

✧ *Peregrine*

An English Companion to *Chutzpah* Magazine

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A Gift from Bill Gates

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A Gift from Bill Gates

Wu Ang

My name is Thousands (“Yiqianji”) and I’ve worked in all sorts of jobs. Most recently, I’ve been spending my time at home writing, and in my spare time, help my mother out picking vegetables. (With the recession, a good job’s hard to find.) Every time I introduce myself, ever so politely, to strangers, I get a box on the ears and they shout: “What decent person would ever choose a Japanese name?”

I’m always flummoxed. As I finger my flaming cheek, I wonder why they don’t listen to my careful explanations. People nowadays are so restless. They listen to half of what you’re saying, they have half-marriages and even half-deaths: it’s not uncommon for someone on their death bed to crawl out and carry on picking vegetables.

I rub my stiff jaw and patiently carry on with what I was saying: I wasn’t called Thousands a year ago, but a writer’s got to have a pen name. It’s like racing cyclists have to put on their helmets before they work those muscles. I wasn’t happy with my original name. Until I got the right pen name, I couldn’t get down to writing.

The great thinker and man of letters Lu Xun had 156 pen names, so many that when he left his office and went home, the house filled with an endless stream of people, all crowded round Xu Guangping and Zhou Haiying [his wife and son] and waiting to acknowledge him as the true Master. I can’t get used to ordinary pen names so I chose Thousands.

So what were you called before? Hundreds?

What an intelligent fellow. He’ll be guessing my future pen name next. Keeping company with bright people saves a lot of trouble. When I was shivering outside the Writers Association building, standing right in a heap of snow to demonstrate my loyalty, in the hopes I could wangle a new set of woolly underwear out of them, I felt quite disconsolate. It was my fate to be one of thousands!

It was just past New Year that I made up my mind that I was going to be a writer. We’d had the New Year festivities, done all the eating and drinking, and then I came to the decision that I was going to start a new life as a writer, under the name Thousands.

I used a bit of money I’d saved from work, together with what my Mum had put by for medical expenses, and I got myself a nice desk and a high-backed chair, a stack of rough paper and a dozen pens.

To start with, I really was a Hundreds man: I only wrote a hundred characters a week. My Mum didn't have many vegetables for me to pick either. So I followed the injunction of the American-based Chinese writer Ha Jin; even if I didn't write anything, I still had to sit at my desk for eight hours before I "left work". A writer has to behave like a writer, just like a monk when he "goes to work" has to sit in front of the Buddha. Even when you've had enough of going out to work, you've got to keep up your work at home.

I ran my hands around the edges of the desk, tidied the drawers, put the caps back on the pens and returned them to the pen stand.

I may have achieved purity of heart but the restless world outside would not leave me alone. The Writers Association asked me to give talks and the Federation of Literature and Art wanted me to report on my thinking. I avoided them all and took the phone off the hook. I even locked the door which led to my mother's flat and simply refused to go and see her.

But my mother wasn't having any of it! She knew I hadn't been to pick vegetables for two weeks, and she was worried about whether the kid was OK. I was out of work, and now I couldn't be bothered to go and pick vegetables. She came over to give me a piece of her mind.

A thousand *li* journey begins with a single step, son, she counselled me. Don't sit there all day like a stone statue, or you'll have me worried to death!

I was 35 years old, a grown man. I could run my own life and I wasn't going to spend it picking vegetables. Just wait till you're dead, then of course I'll go and visit you.

My Mum gave me the usual slap around the ears. The difference was that she was left-handed so it was my right cheek which had the good fortune to get the blow. That right cheek was ignored by everyone except my mother.

After that, in my novel, she passed away with a scowl on her face, bequeathing her fat body to me.

Luckily, she still felt she had a duty to look after me, as my mother, and she left me a bowl of clear broth. As I sadly drank it, my belly felt the first stirrings of comfort since the New Year festivities. Beef bone broth! The bones butchered in Cattle Street in the authentic way from a fresh beef carcass. My mother had got on the light rail, then changed to the subway at Sihui East, exited at Guo Mao Station and ridden two bus routes, just to get the pick of the beef bones before the crowds swamped the market.

She knew what she was doing, my Mum. There are only two bones on a carcass that you can make broth from.

Too bad that a bowl of broth was all she left me. She was as honest as the day, so there was nothing else. Just my luck! Once she'd gone up to heaven, taking with her fond memories of my sincerity and determination, my writing speed increased. Now I could write a thousand characters a week.

So I upgraded my pen name to Version 2.0 – Thousands.

Towards evening, my friend Mozi [the ancient philosopher] came to visit.

He had a very high forehead, and wore an old, dark blue overcoat and a matching floppy hat with a brim. He looked pretty worn down, the spitting image of an old Beijinger from Cultural Revolution times. Just the way we Chinese don't know how far it is from Alaska to Las Vegas, he was equally vague about China's recent history. He lived in a different era – sunless and gloomy, without

electric lights or telephones – grubbing bits of cash here and there and dreaming of fulfilling a life-time ambition to go on a long journey to the future.

Mozi was a frugal man. He thought he'd take a train to 2009. Why 2009? Even he couldn't tell you that. Just the luck of the draw, I suppose. He made a guess at any old date that sounded good. How was he to know his train was going to stop in 1971 where a swarm of Red Guards wanted a ride to Beijing's Tian'anmen, to be inspected by Chairman Mao. Mozi was so excited at the sight of all these young people dressed in their dark blue coats and floppy hats that he took off his own linen gown and offered it to one of the boys. The boy took it and, instead of offering polite thanks, jabbed Mozi with the butt of his gun, making a dent in his belly. Luckily it didn't bleed. Mozi was too old to bleed.

The train tooted and moved off, leaving Mozi standing naked on the platform, his ribs sticking out like a mule's, his penis wrapped in a withered leaf and tied with a bit of string. He cut a comical figure, the absolute opposite of a dignified ancient. The Little Red Guards running to and fro were kids living in their own era and he was nothing to them. They kept treading on his toes and punching him on the arms till he was black and blue.

"Ai, ai, ai!" he cried. "I'm the inventor of the scale ladder!" But no one paid any attention.

"I'm ...the... inventor ...of... the... scale... ladder!"

At midnight on the third day, he was so hungry he started to groan. Then he kept shouting for a sip of water. What he got instead was a kick from a passenger in a hurry to get on the train. He flew down the platform and ended up sliding into the corner of the store-room. Here he came face to face with a dead Little Red Guard who, by the look of him, had been dead for some time.

There was nothing to fear from a corpse. Mozi had fought in a war and he knew how to deal with the dead.

He swiftly divested the body of its dark blue coat and hat, put them on, and got on the night train. Suddenly, people's attitude to him changed. He was one of them, submerged in a sea of dark blue. He did not dare mention his invention of the scale ladder again. The scale ladder was a dangerous object, capable of taking you up the Tian'anmen Gate and must on no account be mentioned!

Mozi was a philosopher, and in philosophy, you learn from your experiences.

My friend Mozi was not a Japanese; still less was he a woman. Women were hopeless – they cut their hair in fringes, wore brassieres, and heaven knows what! He was a philosopher. Anyone who was well-read knew him. How did I end up with such a prestigious friend who'd been dead for so long? Well, that's one of the advantages of being a novelist. You can be friends with anyone when you're writing a book. If you don't believe me, wait till I write about Bin Laden and Diana. They're my good friends too. That sounds like name-dropping, which is a crude habit, but I'm not ashamed. I'm an eccentric with lofty ambitions to write novels.

Unusual things did happen, such as when I lost the ten yuan my Mum gave me to go downstairs and buy vegetables. I insisted that it had gone down the crack in the vegetable cart. The old woman hawker was outraged that I should try and pull this trick on her. After that, she was cool towards my whole family. Even my wife suffered. The old hawker would charge other people 50 cents for a pound of tomatoes but made my wife pay 55 cents, which was quite unjust.

Talking of my wife, that was a sad business. I wrote her out of my life long before my Mum's disappearance.

That woman's back was badly put together and she spent all day at home racketing around, and had PMT for 35 days every month. She was forever sending me out to buy her *umeboshi* juice or getting me to find a good doctor for her uncle's tinnitus. I got fed up with it. As for our sex life, that had secretly been going wrong for ages. When I was on top getting on with it, she'd be underneath saying it hurt. I had to stop and get down and look at her but everything was fine down there, she was as wet as if a couple of gigolos had been at her. I was furious, and turned over and went to sleep. She kept getting more annoyed and harping on about divorce. Half the adults on our street were divorced. I had no intention of following that trend. But you couldn't divorce a dead person, could you?

When finally I got absolutely livid, I got up, threw on my clothes, and went to my desk. I turned on the lamp, took a pen and, in a couple of strokes, wrote her out of my life.

I regretted it straightaway. It's not easy to find a wife. I had to propose three times and it was tough making her agree. Writing her out took five minutes. I did regret it but we had no sex life to speak of and I regretted that even more. But I couldn't find her again no matter how hard I searched. Six years of marriage and she was gone. I was desolate. My Mum asked after her and I muttered something about her going home to look after her sick mother. Then my Mum asked where our five-year-old son was. I stammered something else. I always stammer when I'm nervous. It looked suspicious that all the important people in my family had gone. My Mum had never got on with my wife but she was very close to her grandson. She asked after him every day. There was nothing I could say.

If my son didn't go with his mother, I couldn't look after him.

If I'd chucked him at my Mum, she would have been fed up.

Just now the two women were probably having a good time up there in space.

Luckily, since I'd written my Mum out as well, granny and grandson could have a happy re-union.

Space was a free and easy place where you owned nothing so there was nothing to lose as the Daoists say, and chaos reigned. Adults didn't need to see each other, so mother-in-law and daughter-in-law never need meet. The daily melodramas could stop.

That was the reason why I was now living alone.

I'd better get to the point.

All three of my nearest and dearest had gone and I hadn't had to go to the hospital once, or the cemetery, or fork out Y888 on a casket. Even if they did "buy two, get one free", and threw in the child's casket for good measure, that would still have come to Y1776. Our poor family didn't even have Y1000 to rub together.

Heaven must have taken pity on poor, lonely me.

The house was quite quiet and the early autumn sunshine blazed in making the dust motes glitter, when I got up in the morning. I folded the quilt on the bed, put my wife's pillow back in its place on the bed, and left the old dent made by her body. To keep fond memories alive, I lined up three pairs of slippers under the bed, with my son's small pair in the middle, his parents' on either side, so we could be together. No, wait, I still needed to put my normal slippers on to go and take a shower.

More than half the white tiles were missing from the bathroom walls. Where had they gone to all these years? I'd asked my wife a number of times but she never gave me a straight answer. She would lie about anything, that woman. Well, one shouldn't talk ill of the dead. I faced the messy walls and got under the shower, yelling as I did so.

That should tell you that the shower water was cold.

It cost quite a bit to heat the water. Besides, we needed to be motivated to be writers. So the cushy life wasn't for us. Murakami runs marathons, Tolstoy rode a bicycle. Sadaam Hussein the novelist was still working out up till the day before he went to the scaffold. Most of his body was constrained by his body suit, but he could still swivel his eyeballs. They wept as they looked at the prison, making his jailers tremble.

For writers, swivelling the eye balls is a crucial form of exercise. If you can do that, it means you're still connected to this world. Look at the severely disabled writer on physics, Stephen Hawkins. He must have so many stories swimming around in his head. I saw him on TV once, and I just knew, from his expression, that he was full of stories.

However, people think when he swivels his eyes and blinks, it's astrophysical motion.

An astronomical error!

Under cover of the icy cold shower water, I gave a quick roll of my eyes and a few yelps. My first emission of the day spurted out like pee and was washed away down the plug-hole. That way I could sit in peace for the rest of the day, the only movement left in the universe the pen tip rustling as it came into contact with the paper.

See how simple it is to be a writer compared with waiting desperately in the office for the works bus or riding my son to school through the snow. Six months went by like that and I produced a draft written on both sides of a stack of paper. I had no money for more paper so the novel came to a temporary halt. I felt like giving myself a couple of days off, like a real white-collar worker.

Once on holiday, I began to feel lonely. I missed my fellow human beings, their talk, their cheerful teasing, the way they patted me on the head. It was true, I hadn't been face-to-face with a living being for a very long time.

Then that very day my friend Mozi came to visit.

It was obvious what he had come for. He had no money. He may have been a great thinker but he was usually broke. I was idle today so he asked me to write an idle note in case some rich person wanted to show his sincere regard for us. What rich person? I only knew two: Bill Gates and the Hong Kong businessman, Sir Li Ka-shing. But why not play for big stakes and go for Mr Moneybags himself – Bill Gates?

It was midday and you could have heard a pin drop in my flat. It was a million miles from the outside world. I was on the seventh floor and there was no lift. Let Bill Gates pay a visit, top-secret. There was no need to bother with the transport network, business class flights or the media.

I felt incredibly cheerful. I had a good friend to visit. Not like when my Mum was there, refusing to take no for an answer. I got Mozi to sit down quietly and brought him the remains of the broth. He licked the bowl clean and waited while I prepared the text. No need for one thousand characters, 150 were enough.

I found a cigarette box in the drawer, pulled it apart, smoothed it flat and wrote.

Twenty minutes later, the doorbell rang. Bill Gates hadn't wasted a moment – here he was. He looked just like in the newspapers and on TV with his side parting, and his slightly foolish face, dressed in an orange checked shirt and Levi jeans. He strode in with typical American friendliness, and we didn't even have to broach the subject. He just asked us straight up how much we wanted.

I glanced at Mozi, who said nothing.

At critical moments like this, philosophers always go quiet. It's really irritating!

I hazarded a figure.

500 million?

Just saying that amount of money made us bite our tongues in shock.

The blood gushed from our mouths.

Was this real human blood? Bill Gates seemed incredulous. He reached for Mozi's empty soup bowl, made us press our faces together and held the bowl underneath to catch the fluid. Once the bowl had filled half-way, the bleeding from our tongues finally stopped. In good, honest American English, Bill said how sorry he was that we'd hurt ourselves.

