



Human Interest

After more than a decade of living in the Middle East and Communist China, *The New Yorker* journalist **EVAN OSNOS** has plenty of stories involving danger and intrigue. But it's the story of a nation's rebirth that fascinates him the most

by **BILL SLOCUM** portrait photograph by **STEPHEN VOSS**





Evan and Sarabeth in their Beijing neighborhood

inclined to take a long view.

Evan's older sister, Katherine Sanford, an instructor at Kaia Yoga in Glenville, recalls that when she came home complaining about something that happened at school, her mother would reply: "You know what's unfair? Female genital mutilation."

"She brings a real sense of perspective, a certain way you should treat the world around you," Katherine says.

Today Peter is editor-at-large at PublicAffairs Books, a publishing house he helped found; Susan is an independent communications consultant with various human and women's-rights groups. It may be simplistic to say he supplied the storyteller in his son, and she the conscience, but it seems borne out in a conversation with them.

Talking about Evan's days on the Blues, for example,

Peter remembers a "good player" and, as evidence, references his son's MVP award playing for Pucci Carting. Susan's take is different: "I think his life was in danger on the ice." Evan's own version of the story corresponds more closely to his mother's. The victory he remembers was getting back up and playing some more. "I can't emphasize enough that I was a terrible hockey player," Osnos chuckles. "I was a much better hockey player in my mind than I was on the ice. But it helped introduce me to Greenwich."

Destruction and Prosperity

Newspaper work began with Evan writing for Greenwich High School's student paper, *The Beak*. Eventually he became *The Beak's* coeditor-in-chief (see "Learning to Fly," page 98). Osnos' journalism career began in earnest



Osnos reporting for the PBS documentary series *FRONTLINE*

In the meantime, I had this sense that on the other side of the globe, there was this story about rebirth and the building of a country. I wanted to see that.”

The country was China. Osnos’ time in college had included a semester and a summer in Beijing studying Mandarin. Now he wanted to return, to cover China as a reporter.

At Harvard Osnos found himself attracted to what he calls a “spectacular drama” of modern China, a nation that as recently as 1979 was poorer per capita than North Korea yet reinvented itself as one of the world’s great economic powerhouses. By the dawn of the new millennium, China’s momentum had quickened considerably. It was a time of unimagined prosperity, yet the government remained firmly in charge, shedding blood when challenged, most memorably at the Tiananmen Square demonstrations in 1989.

“That’s a wound on the country that remains unresolved,” Osnos says. “But there was also something amazing about the images of the event. One of the students told a foreign reporter: ‘We don’t know exactly what we want, but we want more of it.’ It was kind of this free-form energy, which had been pent up for decades when China was at its lowest, most poverty-stricken, socialized, kind of lethargic condition. Now it was bursting out.”

What Osnos found in his years writing about China, and which forms the core of *Age of Ambition*, were people channeling sometimes political yearnings for freedom and independence into a society that welcomed individual initiative, as long as it didn’t challenge the status quo.

Stories Osnos filed from China over the years run a wide gamut. Sometimes they cover major news, like a 2011 high-speed railroad crash at Wenzhou that killed forty people and exposed a serious vein of government corruption. More often, they are what might be termed

human-interest pieces, like a retired soldier in southwestern China who discovered truffles growing on his farm and built a mushroom-shaped processing plant to satisfy his European clientele, or the secret house-churches of China’s Christian population.

“I think you have to go out of your way to write a boring China story,” Osnos notes.

Barbara Demick, Beijing bureau chief for the *Los Angeles Times* and author of *Nothing to Envy: Ordinary Lives in North Korea*, says, “I think Evan is the best journalist writing about the Chinese today.”

She notes his fluent Mandarin as well as an ability to be critical without condescension: “He’s not one of these journalists constantly running around with iPod buds in his ears or tapping out text messages. He likes to chat with ordinary people, and those conversations on the street and in airplanes inform his writing.”

Osnos and a photographer once hiked through Sichuan,



Taking a break in the Sichuan Province

mpress her with his sporty interest, even though it had aged considerably since his days at the Dorothy Hamill Rink.

This time, Osnos found victory on the ice. They agreed on a first date and soon discovered much in common. They married in 2011.

"She only found out later I wasn't a jock," he laughs. "The truth has been revealed!"

"Sure, I think there was a sense of us being meant to find each other," Sarabeth concurs. "Since I've known him, he's only played hockey one other time."

Like her mother-in-law, Sarabeth is active in nonprofit activities, in her case as vice president of public affairs at Teach For All, an educational-advancement group. She marvels at her husband's work ethic. If he's writing a piece about a Chinese shipping magnate, for example, she will see him poring over dozens of books with titles like *The History of Cardboard Paper*.

"There is a reason why *The New Yorker* feels more fulfilling to read," she says. "He approaches things with a huge amount of research and thought. He doesn't do anything off the cuff. Like anyone who performs at a very high level,

there is a mix of talent and incredible brute force."

The couple left China in mid-2013. He gives many reasons for that. For one thing, the couple is thinking about children, and air pollution in China is terrible. He also was eager to take on his present assignment, covering national affairs for *The New Yorker*, and to reconnect with family and friends after many years abroad.

"Maybe I've been there so long I'm becoming Confucian, but you start to feel you have a responsibility as a son, as a brother, as an uncle," he says. "I want to be a more present person in people's lives here."

There's no question in Osnos' mind that wherever the future takes him, he will return to China someday: "China is going to be a part of my life forever." **G**

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