

Memorabilia

Caty Ribas

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11th July

07:45 The alarm clock rang. S.E.J. opened her eyes and a wave of excitement ran through her body: “I’m going to China!!!”, she thought and smiled. She put her glasses on and rolled out of bed. She observed the shelves in her bedroom: photos of landscapes in Girona, Roskilde and Melbourne, postcards from South Africa and Japan and a Japanese folding screen with white and pink cherry blossoms on a black background. Memories of trips next to an illuminated world globe, a constant reminder of her insignificance and the innumerable possibilities life offered. She knew those objects did not represent her present, just her past. How could she hint who she was? She had been in a cocoon and now she finally felt eager to break out of it, but she did not know how. S.E.J. turned the CD player on, prepared her mat, raised the blinds which allowed her to contemplate the magnificent views of Majorca and the Mediterranean Sea and started her daily yoga routine.



Views of Majorca © Caty Ribas 2011

21:15 S.E.J. was flying over Mesopotamia heading towards the Gulf. She had passed over Baghdad on the way to Basra, Kuwait and finally Dubai. How many wars, how much pain and frustration in those territories below her and the neighbouring ones! She felt a burst of anger and indignation towards those who had the power to stop all that suffering and would do nothing. How could people despise the lives of others, their physical, emotional and psychological integrity, their dreams, desires, daily struggles, their belongings, their possessions? It hurt her so much she could not help transmitting this feeling when talking about wars. S.E.J. wished her voice did not sound as harsh as it did since she did not like passing her frustration onto others, but she had not managed to reach that goal so far.

12th July

04:00 After two comfortable flights, the plane which would take her to Beijing was smaller, there was no individual TV and, obviously, no games. At least, two radio channels were mildly entertaining and she had brought a novel to read. She was sitting next to the window, so she would be able to enjoy looking at the clouds and, if the night was clear, the tiny lights in a remote place below the plane. She looked to her right as a woman and a man in their late thirties approached her row, sat down and did not even return her greeting.

14:20 After their last meal had been collected, her neighbour opened her handbag and started to pull out a hair brush, an eyelash curler, a nail file, two kinds of nail polish, several make-up brushes and a make-up box. S.E.J. could not believe her eyes: surely the woman would not do her nails, hair and make-up next to her! How mistaken she was! The woman took 30 full minutes to change her appearance before landing. Who was she meeting? She had taken lots of care with her appearance after a long distance flight. Who was her partner? Their way of interacting was not particularly sweet and they did not look like each other either, so she discarded the options of them being lovers or siblings. Were they acquaintances or colleagues? The plane landed while she continued her line of thought, trying to guess more about them and who she wanted to impress. S.E.J. could not understand the language they spoke but their body language did not show intimacy.

17:00 At last in China! S.E.J. was heading towards the Temple of Heaven, the first spot she wanted to visit. She felt curious about this temple of spirituality, not prayer, which would later be devoted to Heaven, and which was situated opposite the temples of Water, Fire and Earth. S.E.J. listened to a guide explain that all the blue that embellished the building had been brought from Tibet. Besides, the wood symbolised life and nature and the temple did not have a single metal item because it represented death and weapons. She enjoyed learning how to read the building: the pagoda had three levels. The first one had twelve columns, meaning the twelve months. The second one also had twelve columns, which represented the twelve hours. The third level had just four columns, implying the four seasons. The Temple was surrounded by a green square and three layers of marble, as a way to describe nature and clouds. This Temple, built in the 15th century, was also special because even the Emperor had to kneel down and did not have a throne in it: he was the Son of Heaven and, as such, he had to show respect to his father and superior. A 70 year-old Emperor ordered the construction of a side door to access the temple easily when his health began to decline. Nevertheless, he gave instructions that only emperors older than him would be able to enter the temple through it. As history has it, he was the only one to use it.