It was too bad our English was so poor we couldn't make head or tail of what he said.

We must have looked astonished, like cartoon characters – mouths agape and the words coming out in a balloon.

Mozi was ready to run and ask his ancient friends for help but I stopped him. Even if he found one, he'd only understand archaic English, pre-Shakespeare, that even Queen Elizabeth 1 couldn't answer. Even when Mozi himself was talking, I sometimes had to look up what he was saying in the *Ci Hai* dictionary. Sometimes he didn't use any punctuation, and he used old words. It drove me mad.

Anyway, after a bit of discussion, we decided to leave the trifling matter of communication for the moment. We took the cheque and went to the window, where the light was better, and took a good look: on it there was a "5", written in Arabic numerals, followed by eight noughts.

It really was 500 million! And it was in American dollars. In front of the string of figures was a symbol any idiot could understand: \$.

Mozi poked me. Bill Gates was still looking around the room, apparently filled with curiosity at the first ordinary Chinese flat he'd seen. He knocked on the partition walls, felt the matting on the bed, and picked up the vegetable basket in the kitchen to see how heavy it was.

I thought he might ask me next where all my family were. But foreigners are always very polite and maybe he thought he didn't know me well enough to go prying into my family background.

I certainly wouldn't welcome that. Imagine if the FBI and CSI were to turn up with all their advanced equipment and their testing powders and their blue and red handsets, poking their noses in here and there. They'd soon discover my mother and wife and son had been here until recently, and had suddenly disappeared.

I was in absolutely no doubt that this was to be avoided at all costs.

I gave Mozi a meaningful look.

I'd always been close to Mozi. We had no need for words. We were like the Brokeback Mountain lover boys in the town of Sandy, Utah, in the 60s. Sandy was pretty reactionary actually. They refused to allow the film *Brokeback Mountain* to be shown there.

Of course, there wasn't anything iffy about my relationship with Mozi. If I wrote just so

that good-looking men could hang out together into my stories, that would be so superficial, and besides, Mozi wasn't even handsome. My Mum wouldn't have stood for it either. She used to box the ears of all the college mates I brought home, till they felt so uncomfortable they all sneaked off and never came back.

And she used to tell me off for bringing these young men home just to show off my stamp collection.

Well anyway, Mozi gave me a poke and, while Bill Gates was in the toilet, I quickly went to the table, took my pen and scribbled a few words. In no time at all, there was the sound of the toilet flushing and I went in to take a look. Well I never! There wasn't a sign of Bill Gates. He'd vanished just like a hard turd disappears round the S-bend.

How very appropriate! The toilet faced in the direction of the great wide western world.

I still held that cheque signed by Bill Gates in my hand. What should we do with it? Was there a bank nearby with the funds to cover it? Mozi asked me how modern banks worked. He knew the classics – they dated from the Spring and Autumn period – and he told me he'd seen the prophecy in the bamboo scrolls which said, in a very convoluted way, that: In the future, people will be able to save their money in public institutions, like grain stores, and when you deposit your money, the manager will give you a slip of paper proving your money is with him.

Any age has plenty of bright people, bright prophets amongst them, and how they chatter. I seriously regretted that I, Mr Thousands, hadn't been born back then in Mozi's time. I could have been a prophet too, and told everyone all about banks and savings and what-not. After all, I knew today's society inside-out, didn't I? Mozi actually said (and this was not just a made-up story): The prophet used to get paid a salary, and at the end of each year, would be rewarded by the king with a new young wife. Since he got a new wife every year, his wife was always sixteen years old. She'd retire at seventeen.

I remember the opening lines of Marguerite Duras' novel *The Lovers*, where the heroine cries: "I grew old at eighteen". Huh! The prophet's wife beat you to it. She got old before you.

We chatted about strange tales of olden times as we went to the nearest bank to draw the money.

It was the first time I'd gone any distance from home for six months or so.

It was a small commercial bank with only two rows of seats for customers, all occupied.

I took a number from the machine at the door. On the way I'd impressed on Mozi that he should keep his mouth shut in public. Spouting on about inventing the scale ladder, it wouldn't work in today's honest-to-goodness society. In fact, I told him, someone would probably dial 110 and the police would be along. The police had inherited some things from the Red Guards, like their dark blue uniforms.

So of course, Mozi didn't dare open his mouth. He just sat there gazing around him with that ancient guileless expression, savouring the atmosphere of a modern bank. One by one, the people in front of us were called to the window. I noticed that no one was drawing anything like the amount we were taking out. With that kind of money, we could buy the whole bank building and all its be-suited employees and still have money left over.

I couldn't help smiling. When he caught my smile, Mozi burst into speech. It drives an ancient mad if he hasn't been allowed to speak in the public arena for a long time. There were so many new

things, even the two modern women sitting opposite us, talking and swearing.

“What are you smiling at?” he asked.

“At how we cornered Bill Gates and flushed him down the toilet.”

“He wouldn’t have died, would he?”

“Oh no. I’m quite sure that anyone past or present is still alive, just in another space. You used to be dead too, but now you’re as alive as I am, sitting in a queue, waiting for your number to be called, to withdraw money. How can we explain that?”

From my point of view, killing someone isn’t a crime, it’s just pushing them into a temporary existence in an adjoining space. Maybe in the process a bit of blood’s spilled, someone gets a bit less air, gets their neck broken, but they also get a bit of a rest, and can take care of themselves. In our space, everyone is so desperately tired. Dead, they could go and see scenery that was out-of-this-world, experience the lack of pressure, the stillness, the relaxed pace of life in the next-door world. They could watch the daily rhythm of the sun and the stars, and the sandpipers preening themselves on the river shore.

And they even might marry a man or woman also on the other side, and have children and create a great dynasty.

Though that old *pater familias*, given half a chance, might sneak back to this world and impregnate some woman or other, and make that womb swell up and become a baby. Having a baby, a new human, beats anything in the other world. Maybe it’s in our narcissism nature to feel that the most delectable thing is what we hold in our own arms.

As I talked, Mozi sank into deep thought. He really could not understand the ins and outs of what I was saying. He would never be able to, he was just too ancient in his way of thinking.

He didn’t even understand why customers kept getting up one by one and going to the window, receiving a bit of money or giving it to the cashier. What actually was this all about?

I’m sorry, dear Mr Mozi, I really haven’t the patience to explain it all to you. What we had to do now was to withdraw our money, then get a taxi home and carry all this money secretly upstairs without letting the taxi-driver know. Otherwise, all the ordinary folks in Beijing, and even those in Beijing on business, would all know about it that very afternoon. Then we’d go out with a stash of the cash on us and take another taxi, still making absolutely sure the taxi-driver didn’t get wind of it. We’d keep our faces expressionless as we chatted to him about the goings-on in the Communist Party as we got him to take us to the Lichang Seafood Restaurant near the Third Ringroad for a meal.

We’d order an emperor crab with the biggest, fattest claws, a lobster sashimi and ten oysters, and devour all that fishy flesh with its delicious juices. We’d follow it up with barbecued leg of lamb, so succulent you just had to pluck a morsel with your chopsticks and put it between your lips for the fatty muttoney meat to slide down to your belly. And we’d wash it all down with twelve pulls of freshly brewed draft beer.

Cold beer and barbecued lamb certainly go well together!

After we’d eaten, we’d belch comfortably as we walked along the street in search ofBuddha have mercy on me, women is what I’m trying to say. And since now we’re so well off, why walk? We’d rent a plane and fly through the endless azure skies....

Until we found the most curvaceous, clear-skinned, most expensive...

...woman.

I hadn't taken into account the US dollar-RMB exchange rate. The 500 million dollars we were getting would make roughly 3,400 million RMB. With that kind of money, why bother renting one plane? We could rent a dozen, we could even, if the paperwork wasn't too complicated, grit our teeth and buy them.

We could keep them in our parking lot and go out in them.

Twelve planes. I'd command the lead plane and Mozi would come with me. Under my command I'd have twelve properly trained pilots, flying in changing formations into the great blue yonder, in search of a whole pack of the most curvaceous, clear-skinned, most expensive...

...women...and once we found them, we'd drive them like sheep from the shore.

They'd be shrieking madly and fleeing barefoot, covered in sand, their perfect buttocks twinkling as they ran, their hair flying out behind them.

Our forces would cover 300 km in a flash and drive them towards the cliff face.

Down below us would be an immense, dizzying cliff-face and, in the distance, a sea of clouds.

Patiently, we'd take the plane down and we'd drive them, one by one, over the cliff edge. Actually, they'd leap stark naked, plummeting down. Quite the opposite of our cool piloting.

Finally, in the solitude of the cliff-top, it would be quite desolate.

Then we'd throw the planes into a 180 degrees-turn.

"Number 124, please go to window number 5, Number 124, please go to window number 5."

Mozi poked me again. I was annoyed that, whatever happened, he communicated it by poking me. But I couldn't be bothered to correct him.

Anyway, it was our turn.

I stood up and smoothed down my jacket. It was the only suit I owned, the one I'd got married in. My Mum had paid for it.

The girl sitting at window number 5 was so fat that not even the most severely-cut cashier's outfit could cover the flab.

"What can I do for you?" she asked, her eyes fixed on her computer screen.

I pushed the cheque through the opening at the bottom of the window.

Then I stood on one leg, resting my other leg against it to form a triangle, one hand on my hip, the other placed on the marble counter, feeling the cold stone surface with my index and middle fingers. If you've ever watched American films, you'll be familiar with this posture.

That's the way the luckless hero stands when he's expecting good news.

Fatty took the cheque and scrutinized it.

"What's this?" she asked.

"A cheque." My answer was calm, brief and to the point. I was completely self-confident.

"Where's it from? I can't make head or tail of it."

"Do you read English?"

"Not a word. I've never seen anything like this before."

I gave a slight smile. I wasn't worried. I waited for the girl to call over the manager who was walking back and forth behind her.

The manager was a young man, still with a full head of hair.

He came over and scrutinised the cheque with the girl.

After a few moments, he spoke to me through the microphone.

“Could I trouble you to come round to the VIP room, Sir?”

“Of course.”

I was in no doubt that a matter such as this would have to be dealt with in the VIP room.

I looked over at Mozi, who was staring the security man in the face. He seemed to find the man’s outfit and truncheon fascinating. Mozi was fixated on uniforms!

I ignored him and went straight for the VIP room, where the manager ushered me in.

It was clean and spacious. It held a writing desk covered in dark brown leather, pots of lucky bamboo and a twelve-filter drinking water dispenser. I used to sell these machines, so I knew just how it was designed and worked.

The manager asked me to sit down and filled a disposable cup with water for me.

“Would you mind telling me how you got hold of this cheque?”

“It’s got Bill Gates’ signature on it. It’s quite clear.”

“Did he mail it to you? Where’s the envelope?”

I said nothing. It wouldn’t do me any good to answer detailed questions too soon. If I told lies and didn’t convince them, it would mean no end of trouble. I had to put it off till the crucial moment, then tell them.

“Have you been to the USA?”

I hadn’t been to the USA. It was easy enough for them to check, as I didn’t even have a passport. So I just shook my head.

“So did Microsoft mail the cheque to you?”

I was forced to nod.

“Why did Mr Bill Gates bestow this huge sum of money on you?”

“Surely you must have clients who prefer to keep these things confidential?” I retaliated.

The manager smiled apologetically. “I’m sorry. It’s such an astronomical sum of money. If the General Manager hadn’t gone to a meeting today, he’d be the one to see you. By the way, for foreign currency remittances you’ll have to go to the Chang’An Avenue Head office, and even so, you won’t be able to withdraw the money today. So we’re just having a chat.”

“Well I’m sorry but why do I have the impression you’re investigating a fraudster?”

I assumed the fretful air of someone who’s rolling in money. The more money people have, the more impatient they are.

“There’s no getting around the fact this is a large sum of money. If it’s a genuine cheque, you’ll have to go through the proper procedures and that’ll take eighteen months.”

Eighteen months! I had no idea it would take that long. Would Mozi and I still be going to the Lichang Seafood Restaurant tonight? What about the lobster sashimi and that succulent barbecued lamb? Would we still rent a plane for a night flight? None of these things could wait. At the very least, I couldn’t take another cold shower tomorrow morning. Tomorrow morning I should be waking up in the Beijing Hilton with two pearly-skinned young girls lying next to me and two more on the floor. Maybe there’d be another couple in the bathroom or the built-in wardrobe, though I was hazy on that.

I had a tight schedule, which the manager was ignoring. He just stared at me and waited for an answer.

“Can’t you do it quicker?”

He shook his head. “Besides, we need to establish whether the cheque is genuine first, and that costs a lot of money for that, as we liaise with Microsoft, make long–distance calls, send international faxes, everything’s international. We might even have to send someone over there. It all incurs expenses.”

It sounded complicated and I frowned, my stomach knotting with anxiety.

“So if you want to get your hands on this money, you’ll have to pay a service charge up front.”

I nearly sprang to my feet. He sounded like one of those swindlers from Fujian who call your mobile and tell you you’ve won a prize, but you have to pay income tax on it in advance. Who would have thought that a regular national bank, housed in a fancy high–street office building, would slap a service charge on ordinary folks like us?

“Approximately... how much?” I asked, beginning to consider our family home.

“I’ll have to work it out, but I can guarantee it won’t be more than 5% of the cheque amount.”

“How much is 5%?”

“Just a moment, I’ll tell you.”

The manager got a tiny, worn–looking Casio calculator from his drawer

Everything in the bank was new except this old calculator, which had obviously seen much use.

I swallowed nervously. I knew it was going to be a lot of money.

“Er...2.5 million dollars. Do you want me to convert it into RMB?”

“No need, really, no need.”

It was hopeless. My voice wobbled slightly, in a way that was just perfect for speaking Russian. My family’s 1989 two–bedroomed flat, at the top of the building and not insulated, was worth not 2.5 million dollars but more like 2.5 million cents.

The manager relapsed into silence and we sat in our two black suits across from one other.

The scene was filled with tension, but it was all for nothing.

What did I think I was doing wearing a black suit to get married in?

