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Peregrine

An English Companion to Chutzpah Magazine

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Dad's Not Dead

Yan Ge

IN DAD'S CELL phone, Granny was listed as 'Mum'. There was the odd occasion when number rang at an inappropriate moment.

Sometimes it would be during a meeting at the factory when Dad was busy telling off the laughing chattering salesgirls. Other times, it would be when he was out drinking with friends from out of town – the five of them would have got through three bottles of *Maotai* by then, and the air in the restaurant side-room would be thick with smoke. Other times, it was worse still: Dad would be in bed, either with Mum or else some young woman of his acquaintance. In short, just when Dad was really getting into the swing of things, *A Pretty Sprig* of Jasmine would sing out. Dad would start to go soft. When his cell phone proved incontrovertibly that it was "Mum", all the fight went out of him and, floating gently to earth like a hen's feather, he'd pick up the phone, clear his throat surreptitiously, walk out into the passageway and respond: "Yes, Mum".

At the other end of the phone, Granny would tug away at the line and at Dad's heart strings too. "Hello, Shengqiang!" "Yes, Mum, what's up?" He'd stand, propping himself against the wall, just five feet from the opposite wall, just four or five streets from Granny: "Mum, I know about that," he'd go on. "Don't you worry. I'll deal with it."

Then he'd hang up and go back into the room. But in just a few minutes, the whole scenario had changed. If he was with the salesgirls, they'd be gossiping away amongst themselves, if it was a get-together with his friends, they'd be sending text messages or lighting up cigarettes, or if he was in bed with a woman, she'd be bent over scraping a callus off her heel. Dad would give a cough, shut the door behind him and they'd get back down to where they'd left off.

The only exception to this rule was if the woman on the bed happened to be Mum. In that case, he couldn't avoid a few questions about Granny first.

"What's up now with your Mum?" Mum would ask.

Dad would come across the room, take off his slippers, climb across the bed and dive under the covers. "Oh, just forget it!"

And they'd get back down to where they'd left off.

Dad put on a maroon striped shirt over his trousers and went out into the passageway. He called Zhu Cheng. "Where are you?...Right...come and get me then."

He put the phone away and started down the stairs. He had only got half-way down to the next floor when he stopped, wavering over something. Then he let forth a poetic stream of obscenities. "A bunch of damned fools, the lot of you!" he went on. "Your old man's gonna do you all in one of these days!" e carried on swearing from the fifth floor all the way down to the ground floor. Once on *terra firma*, he lit up a cigarette and smoked it until, far in the distance, he saw his driver, Zhu Cheng, driving up in the shiny black Audi. He threw down the cigarette, ground out the sparks under his foot then opened the car door and jumped in. "Qing Feng Yuan," he said.

Zhu Cheng turned the steering wheel and the car bowled along West Street towards the outskirts of town. As they crossed the intersection, Dad looked out of the window. The two streets were hideously jammed up with people – no one was paying attention to traffic regulations any more, not since the Tianmei Department Store opened up here. One young couple, their arms draped around each other's waists, made a reckless dash across the road in front of the car; a young mother had her hands so full of shopping bags she wasn't holding her kid's hand and he charged out and nearly pasted himself onto the car's side-mirror. Zhu Cheng slammed on the brakes, just avoiding hitting them, then stuck his head out of the car window and shouted lengthy picturesque references to their ancestors.

"Calm down, Zhu Cheng," said Dad from the back seat.

"Mr. Xue, these people need a telling-off. They just think I wouldn't dare hit them!" Zhu Cheng steered the car carefully through the crowds.

"Nothing's the same any more," Dad said. "People with shoes are scared of people without, and car-drivers are scared of pedestrians."

"Absolutely! The Chinese are so ignorant!" Zhu Cheng agreed.

They exchanged a few more remarks and passed the intersection with Shen Xian Bridge. Just three years ago, a new park had been built there and the original smelly ditch filled in and covered over. Dad could see a bunch of old people gathered in the park, some chatting, some just sitting. Granny wouldn't be there though. He pulled out his cell phone and checked the time.

At the entrance to Qing Feng Yuan, Dad said: "Don't bother to drive in, Zhu Cheng, just leave me here and you can go. I won't need the car this evening, I'll walk home."

"I'll wait for you, you can't go home on foot," said Zhu Cheng, good driver that he was.

"It's no distance. I can walk. And don't take the car back to the factory, come straight to the house and pick me up at eight o'clock tomorrow morning," Dad instructed him. Then he opened the car door and got out.

GRANDDAD HAD DIED two years previously and last spring their housekeeper announced her son wanted her back in the village to look after the grandchild, whereupon she upped sticks and left. Granny said she'd never find anyone else to suit and wasn't going to try, so now she was living alone in the family's old flat, with its three bedrooms and two reception rooms, and without even an hourly-paid helper. She just wanted the peace and quiet, she said.

Dad had noticed that Granny had lost weight since last year, and was getting shorter inch by inch. He walked up the three floors, took out his key and opened the door. As like as not, he wouldn't be able to see Granny; the flat was piled high with books, magazines and newspapers, it looked as if no one had lived there for months. "Mum!" he shouted. Then again, "Mum!" He

sounded worried at the sudden silence.

“Coming, coming!” Granny called back, emerging from somewhere at the back. “Shengqiang... it’s you!”

“Yes, it’s me,” said Dad, going out to the veranda to retrieve the ashtray which Granny had put beside the potted eupatorium plant. He took it back into the sitting-room and put it down on the coffee table, lit a cigarette and sat down on the sofa.

“Smoking again!” Granny exclaimed from her rattan chair, shaking her head.

“Oh, please, don’t go on at me!”

“Well if I don’t, who’s going to?” Granny shot back at him.

“All right, all right,” Dad said with a puff on his cigarette.

“There’s something I want to talk to you about,” said Granny.

Dad scrutinized his mother as she talked. Her hair had been completely white for a while now but she still wore it neatly permed and the waves undulated over her head. She wore a pale-green silk padded jacket over a knee-length grey silk skirt with a white pattern. Her calves were bare below the skirt and above her flesh-coloured socks, the skin pallid and drooping as if half-a-dozen weights were pulling it down.

Dad let his thoughts drift back to the exact moment he realized that Granny was old.

It was about 1996, or maybe 1995, about March or April and Granny suddenly got it into her head that she wanted Dad to drive her to Chong Ning County see the pear blossom in Pear Blossom Gully. When they got there, the gully was crammed full of people. Granny sat in the car frowning at them. Zhu Cheng had just started as their driver and hadn’t quite got the hang of things. He sat woodenly in the driver’s seat and Dad had to help Granny out of the car. He took her left hand, and put his other hand on her shoulder to guide her out.

