

Under the Abalone

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Johnny, the guide, has a good sense of humor and bad teeth. The van stops, and he looks out the windshield, points at the top of the hill. But my wife has had enough sight-seeing for one afternoon, isn't sure she needs to observe everything on this earth from above, says she'll stay with the kids while I take a look. So they get out to play in the gravel, and Johnny and I walk up the five hundred steps.

This hill that covers the tomb of Qin Shi Huang is manmade and thus symmetrical in all senses. Of course the trees are in perfect rows—cypress, pine, cherry. The tomb hasn't been excavated, Johnny says, because the government isn't sure how to go about preserving whatever they find, but there have been unearthings in other parts of the necropolis: tombs holding the bodies of family members and others who either got in the Emperor's way and were dealt with or helped him along and were honored. Around those tombs still other things were found. Tiles and plinths, gold and silver ornaments, a set of stone armor, a terracotta actor with a tremendous round belly.

The view from the top of the hill is fine and Johnny talks about childless concubines burned and buried. Then we walk back down to the van and head toward a nearby re-creation of the Emperor's tomb as it is now imagined.

Qin Shi Huang died not here but in Hebei, while conducting imperial inspections with the Prime Minister. Because this occurred in July, the body rotted on the way home. To hide the fact and stench of the Emperor's death, the Prime Minister ordered Qin Shi Huang's body to be covered with abalone for the remainder of the trip back to Xian.

I ask Johnny why the death had to be hidden. Johnny winces, which means that this is a tragically stupid question.

Because arrangements had to be made, Johnny says. The Emperor's will had to be forged, and his oldest son had to be persuaded to commit suicide, so that his more malleable second son could ascend instead.

Then Johnny says, This is humorous but sad: 700,000 laborers worked for eleven years to build the tomb of Qin Shi Huang, but his body rotted even before it could be buried.

Ah, hubris, I say.

Yes, he says.

A good lesson for the young people of today, I say.

Yes. Do you say 'abalone' or 'abalone fish'?

'Abalone.' Unless, well, is there maybe a regular fish called the abalone fish?

I don't know.

If there is, that's we call it.

Thank you, he says.

It is sometimes hard to tell if Johnny is joking. We arrive, and all five of us walk down into the deep cold dark, and things are eerie and cheesy at once. Where in the real tomb there are rumored to be rivers of mercury, here there are strings of Christmas lights set on



tinfoil imbedded in papier-mâché riverbeds. Where in the real tomb there are rumored to be massive pearls set in the ceiling, here there are dim yellow light-bulbs. Where in the real tomb there are rumored to be automatic crossbows triggered by stepping on certain stones, here there is an old woman who yells at you if you try to take pictures.

My daughter holds to me tightly, and little can be clearly seen: a coffin with fruit and perhaps weapons; paintings and clay statues depicting Qin Shi Huang in perhaps the act of unifying China; a small-scale model of some complicated arrangement. In better-lit corners there are statues and murals depicting slaves and convicts and soldiers in the act of building the tomb, of casting the warriors, of being tortured for unnamed offenses. And of course when I lift the camcorder, the guardienne is spurred to action and yelling and furious gesturing and threats of forcible removal and jail-time, which makes all the sense in the world, because obviously it would be a horrible thing if videos documenting the exact positioning of the Christmas lights on the tinfoil were to fall into enemy hands.