It had been very unlucky!

When I said goodbye to the manager, he was immediately all professional smiles. He saw me out of the room and reminded me courteously to collect my cheque back from the cashier. I did as he suggested. After all, I may not have been able to collect the cash, but the cheque was still an object of value. I could donate it to an IT museum as a proof of Sino–American friendship.

“So?”

Mozi, who had been sitting waiting for me so long he looked cross–eyed and was on the point of nodding off, rushed eagerly up to me.

“Lets go home. We can’t get the money today. We have to pay a fee up–front first.”

“I knew it. We might as well just spend a few cents on a bowl of noodles when we get home,” Mozi muttered, and I felt even gloomier. That 500 million dollar windfall had just gone and blown right away.

So that night, Mozi and I sat down, under the bare electric light bulb, with the dinner table between us, and ate a bowl each of instant noodles. I put down my chopsticks and heaved a sigh. I

could feel what it was going to be like to starve. The noodle cartoon was almost empty.

I wanted to get rid of Mozi but I couldn't face the emptiness of my flat. I hadn't paid the cable TV bills in ages and Gehua Cable TV Co. had sent someone to cut the signal wires. I'm quite self-reliant so I forced open the box and re-attached the wires with insulating tape. They sent someone to cut the wires again.

This carried on for a while until finally the company got fed up and came and pulled out the signal transmission core and took it away.

Then we really didn't have a signal at home.

Go online? In your dreams.

The ancients have more imagination than us and they love nature; Mozi suggested we go for a stroll along the river.

He had seen it in the distance from my balcony – a foul, stinking waterway which, however, had a nicely-built embankment.

I told him this was the old Beijing-Hangzhou Grand Canal, built during the Sui Dynasty, but it had fallen into disuse and stank to high heaven.

“Huh!” he said. “The Sui Dynasty, eh? It was nothing but hassle with those later dynasties.”

Mozi had an instinct for fortifications, and he must have thought the embankment was a defensive city wall.

He wanted to go and reconnoitre. One day we might go to war again and need to use his damned scale ladder.

Well anyway, a stroll would help us digest our food. I'd had enough stress for today. I'd been up on cloud nine and in the depths of depression. It was all too much drama for ordinary folks like me.

There was a chilly wind along the embankment but Mozi actually bought a couple of cans of frozen Qingdao beers from the kiosk at the entrance to our flats. The ancients are a mysterious bunch. When I asked him where he got the money from he didn't answer, except to say that his family might have been a frugal lot, but they always had a bit put by for when they needed it.

The exchange rate between ancient currency and RMB must be even higher than between dollars and RMB.

So we sat down on top of the embankment with the stink of the canal in our nostrils and drank the beers. I made mine last, taking small sips.

I looked at Mozi in the twilight. He was staring down in a daze at the duckweed and not drinking his beer.

“Why are you not drinking?”

“I don't drink. I bought it for you.”

And he pushed his can over to me.

I pushed it back and he pushed it back again.

Life was full of such tussles.

“OK, I'll drink it!” I yelled, fed up with his idiotic manners.

There were a few sparse clumps of trees at the other end of the embankment. It was October, and the ochre-yellow leaves skittered off the trees as the wind caught them. Mozi gave a sigh in the silence. It was a sigh of complete exhaustion, a degree of exhaustion which only someone who had

been buried for many years could feel. It must have been the earth pressing down too hard on him, keeping out even a breath of air.

“You got a wife and kids?” I asked him.

“I did have.”

“They dead?”

“What do you think?”

“Was she pretty? Did she look after you well?”

Mozi fell silent. He didn’t seem to want to talk about his wife.

I didn’t want to talk about mine either. After all, I’d killed her off.

“Have you seen the film about you? *Mozi’s Cheat Code*?”

He shook his head.

“I haven’t seen it either. But don’t worry, we all remember that it was you who invented the scale ladder.”

When I looked at him again, he was still not drinking but tears were actually trickling down each cheek. The ancients were so sentimental, especially when their achievements were recognized by subsequent generations. I wanted to lighten his mood. After all, no matter how poor you were, you had the right to sit on top of a towering embankment with a beer. That was a basic human right and it didn’t change no matter where or when you lived.

I had another sip of beer, thought for a moment, then said:

“You know what I’d most like to do? Drive an iceberg from the North Pole all the way to the South Pole.”

“What’s the North Pole? What’s the South Pole?”

“Basically, after your day, they discovered the earth was round. The earth under our feet is a big ball. The North Pole is at the north and the South Pole’s at the south. But I’m being long-winded again. Lets go back to what I most want to do.”

“OK,” Mozi threw a stone into the water.

“It’s like this: I’d like to wake up at the North Pole one morning in a snug, warm tent. Of course, it would be cold outside, freezing cold and snowy. But in the tent, we’ve got food and drink and a big bundle of reindeer jerky strips. It’s tastier than donkey meat. There’s no problem with getting enough to drink – you just melt some ice and heat it on the stove. Outside the tent, it’s all white as far as the eye can see. This bit of land has gradually come adrift from the continent, a square kilometer of it, and it belongs to me. I live on it. I go out and patrol my domain and when I’m cold I go back in the tent and have a good sleep and just let it drift all the way down to the South Pole. Wouldn’t that be good?”

Mozi nodded but he hadn’t really understood.

“Oh, and no polar bears, no no no!” I added.

“Near the equator – you probably don’t know – it’s pretty hot and the people who live there are black from being in the sun. I haven’t really worked out what’ll happen to the iceberg when we get near the equator. Will it melt away? Lets be optimistic. Obviously it would melt down quite small but still there’d be enough left for me and my tent. The sun’s shining down and I’m lying on the floating ice forking in the grilled tropical fish. Gimme another can of beer and it’s perfect.”

“Do you spend all day thinking about that?”

“You got to think positive. Thinking about bad things makes them worse.”

“You’re right.”

“If I write my wife back in, should change her for a better model? What do you think?”

“No, you’d better stick with the old one.”

“Huh,” I was lost in thought. If I got my old wife back, my son would be bound to come too, and my mother would come clattering along behind. They came as a package, plonked down in front of me just like a can with its contents sealed inside. Our small flat would be crammed full of people again and every morning I’d have to ride my son to nursery, and every time I got to the door, he’d be clinging to my neck and refusing to go inside and I’d cave in and take him back home and my wife would be furious with me and we’d have a fight. Within the space of a day, even taking my son to nursery would make us quarrel, and they’d soon be gone again. Rightaway, it would be winter, and when the evening wind got up, the place would be deserted. I’d go down to the entrance to the flats, spit a gob of phlegm, do my belt up tight and go and buy some cabbage from the back of a farmer’s truck.

Just as I was imagining all this, something big and white loomed up in the darkness of the night. Mozi was a sharp-eyed fellow and spotted it before me. He gave a shout, and I thought he was going to jab me again so I dived away to the left.

The white thing got closer. It was big — big enough to hold a two-bedroomed house. It was an iceberg, floating silently up to us. Well, not quite silently. She had feelings charged with huge amounts of information. Her boundless silence was tinged with sadness as she approached. Now who’d sent us a present?

Translated by Nicky Harman

My Name is Ding Xiban

Wu Qing

One evening, as I lay in bed, I suddenly felt stricken by shyness. It came from nowhere – I'd just been lying there on my own. And this wasn't your average, common-or-garden kind of shyness – it was of a completely different, chronic order of things. It was like I was the shyest person in the world.

As soon as I began to think of how shy I was, I began to feel even shyer, until I thought I might die of it

I lay there sleeplessly, thinking of all the things that I was too shy to talk about. I tried to pull myself together, failed, and began weeping with the self-pity of it.

I cried all night, hugging my quilt. All because I was shy.

This was in fact yesterday; I don't know when I stopped crying and went to sleep, but when I woke up, I no longer felt so bad – or at least, I was no longer thinking about being shy. In any case, I couldn't spend my whole life crying about it.

Let me give you a bit of back-story.

Seminal trauma #1: buying soy sauce. One day, in the middle of cooking, my mother discovered that she didn't have any soy sauce left, so she gave me the empty bottle and told me to go and fill it up at a nearby shop. The problem was, I was too shy to do it. It took me twenty minutes to cover the hundred metres between home and the shop; and even that felt too fast. I began pacing up and down outside the shop. Scarlet with nerves, I tried to calculate whether the seventy cents my mother had given me were enough to run away on.

My mother knew perfectly well how shy I was, but she insisted on sending me. To her, buying soy sauce was a crucial rite of passage. "If you can't even buy soy sauce," she told me, "how're you ever going to get married?" But at that moment, all I wanted was for the world to come to an end, and with it my soy sauce conundrum.

The owner of the shop, a woman about my mother's age, spotted me lurking in front of the shop. "Wu Qing," she called out, "is it soy sauce you're wanting?" I fled, almost insane with shyness. But where could I go? Certainly not home, not with an empty bottle. If my father got wind of it, I'd get a beating. I crept back to the shop, hiding behind a corner that gave me a clear view of the door.

If only, I thought, I could steal the soy sauce then somehow secretly give them the money.

After about ten minutes of loitering with no particular intent, I saw the woman walk purposefully out of the shop. Her daughter was left behind the counter. Salvation was at hand.

Because her daughter was slow for her age, I lost the crippling shyness I felt in front of other people. I slipped into the shop and handed her the bottle: “Quick,” I said, “soy sauce.” Unfortunately, she did everything in slow-motion – she slowly took hold of the bottle, slowly turned around, slowly opened the container of soy sauce, slowly failed to find the funnel, even though it was staring her in the face. It’s there – there, I kept on telling her. I felt like I was about to expire with anxiety; I prayed her mother wouldn’t come back. Finally, the bottle was filled; I stuffed the money into her hand and fled. Halfway home, I noticed the contents of the bottle were the wrong colour; smelling them, I discovered she’d given me vinegar.

By the time I’d returned to the shop, her mother had also come back. I slouched home with the bottle of vinegar. “Where have you been?” my mother asked me. “America and back?” I handed the bottle to her, studying my feet. “What’s this?” she wanted to know. “I asked for soy sauce, not vinegar.” I pretended confusion: “Didn’t you need vinegar?”

My mother was now properly angry. “You’re an idiot! You and that soy sauce woman’s daughter make a fine pair!”

That gave me something to think about.

Seminal trauma #2: smashing a vase. One playtime, probably in my second year at senior school, I somehow smashed a vase in the classroom. When the teacher returned for class, she asked who was responsible. About a dozen classmates denounced me with touching promptness.

The teacher told me to stand up at the front of the class and explain how I’d done it.

Shyness literally swallowed my voice; I couldn’t get a single word out. Instead, to the astonishment of my teacher, I began an elaborate mime detailing the smashing of the vase.

My classmates were in hysterics of laughter. Tears were rolling down my cheeks.

“That’ll do,” the teacher said, “you can sit down.” But for some reason I went on performing the mime, as if on a loop, weeping silently all the while.

Seminal trauma #3: getting my hair cut. Even today, I have an unholy terror of going to the hairdressers. When I was very young, still only a toddler, there was a hairdresser near my mother’s work, so she quite naturally took me there to get my hair cut. I never needed to say anything, as my mother had already given the hairdresser full instructions. As I grew older, I always went back to the same person, because my mother had already told him everything he needed to know. I trusted him completely, as if he was a member of my own family. But one day my mother suddenly told me that he’d run off with some woman – that I had to get a new hairdresser.

The news cast me into a deep pit of depression. It had never even crossed my mind that there might be another hairdresser in the whole world.

At this advanced stage in my life, there was no way I could adjust to a new hairdresser. I began to cry the very moment I set foot in another establishment. Each visit to the hairdresser became a traumatic humiliation; even now, aged 32, I’m paralysed with tension whenever I sit in that chair. I have this phobia of a hairdresser actually trying to talk to me; I can’t remember the number of times I’ve run out in the middle of a haircut.

My most recent haircut began like all my previous ones: I made a careful survey of at least

twenty establishments, in the hope that I'd find someone I could tolerate. When my preliminary hunt got nowhere, I restarted the process, eventually narrowing my list down to two or three places. When I plucked up courage to go into one of them, I ran away as soon as I saw I'd have to queue.

I next took a bus out of the city, to an unknown suburb, in search of an entirely anonymous hairdressing experience.

It began, conventionally enough, with a girl washing my hair. Thankfully, she did not try to speak to me. She was different from the hairwashers I'd known before – gentler. Usually, they put a bit too much into their work, digging their nails into your scalp, but her action was almost limp, as though her hands were weakened by some terrible illness. I quite liked it. I next moved on to the hairdressing chair, expecting that the male hairdresser standing next to her would take over. Instead, my hairwasher picked up the scissors.

It wasn't exactly how I'd imagined things; but I didn't mind.

"How d'you want it cut?" she asked. I'd seen this question coming, and had an answer at the ready: "I don't mind."

As she began, I prayed that she wouldn't ask me anything else. This time, the gods were not smiling on me.

"Have you been here before?"

My heart thumped. I knew this was just the beginning.

I grunted negatively.

"D'you work nearby?"

"No."

"D'you live round here?"

"No."

"So what brings you here?"

"Just passing."

"Were you born here?"

"No."

"Where are you from then?"

"Zhejiang."

"That's a long way away."

I grunted.

"So what brings you here?"

"Just passing."

"On business?"

"No."

"Are you working round here?"

"No."

"So what *are* you doing here?"

I decided not to tell her I was a writer.

"What are you so embarrassed about?" she asked, laughing. "Why won't you tell me what you do?"

"It's just – you know – a job."

“So why aren’t you at work on a week day?”
“I don’t have regular hours.”
“Lucky you. But why did you leave Zhejiang?”
“I just did.”
“So which d’you like better, Zhejiang or Sichuan?”
“I like them both the same.”
“If you had to say one.”
“I like them both.”
“Just say one.”

You get the picture. But I’ve many other examples of my shyness: like when my taxi driver, or someone on a train started talking to me. Or when I’ve gone up to the counter at banks or post office, and have literally wept with shyness – I’m not lying to you. Every day, I thank the Lord for automated cash machines and the internet.