That was the moment he knew it: Granny was old. Through her clothes, Dad could feel the skin on her shoulders hanging in slack folds which actually quivered in time with her footsteps. He froze, appalled. Then Granny said: “Get out of my way, Shengqiang. If you stand in my way, how can I walk?”

Dad took a step back and watched as she made her way to Pear Blossom Gully. “Mum,” he called.

Granny stopped and looked back. She looked just as normal, no different from a few minutes before, but Dad had to steel himself to look her in the face.

“Come on!” she said.

It was 1996, or maybe 1995. As they sat in the car on their way back to Pingle Town, Granny said: “You’d best not divorce Anqin, it won’t be good for you. She did wrong, but now she’s got down on her knees and groveled to you, just let it go. The pair of you should stop bickering and just get on with life.”

Dad only grunted in reply. He was preoccupied with his right arm which was aching.

“Are you listening to me, Shengqiang?” demanded Granny after waiting in vain for his response.

“Yes, right,” Dad said again, putting out his cigarette, lifting his eyes from her calves and nodding.

“Off you go then. I’m going to read for a bit and then go to bed.”

“Yes, you get an early night, Mum,” said Dad stolidly.

Outside Granny’s flat, Dad paused a few moments, then went up to the fifth floor. There was no more staircase above the fifth floor, just a blank, two-panelled door facing him. Dad took out his cell phone and made a call. It rang once then someone answered.

“Open up,” said Dad.

In a second, the door had opened. A pretty young woman stood in the doorway. Zhong Xinyu must have just done her hair, and it hung in a gleaming black curtain around her dainty face.

Dad’s face finally cracked a smile. He went in, shutting the door behind him.

IN DAD’S CELL phone, Zhong Xinyu had gone under a variety of guises, all masculine. A few months ago, she had been listed as Zhong Zhong, then for a couple of weeks, it changed to Zhong Jun; recently Dad had decided to keep life simple, and he listed her as just Zhong.

Once, Dad had been at home eating dinner with his phone beside him on the table and it rang. Dad didn’t pick it up straightaway and Mum leaned over and took a look. “It’s old man Zhong,” she said.

“Oh,” said Dad. “Hey, Zhong,” he said into the phone. “I’m at home having dinner. A game of *mahjong*, eh?”

There was a gasp of surprise from Zhong Xinyu at the other end.

“When I’ve finished eating,” he went on with a smile, “I’ve got to do the washing up too.”

He put the phone down and Mum said: “It’s been a long time since Zhong asked you out for a game of cards, isn’t it?”

“Yes,” said Dad, selecting a mouthful of pepper and aubergine with his chopsticks then raking some rice into his mouth. “When I’ve washed up, I’ll go round and see him.”

“You go as soon as you’ve finished dinner,” said Mum, looking sidelong at him. “Just the word *mahjong* drives you crazy I know. I’ll wash the dishes.”

And Dad went off happily, congratulating himself on having cleverly listed the girl as “Zhong”. It had been an inspired choice.

A little later that evening, Zhong Xinyu asked him: “So I’ve become ‘old man Zhong’ now, have I?”

“Uh–huh,” said Dad, who was engrossed in caressing her breasts. They were not big breasts, but, under his caress, they were cool and weighed in his hand like antique jade.

“Then call me by that name!” Zhong Xinyu ordered him with a giggle.

“Hey, Zhong!” he said.

“Oh, what a good little boy!” she responded with delight, sticking her bottom in the air then grinding herself against him.

To be perfectly honest, it was this foolishness that Dad really liked about Zhong Xinyu; when they were making love, he liked to yell: “Stupid cow!” at her. Zhong Xinyu never got angry at being called names, in fact she liked to act up to it.

She and Dad had been an item for nearly two years now and, it has to be said, Granddad could take some of the credit for that.

It all happened just three months before Granddad died... Granddad was 84, coming up 85, and Granny had had her 78th birthday. It was a fortnight after New Year when Dad’s cell phone rang sometime before eight one morning.

The shrill ring startled him and Mum awake.

Half-asleep, Dad reached out and saw Granny's name on the screen. He stifled his irritation and shouted into the phone: "Yes, Mum."

Granny was weeping down the line. Dad rolled back and sat upright. "What's the matter, Mum?" he asked.

"I want to divorce your Dad! I want to divorce your Dad!" she wailed.

Mum and Dad got dressed and rushed over to Granny's. Mum took her car. "Are you sure you weren't mistaken, Mum really wants a divorce?" she asked as she drove.

But there was no mistake. They got to Qing Feng Yuan, and Mum went to park the car while Dad took the stairs two at a time and let himself into the flat. Granny was in the sitting-room, her tear-streaked face hidden in her hands.

"Mum, Mum, don't cry," said Dad going over to Granny. "Just tell me what's happened."

"Ask your Dad!" said Granny, with a jab of her right hand in the direction of the balcony.

Granddad was sitting out there in a rattan chair, wearing a leather overcoat over his vest and long-johns to ward off the cold, puffing away at a cigarette and dropping cigarette ash all over his coat collar.

"Dad, what have you done?" Dad asked going out onto the balcony.

Granddad shook his head but said nothing.

"Your Dad's got a woman on the side!" Granny's voice came from the sitting-room.

Dad didn't know whether to laugh or cry. He exchanged complicit glances with his father and said: "You're quite a one, Dad! Still up to it at your age!"

Granddad gave a dry laugh. Mum came stomping up the stairs to the flat. Granny set up a wail as if someone was trampling her underfoot.

"Mum!" Mum cried, hesitating in the doorway and looking through to Dad on the balcony.

Dad made a nonchalant gesture and Mum went and crouched down by Granny and put a comforting hand on her shoulder. Softly she said: "Mum, don't cry. Tell me all about it."

"I can't go on like this," said Granny. "I told him, I've had enough of being his nanny. Let him go off with whoever he wants, I just want peace and quiet."

Their house-keeper had gone back home for the New Year a few days before. So now Mum got busy heating up the previous day's chicken soup, and preparing noodles and pickled vegetables, so that at least they could have something to eat for breakfast.

"Shengqiang, after breakfast I'm phoning your sister and getting her over here. I'm going to divorce your Dad today. I've been a decent woman all my life. I'm not going to force him into anything, if he wants to go off and live it up, he can go, but he's not going to force me to go along with it."

Granddad buried his face in his bowl and said nothing. Dad was about to say something but Mum tugged quietly at his sleeve.

Granny never did phone Auntie and Dad thought that it had all blown over.

Three months later, Granddad's blood pressure shot up and he was admitted to Pingle Hospital. Right up until the day he died, Granny refused to step outside the door of their flat. Everyone had a go at persuading her – Mum, Dad, Auntie, the housekeeper – but she wouldn't go and see Granddad.

“No!” she said. “Get that cow to go and see him instead.”

After much thought, Dad felt he should tackle Granddad. He sat down at his bed-side and asked him: “Is there anything you’d like me to take care of? I can do it for you.”

