

APPEARED IN DIFFERENT FORM AS  
“INTERVIEW WITH AN ANGEL” IN  
*THE GETTYSBURG REVIEW*

# Immoral Woman

By Mitch Berman

## 1 The Entrance of Heaven

I was at the Museum of the Moving Image to review a festival of the films of the great silent actress, Ruan Lingyu, who committed suicide at the age of 26 in 1935. This much you must believe. This much you can look up.

Ruan’s father died when she was six. In her early teens she was seduced by Zhang Daming, the scion of the wealthy family who employed her mother as a maid. At sixteen Ruan broke away from Zhang to begin her career. Over the next eleven years she starred in twenty-one films. But Zhang orchestrated a campaign to discredit her, and she was branded an “immoral woman” — a damning indictment in China in the 1930’s. At the zenith of her fame, Ruan Lingyu killed herself. Her last words were, “Gossips are frightening.”

This much you can look up in the festival program, though more detailed sources are available only in Chinese and French. If I seem overly concerned that you

believe the beginning of my story, that is because I am reasonably sure you will not believe the rest of it.

During the credits of the first film, *Little Toys*, a young Asian woman in a tight cheongsam of black and gold silk brocade soundlessly took the vacant seat next to me. She was wearing dark glasses with large round lenses that were flat rather than convex. She did not remove them.

She sat quite still throughout *Little Toys*, except that toward the ending, when Ruan's character was given a cigarette by an obese and leering actor, the woman produced a very long ivory cigarette holder and lit a cigarette that had no odor whatsoever. The only smell was one I have since identified as orange blossom water. I supposed that a draft was blowing the smoke in another direction.

The woman beside me did not rise during the intermission. I joined the crowd in the lobby, where I smelled plenty of cigarette smoke.

I chanced to look at the woman ten minutes into the second film, *The Goddess*. Her lips were moving.

I watched the screen, and then the woman in the seat next to me. Whenever Ruan Lingyu spoke, the woman's lips moved silently; whenever fear or rage showed in Ruan's eyes, I saw similar expressions cross the face of the woman whose cigarettes did not smell.

She bore an uncanny resemblance to Ruan Lingyu. It wasn't simply that she was about the same age as the actress on the screen, or that the shape of her face, like Ruan's, was round and innocent while her features were cool and knowing; no, the two were closer than that. The face of the woman next to me was luminous, a chiaroscuro in the artificial night of the theatre, as if projected by light thrown through translucent film. I was transfixed. I must confess that I am even now quite unable to relate what *The Goddess* was about.

I felt, for some reason, that I must speak to her before the house lights came up, and, as the Chinese characters denoting the end of the film appeared on the screen, I turned to the woman and placed my hand lightly on her forearm and said, "Gossips are frightening."

She tore her arm away and her face contorted with pain. "*Bie mo wo!*" she whispered sharply, almost savagely. "Do not touch me."

"It is you, isn't it?" I asked.

The woman pulled back the sleeve of her dress. A strange mark glowered in the pale skin, now breathing orange like hot embers, breathing bright; now cooling to red, now gray, finally fading. It was the imprint of a human hand. My hand.

She regarded the mark on her flesh, and then, as if the fact that I had made it compelled some response to me, asked, "What is it you want?"

I need make no apology for what I said next other than that I am a journalist. "An interview."

Ruan Lingyu — now I may call her by her name — threw her head back and laughed, laughed boisterously for a long time, though none of the patrons filing out of the theatre paid her the slightest notice. When the room was empty, she said, "Very well. Go to the corner of 8th Street and 6th Avenue at seven o'clock tomorrow morning. Carry a newspaper. A taxicab will stop there. Tell the driver you want to go Uptown."

"Where will he take me?"

"To the entrance of heaven."

She did not disappear, but simply began to walk away. Beneath the Exit sign she turned and said, "You'll have to pay him." She went into the lobby and was gone.

## 2 Of Pericles and Gray's Papaya

At ten minutes before seven the next morning I was at the corner of 8th Street and 6th Avenue with two hundred dollars in my pocket and the early edition of the *New York Times* under my arm. Ruan Lingyu had not told me to hail the taxi, merely to be there. There I stayed for twenty-five minutes, at which point I stepped off the curb and raised my hand. But all the cabs were occupied. At 7:30 I gave up and went into Gray's Papaya and had two ninety-cent hot dogs.

I stepped out, wiping my lips and reading the newspaper, when a yellow cab cut across three lanes of traffic and bounced to a sudden stop in front of me. The cabbie, a broad swarthy fellow with sparse gray whiskers, leaned over and rolled down the window and said, "Which way?"