I sense a question. If I’m so shy, how could I ever have found a girlfriend? Easy: I never tell people I’m in love with that I’m in love with them. This works particularly well if you’re both shy and broke (like me). Oddly enough, though, sex is the only thing that doesn’t make me shy.

~

Waking at midday and finding nothing to eat at home, I went to a nearby noodle shop and ordered a bowl of noodles with peas. Maybe all that crying had given me a good appetite, because I slurped them quickly down, then looked around for a napkin. I spotted a girl at the next door table with a box of tissues near her own bowl of noodles. I walked over and took one to wipe my mouth, and then another to wipe my nose.

“These are my tissues!” the girl protested, glaring at me.

It took me three seconds to work out what she meant: she’d brought the tissues herself from home. Looking around at other tables, I noted that the restaurant’s tissues were indeed different to hers. I felt destroyed.

Although I very much wanted to ask her why she’d brought her own tissues to the restaurant, and indeed, placed them on the table, I felt overwhelmed by the most severe attack of shyness I had ever suffered. I instantly sank to my knees and begged her forgiveness. But it was all too late: I couldn’t forgive myself. I went into the kitchens in search of a vegetable knife and prepared to kill myself in front of her.

~

I secretly began climbing.

I’ve written at least three stories about climbing: about the tigers and girls – with ghostly shrieks – I may or may not have met on mountainsides. As usual, my backpack contained a water bottle, a newspaper, a towel, a rope and a Swiss Army knife.

The mountain I wanted to climb had no name: no-one, or at least hardly anyone, lived on it;

it had no scenery of note (except for the scenery you get anywhere); it was without significance (beyond the significance that everything has); it had no path (except for the paths you find everywhere). Was it high? I suppose so; or at least, no-one called it low.

I hate you, because you deceived me. I don't really hate you, of course; you haven't really deceived me, because I don't believe anyone would take the trouble to deceive me. I must be imagining things.

At the bottom of the mountain, I encountered a beautiful girl, a handsome young monk, a courting couple, and two elderly women burning incense.

The beautiful girl, I thought, would not be climbing the mountain; and certainly not with me.

Why was the handsome young monk staring at me like that? Had he been reading my stories in his spare time? He was holding a bottle of Coke Zero.

I wanted to say to the male half of the couple: So you've got a girlfriend – so what? I almost had one once myself.

The incense-burning old ladies were gossiping like a couple of karaoke divas. "You must learn the Gold-Steel Sutra," one was saying. "I'll teach it you for next time."

I also spotted a yellowing police notice, with a blurred photograph of a male corpse. I didn't bother reading it; I supposed they were trying to identify the dead man.

~

I began to climb the mountain.

I muttered to myself as I walked; just a little habit of mine. If I got thirsty, I drank some water. When I came across an appropriate branch, I cut off a segment with my Swiss army knife to use as a walking stick. I would stop beneath large trees and test my eyesight by trying to find grasshoppers among the leaves. It was much harder than the Spot the Difference competitions you get in magazines. I used to be eerily good at this kind of thing when I was little; I'd have found and captured a grasshopper in thirty seconds. These days, I might still be searching after ten minutes. But of course, I contented myself with merely spotting it, no longer capturing it.

I sat down on a slippery stone by a stream, removed my shoes and soaked my feet in the shockingly cold water. I enjoyed a cigarette. I remembered the slogan for an advert for Scottish whisky: "This is the Chivas Lifestyle." I started to find fish in the water, and crabs too. I stood up, gazing at the dozens of long-legged pondskaters skimming over the surface of the water.

On one expedition, I managed to fall into a dipping pool while catching fish. Luckily, it was a hot day, so I took all my clothes off and lay them out to dry on a rock while I spent the afternoon waiting next to it, completely naked.

It's not always clear where the sources of such streams are. Once I tried tracing one back deep into the mountain, growing more frightened with every step and every strange creature I encountered. Tao Yuanming, China's most famous hermit, wrote of how you forget distances when you're following a stream; of how sickness and death will claim you before you find what you are searching for.

~

I was surprised by how quickly I found my way to the summit. I was obviously in better physical shape than I'd thought.

I gazed off into the distance, the breeze caressing my face. An eagle was flying overhead; or a sparrowhawk, perhaps. I sat down and started to read the newspaper I'd brought. There's something very particular about reading a newspaper up a mountain. You feel oddly disconnected from current events – like the Jade Emperor surveying the mortal world from Heaven.

You may assume, from the fact that I read the newspaper for half an hour, that I am a normal person. Well, I instantly forgot what I'd read, then set about one of my favourite pastimes: ripping the newspaper into identical, tiny fragments which I delighted in releasing – in great fistfuls – into the wind. In the same way that everyone loves popping bubble-wrap, I think that scattering shreds of newspaper on mountaintops has a kind of universal appeal.

I took the rope out of my bag. Dear reader, don't try and stop me; because I wasn't preparing to hang myself. Whenever I climb a mountain, I pack a rope – I've been doing this since I was ten, maybe because I watched too many low-budget American action TV shows as a child. Maybe I thought I might need to haul myself some place as part of a death-defying stunt. Even though it had never happened to me once in twenty years, I still brought the rope every time, sensing that the rope might have a decisive role to play at a key juncture.

Today, its role was to enable me to skip.

I love skipping; humans don't often get the chance to jump up and down free-style – not like sparrows, or rabbits, or frogs, or monkeys. But give a person a rope, and jumping enters a whole new realm of possibility. Jumping on your own, you quickly feel self-conscious; bring a rope into the equation and it seems perfectly natural. And skipping on a mountain is completely different to skipping at sea-level.

~

When I was too tired to skip any more, I lay down on the grass. A breeze was blowing; the sky was blue with white clouds. I closed my eyes and imagined that I was lying on a vast, soft cloud. Science tells us that as clouds are only water vapour they won't support our weight, and that certainly we can't ride them like the Monkey King did. Who cares. I wondered, defiantly, what sex on a cloud would be like.

I tried to conjure up a dream lover – ideally a princess – for my cloud sex. Sadly, once you hit thirty, it takes more than fairy-tales to reach climax. Luckily, a couple of classic porn films on my phone came to my rescue. I took a towel out of my bag. This was no ordinary towel, mind; it had passed through a rigorous selection procedure. I'm of the belief that a towel is at least as important as a girlfriend, perhaps more, because it is the object with which you end up having the most intimate daily contact.

My obsession with towels comes from my long-term love of one book, *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, which contains a particularly informative entry on the subject.

A towel, it explains, is an item of great practical and also psychological use to a space traveller. If a non-hitchhiker encounters a traveller with a towel, the former will naturally assume that this person once possessed all manner of objects: a toothbrush, a bathrobe, soap, a biscuit tin, a flask,

a compass, a map, a rope, insect repellent, a raincoat, a spacesuit, and so on. Consequently, he will willingly lend the hitchhiker all these things, and even a great many others, on being told that the latter happens to have unaccountably lost all of them. The logic goes like this: if an intergalactic traveller has managed to hold onto his towel, he must surely be a person worth taking seriously. Consider the observation (made of the hero of *The Hitchhiker's Guide*): "Hey, you sass that hoopy Ford Prefect? There's a frood who really knows where his towel is."

This particular towel of mine was soft, clean and blessed with a flower design particularly evocative of female pants. I pressed it to my face and surrendered myself to its charms.

~

I warmly recommend masturbating on top of a mountain, in case you've never tried it; it's a million times better than in front of a computer screen. Well, there's no radiation hazard at least. Everything's different when you're on a mountain: higher, freer, purer. Of course, some might counter that it might be more fun to have someone with you too, but that's not an option available to everyone. Nonetheless, I think that there might be some commercial potential in a prostitution business specializing in outdoor unions.

I carefully examined the colour, thickness and smell of my semen, and was reassured by its apparent normality. Something started buzzing in my ear: a large bumblebee. I was struck by the terrifying idea that my sperm was a bee-magnet. The insect was not deterred by my whipping it with the towel. In fact, it now seemed all the more intent on attacking me. A few years ago, I'd been bitten by a wasp on my toe. It took a whole fortnight for the swelling to go down; the doctors couldn't do anything for me, and a popular folk remedy (which suggested rubbing breastmilk into the wound) was of no practical use either. I dread to think what would have happened if it had bit my penis. So I quickly did my trousers up, picked up my bag and made a run for it downhill. The bee came after me. I quickly lost my balance and fell precipitously.

I was sure that I was going to die. Fortunately, a few trees broke my fall, and I managed to steady myself by hanging onto one of them. Though I wasn't seriously injured, I was covered in cuts and bruises, and my clothes and trousers were torn and muddy. I hurried down the mountain, as darkness started to fall.

~

I went down the way I'd come up, the last of the dusk light fading. Finding myself back at the stream, I washed my face, arms, legs and wounds (my trusty towel came into play again here).

As soon as night falls, mountains become terrifying places. Perhaps because I was imagining things, I started to hear strange noises all around me. Of course, I was mostly hearing the noise of the stream, but it started to bounce confusingly around me, and I thought I heard a woman's voice, too. Was there a girl bathing nearby too? My natural licentiousness conquered my natural cowardliness, and I mindlessly began following the stream along. Suddenly, a bamboo forest lay before me. A few hundred paces later, I was hemmed in on both sides by green stalks.

Just as I was pondering whether or not to carry on, I felt a hand touch my back. I whipped

around: a woman stood before me, radiantly beautiful in the moonlight, her forefinger pressed to her lips. Though my first instinct had been to scream, I suppressed it. “What’s wrong?” I asked in low, urgent tones. “Are you running away from someone?” Fixing a piercing gaze upon me, she moved her beautiful lips. “I love you; do you love me?”

I was, naturally, taken aback.

She repeated her previous statement.

By this point, I’d reluctantly concluded that she was at least half-demon. But as she’d already made up her own mind how she felt about me, I felt I should go with the flow.

“I love you I love you I love you I love you,” I answered.

The girl vanished.

Hell and damnation. So she was a demon after all. I was still alive, at least. But if she hadn’t meant to harm me, what had she been after?

~

As I went on my way, I wondered if it had been a hallucination. When I came off the mountain, I happened to pass the sallowed notice I’d spotted on my way up, so I read it by the light of my phone. The corpse in the photo, I discovered, was a brutal mess – it looked as if it had suffered death by a thousand cuts. The accompanying text went as follows:

Caution – Danger.

A snake demon has recently been seen frequenting the streams of this mountain, disguised as a beautiful temptress. If she says “I love you; do you love me?” and a man does not respond or refuses her, her curse is harmless. If he answers in the positive, he will die of the snake demon’s bite on the stroke of midnight, external symptoms as illustrated above. The demon has already claimed a dozen victims; no known cure exists.

~

I glanced at my watch: it was twenty-seven minutes past nine. I had two and a half hours left.

I decided to get something to eat, as I might as well die on a full stomach. But what? As it was going to be my last meal, I thought I should make it a decent one, but the news I’d just received had rather affected my appetite, and I wasted another ten minutes dithering over choice of cuisine. Eventually, I grabbed a hamburger at a nearby Macdonalds, got in a taxi (still eating) and booked a room in a five-star hotel. I thought I had just about enough money in my bank account to pay for one night.

It was 10.40 by the time I’d checked in. From stress or perhaps indigestion, my stomach went into convulsions when I got into the room. After rolling around on the bed in agony a while, I called room service for some antacid. By the time I’d taken it, it was 11.10. I ran a bath, got in and and awaited my destiny.

What time remained to me I decided to spend ringing girls I’d been in unrequited love with. (Though I called my parents first, to wish them all the best and reassure them I’d never ask for

money again.)

But which girl to ring? Obviously, the one who was most likely to run out and have sex with me. Realistically, though, this was not going to happen; I only had half an hour left. I decided not to bother. Even if I rang them, they wouldn't necessarily pick up; and even if they did, would they have believed me if I told them that at midnight a snake demon was about to come and eat me alive?

I was starting to feel resentful toward that snake demon: why did it have to pick on me? It could have told me it loved me without eating my flesh too. Or why didn't it just eat me there and then, and be done with it? What was with all this delayed gratification?

Then again, I only had myself to blame. I shouldn't have told her I loved her; I should have had more self-respect. I'd told her I loved her before I'd even worked out whether she was a creature of the supernatural; I had it coming. All the same, though, eating people alive seemed a touch excessive. I mean, it's the 21st century and all; even snake demons ought to keep up with the ways of progress and the modern world. And aren't snakes meant to poison their victims rather than dissolve their flesh?

Maybe it was a parable, designed to teach men to use the word love more carefully. But I didn't think I abused it that much. Only on unusually beautiful snake demons. And could you blame me? Was I in the wrong, or just plain unlucky?

And why hadn't I read that notice before I went up the mountain? Hell and damnation and hell again. Perhaps it was all a parable telling us to read notices before we go up mountains. But Wu Song from *The Water Margin* didn't read any notices before he slayed the tiger in a fit of drunken bravado. In fact, if he'd read the health and safety warnings about that tiger, he would never have become a legendary hero. Not that the comparison was particularly relevant to me. I was doomed as soon as I met my snake demon. I'd have needed to be an immortal, or at least a Daoist priest, to defeat her; and I didn't have time to find either now.

I wondered why there were still snake demons in this day and age. And why had they picked on me?

One minute to getting eaten alive.

Bring it on.

I love you, snake demon.

~

Zhou Pijiu had walked many roads that day before he turned for home. At the entrance to his compound, he hesitated over whether to buy some beer at the convenience store.

Ding Xiban hated getting sore buttocks: as soon as he had enough money, he was going to dedicate himself to buying the most comfortable chair in the world, even though he'd sworn not to buy anything that he couldn't easily take with him on his travels around the world. In any case, the debate was academic: he didn't have nearly enough money to buy the chair of his dreams. The mere thought of Ikea made him almost ill with longing. As he showered, he felt the pointed mole on his bottom.

Deciding against the beer, Zhou Pijiu crossed the overgrown compound, stopped in front of

a vast reinforced concrete apartment block and swiped the door with his card. It refused to open. After half an hour spent trying to pass through the wall, he aborted the attempt and rang Ding Xiban to ask him to buzz him in. There was no answer.

