

THE GREAT WALT OF CHINA

BY JONATHAN CARROLL

I think this is a simple story to tell but knowing Ettrich, it will probably end up complicated. Sometimes it seemed everything about him was complicated, often for no reason at all.

This happened when he was alive, a long time ago. I knew him when he lived in Europe, when he was a successful man. He had things then, he wore cashmere socks. People spoke well of him; his family was proud. He was at the height of his success then, a couple of years before he got sick.

I wasn't in Europe long, but we met almost as soon as I arrived because we worked for the same company and were in the same division. From the start, I liked him very much and went out of my way to be with him whenever the opportunity arose. He was a businessman but had the kind of presence that would have made him a good politician or actor. Not only did Vincent speak well, he said things you remembered. One of those people who can hold a room whenever they want, who make others sit forward unconsciously in their chairs just to hear better and not miss a thing.

Perhaps that's one of the reasons why whenever we traveled together, beautiful women met him at airports. Not always his wife either, though she was lovely too.

There were so many. Once a small English woman with Audrey Hepburn eyes lifted a manicured hand and waved merrily at us as we came through the gate in Heathrow. Once a dark and dramatic-looking Peruvian was there, but only because she was so angry at something he had done that she wanted to hit him. By the time her limo had reached our hotel, however, the two of them were laughing and exchanging secret looks.

They always seemed to be there for Ettrich-- women and their secret looks. Some took us back to their cities in dark expensive cars that played quiet jazz through eight speakers. Other times the three of us got into battered, exhausted taxis-- Ladas, once-yellow Fiats-- and rode cramped together towards new lights. By then Vincent was usually talking fast with them, trying to catch up and make plans at the same time.

I have never known a man who appreciated women more. He was convinced he had been one in a past life because they did things he not only understood, but usually knew were coming long before they happened. One said to me over dinner "Vincent scares me sometimes. He even understands why you

hate him." When I asked why *she* hated him, she stared blankly at me a moment, then said "Isn't it obvious?"

It's easy to hate someone who knows our secrets, most especially when we don't know theirs and never will. That's not to say Vincent Ettrich was a secretive man. If you asked him a question he would answer it. More than once I heard him say the most painful or embarrassing things about himself without any hesitation. Perhaps that's what made others nervous and sure he was not telling the truth: no one answers certain questions fully, particularly not when it's too close for comfort.

One more snapshot of him and in many ways it is the most important. It was late spring and I had been staying at the Ungelt Hotel in Prague. The morning I checked out, I strolled onto the hotel's beautiful terrace to have one last look around before leaving to the airport. It was early for lunch but such a great day that all of the tables were already full. I took a slow deep breath and sighed, feeling the deliciously bitter mixture of elation and sadness that comes when, alone in a foreign city, you see something marvelous you wish you had someone to share it with. The trees were in full bloom, sunlight cascading through their new leaves. People at the tables wore summery clothes that showed off women's beautiful arms and more than that, skin everywhere. Skin that had spent so many months hibernating beneath heavy sweaters, leather coats, gloves.

I felt alone as usual, but happy looking at the faces and like pleasant distant music, hearing snatches of conversations here and there. At the last moment as I was about to turn and go back inside, I saw Vincent Ettrich and a woman sitting at one of the tables. I would be lying if I said I remembered what she looked like. She was beyond doubt pretty. Long black hair she kept brushing back in a quick dismissive flick, wide thin shoulders. One thing I do remember was how she laughed. It was a big thing-- deep and loud, absolutely uninhibited. In fact when she laughed, it was so brassy that people at adjoining tables stopped their conversations and looked over, alarmed. But Vincent and the woman were too engrossed in each other to notice.

What struck me most was how their tableau looked like an advertisement in a glossy magazine for expensive perfume or jewelry. The good looking man in an elegant dark suit, his large strong hands playing with the woman's black sunglasses as he listens. His expression is amused and mischievous. He knows this woman and thinks she's terrific. She's leaning in towards him across the glowing white tablecloth. She brushes her hair back one moment, touches his hand the next. She can't stop talking; she has to tell him everything.

Later, when I visited him in the hospital and told him this impression, he shrugged and said “She wasn’t smart enough. If the women in those ads were real, they’d have to be gorgeous and smart. Part of the reason why you want to hang around with someone is to hear what they think. Waltraud only talked about herself. Not an endlessly interesting subject, believe me.”

Waltraud Pissecker. If life made sense, the woman I saw across the terrace that April day would not have had that name. When Vincent told it to me the first time I couldn’t suppress a smile and he smiled with me.

