

## 05 SILKEN SAGAS

For the most part we were a congenial group traveling together. There was, however, one woman in our group who found it impossible to be on time for our morning excursions. Every single morning, the rest of us would be sitting patiently on the bus and our guide would be breathing anxiously and looking around with a rictus of a smile frozen on her face, until at last she would go back into the hotel and call the woman's room number. This woman would eventually join us, with no shame or embarrassment or apology. She just sauntered leisurely to the bus and climbed blithely aboard, seemingly oblivious to the poisonous glances many of us were wafting her way.

This woman, as you probably guessed, was ObOff, Obnoxious Offender. I told Myrtle one time that when we come to the end of this trip, I want to slide a lovely thank you note under ObOff's door addressed to "ObOff (aka Obnoxious Offender)" informing her that her name is going down in the history of this trip as just exactly that. So there! Hmph!

By day four of this, some of us were becoming decidedly incensed, and a few, it could fairly be said, started out each morning steaming, my Myrtle being near the tip top of that group. I knew it would not be long before she blew, but she did not consult me about that. Sometimes the less you know, the better.

That day, as we passed a market stall, Myrtle suddenly stopped, told me to follow the group to the next few stalls and try to distract them, and she would follow shortly. With some trepidation I noticed some advertisements on the stall where she had stalled (now isn't that an inspired use of the English language!) The advertisements were for fireworks.

In due course Myrtle joined our group with a smirk on her face and a bulge in her purse. That night as we prepared for bed, I heard her emitting an occasional giggle, but I decided if I knew nothing about anything, I could not be blamed for the "anything" that went wrong, could I?

The following morning, she was up early, dressed, and disappeared out the door. Well of course, my curiosity got the better of me, as it always does, and I had to follow her. She went quietly to ObOff's room, bent down and removed some things from her purse. She looked around the hall quickly to be sure the coast was clear, ignoring me. I came closer and saw she had a metal can with a lid that seemed to have some holes in it, and she was holding Jumping Jack Firecrackers and a match. She proceeded expertly and quickly to light the fuse of the package of firecrackers, place the package into the can, screw the lid on the can and quietly set the can next to ObOff's door. Suddenly there was a pop, followed in wondrous order by many more pops and bangs, all getting louder in the confines of the can.

Not only that! The can started hopping around like a Mexican Jumping Bean, or a goat that had sat in a pepper patch, or a crazed demon, take your pick. Myrtle hooted silently and took off like a rocket for our room. I was struck dumb and immobile, transfixed by the spectacle of that cantankerous coruscating can, my mouth hanging open and my eyes tracking that madly hopping, flip flopping thing. It can be said fairly that that can put on a most impressive performance of Hopping and Bopping and Skipping and Flipping and Leaping and Bleeping and Jumping and Bumping that never was seen before.

I think I lost my marbles then. Can I be blamed for the sensory overload that froze me in place and loosed the idiocy in my mind? That idiocy is always only a hair's breadth from exposure even under the

best of times. This was definitely NOT the best of times. Just listen to the contortions of my wacked-out mind: "Watch out, Mark Twain! The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County is NOT in the same league as The Celebrated Jumping Can of Myrtle X. Mancuso!"

"Wow! That was some fine iambic pentameter there, my JoJo!"

"Iambic Pentameter?! Where did THAT come from?"

"How proud my high school English teacher would be that I had created a perfect Iambic Pentameter to match Mark Twain's!"

"Or, wait a minute. . . Is it Heptameter?"

"Wouldn't Myrtle kill me if she knew I let loose in the universe the initial of her middle name? But could I help it? I needed that extra beat to make my Perfect Iambic Pentameter/Heptameter!"

"Don't say it out loud, but her middle name is Xaviera, which, by the way, means 'bright.'"

"Yikes! I must be developing Leaky Brain Syndrome! If I don't get my wits about me, I will soon be reciting my high school junior year triumph 'Antonio Sarto ees buildin' a wall, but mebbe he never gone finish atall.' Yikes, Yikes and Triple Yikes!!!"

All this while, as these thoughts flew madly about my brain like trapped pigeons, I stood mesmerized by that frantic can that kept bouncing around and emitting the most shocking pops and bangs, leaping and twirling, shooting into the air, occasionally thumping up against ObOff's door.

Eventually my rational mind got my insanity slapped down and I realized there was a reason Miss Myrtle had hightailed it. I turned and fled, but as I ducked into our room, I did hear running footsteps and could not be sure whether I had been spotted.

