

# THE DEVIL OF NANKING

MO HAYDER



**BANTAM BOOKS**

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## Prologue

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Nanking, China: 21 December 1937

To those who fight and rage against superstition, I say only this: why? Why admit to such pride and vanity that you carelessly disregard years of tradition? When the peasant tells you that the great mountains of ancient China were destroyed by the angry gods, that thousands of years ago the skies were torn down, the country set out of kilter, why not believe him? Are you so much cleverer than he is? Are you cleverer than all his generations taken together?

I believe him. Now, at last, I believe. I tremble to write it, but I do, I believe all that superstition tells us. And why? Because there is nothing else to explain the vagaries of this world, no other tool to translate this disaster. So I turn to folklore for my comfort, and I trust the peasant when he says that the wrath of the gods has caused the land to slope downwards to the east. Yes, I trust him when he tells me that everything, river, mud and towns, must eventually slide into the sea. Nanking too. One day Nanking too will slide away to the sea. Her journey may be

the slowest, for she is no longer quite like other cities. These last few days have changed her beyond recognition and when she begins to move it will be slowly, for she is tethered to the land by her unburied citizens, and by the ghosts that will pursue her to the coast and back.

Maybe I should consider myself privileged to see her as she is now. From this tiny window I can peer out through the lattice and see what the Japanese have left of her: her blackened buildings, the empty streets, the corpses piling up in the canals and rivers. Then I look down at my shaking hands and wonder why I have survived. The blood is dry now. If I rub my palms together it flakes off, the black scales scatter on the paper, darker than the words I write because my ink is watery: the pine soot inkstick is finished and I haven't the strength or the courage or the will to go out and find more.

If I were to lay down my pen, lean sideways against the cold wall and adopt an awkward position with my nose squashed against the shutters, I would be able to see Purple Mountain, snow-covered, rising up beyond the shattered roofs. But I will not. There is no call to push my body into an unnatural place because I will never again look upon Purple Mountain. When this diary entry is finished I will have no desire to recall myself, up on those slopes, a ragged and uneven figure, keeping desperate pace with the Japanese soldier, tracking him like a wolf, through frozen streams and snowdrifts . . .

It is less than two hours. Two hours since I caught up with him. We were in a small grove near the mausoleum gates. He was standing with his back to

me next to a tree, the melting snow in the branches dripping down on to his shoulders. His head was bent forward a little to peer into the forest ahead, because the mountain slopes are still a dangerous place to be. The cine-camera dangled at his side.

I had been following him for so long that I was bruised and limping, my lungs stinging in the cold air. I came forward slowly. I can't, now, imagine how I was able to remain so controlled because I was trembling from head to toe. When he heard me he whirled round, falling instinctively to a crouch. But I am not much of a man, not strong, and a full head shorter than he was, and when he saw it was me, he relaxed a little. He straightened slowly, watching me come a few steps nearer until we were only feet apart, and he could see the tears on my face.

'It will mean nothing to you,' he said, with something like pity in his voice, 'but I want you to know that I am sorry. I am very sorry. Do you understand my Japanese?'

'Yes, I do.'

He sighed and rubbed his forehead with his cracked pigskin glove. 'It wasn't as I would have wished it. It never is. Please believe this.' He raised his hand in the vague direction of the Linggu Temple. 'It is true that – that *he* enjoyed it. He always does. But I don't. I watch them. I make films of what they do, but I take no pleasure from it. Please trust me in this, *I take no pleasure.*'

I wiped my face with my sleeve, pushing away the tears. I stepped forward and put a trembling hand on his shoulder. He didn't flinch – he stood his ground, searching my face, puzzled. There was no fear in his expression: he thought of me as a defenceless

civilian. He knew nothing about the small fruit knife hidden in my hand.

‘Give me the camera,’ I said.

‘I can’t. Don’t believe I make these films for their recreation, for the soldiers. I have far greater intentions than that.’

‘Give me the camera.’

He shook his head. ‘Absolutely not.’

With those words the world around us seemed to me to slow down abruptly. Somewhere on the distant slopes below, the Japanese *sampohei* artillery were laying down heavy mortar fire, chasing renegade Nationalist units off the mountains, rounding them up and forcing them back down to the city, but up on the higher slopes I was aware of no sound at all, save the thudding of our hearts, the ice melting in the trees around us.

