

## Editor in Brief

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My name is Tom Winston, for all the good it does me. I remember when a name like mine used to mean something in Shanghai. Being Tom Winston opened doors.

We journalists think we own the city, and in a way, we do. A part of it, at least. Don't ask us why we're here instead of working on a broadsheet back home. We'll only wane lyrical that the jackboot of censorship is preferable to the sheepskin shoe-boot of some cashmere-clad Daddy's girl who lisped her way into the editor's chair of some gently right-wing rag.

Today, the fourth of April, is the first day my magazine will go out without my name on the masthead. No more Tom Winston, Managing Editor. News/Speak, the fruit of my labours, the first gossip-slash-news mag ever in Shanghai, is rolling on without me. I, the former doyen and founder of the glossy, garish, deeply intelligent hybrid of trash and information now hunch, wasted and lost, against the wooden steps of Oceania. Taxis swarm on Fumin Lu beside me, waiting to snatch spent revellers from the ragged lines of hot-pants and slut boots whining into their phones in Shanghainese.

Just as I'm readying myself to skitter off towards Changle Lu, I hear a beery American voice call my name. I strain to focus through the neon, and my eyes light wearily on my assailant. Oh, pity me; it's Charles Canali, one of my ex room-mates, from the glory days in the Shimen Yi Lu penthouse.

"Taam!" he calls again, lurching over from the little park, his hands bristling with fuming shao kao skewers, followed by a coterie of flimsy Yank girls and burly frat-looking guys. He collars me outside Cantina Agave, casting a Red Sea of beggars in his wake.

"How are ya, buddy?" he caws, manhandling me with big, rough paws as if he were a linebacker and Fumin Lu was our pitch.

"Yeah, good, good." I say. From the toxic slant in his eye, I see him gearing up for what he calls 'banter'.

"How's life treating ya?" His drunkenness pulls me downward, his arm over my shoulder like a big, thick antimacassar on a chintz chair.

"Yeah, yeah," I mime.

"Found a new job yet?"

"Nah, not yet,"

"Still living in that shit-hole?"

Before I can reply, Charles lets out a piercing laugh which startles me into remembering how wasted I am.

“Down and out in Shanghai and London!” he crows.

I have absolutely nothing to offer as response.

The girls are gazing at me balefully.

“Are you going to introduce me to your friends?” I gesture to them bleakly. I notice the burly frat-looking guys sitting on the low wall outside Cantina. They seem to be interacting with a beggar.

“Oh, yeah. This is Megan, and this is Madison. They’re visiting me,” Charles hiccups in their direction and then mine. “Girls, this is Tom, my ex-roommate,”

“Nice to meet yew,” they say in unconvincing unison.

“Charles, are we actually going anywhere?” one of them mutters.

“Yeah, or are we just like going to stand here all night?” bleats the other, directing her stare to a little horde of lanky Shanghai princesses who are gathered, one big giggle, off to the side. It’s all neon. I feel weird.

“I’m on to it, ladies,” Charles is weighing me down with the bulk of his cedar-width arm. The stink of his shao kao skewers makes my bile rise. “On to it. What did I tell y’all?”

“You’re on to it,” the girls mumble obediently.

“The C-meister is *on* to it,” he bellows, and does a ghastly gang sign with his free hand. I try to shift from his mammoth grip.

“Yeah, so anyways,” he turns his attention back to me, and just as quickly is distracted by his two other friends on the wall. They look to be haggling with a beggar who is sitting between them, a witchy grin displaying a single mossy tooth.

“Hey, Charles, man!” one of them beckons. There’s a seraphic lightness as the brute releases me and lopes over. A group has gathered.

“Tell this guy I wanna buy his monkey,”

“Pete, man. What is this?” Charles is suddenly enlivened by impending drama.

“He won’t sell me his monkey,” Pete turns his palms towards the small, greasy-looking ape that’s capering between the beggar’s lap and his own. Megan and Madison push closer to look at it.

“What the hell d’you want with his stupid monkey anyways?” Charles asks.

“He’s mistreating it!” Pete whines.

“It’s abuse,” the other guy puts in.

“Ask him how much he wants for it,” Pete says.

“He’s not gonna sell, buddy,” Charles frowns. “It’s, like, his begging tool,”

“Just ask, wouldya?”

“Yeah, Charles. It’s cruel,” Madison says. “Look at the poor little monkey,”

“Ok, ok,” Charles readies himself. He approaches the beggar and says “Dwooar shar chyenn, needer ho-tser?”

The beggar cackles, and makes that eyes-closed hand-slash at the air that means “no way”.