This proved to be the case. As soon as the banging and explosions stopped, there was a knock on our door. Myrtle skedaddled into the bathroom, the little rat. I called out loudly, "Myrtle, can you get that? I am not decent." No answer. More pounding on the door. I grabbed the coverlet from the bed, wrapped it around me, and frantically messed up my hair, which was most aggravating, I tell you, because I had spent considerable time that morning making sure I would have a good hair day. I answered the door with a huge yawn, trying my best to look like I had just got out of bed. The guide and a hotel security guard stood at the door transfixed. I never did figure out exactly what caused them to go into their deer-in-the-headlight stance, but it must be admitted that they looked at me with a bit of alarm. Had I gone too far in the messing-the-hair bit? Well, nothing to be done now but try to get out of this fix that the little rat had got me into, again!

I tried so hard to play innocent that it soon became evident that I was guilty as all get out. How unfair is THAT?! Rats and double rats! Eventually the guard and our guide left, clearly not impressed with my answers to their questions. As I shut the door behind them, Little Rat emerged from her escape hole in the bathroom and chortled, "Did you see that, JoJo? Did you SEE that? Wasn't that the most wonderful thing?!"

I just stared hard at her as she continued to chortle. She said, "Well, time to go, I guess. I will see you on the bus, JoJo." Then it struck me - I was a mess and I had one minute to get my hair done! Well, as you probably guessed, dear patient reader, I was late. This was beyond mortifying! I ran up the bus steps so

fast I tripped and was saved only by the driver's quick yank on my arm. Then the whole bus erupted into cheering and "for-she's-a-jolly-good-fellowing" that stopped me cold. "JoJo! JoJo! JoJo! Let's hear it for JoJo!"

I hunched my shoulders and slunk sheepishly into my seat, only to have Myrtle turn a cold shoulder to me and give her famous little "Hmph." WHAT? Myrtle is mad at me for what SHE did? You have GOT to be kidding! Then the guy sitting behind us leaned forward and whispered "Way to go, JoJo! Maybe that biddy will be on time from now on!" Myrtle hmphed again and turned her face to the window and sulked.

Then I simply could not help myself, dear reader. I slapped my handkerchief over my mouth, jabbed Myrtle with my elbow, and hooted as silently as I could until tears streamed down my face. Myrtle was not amused, and she did not talk to me for at least three hours. I am of the firm opinion that in this life no good deed goes unpunished.

To tell you the truth, Myrtle was out of sorts most of the day that day. When we got to the silk factory, which was absolutely fascinating by the way, all she could do was whine about "all those poor little silkworms being boiled to death." I looked at her briefly, but kindly refrained from saying, in my best sarcastic voice which you will remember is quite delightfully compelling, "I am not sure how you could be wearing that silk blouse you have on did not these adorable little worms give up their lives for your comfort." When Myrtle gets huffy, the rational part of her mind takes a vacation. I don't blame it. I would too.



The factory attendant's lecture was interesting: *The silkworms feed on mulberry leaves. When they are about 4 months old, they turn into 3-inch silkworms and spin silk filaments to make their cocoons. This is raw silk. One single filament can be up to 1.9 kilometers long unbroken. One tie for a man needs 132-140 cocoons. Large carpets of 8x10 feet, 9x12 feet, etc. need huge numbers of cocoons. Now the cocoons are put into a special pot of boiling water, which kills the worms. Then a rotor pulls the raw silk from the cocoons. After that it is dyed with natural dyes of vegetables and minerals like saffron,*

*indigo, etc. They use 70-80 dyes. Once the silk is dyed, the color never fades. The temperature of the "dying water", the water that kills the silkworms, is a trade secret.*

Myrtle had been pouting throughout the lecture, but when we entered the large rooms displaying the silk products, Myrtle forgot all about her bad mood and started oohing and aahing just like the rest of us. There was just too much beauty around us to remain unhappy or pouty! I was like a kid in a candy shop, truly!

Until I started looking at the prices. Yikes!