Granddad looked at Dad, took a last in-breath, shook his head and, gripping Dad’s hand, passed away.

It was the end of the road for a hero and sadness welled up in Dad. He held back the tears, but he couldn’t help being angry. Damn it. He thought of the life Granddad had led. He’d been a decent man but Granny had refused to forgive him. Less than two months later, Dad got together with Zhong Xinyu, who worked in Longteng Telecoms City selling cell phones, and installed her upstairs from Granny’s flat. Damned stupid cows. “Your old man’s gonna do you all in one of these days!” Dad used to say.

That’s right. That’s the kind of weird thing Dad used to say when he was having sex.

IN ALL HONESTY, Dad wasn’t a bad man. Just two months after his 17th birthday, Granny got him a job in a bean-paste factory. Chen Xiuliang, the charge-hand, was also not a bad man, just a bit lazy and fond of his tobacco. Every day when Dad left the flat in Qing Feng Yuan to walk to work, he had to stop off and buy him a packet of Tianxiaxiu cigarettes. Chen Xiuliang would accept them with a beaming smile and put Dad to work. If he hadn’t taken the cigarettes, no doubt he would have called him rude names like “snot–nose kid” – and still put him to work.

According to Mum, that first year at the bean factory, Dad’s job was to guard the fermenting yard: it was the end of May, nearly June, the air was full of flies and sparrows and the ground crawled with Jiuxiang bugs and mole crickets. It was the time of year when all the flowers were in flower and trees in leaf, but it was also when all the townsfolk had to get busy fermenting the bean paste in the sunshine. Granny pointed with her slender white hand and Dad was taken off by Chen Xiuliang and left to kick his heels all day in the fermenting yard.

Outsiders never saw the impressive way in which beans were fermented in Pingle Town, while Dad had seen enough to make him sick of it. Earthenware vats, three or four feet tall and with a girth as big as two arm spans, were set up in the yard. The vats held a bubbling mixture: broad beans, put there in April and left to go mouldy, and crushed red chili peppers and seasonings like star anise, bay leaves, and great handfuls of salt, which were added later. As the days went by in the hot sunshine, the chili peppers steamed and fermented, releasing their oil and a smell which was at first fragrant, then sour. Sometimes the sun was so strong that the brick–red paste in the vats boiled up and started to bubble. Then Dad had to take a stout length of wood as tall as he was and, vat by vat, stir the contents. It was vital to stir the beans and Chen Xiuliang spent a lot of time instructing Dad and clipping him around the ears to get the message across. “Slowly, slowly,” he would shout, standing to one side, cigarette between his lips, making pressing down motions with his hands. So Dad slowed down, manipulating the stirring pole as if it was a spoon, but still Chen Xiuliang was not satisfied. “Now quicker!” he would shout. “Get some speed up!”

As the pole went around, the chili oil mixed with the steam and wafted into Dad’s face. It was so pungent it seemed to reach right down his guts and turn them bright red. Finally Dad had had enough and, flinging the pole at the vat, said to Chen Xiuliang: “You want it slow or quick?! Stop messing with me!”

“Your Dad thought he’d get a beating for that!” said Mum.

But he didn’t. Instead, Chen Xiuliang pensively finished his cigarette, threw the butt to the ground and ground it under his heel then, his face all smiles, went and picked up the pole and demonstrated to Dad how to do it.

“Xue Shengqiang, you watch carefully. Hold the pole tight but relax your wrist, and move the pole from side to side. And remember something else, I’m only going to tell you once: you stir the beans the way you fuck a woman, you get me? The vat’s the woman’s cunt, and if you make her happy, then you’re stirring properly.” Dad hadn’t fucked any woman yet, in fact he still hadn’t figured out what a woman looked like when she was bare–arsed, and Chen’s words made him glue his eyes on him.

He watched Chen Xiuliang rhythmically stir the beans as if this was a witches’ brew: slow, slow, quicker, a flick of both wrists, slowing down again, until the stirring pole made the beans give off liquid moans and the flaming red chili oil leached out, releasing a glorious smell. And Dad, as he stood staring in the fermentation yard, got an erection.

Needless to say, in the fullness of time, Dad became a pretty good stirrer. He reckoned he was pretty good at fucking women too.

I haven’t said just how Dad was a good man. It wasn’t nearly as glorious as the way he learnt to stir the beans, and Mum didn’t tell me about it either, but in Pingle Town everything leaked out sooner or later.

Dad never spoke about it, never even thought about it, but he cannot have forgotten how that summer he nearly drove himself mad thinking about women.

It was all the fault of that fucking Chen Xiuliang. Dad lay drenched in sweat on his bamboo sleeping mat, wanking off and cursing the man. In between whiles, he also found time to think about some of the girls in town that he found the prettiest, thinking about what they were like bare–arsed, etc etc.

But Dad kept his wits about him. He meticulously analyzed the situation in which he found himself and faced the fact that he was very unlikely to get a girl to fool around with, at least without the other townsfolk or Granny finding out. So after he’d spent a week wanking he decided to go off to Yao Wu Yi Tiao Street, and pay a reasonable price for a bare–arsed woman.

Yao Wu Yi Tiao Street doesn’t exist any more, or rather it appears no longer to be there. But if you know the password, you can find the way in. The bums and petty criminals of Pingle society all knew exactly where it was, in other words, all the townsfolk were only pretending not to know. In actual fact, if you headed out of town on West Street, as you got near to Factory 372, there was an inconspicuous little road, with osmanthus bushes dotted along it and ropes strung from the branches on which towels and wet clothes were sometimes hung out. This was the famous Yao Wu Yi Tiao Street. When Dad was small, you could get a woman there for 15 *yuan*. Sometime in the year 2000, or maybe 2002, Dad went once more. The woman put out her hand: “150 *yuan*.” And that was when Dad felt that the good times really were gone for good.

In 2000, or 2002, coughing up 150 *yuan* was nothing to Dad. But a dozen or so years before, things had been very different. He spent a long time racking his brains and figuring out how he was going to earn those 15 *yuan*.

Every day, Dad ate breakfast at home, then went to work at the bean–paste factory, where he would eat his lunch and dinner. Apart from the money he bought Chen Xiuliang’s cigarettes with,

he had no other pocket money. So Dad just had to use Chen Xiuliang's cigarette money as the basis for his calculations. The Tianxiaxiu brand cost 2 *yuan* a packet, but a packet of Baifurong brand was only 1 *yuan*. He could save 1 *yuan* a day that way, and in 15 days he'd have enough to go to Yao Wu Yi Tiao Street. There was another, even bolder, plan: Tianxiaxiu brand cost 2 *yuan* a packet, but a packet of Jiaxiu brand was only 40 cents. That way, he could save 1 *yuan* 60 a day and could make it to Yao Wu Yi Tiao Street in 10 days' time.

