

# The China Bird

(excerpt)

## CHAPTER NINE

Edward surveys the sunlit studio. It is devoid of furniture except for a small knitting-chair like his mother once had. The chair is upholstered in a worn, orange-flecked fabric. At the back of the room is another chair, an orange plastic one with black metal legs. The floor is covered in cheap, petrol-blue carpet. He sits back in the knitting chair and closes his eyes. After his second visit to the restaurant, it had taken him a week to pluck up enough courage to go back again. He'd been in two minds whether to return at all, but her request had intrigued him.

She'd intrigued him.

He can hear her now, setting up her drawing equipment. The sun from the skylight has warmed the fabric of the chair and the warmth is soaking into his body. He feels as if he is part of a surreal dream in which this girl has come into his life and spirited him here to this studio.

'Just come along to the studio, let me make a few sketches, see how you feel,' was how she'd phrased it. She'd taken a ten-minute break, bringing two coffees to the table. He'd watched as she'd warmed her cheek with her cup.

'I came to the library to see if I could find you last week.'

Euphoric was how he felt. There was something about this girl, something in her manner that gave him a sense of release and, for the first time in years, he'd wanted to sing. He had completely forgotten to ask her why she wanted to draw him.

He opens his eyes and notices a fine wire mesh running through the glass of the skylight. His stomach is churning. He presses his hands to it to stem the noise and it makes a loud gurgling noise. He looks over to see if Angela has noticed.

She is kneeling on the floor, unrolling a tube of paper, her hair falling across her face. He observes that she has a hole in the sole of one shoe. As if sensing his scrutiny, she brushes her hair away from her face, looks up and smiles.

He smiles back, 'It's so lovely here in the sun.'

'Not too hot, then?'

'Nope.'

She stands up, drags the plastic chair from the back of the room and places it opposite him before sitting down. 'Right, let me just clip the paper flat and we'll begin, shall we? Just relax and try to keep still.'

'I'm not sure I can do that,' he hears himself say.

She selects a stick of charcoal, 'I'm sure you'll be fine.'

She is observing him. Not looking at him, but observing him, he thinks. She hasn't even considered the possibility that remaining still may cause him discomfort

He watches as she draws bold black lines. His jaw, his shoulder, he wonders, or his nose, long and thin with a square end; like a comic book hero, he'd always thought.

After what feels to him like hours, she breaks the silence, 'What do you like to do in your spare time?'

He moves his hand up to his chin.

'Ah, you moved.'

'Sorry, I forgot.'

'It's my fault for talking to you. Just concentrate on not moving. You can still talk.'

'Is it all right to move my jaw?'

'At this stage, yes, but only slightly.'

He smiles.

'Ah! Smiling is out.'

'Breathing?'

She laughs, 'Seriously, though, just relax. It'll take you several sittings before you get used to being still, and being stared at.'

'And me not even at the starting line,' he mutters.

She cocks her head to one side, 'I don't get you.'

'Usually people look at me and then quickly look away, embarrassed in case I catch them staring.'

Angela frowns. 'I don't understand.'

'I see it in their faces.'

'What?'

'My disability.'

'I think your disability is part of who you are.'

'Do you think having a disability is like the colour of one's hair or something?' He feels his body stiffen, 'What a glib statement.'

She puts her board down on her lap, frowning. 'I'm not sure I know what you mean.'

'Are you saying I chose to be like this?'

He looks up, not caring if he moves. She is looking down at her board, biting her bottom lip. She looks close to tears. For a brief second he feels ashamed, but then, she stares straight at him.

'It can't be changed, can it?'

He finds himself challenged by her directness, 'Thank you for pointing that out.'

'What I meant was that I see you as a person with a disability, not as a disabled person. Does that make sense? First and foremost, you are a person.'

'Was it the person you wanted to draw?' He wonders how will she get out of this one. She is a strange girl; one minute cavalier, the next, vulnerable, 'The truth is that you can never understand what it's like to be me.'

'Edward, please, just tell me how it feels to be like you. I'm not trying to cause offence here. I really want to know.'

'What, exactly?'

'Well.' He sees her considering her words carefully. 'How it feels to be inside your body.'

He closes his eyes. 'It feels, like...' he opens them again, '... as if I carry a huge burden, a heavy weight that very few have to carry.' He waits for a response but she is silent, waiting for him to continue.

