

Door No.2

Writing prompts given:

1. Write a story set somewhere in China
2. Describe the feeling of someone watching you
3. Write about what's behind door number two

I looked at the mirrors and smug Interrogation Me met my eyes. I smiled at Interrogation Me and we shared a self-satisfied moment of appreciation for the truths the game hadn't changed. Even now, years later, the People's Republic weren't willing to let their agents violate the custom of diplomatic immunity.

Not that those rat bastards weren't *thinking* about doing it. I could feel their eyes behind the glass, sizing me up, overanalysing my body language - and I fucking loved it. Stare all you like, you professional perverts. There's something intoxicating about having spies and other government interrogators try to size you up when you know you're holding the strongest cards in the deck in your own hand and they're playing an off-suit mismatched low hand aggressively. You can taste the bluff in the air. You can play your own games, make them think they're in on the bluff, too, while they misinterpret every gesture. It's almost erotic.

There were probably three of them in the room, at least one of whom would be an attractive young woman who - undoubtedly - would've been someone I'd met in-country. Perhaps a masseuse I'd turned down, perhaps a shop assistant I'd purchased goods from, perhaps a stranger in the street I'd waved at. They loved a honeypot in China. I knew the team would be whispering, trying to work out how best to approach me and get whatever tidbits of information might persuade their bosses to get them out of field work and into some prestigious Party office job. I'd heard that it was quite the dangling carrot for junior agents in the Chinese homeland.

I maintained the grin with myself and deliberately relaxed into my plastic chair, manspreading a little more than was comfortable and dramatically yawning as best I could. I knew that'd piss them off. Sure enough, I was rewarded by the muffled sounds of one of them losing his cool.

That's right, fella. I thought. *Fuck you.*

After a delay of five minutes that had been deliberately performed for my benefit - people hate being left alone, or so the theory goes - sure enough a young woman opens the door and demurely takes a seat on the other side of the cheap table.

She can't be more than twenty-five years old, and she can't make eye contact with me. It's probably the manspreading. I almost close my legs out of pity for her, but then I remember she's a government spy. *Sorry love, I'm not about to make your life easy.*

"Mister Ben," she begins, still looking down at the floor. "Please, be civilised. This is just a customs check."

So it *was* the manspreading!

"No." I said.

I can feel the guy in the office next door getting more irate. What is he to her? A coworker, or perhaps something else?

Silence for a contrived ten seconds. A classic play. She wanted me to acquiesce because studies show that (a) people really hate silence and will try to fill it, and (b) if you help

someone once with something easy you're more likely to help them with something hard. You know: like open the diplomatic mail bag that's on the table next to us.

Eventually she gives up. Her hand grabs the sealed toggle of the bag and slides it along the table until its directly between us.

"Will you open it for me please, Mister Ben? If you do, I won't tell your wife about what happened between us."

I shrugged. "Nothing happened between us, and I've been doing this a while. She'll know you're lying. Call her."

She finally looked up and made eye contact with me. Her eyes glowered at my nonplussed face. Perhaps she thought it was intimidating? Her hand pulled a Huawei smartphone from her blazer pocket and she made a show of selecting a contact called "Angela Watts". My wife's name. I heard the call go through, a telephone pickup, and then she began her play.

"Oh, Mrs Watts? My name is Ling Xiaoliu. I met your husband, and I didn't know he was married. Now I'm pregnant!"

I rolled my eyes, but to be honest I thought it was a nice attempt. Her acting was on point and I gave her extra credit for the voice tone that made her sound like a confused teenage girl. Unfortunately for her, we both knew that wasn't Angie on the other end.

Seeing that this wasn't working, she slammed the phone down on the table to try something else.

"What's in the bag, Ben?"

I leaned forward. "You really want to know?"

She leaned forward too. I think she was genuinely sucked in. They don't give these kids enough cultural training.

"It's Project Nunya," I whispered.

She leaned in even closer, close enough to kiss me.

"Please, Mister Ben," she whispered back. "What is this 'Project Nunya'?"

"Nunya business."

It took a couple of seconds for her to read my shit-eating grin and understand the stupidity of the joke. I heard a thump on the other side of the mirrored glass. There's *a/ways* some hot-headed nerd on the time. Not her, though. Despite it all, she cracks and lets out a giggle.

We both flopped back on our respective chairs. The game was over. She couldn't make me open the bag, she couldn't persuade me to do it, and they couldn't open it themselves without breaking a bunch of international treaties.

She pulled out a lighter and a pack of Chinghua cigarettes. She offered me one of the sticks from the red packet, and for reasons of diplomacy I decided to take one and share a smoke break. Her hands were small and barely cupped the lighter as she lit up both our fags, but I spotted the telltale callouses of someone who'd been in surveillance for a long time. She was probably older than she looked.

I softened to her slightly. She was only doing her job, after all.

“Look, you're not getting in the bag.” I said. “Not happening, my boss will throw me in Wandsworth himself if I let you have the post. Still, I can't blame you for trying.”

This time she shrugged. “It's just the game.”

“Yeah, it is.”

We enjoyed the shared cigarettes. It's still illegal to smoke in airports, but as a civil servant working with the Embassy in Beijing no-one was going to slap my wrists for accepting a fag break. I stubbed my dog end out on the laminated table in the absence of an ashtray.

“Look, there's another way this could go down.” I said. “Maybe there's something else I could give you that would at least get you out of low-level surveillance ops.”

“Oh, yes?”

“Yeah.”

She laughed. “You trying to turn me, Ben?”

“You can't blame a guy for trying!”

A muffled tannoy announcement somewhere in the main airport called an end to this chat. I stood up, shouldered the white cloth sack and no attempt was made to stop me.

“I'll be out on that flight, then. Let me know if you change your mind.”

I chanced a look back over my shoulder as I left and I could see she was tempted. We both knew she wouldn't take the offer, but she was watching her promotion walk out the door.

Tough gig, our kid.

It was years before I was reassigned to do courier in China again. Seven years later, I found myself facing Ling Xiaoliu across the table once more. She didn't even bother with half the tricks she'd tried on me the first time.

After a half-arsed questioning, she simply said:

“I've often wondered if you were serious, last time. You were going to use me, I knew it then, but I wondered what would've happened.”

There were no cigarettes this time. The years had worn away Ling's bright features and left worry lines on her face.

“I guess we’ll never know.”

“Is the offer still open?”

Our eyes met. I could see her pleading. Unfortunately for her, she wasn’t the bright young career spy she had been, and she wasn’t of value to us anymore.

And, as much as it hurt her to realise, she knew it.

“I’m sorry, Ling. You walked past Door Number Two seven years ago.

Goodbye, Ling Xiaoliu.”