“Some name, huh? That’s why I called her Walt. She didn’t mind. Actually, she thought it was cute. As long as you were paying attention to her, you could have called her Mud. Walt’s world view stopped with Ptolemy; Only it wasn’t the earth that was the center of her universe, it was Waltraud Pissecker.”

I sat in the chair next to his bed and looked at my folded hands. What I had to say next was difficult but necessary. He needed to be reminded. “But she was what you wanted.”

He turned his head slowly and looked at me. “Yes, what I thought I wanted. Do you remember that day we first saw her?”

“At Langan’s in London.”

He smiled and looked at the ceiling. “Yup. I even remember what we were eating: Bangers and mash. I always loved the name of that dish-- sounded both obscene and sporty at the same time. I was just about to put a forkful of mashed potatoes into my mouth when she walked across the room.”

“And you groaned Jeeeesus.”

“That’s right. It was the combination of that great, thick mane of black hair and her plum colored dress. Whenever we met after that, I asked her to bring it. Once she met me at a Chinese restaurant we liked. When she came in wearing that dress, I stood, and holding up my glass, toasted her with ‘To The Great Walt of China!’” Vincent stopped and was silent a long few moments. “She didn’t get the joke; didn’t know who I was toasting. She looked at me like I was crazy. Asked what I was talking about.”

“That must have been... disheartening. But what was it about her that made you--”

“Say yes to the deal? You can’t imagine how many times I have asked myself that question. Don’t you know?”

Offended, I touched a hand to my chest and stared at him. “Me? Why would I know, Vincent? You’re the one who chose.” My voice rose a little too much at the end of the sentence.

He tried to lock his fingers behind his head, but the pain must have been too great. Grimacing, he lowered his arms carefully to his sides. “She wasn’t even that great looking, although you’ve gotta admit there was something in her, some overwhelming... I don’t know. Anyway, who cares? What difference does it make now?”

None. It made no difference because Vincent was dying by then and his doctors held out no hope. Even worse, he was alone. No one came to see him but me.

I came as soon as I heard the sad news. The first day I walked into his hospital room, he looked at me like I had just returned from Venus. We had been out of touch a long time and in this day and age, who comes running when they hear an old friend is sick? Not many people, but I am one of them. It isn’t part of my job but I like to complete circles, tie up loose ends, close the door when I am leaving the house.

When Waltraud Pissecker passed by our table that fateful evening in London years before, Vincent put his fork down and groaned quietly. It sounded something like a French Bulldog snoring. I looked at him, looked away, looked again. I asked what was the matter because he even looked like a French bulldog with those bulging eyes that make the breed of dog look like they’re in a permanent state of alarm.

He asked if I had seen the woman and I said sure. He said he wanted to have her child. I laughed and asked if it wasn’t supposed to be the other way around. He said ‘Whatever’ and rose a bit off his chair to see if he could get another glimpse of her.

Now remember, I had been with Vincent and his women many times. Vicariously I enjoyed his ardor and envied his rate of success. But sometimes he became boorish about his devotion to women and it became dark, off-putting.

He continued to talk about this one and how much he would like to meet her. In addition, he stopped having dinner with me and simply stared across the room for whatever looks he could snatch of her.

Frankly I was offended and eventually tapped him on the wrist. “What would you do to meet her?”

It took him a moment to realize I had spoken. When what I said registered, he smiled slyly. “Why, do you know her?”

“I’m asking a question. What would you do to meet her? No, better, what would you be willing to give up to meet her?”

“I don’t understand.” His full attention was mine now. He liked this-- women and wagers, the cost of connecting.

“You know exactly what I’m talking about. What would you give up to meet that woman? A hundred dollars? A thousand? Because even if you did, what are the chances of anything happening with her? Could be a very expensive rejection.”

A smug look crept over his face. “I’d take that chance. I’d pay a couple of hundred dollars.”

“All right, but you’ve got money. What else would you give up?”

His self-satisfied look grew. “A month of Saturdays. Park Place and Boardwalk. Two women I already know and like. The ‘Premise’ account. You’re talking to an optimist here. Great women are always worth the risk.”

The Premise account was a big one our company was vying for and we all knew getting it hinged on whether Vincent could pull it off.

I was impressed his zeal went that far. “How about this: How many truly great memories do we have? I’m talking about the ones carved in stone, the ones that define us and help make us who we are.”

His eyes narrowed. “Like the day you got married or the kids were born?”

“Those sure, but smaller ones too. When you and your father went to a hockey game and it was one of the few times you felt he really cared. Or when you took the kids to Disneyland and the whole day was full of love. Memories like that. Would you give one up for an introduction?”

