

"I thank God for my life, the blessings therein, especially for my wife, Tracy, a woman who really understands that no one but God can bring happiness in a marriage. I am grateful to Cameron Tavernier (let me know whenever you see this), who helped me re-write significant portions of this story, especially the part where Johan rides in the police car. I am also thankful for September 2002 all the way to January 2014, because without these years spent in China, teaching English, this book might have been like a sophisticated computer, which has all the programs and apps in the world, but no Internet connection.

What do I mean?

You'll understand when you start reading.

Go ahead..."

No Ugly Chicks

"Crazy things happen when you do an ugly woman a favor."

By

Ernest Yungsi

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...

Dedicated to:

Ronolla

At the Bus Stop

A crowded bus stop.

A very ugly woman.

Those cherry-sized pimples on her face!

She was the only person not spitting in public.

Such a beautiful city, the ground covered with dried up saliva. It felt like people were having a spitting competition sometimes.

Man! She looks just like Mom, in an Asian way.

But what did Mom use to say about ugly women?

Oh yes! Johan remembered clearly.

Mom claimed that the best favor a man could do for an ugly woman is to ask her out.

"We are quite a unique group of people," Mom confessed to Johan and Charlie one day after Dad had come home drunk and yelled at her again." Men never notice us, so when they do we have to be grateful."

Now, Johan glanced at the ugly woman again.

I'll do her a favor, he whispered to himself, shaking his head to get rid of his mother's image.

He stepped up to her, wondering what he would do when she said, "YES."

Chapter One

But she said, “NO!”

And Johan blinked to make sure he wasn’t dreaming. By the time his eyes returned to her, she was gone. When he spotted her, she was turning left down the road.

Something kicked up inside Johan and he followed her.

Without being seen, he marched behind her for about five minutes, and then she stopped and entered a building with a cross on the door.

Johan hesitated.

The last time he had been in church was fifty years ago.

But his feet seemed to speak an independent language. They carried him right into the crowded church.

I’m sixty-five years old and stalking an ugly chick, thought Johan as he sat down at the back, to wait for the woman to finish singing in the choir.

Johan had seen a notice on the wall outside, saying that in this International Christian Church; ushers must inspect IDs and passports of Asian-looking Christians. Due to Chinese government regulations, the church could be closed down or fined if a single native Chinese was caught attending the service.

The ugly chick had told Johan at the bus stop that she was Chinese, so why had they let her in? And she was singing with the choir, smiling as if she were beautiful.

“Stick to the point,” Johan whispered to himself.

It wasn’t the Chinese woman’s presence in this church that made Johan angry. He was mad because she had said “NO” to him.

A beautiful woman saying NO to Johan, that’s OK, but an ugly chick didn’t have that privilege. She should be glad with any fish that comes into her net.

He must get her to say "YES" to him after church.
Wasn't that why he had followed her?

OK, get her to say "YES!" And then what?

Would he date her?

Or maybe he would just say, "No, thanks, I don't date ugly chicks."

Johan's thoughts were interrupted when the choir suddenly ceased singing.

A tall Asian man was walking towards the microphone, the same man whose photo on the wall outside identified him the pastor, a Korean-born American.

The pastor raised both hands in the air, prayed briefly and then began to speak.

"Ask God and He will order angels to do anything for you."

The church slipped into total silence as the preacher looked around with a smile.

"It's easy," he cried. "First, believe in your heart that you'll receive what you're asking for; next, speak out your request, using any quote from the Bible declaring that whatever you ask God, He'll give you and then finally, rebuke the devil."

Johan almost fell off his chair when the man said you can even request a million dollars into your bank account.

What a joke, he thought.

After church, he cornered the ugly woman but she introduced him to her husband, a stocky Korean with a fat tie and bad teeth who smiled all the time, calling Johan "my flend, my flend."

Johan ignored the man's hand, which hung in mid-air, waiting for a handshake. He called the couple "losers" and marched straight to the guides to demand why they had let a Chinese woman in the church and choir.

“Her husband is not Chinese so the government won’t mind,” a young man with a happy face replied. As he was trying to show off several other Chinese Christians who had foreign spouses in the church, Johan muttered, “Who cares?” and then left.

He jumped into a cab outside and told the driver to head for Dave’s bar where he went to work on a bottle of whiskey.

Johan got senselessly drunk, left the bar for home and stumbled into his apartment, the alcohol in his brain pushing him to try “the stupid preacher’s idea.”