I got in and said, "Uptown."

The cabbie squealed through a light that was just turning red. "Sorry I'm late," he said, poking the button to start the meter. "Traffic's a bitch."

He seemed in every way to be nothing but an average New York taxi driver, which is to say that he was not a very good one: as he wove and lurched across the avenue, muttering and swearing as necessary, I could feel every seam and pothole in the pavement. Soon I was glad that I had put something in my stomach, and soon after, not so glad that it had been hot dogs.

I leaned forward. "Do you know the way?"

"Speak up!" yelled the driver. He kept the scratchy, fogged plexiglas partition closed behind him.

I repeated my question.

"Mister," he said. "I've been driving this cab for" — a cough in lieu of a number — "years now." He took a left turn on 34th Street. "Highway OK?"

"I don't know where we're going," I told him.

"The entrance of heaven," said the driver, so nonchalantly that I looked into the rearview mirror for the first time. The man had no reflection. "It's in the Bronx," he added.

On the West Side Highway he told me to open the money tray. I swung out the spring-mounted aluminum drawer in the partition and found a heavy black blindfold.

"Crack the window if you get carsick," said the driver. "But you've got to wear it. Rules are rules."

Once I was blindfolded, the driver became more talkative, as if to compensate me for the absence of sight. He'd been running this route a long time, he said, a *long* time — here he gave another cough — and had collected some interesting coins from his passengers over the years. He told me to open the money tray again, and as the cab sped along — there was a sensation of speed, though the road became so smooth it seemed simply to drop away from beneath us — I felt octagonal coins, coins with lettering instead of reeding on the edges, and some angular chunks of metal.

"Pieces of eight," the driver said. "And that little one about the size of a nickel? It's a drachma. Solid gold. Should have showed you when we were downtown so you could have got a look. That's the way the ducat crumbles."

In a short time the cab stopped, and the driver announced that we had arrived. I removed the blindfold. We were in a part of the Bronx so godforsaken that no one had even bothered to graffiti the boarded-up, burned-out brownstones.

"Go to the fourth floor" — the driver turned and braced a meaty forearm up on the partition, flattening the thick black hairs against his skin — "and when they ask where you want to go, you say Uptown."

"Uptown." I put a foot on the pavement.

"Mister!" the driver called. "Aren't you forgetting to feed the monkey?" He tapped the meter.

"Nineteen and a quarter?" I came around to his side window.

"One hundred nineteen and a quarter, plus tip," he corrected. "You turned the meter."

*"One hundred and nineteen dollars?"*

"We made good time on the highway." He gave a private smile. "We really flew."

I gave him seven twenty-dollar bills and asked for ten back. "Got anything smaller?" he said. It was the motto of cabbies everywhere.

"Sorry," I told him, not without a small sense of satisfaction.

He handed me a single coin and said, "I don't have a ten, so here's Pericles. Don't spend him all in one place."

The portrait of Pericles on the obverse stood out in bas-relief as crisp as if the ancient gold drachma had been newly minted. "See now?" the driver asked as I examined it. "Everybody's happy. Need a receipt?"

The front door of the deserted building was open, and the lobby was dark. My shoes potted through puddles on the floor. I took the stairs to the fourth floor and knocked.

The peephole slid open and an unblinking blue eye swam against it. "Where, please, do you wish to go?" a muffled voice asked.

"Uptown," I said.

The door opened onto a gaslit room cluttered with a hodgepodge of furniture, none of it so recent as the turn of the century. A very tall, very thin gentleman with fine white hair closed the door behind me and said in an almost inaudibly gentle aspiration, "You may, if you choose, repose there" — he fluttered his long bony white

fingers toward a high-backed Queen Anne chair in threadbare green velvet — “where you will find a current gazette for your divertissement during what is liable to be a considerable wait. An absinthe?” he asked, but without waiting for an answer, slowly, silently, stiff-leggedly left the room.

On an unmatched ottoman lay the *New-York Times Evening Standard* for August 3, 1847. The old man was back before I could unfold it. “Won’t you please accept my apologies for the wait?” he breathed. “Allow me to conduct you.” I hesitated only an instant, whereupon he turned and asked me, barely above a whisper, “It is English, is it not?”

The impatient old man, repeating, “come, come,” led me with agonizing slowness through a succession of rooms in an endless railroad flat, each furnished more peculiarly than the last. He walked ahead stiffly, stooped over so far that the starched tails of his tuxedo did not point straight down, but slightly backward. A brittle clacking grew steadily louder.

“A *bowling alley*?” I asked the aged gentlemen.

“Quite.” He held the last door open and inclined his head as a tactful hint that I should enter.

