

# Friendship Hotel

Dr. Skwara Goes to China



A children's book for grown-ups

*by*

Mathilde Walter Clark





This book is dedicated to the writers of the International Writing Workshop at Hong Kong Baptist University 2011, Brit Bildoen, Hans Christoph Buch, Alan Cherchesov, Merja Virolanien and John Qiangsheng Guo, and to the hosts and organizers, Professor Chung Ling, Diana Au and Ken Cheung.

But above all to Dr. Erich Wolfgang Skwara,  
a poet from Austria.

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Dr. Skwara is a poet from Austria. He has been invited by some people from Hong Kong to come and stay in a hotel with a group of other poets from Europe.



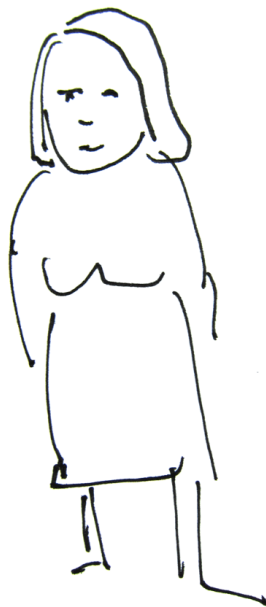
The other poets come from many places.



There is a poet from Finland.



There is a poet from Norway.





There is a poet from Germany.



There is a poet from Denmark.



And a poet from Russia.



But Dr. Skwara is the only poet from Austria.



The other poets call Dr. Skwara many different names.  
Some call him Erich.  
Some call him Wolfgang.  
Others call him Skwara.  
And some call him Dr. Skwara.  
Dr. Skwara doesn't care what people call him.  
He thinks: They can call me whatever they want.  
He knows he is the only poet from Austria.

The people from Hong Kong think of the poets as a group.

They think: »They are all poets. They are all from Europe. So they are a group.«

The people from Hong Kong even have a theme: 'Poets from Europe'.

This is an error.

They don't realize that Dr. Skwara is an Austrian poet. He is an individual and does not belong to a group.

When Dr. Skwara is not invited to Hong Kong to stay in a hotel with other European poets, he teaches at a University in San Diego.

He tries to teach culture to the American people.

This, of course, is impossible.

Dr. Skwara knows this very well, and makes sure that everybody else knows it too.

Dr. Skwara's classes are at nine o'clock in the evening.  
He doesn't want to meet the other professors.  
He prefers not to be part of a group.  
»I am an individual. I don't belong to a group.«





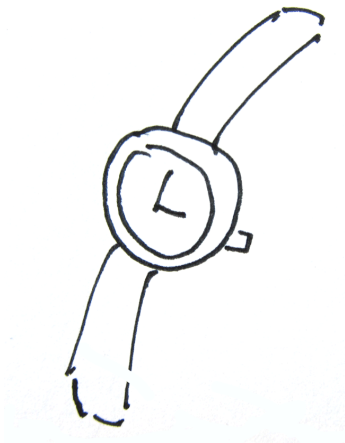
Dr. Skwara prefers to speak German, of course.  
He speaks English very well.  
But he is against the English language.  
So he tries very hard to keep his German accent.  
A small protest, but nevertheless a protest.

Every night, Dr. Skwara smokes his cigar.  
A nice Cuban cigar.  
Some of the other poets in Hong Kong don't like cigar  
smoke.  
So Dr. Skwara sits for himself and smokes his cigar.  
This is alright, Dr. Skwara thinks.  
He is an individual. He doesn't belong to a group.



Dr. Skwara has brought many important things with him from Europe to Hong Kong.

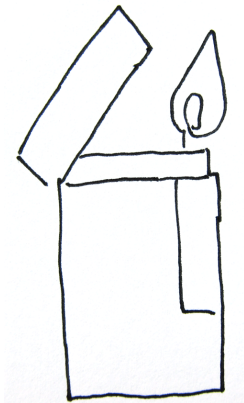
A very expensive Longines watch.



A very expensive Mont Blanc fountain pen.



A very expensive Dupont lighter.



And a walking stick from London.