'I remember, as a child, dancing in the rain with a lightness of heart that I know I can never again recapture. I loved the rain, especially thunder storms, I still do, come to that. But I now know that people stare at me with a mixture of curiosity and pity, as if what has happened to me could never happen to them or their kin.'

He watches her face, waiting again for a response. The door clicks open, fracturing the silence. They turn to see a head poke through the gap, cigarette in mouth, fringe flopping over one eye, hair shading from black to grey.

'Just thought I'd see how you were getting on.' The man walks over to the window and stares briefly out into the courtyard before turning and scrutinising the room, and then Edward. Angela picks up her board and holds it to her chest.

'Aren't you going to introduce us then?' The man nods toward Edward.

'Alex, Edward. Edward, Alex.'

Edward notes her sullen tone.

'I'm her tutor. Though you'd not think it with her attitude, would you?' Alex laughs, 'Mind you, they're all the same these days. No respect.'

Edward takes an instant dislike to this man with his dismissive attitude and his handmade moccasin shoes that slip from his heels as he walks.

'So, you're going to model for Ange are you?'

She interrupts, 'No. Edward just popped in to tell me that his niece, who was going to model for me, couldn't make it today.'

Why is she lying? Edward watches her turn away. Niece! What is she talking about?

'Who were you going to use? Anyone I know?'

'No,' Angela stands up, 'Now if you don't mind...'

Alex tosses his head, catches sight of the paper clipped to her board, flicks his hair out of his eyes, 'But I thought you weren't drawing...' he raises his eyebrows, 'Edward.'

'I'm not,' she says through gritted teeth, 'We were just talking. I was doodling, that's all.'

Alex moves away from the window and takes a final drag on his cigarette. Edward sees that he is looking for somewhere to stub it out.

Angela frowns as Alex makes a hurried exit, 'What was that about?'

Edward tries to laugh, but he doesn't feel like laughing, 'Cigarette burning his fingers.'

'He gets right on my nerves.'

'I thought he was your tutor?'

She doesn't notice the sharpness in his voice.

'And doesn't he know it.' She gets up and goes over to the window. 'All he's interested in is showing himself in a good light. He wants his students to do something really modern, *'Why don't you do a short film?'* she mimics, *'Use other media. Drawing's old hat.* And yet,' she muses, 'I've noticed it doesn't stop him drawing.'

'Why did you lie to him about me?' Edward blurts out.

'I'm sorry.' She tilts her head sideways, 'I just don't want him sticking his neb in.'

'Yes, but why did you say niece? What were you thinking of?'

She shrugs, 'Dunno, Just trying to throw him off the scent.'

'Niece! Would he not be able to comprehend that you wanted to draw an old cripple like me?' He waits for a reaction.

'Look, how can I explain this? You know those snow domes that you shake and it looks as if it's snowing?'

He wonders where she is going with this line of thought.

'Well, did you ever try to open one to get the snow out?'

'No,' he says, 'Why would I?'

'I did, my gran was furious with me.'

'And the analogy is?'

'Well, once I'd broken it, I'd destroyed the whole concept, hadn't I? Do you see what I'm saying?'

He laughs to himself. What a strange girl.

'If I tell Alex, if I tell the world what I am trying to achieve here, then I'll have broken the dome, spoiled the magic.'

'So, let me get this right,' he pauses, 'You want to keep me in the dome?'

'Yes, exactly, I want to be able to keep shaking the snow and watching it fall.'

He is so charmed by her analogy that he forgives her.

'So, what do you want to do? You still haven't told me.'

She grins, 'I want to do a series of drawings of you in charcoal.' She adds, 'If you'll agree.'

'But, why me?'

She leans her back against the window, 'Oh God, how do I answer that? I've got a really good feeling about this. I think I could create something really special.'

'You still haven't answered my question,' he persists.

'Why do I want to draw you?' She puts her hand up to her chin, 'Because you're different.'

'Not good enough.'

'Well, let's put it like this,' she says slowly. He watches her searching for the words. 'If I wanted to draw trees, I wouldn't just go out and find the straightest, tallest tree, would I? I'd look for something different.'

'Old and gnarled?'

'Well, yeah.' The colour rises up her neck, 'You like making me feel uncomfortable don't you?'

He smiles, 'I want to know.'

'But why, just because someone is not considered normal, should they not be beautiful?'