Dad did the sums for both possibilities on a scrap of paper three times and pondered them every minute for five days as he stood in front of the tobacconists eyeing the cigarette packets on display, his head full of those women. Finally, he steeled himself and said to the shop-owner: "A packet of Jiaxiu."

Chen Xiuliang didn't say anything however, just took the packet, squinted at it and grunted. After all, a smoke was a smoke. When it got really hot, he'd sit bare-chested under a big eucalyptus, half a Jiaxiu hanging from his lips. The sun was dazzling and Dad had no idea where he was looking. He might as well stop looking at Chen Xiuliang; head bowed, he went off to give his beans a stir.

The sound of the bubbling beans nearly fucking finished Dad off back then, so that even now when Dad walks past the fermenting yard, he can't help sneaking glances at those bean-paste vats, perfectly aligned in the yard, which had once overflowed with his first love.

To cut a long story short, Dad stuck it out and for ten days bought Chen Xiuliang Jiaxiu cigarettes. Finally he scraped together 16 *yuan* and that very day marched proudly off to Yao Wu Yi Tiao Street, head held high, to lose his virginity. His memories of that day are a bit hazy. He's not sure whether it was because the woman was so proficient at her job or because he was just naturally brilliant, but he just feels that the woman's cries were really quite extraordinary. When he'd finished, he gave her every cent he had.

"You've given me one *yuan* too much, kid," she said kindly.

"That's for you," Dad said, playing down his generosity.

So in the end, the earnest maxims that Granny had drummed into him from boyhood had had an effect; they had turned Dad into a young philanthropist.

THIS EVENING, Dad was eating at the Piaoxiang Restaurant with Gao Tao and Zhong Shizhong ("old man Zhong") and somehow the conversation turned to Baby Girl, Dad's first woman in Yao Wu Yi Tiao Street. Gao Tao took a last puff on his cigarette and stubbed it out on the "pope's nose" of the duck left in the dish. He shook his finger at Dad and said in a slurred voice: "You remember Baby Girl, Zhong? That was Xue Shengqiang's first love!"

"First love', be buggered!" Dad spat out angrily. There was no way he was going to admit that Baby Girl had been the one to take his virginity.

"Well, anyway, as I remember, you were forever running off to Yao Wu Yi Tiao Street as a young lad. You even stole a rabbit from the Huang's and sold it so you could sleep with Baby Girl, do you remember that time?"

Somehow Dad and his friends had got to an age when, with a drop of wine in them, they'd start reminiscing about the good old days.

"You bet I do!" Zhong Shizhong took the floor. "He made his mother so angry, he came over to my house and stayed two nights, the little squirt!"

“You two old farts! That was a lifetime ago! Can’t you think of anything else to talk about?” Dad grabbed a half-empty pack of cigarettes from the table and threw it at Zhong’s head; Zhong gaily caught the pack, shook a cigarette out of it and lit it. The waitress who’d been attending them in the side-room suppressed a faintly-embarrassed smile.

“Anyway,” Zhong took a couple of puffs and pulled himself together, “how is the old lady, your mother?”

“She’s very lively!” said Dad. “She had me over the day before yesterday to talk about her 80th birthday celebrations.”

“A-ya!” Gao Tao exclaimed, clapping him on the shoulder. “It’s a big deal, an 80th birthday! You’d better do a good job of organizing it!”

“Of course I will!” Dad picked up a chunk of duck with his chopsticks and crunched it up, bone and all. “The old lady says she wants the whole family to be there, my big sister, my big brother, everyone. Then there are relatives who live in the Pingle Town, and friends, it’s going to be a big occasion, and me, I’m the one who has to sort it all out, while my revered siblings, who normally we don’t see hide nor hair of, just float along when it suits them!” he complained.

“A-ya!” Gao Tao said again. “But Shengqiang, you’re so capable, besides you live close to the old lady. You’re the right person to take it on.”

“Capable!” That somehow made Dad furious. “Sodding ‘capable’! It’s not as if I had any choice in the matter. The country forced me to do it, society forced me to do it...” He lifted his cup and the three of them clinked and swallowed their Maotai. “Mum forced me to do it!”

This wasn’t just swearing, it was actually true. When Dad was honest with himself, the fact that he hadn’t ended up fucking his brains out with the girls of Yao Wu Yi Tiao Street, that he was doing well for himself now, that he was a man of some importance in Pingle Town, was all down to Granny pushing him along.

“Good people come from gold rods,” as Granny always said. “Spare the rod and spoil the child.” Dad remembered Granny saying this every time she picked up the feather duster to beat his bottom with. He remembered perfectly well, though of course he wasn’t going to admit it, that right up until he was in his early 20s and was going out with Mum, when Granny caught him playing *mahjong* she was quite capable of having his trousers off him and having him spread-eagled over the table in his long-johns for a beating.

Granny had always insisted on the proprieties, and had been thorough in everything she did. All Dad’s life, she had been a refined figure at Dad’s side, landing blow upon blow on his long-john-clad buttocks, her voice neither a shout nor a whisper, but repeating quietly: “Look, Shengqiang, you must obey me. The whole Xue family depends on you. Don’t blame me for beating you. Spare the rod and spoil the child.”

“Nonsense!” Dad had spent his whole life muttering angrily to himself: “How come you never beat my older brother or sister then?”

For over 20 years, Dad had never dared say this out loud but he was pretty clear in his own mind that ever since he’d emerged after 9 months in Granny’s womb, he’d been the family whipping boy.

“Open another for us, Miss!” Dad bellowed, pointing at a still-unopened bottle of Maotai liquor. What was money anyway? Just so much paper! And once it was gone, it was gone. The Xue family money meant he could lead a carefree life.

DAD HAD “DAI ZHIMING” listed in his cell phone. It was annoying because he had no wish to see his elder brother’s name, but his address book listed names alphabetically so it appeared at the front and when he opened it up to look up a name, “Dai Zhiming” always seemed to catch his eye. Sometimes he just saw it, and ignored it, other times it filled him with an obscure fury. Once he nearly deleted the surname, so that he could fucking move it from D for Dai to Z for Zhiming. What the eye doesn’t see, the heart doesn’t grieve over. But then he didn’t. Leaving only his brother’s given name in his address book seemed to make them close friends. No, he’d rather put up with the annoyance of seeing that creep’s name a few more times.

Dad was more respectful about Auntie. He very properly saved her name under “Elder sister”. Every time he called Auntie, he also very properly went somewhere quiet, like the passageway or the balcony, looked up Auntie’s number and keyed it in. Auntie would answer it after a few rings with a light: “Hello, Shengqiang.”

