

The Dance Halls in China are Catching Fire

Craig Loomis

The dance halls in China are catching fire. Somebody keeps barring the exits to keep the riffraff out and the dancers in, and when they do, one of those electrical fires breaks out, and just like that hundreds of young Chinese—dancers, lovers, assorted musicians—go up in flames. Sometimes it's the sweat shops, but lately—the last two, three months—it's been the dance halls. Three hundred and forty-five people at last count. Piles of charred Chinese bodies at the locked exits. . .

Page three: a young nurse has been raped, stabbed, chained to a fence and set ablaze. A Zippo lighter was found in the nearby weeds. They know she's a nurse because her identity card was in her purse, with her clothes, stuffed in a drain pipe. . .

Same page, second column: somebody's grandmother was shot in the head. She was driving to church and had stopped for a red light when the shooter pulled up alongside and shot her through the window, in the temple. Somebody's 79-year-old grandmother.

He laughed and said, Say it again, and so I did. He laughed again, saying, Yes. Good idea. . . No, it's more than that, it's a wonderful idea, and then turning to laugh in his mirror.

With black scissors and gray comb, he started off slowly, carefully. Said he didn't have to, said he could do it all in one swoop. That's what he said, 'swoop,' showing me how swoop worked, by taking those electric clippers off the hook and clicking them on and holding them next to my ear. Hear the hum? I nodded yes, I do, and so he clicked them off, hanging them back on the hook. On his forearm was a tattoo that had something to do with the navy, or at least ships—a green and blue anchor with something coiled snake-like around it. Squinting to get a better look. I could only think of seaweed, but that couldn't be right. He said that since it was all coming off anyway, would it be all right to try something—a kind of experiment? Well, no, on second thought it wasn't even that scientific—not really. Just a kind of doodling with my hair, if I didn't mind. Nothing serious, you understand. Nothing dangerous. Maybe a happy face. How would I like that? All the while hair was tumbling, catching on my nose, perched on my cheeks.

Two others were waiting, flipping through old sporting magazines, Sunday's paper, half-reading and half-waiting. But when he laughed and said, Yes. Good idea, they looked up to see.

Snipping some here, a little there, slowing down to cut something complicated above my left ear. Snickering, but not once letting me get a good squint at the mirror to see what he'd done.

By now the other two had forgotten all about their sports and newspapers, and were sitting arms folded, grinning. I nodded to them as if to say, Yes, isn't this something, grinning back at them, like I was an entertainer and they'd come to see what I could do and now here I was, doing what I said I'd do—giving them their money's worth—and I could tell by their faces, by the way they elbowed each other, that I was doing pretty good. That's when the fat one with the Sunday comics spread across his big lap gave me the thumbs up. Gave me the thumbs up like I was an astronaut.

Finally, his fun all done, he took those electric clippers off the hook and starting at the nape of my neck obliterated everything. He finished quickly, roughly. In the end, my scalp tingled hot, then cold, then colder, with something like pinpricks rushing in to take the place of my once-hair.

He thought he was done—reaching around with one hand to unbutton that striped sheet they always use, and with the other, using a little whisk broom to brush off any leftover shoulder hair—when I said, Wait.

What, he answered, sounding tough and unfriendly all of a sudden.

So I said it again, only softer, Wait. And he did. Please shave it.

He held that tiny whisk broom under his chin, saying, Really?

I said, Yes. Really.

More thumbs up from the fat man.

The shaving part was done fast, recklessly. When he finished—a tiny sweat across his nose—he turned me around and let me take a good look in the mirror. I motioned for my glasses that he had lifted off my face and folded neatly next to an assortment of combs and blue-jellied jars. There were lines of red where the razor had done its job. He stood behind me and to the right, arms folded, the anchored forearm on top.

At first he didn't want to take my money. He said it was his pleasure, and come again in, Say, six or seven months, and we'll do it again. The two waiting for me to finish laughed at this. But finally, when I pushed the money into his hand, he took it, nodding, as if to say, Of course you have to pay; don't listen to this silly talk about not paying, that's just for show, don't you know, and yes, thank you very much.