“Nee bu mai?” Charles checks. The beggar repeats his gesture.

“Nah, man,” Charles steps back. “He ain’t selling,”

“Tell him we’ll give him a thousand,” the other guy says, giving big eyes of empathy to the monkey which is jabbering and grinning.

“Joe, man. He’s not gonna sell,” Charles says. “What do you want with it anyway? It’s prolly got rabies or something,”

“We wanna take it to an animal sanctuary,” Pete announces.

I let out a hollow laugh that surprises everyone, myself included. All eyes are on me.

“An animal sanctuary?” I hear myself saying, and my voice sounds more toffish and braying than ever. I’m embarrassed for myself.

“Yeah. You got a problem with that?” Joe stands up. Suddenly it’s tense.

“If you can find an animal sanctuary in this city, I’ll give *you* a thousand,” I scoff.

“Hey – easy, guys,” Charles comes in as the mammoth mediator.

“This jerk’s laughin’ at us,” Joe squares up.

“I’m not,” I laugh. “I’m just pointing out the near impossibility of locating any sort of animal welfare establishment in this city, especially one that would accept a mangy creature like that,”

There is silence, so I continue – jester sage in a court of fools.

“And how jingoistic of you to assume that the po-faced political correctness of your homeland should be aped – ha! – throughout the world,”

They look at one another, perplexed.

“Is he bringing it?” Joe finally asks.

More silence.

Then,

“Yeah, he’s bringing it,”

and the whole world springs to the monkey’s defence, to Joe’s defense, and everyone is shouting, getting in my face. I see limbs, but my brain has disengaged and I view each second as a frame on a moving video tape which edifies my blunder – some sort of homage to catatonia. I have no idea how it escalated, but out of the melée I rise and find myself running. The scrum carries on behind me and I see a baton, a helmet, and hear a contralto yell from Charles or Joe or Pete.

I run.

The ground is close to my face as I pelt the pavements, thrust on by some force behind me and ahead.

As I turn onto Donghu Lu, I veer left and feel grass on my ankles. Dew. I’m in a garden. And then I realised I am holding something. I crouch and lift it, my eyes coming parallel with a pair of black beads surrounded by greenish fur. The monkey.

We stare at each other. The monkey gives a girlish chitter and ducks away, but I’m holding its leash so it doesn’t get far.

“Ousted,” I whisper to it. It double-takes; it wants to hear more. “I was ousted! They stole it from me. They stole my magazine,”

The monkey cocks its chin and stares at me, perplexed. And then I realise: it doesn’t understand me. Of course it doesn’t! But I can’t bring myself to speak to it in Chinese. It would be the signature on my official warrant of madness. The founder and ex-editor of News/Speak, huddled in a garden on Donghu Lu, speaking Mandarin to a monkey. So we are destined to communicate by glance, by touch, by feeling, and whatever English the monkey has learned from its dealings with foreigners. I pick it up with my hands under its arms and lift it so we are eye to eye. I plough my brain for something to say that isn’t ludicrous, but before I can speak, the monkey bursts into a cacophony of mirthful squeaking.

I feel my pocket buzz, and put the creature down while I retrieve my phone. I prise it open and see the animated envelope wavering on the screen.

*Hi I am Summer, u give ur number. It was nice to have meet u. I hope to meet again before u left Shanghai. Sorry u have the problems~~~~*

I sigh and slide it back into my pocket, thinking of the solace I took in Summer’s doleful, smudgy eyes just half an hour ago at Oceania’s bar. Patient Summer, willing to listen as I regaled her with my woes.

The monkey looks up at me, all “what do we do now?”

“Sit tight,” I tell it. “Sit tight until they forget about us,”

And we watch the dirty yellow moon scrape an inch across the sky through the branches. We wait. The monkey finds a stalk of orange berries to chew on, and I absorb myself in the forthright way it tears its quarry from the wood. Nimble claws hook out the pips at the same time. I marvel at the frankness of animals – the unswerving, unapologetic actions of creatures whose only occupation is survival.

Soon my legs, bent at the knee as I crouch, begin to deaden. I wait until the monkey has finished its feast, then I twitch its leash so it will follow me. We leave our dewy Eden and bend back onto Donghu Lu. The street is empty. The scruffy curve of the tree-tops holds in the smog, and I see taxis passing on Huaihai far ahead. A tramp forages at a bin, but ignores us as we pass.

It’s nearly morning.

We walk side by side down to Xinle Lu and turn onto it, the monkey pausing to scavenge and sniff.