For as long as Dad could remember, Auntie had always spoken mandarin rather than the dialect of Pingle Town, and for that reason alone, Dad made an effort to speak nicely to Auntie. Her voice came over the phone line – sounding just like she sounded on TV – “Has anything happened at home, Shengqiang?”

And Dad suppressed all the snide things he wanted to say and pronounced, in the way he might have reported to the Production Team head: “Nothing’s happened. It’s just that Mum’s 80th birthday’s coming up next month and she’d like everyone to come over and celebrate it with her.”

“Oh, yes of course!” Auntie sounded a bit surprised. “I almost forgot! Of course I must come. You set the date and I’ll be there.”

“Right,” Dad assented. It was Auntie he was talking to. If it had been someone else, he would have made rude comments to himself like: “So, Dai Zhiming, you want me to fix the date, book the restaurant, and you just come back to eat and drink once I’ve got everything ready for you!”

“Is everybody well?” Auntie asked. “How is Anqin? And how’s Xingxing been lately?”

“Everyone’s fine,” Dad put warmth into his answer.

“That’s good, then,” said Auntie.

Auntie’s question effectively stopped up the words on the tip of Dad’s tongue. No one else knew, probably not even Granny, but Dad knew very well, that if it wasn’t for Auntie, he and Mum wouldn’t be together any more – it was Auntie who had dissuaded him from getting a divorce, not Granny.

That was the first time ever that she had given Dad a call of her own volition: “Shengqiang, are you really set on divorcing Anqin?”

Dad said nothing. The day before, he had made repeated promises to Granny, but he couldn’t swallow his anger all the same.

Auntie understood perfectly well what his silence meant. She sighed, and went on: “Shengqiang, I know once this kind of thing happens and you want a divorce, it’s difficult for anyone to dissuade you, but I introduced you to each other and I want to say a couple of things. Will you listen to what your sister says and take it in?”

“Yes I will,” said Dad earnestly and sat down on the sofa, his eyes fixed on the front door at the end of the entrance hall.

“For good or ill, Anqin and I were colleagues for two years and I know she’s a good woman, otherwise I wouldn’t have introduced you. And now that I’ve seen you together I really hate to see

you split up. So today I'm going to beg you on her behalf, will you listen to me?"

"Go on," Dad said, his eyes still fixed on the front door.

"I'm not saying that Anqin's right or Anqin's wrong. I'm just saying that if you divorce her, what will you do? What will Xingxing do? Every family's got to have a home-maker. At your age and with your abilities, it'll be easy for you to find someone else for yourself, but where will you find another Mum for Xingxing? If you find someone your own age, then she'll come with a past, and that'll mean a stack of problems. If you get someone much younger than you, it'll be quite improper. I'm your sister, I know you, and I know you're good at running the factory and you're a popular man with lots of young girlfriends but they're just for fun, you can't take any of them home. Think about it, Shengqiang, can you find one to take back home?" Her manner of speaking reminded Dad of seeing his sister on TV. She might as well have been reciting her lines from the autocue.

Dad stared at the flat door, unable to answer his sister's question. What it boiled down to was: this "Can you find someone to take back home?"

He hadn't had the answer to that question back when he was going to marry Mum, and he didn't have it now, so he had just taken the easy way and married Mum, and in no time at all a dozen or so years had passed.

"All right, Sis," he said finally.

They talked a bit more and, just as Dad finished the call, Mum put the key in the lock and pushed the front door open. She was carrying some vegetables in one hand and, hesitantly, her head bowed and avoiding looking at Dad, she went into the kitchen.

"Anqin," Dad called her back.

"Huh?" said Mum, trembling all over as if terrified out of her wits. She turned to look at Dad. Dad was aware that, even after all these years, she was still an attractive middle-aged woman who had kept her looks, with her pale, oval face adorned with a delicate nose and her bright eyes.

"What are we having for dinner?" asked Dad, retrieving the TV control from behind the sofa to turn on the TV, just as if this was any old evening.

It was to be many years after that evening before Mum finally rallied, began to stand straight and take possession of her position in the family again, like poacher turned gamekeeper, and relax a bit. Finally, home was home, bright and clean, the family was the family, and all was peace and harmony. Dad knew that this was thanks to Auntie's words all those years ago, and he almost didn't say the words that came to his lips.

"Mum wants my brother-in-law and Liu Xingchen to come too." Dad had said it now. There was no taking it back.

"Is that what she said?"

"Yes, the old lady wants us all there, with no one missing." Dad said. "She says she's going to be 80 and she wants a really lively party."

"I understand. So you fix the date as soon as possible." And she briefed him: "A weekend is best. Xingchen and Xiao Zhao have busy jobs, and Diandian's at kindergarten."

"Fine, I'll let you know in the next day or two," said Dad. Then he went on hurriedly: "Sis, if this is going to make life difficult for you, I can have a word with Mum."

"Forget it," said Auntie, cutting him short. "Don't worry about it, Shengqiang. A family is a family, no matter what."

He'd grown up with his sister for nearly 20 years before she married and left home, and Dad was well aware that Auntie was a tough cookie. So he said nothing more and was about to hang up when Auntie suddenly mentioned their brother. "And Zhiming? Have you called him?"

"I know I need to phone him," said Dad. "Sis, you don't need to worry about anything."

He said goodbye, then opened his Contacts list again. Dai Zhiming was on the first page. Dad stared at it for a few seconds. He was on the point of clicking on the number when he changed his mind.

Now's not the right time, he thought to himself. I'll call tomorrow.

He scrolled through the Contacts until he came to Zhong Shizhong's number. Once he got him on the line, he said: "Hey, lad, what about going out to eat?" "You're eating right now? Then chuck your chopsticks down and get out of the house! Nonsense! It'll be delicious! It's on me, I'll get Zhu Cheng to go and get us three bottles of Maotai, lets celebrate tonight!" He knew his friend; a drinker like him would never be able to resist the invitation. Zhong did agree, but suggested calling Gao Tao too.

"All right, all right!" Dad knew quite well what Zhong was up to; Gao Tao was counting on his advertising company getting the contract from the chili bean paste factory next year, and was constantly on the phone and sending gifts. This had been going on for two weeks. Zhong Shizhong was fond of Gao Tao and was keen to give him a helping hand by getting Dad and Gao together.

"The three of us haven't seen each other for ages, lets have a good night out!" said Dad down the phone, though what he was really thinking was: Gao Tao's business is chicken feed. He's got a nerve to call it an advertising company and want to business with me!

"I'll come back drunk as a skunk! Drunk as a skunk!" said Dad, as he walked out of the front door of the flat.

THAT EVENING, as Dad, Gao and Zhong were on the third bottle of Maotai, and Dad sat at the table, breathing heavily and thinking that their waitress was becoming more and more fairy-like, his phone suddenly rang.

It was nearly 11 o'clock at night. "Is that your old lady wanting you home?" asked Zhong Shizhong, startled.