Still in the shower investigating his persecuted bottom, Ding Xiban heard the phone ring. He decided to go and pick it up if it was still ringing after the count of five. But after he had taken one naked, dripping step towards the phone, it stopped. If only he'd counted up to seven, he regretted, he needn't have put himself to the trouble.

Zhou Piqiu suddenly felt overwhelmed with exhaustion, as if he was ready to lie down and die; and yet he couldn't even get into his own apartment. Perhaps he should go and find a security guard; perhaps he should go and punch a security guard. He went off in search. Eventually, finding one walking towards him, Zhou had the strong feeling the guard was in fact about to punch him. Just as they reaching the point of confrontation, Zhou's phone rang and the two of them passed without a word.

"Hello."

"Hey." It was Ding Xiban.

"My card's broken. Can you buzz me in?"

"All right."

Zhou Piqing returned to his own building. It was only when the door still refused to open that he realised he had got the wrong staircase. By the time he had found his way home, Ding Xiban had dried himself and was lying naked on the bed.

"I got the wrong door, damn it."

Ding Xiban laughed.

"Did you masturbate?"

"I had a shower."

"I bet you have masturbated today?"

"And?"

"Do you know how I knew?"

"You can't smell it, can you?"

"No."

"Did you see the tissue in the bin?"

"No. I can't see from here."

"Then you guessed."

"But how could I be so sure?"

"I don't know."

"Because I would have."

"What kind of logic is that?"

"But I'm right."

"You just got lucky."

"Come on."

"Where to? I'm not dressed."

"Let's get some beer."

"Why didn't you get some on your way in?"

“I wanted to get it with you.”

“But I’ve just had a shower and I’m not dressed.”

“I’ve walked for miles today and I’m not complaining. I just want to go out with you to get us some beer.”

“All right. Have it your way.”

Soon, they were back home, lying on their own beds, drinking.

“I’m exhausted,” Zhou Piqui said. “I walked a long way today.”

“Where did you go?”

“Places other people don’t go. Out of town.”

“Did you find what you were looking for?”

“No. It’s hopeless.”

“Don’t worry; you will.”

“I won’t, but I have to keep looking; what else can I do?”

“There’s no point in getting anxious about it. After all, what’s the worst that can happen?”

“I’m going tomorrow as well. I have to keep looking.”

They slowly, silently drank their beer. Each pondered troubles they had no way of resolving.

“Read me a poem,” Zhou Piqui said.

“All right.” Ding Xiban picked up a book from his bedside and flicked through it.

Zhou Piqui closed his eyes, waiting.

“Okay. It’s ‘Farewell to Minister Lu of Qin’, by the Tang poet Si Kongshu.

I know we will meet again,

But separation is still hard.

Let’s raise one more cup to each other,

To battle through Shi’s wind.”

Slightly blurry with beer, Ding Xiban intoned it slowly. Zhou Piqui drunkenly closed his eyes and listened. “Read it again.”

“I know we will meet again,

But separation is still hard.

Let’s raise one more cup to each other,

To battle through Shi’s wind.”

“It’s not a great poem,” Ding Xiban observed.

“Language’s a bit clumsy.”

“D’you know why I chose it though? Because of the last line.”

“Read it again.”

“To battle through Shi’s wind.”

“What’s Shi’s wind?”

“It’s from an ancient legend about a merchant called You who married a woman called Shi. Though the two of them were very much in love, the merchant was always off on business, which back then could mean he’d be gone two years at a time, and the wife became very unhappy. One day, she begged him not to go again, but he still left. Soon after, she died of bitterness. But just before she died, she swore she’d turn into a headwind on behalf of all the lonely wives in the world, preventing their husbands from leaving home.”

“That’s a strange old story.”

“I mean, to become a ghost after you die – that’s one thing. But to turn yourself into a wind; that’s downright perverse.”

“But how could she become a wind?” Zhou Piqui had opened his eyes again.

“Actually, a wind’s much worse than a ghost. If a woman turns herself into a wind, you’ll never escape her.”

“I think it’s beautiful. It means she can be with you wherever you are.”

“But a woman who’s become a wind isn’t a woman in the normal sense of the word.”

“What about that woman who became a cliff to watch over her husband?”

“Now that I can relate to a bit more.”

“How come?”

“Because at least that’s solid – something you can touch and see. Not like a wind.”

“Meaning?”

“What really bothers me is that she wanted to become a headwind. Not an ordinary whooshy, go-with-the-flow sort of wind.”

“I don’t care.” Zhou Piqui closed his eyes again. “I still think it’s beautiful. You could be walking anywhere, feel the wind on your face, and know it’s your lover.”

Zhou Piqui lay there with his eyes closed, as if he was enjoying the caress of a gentle breeze. Ding Xiban thought the relationship between You and Shi had been more complex than some people imagined.

“Ring her,” Zhou Piqui said after a while.

“Who?”

“You know.”

“Now?”

“Of course.”

“No. You ring her.”

Translated by Julia Lovell

Tales at the Funeral

Kan Yao-ming

* Granny Noodles' Cinema

My granny had been very young at heart, and always good for surprises. Her demise was no exception.

It was in the dead of winter, but the sun had come out, and it would have been a shame not to move the rattan chair out under the eaves and enjoy the mild warmth. As she lay on that chair, Granny was watching the fleeting movies played out by the white clouds in the blue skies. All you needed was a dollop of fanciful imagination, and suddenly an inexhaustible kaleidoscope of fascinating moving pictures unfolded right before your upturned eyes, all free of charge.

When the wind died down, the “cinema of drifting clouds” ended, and Granny shut her eyes to rest, her hands holding the washbowl that had once belonged to Gramps. A cat was sitting in it, and presently Granny told her the story she had just seen in the sky. It was about a clam that attached itself to a war horse crossing the little stream in front of our house. This happened back in the days of Japanese rule, and the horse carried the clam with it for two whole months, until it eventually died from exhaustion. The clam, however, had thrived on the horse's blood, traveling with its host across the Da-an River, and more than a hundred kilometers further south until it finally found a new home in the Zhuoshui River. And that was the origin of the “Bloody Clam of the Zhuoshui.”

After she had finished, Granny let out a sigh, “If I could turn into a white cloud and float up into the sky, I could see even more stories.” Then she gradually slowed her breathing, until she didn't feel like breathing at all anymore. That's how she left this world, and she hasn't been back since. Granny was 86 when she died, not a bad age to go. The secret of her longevity, would you believe it, was listening to stories. She was even cured this way when she was ill, and she cured others by telling stories, too.

In fact, Granny had almost died when she was still a little girl. As family tradition has it, she was taken seriously ill as a six-year-old and went into a lasting coma. Death seemed a certainty, and while even a farmer's household with some ten children would naturally feel sad at losing a young one, the hard country life didn't leave much time or energy for grieving. Great-Grandpa was already

preparing to bury Granny wrapped in a straw mat when Great-Grandma, overcome with emotion, told a little story for her youngest daughter, as a parting gift if you like. Made up on the spot, the story was very simple, telling of a philosophical goat that spent half a year standing on its head, and how in the end all the other goats followed its example and stood upside down, too.

All of a sudden, Granny started to cough, and her chest was heaving up and down violently. The sweet story had brought her back from the gates of death, and closer to the world of the living. Great-Grandma took this as a good sign, and carrying Granny about in her arms, she visited all kinds of people and asked them to tell stories as a remedy for her child. And so story after story, sad ones and happy ones, poured into Granny's ears like a panacea, a magic potion that snatched her out of the jaws of death. After a while, she was able to get up from bed, and before long she was up and about again, as bouncy and full of life as ever. And she was so articulate that at times it seemed the words were flying out of her mouth like tiny swift sparrows. Oh yes, Granny was back and doing very well, growing to be such a naughty little rascal that Great-Grandma frequently got angry enough to call her a "damn little devil."

Granny's memory was amazing: her head was a magical receptacle, a veritable "closet of wonders" where she stored all the stories she had ever heard. She had a system, too, with all the winter stories filed in one category, all those with an autumny feel in another, and so forth. If she hadn't heard a new story for some time, she would squat under a tree, eat some baked sweet potatoes, and re-narrate the old stories in her head to herself, all the while moving around small pebbles on the ground, which she imagined to be the main characters of the tales.

As long as Granny was still a little child, people thought her soliloquizing and self-absorbed games cute, saying that she was "a very clever girl, and so eloquent." But as she grew a bit older, comments assumed a more critical nature. "She's odd," they now said, "high time to take her to the temple and ask the Lord Guan to adopt her as a foster child." In the end, someone decided that Granny wasn't right in the head, and that was that. To the old folks, as long as a child was healthy enough to eat and work, that was all they needed to know. Anything short of a life-threatening condition wasn't deemed to deserve much further attention, and while Granny's habit of talking to herself was certainly unusual, it hardly required treatment.

Born in 1921, Granny never received any formal education. Everything she knew, life had taught her. But when she was 12 years old, she acquired a special skill: she learned how to write names. In that day and age, girls weren't sent to school, and Granny was no exception. Thus, for all practical purposes, names had been invisible to her right up to the point when Great-Grandpa showed her how to conjure them up by writing the characters. Great-Grandpa died of pneumonia the same year, and so every time she wrote her own name, Granny involuntarily thought of her father, who had given her this most precious gift and only legacy, the ability to write.

Her husband's death left Grand-Grandma sad and miserable. It wasn't so bad in the daytime, when work kept her mind off other things, but lying in bed at night, the shadow of Great-Grandpa's ghost would haunt her waking mind, leaving her unable to rest. Instead of sleeping, she would sob and cry, thinking of her late husband, and tears were streaming down her cheeks as good and bad memories flooded her head. Then she would pick up a hairpin and carve a line into one of the bedposts, which were made of nanmu wood. A scratch at the head end meant a good memory, a notch at the foot end signified a bad one. After a while, Great-Grandma couldn't help but notice the

growing number of scores at the foot of the bed, as if her husband had been an evil person who'd only come into the world to torture other people. But she still couldn't forgive him for leaving her behind, and that thought was enough to make her cut another deep score into the bedpost, so deep that the wood made a forlorn creaking sound. This caused her to start crying again.

The sound of Great-Grandma's weeping woke up Granny, then still just a 12-year-old girl. Carrying a candle and walking barefoot, she groped her way through the dark house and climbed onto her mother's bed. Then she took the hairpin out of her hand and began to carve more lines into the bedpost, horizontal and vertical ones, some slanted or curved, without ever pausing. In this fashion, she linked up Great-Grandma's previous notches to turn them into Chinese characters, and when she was finished, the names of every family member, from Great-Grandpa and Great-Grandma down to Granny and her nine siblings, were all carved into the post at the head end.

"This bed is a boat. From now on, we're all together in this boat, and no one ever leaves," Granny declared, the flickering yellow light of the candle illuminating her face as she broke into a bright smile.

Next she moved to the other end of the bed, the one scarred with lines that were deep with anger and regret. In the same manner as before, she added a stroke here and a notch there, this time connecting the lines into images of black nightshades, a hare, a black drongo, a crucian carp, a teacup, and other things. Maybe the drawings were a bit clumsy here and there, but there was no mistaking what they represented.

"What about the goat?" Great-Grandma asked. "Why did you draw that?"

And Granny recalled a story about Great-Grandpa and a goat, which had lost its way in a precipitous ravine. Great-Grandpa had rescued the goat and brought it back home, where the animal made itself useful as a no-cost and "fully automatic" lawn mower, grazing all the grass and weeds off the drying yard.

"And how about the carp?" Great-Grandma asked.

So Granny told the story of how Great-Grandpa had once saved a crucian carp stranded on the river shoals. But when he put the carp back into the water, it wouldn't swim away. So Great-Grandpa had taken the fish back home and put him in the water butt, where it repaid the good deed by eating up the mosquito larvae and keeping the water clean. A natural purifier! And free.

"And the spider?"

Now Granny told another strange story. It was spring-cleaning time, and Great-Grandpa didn't have the heart to sweep away a spider's web in the corner of the house. Who would have thought that in return the spider wove another sturdy web across the doorway, effectively keeping out flies and mosquitoes?

Well, by now Granny's voice had attracted the rest of the family, and all her nine brothers and sisters came out of their rooms to gather round the bed that held the unfolding annals of all their lives. Everybody was listening to Granny's stories. Some of these they were familiar with, but Granny peppered her accounts with little details that none of them had any memory of. Or she mentioned things that they had forgotten because they seemed unimportant at the time, but assumed a new and touching quality in Granny's vivid tales. That night was entirely devoted to a sweeping history of Great-Grandpa's life, with the carved figures on the bedpost flickering unsteadily in the quivering candlelight, and flitting across the screen of Granny's cinema. At first

the trembling lines and notches would struggle to break free, like tiny insects caught in flypaper, but eventually they'd pop from the surface like cartoon figures and dance about in the dim air, dreamlike mirages that were yet brimming with liveliness.

Granny's stories alternately made everybody laugh and cry, and Great-Grandma learned an important lesson: her husband still lived in their hearts; he hadn't died as much as departed to another place ahead of everybody else. As the day grew brighter, Great-Grandpa's spirit remained with them even in the light of the rising sun, clear and wonderful, all thanks to Granny's art of storytelling. And that bed had been permanently metamorphosed into a sweet cradle that sent Great-Grandma only the best dreams about Great-Grandpa, every night she went to sleep.

Granny had used stories as medicine to heal her mother's grief and sorrow. Yet Granny had sorrows of her own—or maybe “sorrows” is too strong a word for the troubles of a 12-year-old, but it is definitely fair to say that she felt sad about something. And that something was the fact that there were too few stories in the world, which is why every day, as soon as it dawned, she went out into the village to look for new stories to quench her thirst for tales.