‘I said give me the camera.’

‘And I repeat no. Absolutely not.’

I opened my mouth then, canted forward a little and released a howl directly into his mouth. It had been building in me all the time I’d been chasing him through the snow, and now I screamed, like a wounded animal. I lunged, twisting the little knife into him, through the khaki uniform, grinding through the lucky *senninbari* belt. He didn’t make a sound. His face moved, his head jerked up so fast that his army cap fell off, and we both stumbled back a pace in surprise, staring down at what I’d done. Gouts of blood fell into the snow and the inside of his stomach folded out like creamy fruit through the rip in his uniform. He stared at it for a moment, as if puzzled. Then the pain reached him. He dropped his rifle and grabbed at his stomach,

trying to push it back inside. '*Kuso!*' he said. 'What have you done?'

I staggered back, dropping the knife into the snow, groping blindly for a tree to lean against. The soldier turned away from me and lurched into the forest. One hand clutching his belly, the other still holding the camera, he went unsteadily, his head held up with a peculiar dignity, as if he was heading somewhere important, as if a better, safer world lay somewhere out in the trees. I went after him, stumbling in the snow, my breath coming fast and hot. After about ten yards he tripped, almost lost his balance and cried out something: a woman's name in Japanese, his mother's maybe, or his wife's. He raised his arm and the movement must have loosened things inside because some dark and long part of him slithered out of the wound, dropping into the snow. He slipped in it and tried to regain his balance, but now he was very weak and he could only stagger, in a hazy circle, a long red cord trailing from him, as if this was a birth and not a death.

'Give it to me. Give me the camera.'

He couldn't answer. He had lost all ability to reason: he was no longer aware of what was happening. He sank to his knees, his arms raised slightly, and rolled softly on to his side. I was next to him in a second. His lips were blue and there was blood coating his teeth. 'No,' he whispered, as I prised his gloved fingers from the camera. His eyes were already blind, but he could sense where I was. He groped for my face. 'Don't take it. If you take it who will tell the world?'

\* \* \*

If you take it who will tell the world?

Those words have stayed with me. They will be with me for the rest of my life. Who will tell? I stare for a long time at the sky above the house, at the black smoke drifting across the moon. Who will tell? The answer is, no one. No one will tell. It is all over. This will be the last entry in my journal. I will never write again. The rest of my story will stay on the film inside the camera, and what happened today will remain a secret.

# 1

## Tokyo, summer 1990

Sometimes you have to really make an effort. Even when you're tired and hungry and you find yourself somewhere completely strange. That was me in Tokyo that summer, standing in front of Professor Shi Chongming's door and shaking with anxiety. I had pressed my hair down so it lay as neatly as possible, and I'd spent a long time trying to straighten my old Oxfam skirt, brushing the dust off and ironing out the travel creases with my palms. I'd kicked the battered holdall I'd brought with me on the plane behind my feet so it wouldn't be the first thing he saw, because it was so important to look normal. I had to count to twenty-five and take very deep, very careful breaths before I had the courage to speak.

'Hello?' I said tentatively, my face close to the door. 'Are you there?'

I waited for a moment, listening hard. I could hear vague shufflings inside, but no one came to the door. I waited a few more moments, my heart getting louder and louder in my ears, then I knocked. 'Can you hear me?'

The door opened and I took a step back in surprise. Shi Chongming stood in the doorway, very smart and correct, looking at me in silence, his hands at his sides as if he was waiting to be inspected. He was incredibly tiny, like a doll, and around the delicate triangle of his face hung shoulder-length hair, perfectly white, as if he had a snow shawl draped across his shoulders. I stood speechless, my mouth open a little.

He placed his palms flat on his thighs and bowed to me. ‘Good afternoon,’ he said, in a soft, almost accentless English. ‘I am Professor Shi Chongming. Who are you?’

‘I – I’m—’ I swallowed. ‘I’m a student. Sort of.’ I fumbled my cardigan sleeve up and pushed out my hand to him. I hoped he didn’t notice my bitten nails. ‘From the University of London.’

