

12 HEAVEN IN THE SUMMER PALACE

Ah, the Summer Palace – pure heaven! Honestly, dear Reader, I just wanted to live here for the rest of my life! I couldn't stop exclaiming, "The QUIET! The PEACE! The SERENITY! The BEAUTY! Ah, I am in LOVE, Myrtle!" She responded with some asperity, "Well, you are not exactly contributing to the peace and quiet with your loud voice!" She was right, of course, but I was a bit over the moon, I tell you.

Our guide kept up a running commentary as we walked the Summer Palace grounds, telling us about Lady Cixi. "Lady Cixi spent summers here, from April to October, and the rest of the year in the Forbidden City, eight miles away. Her son the emperor had decreed that the Summer Palace must be rebuilt as a gift for his mother for her 60th birthday, and a canal dug so she could travel back and forth in comfort," said our guide. At that statement, ObOff snorted and piped up, "The emperor did that just to get rid of his mother so he wouldn't always be under her thumb." I wanted to Boo her, spoilsport she was. She was probably only itching for a fight. Very fortunately, our guide spotted a great distraction: a Chinese man writing calligraphy of famous poems on the pavement. The older man recited poetry and lectured as he wielded his brush and water with fluid movements. We all crowded closer to watch.



Our guide let our group join the bystanders for a while. When the calligrapher stopped for a moment to look up at his audience and smile, our guide nodded her head for our group to continue. Myrtle, who had edged her way to the front of our group and was now closest to the calligrapher, quickly smiled her

thousand-watt smile at him and bowed sweetly, saying, “Nihow.” The calligrapher smiled in delight, oblivious of the gaps made by his missing teeth. Myrtle bowed again, smiling, and held out her hand to him saying “qing ni?” I didn’t have my guide sheet with me, but assume she said something like ‘please,’ because he bowed and extended his long-handled brush to her. The crowd grew silent and sober faced. I could almost hear their mental cogs churning, “Who is this blond foreigner who deigns to take up the sacred calligraphy brush? Why is our master relinquishing it?”

Myrtle stepped forward with another bow to the master, dipped the brush gingerly into the ink pot, waited for the drips to stop, then moved to a new section of walkway and began to draw a symbol. I stood frozen in awe and fear as she painted first one symbol, then a second, then a third, the crowd drawing closer to peer perplexedly at what she was writing. One man jumped back in fear, a woman uttered a small shriek and turned and fled, and the calligrapher stood transfixed, looking at Myrtle’s work from this angle, then that angle, finally bending down close to it to inspect a small tail that seemed to veer off one of the symbols. I thought the tail was just a random drip, but what do I know?

Suddenly one of the men shot his fist into the air as he yelled something and glared at Myrtle.

Oh oh. This was not good. I grabbed the corner of her shirt and jerked her back with a hiss, “What the hell did you write, you idiot?”

Myrtle looked too nonplussed to even notice that I had called her an idiot. She smiled uncertainly at the master and the growing crowd, started backing away bowing all the while as arguments broke out among the crowd. The last thing I saw as I kept pulling Myrtle backward faster was two men shoving each other. Again I said, “What in blazes did you write, Myrtle?”

She replied in a puzzled voice, “I wrote ‘May all your days be full of love and joy and the blessings of your ancestors.’”

I replied with a hiss, “It looks like you wrote, ‘May all your dogs have sex with your cats.’”

Myrtle blinked rapidly, but before she could say anything, another voice hissed in a loud whisper, “It’s worse than that; what she wrote was, ‘May all your dogs have sex on the bones of your ancestors.’”

I reeled back in shock and saw that woman, ObOff. I hissed at her. “She did NOT! Myrtle would never say something like that! You are crazy!”

The woman jogged slightly to keep up with the forward momentum I was forcing on Myrtle. Breathing heavily and with nose in the air she huffed, “I am a Cantonese scholar.”

That surprised and confused me so much I almost tripped, but I caught myself and turned on her angrily, “You are crazy, lady. We are in Beijing, not Hong Kong. People here speak Mandarin.”

She shot back, “I know what she wrote. I am a Cantonese scholar.”

That made me so mad, I stopped up short and almost slapped her as she stood there huffing. I am afraid I lost it for a moment, dear reader, and I sort of yelled at her, “You are a crazy Cantonese bitch, is what you are!”