Next.

As I walked out, somebody new was walking in, and I could feel him stopping to stare, to get a good look at my smooth, razor-lined head. I hurried home.

At the front door was the big yellow cat. It watched my shoes come close, closer, growing bigger, meowing at my footsteps. As I bent to pet it, it glanced up and seeing my head scrambled away, slipping once, twice, before disappearing under the gate. I walked straight to the bathroom mirror. The red lines were already beginning to fade. I took a bath. I took a bath and shaved all the hair off my legs and arms and chest. Slowly, delicately—like a kind of surgery—I shaved it all: around the uneven hollows of my armpits, between my legs. I was even able to reach around and shave some of the hairy patches along my back. Because I had planned it all out—two new razors, a can of shaving foam—I thought it would be easy; but it wasn't, and when it was over—the bath water a soapy hairy cool—I was sweating, as if my body still had to learn the difference between shaving and running. My chest and legs were covered with a rash of nicks and tiny, unimportant cuts. My skin ached. Using the towel was like pulling sandpaper across my flesh.

That night I had nightmares about snow, and no matter how I twisted and turned in the blanket, the cold would not leave. I woke three times, each time sweating, my head prickly, my skin opening and closing like a thousand tiny mouths.

It took all the next day and most of that night for the coldness to dim, to weaken, to disappear.

They've hijacked another airplane, killing two of the passengers; and now they want money, their leaders released from prison. . . a case of whiskey. On page one there's a grainy blackandwhite photo of two bodies lying dark and glob-like on the tarmac; on page four another photo—just as grainy—showing a mask-covered face peering through the pilot's window. . .

Page two: an English husband has chopped up his German wife of twenty-three years with a butcher knife—first her and then her favorite cat.

Still, page two: in Singapore, they've decided not to hang a woman until after Christmas so she can have time to celebrate the holidays with her family. In Singapore.

In the beginning, it came to me on a Sunday morning. Hands on chest, knees up, and when I woke it was later than usual. It was right then, as I turned away from the window—seeing a greenandwhite slice of the bathroom, a brown chunk of hallway—that it came to me. It wasn't one of those slow-forming ideas, the sort that fades in and out, up and down, and then, finally, shows itself. Instead, it came to me big and solid, like an object that had been left next to my bed during the night and now all I had to do was lean over, pick it up, hold it in my hands. It was so simple and. . . and right. After all those years of reading about little boys killing littler boys, about coal miners being buried alive, crushed under tons of rock, about subway shootings, about stabbings over cigarettes, women, noise, shoes, about. . . And now this, on a Sunday morning, and if I wanted to I could have held it in my hands, feeling its smoothness, its perfect naked balance. Wide awake and sitting up, the blanket tumbling to the floor, and all I could do was stare into that middle space between ceiling and wall, wondering why I hadn't thought of it before. It was so simple. Two days later I went to the barber over on Ridge Road.

I shaved every night, two hours before bed. Every two or three days the razor would grow dull, tugging at my flesh, leaving redder, longer marks around my ears, across the back of my thighs. One day I took an especially long look in the mirror and became angry. Eyebrows. I'd forgotten the eyebrows. Quickly, as if to make up for lost time, I shaved them off, leaving nothing but pale half-moons. Except for those small unreachable spots at the very center of my back, I was hairless and smooth—a papery white. Sometimes when I took a walk in the evening along the river, I could feel breezes and small winds that I'd never ever felt before. At night, in bed, the sheets felt extra clean and creamy, whispering over my legs.

People stared at me, but I learned how to help them out. I'd wait for them to stare one too many times and then say, Swimmer. And just like that they'd nod a nod that said, Of course, I should have known. There's always a logical explanation for these kinds of things. I'd keep on walking, waving to them, and they'd wave back, and maybe even want to buy me a cup of coffee. No thanks.

All right, next time, and good luck.

That's the way it went for twenty-two days.