The name of that village was Sanliaokeng, and Granny had been born on its outskirts. It was a place like most other places in the days of rural Taiwan, producing bananas, rice, and sweet potatoes; water buffaloes could be seen everywhere and egrets were dotting the sky. Life was mostly simple and quiet, filled with the down-to-earth joys and sorrows of plain folks. Always barefooted, Granny would run towards the village with waving hands, hungry for stories. Wandering past cowsheds, she'd tickle the cows with grass stalks as a sign of friendship. Walking on the ridges between fields and paddies, she'd spread out her arms and run her hands over the tips of the rice stalks, which were swaying gently in the wind, enjoying the tickling sensation this caused in the hollow of her palms. She could of course go straight to the katang tree ¹ next to the temple, where one always found a bunch of children ready for all kinds of games and horseplay. However, Granny preferred to take the long way round, sauntering in the direction of the river valley and paying close attention to everything she encountered along the way: bird's nests, snake holes, or an old gravesite dating back to the Qing Dynasty. It was all part of her search for new tales.

She often talked to the man in the grave, hoping to learn something from him. The most frequent response she got was not silence, but a somewhat flabbergasted “You two keep talking, I'm off” from a passerby.

“Well, I'll go on, then,” Granny would reply, and turning back to the grave would continue her conversation with the dead man. “You are the best,” she'd say, “no matter what I tell you, or even if I curse or say something bad, you never just walk away! Sometimes you appear in my dreams and praise me, saying, ‘I've been lying here for so long that my bones are all rotten and moldy, but fortunately there's you. You keep talking and talking, and that keeps things interesting for me. I almost feel alive again! So come, little girl, let me kneel before you.’ And I'll say that I will keep talking to you, my ghostly friend, no problem, but that there's no way I want you to pay homage to me like that, because it'll only shorten my life. And also, in the future, when you come to me in my dreams, please tell me a few nice stories instead of always whining like a newly wed daughter-in-law

¹ Katang tree: *Bischofia javanica* Blume.

feeling wronged all the time. You sound like a dying carp gasping for air when you do that. Speaking of which, let me tell you a story about a crucian carp.”

Oh yes, that’s how she was, our Granny, constantly muttering and rambling on about something, and that’s also how she got her nickname, “Noodles.” You see, in Hakka the word “noodles” is a synonym for being a chatterbox. If you’ve ever seen how people here eat noodles, you know why (and you’ll agree it’s a very apt term): the sound of someone sucking noodles is simply so similar to the endless chatter and blather of a gabby gal. As the years went by, her moniker was adjusted as befitted her age and status, first from “Noodles” to “Sister Noodles,” then to “Auntie Noodles,” and eventually to “Granny Noodles.”

Meanwhile, in other people’s eyes, her penchant for avoiding big streets and taking small paths and lanes instead made her appear like someone on the run from creditors. Yet this habit of hers made perfect sense, because every time she took the long way round, for example when she was headed, in her own circuitous manner, for the temple to see her friends, her meandering route allowed her to see many things she would have missed otherwise. The longer the route, the more stories came her way, and even a lane or alley she’d walked a hundred times before might offer something novel and exciting when walked with fresh and curious eyes, as if for the first time. Not to mention that there was always an opportunity for chatting with the guy in the grave. That was Granny for you.

Come to think of it, Granny almost never left Sanliakeng. This was where she grew up, got married and had children, grew old and died. And spending her whole life here, with all its ups and downs, she was convinced that the white clouds in the blue skies were a reflection of everything that happened in the village. She never tired of watching these cloud movies. Sure, it wasn’t always easy to understand them, and you needed a bit of imagination to figure everything out, but they gave her so much pleasure that even on the day of her death, just before she drew her last breath, she treated herself to another show, and didn’t forget to share her enjoyment with the cat.

Granny used to say, “When you’re happy, you should share your happiness with others, but when you’re sad, it’s better to cry alone.” She also said, however, that any story, be it a sad one or a happy one, has the power to delight people and make them feel good. As she loved hearing stories more than anything, she had made it very clear during her lifetime that for her funeral she asked for one thing only: that everybody should come and tell a tale or two.

She also said that if there would be a fancy electric float with professional performers and a colorful neon disco ball rising triumphantly from its inside, then that would be okay, too. Scantly dressed pole dancers shaking their booty and whirling themselves into a trance also met with Granny’s approval. Or if everybody preferred a traditional funeral with hired wailers and the speakers cranked up to the point of bursting—well, that was fine with her, too. Anyway, so Granny, “It’s the thought that counts.” How exactly we’d express our feelings wasn’t that important, except for that one request of hers, that during the wake everybody who happened to be there—be they passersby and onlookers or close family and other invited guests—should tell one good story. It didn’t matter if she’d heard it before or not. Afterwards, we should have her body cremated, burn it clean, wasn’t that all there was to it? People’s lives were more important than their deaths, and stories were all that remained of a person in the end. Everybody who had lived inevitably left behind some stories.

I'm Granny's grandson, and I was in charge of writing down the stories that were told at her funeral, and making them into a little book. Since on the occasion the tales were told in a rather confused and muddled fashion, I had to edit and reorganize them a bit. Yet the final result are true stories, whether they seem strange or over the top, whether they are tragic or comical. Written by life, each of these tales happened in this land of ours, right next to you and me.

As for what kind of person I am, that's not something the reader needs to bother about. After all, it's not like I'm looking to get married or something!

* Smiling Old Bessie

The deceased was my mother, and I'm her oldest son. I'll tell the first tale then. It's a bit long, but may well serve as a warm-up. Although my mother doesn't appear in it, I know she really loved this story!

So here goes.

For many years, our family didn't have any cattle, and so we had to do all the plowing ourselves, the way people had done a hundred years ago. Together, my brothers and I would pull the rope to drag the plow, while our father was steering it. It was hard and exhausting work under the scorching sun. Sweat was running down our backs and our lips turned white, and when a day's work was finished the splitting pain in our joints was so bad that we'd lie down in the field, breathing hard and unable to move for quite some time. Only when dusk began to fall would we find the strength to get up and go home.

But being knackered wasn't the worst part of it. Much worse was the pain across my chest, all the way down from the left shoulder, where the skin was raw and bloody from the chafing of the rope, making my shirt stick to the slanting wound as if it had been glued on. You couldn't just tear the clothes off, either, because that way you'd also rip out chunks of flesh. What to do? Well, I didn't change my shirt for a week, and when washing myself I'd lather everything, skin and shirt, with soap and clean it all together. Afterwards I wrung the shirt out as well as I could, and went to sit on a ridge next to a field to let the soft breeze and the warmth of my own body dry my clothes. Only then would I go back inside to sleep.

One day, my younger brother came up to me and said in a comforting tone, "Ah, it's no big deal, I can help you with that."

"Really? How?" I asked.

"Oh, don't worry about that. I'll handle it."

The next day it was business as usual, pulling the plow till complete exhaustion, getting home dog-tired and half-starved. Washing time. I took off my pants, but kept on the shirt, and then I hunkered down on the floor, anxious to see what kind of miracle cure my little brother would conjure up to rid me of the dirty and stinking rag stuck to my upper body.

He said, "I'll count to three and the shirt will be gone." He had hardly reached "two" when I felt him putting his foot against my butt for better balance and yanking the shirt upwards in one swift motion. Ow that hurt! I felt like a truck had just rolled over my chest, and then someone had poured on vinegar and hot coals for good measure. I jumped into the air in agony, then turned around and threw myself at him. I kicked him in the belly, and he punched me in the face. Presently

we were grappling with each other, our arms and legs in a tangle as messy as the innards of a freshly gutted chicken. Dad came running over from the living room, and when he had heard the whole story he said with a sigh, “Alright, alright. At the end of this year, when we’ve saved up enough money, we’ll buy an ox.”

Before you knew it, it was winter. The weather was fair, the fields were bright and yellow with flowering rapeseed, and the bees were busily buzzing about gathering honey. Having finished his breakfast, Dad stepped out the door and walked past the rape field on his way to the cattle market. Together with his dark blue suit he was wearing a douli² and rain boots—a rather botched sartorial mix and match, as people might now call it.

That suit had its own story. There was a hairpin turn in front of our house, and time and again out-of-towners, unfamiliar with the road, lost control of their vehicles and crashed to their deaths. If nobody claimed the victim’s clothes, Dad would take them for his wardrobe. To save money, he didn’t bother to ask a Taoist priest to perform a cleansing ritual, but instead did a perfunctory chant and prayer himself before declaring the suit properly “purified.” Strutting proud as a peacock in that suit, calling it “stately” and “distinguished” more than once, he was now walking to the bus stop alone, because the rest of the family didn’t share his high opinion of his outfit, and felt too embarrassed to see him off.

He had to wait a long time before the bus finally came trundling along. As he stepped on, Dad was greeted by the combined smells of animals, people, and engine oil; the engine howled and roared as the bus moved off again, and the windows creaked and squeaked as they shook in their frames. Moreover, every pair of eyes—including those of assorted chickens and ducks—turned towards him as soon as he was inside. Immediately Dad’s heart began to beat faster, his palms felt sweaty, and his pupils dilated. Now he knew what a prisoner must feel like who is led to the execution ground.

“Where are you going, sir?” the conductress asked.

Now Dad became really nervous. Behind the conductress hung a wooden sign which read “Mandarin Only—No Dialect.” The black characters on yellow ground exuded the authority of an imperial decree. But Dad spoke Hakka most of the time, and his Mandarin was only slightly better than that of foreign missionaries. His head swam and his tongue was tied, but at last he managed to stutter, “I, I ... I want ... to ... to go ... to buy ...” And then suddenly it occurred to him that if he said he was planning to buy an ox, everybody would know that he must have a substantial amount of money on him. What if he attracted the attention of a thief or a pickpocket? And there was no getting off the bus now.

Then he had an idea. Originally he had meant to say “buy an ox,” but now he changed this to, “I want to go and buy a girl.”³

A small difference in pronunciation, but a big one in meaning. All the passengers were staring even harder at him now, and what they saw was a thoroughly odd fellow in a weird outfit, not too

² Douli: a broad-brimmed bamboo hat worn by farmers against the sun and the rain.

³ In Chinese, “ox/cow” and “(young) girl” are both pronounced “niu,” distinguished only by different tones (second and first, respectively).

clean and not too respectable-looking. Scrutinizing him from head to toe, they pointed and made muted comments. Even the rooster crowed.

Dad knew that he'd made a mistake and quickly declared, "I mean, I want to go and buy some buttons."⁴ He indicated where a button was missing on his suit.

There it was, from "buying an ox" to "buying a girl," and ultimately "buying buttons," Dad's little tongue-twisting stunt became the talk of our village for the next three months, and provided a great topic of conversation even further away, as the story was spread by all the passengers that the bus disgorged along its route. But for Dad, the whole thing wasn't over yet. The conductress, who was in fact quite a patient person, now explained, "I don't care what you want to buy; when I asked where you're going, I meant 'which stop,' not where you want to go shopping."

So Dad bought a one-way ticket to Sanyi, some thirty kilometers away, where they had a cattle market. He walked to the end of the bus and chose a window seat. But the seat was facing the back, and Dad, who almost never took the bus, got carsick in no time. His insides were swirling around like balls of fire, and soon his breakfast rushed back into his mouth. By an effort of sheer will, Dad kept it inside until he had opened the window. Leaning out, he puked out his breakfast. Unfortunately, the slipstream blew the money from his breast pocket, one bill after the other whirling away with the wind. He hastily pressed his hand against his chest, but half of the bills had already flown away, landing in the lap of an old woman who happened to be washing clothes by the roadside. From that day on, she squatted in the same spot every day, hoping for the miracle to repeat itself, and convinced that the rich people riding on the bus were using bank notes as tissues, and threw them out of the window after having blown their nose or wiped their mouth with them.

The inadvertent creation of this rural legend cost Dad a lot of money. The inferiority complex found in many rustics prevented him from pulling the bell cord and getting off to pick up his money. Instead, he sat in his seat as if paralyzed, staring feebly at the scenery gliding past the window, which was rendered nightmarish by his inner turmoil and confusion.

After arriving at the cattle market, Dad looked at many different animals, but none of the owners were willing to sell for what he had left to offer. It was already getting dark, and most of the dealers had left, leaving behind nothing but cow dung and countless flies, when he noticed a forlorn beast against the setting sun, looking rather weak and frail. He went over and found that it was an old cow, and that it was smiling at him while swishing away flies with its tail.

Unperturbed by its smiling expression, Dad proceeded to check the cow's health. But whether it were its grayish hooves and blind left eye, or its sadly drooping ears, everything pointed to the fact that this animal was far from vigorous or even just in decent physical shape. Finally he inspected the teeth. Opening the mouth with both hands, he saw that only three of the incisors were left—a healthy cow has eight. Dad reckoned that this animal was about thirty years old, and would only live another two years at the most.

The cow's owner was a thin little boy with naked feet and his head bent down low. The top of his scalp presented a disturbing sight, all mangy and scurfy as it was. Holding the rope in a tight grip, he was staring at his own feet.

⁴ "Button" is also pronounced "niu" (third tone).

Addressing him in Hakka, Dad asked, "Where are you from?"

The little boy lifted his head. His face was very dirty, and his hair a tangled mess, but his eyes were exceedingly bright. Pointing in the direction of the sea, he replied in Hokkien, "Tongxiao. Took me half a day to get here."

Dad looked in the indicated direction and saw nothing but mountains. Tongxiao was a seaside town alright, but the mountain ranges extended almost to the coast in that area, and the fog wafting in from the sea was shrouding the green hillsides in a soft haze, giving the landscape an almost otherworldly quality.

"I come from Sanliaokeng, in Shitan," Dad pointed towards the Central Mountain Range, where peak rose above peak. In one of the long valleys ran a river, and it was from a little village situated on that stream that he had come in the morning. Now darkness was falling fast, and the towering ranges were turning the color of ink.

The little boy lifted his hand and opened it, as if to say that he had brought the baton all the way from the sea, and now it was Dad's turn to take it up and carry it into the mountains.

And take it up Dad did. Without hesitation, he took out the money, paid the boy for the cow, and set out on his return journey. He had barely walked a few steps when he turned around and asked, "What's the name of the cow?"

