

THE
MANDARIN
CLUB *A Novel*

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**GERALD
FELIX
WARBURG**



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Published by Bancroft Press (“Books that enlighten”)
P.O. Box 65360, Baltimore, MD 21209
800-637-7377
410-764-1967 (fax)
www.bancroftpress.com

Cover and interior design: Tammy Sneath Grimes, Crescent Communications
www.tsgcrescent.com • 814.941.7447

ISBN 1890862-45-2
LCCN 2005934850

Printed in the United States of America

First Edition

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

FOR SANDOL MILLIKEN STODDARD
Prolific author, wise teacher, true friend



*W*hat is precious is never to forget,
Never to allow gradually the traffic to smother
With noise and fog the flowering of the spirit . . .
The names of those who in their lives fought for life
Who wore at their hearts the fire's center
Born of the sun they traveled a short while towards the sun
And left the vivid air signed with their honor.

—STEPHEN SPENDER

THE LAST DANCE

They were an eccentric bunch, self-selected and cocksure. They scorned pretense. They shared a passion for debate and dialectic, for the dynamic of intellectual competition as a blood sport. They were subversives, eager to reject the rules of the day, pledged in countless toasts to live freely and fully.

In the beginning, as Rachel remembered it, there was simply the “Gang of Five”—Mickey Dooley, Branko Rosza, Alexander Bonner, Martin Booth, and Barry Lavin. They had been drawn to each other from among the intimidating blend of braniacs and athletes, valedictorians and 4-H Club presidents who peopled the Stanford campus. The feeling of obligation was burdensome, the Spanish mission-style walls of Serra House—home to the university’s China Studies Center—thick and imposing. But under Mickey’s guiding hand, they had found each other for inspiration and mirth. They had bonded together to take on the world, somehow sensing already that their lives would become entangled.

They were public school kids, products of those Jimmy Carter years, the ideological wasteland of the post-Vietnam War era. The Sixties and their passion-driven cause-politics were over. For the young, nothing had risen to replace them.

Each of them had harbored a vision on that New Year’s Eve—that last night of celebration before 1979 and their new lives arrived. They had shared a distant dream, a dream of China that had for so long seemed remote and unattainable.

Tonight, their sense of possibility was electric. Only two weeks had passed since the stunning White House announcement: Washington was abandoning Taiwan and recognizing the communist government in Beijing. Diplomatic relations with the People’s Republic would commence with the new year.

China’s vast interior was now accessible to Americans and American commerce. The forbidden door that had stood before them, threatening to

render irrelevant their studies of language and bureaucracy, had swung open. Opportunity loomed before them in the China of their imaginings. China, the infinitely large consumer market. China, the morally superior Middle Kingdom. China, the anti-Soviet counterweight.

Tomorrow, their years of speculative theories would be challenged. Their academic idyll would be over and a new reality at hand. The news from Washington had transformed them. Suddenly, they were hot properties, their knowledge valued, their skills in great demand.

“It’s too damn hysterical!” Mickey had chortled one day in the lunchroom as he waved a stack of pink phone message slips. “I’ve got a bunch of banks in a bidding war—for me!”

Immediately after President Carter’s speech, the first corporate calls had begun. Bechtel Construction was looking for a translator for a trade mission. Chevron Oil needed a bilingual office manager. Could Serra House recommend anybody? Within forty-eight hours, the telephone queries had become more urgent. Advanced Micro Devices needed an expert on the Science and Technology Ministry, fast, and they would pay top dollar. United Airlines wanted to build an Asia sales force fluent in Mandarin and knowledgeable about Chinese contract law. Even the Central Intelligence Agency contacted the Serra House head, trolling anxiously for brains to beef up their analysis capabilities.

One of the campus’ sleepest backwaters—where scholars pored over translations of Chinese bureaucratese and theorized about Politburo decision-making—became the prime hunting ground for frantic recruiters. To the delight of all, the handful of adventurers who had taken a flier on the obscure field of China studies—while mastering Mandarin on the side—were suddenly being offered signing bonuses, if only they would join up tomorrow.