A man in a green eyeshade who was reading a daily racing form sat on a stool behind a glass counter of shoes. Eyes still on the racing form, he reached down and brought out a pair of black-and-white bowling shoes. “Size ten?” The stub of a cigar smoldered, forgotten, in an ashtray.

“Yes,” I answered, not knowing what else to do.

“Sixteen bucks,” said the cashier, and he had four singles ready when I put a twenty into his blunt fingers. Among the many things that occurred to me was the fact that I now had only forty-two dollars and one drachma left.

“It’s a League night and there’s a wait,” the man told me.

From a box beside the cash register that read **For Our Matchless Friends** I took a pack: **BOWL-MOR LANES, HEAVEN 0x98HL, N.E.** "Heaven is a bowling alley?" I murmured.

"Of course not." The man pushed up his eyeshade. "Heaven *has* bowling alleys, just like earth does."

The scores of the bowlers loomed above them, blown up by overhead projectors, and the giant shadows of fingers came across them like the hand of God. The man in lane five bowled strikes, adding body English to every ball and working his hips like a hula dancer. Ruan was nowhere to be found. I could not imagine her in a short-sleeved bowling shirt with "Lingyu" embroidered on the pocket.

I returned to the cashier and told him I was looking for Ruan Lingyu.

"Should've said so in the first place. She's in the Paradise Lounge." He stuck a thumb over his shoulder.

I started off, and he called me back. "You're not gonna bowl a few frames?"

"No," I said.

"The shoes please, the shoes." He beckoned with a finger.

I removed the bowling shoes and the man shook Dr. Scholl's foot powder into them before replacing them under the counter. He unfurled his racing form and picked up his cigar. "What do you know?" he said. "Damned thing's gone out."

### 3 Immoral Woman

In better days the neon script mounted on the rear wall of the bowling alley had read **Pair-o'-Dice Lounge**, with neon dice showing one and six; now only three of the pips were lit, and even they were flickering.

A beaded curtain made a pleasant muted clicking, like raindrops on dry leaves, as I entered. Despite an intense concentration of cigarette smoke, the air smelled surprisingly fresh, freshened perhaps by the leafy bamboo plants scattered around the large dark room in squat red clay pots. Small-combo jazz issued from a jukebox, the record crackling and popping as if to remind the listener that such music came from far in the past. Men and women in formal wear — no bowling shirts here — lined the bar two and three deep, buzzing quietly and sipping peculiar tinted drinks from tall glasses. I fancied that I caught a hint of orange blossom water.

No sooner did I appear when the bartender, over a game of chess with a customer, pointed to a still darker, still smokier corner of the room.

“Ruan Lingyu?” I said, voicing my unspoken question.

“You’d try the Danish Gambit on *me*?” the bartender’s elderly opponent beseeched in a reedy quaver. “Two pawns and a shattered Queen’s side for a lot of huffing and puffing, signifying nothing.”

“Chess isn’t played with words.” The bartender caught my eyes and pointed again toward the corner.

A ring of men in slicked-back black hair, tuxedos and cummerbunds stood off at a polite distance around a pinball machine, where, as I discovered, a woman was tapping and slapping the machine, sending the ball unerringly wherever she pleased.

She wore the same dark glasses, and I noticed now that the rims were not plastic but smooth carved black horn, the lenses not glass but smoke-colored crystal shot through with veins of darker smoke. When she stopped the action by cradling the ball behind a flipper —she did it often and at will — the nearest of her young admirers put to her lips a long ivory cigarette holder in which burned an odorless cigarette. Pastel versions of the pinball machine’s lurid colored lights reflected back from her pale face. The vertical rear panel of the machine bore a cartoonish likeness of the same woman

who now played — I speak, of course, of Ruan Lingyu — recumbent on a blue divan, her head thrown back, her skin Yellow-Peril yellow, her parted lips the same bright red as the cheongsam that was slit to her hip. The name of the machine was emblazoned across the glass in bamboo lettering: **IMMORAL WOMAN**.

Ruan exhaled a thin plume of smoke and a light from the machine struck it violet, then lavender as the smoke dispersed. With her back still to me, she said, “You’ve come.”

She turned around. The young men swiveled to regard me with civilized envy, like a firing squad training their rifles on a common target. Ruan Lingyu smiled slightly. “Would you like to play?”

“Yes,” I said.

“Then I will lose on purpose.” Her circle of admirers let out a soft moan. Ruan Lingyu allowed the ball to drop between the flippers, and said, “It is hard for me to lose at ‘Immoral Woman.’ Go ahead,” she told me, stepping to the side and reclaiming her ivory cigarette holder, “play the game.”

