

Shanghai

or Two Billion Armpits

Emily Murray

“Sarah.”

“Sunny.”

The two women stood facing each other with their heels sunk in the sand. Sarah took her sunglasses from her pocket and slid them onto her nose.

“Let’s walk and talk.” Sunny said, with a faint hint of an American accent, and Sarah followed her across the lanes of traffic. They overtook a woman with two baskets of white peaches swaying above the road, balancing her sweet, furry load on a long stick across her shoulders. Two men rode with fridges strapped to their bicycles, leaning over the handlebars and pedalling into the corner. They passed into the park beneath a sign reading “Free for honored local elders over 70 years old with certificates and children under 1.2m”.

“What have you found?” Sarah asked as she paid the entry toll.

“Wait, I must take this call.” Sunny strode away with her phone against her ear. Sarah waited by a tall sign, “Tourists entering the Park shall obey the Seven Prohibitions and Civilised Norms of Shanghai”, and browsed the list of commandments. Blue trousers flapped from the trees as workers pruned with their heads swallowed in the foliage. The old men sat close, bottom to bottom on marble walls with their backs resting in the hedges or perched on the rims of large glazed pots, shoulder to shoulder around the trunk of a plum tree.

“Okay, I’m ready. Let’s sit on top of the mountain.” Sunny swept by Sarah, taking a path that led up a low hill of mown grass and past a sign reading, “Mountain of Solitude”. The air shook with the pulsing of dragonflies and the cicadas’ wail. They sat inside a tiny pagoda, built for lovers, and the women looked down over the vast expanse of park.

“It’s nice, very green.”

“I hate parks,” Sunny said, wrinkling her pretty nose. “Only old people and babies go to parks.”

Sarah could see across to a pavilion near a large lake where the flared roof cast a deep

shadow and protected the slow dancing couples on the deck.

“Do they do that all day?” she asked, watching the distant waltzing.

“What?” Sunny squinted in the direction of Sarah’s gaze. “Oh, them. Yes, they have nothing else to do. They will be a burden on our economy soon. Too many old people, nowhere to put them.”

Sarah searched Sunny’s face for a hint of a smile, but it remained smooth and still. “Tell me what you know,” she said.

“Well, first, your competition – the Apex Consortium. The joint venture is in trouble. I extracted some information from a stupid French boy two nights ago who works in their HR department. They are having trouble with staff but the government is insisting on minimum local labour requirements.”

“What sort of trouble?”

“Well, the French partners don’t believe the Chinese are up to the job, and they told them so, big mistake.”

The trees were planted in rigid lines and tied into place with bamboo props. A square of lush, overgrown grass was fenced off and Sarah had a sudden urge to kick free her shoes and run down into this prohibited zone. “What else?” she said

“Your project is going to fail.”

Sarah laughed, “I’m not asking you for business advice, Ms Lu, just business intelligence.”

“People come here and they fail, when everything is so open to them.”

Sunny shook her head in disgust. “You all come here like it’s a goldrush. And then you mess it all up, and now you’re all scared and need your spies. But good for my business, yes?”

“We won’t fail. We’re very careful.”

“You read a few books on culture and communication and you think you’ve learnt how to deal with the Chinese.”

“I don’t think you really know very much about our approach.”

“I know a lot. That’s my job.”

“Your job is to provide me with information about the competition.” Sarah kept her tone

even but her eyes flashed in warning.

"This is information about the competition. Do you know that book, maybe your boss made you read it, something like 'Two Billion Armpits'. It is about how there are at least two billion armpits in China, which makes these foreign companies so wet with joy. But then the author says 'well the Chinese don't buy deodorant' and this is supposed to teach you about China." Sunny waited for a response and piped music drifted from speakers attached to the trees below. "Smell my armpits," she said, raising one elbow above her head.

"What?"

"Do I smell like I don't wear deodorant?"

"You smell like you're wearing Chanel."

Sunny gave a nod of rare approval. "Number 5, very expensive. You people always need people like me, Miss Reid, because Shanghai is always changing. Your books won't help you here."

It was the social hour and children ran beside grandparents as they walked the park, careful to stick to the path. Two girls ran around the bottom of the Mountain of Solitude, joined by a skipping rope, horse and rider. A grandmother looked on with voracious attention. Sunny tapped the face of her mobile phone with one red fingernail and watched the girls tug each other with their rope.

"I also have some information about your other problem."

"What problem? I only wanted you to look into the Shanghai situation."

"No, your personal problem."