Now, dear reader, that is not cool what I said. Not only did all the Chinese for miles around start to gather to see this interesting altercation between three of those deranged American Imperialist Devils,

but I stopped our threesome long enough for Myrtle to get her famous handbag in position for its famous swat. As I leaped at Myrtle's arm to prevent an international incident, I saw our guide walking briskly back toward us with a serious frown on her face.

With a lightning moment of clarity, I faked a fall, grabbed Myrtle's arm, and held on with a death hold, all the while dragging her forward and away from the crazy ObOff and toward the guide. As the guide came closer, I breathlessly grabbed on to her arm as well, grimacing and whimpering and limping on one leg so piteously that not only did all the onlookers stop their shoving and arguing and pointing fingers, but they also now began to crowd around me offering all their helpful wisdom about how I should treat an ankle injury.

They were so serious and solicitous that I begin to whimper in earnest, thinking I must indeed have a sprained ankle or worse, and when I spied a nearby bench, I hopped to it rapidly and plopped down in a totally undignified manner and began to wail in earnest, absolute pity for poor me that gets stuck in such stupid high jinks with Myrtle.

But then I figured I had better not overdo it, and I stopped. Myrtle gave me one of the handkerchiefs she keeps in that handbag. The third wheel of our threesome, ObOff, slunk away to join the rest of our group who were waiting a few yards further on. A helpful young man came running up out of breath, holding out a crutch to our guide, who gave it to me. Myrtle smiled at him brilliantly, bowing and bowing and all the time saying 'Xie Xie, Xie, Xie, Xie, Xie.' The young man was delighted, the crowd that had gathered smiled with relief and talked among themselves approvingly, probably saying something about how a charming and polite person like this blond foreigner could not have written anything bad, that it had to be the master's brush that was at fault.

One man snatched up the brush and snapped it in two over his knee, threw it to the ground, and spit on it. There were satisfied noddings and murmurings all around. Our guide took that opportunity to thrust some yuan into the calligrapher's hand, thank the young man and the crowd profusely with deep bows and wish them all the blessings of the ancestors, or something like that I assumed, because they all smiled at our guide and bowed.

By then our guide's perpetual smile was more than a little forced, and she shoved the crutch at me, briskly asking if I could continue our tour. I assured her I could. Whew! What a close call! I think even Myrtle was a bit shaken by that one, because I think she had no clue what she had written, and when Myrtle does not understand something, especially something she did, she gets very quiet and very small and keeps her head down.

Ha, I gloated, you deserve to keep your head down!

But I quickly relented, of course, partly because when Myrtle gets her guilty confused attitude, you can't help feeling sorry for her, but mostly because I noticed the exquisitely beautiful surroundings we were entering. We were in the grounds of the Summer Palace, Empress Dowager Cixi's special domain. Oh, my! Oh, my! Oh, my! I got so overwhelmed and excited by all this unbelievable workmanship and beauty that I started salivating and jumping around, dropping the crutch and throwing my arms up into the air, twirling with my mouth open, unable to believe anyone could create all of this! And all for me! Fortunately, Myrtle kept her head and swiftly tripped me so that I started to fall. But then Myrtle accomplished something so unreal that even today I have trouble believing she could do that without

divine intervention of some kind. Of course, knowing Myrtle, the divine intervention would more likely come from the nether regions than the heavenly abode. Whatever!



Anyway, little old Myrtle somehow caught my arm, pulled me toward her, bent over to retrieve my crutch, causing me to fall onto her firmly braced back so that I could right myself, snatched up the crutch and thrust it into my hand, waved her other arm victoriously at the tail end of our group who had turned around at my undignified yell, and said to them with a big smile, “No worries, JoJo just dropped her crutch. All is well.”

As they turned around to follow our guide and I remained transfixed on the path, looking at my crutch like I had never in my life seen anything like it, Myrtle hissed at me, “You are supposed to be lame, id... JoJo. Please stay in character.” My feathers huffed up big time then, because I knew she was going to call me “idiot” and had stoppered her tongue only at the last moment.