I put a quarter into the machine, and nothing happened.

Ruan laughed softly. “It doesn’t take American money.”

“What *does* it take?”

“Drachmas,” she said.

Reluctantly, I dropped my ancient coin into the slot. The machine lit up and blared a tinny electronic version of a Chinese folk song, and all of the counters rolled back to zero.

“You have three balls,” said Ruan.

The flipper buttons were warm from her touch. I released the firing pin: the first ball sailed in a lazy arc up through the center of the machine and down between

the flippers without having hit anything in the meantime. I got ten points for having lost the ball; I needed 3,333,323 for a replay.

“Beginner’s luck is usually bad,” Ruan said with the same slight smile. “Try again.”

When I had fumbled away the second ball, the machine had bestowed only two hundred points on me.

“Do not be afraid to hit the machine,” Ruan Lingyu told me. “Come here.” I bent down to her, and she whispered so close to my ear that I could feel the hot hiss of her breath: “Remember — it is a woman! It is an immoral woman!”

At first I slapped and pushed the machine, as I had seen Ruan do; but gradually, as my confidence increased, I began actually to imagine that the pinball machine *was* a woman, that it required a more gentle, empathetic touch, that I could bring to bear on it all the subtlety — even, strange to say, the affection — that a man can feel toward a woman. I came to understand that a machine can be caressed as can a woman, as gladly and as gratefully (had the circumstances of our meeting been vastly different) as I could have caressed Ruan herself. It was the first time I had allowed myself, even so indirectly, to think of her in this way; but this fantasy, far from distracting my concentration from the machine I held in my hands, sharpened my sensitivity to it. While I played I could feel Ruan watching me, watching as I knocked down rows of drop-targets, sent the bonus lights whirling toward the maximum. By the time I had finished with that third ball I had earned a replay. And when I turned around, Ruan was gone.

## 4 The World of Hurt

The elegant ladies and gentlemen had vanished from the Pair-o'-Dice Lounge and been replaced by another class of customer: middle-aged men, drowsy from alcohol, in shabby flannel shirts and brown corduroy pants. Harsh-bright fluorescent lights exposed the bamboo plants as artificial, and the jukebox bore an out-of-order sign, curled and yellowing. The lounge smelled like an overturned beer truck. The only remnant of its hour of glory was the elderly customer at the end of the bar, who had folded his arms and fallen asleep beside the chessboard.

The bartender tapped the old man on the shoulder and informed him, "You left your queen *en pris*."

"Be my guest," grumbled the old man, slipping off his stool. "Every game's got to end some time." He left the lounge, shaking his head and buttoning his tuxedo, as if he had gone to sleep in a dream and awakened to a nightmare.

On the other side of the beaded curtain, the league players were still chalking up their scores on the overhead projectors, and the man in lane five still stood at the line urging his ball with his hips. "Where is Ruan Lingyu?" I asked the cashier.

"Hey!" he shouted, dropping his racing form and pointing. "Outta here! Out!"

An old woman had pushed halfway through the entrance with a supermarket shopping basket full of distended plastic bags. Three policemen in riot gear followed. "Keep it moving," said one, ringing her cart with his billy club.

"I was just asking — " sputtered the woman.

"Ask somewhere else," another cop interrupted, shoving her cart back outside.

The three ambled jerkily to the counter, as if their armor were too heavy for them. One lifted his face shield and whined, mimicking the woman, "'Just wanna go to the bathroom, Sir?'"

The cashier chuckled. "Next thing you know she's taken a bath in there and I got a flash flood all over the floor. Hey boys" — he held out a box of Garcia y Vega cigars — "someone on earth just had a baby."

When the policemen had gone, I said, more to myself than to the cashier, "Homeless people and graft here?"

"You roll in fresh off the hay truck?" said the cashier. "They aren't 'homeless,' they're Wait-listers, and it's not exactly 'graft'" — he weighed it out with his cigar stub — "it's *graft*." His eyes narrowed. "Where you staying, by the way?"

"I'm not," I said.

He reached beneath the counter. "My finger's on the alarm. You've got three ticks to show me you aren't a Wait-lister."

"I came to find Ruan Lingyu," I said.

He tilted back his head to scrutinize me below his green eyeshade. "You're a *visitor*," he murmured finally. "Don't get many of 'em here. All I can say is I hope you've got the means. You're from America, early twenty-first? Currency's weak." He shook his head. "You're in a world of hurt, my friend."

"Where does Ruan Lingyu live?" I asked.

He shrugged. "Try the projects."

