

The River to the Shore

Hamburg, Germany

February 1906

The sun has not yet risen when she wakes up.

Usually, it's not this quiet. Waldemar leaves for work early, as an accountant or assistant at some company she's never quite figured out. It is not a life that she was promised, but how can there be anything else for two souls like them?

But today he must've gone even earlier than usual. Haixia thinks she knows why, but pushes aside the thought for the time being, opting to watch over her son instead.

Max is sleeping soundly across the room, curled up in a ball. He turned six earlier in the winter, and he was bright as ever. But even at this age his looks are evident, Haixia thinks. He looks like her. The children of Hamburg will not care for nuances, the roundness of his cheeks the same as hers, the same set of their eyes below neatly parted hair. No, they only see the face they know as foreign.

She wonders briefly, as she often does, when the Kaiser's yellow peril has become entangled with what could only be called yellow fever, how these Germans have come to be a part of her old life. Why did she agree to come here if they are supposed to hate her?

Waldemar could really talk anyone into anything.

Sometimes, she looks out at the waters of the Elbe and pretends it's the sea, as she does today. Between the weekend outings to the north, where the real North Sea is, she finds that it's not very different. But the river is simply too still.

She wishes to be back in the ports at Qingdao. More than anything she wishes for her life to feel... real, for the anchor dragging her down to be gone. She loves her son, of course, and she loves her husband—although she doesn't think she quite knows what that means anymore.

Her musings are cut short by Max plodding over and sitting down at the table, and she sets down a plate of breakfast in front of him. Fish, of course, so plentiful in this port town. With millet porridge, although Haixia misses rice.

The day meanders on, as all her days do. She sweeps the floors twice and stares out the window at the passersby in the streets. They all seem to have places to be. Here, Haixia has grown a peculiar aversion to going outside.

But Max tugs on her sleeve in the early afternoon, and she obliges, knowing that if she doesn't he will just run off and cause trouble on his own.

An hour later they return, and Max promptly props up a book on the dining table. The boy hasn't quite found something he's good at, she thinks. She wonders if that's something to be concerned about, because what if she is failing as a mother? But she listens to him yammer on, switching between languages with ease, and as she listens to the blend of lilting intonations and sharp consonants an equally strange mixture of pride and discomfort emerges. She finds herself dreading the day he would have to start primary school, a day where he may be ripped from her irreversibly.

When the sun begins to sink into the surface of the river, Waldemar Lutz returns.

He sits down silently, seeming to be staring intently at something she cannot see, and she places a plate down. He then looks up at her, and his expression is so severe she almost flinches, but he looks away quickly again, what seems to be a trace of guilt on his face.

After supper, he retires to his room, and Max sits up in his chair and doodles idly on a stray piece of paper. Haixia pretends to read, but she just watches his figures take form—the plump cat that can only be the ginger frequenting their street, some birds, and a strange circular... thing, which she has no idea what to make of.

Soon afterward, Waldemar returns to the table, looking slightly less agitated than before. Haixia examines his worn face and its faded laugh lines. The light of the candle is glinting in his blue eyes: the sun at high noon.

He used to be happier—they both did. Are they falling apart because they don't love each other, or because of this suffocating life?

Both. It must be both.

His eyes flicker to hers briefly before landing on Max—and then the paper he's drawing on. Wordlessly he takes it, turns it around, and stares at the figures—lengthy tallying digits of marks that have come to define this prosperous port town—and there is a brief pause before she hears his sharp intake of breath.

“Maximilian,” he says, each syllable a cutting shard.

Haixia has long abandoned the prose of her classic, and she stares at the scene. Max is trembling, she can tell. What's gotten into Waldemar today?

(There's no deluding herself. She knows the answer.)

“Waldemar,” she begins, and she finds that her voice sounds just like his—frozen, sharp.
“He didn’t mean it.”

“I know that.”

Silence.