He cannot resist, 'So you consider me beautiful, do you?'

'Yes, actually, I do. And there we finally have the answer. That is why I want to draw you.'

'You have a strange concept of beauty,' he mutters. Suddenly he feels shy. An emotion he has not felt for a long time. 'Can I move if you're not going to continue drawing?'

'Sorry, yes of course you can. I think...' she looks at her watch, 'We'll call it a day. Don't want to tire you out on your first session, do we?'

He presses down on his stick and heaves himself out of the chair. 'I don't remember saying I'd agreed?' He walks over to the window to join her

'Please?'

He turns his head to look at her, she seems really anxious about this. He feels suddenly overcome, a welling up inside his own sense of kindness. 'How can I refuse?'

'Thank you,' she says quietly.

They stare out into the courtyard for a moment, in silence.

'I went to see your mother on Wednesday,' Angela says, watching his reflection in the glass, 'I took the portrait.'

'It's of my Granddad, I do believe.'

'I like your mother, you know? In spite of her prickliness.'

'I suppose that, superficially, she's quite acceptable.'

She frowns, 'I don't get you two at all.'

He draws in breath, looks at his watch, 'I suppose I'd better be going.'

'She mentioned you had lent her a book on Schiele, I didn't realise you were interested in art.'

'I bet she complained about it too, didn't she?'

'Edward?'

He turns; she is staring straight at him. He notices the dark circles under her eyes.

She moves to look away, but then looks directly at him again. 'You do realise what this entails, don't you? I want you to model without clothes.'

The words bounce around the inside of his head. He leans on his stick for support, 'What are you saying?' He hears his voice rise to a wail. 'You can't possibly ask me to do that. Get me a chair. I have to sit down.'

She brings a chair, the comfortable chair. 'Do you want a drink of water?'

'No,' he whispers.

'I'm sorry.' She bends forward, trying to see into his face, 'I thought you realised.'

'I should have, shouldn't I? What a naïve old man you must think me.'

He is overcome by a sudden wave of terrible disappointment. He realises how much he had been looking forward to working with her. Could he still do it? She has a nerve even asking.

'So this is what you had in mind all along, was it? Thought you'd lull me into it gently.'

She kneels down on the floor in front of him. 'You look really pale.'

'I'm not surprised.' He breathes out suddenly, 'What a shock.'

She tilts her head, looks up into his face, 'I just didn't know how to broach the subject.'

'I could model clothed?'

'It might be difficult at first, but then,' she shrugs, 'Most people find it really natural once they've got over their initial shyness.'

'Have you done it?'

'No, but I would, if anyone wanted to draw me.'

'But you don't look like me do you?'

'I told you, didn't I? What I thought. Why I wanted to draw you.' The colour is rising up her cheeks again. 'Come next week. Please?' She begs. 'I'll have a think about it. Maybe we can work something out.'

'Like what?'

'I'm not sure, let's talk about it next week, shall we?'

'Maybe I could just remove certain articles of clothing?'

'Maybe.'

He turns towards her, shading his eyes against the bright light from the window, 'I think I need a strong coffee. Would you like to go for one?'

He sees her hesitate. 'I'd love to,' she says. 'But I'm sorry, I can't.'

He twirls the nub of his stick around on the carpet. He feels suddenly rather let down. It must have shown in his body language because Angela stammers,

‘I’ve spent up, except for my bus fare.’

He smiles. ‘Surely you’ll let me buy you a coffee?’

She shakes her head, ‘I thought I’d stay behind, see if I can get on with some work.’

As he makes his way along the corridor Edward hears the front door clang shut in the distance the sound reverberating back down the corridor towards him, a hollow building he thinks.

Once outside he feels curiously restless and wanders round onto the main street, a street of takeaway outlets. He flicks away a brown paper bag with his stick and notices that the underside of the bag is stained yellow with curry. He enters a charity shop and scans the bookshelves for interesting titles. Looking up, he sees Angela hurrying along the street with a five-pound note clasped in her hand. She enters a newsagent. He waits, and sees her re-emerge carrying two chocolate bars and a packet of cigarettes. He wonders if the cigarettes are for her tutor. She could run an errand for him, and yet she didn’t have time to come for a coffee, put him at his ease, talk to him about her outrageous request. ‘*Maybe we can work something out*’. Fat chance!