"Her?!" Dad grunted, but he picked up the phone anyway.

He could see the name "Zhong" clearly on the screen. Dad sneaked a look at Zhong Shizhong and went out into the corridor, then took the call. "It's the middle of the night," he slurred. "Has someone died?"

He was startled at his own words. Perhaps something had happened to Granny? He leaned against the wall as Zhong Xinyu talked into his ear, but this terrifying thought reduced him to silence. Once Granny died, the family would fall apart at the seams. How would he ever manage to pick up the pieces? He was filled with gut-wrenching fear.

Then he calmed himself. It was all right. From what Zhong Xinyu was saying, nothing major had happened. She'd just got some foolish fancy into her head and was tearfully begging him to go over.

"I'm out drinking, how can I?" Dad attempted to placate his "silly cow" but recently she'd been seized by strange thoughts and was getting a bit uppity.

"I don't care! You've got to come now!" came her voice down the phone.

“Really, I can’t. I’ll come tomorrow and we’ll be together, OK?” Dad carried on talking gently into the phone. Zhong Xinyu really was too young, he thought to himself. Saying all this stuff like “must” and “don’t care”? Who’d been getting her into bad habits?

“No! I want you here now!” Zhong Xinyu surprised him by sounding distinctly unfriendly.

Dad leant against the wall and scrutinized a piece of the wallpaper that was curling up at one corner on the wall opposite. This was a scene he was extraordinarily familiar with; it was just like every time Granny phoned him up.

At this thought, Dad suddenly felt an overwhelming surge of anger. A young girl like Zhong Xinyu making a scene and harassing him like this! And to think that when he first saw her, she was a maroon-uniformed slip of a girl in Longteng Telecoms City, bowing demurely and saying Yes, Sir, No, Sir to the customers.

Dad was about to spit out both the anger and the phlegm stuck in his throat when he heard Zhong Xinyu say: “If you don’t come now I’m going downstairs to your Mum’s flat and I’m going to knock on her door. Just you see if I don’t! I’m going to get her out of bed and tell her everything about you and me. We’ll see what she says then!”

It was just like having the hand-brake slammed on when he was about to have sex. Dad suddenly shrivelled. He was getting older, it wasn’t surprising he sometimes felt emasculated.

He went back into the side-room to face the inevitable ribbing from Gao and Zhong. “The fire alarm’s gone off at home. He’s got to go and douse the flames!”

Dad put his arm around the waitress’s waist and said: “Take me to pay the bill!”

The girl made a token effort to push his arm away: “Mr Gao’s already paid it, Sir!”

Even though he’d expected this, Dad gave a polite exclamation of surprise. While he was at it, he gave the waitress’s waist a pinch or two and discovered she was wearing tights, above which a roll of fat protruded. He kneaded it between his fingers, and felt an expected surge of tenderness.

Since he was in the mood, Dad decided to make it a long night and rushed off to Qing Feng Yuan. There, in Zhong Xinyu’s bed, he indulged in amorous activities one more time. It was the only way. Otherwise, in the middle of the night he would feel a surge of anger and wonder how he was ever going to extricate himself.

Dad was keenly aware that he was not having a good time because he was so drunk. But Zhong Xinyu gave sibilant cries of joy until Dad hushed her: “Keep your voice down. It’s the middle of the night.” From underneath, Zhong Xinyu looked up at him: “What’s up? Who are afraid you will hear?”

Dad gave her a couple of savage thrusts. He felt extremely aggrieved. It was hard just being human, let alone being a man. It was ever thus. There were the work-horses of this life, always needed to do the hard graft. So he, Xue Xingqing was fated always to be the butt of criticism, working himself to the bone to give his old mother a comfortable life and keep his mistress. And then there were the sages – always solitary and never putting themselves out for anyone.

Tomorrow morning... Dad thought to himself as he made love to his lover Zhong Xinyu for the last time. Tomorrow morning I’ll get things sorted out, I’ll give Dai Zhiming a call, and settle down to arranging Mum’s 80th birthday party. No more messing around...

A Pension Plan

Ha Jin

IT WAS SAID that Mr. Sheng suffered from a kind of senile dementia caused by some infarction in his brain. I was sure it was neither Parkinson's nor Alzheimer's, because I had learned quite a bit about both during my training to be a health aide. He wasn't completely disabled, but he needed to be cared for during the day. I was glad to attend to him, because I'd been out of work for more than three months before this job.

Every morning I'd wash his face with a hand towel soaked with warm water, but I'd been told not to shave him, which only his family members could do. He was sixty-nine, gentle by nature and soft-spoken. He'd taught physics at a middle school back in Changchun City three decades ago, but he couldn't read his old textbooks anymore and was unable to remember the formulas and the theorems. He still could recognize many words, though. He often had a newspaper on his lap when sitting alone. My job was to cook for him, feed him, keep him clean, and take him around. A young nurse came every other day to check his vital signs and give him an injection. The twentysomething told me that actually there was no cure for Mr. Sheng's illness, which the doctor could only try to control and slow down its deterioration. I felt lucky that my charge wasn't violent like many victims of dementia.

Mr. Sheng's wife had died long ago, before he came to the United States, but he believed she was still alive. Oftentimes he couldn't remember her name, so every morning I let him look through an album that contained about two dozen photos of her and him together. In the pictures they were young and appeared to be a happy couple. She was a pretty woman, the kind of beauty with glossy skin and a delicate figure you often find in the provinces south of the Yangtze River. Sometimes when I pointed at her face and asked him, "Who's this?" he'd raise his eyes and looked at me, his face blank.

About a month after I started, his daughter, Minna, intervened, saying the photos might upset him and I shouldn't show them to him anymore, so I put the album away. He never complained about its absence. Minna was a little bossy, but I didn't mind. She must have loved her dad. She called me Aunt Niu. That made me uneasy, because I had just turned forty-eight, not that old.

Part of my job was to feed Mr. Sheng. I often had to cajole him into swallowing food. Sometimes he was like a sick baby who refused to hold food in its mouth for long. I made fine

meals for him – chicken porridge, fish dumplings, shrimp and tyro pottage, noodles mixed with shredded shiitake mushrooms, but in spite of his set of full teeth, he seemed unable to tell any difference among most of the foods. A good part of his taste buds must have been dead. When eating, he'd jabber between mouthfuls, his words by and large incomprehensible. Yet once in a while he'd pause to ask me, "See what I mean?"

I'd keep mute. If pressed further, I'd shake my head and admit, "No, I didn't follow you."

"You always space out," he'd grunt, then refuse to eat anymore.

Lunch usually took more than two hours. That didn't bother me, since in essence, my job was just to help him while away time. Due to his willfulness about food, I decided to eat my meal before feeding him.