“You didn’t have to bring him into this,” she says steadily, but she can feel a rise in her tone. Max’s pencil clatters onto the hardwood floor. Waldemar matches her gaze evenly. When did they become like this? Regret settles at the base of her throat.

Then he breaks off, glancing down at Max shrunk down in his seat, and his expression softens. Just a little, but it isn’t enough for Haixia to let go of the grievance. “I’m sorry, Maxi,” he says, so softly she thinks she must’ve imagined it, and then he crosses into their room.

Haixia follows, closing the door behind her. Here they are again, pretending that Max could somehow not hear them through the thin walls, pretending that at least this facsimile of discretion, this covering of a festering wound, is somehow better than leaving it open.

“Look, Haixia,” he begins, in Mandarin this time. It’s in the patronizing voice he reserves for when he thinks he’s absolutely in the right. “You have to stop being so soft on him-”

She replies steadily in German. “I thought this isn’t about him?” It isn’t. Yet it always has been, with Waldemar, in Hamburg. After all, how different would her life have been without Max?

Waldemar, it seems, does not want to confront the truth. “Well, it’s about what you’re turning him into,” he snarls, sugarcoating suddenly gone.

“And what is that? As if you would know, being gone all day.”

“I- Haixia,” he says, and then laughs a bitter laugh. “Do you think we can live with nothing to survive on? That we can just roam the Earth forever?”

“That’s what you promised me,” she says, and then she realizes how silly she sounds. What were Waldemar Lutz’s promises, anyway? “I- thought life with you would be... good.”

Something in her voice must’ve made him pause, because the fire in his eyes suddenly fades. “I...” But moments pass by without him making up his mind. “Me too.”

“But we were wrong,” she says simply, and then rage unleashes within her. “You lied.” All of those fleeting moments of self-doubt seem to suddenly amalgamate into one realization: “You should’ve never brought me here, Waldemar, do you not see what it’s like?”

They’re reverting to their native languages now, and it’s sickening, sickening, how she’s played along with this game.

“I didn’t know it would be like this,” he says silently, looking down at his hands, and Haixia knows in an instant that he is admitting the truth, however ridiculous it must be. Yet she didn’t know it would be, either. Oh, how young and foolish they were.

“Of course you didn’t,” she says. “I should’ve never come with you.”

Waldemar looks up suddenly, anger reignited. “Then leave! Leave, if you hate me so much!”

I’ve already left, she thinks bitterly, how many times will it take for her to find somewhere she belongs?

“Fine.” She’s caught off guard by her own answer.

“What?”

“I’ll leave.”

“You... will?”

The remnants of their argument seem to crash down all around them into silence.

Waldemar stares over at her, but she’s already crossing out of the door, finding the savings they

kept in the house. She counts out the marks for the boat ride, willing her hands not to shake. They don't. Waldemar remains staring at her, eyes wide open, looking like a mouse in the face of the eagle, even though she's the one who's been caged here like prey for far too long.

She searches herself for any regret, enthusiasm, anything, but just like that fateful day years ago she only feels resolve.

“Mama,” Max squeaks, dark eyes wide. “Are you leaving?”

“No. *We're* leaving.”

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When she finishes packing, she steps outside and finds Waldemar still standing in the room, and an irrational flash of annoyance courses through her: can't he do more to make her stay? But he continues to stand, continues to stare and stare, as Haixia grabs onto Max.

She almost wishes to linger, to wait for a reaction that may never come. But she can't stop now, can she? She has a whole suitcase of belongings and Max's hand in hers, and she can almost smell the salt air, feel it brush against her cheeks and beckon her home.

Except... she doesn't quite know if she will still be welcome, and if she isn't, what future will she have then? She could leave Max here, perhaps, but she can't subject him to the same treatment she'd endured the past three years. If she could have left him behind at any point it was at Qingdao, and the time was long past for that.

She must have been really committed three years ago, she thinks bitterly.

So she brushes past him, and finally, *finally*, he moves to follow her.