He eyed me thoughtfully, taking in my white face, my limp hair, the cardigan and the big shapeless holdall. Everyone does this the first time they meet me, and the truth is, no matter how much you pretend, you never really get used to being stared at.

‘I’ve been needing to meet you for almost half my life,’ I said. ‘I’ve been waiting for this for nine years, seven months and eighteen days.’

‘Nine years, seven months and eighteen days?’ He raised an eyebrow, amused. ‘So long? In that case you had better come in.’

I’m not very good at knowing what other people are thinking, but I do know that you can see tragedy, real tragedy, sitting just inside a person’s gaze. You can almost always see where a person has been if you look hard enough. It had taken me such a long time

to track down Shi Chongming. He was in his seventies, and it was amazing to me that, in spite of his age and in spite of what he must feel about the Japanese, he was here, a visiting professor at Todai, the greatest university in Japan. His office overlooked the university archery hall, where dark trees gathered round the complex tiled roofs, where the only sound was crows calling as they hopped between the evergreen oaks. The room was hot and breathless, dusty air stirred by three electric fans that whirred back and forward. I crept in, awed that I was really there at last.

Shi Chongming shifted piles of paper from a chair. 'Sit. Sit. I'll make tea.'

I sat with a bump, my heavy shoes pressed rigidly together, my bag on my lap, clutched tightly to my stomach. Shi Chongming limped around, filled an electric Thermos from a sink, oblivious to the water that sprayed out and darkened his mandarin-style tunic. The fan gently shifted the stacks of papers and crumbling old volumes that were piled on the floor-to-ceiling shelves. As soon as I walked in I'd seen, in the corner of the room, a projector. A dusty 16mm projector, only just visible where it had been pushed up in the corner among the towering piles of paper. I wanted to turn and stare at it, but I knew I shouldn't. I bit my lip and fixed my eyes on Shi Chongming. He was delivering a long monologue about his research.

'Few have a concept of when Chinese medicine first came to Japan, but you can even look at the Tang era and see evidence of its existence here. Did you know that?' He made me tea and rustled up a wrapped biscuit from somewhere. 'The priest Jian Zhen was preaching it, right here, in the eighth

century. Now there are *kampo* shops everywhere you look. Only step outside the campus and you'll see them. Fascinating, isn't it?'

I blinked at him. 'I thought you were a linguist.'

'A linguist? No, no. Once, maybe, but everything has changed. Do you want to know what I am? I'll tell you – if you take a microscope and carefully study the nexus where the biotechnologist and the sociologist meet . . .' He smiled, giving me a glimpse of long yellow teeth. 'There you'll find me: Shi Chongming, a very little man with a grand title. The university tells me I'm quite a catch. What I'm interested in is just how much of all this . . .' he swooped his hand round the room to indicate the books, colour plates of mummified animals, a wall-chart labelled *Entomology of Hunan* ' . . . how much of this came with Jian Zhen, and how much was brought back to Japan by the troops in 1945. For example, let me see . . .' He ran his hands over the familiar texts, pulled out a dusty old volume and put it down in front of me, opened at a bewildering diagram of a bear, dissected to show its internal organs coloured in printer's pastel shades of pink and mint. 'For example, the Asiatic black bear. Was it after the Pacific war that they decided to use the gall bladder of their Karuizawa bear for stomach ailments?' He put his hands on the table and peered at me. 'I expect that's where you come in, isn't it? The black bear is one of my interests. It's the question that brings most people to my door. Are you a conservationist?'

'No,' I said, surprised by how steady my voice was. 'Actually, no. It's not where I come in. I've never heard of the – the Karuizawa bear.' And then I

couldn't help it. I turned and glanced at the projector in the corner. 'I . . .' I dragged my eyes back to Shi Chongming. 'I mean that Chinese medicine isn't what I want to talk about.'

'No?' He lowered his spectacles and looked at me with great curiosity. 'Is it not?'

'No.' I shook my head precisely. 'No. Not at all.'

'Then . . .' He paused. 'Then you're here because . . .?'

'Because of Nanking.'

He sat down at the table with a frown. 'I'm sorry. Who did you say you were?'

'I'm a student at London University. At least, I was. But I wasn't studying Chinese medicine. I was studying war atrocities.'

