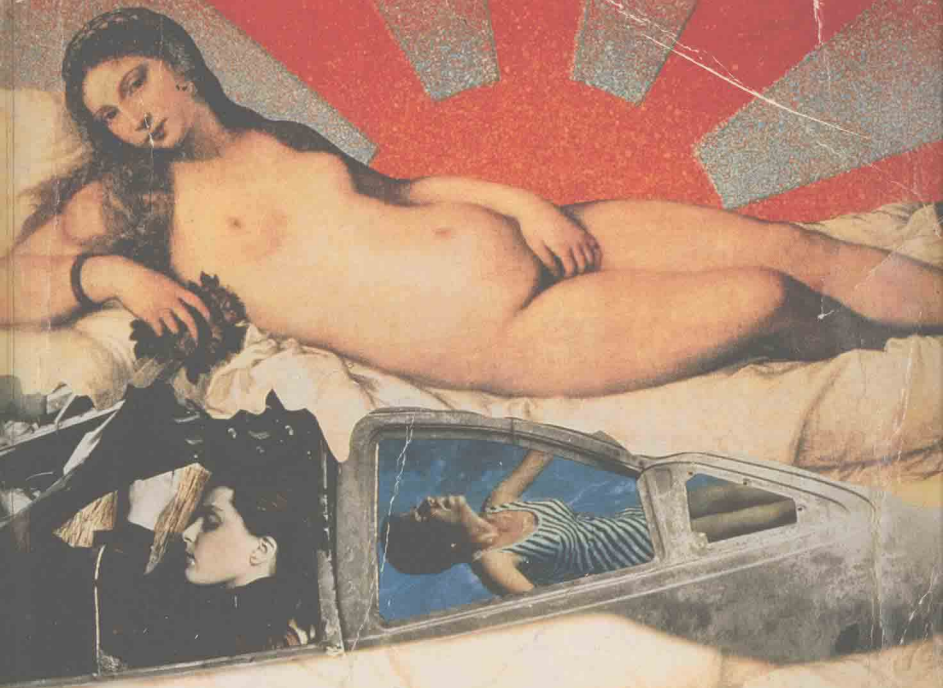


THE SEQUEL TO
THE EMPIRE OF THE SUN

J.G. BALLARD



THE KINDNESS OF WOMEN

"Raw and tender in its beauty, and dark in its hilarity .
capstone to a magnificent career." —*San Francisco*

A HARVEST/HBJ BOOK

THE
Kindness
OF
Women



J. G. Ballard

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PART I

A
Season
for
Assassins

1

BLOODY SATURDAY

Every afternoon in Shanghai during the summer of 1937 I rode down to the Bund to see if the war had begun. As soon as lunch was over I would wait for my mother and father to leave for the country club. While they changed into tennis clothes, ambling in a relaxed way around their bedroom, it always amazed me that they were so unconcerned by the coming war and unaware that it might break out just as my father served his first ball. I remember pacing up and down with all the Napoleonic impatience of a seven-year-old, my toy soldiers drawn up on the carpet like the Japanese and Chinese armies around Shanghai. At times it seemed to me that I was keeping the war alive singlehandedly.

Ignoring my mother's laughter as she flirted with my father, I would watch the sky over Amherst Avenue. At any moment a squadron of Japanese bombers might appear above the department stores of downtown Shanghai and begin to bomb the Cathedral School. My child's mind had no idea how long a war

would last, whether a few minutes or even, conceivably, an entire afternoon. My one fear was that, like so many exciting events I always managed to miss, the war would be over before I noticed that it had begun.