We watched workers at small needlework frames and at large looms creating these works of art. For a while I tried to make notes about how the carpets are made, and the prices of the pieces on display. The tiger picture, for example, in silk needlework, cost \$800, the flower arrangement was \$4300. We learned that the white tiger symbolizes Power, and the crane symbolizes Longevity. Here are some of my notes about how these large carpets are made:

*For carpets 120 lines per square foot is the basic density. 300 lines is medium density.*

- 1. First make the foundation on the loom, make it tight.*
- 2. Make knots, use fingers to make double knots by figure 8 around the fingers. Form one warp. 8 is a lucky number. 6 and 8 are lucky numbers. 8 is big fortune, 6 is everything be OK. Repeat this 625 knots per square inch. When each row of knots is finished, the horizontal weft, use metal comb to beat it down and make it very strong, then trim it with scissors and make surface short and even.*
- 3. Density is most important. For 9/12 carpet, it takes 3 people working for 1 ½ years to complete such a rug at basic density.*
- 4. Patterns look like musical scores.*

*Prices: \$350 cotton and silk basic takes 3 months to make. \$530 silk medium takes 6 months to make. \$2900 pure silk 2500 knots per square inch - two years and three months to make. Value depends on density.*

At that point my notes abruptly ceased because we came upon this astonishing rug that took my breath away. I found myself sucked into a swirl of colors and feelings that overwhelmed me. I wanted to dive into the world of that rug and disappear into it. I guess Myrtle became alarmed. "JoJo," she said, "Are you OK? You know that rug would set you back at least \$10,000." A nearby salesman said quietly, "I am sorry, Madame. You cannot buy this rug for \$10,000. It is priceless. It says, "I love you." He respectfully bowed his head as Myrtle blinked a little and I regained my equilibrium.



One of our group bought a rug for \$2800 and we had to wait briefly for her to make final shipping arrangements. That gave me time to pull myself back out of the world of fairy tales, and my near meltdown did bring Myrtle out of her sulk. By the time we reached the house of the local Hutong family who would host our lunch, I was back in the world of reality and Myrtle was her usual chirpy self.

Our guide told us that hutongs are disappearing rapidly to development within Beijing. One third of Beijing's population used to live in hutongs, but now hutongs are in danger of disappearing altogether because the land they are on is so valuable and in demand for modern housing. The government has declared that 25 hutong areas are to be preserved forever, to try to safeguard and protect this important element of Chinese culture.

The traditional hutong is a courtyard residence. The word "hutong" is the Mongolian word to describe the sound a rock makes when dropped into a deep well. Three generations of one family, eight people, lived in the hutong we visited. The buildings are sited for sun and coolness and enclose a central courtyard. The entire property was 3000 square feet with buildings on all four sides of the courtyard taking advantage of the sun and breezes. This hutong was built in the late 1800s and has been in this family for five generations. There are pressures to sell now because the property is worth one million U.S. dollars. There is very little free land this close to the center of Beijing anymore.

We were invited to help make potstickers with noodle dough stuffed with fennel and pork.





With a charming smile our hostess showed us how to stuff and roll and pinch the little potstickers, and our guide assured us, “It is easy; It is easy; try it.” But the few of us who were brave enough to try to replicate the perfect little puffballs of our hostess returned to their places on our benches with a bit of chagrin on their faces as our hostess with an encouraging smile intoned, “Very good, very good” even as she surreptitiously reshaped the poor floppy specimens our group produced. Meanwhile her assistant in his chef’s hat was kept busy frying the potstickers in deep, hot oil and placing them

in perfect formation on napkin-covered plates, which our hostess brought to our tables.

All I can say about the taste of these potstickers, dear gentle reader, is that I cannot describe how utterly delicious they were, light and flaky and crispy and crunchy with the savory pork and fennel inside melting on your taste buds. Oh, my! All of our group just sat there like little birds in a nest with open mouths waiting for parent birds to bring back food. I think we were all a little embarrassed that we simply could not stop grabbing for those potstickers each time the hostess brought another plate to the table. Truly, if the guide had not put a stop to the meal by telling us the hostess would now show us around the complex, I think we would have just sat there the rest of the day waiting for more hot potstickers.

At last we thanked the hostess and family profusely as we left the compound and our guide led us down the alley and showed us the few other hutongs in the neighborhood, explaining the meaning of the construction of the hutongs. “A red door with two lintel beams means this is a Two Star Family. They must marry into another two-star family. A high doorjamb keeps good chi in the house and bad chi out. The run-down property next door was bought for one million U.S. dollars two years ago and is now worth four million. There used to be five families living inside. The round shape of the stonework on either side of the door signifies that a military man lives there. The next house with the tall rectangular door posts is a civil servant.”

Then it was time for our rickshaw ride, and that was so pleasant it almost took our minds off wanting more of those luscious potstickers. Almost.

To be continued . . .