They could reinvent themselves. On the streets of Beijing, or among Washington’s new elite of China experts, each could adopt a new persona. They would be shorn of the heavy definition of past lives in small towns and school cliques. With their new purpose came the freedom to transform themselves as the world changed about them. Like the very remoteness of China, this promise of liberation was itself a compelling attraction.

The guys in the Club faced the future with a confidence that Rachel, the

latecomer and the sole female, could only envy. They prodded each other, striving for accomplishment and a happiness they could not quite define. They challenged each other from library to tutorial, from the drinking contests in the bar to alleged conquests in the bedroom. Yet, with all their quirks, they seemed an unlikely mix.

Mickey Dooley was the most calculating of the originals, a flip womanizer whose charm lay in his appearance of utter directness. He had been blessed with a skill in presentation that endeared him to his elders—part Puck, part Daniel Boone, part Donald Trump. Mickey loved his campus years; nevertheless, he was the one most eager to leave the security of the familiar. He was an Army brat, an outdoorsman who knew the western desert from a childhood passed in such mischief as hunting prairie dogs with firecrackers and a pocketknife. He was ingenious, seemingly able to talk his way through anything.

Booth—“Martin” to his late father, but simply “Booth” to the rest—was clumsy and earnest, burdened with the guilt of a minister’s son. His Iowa roots were deep: the Dust Bowl privations of preceding generations had somehow been mainstreamed through the family DNA. When the car tire went flat on one of their road trips, Booth instinctively quoted Scripture. He expected life to be hard; his Swedish ancestors had never known a life of privilege. He gave thanks for the camaraderie of the gang, their capacity for intense study broken by weekends of amusement in which, otherwise, he might never have indulged. He remained righteous to a fault, a crusader at heart.

Then there was Alexander Bonner, their skeptical Steinbeck. Alexander retained an air of remove that could have been mistaken for aloofness. It was almost otherworldly, this ability of his to sit silent and bemused, to observe their manic play from the fringe. He saw things, though. He saw humanity in all its frailties, savoring the idiosyncrasies of others. Where Mickey was the big talker, eager to fill any silences, Alexander always seemed possessed of some private wisdom. Long before life nearly crushed him, Alexander’s reflective presence offered Rachel comfort. He listened. He gave a sense that he knew where she was going before she got there, all while he waited patiently, with those penetrating eyes, for her to arrive.

Branko Rosza was the fourth of the original quintet, serious and fatalistic.

Branko was a Slav, dark in his outlook, expecting the worst from people left to their own base instincts. He was remarkably insightful about individuals and motives, a genius really, if there was one among them. “The Cipher,” his classmates called him; he was a chess master who hated to lose. He was first and foremost Hungarian, just one generation removed from the Displaced Person camps of World War II. He remained resolute in his anti-communism; ideology afforded him a clear mission in morally ambiguous times. Even then, his destiny was clear to all: Branko was an operative, born to spy.

Barry Lavin was painfully handsome, a bronzed swimmer with a self-image that brought certitude to his every task. That he was the type of guy who had mapped out a life plan in some Eagle Scout essay did not bother Rachel in those days. He was a Florida bank president’s son; his was a world of precision, of absolutes, of targets to be met. He made her feel wanted, his irrepressible optimism winning her trust despite the air of inevitability he brought to his courtship. He succeeded at everything. There was a safety in their coupled status that allowed Rachel to venture out from a secure base, comforted that she had a solicitous big brother nearby. She welcomed the sense of security, however smothering. She tolerated it for years until her self-confidence grew and she finally came to see how he relished the control, keeping his secrets to himself, fearing always where they might lead.

It all came back to Mickey, their ringleader and master of ceremonies—Mickey, who seemed to manipulate developments with a deft hand. It was Mickey who had located the professor on sabbatical whose Menlo Park house was for rent. Mickey first brought the five together under one roof, decreeing that they should set up house together. Mickey orchestrated their madcap road trips; to smoke joints and cheer mindlessly for the Giants at Candlestick Park; to bar-hop on Union Street and holler into the night as they rode cable cars down to the Buena Vista Café; to camp out and skinny-dip along the Pacific coastline at Point Reyes, north of San Francisco. He was the one who insisted on adopting Li Jianjun and shoe-horning him into the studio above the garage on Plum Street. They took pity on “Lee,” one of the first exchange students Beijing authorities permitted to study in America, a clever companion who had wearied of his vagabond existence when Stanford locked the stuccoed dorms each holiday break.