Throughout the summer everyone in Shanghai spoke about the coming war between China and Japan. At my mother's bridge parties, as I helped myself to the plates of small chow, I listened to her friends talking about the shots exchanged on July 7 at the Marco Polo Bridge in Peking, which had signalled Japan's invasion of northern China. A month had passed without Chiang Kai-shek ordering a counter-attack, and there were rumours that the German advisors to the Generalissimo were urging him to abandon the northern provinces and fight the Japanese nearer his stronghold at Nanking, the capital of China. Slyly, though, Chiang had decided to challenge the Japanese at Shanghai, two hundred miles away at the mouth of the Yangtze, where the American and European powers might intervene to save him.

As I saw for myself whenever I cycled down to the Bund, huge Chinese armies were massing around the International Settlement. On Friday, August 13, as soon as my mother and father settled themselves into the rear seats of the Packard, I wheeled my bicycle out of the garage, pumped up its tyres, and set off on the long ride to the Bund. Olga, my White Russian governess, assumed that I was visiting David Hunter, a friend who lived at the western end of Amherst Avenue. A young woman of moods and strange stares, Olga was only interested in trying on my mother's wardrobe and was glad to see me gone.

I reached the Bund an hour later, but the concourse was so crowded with frantic office workers that I could scarcely get near the waterfront landing stages. Ringing my warning bell, I pedalled past the clanking trams, the wheel-locked rickshaws and their exhausted coolies, the gangs of aggressive beggars and pickpockets. Refugees from Chapei and Nantao streamed into

the International Settlement, shouting up at the impassive façades of the great banks and trading houses along the Bund. Thousands of Chinese troops were dug into the northern suburbs of Shanghai, facing the Japanese garrison in their concession at Yangtzepoo. Standing on the steps of the Cathay Hotel as the doorman held my cycle, I could see the Whangpoo River filled with warships. There were British destroyers, sloops, and gunboats, the U.S.S. *Augusta* and a French cruiser, and the veteran Japanese cruiser *Idzumo*, which my father told me had helped to sink the Russian Imperial Fleet in 1905.

Despite this buildup of forces, the war obstinately refused to declare itself that afternoon. Disappointed, I wearily pedalled back to Amherst Avenue, my school blazer scuffed and stained, in time for tea and my favourite radio serial. Hugging my grazed knees, I stared at my armies of lead soldiers and adjusted their lines to take account of the latest troop movements that I had seen as I rode home. Ignoring Olga's calls, I tried to work out a plan that would break the stalemate, hoping that my father, who knew one of the Chinese bankers behind Chiang Kai-shek, would pass on my muddled brain wave to the Generalissimo.

Baffled by all these problems, which were even more difficult than my French homework, I wandered into my parents' bedroom. Olga was standing in front of my mother's full-length mirror, a fur cape over her shoulders. I sat at the dressing table and rearranged the hairbrushes and perfume bottles, while Olga frowned at me through the glass as if I were an uninvited visitor who had strayed from another of the houses in Amherst Avenue. I had told my mother that Olga played with her wardrobe, but she merely smiled at me and said nothing to Olga.

Later I realised that this seventeen-year-old daughter of a once well-to-do Minsk family was scarcely more than a child herself. On my cycle rides I had been shocked by the poverty of the White Russian and Jewish refugees who lived in the tenement

districts of Hongkew. It was one thing for the Chinese to be poor, but it disturbed me to see Europeans reduced to such a threadbare state. In their faces there was a staring despair that the Chinese never showed. Once, when I cycled past a dark tenement doorway, an old Russian woman told me to go away and shouted that my mother and father were thieves. For a few days I had believed her.

The refugees stood in their patched fur coats on the steps of the Park Hotel, hoping to sell their old-fashioned jewellery. The younger women had painted their mouths and eyes, trying bravely to cheer themselves up, I guessed. They called to the American and British officers going into the hotel, but what they were selling my mother had never been able to say—they were giving French and Russian lessons, she told me at last.

