

Small Crimes in an Age of Abundance

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1. Stone

None of it would ever have happened if Tania had not become best friends with Sarah Spence. One moment Tania's parents had hardly heard the name and the next it seemed like they heard nothing else: Sarah Spence knew where to buy the best second-hand clothes, Sarah Spence had a CD by a fantastic new band, Sarah Spence said Friends of the Earth were just old hippies. At first Tania's parents were happy enough as Sarah Spence – an unexpectedly plain yet self-possessed girl – always treated them politely. But Tania's father, Guy, began to lose patience when Sarah's reported achievements were extended to travel. The Spences, Tania explained triumphantly, 'were really adventurous', going to exotic, faraway places all by themselves. Sarah's father was a 'totally brilliant linguist' and would learn Latin American Spanish or Bahasa Indonesian 'just like that', so they could buy tickets and find hotels as they went. 'Sarah says it's the only way to travel,' Tania insisted, 'as you can really see the country and make friends with the people.'

There was no mistaking the criticism of her own parents lurking in Tania's praise, and Guy Winter found this especially annoying as he was rather proud of his family's holidays. Yes, they went with a tour firm, but this

was no ordinary tour firm. For some years Guy's family had booked with the High Style Travel Company, to Rajasthan, Tanzania, Indonesia and elsewhere, and not once had they been disappointed. High Style lived up to its name, taking them to atmospheric, offbeat spots alongside the standard tourist sights, and choosing characterful hotels. Most of all, High Style had a knack of attracting just the right sort of person to their groups, which never seemed to include the loud boors or complaining oldsters Guy dreaded. He and his wife, Chloe, had met some fascinating people on their trips, from all kinds of interesting professions, and they had remained good friends with a number of High Stylers even long afterwards. For that matter, Tania herself had loved all their High Style holidays, and it was only now that she had treacherously decided they were inferior to the Spences' DIY efforts. The Spences? Guy did not think of himself as a snob, but there were some people he simply had no time for. Didn't Geoff Spence run some sort of fitness club? Guy had met him at parents' events and had thought him a silly-looking man, with straggly hair and an overeager, gap-tooth smile.

What really decided matters, though, was Michael Chen. Chen was a buyer for one of Hong Kong's larger jewellery stores, who passed by Chloe's shop during a visit to London and stepped inside, professionally curious. He ended up staying for more than two hours, examining piece after piece. 'You should come to Hong Kong and show these to our manager,' he told Chloe. 'Of course, I can't promise anything, Mrs Winter, but I like your designs and I'm sure he'll like them, too. And believe me, Hong Kong people like buying jewellery.'

He left an impressive-looking business card, which she showed to Guy that evening. There was no denying it was a good opportunity, but a return flight there seemed an expensive outlay when nothing was certain, and Guy remained doubtful. 'You might go all the way there and then find this man Chen had just got overexcited. People do that when they're on a trip.'

'What if we combined it with our next holiday?' wondered Chloe.

For some time Guy and Chloe had been tempted by High Style's 'Cool Cathay' tour of China, but had always decided against it because of the country's poor record on human rights. Chloe, the family moralist, was firmly opposed to visiting countries with reprehensible regimes, insisting that 'spending money in that sort of place is like giving presents to criminals'. Guy was rather proud of her stand on such matters. Not that he was morally unconcerned himself, but he represented the safe, sensible side of the Winter marriage while Chloe represented the passionate and committed side. Although he had discovered she could be more practical than he expected. He had not taken her jewellery shop seriously at first, regarding it as more a hobby than a real business, and quietly hoping it would not make too much of a loss, but after a couple of slow years it had done surprisingly well and now brought in a handy addition to his own income. It had also introduced them to a more exciting circle than they would ever have met through his City colleagues. In fact, they had first heard about High Style through one of Chloe's clients.

'China's getting a lot better these days,' Chloe considered. 'I saw something in the paper about it. They still

have a long way to go, of course, but things aren't nearly as bad as they were. Perhaps we should give it a try.'