"Excuse me?"

On the path below, a dog with tiny booties tied around its ankles trotted in front of his pretty young owner. Sunny waited until Sarah stopped frowning. "Cute dog," she said pointing. "You're being followed Ms Reid."

Sarah leant forward in surprise. "Which company?" she asked, spinning through a list of competitors.

"No." Sunny glanced around as a chubby man staggered to the top of the Mountain of Solitude. His girlfriend followed on chunky platform shoes, complaining and bent over in exhaustion.

"We should move. Let's visit the Pond of Eternal Contemplation."

They walked through the stench of cut grass and around a gazebo draped with young sleeping workers, cringing and curled, as if they had been gassed by the late afternoon. Sunny walked a meter ahead of Sarah until they reached a circle of exercise machines humming with the rhythmic walking, lifting and stretching of old women.

"The Communists taught them to exercise and they love to gossip. Now they come here to talk and work out in one spot," Sunny said over her shoulder and the women pivoted their heads to watch Sarah pass, their legs and arms swinging in time.

An elderly man looked up in surprise as they sat down on a bench beside a large green pond. He returned his focus to his fishing rod, a long and bowed bamboo pole and on the opposite side of the pond a gaggle of young boys chased dragonflies with makeshift nets.

"This information is not part of our agreement," Sunny started and paused. "Don't worry, he can't speak English," she said in response to Sarah's glance at the fisherman, "and he won't catch any fish either. They just come here to escape their apartments. Or their daughter's apartment." The distant wail of an opera singer glided across the water from the opposite bank.

"Okay Sunny, we'll renegotiate. But I want to know what it's about."

"Someone has been following you. A young man, Asian, and then an older man. He's a white man. Quite handsome." She smiled and Sarah saw a glimpse of the coy beauty that loosened silk ties and secrets from lonely businessmen.

"Who are they?"

"You tell me."

"How do you know they're not from one of our rivals?"

"I know. I am very good at my job, and it's my job to know your rivals, Ms Reid."

"Have you contacted Alan about this?"

"Alan won't pay me for this information."

"I want to know who they are. I want names."

"I have one of the names."

"Who?" Sarah tried to flatten the urgency in her voice. Sunny waited, staring with what looked like absent-minded interest across the

green water. A group of men with plastic tanks strapped to their backs advanced toward the two women at crawl speed. Their arms waved above their heads, and as they drew closer Sarah realised they were spraying a mist of insecticide into the trees in slow, toxic sweeps.

“What are the terms of payment?” Sarah asked finally.

Sunny handed her a neatly typed invoice and Sarah scowled. It was expensive and she didn’t trust this immaculately groomed hustler.

“What does this price cover?”

“Answers. Names, locations, backgrounds.”

“Okay. But this has nothing to do with our other agreement, and the data is for my eyes only.”

“I don’t give freebies.” Sunny smiled coyly. “And I have photos.”

Sarah held out her hand and Sunny retrieved a sheaf of blurred, black and white photographs from her bag. Sarah leafed through the first three, looking hard at the man leaning over the walkway in the Mumbai Times Square Mall, on the escalator, peering into the window of an empty store. His eyes always looking away from the camera, dark and seeking something outside the frame.

“We don’t know his name yet, but he is connected to your Bangkok clients.” Sunny said. Sarah nodded – they expected something like this – and shuffled the photos again. For a long time she stared down at the image in her lap. The body was smudged, as if it had been caught running. It was the same man, the man at her apartment, in the airport. And then the memory heaved and her head was swollen and hot with the flood of rising blood.

“I have the name.” Sunny said, watching Sarah’s face closely, intrigued by the sudden flush that moved like a pink shadow across her face and neck and arms and hands.

“I know.”

“Tomas Kovich.”

“I know.” Sarah put the photos away, but kept the close-up and held his flat eyes between her moist fingers. They rose to leave as the sprayers swung their tanks closer along the path. “Find out everything,” she said, flapping Tomas’ face before dropping it into her case. “I want to know everything this man has been doing in the last

ten years.” Sunny laughed and turned to say something in Mandarin to the old fisherman. He nodded and dipped his rod in the pond, sending ripples out from its tip.

The Author

Emily Murray has Bachelor degrees in Architecture and Arts, most recently completing a Masters of Arts in Creative Writing at the University of Melbourne, Australia. She has had short fiction published in Picador New Writing and other local anthologies. Her writing shows an ongoing preoccupation with airports, shopping malls, freeways, hotels, unbuilt suburbs and megacities.