“You’re actually leaving. You’re going to Tsingtau by yourself,” he says. “There’s no way you can-”

Maybe he was right. Maybe she’ll get nowhere, maybe they’ll throw her right off the ship without Waldemar’s presence. Maybe she’ll get violated by leering men here or on the ship or back in Qingdao—anywhere, really. Maybe she’ll go back to find no one waiting for her. Will her parents take her back? It must be too late now, surely.

But it would be almost better than being trapped here.

Almost.

She continues down the street, slowing down slightly only when Max stumbles. Waldemar matches her every step. Warm golden light emits from nearly every household: symbols of what she once had, what she can no longer have.

“Please, Haixia,” he says, voice high, and it is so disconcerting. So he’s going to beg now. Haixia thinks of still nights in alleyways, soft dawns on the harbor. And continues onward.

The three of them are crossing the river. And suddenly they are back in those sunlit docks across two seas, built by German dreams and Chinese hands. Those days when they snuck to rendezvous, when they still basked in happy deception that they loved each other in the right way, deception that they could be and were equals. Once she was Li Haixia, the daughter of a prospering businessman and the mother of a son out of wedlock, and she looked to the cheery German soldier she met in the market to take her out of that life.

She wonders how he had possibly hoped to make a home in this city with the two of them, when he had never called it home himself. He tried, of course. He tried. When all their hopes had fallen into pieces, he came to the one place that could find them in dreary stability instead of ruin.

“Haixia, listen to me,” he says, voice ragged. “I didn’t know you were feeling that way. I thought we were fighting over things that didn’t matter.” What they would have for dinner, leaving the windows open in the winter evenings.

He was right. Those things didn’t matter. But in the end, it was never about them.

“I can do better, I swear,” he continues, words coming out in huffs as he tries to match her steps. “I care about you, I care about Max, you two are some of the only good things to have ever happened to me and I don’t know how I can be alone...”

Haixia has once seen a dying sparrow back in the old days, lying on the dirt road with a wide gash spanning both of its wings. Waldemar’s voice reminded her of that sparrow, and she turned to survey his face. She hasn’t seen him show so much emotion for a very long time.

Frankly, she doesn’t quite know how to respond. She should be long gone by now; she’s made up her mind, so why is she letting him do this to her? But some part of her listens, agrees, stops her in her footsteps.

So she stays. She doesn’t know if it’s because she believes him, or she doesn’t believe herself. Maybe she just doesn’t want Max to grow up without a father like before.

Waldemar doesn’t quite stop moving in time, and so he turns around and makes his way back to her, almost amazed.

But he stops in front of her, as if afraid to touch her, certainly recalling the conversation they had last night.

“I don’t think I love you.”

It was a terrible thing to lead with. Waldemar stared at her, his expression, for once, unreadable. So she continued on haphazardly, trying to shape her feelings into words: “At least

not like you do.” She never quite identified with flowers and cheek kisses and all of the acts that seemed to be based on this notion of romance, she said.

“I see,” he said simply. She wasn’t sure if he understood.

But he did. Although not quite with romance but something else, he says, a touch embarrassed, with a glance over at Max, standing a bit too close to the edge of the bridge. Haixia pulls her son closer to her and looks at Waldemar. It feels good to be... honest, for once. Honest about their feelings and honest about their life.

They walk back, across the bridge and then along the street, between them the certain stiff silence that pervades after a storm. Max’s hold on her loosens as she steps back across the threshold.

“I love you.”

“I love you too.” It is a bond shaped by the time spent by each other’s side, staring out into the water and dreaming of a new world. They met and fell in love, fell apart and somehow come back together, because the sea is their home as long as they are near.

She is in no shape to think this through tonight, of course. Max is already starting to doze off, and a wave of fatigue rises up to meet her as well. But she is so, so glad that everything there is to say has been spoken, and she is not broken at the end of it.

Haixia stands on the deck, watching the ship cut through the deep waters. Waldemar’s fingers brush against her free hand, the one not holding onto Max, and he gives her his easygoing smile, eyes sparkling.

How little she knew of their life to come.