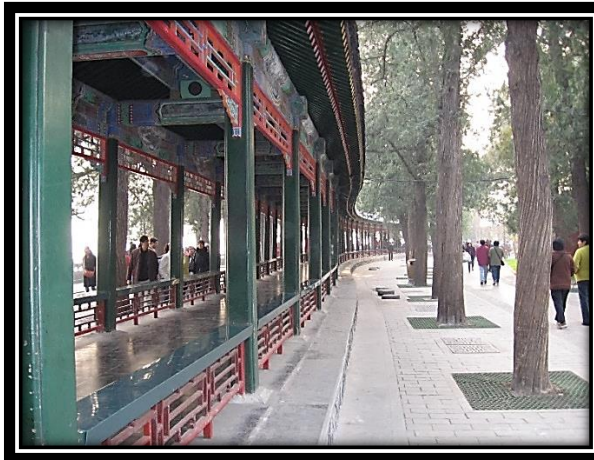
But then she gently maneuvered me to a handy bench, pushed me down onto it, and proceeded to remove her scarf from around her neck and wrap it expertly around my ankle. I gasped. That was her favorite scarf! The one we used to sing about, “Yves, Yves, all aboard the Yves train to Saint Laurent! All aboard the Yves train.” Only we pronounced it Ivies Train. I know, dear reader, that is pretty lame and juvenile, but sometimes in life you just have to be lame and juvenile, and when you splurge on something like an Yves Saint Laurent scarf, a certain license to joie de vivre and crazy behavior come packed in the box. N’est-ce pas? Oui? Ooh la la and all that other stuff. Sniff.

Anyway, such a magnanimous gesture on Myrtle’s part had to be rewarded. I totally forgave her, and all was well. She smiled at me, held out her hand to invite me to join her on the path, and quick as a wink I understood: the pressure of Myrtle’s Magic Scarf around my ankle would stabilize it so well that I could walk normally without a crutch - amazing! Did I tell you that Myrtle and I are the greatest team ever?

When I informed our guide and our group of this Magic, they looked at me with what I can only call an eye scoff. But then they left me alone, probably deciding I was crazy enough to pull off something like that, or more likely, that Myrtle had found something quite potent in that voluminous bag she had. At any rate, I could then walk and hop and jump to my heart’s content as I waltzed my giddy way down the Long Corridor. I think my excitement infected Myrtle, and she quite got into it, getting so hysterical a few times about this or that amazingly gorgeous detail that I had to hush her in the name of keeping her out of trouble.

We walked and we walked and we walked and we walked! Or bounced and danced and jigged, take your pick. The Long Corridor built for Dowager Empress Cixi's pleasure is 728 meters long, starting from the Spring Walkway and moving through the Summer Walkway, the Fall Walkway, and the Winter Walkway, following the north shore of scenic Kunming Lake.

It is said that no two parts of the decorations on the Long Corridor are exactly the same, and all the walls on the palace grounds are different. Oh, what heaven I was in to have all these riches just for the looking, thousands of works of art painted on pillars, crossbeams, and ceilings, depicting scenes of the beauties of nature in China, or folk tales and ancient myths, or Buddhist teachings. I commented that the colors were so brilliant and vibrant that it looked like they were just painted. Myrtle did have an answer for that. "In the 1980s some faculty members from the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing spent a lot of time restoring many of the paintings on this Corridor. So, in a manner of speaking, much of the painting here is relatively recent."



Kunming Lake was restful and serene, and a slow breeze wafted our way over its surface. It made me a little sentimental and reflective, which was a good thing, I guess, because my manic excitement died down as my energy level started to flag. Just in time our guide said we would interrupt our walking with a boat ride on Kunming Lake. Hurrah! We queued up nice and polite on the dock as the boat came close enough to board. And then, what do you know! The minute that boat touched the dock, all these Chinese people who had been behind us rushed forward, shoving us out of the way as they scrambled