Always worried by my homework, and aware that many of the White Russians spoke excellent French, I had asked Olga if she would give me a French lesson like the young women at the Park Hotel. She sat on the bed while I hunted through my pocket dictionary, shaking her head as if I were some strange creature at a zoo. Worried that I had hurt her feelings by referring to her family's poverty, I gave Olga one of my silk shirts and asked her to pass it on to her invalid father. She had held it in her hands for fully five minutes, like one of the vestments used in the communion services at Shanghai Cathedral, before returning it silently to my wardrobe. Already I had noticed that the White Russian governesses possessed a depth of female mystery that the mothers of my friends never remotely approached.

"Yes, James?" Olga hung the fur cape on its rack and slipped my mother's breakfast gown over her shoulders. "Have you finished your holiday book? You're very restless today."

"I'm thinking about the war, Olga."

"You're thinking about it every day, James. You and General

Chiang think about it all the time. I'm sure he would like to meet you."

"Well, I could meet him . . ." As it happened, I did sometimes feel that the Generalissimo was not giving his fullest attention to the war. "Olga, do you know when the war will begin?"

"Hasn't it already begun? That's what everyone says."

"Not the real war, Olga. The war in Shanghai."

"Is that the real war? Nothing is real in Shanghai, James. Why don't you ask your father?"

"He doesn't know. I asked him after breakfast."

"That's a pity. Are there many things he doesn't know?"

Still wearing the breakfast robe, Olga sat on my father's bed, her hand stroking the satin cover and smoothing away the creases. She was caressing the imprint of my father's shoulders, and for a moment I wondered if she was going to slip between the sheets.

"He does know many things, but . . ."

"I can remind you, James, it's Friday the thirteenth. Is that a good day for starting a war?"

"Hey, Olga . . . !" This news brightened everything. I rushed to the window—superstitions, I often noticed, had a habit of coming true. "I'll tell you if I see anything."

Olga stood behind me, calming me with a hand on my ear. Much as she loved the intimacy of my mother's clothes and the ripe odour of my father's riding jacket, she rarely touched me. She stared at the distant skyline along the Bund. Smoke rose from the coal-burning boilers of the older naval vessels. The black columns jostled for space as the warships changed their moorings, facing up to each other with sirens blasting. The darker light gave Olga's face the strong-nosed severity of the mortuary statues I had seen in Shanghai cemetery. She lifted the breakfast robe, staring through the veil of its fine fabric as if seeing a dream of vanished imperial Russia.

"Yes, James, I think they'll start the war for you today . . ."

"Say, thanks, Olga."

But before the war could start, my mother and father returned unexpectedly from the country club. With them were two British officers in the Shanghai Volunteer Force, wearing their tight Great War uniforms. I tried to join them in my father's study, but my mother took me into the garden and in a strained way pointed to the golden orioles drinking from the edge of the swimming pool.

I was sorry to see her worried, as I knew that my mother, unlike Olga, was one of those people who should never be worried by anything. Trying not to annoy her, I spent the rest of the afternoon in my playroom. I listened to the sirens of the battle fleets and marshalled my toy soldiers. On the next day, Bloody Saturday as it would be known, my miniature army at last came to life.

I remember the wet monsoon that blew through Shanghai during that last night of the peace, drowning the sounds of Chinese sniper fire and the distant boom of Japanese naval guns striking at the Chinese shore batteries at Woosung. When I woke into the warm, sticky air the storm had passed and the washed neon signs of the city shone ever more vividly.

At breakfast my mother and father were already dressed in their golfing clothes, though when they left in the Packard a few minutes later my father was at the wheel, the chauffeur beside him, and they had not taken their golf clubs.

"Jamie, you're to stay home today," my father announced, staring through my eyes as he did when he had unfathomable reasons of his own. "You can finish your *Robinson Crusoe*."

"You'll meet Man Friday and the cannibals." My mother smiled at this treat in store, but her eyes were as flat as they had been when our spaniel was run over by the German doctor

in Columbia Road. I wondered if Olga had died during the night, but she was watching from the door, pressing the lapels of her dressing gown to her neck.