First, he closed his eyes. Then he squeezed his mind like a lemon. Finally, he spoke; declaring that he wanted a wife, the most beautiful woman that ever walked on this planet. After that he muttered, “hell yeah!” and then fell asleep.

Chapter Two

It was only 5 A.M., but the waiters were overturning tables and chairs, sweeping the floor and taking out the trash.

Johan hated this.

If the manager could not stay open all night, he should never have opened a bar in the first place. Didn't he see that Johan wanted to drink all night?

Also, the women tonight looked extra ugly. They could have become beautiful only after Johan got very drunk. In fact he usually measured how tanked-up he was in a bar by how fast it took hideous women to look attractive in his eyes. But because the manager was bent on closing early, Johan would go home without reaching that peak point.

He cursed the manager's mother when the man tried to help him into a taxi, but the Chinese man smiled, breathing garlic flavor in Johan's face as he said, "Bye- bye laowai!"

Later, when he finally found the keyhole and unlocked his door, Johan staggered to the bathroom, and without brushing his teeth or washing his face, he applied a green facial mask for his acne, and then fell in bed, fully dressed.

Drifting in and out of sleep, Johan tossed under the covers until the rising sun chased away the darkness from the house.

Then he found himself staring, dry-eyed, at the red window curtains, wondering if the loud music from outside would ever stop.

He could have closed the windows, but the inside of his head was pounding to the unpleasant rhythm of the deafening *boom, boom, boom*, rocking the blue walls of his tiny apartment.

The bitter taste in his mouth confirmed that he had consumed more alcohol than he thought the previous night, but it was the banging inside his head that hurt.

Immediately he knew that those idiots were out there, and a murderous rage filled him.

I'll show them, he threatened silently.

There was no need to dress after he crawled out of bed.

Johan skipped towards the door but suddenly stopped. He had just seen his face in the wall mirror. Covered in the green facial mask, he looked like Shrek.

Quickly, he stepped into the bathroom and splashed cold water on his face. Without brushing his teeth, he stepped out and lit a cigarette.

At the door, he suddenly stopped and made a U-turn, heading for the open closet where clothes hung carelessly and pants, socks and underwear slept on the floor.

He reached into the pocket of his battered, leather jacket and grabbed the handle of an old Swiss Army knife, the one that he had bought years ago with the positive intention of killing his Dad.

An electric thrill rushed through his body and Johan slashed the air a couple of times, thinking about that hot summer afternoon fifty-four years ago, how his mother had come out of the shopping center a few seconds after his father had slid a piece of paper inside his pocket, digits finagled from the blonde by lying that he was unmarried, and that he owned the gleaming red Cadillac.

They'd better not give me any trouble, Johan thought, holding up the knife against the light.

Then his mother's pimply face flashed in his mind...eyes swollen from crying, hair undone, bruises on her cheeks. She was explaining to him that all the noises last night were nothing.

"Just clumsy old me falling out of bed and Daddy yelling because he was helping me get back in bed."

Johan's heart gave a sudden lurch and he decided against carrying the knife.

His insides ran upwards as the elevator took him downward. Then his legs seemed to move into his upper body as the machine stopped on the first floor.

When he came out, Chinese people in the vestibule stared at him. Johan felt that all eyes were on him not because he was smoking in a public area but because the little hair left on his round head was blond and his beady eyes were sky-blue.

"Look! A foreigner!"

He heard the sentence many times. Some people pointed. But others instantly made a public show of politeness.

A fat woman held the hand of a boy pointing a chubby finger at Johan. The boy had the same level of excitement children display when watching a circus. The woman slapped the kid's face and said, "Don't point at the foreign uncle, it's not polite! Don't you know how to be polite?"

The other people nodded their heads solemnly.

"How lucky this little boy is to have such a polite mother!" They exclaimed, one after the other, in loud tones. The lad stared blankly at the grownups as if they each had two heads.

Acting on a sudden instinct, Johan stuck out his flabby tongue at them. Then he raised his middle finger, without saying the words that go with the gesture.

The people laughed happily.

They must have thought it was a game. They were still laughing as they showed Johan their own fingers. Some showed their thumbs, forefingers, little fingers and ring fingers, probably wondering why Johan wasn't staying to continue this fun game.

Chapter Three

Boom! Boom! Boom!

These sounds, Johan heard as he marched towards the crowd. Even the noise of traffic was smothered by the beat.

A red stage had been mounted near the shops that sold tea.

Six belly-dancing girls, dressed like they were going swimming but were afraid that sharks would bite their stomachs, were twisting their bodies like snakes, with fixed identical smiles on their heavily powdered faces.

