

Inside the *Bar Eugenio* it was warm and light and smelling deliciously of coffee. Outside the mountain air was the opposite—chill, dark and remote. I thanked myself for seeking a haven rather than continuing to walk all the way back down the road towards Sondrio. My friends and I were supposed to have all left the train at Tresivio, just east of the Valtellina's provincial capital. And yet here I was alone, out here at some god-forsaken little railway stop called Chiuro in these mountains of Lombardy.

To my surprise I realised the *Eugenio* barman appeared to be speaking in Chinese on his cellphone! I looked more closely and could see he had Asian features. So welcome to a Chinese barman in a north Italian bar! Abruptly interrupting his conversation, I ordered a coffee and sat down at a vacant table. Amazing I had come to be in this northern Italian province on the Swiss border, cut off from my friends. No passport, no mobile, no luggage, no wallet and only a handful of euros to spend!

How the hell had that train I was in moved on from Tresivio Station so abruptly and with no warning? And before I could even clamber down to the platform? I had passed my luggage to my companions and lingered a second or two out of kindness to let the two elderly ladies ahead of me clamber down first. All because the other damn door of the carriage had become stuck. The two ladies descended safely to the platform but instead the door's sudden closing blocked me. In a moment I was being jerked onwards on an unscheduled journey.

As the train gained speed I was still swearing, using every language that might suffice—Chinese, English, German and finally Italian. Then I managed to locate the guard or ticket collector. She had disappeared along the corridor into the next carriage. Immediately I was pleading with her to halt this rogue rural rail trip while the train was still leaving the station precincts. But she was resolute. Obviously, the timetable was all that mattered to company staff. Now what a mess I was in!

If I kept going on blindly within Italy to the end of the line, we would finally reach the Tirano terminus and Switzerland. But that would leave me an impossible journey trudging back ten or fifteen kilometres to my original destination, just east of Sondrio. And about my friends, would they then still be waiting hopefully in Tresivio?

'But sir,' the official had admonished, 'we're no distance to the next small train stop— Chiuro. There you can get a taxi back to Tresivio.' Momentarily I envied her being close to finishing her shift for

obviously she was already anticipating that event. So my plight was minuscule compared to her need to knock off work promptly! Probably she lived in Tirano anyway.

'Well, next time, madam, make sure I get down onto the platform before you move the train out of the station with no warning! That's *your* job.'

'I'm sorry, sir, we have a strict time allowance for each stop.'

My mood was not improving. I was thinking how little cash I had in my trouser pocket. Could I contact my friends at Tresivio and get them to meet me further up the line? The train seemed to be trundling slower and slower but in the darkness nothing outside the windows was visible except the near-vertical face of the Engadin Alps. I strained to see a signboard or a street-name. Finally we creaked to a stop and this time I shot out the door like a scalded cat and staggered across the platform I was relieved to see at least it was Chiuro station. No one else exited from a carriage and the train whipped away in an instant. The station sure was only a minor train stop. And unmanned. No one else seemed to be in the vicinity, so I sidled into the darkness of the tiny station garden, for an opportunity to relieve myself. Perhaps not the moment to be distracted by a call of nature. Outside in the street, apart from a rumbling *furgoncino*, there were no vehicle movements. Houses all seemed locked and barred. So I figured which must be the direction back down the valley towards Tresivio and began humping along as close to the edge of the street as I could manage. Just in case my friends happened along in a taxi or borrowed car.

In the distance I had heard the traffic of the main road but the street I was following was not getting any closer to that. I wondered if anyone had realised what had happened and would be pursuing the train to rescue me. They would be on the main road anyway and would miss me. It was then I remembered I had passed a small bar or café hundreds of metres back. I turned round and began retracing my footsteps. That was how I had come to be now at *Eugenio's*. The café barman brought my coffee promptly and I thanked him in my halting Chinese. Really, I had to come up with a strategy to meet up with my friends or resume the tedious walk that I had started down the foggy alpine road.

Lucky for me I remembered the location of *Eugenio's* bar, possibly a tribute to the writer Montale. When I got back to it, I dragged myself in there for sanctuary. Just a few local *contadini* still in work-clothes were playing cards at a table with eyes sometimes wandering to an old TV set. They could see

I was not a local and merely nodded in my direction. I didn't know their dialect so merely grunted in return. At that moment a Chinese teenager came in from the kitchen or living area and asked me in Italian if I wanted any food. In my elementary Chinese (and trying to make an impression on her) I asked what they had on the menu. She seemed surprised, if not startled. I tried again in English, thinking it might be more comfortable than her Italian (or my Chinese at least). 'Oh, are you from America?' she asked. 'We lived in Los Angeles before we came here.'

'*Bu, bu, bu. Wo shi Au Daliya ren.*' I quickly replied. 'No, I'm from Australia. But I was once in China. I haven't been in Italy very long with my travelling companions. I'm re-joining them on a walking trip through Switzerland but I've been separated from them.'