"I've already met the cannibals." However exciting, Crusoe's shipwreck palled by comparison with the real naval disaster about to take place on the Whangpoo River. "Can we go to the Tattoo? David Hunter's going next week . . ."

The Military Tattoo staged by soldiers of the British garrison was filled with booming cannon, thunderflashes, and bayonet charges, and re-created the bravest clashes of the Great War, the battles of Mons, Ypres, and the Gallipoli landings. In a sense, the make-believe of the Tattoo might be as close as I would ever get to a real war.

"Jamie, we'll see—they may have to cancel the Tattoo. The soldiers are very busy."

"I know. Then can we go to the Hell Drivers?" This was a troupe of American daredevil drivers who crashed their battered Fords and Chevrolets through wooden barricades covered with flaming gasoline. The sight of these thrillingly rehearsed accidents forever eclipsed the humdrum street crashes of Shanghai. "You promised . . ."

"The Hell Drivers aren't here anymore. They've gone back to Manila."

"They're getting ready for the war." In my mind I could see these laconic Americans, in their dashing goggles and aviator's suits, crashing through the flaming walls as they answered a salvo from the *Idzumo*. "Can I come to the golf club?"

"No! Stay here with Olga! I won't tell you again . . ." My father's voice had an edge of temper that I had noticed since the labour troubles at his cotton mill in Pootung, on the east bank of the river. I wondered why Olga watched him so closely when he was angry. Her toneless eyes showed a rare and almost hungry alertness, the expression I felt on my face when I was about to

tuck into an ice-cream sundae. One of the Communist union organisers who threatened to kill my father had stared at him in the same way as we sat in the Packard outside his office in the Szechuan Road. I worried that Olga wanted to kill my father and eat him.

"Do I have to? Olga listens all the time to French dance music."

"Well, you listen with her," my mother rejoined. "Olga can teach you how to dance."

This was a prospect I dreaded, an even greater torture than the promise of unending peace. When Olga touched me, it was in a distant but oddly intimate way. As I lay in bed at night she would sometimes undress in my bathroom with the door ajar. Later I decided that this was her way of proving to herself that I no longer existed. As soon as my parents left for the golf club, my one intention was to give her the slip.

"David said that Olga—"

"All right!" Irritated by the ringing telephone, which the servants were too nervous to answer, my father relented. "You can see David Hunter. But don't go anywhere else."

Why was he frightened of Shanghai? Despite his quick temper, my father easily gave in, as if events in the world were so uncertain that even my childish nagging carried weight. He was too distracted to play with my toy soldiers, and he often looked at me in the same firm but dejected way in which the headmaster of the Cathedral School gazed at the assembled boys during morning prayers. When he walked to the car he stamped his spiked golf shoes, leaving deep marks in the gravel, like footprints staking a claim to Crusoe's beach.

Even before the Packard had left the drive, Olga was reclining on the verandah with my mother's copies of *Vogue* and *The Saturday Evening Post*. At intervals she called out to me, her voice as remote as the sirens on the river buoys at Woosung. I

guessed that she knew about my afternoon cycle rides around Shanghai. She was well aware that I might be kidnapped or robbed of my clothes in one of the back alleys of the Bubbling Well Road. Perhaps the terrors of the Russian civil war, the long journey with her parents through Turkey and Iraq to this rootless city at the mouth of the Yangtze, had so disoriented her that she no longer cared if the child in her charge was killed.

"Who did your father let you see, James?"

"David Hunter. He's my closest friend. I'm going now, Olga."

"You have so many closest friends. Tell me if the war begins, James."

She waved, and I was gone. In fact, the last person in Shanghai I wanted to see was David. During the summer holidays my school friends and I played Homeric games of hide-and-seek that lasted for weeks and covered the whole of Shanghai. As I drove with my mother to the country club or drank iced tea in the Chocolate Shop I was constantly watching for David, who might break away from his amah and lunge through the crowd to tap me on the shoulder. These games added another layer of strangeness and surprise to a city already too strange.