The small crowd, watching the free performance, cheered wildly. The gym's workers dressed in matching black T-shirts bearing the establishment's name on both sides were handing out flyers and leaflets.

Johan marched straight behind the stage where cables were connected.

People pointed at him and shouted "*laowai, laowai*," and despite his limited knowledge of Mandarin, he knew that *laowai* meant foreigner, a label he hated like poison because it was offensive in some contexts, reminding him of the Spanish "gringro."

His eyes scanned thick cables running over each other and found the main power supply switch, a white one, (made in China of course), to which the main cable giving electricity to the speakers, turntable, microphones and all the other equipment was plugged.

The surge of energy that visited his body was the electricity that usually shocked his face whenever his father slapped him across the mouth. He jumped forward and grabbed the plug, screaming at the top of his voice.

And then time froze and the smiling sun became obscured by a shapeless cloud.

The decorative lights went out, not one by one. The musical equipment's blinkers stopped flashing, and everything became so still that no one missed the sound of the voice screaming behind the stage.

Chapter Four

The cloud blocking the sun floated away, and solar energy filled the atmosphere.

Johan brandished the white three-headed plug in one hand and his almost burnt out cigarette in the other, screaming, "Stop this noise! I can't freakin sleep!"

The spectators, probably thinking that this was part of the entertainment package the gym had prepared for them, started clapping and shouting, "*laowai, laowai!*"

Johan's face reddened as he climbed on one of the speakers, stumbling and falling down, while the onlookers giggled and clapped.

Johan frowned as he tried again. The speaker danced dangerously beneath his feet. People opened their eyes wide as if holding their breaths. The sound box stopped shaking and Johan hoisted himself on top.

Shoulders in the crowd relaxed as if everyone had resumed breathing.

Then Johan began to hop up and down, screaming, "Stop this freakin noise! I can't freakin sleep!"

The spectators roared louder.

Johan's face shone with sweat.

The people were still screaming out their lungs when blue lights flashed on the scene.

The police had arrived.

Chapter Five

Johan ran his mouth a lot when he got drunk, but he never told anyone that teaching English was not his real job. It was a cover to obtain and renew his visa so that he could remain legally resident in China to carry out his real mission.

All this changed when he met an African man called Justin, under quite strange circumstances.

A woman, whom Johan had found on the Internet, had flown in from Chengdu to visit him in Dalian. One look at her and Johan regretted why he ever let her come this far into his life. She was the definition of “UGLY” and that’s how Johan knew that all her pictures had been photo shopped. To make matters worse, as soon as they got home the first thing she said was, “You reimburse my flight.” When Johan said “No,” she got angry, and told him that she was going to stay at her sister’s house. Before Johan could say a word, she grabbed the kitchen knife.

“I kill you before I go,” she screamed.

Johan panicked and ran outside, wearing only his boxers and no shirt. The woman locked him outside. And then she started smashing every item that could be broken in his apartment.

Neighbors heard the commotion, came out and realized it was a foreigner. Some pointed at Johan and screamed, “laowai, laowai,” before going back inside their houses and locking their doors. Johan was still knocking on the door when a tall, dark man came out of the elevators.

“Hi,” said the man. “My name is Justin and a Chinese lady called me to say you need help.”

Justin convinced the woman to open the door but she was still bent on getting money from Johan.

"He promised me he'll pay flight," she told Justin.

When Justin gave her some cash, she counted the money, smiled at him and then walked up to Johan and slapped his face, before grabbing her bag and storming out of the house.

Immediately, Johan felt like he could tell this African man almost anything.

"You remind me of my son," Johan said to Justin.

"Oh," replied Justin. "Where is he?"

"I'm talking about the son I never had," replied Johan with a laugh. And then he told Justin his real reason for coming to China.

But when the two policemen got out of their car and a horse-faced young man with a haircut like an umbrella ran forward and volunteered translate, Johan found himself facing the familiar question.

"Why did you come to China?" The cops asked through the interpreter.

When Johan told them where he worked, the translator smiled through buck teeth and informed Johan that the policemen thought he was cool.

"You're American and you teach English in the university, so they like you," said the young man.

The two police officers were very different physically. One was very fat while his partner was very skinny. The fat one spoke to the translator in a loud voice, and the young man turned to Johan.

"Why do you sleep in the morning? Why don't you sleep at night when there is no loud music?"

Johan saw the gym's workers squeezing close to the belly-dancing girls and the rest of the crowd pushing forward.

Why was everyone in this stupid street so interested in what he had to say?