I took the exit to the street. My pupils contracted. Neon cowboys drew their guns and fired neon tracer bullets, neon bottles of beer drank and refilled themselves, neon pens wrote the names of stationery shops across the backdrop of a night brighter than day. I was aware of a crush of foot-traffic and a pounding of cars in the street, but only vaguely: the thrumming of neon blanketed all other sounds; the towering signs made all other shapes look puny, soft, indistinct, unreal. Now I knew why Ruan Lingyu wore dark glasses.

As I went down the sidewalk — mica, twinkling — more signs came into view, neon moons emerging from behind their planets. An arrow perhaps ten stories high of wavering yellow neon flames undulated downward to a place called Hell. **Hell**, said the sign in ice-blue letters, **Hell** in pink, in black light, in chartreuse; **Hell** in capillary red said my eyelids when I blinked.

Something told me Ruan Lingyu might be in Hell. Doormen in red-sequined devil outfits replete with glow-in-the-dark pitchforks were making a great show of selectivity, unlatching a velvet cordon to admit only the strange, the smart, and the striking — or anyone who arrived in a limousine.

“You!” One of the doormen had singled me out. “Visitor?”

“Is Ruan Lingyu here?” I asked.

“Of course,” he said. “And welcome to Hell.”

I took an escalator down, and a she-devil pressed her forehead to the ticket window and looked me over. Her only satanic accessories were elbow-length red gloves and a headband with pointed ears. “American, twenty-first century? The cover is” — she ran a red fingernail down a printed chart — “two hundred and nine dollars.”

I bent down and said into the louvered metal speaking hole, “I don’t have it. Is Ruan Lingyu here tonight?”

“Of course.” The cashier lowered her voice and leaned close to the glass.

“You’re a visitor? Got any coins?”

I dug into my pocket and produced a dime and two nickels.

“That’s fine,” she said, quickly sweeping the coins into her own purse. Evidently the taxi driver wasn’t heaven’s only numismatist. “Welcome to Hell,” she added.

Another escalator led me down into a room whose modest neon sign read **Purgatory**. One devil stretched a man on the Rack; another, seated before his client like a manicurist, was inserting bamboo slits under the client’s fingernails. Near me a

hooded devil with a salt-and-pepper growth of stubble was giving a man strapped into an electric chair a powerful current.

“Enough?” the devil asked, turning the dial back to zero.

“More,” insisted the man in the chair, his chest heaving. “A lot more. C’mon now, really crisp me.”

The devil turned the dial to the maximum. A column of smoke arose from the top of the man’s head, and the devil turned off the dial. “Sick sick sick,” said the devil with matter-of-fact disdain.

I stepped back from a sudden smell of burning hair. “How is it that you don’t kill him?”

“How is it — *what?*” The devil stared at me. “Oh — a visitor. So welcome to heaven, welcome to Hell. He’s already dead, that’s how.”

The man in the chair grogged awake and slurred, “Byooful. More now.” He clutched the devil’s sleeve. “*Execute me.*”

The devil gave the dial a contemptuous twist and removed his red hood to wipe his brow. “The business of infinite suffering,” he sighed. “I’ve got to start sending my resume around.”

On the next escalator down I asked a she-devil in a red-sequined bodice if she had seen Ruan Lingyu.

“Of course,” she replied. “Try Sin City, down and right.”

In Sin City middle-aged women with yellow plastic pails fed strange coins into slot machines, remaining equally composed or discomposed through the winning and losing (though there seemed, as on earth, decidedly more of the latter); dyed-blond girls in diamonds squealed at every spin of roulette wheels while wealthy older men stood behind them, conserving their limited supply of excitement for other occasions; serious bettors played baccarat, unemotionally replenishing the small fortunes that

were swept from the tables by devil croupiers; jaded males sat along a counter and lady angels clad only in white-feathered halos gyrated before them. Pitchfork cocktail stirrers in a large brandy snifter read **Hell in Heaven** on one side, **Heaven in Hell** on the other. Ruan Lingyu was nowhere to be found.

I took escalators upward, following signs that read **Heaven** ↑, **Hell** ↓. “Welcome to Hell,” a she-devil told a man just arriving; when the man asked if she’d seen Mamie Eisenhower tonight, she answered, as they always did in Hell, “Of course.” As I left, she called after me, “Welcome to heaven.”

Wait-listers rattled their shopping carts over the mica walk that twinkled as if everything had been turned upside down and the stars lay afoot. The neon signs tapered downward in the distance, and darkness grew up around ghostly towers looming like the masts of tall ships run aground in dry beds of ancient seas: the housing projects where I’d been told I might find Ruan Lingyu.