The tiny fires that had flashed up and down my skin vanished, while the curves and dips of my clean body began to feel fresh and new against my clothing. I had become sleek and shiny. But then on day twenty-three, a Thursday, I read the morning paper. Sipping orange juice, hot coffee, nibbling a slice of toast that wasn't really toast but just warm unbrowned bread, and running my hand across my head because for just a moment I'd forgotten all about not having any hair—my fingertips bringing goosebumps to my neck, my arms and legs—and then turning to the morning paper and reading.

In the Sudan the new revolutionary government has executed the old cabinet ministers—tying their hands behind their backs and pushing them into the street (the lunch-hour traffic slowing, stopping, creating terrific tangles of cars and buses), and there, shooting them one at a time, in the back of the head.

Page five: a neighbor's guard dog has eaten a newborn infant, snatching it out of its bassinet, thinking—says an expert who knows about things like this—that it was a rabbit or a cat, or . . . That same night, the baby's mother kills herself.

After that I tried shaving my head harder, smoother, as smooth as the soles of my feet. I tried shaving and then re-shaving my arms, legs and chest. For the next five days I shaved harder, longer, double, going surgeon-slow around the knuckles and kneecaps. Sometimes I pressed too hard, too deep, making redder lines. I left a long slice under my left ankle. I cut my elbow but didn't know it until I felt the tickle-trickle

of blood. Three of the five mornings I woke up and found blood stains on the sheets. In the end, there were scabs.

I saw the yellow cat two more times, and both times it looked drawn, sickly. When it saw me it glared, darted, stopped, glaring again.

Unlike the barber, the dentist was silent, angry, in no mood for pranks. Young man, I'm in no mood for pranks. Although I assured him that, number one, I wasn't so young and that, number two, it wasn't a prank, he only got angrier. I had to wait for his anger to wear itself out before resaying that it wasn't a joke. His anger all spent, sighing—his assistant having long since left for another room, perhaps to call a friend, cupping her mouth around the receiver, giggling—he went on to explain how pulling out all my teeth was a terrible idea; how it would ruin my health, my appearance. . . He counted off the reasons on his fingers, taking up all of one hand and part of the other.

As he moved to fingers six and seven, I could see that nothing would come of it, so I said, Good-bye, I'm sorry to have taken up your time, and oh, by the way, what do I owe you? He peeled off his latex gloves—not even gloves really, more like a second skin—and stood looking long and hard at me, as if he knew all about my sort; how he'd seen the movies, read the books about people like me, and now, finally, after all these years, one had come walking into his office. Meanwhile, his assistant, a strawberry-blonde with almost invisible eyebrows, had slipped back in and sat smiling. Stepping to the sink, he half-turned, asking, How about a good cleaning? Would you like that? I said, No, no thanks, and got up to leave. No thanks, but before I go is there a dentist you could recommend? Someone who could help me? The strawberry-blonde edged closer to him. He tapped his chin, thinking, looking down at her, and then tapping his chin some more. Finally, she whispered, Dr. Lettera, and he nodded, as if to say, Of course, who else. He turned to me and said, Dr. Lettera.

I said thanks one last time, leaving both of them standing next to that stainless-steel sink of his.

I took bus 45 home. When I got home, the big yellow cat was sitting at the door, coughing, vomiting. I squatted and asked it what's wrong. But of course it only meowed, taking two or three small cat-steps toward the gate before changing its mind to come back and eat its vomit.

The next day I called Dr. Lettera's office and he answered. I said, Yes, good morning. When there was no good morning back, I went on, telling him I'd like to make an appointment for today, if that's all right, say, ten o'clock. There was a short silence and I had to say hello again just to make sure nothing had gone wrong. And he said yes, he had an opening at ten. But please, he continued, please be on time, and oh, by the way, one more thing—another piece of quiet—yes, one more thing, a first-time checkup is thirty-five dollars.

As I got ready for Dr. Lettera, for the first time I noticed a new bigness with my clothes. There was a new emptiness along my thighs, a fresh hollowness along my shoulders.