Lie! A voice screamed inside his head.

Dad used to lie all the time.

Caught up suddenly in a tide, soaring out of an ocean of repressed memories, Johan closed his eyes to become six years old. His handsome almost twelve-year old brother, Charlie, stood next to him, outside a mall in Duluth, Georgia. The two boys were watching their father, flirting clumsily with a blonde in a short skirt. Dad kept glancing towards the mall where Mom was using the restroom.

But the translator's voice brought Johan out of his thoughts.

"Why don't you sleep at night when there is no loud music?"

Johan murmured quickly, saying "stupid" and "idiots" twice. The translator frowned and Johan had the feeling that the young man would eat his head before admitting that he didn't understand much English.

Even with Johan's limited knowledge of Mandarin, he was proved right when he heard the translator telling the policemen that the foreigner had said he couldn't sleep at night because he worked at night.

When the chubby policeman began to speak loudly, Johan used the way he slapped the young man's back as a clue to conclude that the cop was praising the translator's bilingual skills.

As the crowd rushed forward, it suddenly appeared like the people would squeeze life out of Johan and his little group. But the skinny officer who had not yet spoken, saved the day by inviting Johan to their car.

They drove around the city, bombarding Johan with questions. From the back seat which he shared with the translator, he answered in English. The translator stumbled and stuttered, got lost several times, but always bluffed his way out. At the red lights, the young man poked a forefinger inside his nostril and pulled out something. He rolled it slowly between two fingers before rubbing on what he thought was the car's seat.

But his finger was on Johan's pants.

Consumed by silent disgust, Johan ignored the smeared spot, keeping his eyes ahead until the bumpy ride came to a finish, in the same place, where it had commenced.

But the crowd had dispersed.

Chapter Six

With the crowd gone, the street became its busy self again. Johan speculated that the gym's workers had transferred to the other side of the city, near the shops selling knock-offs with brand names like *Gacci*, *Addodos*, *Nika*, *Luis Vitta* and even *America*! Those shops stood close to the bookstore that sold foreign books and usually hosted English Corners.

Johan felt like a super hero as he marched towards the *Shan Ding* Mansion, not because his apartment stood in one of the tallest buildings in the center of Dalian city. He was bursting with pride because those bastards would never try their nonsense around his building again.

I showed them who's boss, he thought, smiling.

He was still smiling when the elevator stopped on the second floor and a skinny Chinese woman got in. He offered her the smile but she looked down and ignored him. Johan opened his mouth to inform her that he had just saved the entire building, but a sharp ding rang out and the doors creaked open. She stepped out quickly, leaving a whiff of perfume in the air.

In his apartment, the "missed call" from his boss invited a deep frown on Johan's large forehead.

Mr. Wong never called unless something was wrong.

At first Johan couldn't decide what to do. But when he finally made up his mind and called back, he heard several rings, and no answer. Johan hung up and sighed, feeling relieved and craving a cigarette.

The phone rang before he could start smoking; he brought his cell close to his ear and heard Mr. Wong's loud voice.

"Don't go to school in the afternoon," Johan's boss shouted.

The rest of their conversation was as brief as a peck on the cheek.

"Classes cancelled again?" Johan asked.

"YES!" screamed the voice on the line.

"And tomorrow?"

"CANCELLED!"

"The day after?"

"CANCELLED!"

"When will I resume?"

"SOON!"

Johan heard a click, followed by a beep and then silence.

The old lizard always ended phone calls abruptly.

Sometimes you'd be in the middle of a sentence and you'd realize you're talking to yourself. It was worse when you said something that was supposed to be funny and then found yourself laughing into a void. Come to think of it, the idiot had never said a proper goodbye to Johan on the phone.

Soon my ass, thought Johan angrily, going for the pack of cigarettes.

Why did everyone around here say "Soon" when they meant to take all day?

He was so sick of that stupid word.

Ms Zhu (his first employer) had said, "Soon," when Johan had called from the airport the day he arrived in Dalian to discover that there was no one waiting to pick him up as promised. After that, he had waited for four more hours before someone showed up.

His former landlord had also said, "Soon" when Johan had asked him when he would fix the broken sink, mirror and table in his apartment. But by the time he was moving out after a year, the repairs had not yet been done.

Johan now knew that "soon," was an utterance whose semantics was so elastic it could stretch around any failure to keep promises, making any number of disappointments to seem very promising.

It wasn't the first time Mr. Wong was cancelling Johan's classes in the past three weeks. He would ring Johan up on Sunday morning and inform him that his classes for the week had been cancelled. Johan would spend the entire week trying to complete the mission that brought him to China, and getting terribly drunk each time he failed.