In Hong Kong Dr. Skwara keeps himself very busy  
with the things he brought from Europe.  
The expensive Longines watch is broken.  
The expensive fountain pen is broken.  
The Dupont lighter doesn't work properly.  
And the walking stick is too short.  
So in Hong Kong Dr. Skwara goes to many shops to fix  
the broken things.  
In the shops they make phone calls to Europe to get  
the missing parts, so they can fix Dr. Skwara's things.  
They are all very nice to Dr. Skwara.



The only thing that cannot be fixed in Hong Kong is the walking stick.

The gentleman who sold it to Dr. Skwara in London insisted it was just perfect - not too short and not too long.

But it is too short.

And so it cannot be fixed.



In Hong Kong Dr. Skwara goes on a trip to Macao.  
In Macao they have lots of casinos.  
He goes there all by himself.  
He is an individual and does not belong to a group.  
Dr. Skwara likes to lose money in the casino.  
It makes him feel good.  
In fact, he prefers it to winning.  
Winning makes him feel guilty.  
It is all very complicated.  
He is a poet from Austria, you see.

In the casinos in Macao he loses a lot of money.  
So he goes to the cash machine to get some more  
money to lose.

He puts his credit card in the machine, and the  
machine spits out bank notes: 1-2-3.

3000 Hong Kong Dollars.

Dr. Skwara is very happy. He takes the money and  
goes back into the casino to lose them.

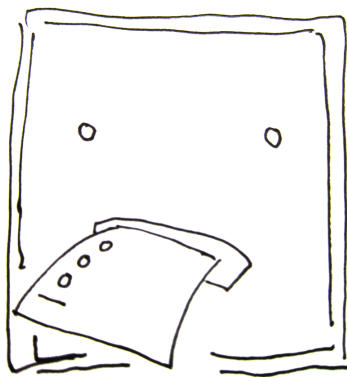
But he forgets to take his credit card.

When you forget your credit card in the machine, the  
machine swallows it.

So when he returns, the credit card is stuck in the belly  
of the machine.

The machine is made like that.

It is all very strange and not like in Europe.



So now Dr. Skwara has no credit card.  
He is unable to lose more money and has no choice but to return to Hong Kong.  
The boat is full, and there are fourteen seats abreast, but only two window seats.  
Dr. Skwara wants a window seat, so he can see the ocean and the tall buildings on Hong Kong Island.  
In Austria they have no ocean or tall buildings, you see.

Dr. Skwara rises and announces to the other passengers on the boat:

»I am a poet from Austria, and I would like to have a window seat.«

A nice man gets up to offer him his seat.

It is a window seat.

Dr. Skwara is very happy.

On the boat from Macao they are all very nice to him.

When Dr. Skwara returns to Hong Kong, the other poets ask him many questions.

»Where have you been?«

»How much money did you lose?«

And “Where is your credit card?«



Dr. Skwara explains to the other poets what happened in Macao.

»I lost a lot of money so I am very happy. But now I don't have a credit card. This is very inconvenient. Now I have to call the bank in Austria, so they can send me a new one.«



The bank in Austria asks Dr. Skwara to send a fax.  
But before he has a chance to send the fax, the people  
from Hong Kong want to take all the poets on a trip to  
Beijing.  
Beijing is in China.  
Hong Kong is in China too, but a different kind of  
China.  
In Beijing they don't know what a fax is.  
This is very inconvenient for Dr. Skwara.  
Dr. Skwara doesn't want to go to Beijing.  
He wants to send his fax – not to go to Beijing.



Travelling is difficult.

In the airport they ask travellers to take off their belts and sometimes their shoes.

Dr. Skwara uses many trays for all his things.

One for his very expensive Longines watch.

One for his very expensive Mont Blanc fountain pen.

One for his very expensive Dupont lighter.

And one for his Cuban cigar.

But he makes sure to keep his wallet in his pocket.

When he goes through the security check they always insist on fondling Dr. Skwara up.

Dr. Skwara likes this.

Especially if they are puritan Americans.

In this case they are shy Chinese.

He tells the security guards that he likes being fondled,

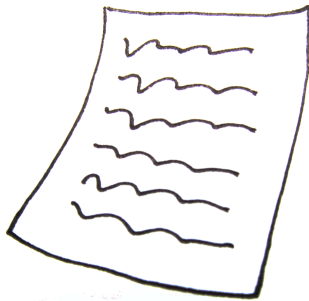
just to see their reaction.