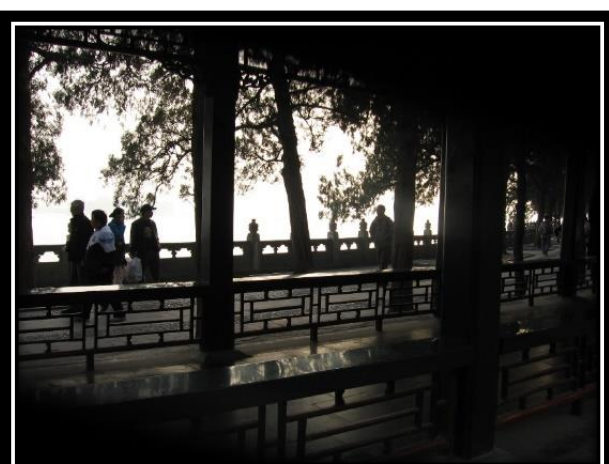
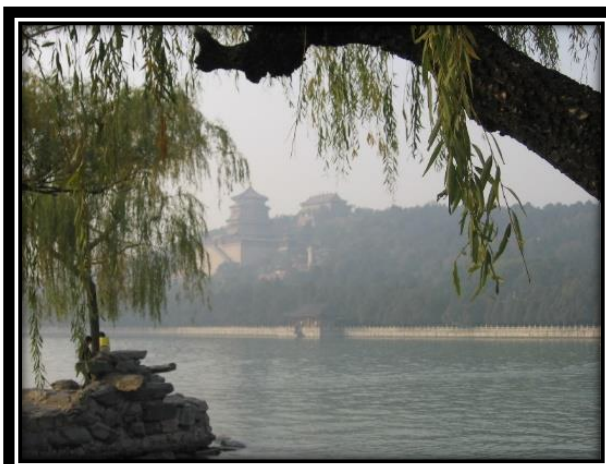
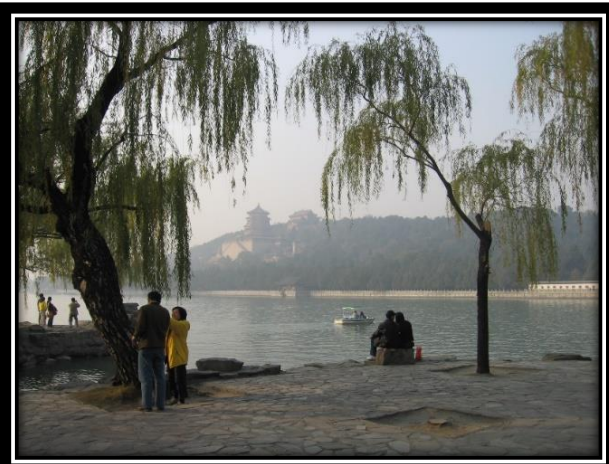
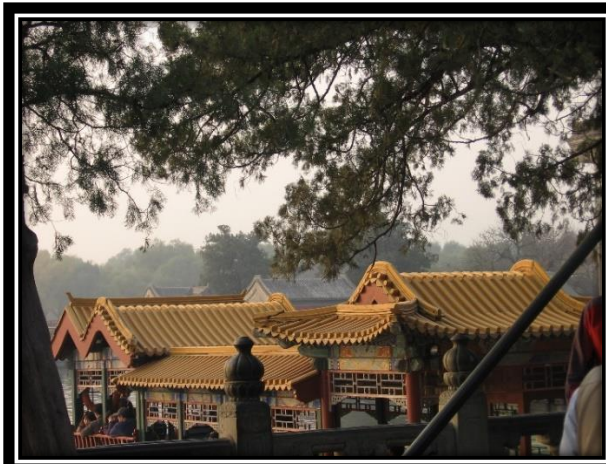
onto the boat and snagged a seat. Our guide yelled at them and told the boatman to block their passage because we had been in line first. We finally did all get on board and found seats, but my heart was racing a bit wondering if I would have to play interference with Myrtle's handbag. Yikes! Our guide said to us, "This pushing and shoving we had to go through to get on the boat is normal for Chinese tourists. Use your elbows to make room for yourself." OK, then! I have big elbows!



We had a lovely ride, but boy, was it overcast! I commented about this to Myrtle, and she sort of sneered, "That is not overcast, that is smog. The Chinese burn too much coal." Well, sure enough. I looked up into the sky and found a beautiful orangish globe that I could stare right at. The dear old sun was quite thoroughly obliterated by smog! Later I mentioned to our guide that the air around Kunming Lake seemed very heavy with smog. She took a deep breath and said quietly, "That is not smog, that is fog, fog above the lake." Unfortunately, Myrtle being Myrtle gave a serious snort, which she at least had the grace to try to cover with a cough. But I did understand why so many of the Chinese people on the streets were wearing masks.