Once we cross Xiangyang, I see a glut of cabs and realise that we’re close to Room 101 – the dirtiest dive bar in Shanghai. The place you go to when no other bar will have you. The denouement of many a gaudy night.

Despite my inebriation, I know that the monkey won’t be welcome, so I tie his leash to a pipe in the lane beside the bar. He begins to rifle daintily through the discarded remains of a noodle dinner, and I know he’ll be happy to wait.

Room 101 is accessed by a staircase leading down. Once inside, I see that it’s empty except for group of four at a table by the wall. By the time I realise who they are, it’s too late to turn back without appearing cowardly.

There’s William Jura, whose name appears for the first time this week on News/Speak’s masthead not as Assistant Editor as previously, but as Managing Editor.

There’s Julia Wu, the intern who was once my girlfriend (and would have been my wife), before Will Jura stole her too.

There’s Kevin Zhao, the plump IT guy who smiles at everyone. He’s smiling at me now, a little skittishly.

There’s Aimee Schmidt, the appallingly artless sub-editor who is now Will Jura’s sidekick – what Will once was to me.

I approach the four of them like an impeached president returning to his former senate.

“Hey,” I say perkily.

“Hi Tom,” Will orates in his fake London accent. He’s a Geordie through and through, and he knows I know it. Three years at Durham and a stint as editor of the student rag sharpened

his vowels and propelled him to a job on a leftie magazine. A year later, here he is, in my job with my magazine propped triumphantly between empty beer bottles. So they're celebrating. The first Tom Winston-less News/Speak.

"Hey Tom," Aimee barks, savage as ever, her tone as arid as the Australian desert from whence she sprung, reptilian. I can't stand her. It was Will's idea to hire her. She blustered into the interview as if the gig was already hers, ranting about smoking joints and busting expat clichés and just how downright hip and hot she was. Please.

"Hey," I say. "Hi Jules,"

Julia says nothing. She looks at her wine glass.

"Hallau!" Kevin smiles. He holds out his box of cigarettes and I take one. He lights it for me. It tastes like cork and it rips my throat. Disgusting. I stub it out. Kevin frowns. Now I've lost him too.

"How's life?" Will asks after a cavernous pause.

"Yeah, good," I say.

"When are you off?"

"Today, actually. I'm on my way to the airport now,"

"To Pudong?" Aimee snarls. "Where's your shit?"

"My possessions?" I say gracefully.

"Yeah,"

I pat my pocket by way of an explanation.

"What, you're leaving all your stuff in Shanghai?" she sneers, appalled.

"Yep. Fresh start and all that,"

Aimee curls her lip unattractively like a latter-day Elvis Presley and sits back in her seat.

"Anything lined up for when you get back to London?" Will asks.

"Yeah, actually I'll be starting at the Guardian as a features editor," I lie.

Aimee snorts.

I hold back my arm to stop it chopping into her neck and sending her chair skittling backwards onto the concrete floor. How I got through so many editorial meetings with her on the team, I will never know. Despite her claims to the extraordinary, she is the most mundane, mediocre, unexceptional writer I have ever had the damned luck to toil with. Now, her buttocks spread like baozi over the sides of her barstool, and her chubby, forceful features

fester with entitlement. She thinks her Mandarin is native, but her rhotic (and mystifying) attempts at *Beijinghua* make an idiot of her.

“The Guardian, eh? That’s big stuff,” Will says.

“Well, seeing as I set up my own magazine,” I counter. “Editing features will be a breeze,”

I let that one stew.

Will gives the signature cry of the laowai: *fuwuyuan!* and a tired waitress shuffles over. “Ahh, lah ee pying pee-jo, ahh,” he says with that imperious, scornful ease of an expat versed in Putonghua. I feel like spitting. Awful, awful man. William Jura is a shining disgrace of well-bred sand-hued hair, big jaw, and ruddy, rugby-honed joviality.

“So is this the latest edition?” I pluck the magazine from between the empty bottles so the waitress can clear them away.

“Yeah,” Aimee says. “We worked damn hard on it,”

“Tough at the top, eh?” I sniff, flicking through it.

“Too right,”

As I pretend to admire the front cover (a hideous, blurry lomography shot of an orange sunset broiling over the Lujiazui skyscrapers, headlined ‘SHANGHAI’S HOT’), I notice Julia glance over at Will. From the movement of his arm, I see that he is squeezing her thigh under the table.

That makes me want to die more than any other of his thefts.

After a couple of pages (A5 sized pages, another groundbreaking idea of mine – ‘fits straight into your pocket and your life’) I find the editorial.