"Firefly," the boy declared. And then he just stood there until Dad and the cow were swallowed by the dark mountains.

What our reaction was? Well, after Dad had left that morning, we'd taken our wooden stools outside and sat down by the roadside to wait for his return. Four hours went by, then it became eight, and every time a small truck or van appeared, our hopes would rise, only to be disappointed again and again. Eventually the sun went down, the first stars came out, and a thick mist began to settle on the mountainsides. It became difficult to see anything in the dark and the gathering fog. Dad had just gone to buy an ox, how come he still hadn't returned? Our impatience turned into worry, and when the last bus had come and gone and there was still no sign of him, my younger brother and I packed a few things into an old fertilizer sack and set off to look for Dad. If he had missed the last bus, we knew we were bound to find him on the road, somewhere within thirty kilometers from our place.

Braving the chilly air and cold road, we had covered about ten kilometers when we finally saw Dad coming towards us on the road ahead. He had not let us down: he was bringing back a big, brawny bull. We could clearly discern the sound of its steady hoofbeats through the dense mist. Excited, my brother and I ran forward, but soon we stopped in our tracks, dumbfounded.

What had looked like a strong bull through the thick fog presented a very different picture from close up. Our stunned eyes saw an old cow with no eyelashes and opaque eyes. And the udders! Sagging and flabby, they were almost scraping the ground. There could be no doubt, this was a "granny cow." What on earth was wrong with Dad, buying a piece of garbage like that? The whole way back there was no end to our reproaches and sarcastic comments. We were in a really bad mood. I was 15 that year, and my brother barely a junior high school student, so we were too young to understand that like everybody else, Dad was only a human being, and prone to make mistakes once in a while.

“I bought this cow from a little boy, even younger than you are. I think he must’ve really needed the money, or he wouldn’t have sold it. Maybe there’s someone sick in his family.”

“How would you know, if you didn’t ask him?” I said sulkily.

“I didn’t ask him, that’s true, but I could smell it,” Dad relaxed his grip on the rope to let us get a whiff.

I detected a faint smell of Chinese medicine, probably a mixture of angelica, felwort, ginseng, and similar herbs. I also caught a faint scent of salt—not the sweaty kind, but the tangy aroma of the great wide sea. This was proof that the cow came from the coast, and that its owner frequently concocted Chinese medicine.

“But you still didn’t have to buy such an old cow, did you now?” I still complained.

“She’s not old!” Dad replied. “And she saved me, too, you know. After buying her, I had no money left, so I had to walk home. And this is a long and winding road, with many twists and turns and paths branching off. And the heavy fog! But luckily this cow, just like a firefly, lit my way, guiding me home through the thick fog. Together, we’ve walked for eight hours, crossing many hills and mountains, which goes to show that she’s a sturdy beast.”

“Oh, and there’s something special about her,” he added.

“She can carry sacks of grain?”

“I’d think so.”

“She can pull heavy logs, or cook dinner?” I asked sarcastically.

“She can smile.” Dad patted the old animal’s shoulder, “Come on, give us a smile.”

And smile the old cow did, baring teeth that were as yellow as bananas. All I could offer in response was a wry grin. As if a smiling cow was going to ease our workload! If our problems could be solved by smiling, we’d all be standing in the field together the whole day, arms akimbo, and laughing our guts out—why should we bother with actual backbreaking work? As for my younger brother, the depth of his anger and frustration could be seen from the way he kept kicking the gravel in the road as hard as he could.

As we were treading along, accompanied by the gentle clip-clop of the cow’s hooves on the gravel road, the mist began to lift and soon disappeared altogether. Myriads of stars appeared in the clear night sky; the entire firmament was throbbing with the Milky Way’s pristine brightness. Gazing at this vastness with my head thrown back, I had to think of the famous legend of the cowherd and the weaving girl. Didn’t the cowherd also ride a dim old cow? Ah, but what use was it to think of these things?

After we got home, the old animal got a two-day break before it was put to work. As everybody knows, old cows are about as tough as jelly, and as soon as we put her to the yoke, she began to pant. Attempting to walk, she shuddered and trembled at the strain, and when the moment arrived to pull the plow in earnest, she swayed from side to side, unable to move forward, and eventually collapsed in the field, almost drowning in the irrigation water that was barely an inch deep. Seeing her sprawled in the mud like that, weak as a kitten, we had no choice but to give Her Highness special treatment. We led her to a ridge and let her rest, and then we went back to using the old method from a hundred years ago. Wasn’t it just dandy? The news spread quickly, and people came running from all around to see the spectacle of the cow that was resting while its masters were toiling in the field. Before long, this became the favorite topic of local conversation, something to

keep tongues wagging and people laughing over their meals. They even picked a nickname for our aged bovine: Old Bessie.

Two weeks later the spring plowing was over and our legs were trembling with fatigue. Whenever we ran into other villagers, they would hasten to express their concern in a unique fashion, always making the same kind of comments. “Where did you get this precious cow?” “So how’s Old Bessie doing these days?” “That cow of yours, Old Bessie, she’s really something, the way her udders are dragging along the ground, you can use her as a broom, hahaha...” At some point, they were all cut short by their own laughter, their bodies convulsing with mirth.

The only person in the whole village who actually liked Old Bessie was my grandma. She’d say, “This cow’s a lot like me, and no mistake: old and no longer much use.” Then she’d laugh heartily and stroke Old Bessie gently.

But then Dad announced that he was going to sell Old Bessie. Good news! Of course, no one in the village was going to buy her, since no self-respecting farmer would want an old animal that was generally referred to as “a walking bunch of scrap leather.” What Dad meant, then, was to sell Old Bessie for slaughter, as was the custom in such cases: once an ox or a cow became useless—be it because of a broken leg, or because they were going blind, or simply getting old—it didn’t matter how much hard work they’d done. Even if there was an emotional bond, there was no way you’d let them live out their lives in peace; rather, while they were still breathing, you had to get them to the slaughterhouse, where they were hit right between the eye with a big hammer, cut up and sold for meat. So Old Bessie’s fate was sealed, and the ironic fact that she’d never even done any for work us made the decision an easy one. We didn’t feel the slightest bit of regret. All we wanted was to get rid of this “talk of the village.”

But that wasn’t all there was to it. Two days before the date set for taking Old Bessie to the butcher’s, Grandma went missing. She had gone gathering medicinal herbs for her gout, as was her wont, but she still hadn’t returned after nightfall. A hard rain was falling, huge drops spattering against the windowpanes that made the world disappear in a fog of spray. We were all worried to death, and Dad reckoned that even if the rain stopped, Grandma would hardly be able to survive a whole night out in the mountains: she’d die from the cold. So he decided to ask the villagers for help.

Soon, a team of able-bodied men was formed, and they ventured out into the dark night and the deafening downpour wearing raincoats and carrying flashlights. The sound of their calling voices was drowned out by the loud rain, however, and the utter darkness made the search look quite hopeless. That was when I thought of Old Bessie. True, her left eye was blind, but the right one was all the brighter, glistening like a glowworm. Hadn’t she guided Dad home right through the thickest fog? So maybe she could help us find Grandma.

Following my suggestion, Dad went to the stable and led out Old Bessie. He untied the rope that went through her nose ring, fastened a miner’s lamp around each of her horns, and said, “Now go! If you can find my mother, I’ll let you off the hook.” Then he gave her a slap on the rump to send her on her way.

“Go! Go and find her! Show us what you got!” I shouted after her.

Old Bessie turned around a few times, looking this way and that, and then trotted off into the rain, which pelted her hide and splashed off her body to create a halo of vapor around her, blurry

and out of focus. We followed at a distance in order not to cramp the old cow's style, and if it hadn't been for the two lamps attached to her horns, and the penetrating sound of the cowbell, we'd probably soon have lost track of the animal. Old Bessie was going slow enough, swaying this way and that, and now and then taking a turn. Occasionally she'd completely interrupt her unhurried progress to nibble a few mouthfuls of grass, thereby further testing our patience as we walked behind her in the incessant rain, heavy drops bouncing off our hot skin in steaming cascades. After what seemed like a small eternity, Old Bessie swerved onto the mountain path that Grandma usually took when she went looking for herbs. The pattering noise of countless raindrops on countless leaves became even louder as the vegetation grew denser. The sound of the bell was gradually swallowed by the din of the downpour, and the old cow's silhouette grew ever dimmer and fuzzier, until at last our only remaining guide were the two lamps, flashing and vanishing and reappearing again in the darkness ahead of us.

Old Bessie had spent some time exploring the trail ahead of us when suddenly there came a loud and wailing sort of moo as the animal dropped off the path. We all rushed to the spot where she had lost her footing and disappeared into the ravine. Gazing down the sloped mountainside, black and seemingly endless, fear rose in our hearts. Then we spotted the two lights, but saw that they were about ten or twelve meters apart. What on earth had happened?

Craning our necks and treading carefully, we descended for twenty or thirty meters until we found a broken-off horn, stuck between two thick tree branches and with the miner's lamp still attached to it. A subdued hissing sound emanated from the burning hot lamp case as the cool rain evaporated off its surface as pallid steam—a rather pathetic sight. Old Bessie was obviously hurt, and would no longer be any use in trying to find Grandma.

But once we got to the bottom of the valley, a truly touching scene met our eyes. Blood was gushing from the old cow's wound where the horn had been severed, mixing with the pouring rain to make her head look like a mushy mass of tomato pulp. However, her other horn was fine, as was the lamp still dangling from it, and in its circle of blurry light we could make out the shape of the very person we were looking for. No doubt about it, there Grandma lay in the shelter of a big uprooted tree, shivering like a sick puppy. Old Bessie was smiling, using her huge body to protect and warm Grandma.

"You face the whole world with a smile, and that smile of yours just warms my heart," Grandma muttered as she snuggled up under Old Bessie's flaccid udders, large and drooping, which not only warded off the rain like some kind of umbrella, but also served as a warm blanket, nice and cozy.

The rain continued to fall, cold and relentless, and yet Old Bessie's answer to it all was an unwavering smile. There could be no simpler or more direct response to the vagaries of life—all difficulties and troubles melted away before that beaming smile.

We took Grandma back home to put her in warm clothes and feed her hot ginger tea. She explained that she'd taken a stumble down the mountainside and had lacked the strength to climb back up the slope. Also, the river's rising waters had cut off her escape, forcing her to take refuge under the trunk of a tree. There she'd cowered all alone, thinking that she'd never last through the night. But when she opened her eyes again, she was looking right at Old Bessie's smiling face, illuminated by the light. Before she knew it, tears were streaming down her face....

So that was what happened! Old Bessie hadn't tripped by accident, but rushed down the slope to get to Grandma quicker. From that day on, the old cow had it good: not only didn't Dad sell her, he now viewed her as part of the family, and he put me in charge of looking after her.

Sometimes people can come back from the dead. Old Bessie certainly did. Saving Grandma had elevated her status enormously, and not just in our family, but in the entire village. All of a sudden, she became the star of the neighborhood, and everybody was talking about her great qualities and virtues. Let me tell you a bit more about those.

First of all, Old Bessie was the only actual *cow* in all of Sanliakeng; all the other beasts were bulls or oxen. As the saying goes, "After three years in the army, even a pig looks like a stunning beauty." It's no different in the world of bovines. Since the bulls in our village rarely ever got to see a cow, it was quite possible that to them Old Bessie with her sagging udders, flabby skin and missing horn was the epitome of ideal beauty. When in rut, those bulls would never forget to let out a string of ardent moos when ambling past our home.

Then Grandma would say with a loud chuckle, "Listen, those studs are in love with our granny cow."

Secondly, Old Bessie still had milk. Whenever I was feeding her fresh grass, I'd take the opportunity to reach for the old cow's udders and pull them downward—they were so floppy and soft that this didn't cause her the slightest discomfort. Then I'd put one of the teats in my mouth and start sucking away. The smell of the raw milk was almost overpowering, but it tasted fantastic. I would just lie there, my upper body resting on one of the lower fence rails and my eyes half-closed in enjoyment, and keep quaffing away. Turning my head left and right, I'd find that my younger brother and sister were standing next to the cowshed, waiting to get their share....

Thirdly, Old Bessie produced a staggering amount of shit. Most cows will crap maybe three or four times a day, tops, but Old Bessie went seven times or more, easily. Her digestive tract must have been more efficient than the heaviest grindstones! I spent a considerable amount of my time collecting cow dung, which we'd then dry in the sun and put to a variety of uses. In addition to serving as manure, it was an excellent adhesive for building cob walls. In the old days, walls were built by first erecting a framework of bamboo, and then covering it with a mixture of mud, rice straw and dung. It was the high content of fiber that made the cow dung, together with the straw, such a great bonding material. But this by no means exhausted its usefulness. After the rice had been harvested, we'd pick a plot of land and make it as flat as possible with the help of stone rollers. Then we covered the ground with cow dung to create a drying yard. Tell you what, the most delicious rice is rice that's been dried on a plot plastered with cow dung. The long and uniform exposure to the heat makes each single grain milky, translucent and bursting with fragrance and aroma. The second best rice is the kind that's been dried in a cement yard, and the worst-tasting grains come from a roasting factory, because they have kind of a rusty smell about them. So we were lucky to have such a rich supply of dung. The grains dried in our yards were of such an outstanding quality that we could ask a ten percent higher price for them.

Last not least, thanks to Old Bessie I also became sort of a celebrity in our neighborhood. To explain this, I have to tell you about the "afternoon baths." As a water buffalo, Old Bessie needed to cool off during the hottest time of day, and the best way to do this was to let her bathe in the nearby river. Of course, all the other cattle from our area also converged upon the river in the

afternoon to escape the heat, and everywhere the heads and backs of water buffaloes could be seen sticking out from the tranquil water. The lazy afternoon quiet was accentuated by the snorts and puffs of the animals as they were huffing for air. All the best spots were usually taken, and no one was willing to make space for an old lady, so our Bessie had a hard time finding a halfway decent place for a cooling soak. The best she could do was to wallow in the shallower and rockier parts of the river, which were difficult to navigate because of pebbles and sharp little rocks. And to get there, she first had to walk across the larger stones and rocks on the riverbank, which were smooth but very hot and white from the fierce sunshine. As she made her way towards the water, Old Bessie's shoulder bones, moving up and down like ponderous pistons, were protruding even more than usual.