I had divided my day among earth, heaven and Hell, and I had done it on two hot dogs. Judging by the shopping carts parked in front, I guessed I could afford the fare at an unprepossessing establishment called Artie’s Luncheonette.

“U.S. of A., century two-one?” said a man who was swabbing down the wood-grained formica counter with a cloth that had once been white. “Me too, matter of fact. Your money’s good here.”

“How much is a hamburger, Artie?” He seemed like a man you could address by his first name.

“68 bucks, plain no pickle.”

“I only have 42,” I told him.

“Sorry,” said Artie, drawing a cup of coffee for a Wait-lister two stools down.

“If it’s close I work a break for a fellow Wait-lister. All’s I can offer you is Derelict Soup

— hot water, you add ketchup and imagination. I'll even snazz it up with a couple rounds of melba toast."

"I'm not a Wait-lister," I said.

"No?" He pushed back his short-order-cook hat with the heel of his hand.

"And twenty-first century? A visitor, then. From where?"

"New York."

Artie smiled. "Ever been out to Asbury?"

"Once."

"Remember my place on the Boardwalk?"

"I think so," I lied.

"Then maybe you remember those hypodermics that washed up ten summers ago on the Jersey Shore — scared off all the tourists and shot the Boardwalk full of poison. After 43 years, my place went out of business. So did I." He put a fist to his chest. "Broken heart, diagnosed as angina pectoris."

Artie went down the counter, serving his Wait-listers milk shakes and scoops of sauerkraut. When he returned, I asked him, "What's so heavenly about this place?"

Artie laughed. "'Heavenly'? It's *heaven*, Jack, the genuine article. You've heard that one of twenty people who ever lived is alive today — but the other nineteen?" He tapped an index finger on the counter. "Right here. It took a maximum of six billion souls to bring you the glories of the Inquisition or the world wars or the Crusades — or hypodermics on the Jersey shore. Multiply that by nineteen, and the wonder is heaven's as good as it is."

My stomach inarticulately instructed me to take that Derelict Soup now. I added enough pepper to disguise the fact that there was a taste, and washed the memory out of my mouth with a glass of water.

As I went on toward the housing projects, the Wait-listers multiplied. Not all were poor — some wheeled carts of dog-eared magazines and broken appliances, others furs and jewelry — and their clothes were of no one time or place. I saw Wait-listers in stovepipe hats, in saffron robes, lime-green leisure suits, samurai armor, high-necked Victorian dresses, Hawaiian shirts; they looked back at me through monocles, pince-nez, Ray-Bans, lorgnettes.

The projects — there might have been twelve or twelve hundred buildings — were wreathed in an impenetrable low-lying fog, as if I had, in traveling to this sector of heaven, come so far as to enter another kind of weather. A few lights glowed dull and brown through newspapers pasted into windows in lieu of curtains, and fewer residents wandered the weed-cracked concrete paths between unkempt browning lawns. Where in these ghost ships on this dead sea could I find Ruan Lingyu?

Not in Building 55, the first place to which I was directed; nor in Building AR-2, where I found a heap of yellowing correspondence addressed to Ruan and her junk-mail alter egos R. Lingyu, Rune Lingyu, Occupant, and Ronald Ling. Someone had scrawled, on what looked like a chain letter, "Forward to York Bldg., No. 6 N.W., 4th Floor."

Fire had hollowed out boarded-up Building 6 Northwest from empty window frames to unlit lobby, where a broken pipe sprayed a fine stream of water into the darkness, and catlike rats — or ratlike cats — scuffled through the ashen mud. At the fourth floor I knocked on the door; knocked harder, and the door came ajar. I stood on the threshold of a room in which no light was on, and I would have turned back, were it not for a very slight floral scent that told me there might be life within.

The rooms were strung together railroad-style, and as I made my way toward the final chamber in the line, the scent grew stronger. It was orange blossom water.

## 5 The Slice of Ginger

Ruan Lingyu, her narrow shoulders centered against the high back of a chair, was squeezing a sliver of lime into a cup of tea. She sucked the juice from her fingers; but even in this she somehow remained elegant. "I take lime with my tea," she said. "It is one of my eccentricities." She removed her dark glasses and stared into the cup, as if reading her fortune there and finding no surprises. "I seem to have forgotten a spoon."

I handed Ruan the pitchfork stirrer I had taken from Hell. "Tell me," she asked, stirring her tea, "did heaven live up to your expectations?"

"No."

"Then we are even." Ruan Lingyu fixed a cigarette in her ivory holder. "For earth did not live up to mine."

I struck one of my Bowl-Mor matches. "No thank you," she told me. "I would prefer to light it myself."

