

Extract from THE LIVES BEFORE US

by Juliet Conlin

Kitty can't sleep, despite the five Manhattans she ended up drinking to try to stop her whirring thoughts. Or at least slow them down long enough to fall asleep. Earlier, the young Chinese boy eagerly fixed her one drink after the next, but at one point – when the room began spinning – she shooed him away. She didn't want a child witnessing her humiliation.

She turns to her side, the sheet sticking to her damp skin. It seems even hotter now than during the day. Finally, when the silver-plated clock on the dresser strikes out three thin chimes, she gets out of bed and goes to the window. The street below is dark and quiet, just a few lone vendors sitting here and there in front of charcoal braziers, calling out to the occasional passer-by. The apartment is located in the French Concession, the section of Shanghai under French authority, Vitali explained at length on the drive from the port. Of course, he knew all along what he intended to tell her once they'd arrived and just wanted to cover his own uneasiness with a pretend air of nonchalance.

As soon as he left, Kitty began to panic. Her first thought was to get out of there, to head back to the port before the ship started out on its return journey and get as far away from Shanghai as possible. But even before she carried her suitcase to the door, she realised it was futile. Pride has so far prevented her from counting the money Vitali left behind, but she knows there is no going back. She placed all her bets on one card – Vitali, the coward – and now, it seems, she has lost.

She presses her cheek against the cool window glass. If she cranes her head, she can make out the intersection, see the red, blue, yellow glow from the electric neon signs that line the façades of the buildings, can hear the noise of cars and trams and the shouts from rickshaw runners.

She yawns, then shivers, in spite of the cloying heat. A shriek of laughter travels up from the street, and somewhere in the distance a car backfires. Four Chinese women in skintight embroidered dresses walk, arms interlinked, along the pavement towards the intersection fifty metres away, chatting in sweet sing-song voices. Kitty can well imagine what they are talking about. For all their exoticism, the women's conversation is unlikely to be much different in content from those Kitty had with Resi, walking home along Stuwertstraße at dawn.

She and Resi parted on poor terms. Another dancer at the Nachtfalter accused Kitty of accepting tips that weren't rightly hers; there was an ugly row, allegiances were formed, and Resi ended up taking sides against Kitty. Because she'd found out she was Jewish, Kitty is sure. And then, the following evening, Vitali came to the bar – the proverbial dark handsome stranger – and all seemed suddenly well. And now ... Her breath is crushed in her chest as she fights down another surge of panic. Eyes closed, forehead resting on the windowpane, she takes several deep breaths. She has survived before. She has endured fear and suffering and humiliation at an age at which most girls would be sitting pigtailed behind school desks. She is fearless – isn't that what Esther said?

And if Vitali really does love her, all will be good. She won't force his hand but will wait until that wife of his has recovered from (or succumbed to, she thinks spitefully) whatever illness she is suffering from, and she will be ready and waiting and irresistible. It is far from what she envisaged, but if this is her only choice, well, then she will make it her own. She wipes her tears away with her hand. There is no use in crying. Life is hard, and it is a vanity to believe any different.