Guy and she had looked up the High Style brochure only to find that the 'Cool Cathay' tour did not pass through Hong Kong, but began at Beijing and finished at Shanghai. Chloe was not put off. 'What if we took the tour and then travelled down to Hong Kong ourselves? We could even stop off at a few places along the way.'

Travel independently? Guy found his wife's suggestion a little alarming, as Chloe's ideas often were, but he could see how it might be exciting. If the Spences could do this sort of thing, then why not the Winters? Then a problem occurred to him. 'What about the jewellery? You can't very well haul it round China.'

'I don't see why not, so long as we get it insured. Chen mostly liked the rings and smaller pieces, so they wouldn't take up much room.' She looked into it the next day, picking out a collection she felt was suitable, estimating the value – rather less than Guy would have guessed – and found it was fairly straightforward to arrange a premium with the company that insured the shop. 'They weren't interested in how I'd be travelling. They just wanted to know where and how long I'd be there.'

So that was that. The next day she bought a map and a guidebook and began studying possible routes, and that weekend they told the children. Guy half expected Tania to turn up her nose at the idea – she was getting so hard to impress these days – but instead she surprised him with her enthusiasm, saying, 'Wow, Dad, that's so cool,' so he wondered if she, too, was involved in a little rivalry with the Spences. Her younger brother, Ben, was also excited, and more so when Chloe suggested they might visit the

Baolin martial arts temple; Ben had been doing kung fu after school for a year now and nothing could have been more appealing than a visit to Baolin. Tania, who was going through a mystic phase, wanted to see the huge carved Buddhas near Guangfaochu. Chloe cleverly managed to come up with a route that combined them both. The High Style tour ended with a long boat trip down the Yangtze River, and the Winters would simply disembark half a day early, take a train direct from the river port to Guangfaochu, then another train to the town below Baolin, and finally a third back to the main railway line south to Canton and Hong Kong. Chen confirmed their proposed date for a meeting while High Style had no problem booking a flight home from Hong Kong rather than Shanghai. In a week everything was fixed and paid for. Guy took some pleasure in mentioning it to Geoff Spence at the next parents' event and seeing his surprise.

'China? That should be interesting. No, we've not done that one yet. I've heard it's quite a hard place to go travelling.'

Guy smelt the whiff of sour grapes. 'I'm sure we'll survive.'

He even bought a language course in Mandarin Chinese, though the words and the strange system of tones were so remote from English that memorizing them proved laborious, and he was still only on page five when the time came to begin packing their bags.

'Don't you worry, we'll get by,' Chloe told him breezily. 'People always do.'

The High Style tour proved disappointing compared to others they had taken. Famous sights such as the Great Wall and the Terracotta Army were impressive enough,

but China as a whole seemed far less charming than Indonesia or India. The countryside could be picturesque but most of the towns were depressingly industrial, and so polluted that the sun looked as if it were shining through gauze. The hotels, too, were not up to High Style's usual standards, being either modern and unmemorable or grim, Soviet-era blocks, while even the new ones felt faintly rundown, with their dusty corridors, and at one place near Xi'an Chloe decided against leaving her slim jewellery box in the safe, hiding it in her luggage in the room instead. She became increasingly irritated with the Chinese tour guides, whom she referred to as 'the robots', as they always towed the official line and became quite angry when she asked them about imprisoned human rights activists, or censorship of the press.

The main problem, though, was the other tourists. Most of these seemed tolerable enough at first, and Guy and Chloe got on quite well with a couple from Chalk Farm who ran their own PR firm, but little by little a gulf opened up between the Winters and everyone else. The reason was plain enough: their plans to travel independently after the tour. Guy was aware that he and his family talked about these a good deal, and sometimes he even found himself using phrases borrowed from Sarah Spence, about how this was the only way to see a country properly and make friends with the people. And why not? They were not showing off but simply voicing the excitement they felt. He became increasingly annoyed by the small-mindedness of the others: their weary looks and sarcastic replies. They were jealous, he and Chloe agreed. It was so unreasonable, too, seeing as there was nothing to stop them travelling alone themselves. As the days

passed he and Chloe found it increasingly hard to conceal the disdain they felt, and the coolness around them sharpened. By the third week even the PR couple were hardly speaking to them and when the Yangtze boat finally docked, early one steamy, summer morning, and the Winters assembled by the restaurant room with their luggage, nobody troubled to come and wave them good-bye.