'Stop.' He held up his hand. 'You have come to the wrong man. I am of no interest to you.'

He started to get up from the desk but I unzipped my holdall hastily and pulled out the battered pile of notes secured in an elastic band, dropping some in my nervousness, picking them up and putting them all untidily on the desk between us.

'I've spent half my life researching the war in China.' I undid the band and spread out my notes. There were sheets of translations in my tiny handwriting, photocopies of testimonies from library books, sketches I'd done to help me visualize what had happened. 'Especially Nanking. Look,' I held up a crumpled paper covered in tiny characters, 'this is about the invasion – it's a family tree of the Japanese chain of command, it's all written in Japanese, see? I did it when I was sixteen. I can write some Japanese and some Chinese.'

Shi Chongming looked at it all in silence, sinking

slowly into his chair, a strange look on his face. My sketches and diagrams aren't very good, but I don't mind it any more when people laugh at them – each one means something important to me, each one helps me order my thoughts, each one reminds me that every day I'm getting nearer the truth of something that happened in Nanking in 1937. 'And this . . .' I unfolded a sketch and held it up. It was on a sheet of A3 and over the years transparent lines had worn into it where it had been folded for storage. ' . . . this is supposed to be the city at the end of the invasion. It took me a whole month to finish. That's a pile of bodies. See?' I looked up at him eagerly. 'If you look carefully you can see I've got it exactly right. You can check it now, if you want. There are exactly *three hundred thousand* corpses in this picture and—'

Shi Chongming got abruptly to his feet and moved from behind the desk. He closed the door, crossed to the window overlooking the archery hall and lowered the blinds. He walked with a slight tow to the left and his hair was so thin that the back of his head seemed almost bald, the skin corrugated, as if there was no skull there and you could see the folds and crevices of his brain. 'Do you know how sensitive this country is to mention of Nanking?' He came back and sat down at his desk with arthritic slowness, leaning across to me and talking in a low whisper. 'Do you know how powerful the right wing is in Japan? Do you know the people who have been attacked for talking about it? The Americans –' he pointed a shaky finger at me, as if I was the nearest representation of America '– the Americans, *MacArthur*, ensured that the right wing are the

fear-mongers they are today. It is quite simple – we do not talk about it.’

I lowered my voice to a whisper. ‘But I’ve come all this way to see you.’

‘Then you’ll have to turn round and go back,’ he answered. ‘This is my past you’re talking about. I am not here, in *Japan* of all places, to discuss the mistakes of the past.’

‘You don’t understand. You’ve got to help me.’

‘Got to?’

‘It’s about one particular thing the Japanese did. I know about most of the atrocities, the killing competitions, the rapes. But I’m talking about something specific, something you witnessed. No one believes it actually happened, they all think I made it up.’

Shi Chongming sat forward and stared at me directly. Usually when I tell them what I’m trying to find out about, people give me a distressed, pitying look, a look that says, ‘You must have invented it. And why? Why would you make up a dreadful thing like that?’ But this look was different. This look was hard and angry. When he spoke his voice had changed to a low, bitter note: ‘*What* did you say?’

‘There was a testimony about it. I read it years ago, but I haven’t been able to find the book again, and everyone says I made that up too, that the book never really existed. But that’s okay, because apparently there’s a film, too, shot in Nanking in 1937. I found out about it six months ago. And *you* know all about it.’

‘Preposterous. There is not a film.’

‘But – but your name was in an academic journal. It was, honestly, I saw it. It said you had been in Nanking. It said you had seen the massacre, that you’d seen this kind of torture. It said that when you

were at Jiangsu University in 1957 there were rumours that you had a film of it. And that's why I'm here. I need to hear about . . . I need to hear about what the soldiers did. Just *one detail* of what they did, so I know I didn't imagine it. I need to know whether, when they took the women and—'

'Please!' Shi Chongming slammed his hands on the desk and got to his feet. 'Have you no compassion? This is not a *kaffeeklatsch!*' He hooked up a cane from the back of his chair and limped across the room, unlocking the door and taking his nameplate off the hooks. 'See?' he said, using the cane to close the door. He held up the nameplate to me, tapping it to make his point. 'Professor of Sociology. *Sociology*. My field is Chinese medicine. I am no longer defined by Nanking. There is no film. It is finished. Now, I'm very busy and—'