After lunch we often went out for some fresh air, to do a little shopping and get that day's *World Journal*; I pushed him in the wheelchair. Like a housewife, he was in the habit of clipping coupons. Whenever he saw something for sale, he would cut the ad out of the paper and save it for Minna. That made me feel that he must have been a considerate husband willing to share lots of things with his wife. Now, with my help, he enjoyed frequenting the stores in Flushing. For food he claimed he liked freshwater fish, perch, carp, eel, dace, bullhead, but he wouldn't eat seafood, nothing from the sea but scallops. The last was recommended by the young nurse because it contained little cholesterol. She also told me to give him milk and cheese, but he disliked them.

One afternoon we went out shopping again. As we were approaching a newsstand on Main Street, Mr. Sheng cried, "Halt!"

"What?" I stopped in my tracks. People were pouring out of the subway exit.

"Wait here," he told me.

"Why?"

"She's coming."

I wanted to ask him more but held back. His mind could hardly take in a regular sentence. If I asked him a question longer than ten words, he wouldn't know how to answer.

More people were passing by, and the two of us stood in the midst of the dwindling crowd. When no passenger came out of the exit anymore, I asked him, "Still waiting?"

"Yeah." He rested his hands on his legs. Beside him, a scrap of newspaper was taped to the top horizontal bar of the wheelchair.

"We must buy the fish, remember?" I pointed at the ad.

He looked vacant, his pupils roving from side to side. At this point the subway exit was again swarmed with people, and pedestrians were passing back and forth on the sidewalk. To my amazement, Mr. Sheng lifted his hand at a young lady wearing maroon pants, a pink silk shirt, and wire-rimmed glasses. She hesitated, then stopped. "What can I do for you, Uncle?" she said with a Cantonese accent.

"Seen my wife?" he asked.

"Who's she? What's her name?"

He remained silent and turned his worried face up to me. I stepped in and said, "Her name is Molei Wan." Not knowing how to explain further without offending him, I just winked at the woman.

“I don’t know anyone who has that name.” She smiled and shook her dark-complected face.

“You’re lying!” he yelled.

She glared at him, her nostrils flaring. I pulled her aside and whispered, “Miss, don’t take it to heart. He has a mental disorder.”

“If he’s a sicko, don’t let him come out to make others unhappy.” She shot me a dirty look and walked away, her shoulder-length hair swaying.

Annoyed, I stepped back to his chair. “Don’t speak to a stranger again,” I said.

He didn’t seem to understand, though he looked displeased, probably because he hadn’t caught sight of his wife. I pushed him away while he muttered something I couldn’t catch.

The fish store was nearby, and we bought a large whitefish, a two-pounder. It was very fresh, with glossy eyes, full scales, and a firm belly. The young man behind the counter gutted it but left the head on, like I told him. By no means could Mr. Sheng eat the whole thing—I would cook only half of it and save the other half for the next day or later. On our way back, he insisted on holding the fish himself. I had tied the top of the plastic bag, so I didn’t intervene when he let it lie flat on his lap. Bloody liquid seeped out and soaked the front of his khaki pants, but I didn’t notice it. When we got home, I saw the wet patch and thought he had peed. Then I found that neither of his pant legs was wet. “You meant to create more work for me, eh?” I said. “Why didn’t you hold the fish right?”

He looked puzzled. Yet he must have meant to be careless with the fish, peeved that I hadn’t let him wait longer outside the subway terminal. I began undressing him for a shower, which I had planned to do that day anyway. As for his pants soiled by the fish blood, I’d wash them later. There was a washer upstairs on the first floor of the house, where his daughter lived with his two grandchildren and her husband, Harry, a pudgy salesman who traveled a lot and was not home most of the time.

I helped Mr. Sheng into the bathtub. He held on to a walker with its wheels locked while I was washing him. I first lathered him all over and then rinsed him with a nozzle. He enjoyed the shower and cooperated as usual, turning this way and that. He let out happy noises when I sprayed warm water on him. He should be pleased, because few health aides would bathe their patients as carefully as I did. I had once worked in a nursing home, where old people were undressed and strapped to chairs with holes in the seats when we gave them showers. We wheeled them into a machine one by one. Like in an auto bath, water would spurt at them from every direction. When we pulled them out, they’d hiccup and shiver like featherless turkeys. Some of the aides would let those they disliked stay there wet and naked for an hour or two.

After toweling Mr. Sheng, I helped him on with clean clothes and then combed his gray hair, which was still thick and hadn’t lost its sheen. I noticed that his fingernails were quite long, with dirt beneath them, but the company’s regulations didn’t allow me to clip them, for fear of a lawsuit if they got infected. I told him, “Be a good boy. I’m gonna make you a fish soup.”

“Yummy.” He clucked, showing two gold-capped teeth.

I COULDN’T DRIVE, so whenever Mr. Sheng went to see the doctor in the hospital, Minna would take both of us there in her minivan. She already had her hands full with her four-year-old twin boys and her job in a bank, and had to use a babysitter. Her father didn’t believe in Western

medicine and became unhappy whenever we visited the hospital. He might have his reasons - according to the young nurse who came every other day, acupuncture and medicinal herbs might be more effective in treating his illness. But he would have to pay for the herbs since Medicare didn't cover them. Even so, he'd make me push him from one herbal store to another, and sometimes he went there just to see how those doctors, unlicensed here because of their poor English, treated patients - feeling their pulses, performing cupping, giving therapeutic massages, setting bones. He couldn't afford a whole set of herbs prescribed by a doctor, usually more than a dozen per prescription, but he'd buy something from time to time, a couple of scorpions or centipedes, or a pack of ginseng beard, which is at least ten times cheaper than the roots and which he asked me to steep in piping-hot water to make a tea for him. He would also have me bake and grind the insects and promise him never to disclose his taking them to Minna, who regarded Chinese medicine as quackery. I had no idea if centipedes and scorpions could help him, but whenever he ate a few, he would grow animated for hours, his eyes shedding a tender light while color came to his face. He'd sing folk songs, one after another. He always got the lines garbled, but the melodies were there. Familiar with those songs, I often hummed along with him.

Together we'd sing: "As the limpid brook is babbling east, / I shall keep your words secret and sweet." Or, "A little pouch with a golden string, / Made for me by the village girl / Who smiles like a blooming spring."

But often I wasn't so happy with him. Most of the time he was difficult and grouchy and would throw a tantrum out of the blue. Because Medicare covered acupuncture, he went to a clinic for the treatment regularly. The only acupuncturist within walking distance and listed by the program was Dr. Li, who practiced in one of the tenements on Forty-sixth Avenue. I often missed his office when I took Mr. Sheng there because those brick buildings appeared identical. One afternoon as I was pushing him along the sidewalk shaded by maples with purple leaves, he stopped me, saying we had just passed Dr. Li's clinic. I looked around and figured that he might be correct, so we turned and headed for the right entrance.