'You speak Chinese quite well. Have you been studying in China?'

'*Ydian,*' I responded hesitantly. 'A little. I spent half a year in Shanghai to do a course in Mandarin at a university there. I do miss the Shanghai egg drop soup with tomato. And those Cantonese noodles.'

'We are actually from Hongkong,' she offered. 'But my parents came originally from the extreme north, from Harbin. We even prefer Russian food to Hongkong or Canton food. And Harbin food is more like Western. Sorry, no egg drop soup here.'

'I have just thought of something,' I said. 'I need to contact my friends to come and get me here. I left my cellphone in my luggage with my friends. I have their number but there's no way I can explain to them how to find this Bar. If I call them up on your cellphone, could you please talk to them for me? Give them some directions to find the place? It would be a great help.'

'Oh yes, sir. It's a bit tricky to find *Eugenio's* here from the main road. Just step into the back-room for a moment and, yes, I can give instructions to your friends. Excuse the mess out here. I am studying externally at Milan Polytechnic. I'm going for a job in computing, I hope.' I followed her through the door from the bar and she spoke over her shoulder, 'Just take my chair for now.'

'Thanks, Miss. I'm sorry to be such a trouble when you're trying to work and study. I didn't expect anything like this to happen to me up here in the Valtellina. Hang on...they call me Marco, what's your name?'

'I'm Yun Qiu,' she said happily enough, 'But I had better get back into the bar-room as soon as I can. Or my father will lose his temper.'

'*Guolai, xiao yatou!*' It was her father just at that moment, yelling for her presence.

'I'm in the living room! Just coming, *Ba-ba*,' she replied. And then to me, 'I'll be back, sir. Just give me a moment and I'll help you out.'

Sure enough, as soon as Yun Qiu had taken quickly several churns of milk to her father, she returned with her phone. Briefly she explained in English to my friends where exactly they could pick me up. Then before I left to go back into the bar, Yun Qiu said she'd something special to show me.

'Years ago in Hongkong,' she explained, 'when my great-aunt died, she left me a pair of her best tiny traditional Chinese shoes. It was from the time when from infancy they had their feet crammed into 'lotus shoes', as they called them. Poor woman, she had her feet bandaged from childhood—to keep them ultra-small.'

'Yes, I have heard about that, of course,' I responded. 'It was a Han custom or fashion from the 12th century wasn't it?'

'Yes, the Song Dynasty was 960 to 1279, but that sort of oppression of women lasted until the Communist Revolution in 1949.'

'I am glad to hear it's gone now. I haven't come across such things, except in museums. Not appropriate to your homeland's "belt and road" march these days?'

'Now you can see for real,' Yun Qiu told me, opening an elaborate carved rosewood cupboard in the corner of the room and carefully balancing on her palm a red and royal blue embroidered shoe hardly bigger than a teacup. I moved forward eagerly to take it in my hand but she held the tiny shoe out of reach, 'Not to be touched by you, Marco. My poor aunt's *shihyen* shoe treasures are too precious to me. But I will put it on this cushion so you can see it properly.'

‘But you wouldn’t wear something like that nowadays?’ I asked.

‘Oh, not in China any more, but there’s still so much other Han tradition from the Song and Tang Dynasties in the literary culture about a women’s foot. Especially as with “golden lotus shoes”. Classical Chinese poetry is full of that stuff. It’s all considered rather sensuous.’

‘I daresay it is,’ I laughed rather weakly, ‘I haven’t progressed far enough in my Mandarin to have knowledge of that.’

‘Pity you are travelling on so soon, Marco. Otherwise there’d be time to make you a nice bowl of Heilongjiang noodles. More like Italian spaghetti than those Cantonese rice noodles.’

‘You are very generous, Yun Qiu, but I expect my friends will be here any minute. If I come back this way sometime, I will gladly take you up on that offer. Hope your studies go well but I seem destined to be a foot-slogger (or *füssganger*, as the Germans say). Especially for our next month of tramping through Switzerland.’

And indeed there was instant news, for at that moment shouting came from the bar. When the two of us walked out there (to frowns from her father), I was greeted by the cheery jibes of ‘Mark! Mark! Always chasing skirt!’ from my fellow travellers. Any thoughts of sharing my new knowledge of lotus shoes or Heilongjiang noodles were securely put away.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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Born in Southern Cross, Glen Phillips has taught English for many years at Edith Cowan University In Perth Western Australia, where he currently lives. He is the Founding Director of ECU's International Centre for Landscape and Language. His poetry is represented in 30 anthologies, and over 40 individual volumes. His poems have been awarded prestigious prizes, have been translated into several languages and are object of graduate studies. His more recent books include *Alpi e Prati: Poems of Italy* (2014), *Poems of the Wheatbelt* (2016) and *Crouching Tigers, Hidden Dragons: Chinese Poems* (2016).