Reaching back through the fog of remembrance, Rachel could recall that last December night in 1978 when they had celebrated with gusto. Mickey had billed his grandiose vision “The Last Dance.” Branko and Booth had created elaborate place cards with Chinese characters. Barry insisted they dig out what passed for their formal wear, and produced a camera with tripod and flash to memorialize the occasion.

“I feel ridiculous,” Rachel had whispered to Barry as they dressed beforehand at the boys’ place. The cleavage on her black cocktail dress was overdone. It would bring disapproving clucks from the other guys’ dates, she feared.

“You look naughty!” Barry muttered conspiratorially. He relished it a bit too much, she thought—the ritual, the knowing glances at her objectification. He liked it when notice was taken that his girlfriend had removed her granny glasses and curled her hair, playing the role as she took his arm and they made a formal entrance. Barry was in full tuxedo and crisply starched shirt; she looked quite dishy even as she teetered on her heels.

Branko tended the makeshift bar in a room cramped with packing boxes. He pattered with the glasses amidst the cans of soda pop and a bottle of Seagram’s scattered on a sticky counter-top. Branko was the most sober of the lot that night, having signed on with the CIA and already begun the security clearance process. He was destined to continue his Jesuit-scholar type work in Washington, helping decipher the captured messages from behind the high walls of Zhongnanhai, the Beijing compound for China’s elite government officials. His mission was clear: to unravel the mysteries of Communist power and deploy the insights as a weapon in the struggle against them.

Booth was nursing his drink on the sofa, a party hat on his red hair and a goofy grin on his face. Having taken a job with the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, he would be the first of them to arrive in China. He would head out the very next day with a trade delegation coordinated by his new boss, California’s freshman senator, Jake Smithson. Booth’s sense of duty was fulfilled as he drank deep and, for this one night, nearly guilt-free.

Mickey Dooley was pumping Marvin Gaye on the communal stereo as he hopped about, ever the host and provocateur. His ponytail swung incongruously behind his baseball cap, a red “A” for Albuquerque stitched above the

black bill. He was facing the radical change ahead with cool aplomb as he danced one by one with all the guys' dates, fueled by the energy of the party he had launched. Mickey floated above the pedestrian concerns of others, but then, things always seemed to fall into his lap. He had closed a sweetheart deal with American Express, to assist the marketing director in establishing a new Beijing office. Mickey with an expense account—it was a frightening concept.

Barry, Rachel's Almost-Perfect-Boyfriend, was dancing to a tune of his own, working methodically at some kind of fox trot, alone with his drink. He would pause periodically to admire his form in the long mirror fronting the hall closet, humming to himself, lost in his private reverie. He had signed on with IBM to develop Chinese sales opportunities. It was an ideal set-up for a man intent on playing the sharpest poker hand and cornering the largest stack of chips.

The plan had been for Rachel to follow in June, once she finished her bachelor's degree. They would get married at some point—either at her folks' place in Wyoming or in Stanford's Memorial Chapel. Her hopes for a history doctorate would have to be put on hold. She was just trying to keep up, ignoring her intuition, doing the expected. So deep was her hunger for acceptance that she had mastered a capacity for dismissing self-doubt.

From the start, Rachel had been uneasy with her role in their little fraternity, the only female Mandarin language specialist and the sole undergraduate in the China program at Serra House. The several years age difference that separated her from most of the scholars seemed at times an entire generation as she struggled to project a tough exterior, fearful of being found wanting. She liked surrounding herself with the more certain guys, whose depths and contradictions were left less explored. She liked men's clothes, still preferring the feel of denim and corduroy, the smells of leather and a dusty kerchief, over soft linens or silk. She kept her thick blonde hair in a knot, wanting desperately, as in her Wyoming ranch days, to be accepted as just one of the gang.