But one day Old Bessie stumbled into the deep end of the river. There she was, bobbing up and down as she drifted in the water. And just when all the other buffalo boys came running and shouting to witness her drowning, Old Bessie began to swim. Not to flounder and kick about, mind you, but to swim with graceful and deliberate movements. After that, the deep end was her undisputed territory, a pool she had all to herself. Sometimes I would go for a swim myself, climb up Old Bessie's back and use a plank of wood as a paddle, pretending I was rowing a boat. When the number of onlookers was big enough, I'd even stand up on the old cow's back and give her a stomp on the spine that sent her turning over on her back. She'd continue to float, however, and was able to maintain this "backstroke position" for about five seconds—time enough for me to scramble onto her belly and perform some antics. I'd cross my legs as if I was luxuriating in a comfy armchair, and might even grab those long teats, left and right, and place them in front of my chest like a safety belt. All the buffalo boys within a radius of three miles around the river had seen Old Bessie "perform," and were full of praise and admiration. By contrast, all those bulls with five whorls on their head, deeply furrowed horns and muscular hind legs were relegated to the bleachers.

But fame draws envy, and not everybody had only admiration for a cow that didn't plow the fields but was very good at pretty much everything else.

So when I was leading Old Bessie along, some of the other buffalo boys would scoff, "Look, a giant unicorn beetle." Or when they spotted me squatting in the grass to take a crap, they'd shout, "Look at that! He's gotta pee sitting down now, looks like it's not just his cow that doesn't have a willy, he he he." Even their bulls would join in the derisive chorus with a few loud and mocking moos. Only Old Bessie took pity on me, mooing softly and licking my face.

Among the other boys, nobody was more eager to jeer and issue taunting challenges than A-sia-ko, who lived near the entrance of the village. A-sia-ko was his nickname, indicating that he came from a well-off family. He was a rather snotty fellow, and his pride was mostly rooted in his family's bull. Now that beast was quite a specimen, having a big temper and a wily disposition, as well as a penchant for grazing in other people's fields—he was especially fond of young rice shoots. Naturally, he also was the undisputed "Warrior King" of our neighborhood. There was simply no other animal in the whole valley that could beat this bull in a fight.

These bullfights were a contest of both strength and skill, with the animals locking horns and pushing until one of them gave up and fled. Warrior King's most fearsome trait was his split nose, divided by a horrible scar that was a memento from one of his many fights. On that occasion, he had stood his ground with characteristic resilience and obstinacy, even though he had his snout

ripped open and blood pouring down his face like a waterfall, until his opponent finally had enough and ran off with his tail between his legs.

One time I was leading Old Bessie along a narrow path when A-sia-ko came up from the other direction with his bull. Seeing us, he immediately tickled Warrior King near the shoulder, where the leg connects with the body. That's a particularly sensitive spot in cattle, and the bull responded at once, shaking his head wildly and moving forward with an impetuous grunt. Walking past Old Bessie, who was never too firm on her feet, he squeezed her right off the path, sending the old cow lurching and rolling down the embankment.

It took me a considerable amount of time and effort to get her back up again, and I couldn't resist scolding her, "You useless old cow, a little nudge and you go tumbling down like that! Apart from crapping like a champion and having long teats, what are you really good for?"

Not that my scolding made any difference. The next time we ran into Warrior King, Old Bessie was just as scared as before, turning her head and taking to her heels as soon as she caught sight of the bull. But I was still holding the rope in my hand, and so a tug of war developed, with both of us pulling hard until anger began to well up in me. All my frustration and discontent bubbled to the surface, and I gave Old Bessie a good piece of my mind. But as usual, the old cow remained completely unfazed by my outbursts. Whether she was tired of living, or simply too docile and good-natured, the bottom line was that she never showed the slightest sign of irritation, never bellowed or shoved me—on the contrary, she'd just stand there and listen to my tirades with that smile of hers. That, however, only served to make me even angrier. How could even a cow be so devoid of any sense and reason, so simpleminded and naïve? How could she forever be looking with such kind eyes on this imperfect world?

As the old saying goes, enemies are bound to meet on a narrow road, and the next time we met on that little path, I knew we were in for another round of humiliation. There was absolutely nothing I could do about it, either. But as I stood there, looking on as Warrior King bullied Old Bessie off the trail again, I got so mad that I said to A-sia-ko, "What's the big deal, you think I'm afraid of you? Let's have a bullfight, then. And if you lose, you have to eat Old Bessie's shit, every little ounce of it."

A-sia-ko burst into loud laughter. But he accepted the challenge, and spread the news of the upcoming fight all around our village, not without peppering his announcements with a healthy dose of mockery and sarcasm, along the lines of, "You know, Warrior King is really afraid of this coming fight. I mean, if he doesn't get smothered by Old Bessie's tits, he'll probably drown in her shit." It goes without saying that I had no confidence at all in our Bessie, and to toughen her up a bit I collected some tu-renshen ⁵ and fed it to her. But while it's supposed to be tonic and nutritious, like ginseng, tu-renshen doesn't taste very nice, and Old Bessie must have found the leaves as unpleasant to her palate as bitter melon was to mine, especially compared to the fresh green grass she was used to eating. Seeing that she refused to eat the leaves of her own accord, I picked up a stick, pried her mouth open, and shoved them down her throat. I was so worried Bessie wouldn't survive a single round that a bit of force-feeding didn't seem out of place.

⁵ Tu-renshen: *Talinum crassifolium*, sometimes known as waterleaf.

The fight was to take place two days later by the riverside. When the day arrived, all the kids from the neighborhood turned up, and many of them were eager to bet on the outcome of the bullfight. The problem was, no one was willing to bet on Old Bessie, and before long the bookie declared that there would be no action that day, adding in his loudest voice that this was the “most boring fight in the history of Sanliakeng.” Even without gambling, there was still the spectacle of “Old Tittie crushing the bull” to look forward to, and there had never been a larger assembly of village children than on that day. Well, it turned out that I had fed Old Bessie too much of that nourishing tu-renshen, and as a result her udders were swollen with too much milk; it was like dragging an oversized water balloon onto the battleground.

The last preparations were under way. Old Bessie and Warrior King were facing each other at a distance of five meters. Everybody was waiting for the starting signal, and for the two beasts to ram each other’s head. With bullfighting, the trick is to “wind up the bull,” which simply means that the owner of the animal will twist its tail long and hard until it’s tightly wound and the beast in proper agony. You see, the more furious the bulls, the more interesting the fight. There were three kids getting Warrior King ready for battle: two were grabbing his horns while A-sia-ko was busy “winding up the bull.” He had twirled the tail to point where you expected blood to come seeping out, and the two guys holding on to the bull’s horns, feet dug into the ground and bodies straining, were using all their strength to keep Warrior King from charging forward too soon.

“Are you ready? We can’t hold him much longer,” A-sia-ko asked, a pleading look in his eyes.

“Yes, yes, just one moment,” I replied.

The truth was, I didn’t need a team to help me restrain Old Bessie, and was quite capable of doing the wind-up thing myself. But the problem was that even though I was twisting the old cow’s tail hard enough to almost make it snap, she still didn’t show the slightest sign of getting into a fighting mood, standing there perfectly calm, emanating an air of pacifism and serenity. Some in the crowd were getting impatient, and began to throw little rocks at Old Bessie, but to no avail. She didn’t moo or bellow, and instead of working herself into a rage, she just kept smiling as if nothing particular were happening. Perhaps she felt that everything was all right with the world, that this was just the way things were supposed to be, no need to get excited about anything.

By now I was desperate to find a way of rousing Old Bessie to anger, and—necessity is the mother of invention—I came up with this: I picked up a small rock and jabbed it fiercely into the old wound where her horn had broken off. That did the trick. Old Bessie made a mooing sound (it was hard to tell whether it was an infuriated bellow or more of a resigned sigh), and the referees took this as their cue to wave a bunch of white ginger lilies and scream at the top of their voices, “Go!” Everybody hurried to get out of the way, and a tense silence settled on the scene as the crowd looked on in eager anticipation.

Living up to his moniker, Warrior King, propelled forward by his strong legs, charged like an arrow from a bow, his head with the five obstinate whorls bent down, eyes rolled up and horns ready to smash anything in their way.

But Bessie? Old Bessie just stood there, swishing her tail and twitching her ears, her face faintly beaming with that familiar smile of hers. And in that moment I at last understood the feeling of déjà vu that smile always gave me. I had seen it before, on the night when Dad had brought the old cow back to Sanliakeng, when I’d thrown back my head and looked at the cowherd and the

weaving girl gazing at each other across the vastness of the Milky Way. All the stars in the sky had been smiling at me, and it was this very smile I'd constantly seen reflected on Old Bessie's face over the past few months.

Surely she was a star descended from the heavens! Ah, if I had only figured this out a bit sooner, I would not have forced her to face this fight.

But it was already too late. With a sickening noise Warrior King crashed into smiling Old Bessie, who was sent flying backwards several meters. She was still struggling to get up when Warrior King, unable to stop, came rushing straight at her again, trampling the old cow underfoot and stomping her eyes blind. Old Bessie gave a frightful bellow. She managed to raise herself from the ground and ran off at an alarming speed. It was the first time ever that I saw Old Bessie run fast, tearing along like an out-of-control magic carpet. If she bumped into anything—blind as she was—she would ram it a few times and then run around it. As she vanished out of sight, blood was streaming freely not only from her eye sockets, but also from the lacerations on her head.

The crowd gradually dispersed and quiet settled again on the world. I was sitting by the riverside, all alone and in a desolate mood. I had no mind to go and look for Old Bessie. Most likely, I thought, that was because I couldn't stand the idea of facing the old cow, injured so badly only because of me. Dusk came and the river air was filled with the chirping of birds and insects. A crab-eating mongoose stuck its head out of the thick reeds, only to disappear again the next moment. A flight of egrets suddenly fluttered up from the water and soared into the expansive sunset clouds. Then darkness fell in earnest, and I knew that I couldn't keep sitting by the river any longer. I got up and walked away. The hardest part lay still ahead of me, and that was to go home and face the music. I had to own up to what I'd done and live with the consequences.

My father gave me a slap in the face, a real wallop of a smack that made Grandma come out of the house to see what was going on. She dissuaded Dad from giving me a good licking and, with a good deal of nudging and shoving, urged everybody to quickly get some lights and go looking for Old Bessie. Going back to the river, we followed the trail of blood on the ground, and after rounding a few hills, we found her under an old katang tree. She was leaning against the tree's trunk, panting heavily. You could see that she didn't have much breath left in her.

The towering mountains were so massive, the dark night so dense, and the road so long that it should in fact have been very difficult to find Old Bessie. That we still managed to do so in such a short time couldn't have been a coincidence. No, it was clearly meant to be, and it was only possible because the old cow had become larger than life; she was shimmering with a bright glow that rendered her visible from far off. It was this vivid sheen that had led us to her, a soft and warm radiance that was yet so dazzling and intense that we had to turn off our flashlights before we approached her.

It wasn't Old Bessie who was emitting this radiance. No, it came from fireflies, a multitude of fireflies that were hovering quietly in the air about the cow. That was why she seemed to have grown in stature, for what we saw wasn't the outline of her actual body, but rather an amplified aura, inside of which, like the wick of a burning candle, she was nearly hidden from sight. It looked so beautiful that we almost felt like we should avert our eyes.

"Thank the Lord Guan, she's still alive," Grandma exclaimed.

"Yes, but she's covered in blood!" Dad said.

“Old Bessie, come on,” I called. “Let’s go home.”

When she heard me calling, the cow gave a plaintive moo and began to totter around the tree, blood continuing to gush from her many wounds and soon coloring the tree’s bark scarlet where she was rubbing against it. Never moving away from the bole, she just kept going in circles in a slow, reeling stagger, and the halo of fireflies moved along with her like a kind of protective shield. I understood. Old Bessie hated me because I had forced her into that bullfight, and hearing my voice had stirred her to anger. Tears were rolling down my cheeks as I gave myself over to convulsive sobbing, knowing very well that all my feelings of guilt and regret wouldn’t make Old Bessie whole again.

“Firefly, why don’t you stop and rest now?” Grandma called.

Hearing her original name, Old Bessie stopped going around in circles. Leaning heavily against the tree, she continued to pant. Grandma swiftly moved to her side, walking with the nimble grace of a young girl. As she got nearer, her figure made a growing dent in the bubble of glowworm luminescence, until the arc of resistance broke with a light pop and Grandma entered into the circle of light. In the brightness of that light, we saw her take the Buddhist rosary off her wrist and slip it over the cow’s horn. Next, she took off her jacket and hung it over Old Bessie, and then she also removed her blouse to cover the hind part of the cow’s body.

Now Grandma was stripped to the waist, and you could see her wrinkled old skin, and her flabby breasts hanging almost down to her navel, proudly bearing witness to her contributions as nurturer of the clan. She was sharing all the good karma she had accumulated during her life with Old Bessie, treating her as a full-fledged member of the family.

Finally, Grandma removed the old cow’s nose ring and told her, “Firefly, now go and be reborn as the child of a good family.”

Old Bessie smiled and closed her eyes. As she went with the waiting Bodhisattvas to seek a higher level of existence, the cloud of light also floated upwards. Or rather, the innumerable fireflies hovering around the cow suddenly drifted to the crown of the katang tree, perfectly tranquil and beautiful, and exceedingly bright. Lifting my head, I could see a luminescent dot racing towards heaven, as if it was returning to its rightful home in the firmament. That night, the stars were particularly pristine and brilliant, twinkling like eyes in a laughing face, and the entire Milky Way seemed to soften into the curve of a smiling mouth.

Translated by David van der Peet

Peregrine

An English Companion to *Chutzpah* Magazine

Editors: Ou Ning, btr

Published by *Chutzpah* Magazine
In association with Paper Republic

Issue 4, October 2011