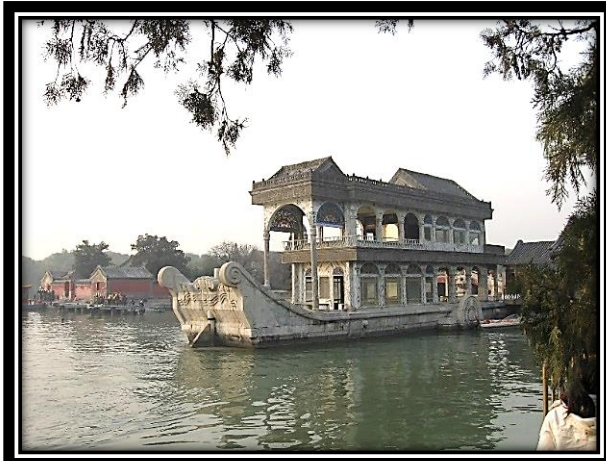
A little later Myrtle, who had been blessedly silent, started mumbling and sort of singing, "Smogfog, smogfog, all agog for the smogfog, just like living in a bogbog, favorite abode of the frogdog, let's all hear it for the smogfog." I tried to clap my hand over her mouth, but she turned away with a giggle as I hissed at her, "Stop it, Myrtle! You know our guide could get into serious trouble if she told us this was smog. China would lose face. Our guide MUST toe the party line – you KNOW this! We talked about it!"

“Yes, yes,” she tsked. “Of course I know that! Can’t I have a little fun?” “NO,” I replied, “Not at the expense of our guide. She has been most forgiving of our little high jinks and I respect that!” But despite the serious smog, the Summer Palace grounds were still exquisitely beautiful, and I do think my blood pressure went down a few points just from the peace and serenity of everything.





Then we came to the western end of the Long Corridor and found the Marble Boat! Yes, dear misbelieving reader, the boat is truly made of marble - NOT! Gotcha! Sorry, but wouldn't it be romantic if it really were a boat made of marble? It seems that it is a two-story wooden structure supported by a base of large stone blocks set into the northwest shore of Kunming Lake. It is known as the Boat of Purity and Ease. Myrtle and I immediately fell in love with it, of course.



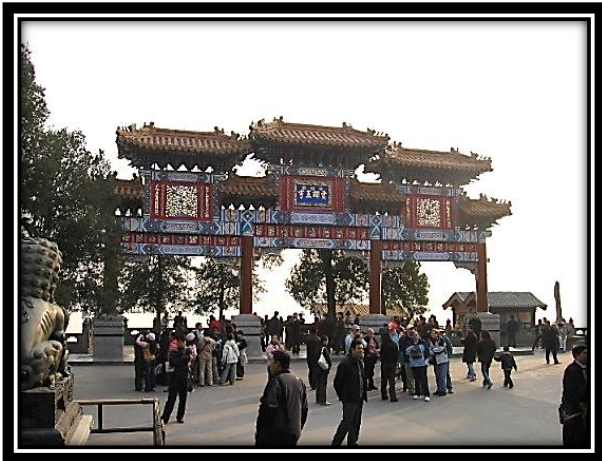
We stood at the railing on the top desk and imagined ourselves empresses as our guide continued her lecture. “The Summer Palace has a long history, and it gets confusing because there was an Old Summer Palace and a Summer Palace. Through the years, the Old Summer Palace was changed, added to, repurposed, and neglected many times. During the Second Opium Wars the British and French forces occupied it and burnt it to the ground. In 1873 the young Tongzhi Emperor wanted to rebuild the Old Summer Palace as a place of retirement for his two regents, the empress dowagers Ci’an and Cixi. There wasn’t enough money to do that, so in 1886 the Garden of Clear Ripples was renovated for the Empress Dowager Cixi’s 60th birthday, to become her summer resort. At 1000 acres, it is much smaller in scale than the Old Summer Palace, but still five times larger than the Forbidden City. Cixi spent April to October here in the summer palace and winter in the Forbidden City, which was eight miles distant.