I handed her the matchbook. "I understand there's a long waiting list. Why is it that you aren't a Wait-lister?"

"You are right: I did not wait." Ruan Lingyu shook the match out. "I was admitted with no questions asked nor answers given. Such are the advantages of fame."

I sat on the ottoman in front of her chair, putting me at her eye level. "You *can* take it with you?"

"Yes!" she declared, with a vehemence that surprised me. "You take it all with you. You cannot help but take it." She smiled for a time, watching me steadily, watching me until her smile faded and a wistful, almost mournful expression took its place. "You have nothing else to take."

"Nothing but your fame, your possessions ... ?"

“No,” said Ruan Lingyu, “or rather yes, if that is all you had. I had more.” She allowed her cigarette to burn untended, her eyes not on me, and a wisp of smoke rose up in the silence, as if toward a heaven above heaven.

“I had — *I have* — the memory of a single afternoon. I believe it was in 1917. I was eight. My mother was preparing dinner for the Zhang family.

“I remember it as the middle of summer — very humid, very sticky — but that may be because my mother was making soup, and the stock had already started to simmer, filling the kitchen with steam.

“Since I had first been able to talk, I had been asking my mother to let me help her cook. She had never allowed me. I would stand beside her, guessing which vegetable she might be chopping above the level of my eyes on the high counter. You know the sound a train makes on the tracks as it pulls out of a station, just when it is beginning to pick up speed? That was the sound of my mother’s cleaver, clock-clock-clock on the cutting board.

“She would give me a slice of ginger to suck on, pink and thin as your fingernail. I was very fond of ginger. That is why she called me ‘Root.’ And whenever I spoke harshly, my mother liked to say that all the ginger had left a sharp tongue in my mouth.

“Once in a while, when she was making soup, my mother would pick me up around the waist and let me drop a clove of garlic into the pot, but I entertained no illusions. She was not really letting me cook. I was too young, the cleaver was too sharp, I would hurt myself.

“My mother took pride in the sharpness of her cleaver. When she was not chopping vegetables she was always drawing her cleaver across a whetstone, and that is another sound of my childhood.” Ruan allowed her eyes to close, and closed, they looked enormous, like a sleeping cat’s. “I can still hear it — tshh-tshh, tshh-tshh.” She smiled, and said again, very softly, “tshh-tshh, tshh-tshh.” Her eyes remained closed,

and her voice seemed to come from a great distance, as if she were narrating a dream. I was content to watch her face as long as she cared to speak.

“So it is summer, or at least it is summer to me. I am eight. I have always been too young to cook, and the stock pot is boiling on the stove. I tug on my mother’s dress. This is the signal that I require a slice of ginger. My mother understands this signal perfectly.

“Yet on this particular afternoon my mother has no ginger for me. Instead she brings the stool from the corner and tries to help me up onto it, but no, I’m a big girl, and I climb onto the stool by myself. Now I am almost as tall as my mother.

“She kisses me on the bridge of my nose and takes my hand and draws the cleaver across the back of my wrist. It shaves the fine hairs.

“‘You see?’ she tells me. ‘Be very careful. China is full of ginger, but you are the only Root I have.’

“She puts the handle of the cleaver into my hand. My mother gives me her special cleaver and tells me that I am the cook now.

“There are many vegetables in front of me. I’ve seen them bulging the net bag my mother takes to market — scallions, watercress, garlic, bok choy. They are whole and washed — beads of water stand out on their flesh like teardrops. I do not know where to begin.

“My mother’s first act as a guest in my kitchen is to solve this dilemma. She asks me for a slice of ginger.

“Very slowly, conscious of the importance of my task, I halve the ginger, cut a center slice and place it in my palm and offer it to my mother. I am prouder of this gift than of any other I have ever given.”

Ruan’s eyes came open and slowly refocused. Seeing that her cigarette had

burned down to the end, she tapped the ashes from the holder and fixed a new one into it. "You may tell me that I will always have my fame or I will always have my movies, or whatever else it is that occurs to you that I might have had in my life. No. That day with my mother is what I have. That is all I will ever have. In that moment, I did not even know I was happy."

She lay her head back and exhaled a column of odorless smoke into the still air. "I have invited many visitors here, each in the hope that he will carry with him something of earth that will equal that slice of ginger. It has never happened."

"We might have — " I began, but she raised a hand.

"Sixty years ago, on the other side of earth," said Ruan. She arose, and I got up with her. "There is no harm if you believe we could have cut another slice of ginger for ourselves." In the doorway she turned and bowed her head to bid me goodbye.