To his credit, Vincent didn’t answer immediately. He tapped the table with his index finger and made a few fast circles on it. Clockwise. Counterclockwise. “A bird in the hand, huh? What would I give up that was great in exchange for something that has the possibility of being even greater?”

“Exactly. But you couldn’t cheat. It would have to be a big memory. One that you’ll cherish at eighty when there’s nothing left but memories.”

“How will they know I’m not cheating and just saying this is a big one?”

I took a sip of wine. Good wine. Always good wine when you dined with Vincent. “They’ll know.”

He crossed his arms and looked at me. He was taking it seriously. But then a big loud laugh rang out in the room and he was distracted. We both looked toward the laugh and saw it came from the woman. Her head was thrown back and she had her hands in her hair. Her arms were long and bare. Beautiful arms. Hard to resist.

His eyes slid slowly left from her to me. “When I was first married, Kitty and I spent a summer in Brittany. On nice days we used to pack a picnic and go to the ocean. I remember once we were sitting on the beach eating roast chicken.

No one else was around. There's lots of beaches near Vieux Bourg where you can go and be alone. Kitty stood up and took off her clothes. She was so beautiful. I still couldn't believe she was mine. When she was naked, she picked up her chicken leg and walked down to the water. She stood with her back to me, eating and watching the sea." He pursed his lips. "I've never forgotten that."

"It sounds beautiful. You'd give that up?"

"That was a long time ago." He pointed to the laughing woman. "Today's today. It'd be hard not to."

I took a roll out of the basket and tearing off a piece, offered it to him.

"Eat this."

"Why?"

"Just eat it, Vincent. You'll like it."

He looked at me quizzically but took the bread and ate it.

The nurse brought in his lunch tray and put it down on the table. She gave a big bright fake smile and left again. He looked the food over but it was a sad sight. Certainly compared to the exquisite meals he had eaten over the years. Among other dull things on the tray was a slice of square white bread. He picked it up and took a small bite. He chewed a few times, frowned, and put the rest of it back on the tray.

"So it was the bread, huh? When I ate the bread that night it sealed the deal, right?"

"Right."

"And then they transferred you to Washington."

"I've been transferred a lot in my career. But I saw you that day in Prague. You two looked wonderful together. Just like an ad."

Good sport that he was, he chuckled. "And now that I'm here, like this, you still won't tell me the memory I gave up? I mean, come on, what difference does it make?"

I paused to give him the hope I was seriously considering the idea. But I wasn't. "I wish I could, Vincent. But that goes against the rules. I'm sorry."

He waved it off. "It doesn't matter. Hey, I'm just really touched you came to see me. It's a great thing. It's great to see you."

"Thank you. It's good to see you too." Naturally I didn't tell him I came to see all of my clients one more time. To reminisce. And if they hadn't figured it out yet, to explain.

“But even without that one, I’ve got a lot of memories. That’s all I do now anyway: lie here and run through my Rolodex of memories. Even Waltraud Pissecker. Even with her there are some nice things to think about.” He picked up the bread again but put it right down. “You know though, of all of them one keeps coming back again and again. And it’s about my wife Kitty, of all people. Or sort of.

“After we divorced, I went to Greece with someone nice. A small island off the coast of Turkey. One day we were sitting together on the beach and I was very happy, you know? My marriage was finally over, I was free to do what I wanted... I liked it.

“But then a few feet away I saw a woman who didn’t look exactly like Kitty but enough so that it startled me. And worse, she looked like Kitty when we were young and first married and I just wanted to touch her all day long. Anyway, I was trying to sneak as many peeks at her as I could. Suddenly she stood up, took off her bathing suit and walked down to the water. Totally uninhibited. No big deal to her. She stood there with her back to us, staring out at the water like life and time were spread out in front of her like one long endless day...

“It just crushed me. Long hair down her back, the legs... I looked at the woman I was with but she didn’t matter anymore. All I could think of was ‘What have I done? What the fuck have I done with my life?’ And you know, I can’t stop thinking about that moment. All the others, all the good ones, the sexy, wild, exotic memories... They come and they go. But not this one. Son of a bitch. Not this one.”

There was a loose thread on the cuff of my sport jacket. I would have to have that fixed. I hate shoddy workmanship. I sighed.

Vincent mistook that sigh for sympathy. “Don’t worry about me. I’m all right.”

To keep from smiling, I quoted an old Jewish proverb. “No man dies with even half his desires fulfilled.”

He thought about that a while and then smiled gratefully. “That’s nice. Did you think that up?”

“Just this minute.” I lied.