A beautiful underground burial chamber next to the emperor was built for Empress Dowager Cixi, but she wanted to be buried in a mausoleum of her own design. When she died in 1908 she was interred in her mausoleum, and a piece of jade was put into her mouth to preserve the body.” ObOff spoke up quickly, “I heard it was a huge pearl.” Our guide responded, “That is what some people say, and it seems to be based on the saying that pearls are the emperor’s gemstone. However, the ancient Chinese cultures in the northeast along the Great Wall have the practice of putting jade into the mouth to preserve the body. It is said that a warlord got into Cixi’s tomb and took the jade out of her mouth and gave it to Chiang Kai-Shek, who gave it to his wife, who put it on her shoes. The warlord could, of course, have been lying and kept the pearl for himself. We will never know for sure.” A woman in our group asked, “What was so special about Cixi that the emperor chose her, when there must have been many beautiful young girls in China then. Also, I understand Cixi did not have bound feet, and I thought that an emperor would want a girl with tiny feet.” Our guide said, “It is true Cixi did not have tiny feet. Her feet were never bound because she was Manchu, and the Manchu and Mongolians did not bind girls’ feet. Only Han dynasty women did that. The Qin dynasty was a Manchu dynasty. As to why the emperor chose her, it is said that Cixi had a beautiful voice that the emperor heard and that’s how the emperor chose her. She sang in the garden and he would sit at his window and listen to her singing. Then she had the son, the emperor’s only son; and when her husband died, she ruled China for over 48 years. She is the most famous woman in Chinese history. Unfortunately, no one knows where her body is now because the warlord took all her jewels from her coffin and threw her body out.” Then our guide grew pensive and said, “Sometimes when I bring groups here, I seem to sense Empress Cixi’s presence, as though this is where she is choosing to spend her afterlife. Her favorite afternoon pastime was to sit

on the second floor here and face the mirror and watch the lake in the mirror as she sipped the tea and munched the sweets her servants brought to her. It is said she spent hours watching the lake. She would sit so still, sometimes the servants or her visitors did not know she was here, and they would talk freely. In this way, of course, she picked up valuable information to help her rule the palace or the country. We will now head back to our bus, which will meet us at the northwest gate.”

As she left and our group began to follow her, I slipped onto the bench where it is said Cixi sat, and I watched the lake in the mirror. The first thing I noticed was that I began to feel very relaxed and drowsy watching the graceful motion of the waves, almost as though I were being hypnotized. I began to think that maybe I would be favored with a visitation from the ghost of Cixi, and I was looking forward to that experience eagerly. Myrtle, of course, had to ruin that by pulling at my arm and saying in her imperious I-mean-now voice, “Come on, JoJo, we’re going to lose our group.” I reluctantly rose and blew a small kiss at the mirror, silently telling Cixi that if she will continue to hang around, I will do my level best to get back again and try to connect with her. Without Myrtle.



When we reached our minibus, Myrtle indicated I should board, but she started rummaging in that purse of hers and dawdled by the door to the bus as everyone passed by her. She came up the bus steps last, then stopped at the top and clapped her hands, saying, “Dear friends, there is one among us who is too modest to blow her own horn, so I would like to do that. Please join me.” Then Myrtle called out in a loud singsongy voice,

“Let’s all holler
For the Cantonese Scholar
Who knows all about the Chinese dollar,
Even when it’s wearing a mandarin collar,
And that, my friends, is no bat squalor!
Hip Hip, Hooray, Hip, Hip, Hooray! Hip Hip Hooray”

There was stunned silence for a minute, followed by a loud male hoot from the back of the bus, which sort of spoiled the gravitas of the situation in my opinion. So I erupted with a resounding, “Hip, Hip Hooray, Hip, Hip Hooray!” and a few other voices chimed in weakly. Devious Myrtle, of course, had been watching ObOff’s face while all of this was going on, and Myrtle later fairly chortled as she reported to me, “Oh, JoJo, it was delicious! First her face got very white, then it got very red, then she started to

smile, but she also started to frown, and honestly, JoJo, her face was a perfect study in abject confusion! She simply could not decide whether she should be pleased or mad, and in the end she ended up looking extremely put out while smiling at those who were looking at her. It was wonderful!”

While I was happy ObOff got a little of what was coming to her, I started counting how many days were left on this trip during which ObOff could get her revenge.

To be continued . . .