I wheeled my cycle from the garage, buttoned my blazer, and set off down the drive. Legs whirling like the blades of an egg-beater, I swerved into Amherst Avenue and overtook a column of peasants trudging through the western suburbs of the city. Refugees from the countryside now occupied by the Chinese and Japanese armies, they plodded past the great houses of the avenue, their few possessions on their backs. They laboured towards the distant towers of downtown Shanghai, unaware of everything but the hard asphalt in front of them, ignoring the chromium bumpers and blaring horns of the Buicks and Chryslers whose Chinese chauffeurs were trying to force them off the road.

Standing on my pedals, I edged past a rickshaw loaded with bales of matting, on which perched two old women clutching the walls and roof of a dismantled hovel. I could smell their bodies, crippled by a lifetime of heavy manual work, and the same rancid sweat and hungry breath of all impoverished peasants. But the night's rain still soaked their black cotton tunics, which gleamed in the sunlight like the rarest silks on the fabric counters in the Sun Sun department store, as if the magic of Shanghai had already begun to transform these destitute people.

What would happen to them? My mother was studiously vague about the refugees, but Olga told me in her matter-of-fact way that most of them soon died of hunger or typhus in the alleys of Chapei. Every morning on my way to school I passed the trucks of the Shanghai Municipal Authority that toured the city, collecting the hundreds of bodies of Chinese who had died during the night. I liked to think that only the old people died, though I had seen a dead boy of my own age sitting against the steel entrance grille of my father's office block. He held an empty cigarette tin in his white hands, probably the last gift to him from his family before they abandoned him. I hoped that the others became bartenders and waiters and Number 3 girls at the Great World Amusement Park, and my mother said that she hoped so, too.

Putting aside these thoughts, and cheered by the day ahead, I reached the Avenue Joffre and the long tree-lined boulevards of the French Concession that would carry me to the Bund. Quick-tempered French soldiers guarded the sandbagged checkpoint by the tramline terminus. They stared warily at the empty sky and spat at the feet of the passing Chinese, hating this ugly city to which they had been exiled across the world. But I felt a surge of excitement on entering Shanghai. To my child's eyes, which had seen nothing else, Shanghai was a waking dream where everything I could imagine had already been taken to its

extreme. The garish billboards and nightclub neon signs, the young Chinese gangsters and violent beggars watching me keenly as I pedalled past them, were part of an overlit realm more exhilarating than the American comics and radio serials I so adored.

Shanghai would absorb everything, even the coming war, however fiercely the smoke might pump from the warships in the Whangpoo River. My father called Shanghai the most advanced city in the world, and I knew that one day all the cities on the planet would be filled with radio stations, Hell Drivers, and casinos. Outside the Canidrome the crowds of Chinese and Europeans were pushing their way into the greyhound arena, unconcerned by the Kuomintang armies around the city waiting to attack the Japanese garrison. Gamblers jostled each other by the betting booths of the jai alai stadium, and the morning audience packed the entrance of the Grand Theatre on the Nanking Road, eager to see the latest Hollywood musical, *Gold Diggers of 1937*.

But of all the places of wonder, the Great World Amusement Park on the Avenue Edward VII most amazed me. Unknown to my parents, the chauffeur often took me into its dirty and feverish caverns. After collecting me from school, Yang would usually stop the car outside the Amusement Park and carry out one or other of the mysterious errands that occupied a large part of his day.

A vast warehouse of light and noise, the Amusement Park was filled with magicians and fireworks, slot machines and sing-song girls. A haze of frying fat gleamed in the air and formed a greasy film on my face, mingling with the smell of joss sticks and incense. Stunned by the din, I would follow Yang as he slipped through the acrobats and Chinese actors striking their gongs. Medicine hawkers lanced the necks of huge white geese, selling the cups of steaming blood to passersby as the ferocious