'Please.' I gripped the sides of the desk, my face flushing. 'Please. There *is* a film. There *is*. It was in the journal, I saw it. Magee's film doesn't show it, but yours does. It's the *only* film *anywhere in the world* and—'

'Ssssh,' he said, waving the cane in my direction. 'Enough.' His teeth were long and discoloured, like old fossils prised from the Gobi – polished yellow on rice husk and goat meat. 'Now, I have absolute respect for you. I have respect for you and for your unique institute. Quite unique. But let me put this quite simply: *there is no film.*'

When you're in the business of trying to prove that you're not crazy, people like Shi Chongming really don't help. To read something, in black and white, only to be told the next minute that you've imagined

it – well, that’s the kind of thing that can make you as mad as they all say you are. It was the same story all over again, exactly the same as what had happened with my parents and the hospital when I was thirteen. Everyone there said that the torture was all in my imagination, all part of my madness – that there could never have been such terrible cruelty. That the Japanese soldiers were barbarous and ruthless, but they could not have done something like *that*, something so unspeakable that even the doctors and nurses, who reckoned they’d seen everything in their time, lowered their voices when they talked about it. ‘I’m sure you *believe* you read it. I’m sure it’s very real to you.’

‘It is real,’ I’d say, looking at the floor, my face burning with embarrassment. ‘I did read it. In a book.’ It had been a book with an orange cover and a photograph of bodies piling up in the Meitan harbour. It was full of stories of what had happened in Nanking. Until I read it I’d never even heard of Nanking. ‘I found it at my parents’ house.’

One of the nurses, who really didn’t like me at all, used to come to my bed when the lights were off, when she thought no one was listening. I’d lie, stiff and still, and pretend to be asleep, but she’d crouch down next to my bed anyway, and whisper into my ear, her breath hot and yeasty. ‘Let me tell you this,’ she would murmur, night after night, when the flower shadows of the curtains were motionless on the ward ceiling. ‘You have got the sickest imagination I’ve ever known in ten years in this fucked-up job. You really are insane. Not just insane, but evil too.’

*But I didn’t make it up . . .*

I was afraid of my parents, especially of my mother,

but when no one in the hospital would believe that the book existed, when I was starting to worry that maybe they were right, that I *had* imagined it, that I *was* mad, I got up my courage and wrote home, asking them to look among all the piles of paperbacks for a book with an orange cover, called, I was almost sure, *The Massacre of Nanking*.

A letter came back almost immediately: *'I am sure you believe this book exists, but let me promise you this, you didn't read such rubbish in my house.'*

My mother had always been so certain that she was in control of what I knew and thought about. She wouldn't trust a school not to fill my head with the wrong things, so for years I was educated at home. But if you're going to take on a responsibility like that, if you are so afraid (for whatever private, anguished reason) of your children learning about life that you vet every book that comes through the door, sometimes ripping offending pages from novels, well, one thing's for sure: you have to be thorough. At least a little more thorough than my mother was. She didn't see the laxity creeping into her home, coming through the weed-choked windows, slinking past the damp piles of paperbacks. Somehow she missed the book on Nanking.

*'We have searched high and low, with the greatest of intention of helping you, our only child, but I am sorry to say, in this instance you are mistaken. We have written to your Responsible Medical Officer to tell him so.'*

I remember dropping the letter on to the floor of the ward, a horrible idea occurring to me. What if, I thought, they were right? What if the book didn't

exist? What if I really had made it all up in my head? That, I thought, a low thumping ache starting in my stomach, would be the worst thing that could ever happen.

Sometimes you have to go a long way to prove things. Even if it turns out that you're only proving things to yourself.

When I was at last discharged from hospital, I knew exactly what I had to do next. In hospital I got all my exams through the teaching unit (I got As for most of them, and that surprised everyone – they all acted as if they thought ignorance equalled stupidity) and out in the real world there were charities for people like me, to help us apply to college. They took me through all the stuff I found difficult – phone calls and bus journeys. I'd studied Chinese and Japanese on my own, from library books, and pretty soon I got a place doing Asian Studies at London University. Suddenly, on the outside at least, I appeared almost normal: I had a rented room, a part-time job handing out leaflets, a student rail pass and a tutor who collected Yoruba sculptures and Pre-Raphaelite postcards. ('I've got a fetish for pale women,' he'd once said, eyeing me thoughtfully. Then he'd added, under his breath, 'As long as they're not crazy, of course.')