The lights grew brighter, lending a yellowish cast to my thoughts of all I had seen. They were gaslights. The room's furniture was old, and the chair in which Ruan Lingyu had been sitting was upholstered in threadbare green velvet.

## 6 Round Trip

I had no idea how long the white-haired gentleman had been watching me — or me and Ruan Lingyu — but he was watching now. One of his pointed black shoes was tapping impatiently.

"Are you *quite* ready to return, Sir?" he aspirated. "Your conveyance awaits."

In the distance, behind closed doors, I could hear the clacking of bowling balls and pins, and so far away that it might have come from another world, the faint blare

of a car horn. Only now did I fully realize that I had returned to the entrance of heaven. My *New York Times* lay on the seat of the green chair, and I bent to pick it up.

“We had entertained a hope,” said the old man, a peremptory quaver in his voice, “that you might allow your gazette to remain here, if our presumption was not untoward.”

My eyelids felt slightly sticky when I blinked, as if I were coming awake from a dream. “For the divertissement of the next visitor, you mean?”

“Quite.” He held the door open for me.

The razzing of the horn grew louder as I descended the stairs, jarring as an alarm clock in the morning. It belonged to the same taxicab that had taken me to the entrance of heaven, and the same driver sat behind the wheel.

“Monkey’s hungry,” he shouted from behind the partition as I got into the back seat. The cab jerked into the street. The fare was \$4.10.

“One hundred and four dollars, I suppose?” I said.

The driver’s laughter was as grating as his horn. “How long you think I’ve been here? *Three* hundred and four bucks” — the meter clicked — “and thirty-five cents.”

I glared into the rearview mirror, but I had forgotten that the driver had no reflection, and so I glared at myself.

The driver threw a thumb over his shoulder, toward the blindfold waiting in the money tray. “Rules are rules.”

He was not nearly so talkative as on the first trip, which was well. In midtown he permitted me to remove the blindfold, and left the meter running while I went to a cash machine.

I put money in the tray as the driver pulled to the curb at 8th Street and 6th Avenue. He took it, except for a ten-dollar bill which he left dangling toward me.

“Wanna sell me back Pericles for it?”

"I don't have that coin anymore," I told him, I told him, not without a small sense of satisfaction. "I spent it."

He turned around and braced his thick arm against the partition. "You *spent* it?" He shook his head. "Some people don't know the meaning of money."

I got out and ordered two hot dogs at Gray's Papaya. Earlier I had stood behind the same greasy stainless steel counter on the same busy street corner, watching the same or interchangeable traffic pounding past and eating two identical hot dogs without tasting them; now I was lost in every hot burst of wet-salt-onion-garlic, able to think of nothing but the acidity of the mustard, the steam that rose into my nostrils and the wetness that spilled into my mouth when my teeth broke the skin of the meat, the crunch of the warm grilled bun. Perhaps simple hunger ran a shock of pleasure through my body, or perhaps heaven's prices had made me grateful for earth's, or perhaps, as I had marked Ruan Lingyu's flesh with my touch, so she had left her own mark upon me.

It was not until I stepped out to the intersection where I had begun my day that I realized I had returned with no proof of the existence of heaven. With deceptive ease I had collected three such proofs: an ancient gold coin, a cocktail stirrer, and a book of matches. Now each was gone, each confiscated from me by Ruan Lingyu. Heaven would suffer no physical evidence to cross customs, would tolerate no remainder or reminder of itself on earth; heaven must remain a colorful dream dissolving into shadow as the waking mind pursues.

And so it is that I come to you with this story of a day spent on heaven, hell and earth, disarmed of anything that might have convinced you of its truth; and so it is, powerless to convince, that I must tell my story anyway. For whether or not you believe I return from the realm of death, I return from the telling having won back a birthright: the greatest or the smallest thing — a hot dog, a stroll on the Asbury Park

Boardwalk, a slice of ginger — may remain the thing it is, which is to say not a thing at all, not a thing experienced, but merely the name of that thing, alphabetized and chronologized into the great catalog of a life, a catalog that remains as useless as a defunct telephone directory full of parties who no longer answer at any of the numbers; or an ordinary event can be transformed, wholly and without warning, by the alchemical processes of sensation and retrospect.

As surely as Ruan Lingyu never knew anything to equal a slice of ginger she once cut for her mother — not since her childhood, not since her death — so I have not yet known anything to equal my encounter with Ruan herself. I do not know whether I will ever again have such an experience, but if I do, I am unlikely to receive any warning when or how such an experience may arrive, or to know — even at the moment it is happening — that it will become a memory. I can have no idea whether a memory will linger until tomorrow, or longer; it may stay with me my entire life, or, as it did with Ruan Lingyu, even longer than that.