Dr. Jacob Lettera needed a shave. That, and he had some of the smallest eyes I'd ever seen. As he listened—watching me too carefully for any dentist I'd ever known—he reminded me of one of those gangsters; he nodded as if he'd heard my story before, as if I hadn't been the first, but one of many, and now here's another just like the others. Sit over there, he said, and so I did. When I leaned back, he turned on that bright light of his, saying, Open wider—wider. Not even bothering to slip on latex gloves, he poked and probed, pulling my cheeks back to get a better look. I could see where the hair was heavier on his chin, heaviest under his lip. His head drifted clear of my mouth. He pushed the light away, clicking it off. Yes, certainly it can be done, he

said. Things like this are rather simple, you know. But it's not a good idea, especially with someone like yourself who is still young and full of good strong teeth. He stopped there, giving me room to speak. The one window in his office was small and up high so there was nothing to look at except the gray sky and a tangle that looked like branches. Dr. Lettera stepped closer to the wall, the window directly above him. He said he couldn't do it all at once, but over time, say, two or three months. Would that be alright? With him standing there under the window, I could see how he once might have been larger, fuller, even muscular, but then something must have happened. When I asked him if he wanted to know why I wanted my teeth pulled, he only shrugged. Our first meeting ended with him asking, Will this be cash or charge?

During the first week he extracted four at a time. He called them clusters. When I asked him how he decided, how he selected, he simply said, Some here, some there.

In my groin, around my knees and elbows, at my throat, my flesh was beginning to pucker and wrinkle. I tried baby powder. When I went to the pharmacy to buy the powder, the cashier—dabbing at her nose with wadded tissue—asked me if it was a boy or girl.

What?

Motioning to the baby powder, she said, The baby—boy or girl?

I said, Boy, and she held the tissue against her nose and nodded.

With three clusters gone, for the first time in what had to be weeks, I chanced a look at the newspaper. It was encouraging. In Geneva they were talking peace, and in Brazil some cleaning woman with five. . . no, six kids had just won the national lottery. An Englishman was sailing his sailboat around the world, not once, but twice.

I quickly picked up the telephone and called Dr. Lettera to see if we could speed things up. He asked me how I felt and I said fine and he said fine back. Again I asked him if we could finish faster, sooner, and like always there was a small silence and probably one of his shrugs, and then he said, Certainly. Why not.

He finished the job on a Saturday. There were seven teeth left, but he called them the important seven, and when I asked him what that meant, he said, You know, molars and things like that. It took him almost all Saturday morning. In the end, I walked home in the rain—a rain that hadn't looked possible four hours earlier. My mouth felt too-big and round and full of unfeeling. His last words to me were "chocolate milkshakes." Waving to me from his office door—not wanting to step all the way out and get wet—he said, Drink plenty of milkshakes—chocolate milkshakes.

It rained all Saturday afternoon and that night and most of Sunday. For three days I ate nothing, shaved nothing. My body grew tiny bristles. For three days and three nights the throb of my once-teeth went on. Even now I can run my tongue over the ragged raw gouges that used to be teeth and feel the ghost of molars. They say it's the same with soldiers who have lost an arm or a leg, the way they'll bend to scratch an itch that isn't there, to rub a muscle that's been long gone.

I wondered how the yellow cat was doing. I probably dreamed, but I don't remember, my sleep being too short and shallow to hold the stuff of dreams. If I turned the wrong way, letting a cheek touch a pillow, an arm, a stray piece of blanket, the pain bolted through me, and so I could only half sleep and listen to my stomach whine and wheeze. At the end of night three, I slid the pillow down next to my jaw, and then, ever so gently, turned on my side. Pulling my knees up, I slept a sleep that was long and hard and something like a death.