But while the other students were picturing a graduation, maybe post-graduate study, I was thinking about Nanking. If there was ever going to be peace in my life I had to know if I'd remembered the details in the orange book properly.

I spent hours in the library, sifting through books and journals, trying to find another copy of the book

or, failing that, another publication of the same witness testimony. There had been a book called *The Horror of Nanking* published in 1980, but it was out of print. No library, not even the Library of Congress, held a copy and, anyway, I wasn't even sure if it was the same book. But that didn't matter, because I had found something else. To my amazement I discovered that there was film footage of the massacre.

In total there were two films. The first was Reverend Magee's. Magee had been a missionary in China in the 1930s and his film had been smuggled out by a colleague, who was so terrified by what he'd seen that he'd sewn it into the lining of his camel-hair coat on his way to Shanghai. From there the film lay forgotten in a hot southern California basement for several years, disintegrating, becoming sticky and distorted, until it was rediscovered and given to the Library of Congress film collection. I'd seen the video copy at London University library. I'd watched it over and over again, peered at it, studied every frame. It showed the horror of Nanking – it showed things I don't like to think about even in the light of day – but it didn't show the torture I'd read about all those years ago.

The second, or rather the mention of it, was Shi Chongming's. The instant I heard about it I forgot everything else.

It was my second year at university. One spring morning, when Russell Square was full of tourists and daffodils, I was in the library, seated at a low-lit table behind the Humanities abstracts stacks, cramped over an obscure journal. My heart was thumping – at last I'd found a reference to the

torture. It was an oblique reference, vague, really, and without the crucial detail, but one sentence sent me bolt upright in my chair: ‘Certainly in Jiangsu in the late 1950s, there was mention of the existence of a 16mm film of this torture. Unlike Magee’s film, this film has not, to date, surfaced outside China.’

I grabbed the journal and pulled the Anglepoise low over the page, not quite believing what I was seeing. It was incredible to think there was a visual record of it – imagine that! They could say I was insane, they could say I was ignorant, but no one could say that I’d made it all up – not if it was there in black and white.

‘The film was said to have belonged to one Shi Chongming, a young research assistant from Jiangsu University who had been in Nanking at the time of the great 1937 massacre . . .’

I reread the paragraph over and over again. A feeling was coming over me that I’d never had before, a feeling that had been packed tight and solid by years of disbelieving hospital staff. It was only when the student at the neighbouring desk sighed impatiently, that I realized I was on my feet, clenching and unclenching my hands and muttering to myself. The hair on my arms was standing on end. *It has not yet surfaced outside China . . .*

I should have stolen that journal. If I had really learned my lesson in hospital, I’d have put the journal inside my cardigan and walked straight out of the library with it. Then I’d have had something to show Shi Chongming, proof that I hadn’t made things up from a diseased imagination. He couldn’t have denied it then, and set me questioning my sanity all over again.

## 2

Opposite the huge red-lacquered *Akamon* gate at the entrance to Todai University there was a small place called the Bambi café. When Shi Chongming asked me to leave his office I did, obediently gathering up all my notes and stuffing them back into the holdall. But I hadn't given up. Not yet. I went to the café and chose a seat in the window, overlooking the gate so that I could see everyone coming and going.

Above me, as far as the eye could see, the skyscrapers of Tokyo rose glittering into the sky, reflecting the sun back from a million windows. I sat hunched forward, staring up at this incredible sight. I knew a lot about this phoenix city, about how Tokyo had risen from the ashes of war, but here, in the flesh, it didn't seem quite real to me. Where, I thought, is all of wartime Tokyo? Where is the city that those soldiers came from? Is it all buried under *this*? It was so different from the dark images I'd had all these years, of an old charcoal-stained relic, bombed streets and rickshaws – I decided I would think of the steel and roaring ferro-concrete as an

incarnation of Tokyo, something superimposed over the authentic city, the real beating heart of Japan.