Temple of Heaven© Caty Ribas 2007

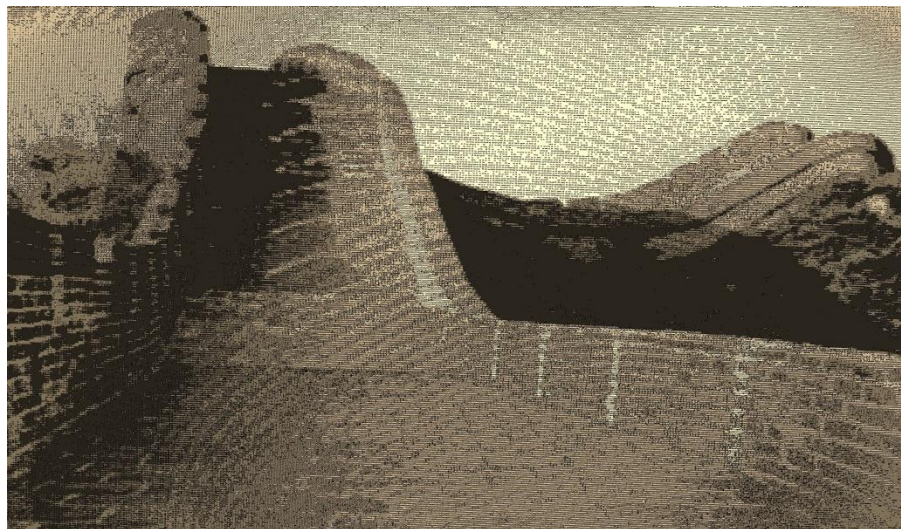
S.E.J. left the group, walked in and admired the images, the colours and the wood. She was mesmerized observing the details and imagined the hard work and the amount of hours involved in its construction. When she left the building, a warm sun broke through the grey clouds and caressed her skin. She walked towards some benches in order to sit down and admire the area. She enjoyed listening to people talk, although she was unable to differentiate languages and dialects.

Suddenly, she realised that a 10 year-old girl was looking at her with curiosity. S.E.J. smiled at her and the girl and her father approached her. He explained that she was the first foreigner his daughter had seen so close and that she was intrigued by her glasses, her nose, her hair and her skin and he wanted to know if his daughter could touch her. S.E.J. looked at the girl, smiled again, nodded and removed her glasses. The little girl hardly dared to touch her and started giggling. She let her hair flow so the girl could also caress it. After that, the girl dared to touch her nose and face and ran back to her mother. The family asked to take a group photo with her, and S.E.J. was happy to have it taken. Everyone she had met since she had landed had been very friendly to her and she could imagine the girl showing the photo to her classmates and remembering that day. "I am going to become some memorabilia," S.E.J. thought. After saying their goodbyes, she started to walk back to her hotel. She had been pointed out at the "other", but she had felt at ease and was eager to have contact with Chinese peoples. She could not speak Chinese, only mispronounce "xie-xie", "ni hao" and some other words she had learnt through an app on her mobile phone. Before leaving Majorca, she knew she would feel confronted by Chinese cultures and her inability to speak or read Chinese dialects but she had felt at ease during the first exchanges of impressions. She hoped that feeling would last the whole trip.

13th July

10:00 S.E.J. was in Badaling, walking along the Great Wall, feeling the sunshine warm her skin, enjoying the magnificent views from that marvel of History. She was moved by the story of Meng Jiangnu, the young wife who left her home in search of her husband, who had been forced to work on the construction of the Wall. When she arrived at the site, she was told that her husband had died of exhaustion. Meng Jiangnu cried and cried and her bitter weeping caused part of the Wall to collapse. The emperor was nearby and was ready to have her killed, but when he saw her, he was struck by her beauty and wanted to marry her. She accepted with three conditions: that the emperor would find the body of her husband, give him a state funeral and wear black to mourn the workers who had died building the Wall. The emperor accepted and the three conditions were met. However, before they got married, she jumped into the nearby Bohai Sea and killed herself. Meng Jiangnu was a symbol of love and of the terrible conditions the workers suffered.

