

MEETING ECHO

BY DANNY WALLACE

I smiled.

'I have a cat,' I said. 'I would not make a very good architect.'

I didn't know quite where this conversation was going. It is rare that conversations begin with the name of your dad, your pet status and whether or not you'd be any good at building shopping centres. But I did know it was a welcome distraction. I'd been bored senseless. I had seen all there was to see in the airport. I had read most of my newspaper. I'd played the one thing I had on my Walkman to death. I now needed this conversation to work.

'I have two brothers,' Echo told me, brightly. 'Guangdong is warm in the summertime.'

'I have no brothers,' I replied. 'In London it often rains.'

At this – and I have no idea why – she laughed.

I was pleased that this odd connection had somehow sparked into life. Airports are a weird limbo – you're neither in the place you've been, nor in the place you're going. I, like you, have been in dozens of nowheres, nothing places like this. Spent probably days of my life wandering around their bland and manufactured worlds of the same shops, and the same bored people seeing the same boring things. And yet I remember virtually none of them. I know I was there, know I *must* have been there. It's just that they're never where you *want* to be, never where you're going to be. In the history of God's green earth, never has anyone gone to an airport just to go to an airport. And if they have, I'd like you to tell me their name, please, as someone should really alert the authorities.

But this time was different.

'I talk English with my aunt,' she said. 'My aunt name is Feng.'

'I talk English with...most people,' I said, and immediately wished that I hadn't, because if I had understood the rules of this conversation correctly, I would now have to name them all.

Echo was twenty, and I was twenty-two. Her English wasn't the best – as you may have worked out by now – but she said

ECHO CAME FROM a town near Guangdong and her father's name was Jing.

'I come from a town near Guangdong,' she said. 'My father's name is Jing.'

She looked at me, eagerly, awaiting my response. I didn't know quite what my response should be. This was the first thing she had said to me, on the first and last and only time we met, and I was confused. I didn't know who this girl was, I hadn't asked her where she was from, and I was fairly sure I wasn't wearing a T-shirt marked 'Tell Me Who Your Daddy Is'.

'I...er...I'm from England,' I tried, unsurely, putting my newspaper to my lap. 'And my father's name is Ian.'

There was a pause, and then Echo giggled. She was delighted. At the fact that I had responded in kind, I think, rather than at the fact that my father's name is Ian.

We were sitting on two chairs in Shanghai International Airport. My flights had been delayed by three hours. And then

what she knew with enthusiasm and wide, pretty eyes, which smiled even when she didn't. She was as Westernised a girl as I'd seen in Shanghai – low-cut jeans and trainers and Marlboro Lights and a purse with a picture of James Dean on it.

For fifteen minutes or so we swapped simple, unrelated sentences, and we laughed. From what I could work out, Echo was on her way to Paris.

'I go to see my friend and the city,' she said. 'I am very excited.'

'I love Paris in the springtime,' I said. 'I love Paris in the fall.' Echo raised her eyebrows.

'It's a song,' I said. 'It's about Paris.'

She nodded, but still didn't say anything.

'It's about someone who really loves Paris.'

Had I been in a film I daresay I would probably have stood up and sung it at this point, and the whole airport would have started singing too, and then Echo would have probably fallen in love with me. But I was not in a film and so I didn't. I simply said, 'Yep, they *really* love it.'

We both fell silent for a few moments. It seemed like perhaps we'd reached the end of our short conversation. I didn't know where to look; whether I should pick up my paper again and pretend to read. But I didn't want to. In some ways this had been a conversation about absolutely nothing, in a place that seemed absolutely nowhere. But in other ways, I'd actually learnt more about Echo than I knew about most people. I knew about her ambitions, her likes, her dislikes. I knew about her family. I knew where she went to school, who her best friend was, that she liked James Dean better than anyone. The most simple conversation made up of the most tiny details. But sometimes, those can be the most important.

Suddenly, she asked me about my cat.

'It is bigger than a cat,' I said. 'And it looks like Mel Gibson.'

Echo looked shocked. I watched her try to work the

sentences out. And then, when she'd done it, she laughed. And she laughed again, and she reached for my hand and squeezed it. And quicker than I was expecting, she pointed upwards, and told me that her grandmother was a spaceman, and that she lived in the sky.

So I told her that my best friend was an apple and my shoes were made of water, and soon we were swapping sentences of such complete nonsense that the people around us must have assumed we were either simple or high.

But soon after, it was time for Echo to go.

'OK, Danny, I leave now,' she said, getting her things together, then smiling and standing up and kissing me once on the cheek. 'How are you, nice to meet you.'

I scribbled my email address on a napkin and gave it to her, and she said, 'Good, Danny!'

I smiled as she went. It was such a small thing, such a sliver of an event, but it turned a dozen hours in an airport into... well... something that I wouldn't just remember as a dozen hours in an airport. Nowhere was now somewhere – it was the place I met Echo. Thanks to her, a nothing was, for once, a something.

It's been years now. I still hope that one day I'll get an email. Even if it is only to tell me that she still has no pets, or that she's from a town near Guangdong, and her father's name is Jing.