The waitress was staring at me. I picked up the menu and pretended to be studying it, my face colouring. I didn't have any money, because I really hadn't thought this far. For my plane ticket I'd worked packing frozen peas in a factory, wearing away the skin on my fingers. When I told the university that I wanted to come out here and find Shi Chongming they said it was the last straw. That I could stay in London and finish my failed courses, or leave the university entirely. Apparently I was 'destructively preoccupied with certain events in Nanking': they pointed to the unfinished modules, the law department core courses I hadn't even turned up for, the times I'd been caught in the lecture hall doing sketches of Nanking instead of making notes on the economic dynamics of the Asia-Pacific region. There was no point in asking them for research funds to travel, so I sold my belongings, some CDs, a coffee-table, the old black bike that had got me around London for years. After the plane ticket there wasn't much left – just a grubby fistful of yen shoved into one of the side pockets of my holdall.

I kept glancing up at the waitress, wondering how long it would be before I'd have to order something. She was starting to look upset, so I chose the cheapest thing on the menu – a melon 'Danish' covered in damp sugar grains. Five hundred yen. When the food arrived I counted out the money carefully and placed it on the little saucer the way I could see all the other customers doing.

There was a little food in my holdall. Maybe no

one would notice if I got some of it out now. I had packed eight packets of Rich Tea biscuits. There was also a wool skirt, two blouses, two pairs of tights, a pair of lace-up leather shoes, three Japanese language books, seven textbooks on the Pacific war, a dictionary and three paintbrushes. I'd been vague about what was going to come after I'd got Shi Chongming's film, I hadn't really thought about the practicalities. There you go, Grey, I thought. What were the doctors always telling you? *You'll have to discover ways of thinking ahead – there are rules in society that you will always have to consider.*

Grey.

Obviously it isn't my real name. Even my parents, tucked away in the crumbling cottage, where no roads came and no cars passed, even they weren't that odd. No. It was in hospital that I got the name.

It came from the girl in the bed next to me, a pale girl with a ring in the side of her nose and matted hair that she'd spend all day scratching: 'Trying to dred it up, just want to dred it up a bit.' She had scabs around her mouth from where she'd sniffed too much glue, and once she'd untwisted a coat hanger, locked herself in the toilets and pushed the sharp end up under her skin from her wrist all the way to her armpit. (The hospital tried to keep people like us together, I'll never know why. We were the 'self-harm' ward.) The girl in the dreds always seemed to have a confident smirk on her face and I never thought she would speak to me of all people. Then one day we were in the breakfast queue and she sensed me waiting behind her. She turned

and looked at me and gave a sudden laugh of recognition. ‘Oh, I get it. I’ve just sussed what you look like.’

I blinked. ‘What?’

‘A grey. You remind me of a grey.’

‘A *what?*’

‘Yeah. When you first got in here you were still alive. But,’ she grinned and pointed a finger at my face, ‘you’re not now, are you? You’re a ghost, Grey, like all of us.’

A grey. In the end she had to find a drawing of a grey to explain what she was talking about: it was an extra-terrestrial with a big head, blank, insect-like eyes set high and even, and strange, bleached-out skin. I remember sitting on my bed, staring at the magazine, my hands getting colder and colder, my blood slowing to a crawl. I was a grey. Thin and white and a little bit see-through. Nothing at all left alive in me. A ghost.

I knew why. It was because I didn’t know what to believe any more. My parents wouldn’t back me up, and there were other things that made the professionals think I was crazy – all the stuff about sex to start with. And then there was my weird ignorance about the world.

Most of the staff thought secretly that my story was a little outrageous: brought up with books, but no radio or TV. They’d laugh when I jumped in shock when a Hoover started up, or a bus rumbled by on the street. I didn’t know how to use a Walkman or a channel-changer and they’d sometimes find me stranded in odd places, blinking, forgetting how I’d got there. They wouldn’t believe it was because I’d grown up in isolation, cut off from

the real world. Instead they decided it was all part of my madness.