She was nagged by a sense that she had missed out on something, that

she was just a little late to the party, not privy to the inside joke, laughing too anxiously with the older boys. The “Summer of Love” had never made it to Cody High. By the time she arrived in Palo Alto, LBJ and Nixon were history. The Vietnam experience and Watergate had already become loaded metaphors, no longer current events. She had missed all the excitement the older students had lived, the satisfying clarity derived from the contest of good and evil.

She bonded with the troupe, though, through many months of shared seminars and common dreams. There was established a tribal commitment to each other that seemed certain to endure. For Rachel, this family provided emotional context, making her feel, even while romanced by Barry, that she had found another set of brothers, as solid as her own flesh and blood.

Right on time, Alexander had appeared, rumpled as ever in his chinos, sporting a tacky orange tie. Now sitting on the couch, he was tossing a football from hand to hand. He, too, was departing soon, off to chronicle the American landings in Beijing as a special correspondent for the *San Francisco Chronicle*. Rachel had been secretly disappointed. She noticed even then how she lived vicariously through others, how her hopes had been higher for Alexander. She expected he would be the first in the bunch to actually get that Ph. D.; his ability to discern the nuances in *People’s Daily* was remarkable. But he, too, was determined not to be left behind when the adventure began.

They could not be certain what Li Jianjun really made of them all. Acneed and shy, Lee was ever so serious when sober. He drank little that night as he watched their antics with a look of sorrow. He had brought no date to witness their rite of passage, and spent much of the evening on the back porch, deep in conversation with the equally earnest Branko.

Lee was, they had belatedly discovered, the most genuine intellectual of them all, the one who most revered ideas for their own sake, endlessly questioning premises and implications. He pressed far beyond what was safe and acceptable, willing to test the gods. A product of great hardships, Lee savored the freedoms the others often took for granted. His patriotic vision was clear. His very foreignness—and his capacity for self-criticism—enabled him to see

the contradictions in their lives to which the others were then oblivious.

It was Lee who harbored the most dangerous desire to challenge the status quo, the one true revolutionary among them. Soon, he would be forced home by events, home to duty and country, home to witness the American invasion, the hordes of capitalist missionaries whose gaudy individualism and raucous style so riled his father and China's old guard. Lee, alone, was burdened with the foresight to fear the events to come.

To the rest, it seemed their moment had arrived. Barry was finally going to make some money. Branko would have a real job confronting a formidable adversary. Booth would answer the call to public service, with a decent salary to boot. Mickey would have to get a haircut. Now, it was all to begin.

So they drank that sentimental New Year's Eve—rum and scotch and sweet soda pop, a volatile mix that would only prolong wicked hangovers. Rachel could remember the toasts still.

They pledged to honor each other always, to treasure the time of shared lives lived fully. They swore never to forget. They drank to the future, to the kaleidoscope of possibilities that beguile the young. They toasted to peace, and to prosperity. They drank to each other, to the familial bonds that united them for a time against the forces of chance and change certain to scatter them.

Just before midnight, Mickey roared his parting shot: "China here we come! And may it someday be said that we Mandarins came to do good . . . and did well!"

She could hear him still, his voice quavering with an energy that charged the proceedings with danger. Booth had begun to rise in protest. But Mickey, in his tux top, boots, and blue jeans, had waved him off, barreling ahead, Seven-and-Seven in hand.

"Watch out, or that'll be our epitaph!" Mickey said, giddy with drink. "Just like those old-time missionaries out to convert the native Hawaiians. 'They came to harvest souls. Ended up owning all the land!'"

The challenge implicit in Mickey's benedictory toast spoke to Rachel for years whenever she questioned her purpose. To change the world for the better? Or just to find a comfortable niche within it? To do good, or simply

to live well? Mickey's riddle remained, a vivid and haunting memory of an otherwise blurry night.

Years would pass before their once parallel paths would collide and their core principles would be tested: love and honor, duty and country. They would struggle mightily to fulfill their promises, clinging always to visions of how simple things had once seemed so very long ago. ✨