From the haircut to now has been forty-six days. I am sitting at the kitchen table, following Dr. Lettera's orders, eating chocolate ice cream. Because I must be careful that the spoon doesn't touch my gums, the ice cream has to slide in. When I go

to the mirror, I see someone brand new, someone whose face leans too far to the left. My cheeks are dark, hollow and heavy with bristles. I have seen photographs of my new face. . . faces looking out through barbed wire at places like Treblinka, Maidanek, Auschwitz.

Later, I stick my head out the door and try calling the cat by making a sucking sound. But even before I start—my lips slipping, sputtering—the pain comes roaring in, and there is spit and blood. I gently lower myself to the floor.

It takes two hours to shave my body. Because of the new three-day-old hair, there are fresh cuts and scrapes. Still, after two hours my body glows, throbs. Last night I tried mashed potatoes, that, and a kind of stew. I rolled it slowly around in my mouth until it was ready to go down.

It is now Sunday morning and I am ready. I shave extra hard and long, and except for a tightness that feels like a stitching along my jaw, rimming my lips, the soreness has left. I sip coffee and gulp oatmeal. It is a foggy morning. Tiny brown birds flutter and hop along the fence. Finally, there's nothing left to do except go outside and pick up the Sunday paper on the porch. As I bend to grab it, its rubberband snaps, twangs, and like some bright papery flower it carefully lifts, unfolds and blooms. I wait for it to finish before taking it inside.

In Mexico, a government building has been bombed. Scores are dead, dying. Within hours, two. . . no, three revolutionary groups claim responsibility.

Page two: still in Mexico, a bus filled with holiday-makers plunged into a two-hundred meter ravine; bodies are scattered along the hillside and five people drown in the rain-swollen river at the bottom. It takes rescuers a day and a night to get to the wreck, to find all but one of the bodies.

Page four: a husband who has been abusing his wife for seven years has been taken to the hospital. She cut off his penis. The next day she takes his penis to the hospital in a jar. She is arrested. In India, there are three other cases of penis slicing.

Same page: one column over: a man has killed his wife and kids and boss, using assorted pistols and knives, a monkey wrench. His motive? He says he was unhappy.

I drop the newspaper. It flutters against the chair. I watch it slowly refold, unbloom. I take three giant steps to the couch, and sit. Watching the Sunday paper there against the chair, I think back to that other Sunday morning—so many weeks ago now—and how the idea of stopping all this. . . this hate. . . this death and dying had come to me; how it had gathered strength and solidity; how it had crystallized right there in front of me on the floor, its presence so real and tangible that it had to be right. It had to be. But now this. Still this.

The day turns grayer, heavier. A new dankness clings to the windows. It is then, with the Sunday fog growing bigger, that I take off my clothes. I take off my clothes and run my fingertips down my arms and legs, over my head and chest. My tongue rolls gently over my gums. Nothing reaches out to snare me, to nip my fingertips. I can touch my body anywhere and there is only soft and smooth and curving.

I see a shadow under the door. It moved a moment ago, but now it's stopped, waiting. Now it shifts again. I can't imagine who would want to visit me, to see me. I push my glasses tight against my nose to get a better look. We both wait. Just when I'm about to give up, it slides, throwing a double grayness under the door.

When I open the door, the yellow cat scurries in. It tucks itself under the chair, next to the newspaper. It looks surprised to see me, as if it no longer believed anybody lived here. But now seeing me, its ears flatten, its tail bristling. Right then, even before it can finish hissing, it coughs and lurches, spewing out a great coil of vomit. It

sniffs its work and rushes away. All the while, I haven't moved from the door, the doorknob still tight in my hand.

I sit, the Sunday paper and cat vomit at my feet. I slip my glasses off and rub the red spots on my nose. Elbows on knees now, glasses dangling from my fingers, and when I open my eyes and look at the newspaper by my foot I can't read it. There are big black lines, followed by chunks of gray blur. I stop, looking harder, turning my head this way and that to make doubly certain. The newspaper remains nothing more than squares of gray, margins of white.

I drop my glasses to the floor and crush them with my bare foot. The glass snaps, pops as I grind it into the linoleum. I wait for it to hurt, but it doesn't.