‘I suppose you think ignorance is some sort of excuse.’ The nurse who used to come in the middle of the night and hiss all her opinions in my ear thought my being ignorant was the biggest of sins. ‘It’s not an excuse, you know, it’s not an excuse. No. In fact, in my book ignorance is no different from pure, straight evil. And what you done was just that – pure, straight evil.’

When the waitress had gone, I unzipped my holdall and took out my Japanese dictionary. There are three alphabets in Japan. Two are phonetic and they’re easy to understand. But there’s a third one, too, evolved centuries ago from the pictorial characters used in China, and it’s far more complex and far, far more beautiful. *Kanji*, it’s called. I’ve been studying it for years, but sometimes when I see *kanji* it still makes me think about the littleness of my life. When you stop to consider the lifetime of history and intrigue all hidden in a single scripted picture tinier than an ant how can you not feel like a waste of air? *Kanji* had a beautiful logic for me. I understood why the symbol for ‘ear’ pressed close up to the symbol for ‘gate’ would mean ‘listen’. I understood why three women clustered together meant ‘noisy’ and why adding splashy lines to the left of any character would change its meaning to include water. A field with an added water symbol meant sea.

The dictionary was my constant companion. It was small and soft and white and familiar, bound in something that could have been calfskin, and it fitted inside my hand as if it was moulded there. The girl

with the dreadlocks had stolen it from a library when she got out of hospital. She had mailed it to me as a present when it got round the patients that I was leaving at last. She'd put a card between the pages that said: '*I believe you. Stick it to them all. Go and PROVE IT, girl.*' Even all those years later I was still secretly thrilled by that card.

I opened the dictionary to the front page, the page with the library stamp on it. The characters for the Chinese name Shi Chongming meant something like 'He who sees clearly both history and the future.' With a red felt-tip from the bottom of my bag I began to sketch out the *kanji*, intertwining them, turning them upside-down, sideways, until the page was covered with red. Then in the gaps, using very tiny letters, I wrote Shi Chongming in English, over and over again. When there was no more room I turned to the back page and sketched out a map of the campus, putting in a few hedges and trees from memory. The campus was so beautiful. I'd only seen it for a few minutes, but it had seemed like a wonderland in the middle of the city: shadowy ginkgo crowded around white gravel paths, ornate roofs and the cool sounds of a dark lake in the forest. I drew in the archery hall, then added a few stone lanterns from my imagination. Lastly over Shi Chongming's office I carefully drew a picture of me standing in front of him. We were shaking hands. In his other hand he was holding a film in a canister, ready to pass it over to me. In my image I was trembling. After nine years, seven months and eighteen days, I was at last going to get an answer.

\* \* \*

At six thirty the sun was still hot, but the big oak doors to the Institute of Social Sciences were locked, and when I pressed my ear to them I couldn't hear anything inside. I turned and looked around, wondering what to do next. I'd waited for Shi Chongming in the Bambi café for six hours and although no one had said anything I'd felt obliged to keep buying iced coffees. I'd had four. And four more melon pastries, wetting my fingers and dabbing up the stray grains of sugar on the plate; reaching a sneaky hand under the table and digging surreptitiously in my bag for some Rich Tea biscuits whenever the waitress wasn't looking. I had to break bits off under the table and put my hand casually to my mouth pretending I was yawning. The handful of yen notes dwindled. Now I realized it had been a waste of time. Shi Chongming must have gone a long time ago, leaving from a different entrance. Maybe he'd guessed I'd be waiting.

I went back to the street and pulled several folded pages from my bag. One of the last things I'd done in London was to photocopy a map of Tokyo. It was on a very big scale: it covered several pages. I stood in the late sunshine with the crowd streaming round me, and inspected the pages. I looked up and down the long thoroughfare I stood on. It seemed like a canyon because the buildings were so dense and precipitous, the crowds and the neon signs and the buildings bristling with shops and business and noise. What was I supposed to do now? I'd given up everything to come here to see Shi Chongming, and now there was nowhere for me to go, nothing more for me to do.

Eventually when I'd studied the pages for ten

minutes and still couldn't decide what to do, I crumpled them back into the bag, put the strap across my chest, closed my eyes and turned round and round on the spot, counting out loud. When I reached twenty-five I opened my eyes and, ignoring the strange looks from other pedestrians, headed off in the direction I faced.