"Will I ever accomplish my mission?" he thought, puffing at the cigarette as if his life depended on it.

Chapter Seven

At the end of the cigarette, Johan didn't feel calm like he had expected. Maybe it had to do with being a teacher, on a Monday when your lessons are cancelled and you're suffering from a hangover.

The tiny bed with crumpled sheets invited him back to sleep even with a large portion of bed clothes on the floor. Boy, he had really been in a hurry to disperse that crowd with their loud music.

Those money-seeking idiots now know that you don't mess with a man who had almost become a boxer in his teenage. And he was sure they won't be back.

However, if they did return, he didn't want a replica of that ugly scene. Staying at home and going to sleep harbored such risks.

What if they returned? Then he would be forced to go out and everything would start all over. The policemen would come, and he would have to ride in their stinky car. God knows, at sixty five, this kind of excitement was not healthy.

No!

He would not sleep.

Good thing, he had just finished reading *Heavenwood*. What he needed was another novel by the same author because the man had written a great story: a movie theater in the afterlife where you see everything your friends and family did while your back was turned, sounds like every human being's fear and hope. The only thing he didn't like about the book is that you get to meet each person, and if you can't forgive you're not able to move on. This part scared Johan because of his father, his mother and Charlie.

He would go to the bookstore and try to find, *the daughter between*, it is by the same author, and oh, remember to check all the pages.

When you buy pirated books at cheap prices in China, be careful. Last week, he had bought a copy of *The Great Blue Yonder*. But two days later he had found more than forty blank pages.

So he had stormed into the shop to return it, and had discovered *Heavenwood*, a novel you won't wanna put down once you start reading.

Chapter Eight

Zhongshan square is a huge, round tiled- rink where Chinese people gather to feed pigeons and practice speaking English with foreigners. But some of the best English corners happen behind the square in a crowded bookstore a few blocks from *Xing Hua* bookshop.

Unlike *Xing Hua* that sells originals of imported books, the *Pian Yi* bookstore sells pirated books at cheap prices. It attracts customers by baiting them with daily English corners, which Johan avoided.

But from a distance, he scoffed at a circle of more than twenty Chinese people, standing around two foreigners, a blond-haired woman and a tall, dark-haired man. The foreigners sat on stools like lambs to be slaughtered and the audience took turns throwing questions at them.

As Johan watched, the blonde-haired woman's face reddened and she yelled, "I can't tell you that!" Some of the spectators giggled. The man who had just asked her the question blushed and said, "So sorry."

Johan knew the questioner had crossed a forbidden cultural line.

He had attended English corners before.

The questions they ask you!

All sorts of things.

Why are you so short?

What happened to your hair?

Why is your stomach so big?

And so, they go on, never stopping, causing you to wonder if someone sent them to attack you personally.

The Chinese man was still saying, "So sorry" to the blonde-haired woman. Johan was ready to bet that the man had just asked the woman about her age, her breasts or her salary.

Looking at her cleavage and see-through blouse, it was definitely the breasts, and the man must have been pushed by his wife, since Chinese women are more curious about physical attributes which they lack than anything else.

After his first three English Corners, Johan had stopped going.

So now he left this scene with the blonde-haired woman calming down, and dodged behind some shelves, only to discover that when you're a foreigner in China, you're never invisible.

Chapter Nine

"Hallo teacher!"

Johan jumped at the voice. And then he saw the boy, skinny as a starved goat, with an accent so thick it sounded like he had just said, "*Yellow tee-shirt!*"

Johan was forced to stop and force a smile.

"I'm Bill," cried the boy, grinning. "Bill Cabbage. This English name, you gave me last month, remember?"

Of course Johan couldn't remember the stupid name. He had given English names to more than a thousand students. What made this fool think his was so special?

Sometimes he ran out of labels to tag them with and simply called them "Apple," "Banana" or any other fruit which came into his mind. Strangely, the students liked these names. They claimed that unlike other English names like Bill, Bob and Robson, which meant nothing, these identifications of fruits actually meant something.

Bill stepped closer, smelling of garlic.

"I want buy a book," he said. "After buy book I stop at the English corner. Later, I going to your class today."

"But there's no class today," Johan protested.

"Yes, there's class."

"Are you sure?"

"I very sure because my classmates all here, we go to class together."

Mr. Wong is up to something, thought Johan, smiling at Bill and thinking about changing the boy's name to *rat* sometime in the future.

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