S.E.J. had been strolling along the wall and had reached the highest part of the Wall. She stopped to rest, sat down and started to draw some sketches. Meanwhile a young man sat nearby and also began to scribble in a notebook. They smiled at each other and continued their tasks in silence, taking in the sunshine, the nature, the building and the events of the place. After a while, they started to talk. Born in Shanghai, Hu Huizhong – whose name meant “wise loyalty”- was a teacher of Chinese history at a university in Beijing and had lived in France as part of his PhD studies. Over the following hours, while they walked down the Wall, had lunch and went back to Beijing, he narrated some facts, events and stories of the Great Wall, of Beijing and Xian as well of Shanghai, Suzhou and Guilin. S.E.J. was mesmerised and took in as much information as she could. They also talked about Europe and different places they had travelled to or lived in. They continued their talk over dinner and decided to meet the following day and visit Tiananmen Square and the Forbidden City.



Part of the Wall© Caty Ribas 2014

14th July

9:30 Hu was waiting for S.E.J. at Qianmen, a gate localised at the south of the impressive Square. When S.E.J. arrived, she thanked Hu for meeting her and showing her around and she gave him a present: a notebook and a set of pens and pencils so he could continue the story he had been writing the day before. Hu thanked her and both

started their second day together. Hu explained some facts and stories about the Square: the Monument to the People's Heroes, the Mausoleum of Mao Zedong, the National Museum of China, the Great Hall of People and the Forbidden City. S.E.J. had been advised not to mention the events of 1989, so she asked many questions about all those buildings and monuments while they walked across the 880-metre long square.



Qianmen© Caty Ribas 2007

When they were reaching the Forbidden City, she was surprised to see the couple who had sat next to her on the plane: he was being photographed while she was with a group of women and men deciding the location and clothes he would wear in the next shoot! She had never guessed she would find them again, and even less that he was a model! S.E.J. explained the anecdote and Hu took a photo of her with the photo shooting on the right and the gate to the City in the background. Now, *they* had become part of her memorabilia.

16:00 After visiting the Forbidden City, taking some time to write and draw and having lunch, Hu had a surprise for S.E.J.: he would introduce her to his aunty, who lived in a hutong. Hu's grandparents and ancestors had lived there and the area was now protected. The hutong had a patio with lovely plants and flowers and around it there were the different rooms where the family lived. Hu's aunty, Xie Jiaying—whose name meant “good and clever” and was addressed as Laoshi Xie—welcomed them and S.E.J. gave her a present: a basket with some fruit, especially peaches, apples and dates. They sat in the kitchen and Laoshi Xie offered them some tea. Laoshi Xie was an English teacher who had lived in Beijing and Shanghai and had travelled widely. They started talking about the house and the city and how it had changed for the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games. They also spoke about the 2010 Shanghai World Expo and the future of China. Over dinner, they talked about past historical events and S.E.J. explained some historical and cultural facts of Majorca and of Spain. Laoshi Xie also commented on the Cultural Revolution and the modernisation of the country. S.E.J. shared her difficulty to talk about violence and suffering and how she tried to make sense of it but was frustrated at her inability to maintain the tone of her voice. Laoshi Xie told her that she would be able to control her voice if she were able to accept her thoughts and feelings and stop opposing them. Violence was part of humanity and it was necessary to

learn about past events to understand the present and create a future. She could see that S.E.J. was open to learning from others but was fearful of facing her inner self. After finishing the dinner, Hu and S.E.J. thanked Laoshi Xie profusely and walked towards her hotel, which was not far away. Hu had to teach a class on Emperor Qi the following day and invited S.E.J. to attend it.

23:00 S.E.J. was having a superb time in Beijing and could not thank Hu enough for his generosity, but she had been pensive since the conversation with Laoshi Xie, who had nailed it with her advice. She had been trying to open up to herself through yoga but listening to a lady like Laoshi Xie had stirred something inside her. She had to accept her emotions and thoughts, not block them, face her fears, dream and live her dreams. S.E.J. felt at home in Beijing and started to consider the possibility of spending some time in the city working as a Spanish, Catalan or English teacher. She would be going to a university the following day and she would be able to see how Beijingers lived, away from the main tourist spots. She was open to change and experience and wanted to break out of her cocoon: maybe that was her real journey.

Caty Ribas was born in Majorca and she travelled to China in 2007. This piece is her first attempt at creative writing and it is partially based on personal experiences although characters and situations are fictional. She is a member of the Australian Studies Centre at the University of Barcelona and was an exchange student in Australia.