‘Good riddance,’ said Chloe as they shouldered their shiny new backpacks and walked down the gangplank to the shore. ‘Boring old farts.’

Tania and Ben giggled at this disrespect.

The High Style guide tried to get them a taxi but they seemed not to be available in the little port, and so the Winters walked the short distance to the railway station. In the event Guy was pleased they had to walk, finding it strangely exhilarating to be striding along the waterside of this foreign town and breathing in its early-morning smells, of river water, jasmine tea and unfamiliar spices and foods. He was surprised he had never thought of travelling like this before, and even felt a grudging respect for Geoff Spence. How good it was to be rid of the baggage of guides and other tourists. Yes, he and Chloe had their planned schedule, but they could change their minds if they liked. He felt as if the whole of this vast country was unfurled before him like a great map: they could go anywhere they wanted, do anything they chose. In a curious way he had never felt so intensely free.

People were looking at them strangely and one man almost fell off his bicycle. ‘I don’t think many foreigners come through here,’ said Guy, pleased by the thought.

‘It’s like we’re explorers,’ said Ben grandly.

The railway station gave them a moment of shock. Walking into the main hall they were taken aback by a scene of seeming chaos. The Chinese written characters above each ticket window meant nothing to Guy, while the queues were alarming, with people shoving tightly forwards against one another. As he and his family watched, angry shouting suddenly broke out from the far end of the hall, almost like a scream. Ben and Tania were looking nervous, and even Chloe seemed unsure. 'Stay here and watch the bags. I'll deal with this,' said Guy briskly. Everything had started so well and he was not going to let it go sour. 'What was the name of the place?'

'Guangfaochu,' said Chloe.

'Guangfaochu,' Guy repeated, adding a sing-song accent to the word so it sounded pleasingly authentic. He chose the window with the shortest queue, waited his turn in the squash – actually it wasn't so bad when you were in it – and told the ticket seller one of the few phrases he had managed to memorize: '*Wo shiang chu*' – I want to go to – '*Guangfaochu*,' giving the name his full Mandarin Chinese lilt. The ticket seller looked puzzled – Guy wondered if he had ever spoken to a foreigner before – and made him repeat the name twice, but then held up eight fingers. Ticket window eight. The numbers were western, fortunately, and Guy joined another slow-moving queue till finally it was time to repeat his demand, '*Wo shiang chu Guangfaochu*.' A moment later he was walking back to his family, triumphantly holding up four cardboard tickets.

'Well done,' said Chloe proudly. Even Tania looked impressed.

'It was easy,' smiled Guy.

After that he simply showed their tickets to anyone wearing a uniform till they were on the right platform. Less pleasing was the sight of the train, with its battered paintwork and hard plastic seats. 'How long does this take?' asked Ben doubtfully.

'Three hours,' said Guy. 'There are supposed to be really good views.'

At least it was not crowded and they easily found four seats together. Their mood began to improve as the carriage jolted into motion and they were on their way. And there was so much to watch. On the High Style tour they had travelled only on planes and coaches, always cocooned with the group, and Guy was intrigued by the life around them on this Chinese train. Almost all the other passengers seemed to be eating something, from peanuts and strange fruit to chunks of chicken in plastic bags or rice in boxes. Leavings were simply thrown to the floor, which quickly became thick with husks, peelings and bones. Just as the mess was threatening to become oppressive a large, uniformed woman appeared with a broom, bossily making everyone raise their feet as she swept everything away. She returned shortly afterwards, now wielding a vast kettle, at the sight of which the other passengers brought out bags of tea leaves and tin mugs, which she carefully filled, their owners snapping tin lids into place to keep in the warmth.

'I feel distinctly under-prepared,' said Guy, making his family laugh.

'I rather like it,' decided Chloe. 'It makes a nice change from crisps and sandwiches from a trolley.'