But afterwards he says: »Travelling is very difficult.«



In Beijing the poets are to stay in a hotel.  
Each writer gets their own room.  
Dr. Skwara's room has a window.  
But it turns out, it is not a real window.  
It is facing a wall.  
The wall is 10 centimeters from the window.  
So in effect the room has four walls but no window.  
In Dr. Skwara's room there is no toilet paper.  
The room is very cold: 14 degrees celsius.  
And there is a mosquito in the room  
It is not really a room, Dr. Skwara thinks to himself.  
It is a grave.

How to use a toilet without toilet paper?  
Of course he could use the fax for the bank in Austria.  
But Dr. Skwara will not do that.  
He will not give in to barbarianism.



In Austria the old Emperor decided that all houses should have three things.

A door you can open.

A door you can close.

And a window.

If the old Emperor was still alive, Dr. Skwara thinks, he would surely have added:

And a nice room temperature. And toilet paper.

Dr. Skwara wishes the old Emperor was still alive.

The first night in Beijing Dr. Skwara sleeps with his coat on.

It is like sleeping in a grave.

A cold, dark windowless grave, a noisy grave where you cannot go to the toilet even if you have to.

From Dr. Skwara's grave he can hear the other poets sleeping in their graves.

It is a terrible experience.

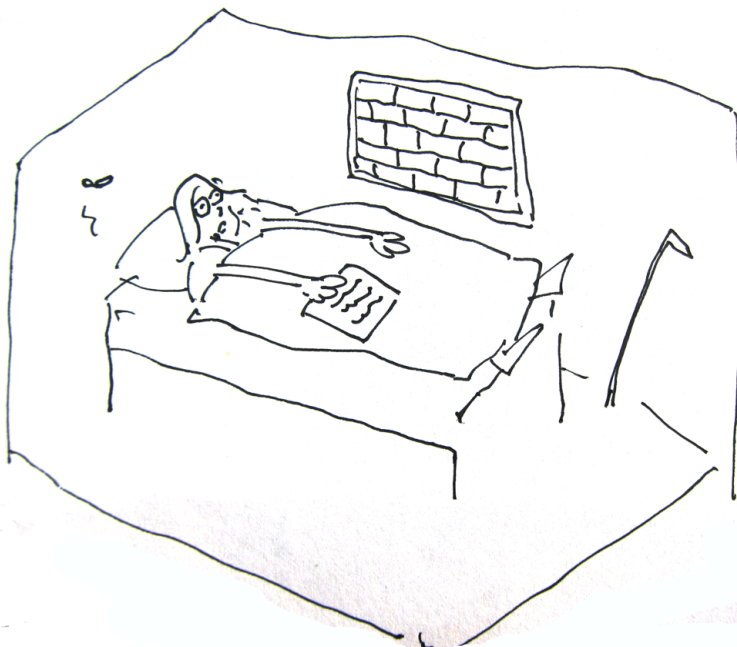
A terrible, terrible experience.

When Dr. Skwara gets up the next morning, he knows what it is like to be dead. He has practiced all night, you see.

He is cold and miserable and hasn't slept.

And he still hasn't sent his fax to the bank in Austria.





The Chinese woman at the reception doesn't understand what a fax is.

Dr. Skwara tries to explain to her what it is.

»It is a piece of paper that you put through a machine in order to inform my bank in Austria that I should be given a new credit card,« he says.

»Some machine in Macao swallowed my credit card, you see, and I need to get a new one, so I can lose more money. It is very important. Please understand.«  
But the Chinese woman does not understand.



Dr. Skwara asks the Chinese people at the reception many questions.

»Why is there no window in my room?«

»Why is it so cold.«

And he adds: »Why is there no toilet paper?«

He says: »I want another room.«

The Chinese people at the reception say: »All the rooms are like this.«

»It is systemic,« they say. »It is the system.«

Dr. Skwara informs the other poets and the people  
from Hong Kong:  
»Beijing doesn't like me.«



Dr. Skwara finds Beijing to be a hostile and barbarian place.

To begin with people in Beijing don't know how to speak Chinese properly.

In Hong Kong people speak proper Chinese.

But in Beijing the Chinese language is vulgar and wrong and has many sloppy sounds.

Dr. Skwara would like to go back to Hong Kong where they speak proper Chinese.

The people from Hong Kong keep Dr. Skwara very busy in Beijing.

