

COTTON
By
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Characters & Setting

Characters

Jack - A textile salesman out of New York.
Recent years have been tough.

Paulette - Jack's wife

Setting

A hotel room in Beijing, New Year's Day, 2000.
Pleasant accommodations for a mid-level
Western business traveler.

COTTON

A Hotel Room in Beijing. Dusk. PAULETTE lies asleep in bed. She's dressed in street/touring clothes. JACK, wearing suit pants, white shirt, suspenders, sits in a chair, distractedly watching CNN dubbed into Chinese. Paulette stirs.

JACK

Hey. Did you go out?

PAULETTE

(drowsily)

What time is it?

JACK

Five-fifty.

PAULETTE

Five-one-five or five-five-oh?

JACK

Five-five-oh.

PAULETTE

Oh god. No, I stayed in. Obviously, I guess. How was your meeting?

JACK

Weren't you going on that tour?

PAULETTE

I decided that an American Express tour of Taoist Beijing would be sort of a . . . a--

JACK

Drag?

PAULETTE

Oxymoron.

JACK

Ah.

PAULETTE

In four hours, no less. So I stayed in. I didn't sleep in, I must have fallen asleep later.

JACK

My meeting was not good. It was . . . not good. They don't want cotton. Or they don't want to pay for it. I think they actually don't want cotton. They liked the line.

(MORE)

JACK(cont'd)

They liked the stupid New England English Garden dainty flower fucking line, can you believe that, I mean, Chairman Mao's gotta be rolling in his grave somewhere, but they want it in Rayon. So now I gotta call New York and tell Lenny that they liked the line, the fucking line I told him was worthless outside a hundred mile radius of Newport, Rhode Island -- but I can't sell cotton to a Chinaman.

(pause)

'Course, I'm not really sure what I was actually saying to them, I mean, what they were hearing, 'cause my translator was on their team. Twenty-six, twenty-seven year old Chinese guy, Wharton School of Business, Dartmouth undergrad -- you know, a prick, right? Every time this guy's translating, I feel like somebody's just snuck up behind me and taped a "Kick Me, I'm Stupid" sign to the back of my shirt.

Paulette exits to the dressing/bathroom area. Jack keeps on going.

JACK (cont'd)

And then, couple of minutes before four o'clock, he stops the meeting. And says he has "a surprise". A surprise. And I . . . I don't know what to think, I've just been trying to sell for two hours even though I know after the first five minutes I . . .

PAULETTE (O.S.)

I'm listening.

JACK

I know. And he makes this little speech. That in a couple of minutes, it's gonna be the two-thousandth year in America. The year two-thousand. And he explains how important this is, that this is very important in America. A very important tradition, "transition" I think he said, I dunno. And he makes a little joke about America only being two-hundred, but it celebrates being two-thousand or something like that.

Paulette reenters wearing a nightgown.

JACK (cont'd)

And I realize, shit, yeah. It's New Year's Eve. It's New Year's Eve, 2000. And then he reaches into his briefcase and passes out these little paper New Year's horns and bags of colored confetti to everybody. And gives me a little pointy hat with swirls on it. And he does a countdown and yells Happy New Year and we all throw the confetti on the conference table and blow the horns -- and these horns, they didn't sound like real New Year's horns, they had this sort of sick, high-pitched whine, it was like a lambs death rattle or something. And they all clapped and laughed. And I'm looking at them, trying to see . . . are they being nice? Or are they being mean? And which is more insulting?

(MORE)

JACK(cont'd)

I mean, I'm looking at this little prick, this little Wharton Dartmouth Chinese prick, and I swear he's looking right at me saying, "Here's your little two-thousand years" like it's "Happy Sweet Sixteen" and I'm thinking, "Who the fuck are you to lay claim to Time?" But I can't be sure. And then we all swept the confetti off the table into black plastic wastebaskets and they all looked up at me and I was supposed to continue. And I couldn't, I just couldn't. I didn't know why I was there or what time it was or if that transition actually happened, and if it did did it count, and why I wasn't with you and . . . I dunno. I waited until I was outside to throw out the hat and the horn. I was very polite.

Pause.

PAULETTE

Four o'clock wasn't midnight New York time. It was three a.m.

Jack looks at her quizzically. Then, as if to help:

PAULETTE (cont'd)

It was midnight L.A. time.

JACK

That prick. He did that on purpose. That little prick. He skipped New York.

PAULETTE

I saw it on CNN. At one o'clock, they actually showed it live. It was nice with the sound off. I was reading *Gone With the Wind* and I just, just happened to look up five seconds before midnight, and the ball dropped, and then I could just go back to *Gone With the Wind*. I'm so glad I brought it with me, it's really . . . I haven't read it since the summer after grad school, at the beach -- that was the second time. It was nice to be reading it at midnight. I was reading the part where Scarlett goes to see Rhett after the war and she's made the gown out of the curtains and he sees her hands. And her hands are all blistered from working in the fields of, uh, Tara. So he knows things are tough. It wouldn't be that today, today the giveaway would be, like, secretary spread. If *Gone With the Wind* was today, Rhett would be about to do Scarlett doggie style and he'd stop and say, "Scarlett, I can see by your pancake butt you've been word processing. Hours and hours and hours and hours. Am I right?"

(pause)

The Confederacy is so legendary. All that drama and . . . it was only five years. Just a little blip, really.

(pause)

Well, we've got two more days. No more meetings?

Jack shakes his head.

PAULETTE (cont'd)

We can go to the Great Wall tomorrow.

JACK

I don't want to go to the Great Wall. I don't want to see the Great Wall.

PAULETTE

I'd love a picture of you there. You'd be like Genghis Khan.

JACK

I don't think so.

PAULETTE

This may be our only chance.

JACK

Sweetheart, please. Don't make me go to the Great Wall.

END PLAY