all about? They discussed the matter at great length. What had come into the head of old Master Wang? Was he demented? Did he seriously think that she was some kind of Chosen One on her way to the Great Revelation in the Realm of *shufa*? Heping eventually tried to release some tension and remarked that at least she had got herself sixty hours of *crème-de-la-crème* calligraphy lessons for the bargain price of a lunch for three. He saw her wince. She seemed at a loss. So he more soberly advised her to follow Master Wang’s instructions, to come back as planned in a year and see what he would have to teach her. But she didn’t even want to learn *caoshu*! She wouldn’t even be able to read her own writing in *caoshu*! “Well, you have one year to think about it,” Heping had concluded.

That day had been the last she had seen Master Wang.

Heping had called two weeks before to inform her that Master Wang was in a critical state and wanted to see her. Of course she would come. She would just need some time to obtain her visa and to work out some kind of arrangement with her school for a leave of absence. Since her return home, she had been practicing daily, she had even dared sign with her name seal a few rolls whose writing she deemed acceptable. She had pondered over Master Wang’s apparently whimsical wish to teach her *caoshu*, and decided that although she thought she was not fit for it, she would comply. She reasoned that refusing point blank would be both disrespectful and upsetting to him; whereas by accepting, she would please him and only run the risk of disappointing him if, as she feared, her hand at *caoshu* turned out to be beneath his expectations.

She was too late. He passed away less than two days before she got back to Shanghai. She had never been there at that time of year. The whole city seemed numbed in a cold damp woolly limbo. On her way from the airport to the campus, she could see that construction work was thriving; whole blocks had been bulldozed and new buildings were already sprouting up. She did not recognize familiar landmarks and had no way of knowing her whereabouts. On her arrival at the university hotel, Heping informed her that Master Wang’s mortal remains had already been cremated and that there had been no ceremony, in accordance with the wish of the deceased. But they had an appointment on the next day for her to sign papers. It appeared that Master Wang, who had neither child nor kin, had bequeathed her all his scrolls, seals, brushes and ink-stones. She did not sleep. As the night went by, a mounting sense of grief engulfed her. She had genuinely liked the old man and she

had been so deeply moved by their last encounter, not only by the gift of the seals of course, but also, and maybe even more so, by the token of his handshake.

She signed the papers that entitled her to all his calligraphy possessions and impedimenta. The list seemed endless and the collections of scrolls and seals in particular were highly valuable as they contained precious *chefs d'oeuvre* by his three masters. Heping arranged to have everything delivered that day to a two-room apartment she could rent for a week. But she already knew that she would need much more time than that. She felt awed by the large boxes marked "scrolls," so she started with those marked "brushes." One of them was much heavier than the others. The cardboard box contained another box nearly as big but made of wood and entirely filled with hundreds of used brushes of different sizes and quality.

"Well, I guess you've just discovered the Tomb of Brushes!" her friend exclaimed.

"What is that?"

"The calligraphy brushes of a lifetime."

She saw something roughly wrapped in an old sheet of rice paper. She removed the paper and found yet a new layer, made of dark blue cloth. As she unfolded it, she discovered a medium-sized brush, with a plain slim bamboo handle, but its head was not made of wolf, goat or squirrel hairs. It was visibly made of black human hair. And it had apparently never been used. She was suddenly overwhelmed by a poignant sense of abandonment. It dawned on her that although she had been much aggrieved by the absence of a funeral, ashes didn't count, brushes did.