The poets go to formal dinners to eat food and shake hands with Chinese people.

The poets go to recitals to read their poems to the Chinese people.

And the poets go sightseeing to see the Forbidden City and The Great Wall.

At the formal dinners the Chinese hosts order a lot of food.

They put all the food in the middle of a big round table, and then everybody eats.

There are small snails, and sticks of a strange root.

There is turtle soup, and one thousand year old eggs.

Fried bird's heads served on a plate.

All amidst a mountain of flowers.

But Dr. Skwara never gets his own plate with his own food.

He doesn't like this. He is against this way of eating.

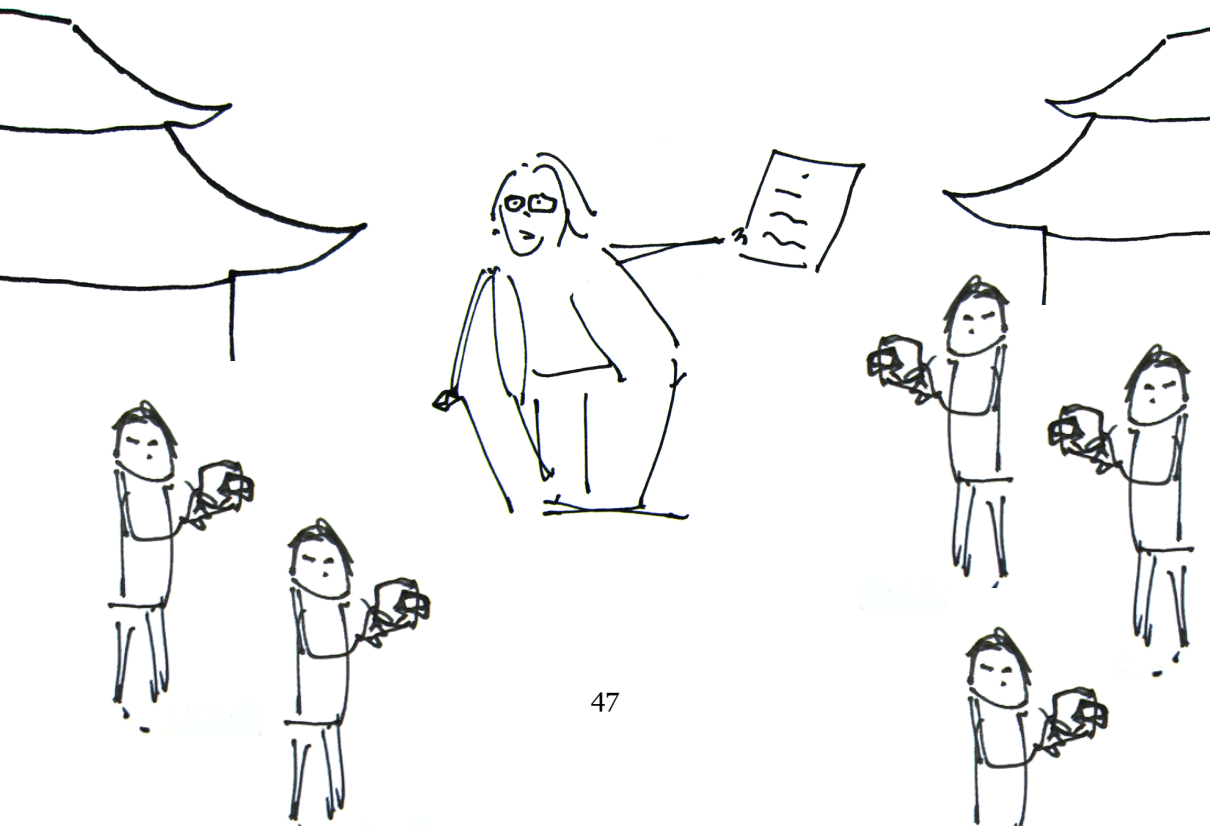
Dr. Skwara is an individual and he prefers his own plate and his own food.



The Chinese people eat all their food with chopsticks.  
And they make a lot of noise when they eat.  
But Dr. Skwara is smart.  
He brings his own knife and fork to the formal dinners.  
This is the proper way to eat.