*Hi guys,*

*Welcome to our lucky thirteenth edition of News/Speak.*

*In case you were wondering, we’ve had a bit of a shake up here at News/Speak Towers. It’s a case of out with the old, in with the new. Our former editor has headed off to pastures new, leaving the mag in our more-than-capable hands.*

*So, we’re looking forward to bringing you more of the hottest gossip and most up-to-date news from the ‘Hai.*

*In this month’s edition we’ve trawled the Bund’s bars for juicy rumours, and interviewed a construction worker at the site of next year’s Expo. We like to keep it real, you know! We’ve also got a brand spanking new information feed on our website, thanks to our IT bod Kevin, and a beefy hot blog from our resident hipster and all-round wunderkind Aimee. Our lead feature separates the wheat from the chaff – who is hot in Shanghai? No-one likes a loser, so our guide to the hots and nots will make sure you don’t take home a reject.*

*Enjoy!*

The waitress has brought my beer, and I gladly suckle from it like Zeus from the goat's horn. I am sickened. Pastures new. The 'Hai. Hots and nots. Beefy hot. Wunderkind. I am mute.

The scene unfolds into a Boschian frieze as the four of them raise their drinks and offer me a Last Supper toast. I oblige, but weakly. I am appalled.

"What do you think?" Aimee asks belligerently.

I shake my head. "Incredible,"

"In a good way or a bad way?"

"You've ruined it," I whisper.

"Tom..." Will says.

"Ruined it,"

"Steady on," Aimee sits up. "It's a better magazine than it was when you were in charge,"

"Really?" I squeak, close to weeping.

"At least we're actually communicating with real people, instead of churning out your pretentious wankery," she spits. "I still can't believe that you sent one of my articles to press in Dingbats font,"

I laugh inside, despite my agony.

"In my defense, the dross you wrote was more interesting to read in pictographic form," I tell her. "And most probably remains so,"

"Tosser," she whispers.

"Ever the poet, Aimee," I sigh.

I am defeated now. The wordy ripostes and cutting tirades I had rehearsed for an occasion like this will remain unused.

"Look, Tom – we didn't mean to hurt you," Will has stood up and is coming to my side. I let the magazine drop onto the table. It falls open on Aimee's blog, and a black and white photo-booth picture of her smirks malignantly from the page.

"Hurt me?"

"We just thought that the magazine needed to go in a different direction," he soothed.

"It's *my* magazine!" I rage meekly. "It's my direction!"

"If we'd known how badly you'd take it –"

“What do you mean?”

“You’ve gone off the rails,” Aimee interjects. “To put it mildly. Look at the state of you!”

Will frowns and shakes his head at her.

“Maybe going back to England will be the best thing for you,” he says. His tone is so gentle and mellifluous that I yearn to roundhouse him out of the door and let the monkey tear open his face.

“It’ll be nothing without me,” I prophesy. “You’ll fail! I know you will!”

Aimee mutters something to Julia. Kevin is watching proceedings with a pained expression. His hand is on his cigarette packet and he looks as if he wants to offer me another, but fears rebuke.

And then all four of them are staring at me.

“Kevin, come on. You’re my friend, right?” My voice has gone up a strained octave. “We had some good times, you and me,”

Kevin’s mouth carps open and closed a couple of times.

“I’m sorry, ok,” he says finally.

I turn to Julia. Lovely Julia, whom I had planned to marry.

Before I can speak, she shakes her head, and I find myself thanking her.

I turn to leave. My vision is switching to video-frame again.

When I get out onto the street it’s dawn. The rain has washed the city clean. There’s no moon; the mild white sun has come too soon, and the neon has weakened.

The monkey is right where I left him. A wretched-looking alley cat is staring at him from a doorway. I untie him, half thinking of taking him into the bar and letting him loose on my ex-colleagues, but I decide against it, and we start down Xinle Lu back towards Xiangyang. We cross onto Shaanxi, and I hide the monkey under my shirt lest he be recognised by the dawn risers who are already pottering on the pavements, opening up breakfast stalls, sluicing their doorsteps.

On Yan’an Lu I run with the traffic for a little way until I lose my breath.

Eventually we reach Jing’an.

The rain has dulled the wood of the high temple walls to deep brown. The four gilded lions atop the pillar gaze north, east, south, and west.

There is no way the monkey can come with me. I am bound for Longyang Lu and then the airport; he belongs here.

The temple hasn't opened yet, but I see that there's just enough space under the door for the monkey to slip through. He's reluctant at first, but after I disentangle his paws from my fingers, he scurries slowly under the portal. An ape god now.

I stand up, lope over to the subway steps, and disappear.