The one thing that troubled Guy a little was their speed. This was supposed to be a main line and yet the

train seemed in no hurry at all, trundling slowly past terraced hillsides and often coming to a stop in the middle of nowhere, halting for what seemed an age beside paddy fields or some broken railway building, where the carriage, robbed of its breeze, soon became like an oven. After two and a half hours Guy felt a need to check and asked a man behind him, 'Guangfaochu?' to be answered with a finger pointed forwards. He was met with the same gesture after three hours, three and a half hours, and four.

'I thought we were supposed to be there by now,' said Ben grumpily.

'It must just be a slower train than the guidebook said,' Guy told him.

'Or the guidebook was wrong,' added Chloe suspiciously.

After four and half hours their neighbours took pity on them and gave them quantities of peanuts and fruit, as well as a couple of tin mugs for tea, for all of which they were very grateful as their own water and biscuits were long gone. After five hours the train rolled through the outskirts of a larger town, briefly filling Guy with hope, but no, it was not Guangfaochu, and what's more the name was like nothing he could see on his map of China.

'This really can't be right,' said Chloe.

'But it must be,' Guy insisted. 'Everyone says so.'

After five and a half hours Tania had to go to the bathroom and she returned pale and angry. 'It's really horrid in there.' After six hours Guy broke into a sudden panic that they had missed the stop, and asked five different people, one after the other, '*Guangfaochu?*' only to be given the same forward-pointing gesture. After that he lapsed into a kind of uneasy resignation, too hot to worry.

Chloe and the children fell asleep, each shooting him accusing looks when they woke and found themselves still on the train. After eight hours the carriage began to cool a little, breaking into new life, and their neighbours decided Guy's interminable cries of 'Guangfaochu?' were hugely funny. After ten hours the joke had become undeniably stale. After eleven hours Guy had stopped asking, and almost ceased to care what happened. Did it really matter where they were? They were bound to end up somewhere, surely? He had been on this train for so long that he was beginning to feel reluctant to get off – it was quite dark outside while at least they were safe in here – and he jumped slightly when, after twelve hours, the man behind him tapped his shoulder and told him, '*Guangfaochu.*' Should they just stay in their seats? But no, this was where they had wanted to go. Standing up, he found they had unwittingly become celebrities and the whole carriage broke into goodbye waves and shouts of '*Guangfaochu! Guangfaochu!*'

Only a handful of other passengers got off with them and the station building was ominously quiet. Walking outside, they found themselves in a long, poorly lit street.

'That man's looking at us,' said Ben.

He was about the only person to be seen: a thin figure leaning in a doorway, leaning too much somehow, as if he were hinged at the waist. He was probably no more than twenty but there was a seriousness about him that made him seem older. He stared at them with undisguised curiosity.

'He's probably just not used to seeing foreigners,' said Chloe.

Guy was frowning at his guidebook map. 'I don't

understand. There should be two hotels just across the road here.'

There was nothing except a long blank wall. By now their watcher was stepping cautiously towards them. Guy held up the guidebook to him, pointing to the Chinese characters beside the name. '*Guangfaochu?*'

'*Meio.*' The man broke into a stern frown. '*Guangfaochu.*'

'But that's what I just said.' Guy was too tired for this. He pointed again at the characters. '*Guangfaochu?*'

'*Meio. Meio. Guangfaochu.*'

It took four more tries before Guy finally understood. The words were the same but the tones were different: one *Guangfaochu* went up in the middle and down at the end, the other did the opposite. 'Oh hell.'

'So we're in the wrong town,' said Chloe ominously. 'Well, I suppose that explains why the train took four times longer than it was supposed to.'

'It's not my fault,' Guy snapped. But it was actually, and he knew it, as it was he who had bought the tickets. If only he had thought to show the written Chinese character name at the station rather than showily trying to pronounce it, this would never have happened. He flipped impatiently through the phrases at the end of the book and found the word for hotel. This time the man understood at once and began leading the way down the road. At least there was one here.

'Where's Eeyore taking us?' said Ben, breaking into a giggle.