In the Forbidden City there are many palaces.  
And behind the palaces are more palaces.  
And behind those are even more palaces.  
These are for the Emperor's wife and for the Emperor's  
concubines.  
Dr. Skwara says to the other poets and the people from  
Hong Kong: »If I could only be Emperor, I would like  
to stay in Beijing.«  
»Otherwise not.«  
»Beijing doesn't like me,« he says.



Dr. Skwara has a theory on mistresses and languages. Every language in the world creates a different reality and life.

If you have a lover in one language, you must never betray that person with someone in that same language.

That's betrayal.

But you have a right to have a lover in every language.

That is not a moral violation.

This is how Dr. Skwara knows so many languages.

German, Italian, French, English, Spanish and many more to come.

Unfortunately Dr. Skwara's wife and some of his mistresses don't understand his theory.

At The Great Wall there are many strange signs.  
In the toilet it says: 'Close to the distance near  
civilization'.

This is Chinese for: 'Take a good aim. Don't miss the  
toilet'.

At the wall itself is another sign, a warning sign of  
sorts. It says: 'Warm prompt',  
This is Chinese for: 'Gentle reminder' or 'kind request'.  
The Great Wall is a great mystery to Dr. Skwara.

At The Great Wall Dr. Skwara notices something else that is strange.

The Chinese have stacked the bricks in a very odd way. The bricks are not horizontal like they ought to be, but go up and down, up and down like a snake gliding through the mountains.

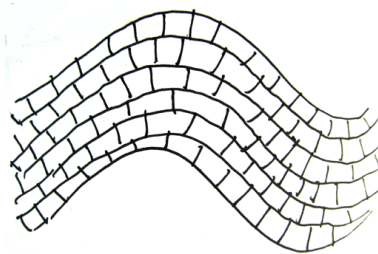
This makes Dr. Skwara very seasick.

So instead of walking up and down the dizzyingly stacked bricks, Dr. Skwara sits down to write in his diary.

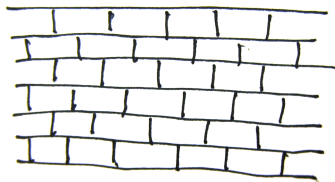
The Chinese should have asked the Germans to help them, he writes.

The Germans know how to build proper walls.

Chinese wall:



German wall:







Dr. Skwara thinks to himself: The Great Wall is not so great after all.  
To be honest, he'd expected something more.  
It wasn't all that big.  
They should call it The Little Wall.  
It is a bonzai wall, really.

But as Dr. Skwara is about to get up and leave with the other poets, something happens.

A nice Chinese woman offers to sell Dr. Skwara a walking stick.

It is a walking stick that is not too short and not too long.

It is a perfect walking stick.

Not even in London can you get a walking stick this perfect.



In Beijing Dr. Skwara and the other poets go to important seminars to discuss important matters with Chinese poets.

They go to the university to read their poems to the Chinese students.

And they go to a bookshop to read their poems too.

This is good, Dr. Skwara thinks.

A bookshop is the best place to steal paper.

So from the toilet he steals a roll of toilet paper to keep in his room.

He tells the other poets: »Paper is paper is paper.«

After all, it is a poetry recital.



After Dr. Skwara has read his poems to the Chinese students in the university, he goes to urinate in the edible water room.

‘Edible water room’ is Chinese for ‘toilet’.

Dr. Skwara takes the German poet with him, so they can speak German together while they urinate.

»Es stinkt schrecklich,« says Dr. Skwara from his booth.

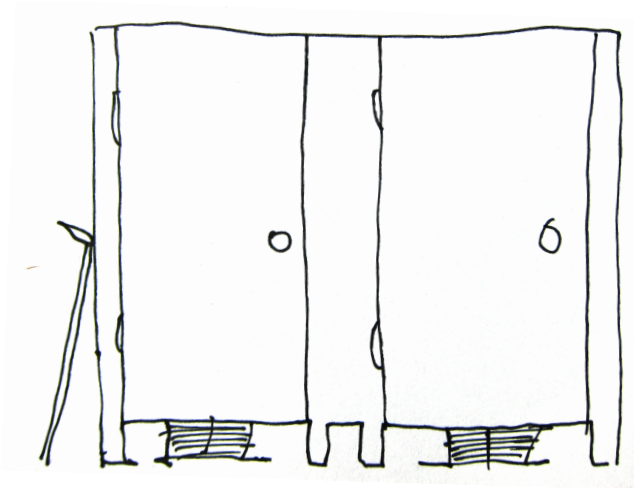
It means: It stinks terribly.

But the poet from Germany has already left.

In the booth next to Dr. Skwara someone else is now urinating.

Dr. Skwara does not know this.

## Edible water room:



From the booth a strange voice speaks to him and confirms Dr. Skwara's observation. »Yes,« the strange voice says in German. »It is so true, it stinks terribly in here.«

At first Dr. Skwara thinks: »This is the German poet.« But then he thinks: »His voice has changed.«

When Dr. Skwara comes out of his booth he sees that it is a Mongolian invader. He is black in the face, like parchment.

»What are you doing here?« Dr. Skwara asks.

»I am repairing the toilets,« The Mongolian invader says.

»How come you speak German?« asks Dr. Skwara.

»I lived in Düsseldorf for six years,« says the Mongolian invader.

»But why did you come back here,« asks Dr. Skwara.  
»There were no toilets to repair in Germany,« says the Mongolian invader.

Dr. Skwara agrees. In Germany everything works.  
Then he asks the Mongolian invader: »Can you repair the bad smell?«

The Mongolian invader says: »No. It is systemic. It is the system.«

Dr. Skwara thinks to himself: This is strange. There are all these professors at the university and they don't speak a word of German. And then you go to the toilet, and the plumber speaks German fluently.

This is all very odd.



And Dr. Skwara still has to send his fax.  
Dr. Skwara thinks: »Beijing doesn't like me.«



But the last day in Beijing several things happen:

- 1) Dr. Skwara gets a good night's sleep. He is getting used to his grave. Now he wants to sleep there all the time. »I like my room«, he tells the other poets. »If the old Emporer had lived today, he would have declared that no rooms should have windows. They should never be warmer than 14 degrees celsius, and there should be no toilet paper.«
- 2) Dr. Skwara goes to a restaurant on campus.
- 3) A girl asks him if he has a faculty ID.
- 4) He shows her his faculty ID from the university back in Hong Kong.
- 5) Nothing happens.
- 6) Then he shows her a Chinese banknote with a

picture of Chairman Mao.

7) The girl smiles.

8) Then he is served spaghetti bolognese.

9) His very own plate to share with nobody.

10) The spaghetti is better even than in Italy.

11) They put something in it, something unusual, onions cut in small pieces, something they would never do in Italy.

»This is proper spaghetti bolognese, Dr. Skwara thinks to himself. He will remember to tell the Italians how to make proper spaghetti bolognese next time he is in Italy.

After he has eaten, he gives the Chinese girl more notes with pictures of Chairman Mao.  
And then the Chinese girl smiles at him again.  
She has a beautiful smile.  
Dr. Skwara is very happy.  
»Maybe I should learn Chinese?« he thinks.

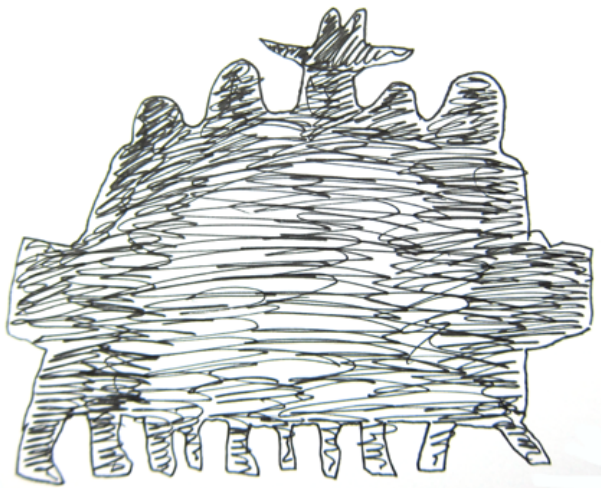


When Dr. Skwara returns to the hotel, the people from Hong Kong tell him, they have sent his fax to Austria. Dr Skwara says to the other poets and the people from Hong Kong:

»I think Beijing is warming up to me.«

»I think Beijing likes me after all.«

After that the people from Hong Kong bring Dr. Skwara and the other poets back to Hong Kong where they speak proper Chinese.



And in Dr. Skwara's suitcase, a tiny mosquito is traveling with him from Beijing to keep him company in his room.