'Don't be rude,' Chloe warned him, but even Guy smiled as the name could not have been better suited to their guide, with his long, unsmiling face. Fortunately

Eeyore seemed not to realize he was the subject of the joke and led them on through dark streets, till finally they reached a small, peeling hotel. The receptionist, a bonethin, shaven-headed man in a sleeveless vest was slumped watching a kung fu costume drama on television. He looked startled by the sight of foreigners but then recovered himself, took their passports and showed them inside. The concrete corridor was scattered with coal dust, the rooms were plain and bare and it all seemed a shock after their High Style hotels.

'It's awfully dirty,' complained Tania, sitting on her parents' bed.

Guy was unable to resist temptation. 'I'm sure Sarah Spence has stayed in worse.'

'I can't believe they'll have a safe here,' said Chloe wearily.

Guy, having brought them to this place, accepted the role of trying to make everything right. He examined the door, which did not have a proper lock but a thick metal hasp and staple, for which they had been given a padlock. 'Actually this looks quite strong,' he decided. 'If we had our own lock it would be pretty secure.'

'I don't like it here,' decided Tania.

'Eeyore does,' said Ben.

He had followed them up and seemed in a state of doleful wonderment as he inspected the room, now carefully examining the empty minibar fridge, then trying the remote control to the television, which didn't work. Next he tried the buttons on the television itself, turning the volume high till the room was filled with its din. He looked faintly resentful when Guy switched it off.

'I'm hungry,' said Tania.

They all were. Guy flipped through the phrase list for the word for restaurant, and Eeyore pointed through the window to a lighted doorway further down the street. Chloe put the long, slim, jewellery box in her daypack for safety and they made their way down, peering through the door of the restaurant: a white-walled room, over-lit by strip lights, so it seemed faintly like a swimming pool. At least it looked clean.

‘It’ll have to do,’ said Guy.

‘Eeyore seems to be joining us,’ observed Chloe. Sure enough, he was following them inside.

Guy was a little surprised. But then where was the harm? ‘I suppose he helped us and now he wants his reward.’ When they sat down, though, and Guy pointed at the indecipherable menu to ask what he wanted, Eeyore looked puzzled, and only after some encouragement did he order anything. When the food arrived his turned out to be a simple boiled rice and egg, and he refused to take anything from their numerous dishes.

‘I think he’s just curious about us,’ said Ben.

‘I’m getting tired of being so fascinating,’ complained Chloe. ‘We wouldn’t be half so interesting if we were in the right town.’

Guy slept heavily that night and when he woke the next morning everything seemed somehow better. He had been faintly aware through his sleep of a rising noise outside and when he peered out through the curtains he found it hard to believe that this was the dark, lifeless place where they had arrived the night before. The street below had opened like a flower and was ablaze with colourful shops, and crowded with pedestrians and cyclists. Even Chloe seemed revived, humming as she got

ready to risk the showers at the end of the corridor. Opening the door she broke into a laugh. 'Guess who's here? It's Eeyore. He looks like he's waiting for us.'

Guy had already forgotten all about him and the name gave him a faint feeling of weariness. 'D'you think he's been out there all night?'

'No. He's wearing a different shirt.'

Despite his doleful presence he was useful, and he helped Guy tackle the hotel man over the question of the two Guangfaochus. It seemed matters were not as bad as Guy had feared, and that their interminable train journey had not taken them in completely the wrong direction from the real Guangfaochu but parallel to it, while the hotel man said it could be reached with one direct bus journey. 'So we won't have to go all the way back,' Guy told his family. 'That's something.' He slipped out to buy a large, black padlock for the door and they put all the bags in his and Chloe's room for safety. After stopping at a dumpling stall for breakfast – surprisingly tasty – they set off for the bus station, Eeyore leading the way through the crowded streets. Guy's optimism faltered a little when they walked through the gate and he saw the long row of battered buses with their cracked windows and balding tyres, but at least there was no queue. He set to work questioning the ticket seller, this time taking care to point his finger at the Chinese characters in his guidebook as he pronounced each word. 'He says the bus for the real Guangfaochu leaves at eight tomorrow morning,' he explained at last, 'and takes seven hours.'

'Seven hours in one of those?' groaned Tania, who seemed to have lost all enthusiasm for Sarah Spence's notions of adventurous travel.