Excited about my mistake, he told the doctor I was "a dope". Lying on a sloping bed with needles in his feet, he pointed at his head and said, "My memory's better now."

"Indeed," Dr. Li echoed, "you've improved a lot."

I hated that donkey-faced man, who lied to him. Mr. Sheng couldn't even remember what he'd eaten for lunch. How could anyone in his right mind say his memory had gotten better? He smiled like an idiot, his face showing smugness. I was pretty sure that he had identified the right entrance only by a fluke. Outraged, I flopped down into his wheelchair and pretended to be trembling like him. I groaned, "Oh, help me! Take me to Dr. Li. I need him to stick his magic needles into my neck."

Li laughed, quacking like a duck, while Mr. Sheng fixed his eyes on me like a pair of tiny arrowheads. Red patches were appearing on his cheeks and a tuft of hair suddenly stood up on his crown. That frightened me and I got out of the chair. Even so, I couldn't help but add, "Take me back, I can't walk by myself."

I shouldn't have aped him. For the rest of the day he went on jerking his head away from me, even though I cooked his favorite food—chicken porridge with chestnuts in it. I thought he must

hate me and would make endless trouble for me. But the next morning he was himself again and even gave me a smile of recognition when I stepped into his quarters in the basement.

Mr. SHENG DEVELOPED a strange habit—he would prevent me from leaving him alone and want me to sit by him all the time. Even when I went upstairs to launder his clothes, he'd get impatient, making terrible noises. He just needed my attention, I guessed. When I walked out of his room, I could feel his eyes following me. And he had become more obedient at mealtimes and would swallow whatever I fed him. One morning I asked him teasingly, pointing at my nose, "What's my name?"

He managed to say, "Jufen."

I gave him a one-armed hug, thrilled that he'd remembered my name. To be honest, I liked to stay with him, not only because I got paid eight dollars an hour but also because his fondness for me made my work easier. It took less time to feed and bathe him now. He was so happy and mild these days that even his grandchildren would come down to see him. He also went up to visit them when his son-in-law wasn't home. Somehow he seemed afraid of Harry, a white man with thick shoulders, shortish legs, and intense blue eyes. Minna told me that her husband feared that Mr. Sheng might hurt their children, and that Harry didn't like the old man's smell. But honest to God, in my care, my patient didn't stink anymore.

He had quite a number of friends in the neighborhood, and we often went to a small park on Bowne Street to meet them. They were all in their sixties or seventies, three or four women while the other seven or eight were men. But unlike my charge, they weren't ill; they were more clearheaded. Though Mr. Sheng could no longer chat with them, I could see that they used to be quite chummy. They'd tease him good-naturedly, but he never said anything and just smiled at them. One afternoon, Old Peng, a chunky man with a bullet-shaped head, asked him loudly, "Who's this? Your girlfriend?" He pointed his thumb at me, its nail ringwormed like a tiny hoof.

To my surprise, Mr. Sheng nodded yes.

"When are you gonna to marry her?" a toothless man asked.

"Next month?" a small woman butted in, holding a fistful of pistachios.

Mr. Sheng looked muddled while his friends kept rolling, some waving at me. My face burning, I told them, "Don't make fun of him. Shame on you!"

"She's fierce," said Old Peng.

"Like a little hot pepper," another man echoed.

"She's real good at protecting her man," added the same woman.

I realized there was no way to stop them, so I told Mr. Sheng, "Come, let's go home."

As I was pushing him away, more jesting voices rose behind us. I began to take him to the park less often; instead we'd go to the Flushing Library. He liked to thumb through the magazines there, especially those with photographs.

One morning, as I was scrubbing him in the bathtub, he grasped my hand and pulled it toward him slowly but firmly. I thought he needed me to check a spot bothering him, but to my astonishment, he pressed my hand on his hairy belly, then down to his genitals. Before I could pull it back, he began mumbling. I looked up and saw his eyes giving out a strange light, some sparks

fitting in them. Wordlessly I withdrew my hand and went on spraying water on his back. He kept saying, “I love you, I love you, you know.”

Hurriedly I towed him and helped him into a change of clean clothes. I didn’t say a word the whole time, but my mind was in turmoil. How should I handle this? Should I talk to his daughter about this turn of events? He wasn’t a bad man, but I didn’t love him. Besides our age difference, twenty-one years, I simply couldn’t imagine having an intimate relationship with a man again. My ex-husband had left me eight years ago for an old flame of his, a woman entrepreneur in the porcelain business in the Bay Area, and I was accustomed to living alone and never considered remarrying. I’d been treating Mr. Sheng well mainly with an eye to making him like and trust me so my work would be easier, but now how should I cope with this madness?

Having no clue what to do, I pretended I didn’t understand him. I began to distance myself from him and stay out of his way. Still, I had to take him outdoors and I had to coax him like a child at mealtimes. Also, he’d break into a cry and let loose a flood of tears if I said something harsh to him. He’d murmur my name in a soft voice –“Jufen... Jufen...” as if chewing the word. He could have been interesting and charming if he weren’t so sick. I felt sorry for him, so I tried to be patient.

About a week later, he began to touch me whenever he could. He’d pat my behind when I stood up to get something for him. He’d also rest his fingers on my forearm as if to prevent me from going away and as if I enjoyed this intimacy. Finally, one afternoon I removed his hand from the top of my thigh and said, “Take your paw off me. I don’t like it.”

He was stunned, then burst out wailing. “No fun! No fun!” he cried, pushing the air with his open hand while his face twisted, his eyes shut.

Minna heard the commotion and came down, a huge bun of hair on top of her head. At the sight of her heartbroken father, she asked sharply, “Aunt Niu, what have you done to him?”

“He –he kept harassing me, making advances, so I just told him to stop.”

“What? You’re a liar. He can hardly know who you are, how could he do anything like that?” Her fleshy face scrunched up, showing that she resolved to defend her father’s honor.

“He likes me, that’s the truth.”

“He’s not himself anymore. How could he have normal feelings for you?”

“He said he loved me. Ask him.”

She placed her hand, dimpled at the knuckles, on his bony shoulder and shook him. “Dad, tell me, do you love Jufen?”

He looked at her blankly, as if in confusion. I hated him for keeping mute and humiliating me like this.

Minna straightened up and said to me, “Obviously you are lying. You hurt him, but you pinned the blame on him.”

“Damn it, I told you the truth!”

“How can you prove that?”

“If you don’t believe me, all right, I quit.” I was surprised by what I said; this job was precious to me, but it was too late to retract my words.

She smirked, fluttering her mascaraed eyelashes. “Who are you? You think you’re so

indispensable that the Earth will stop spinning without you?”

Speechlessly, I walked into the doorway to collect my things. It was late afternoon, almost time to call it a day. I knew Minna had befriended Ning Zhang, the owner of my agency; they both came from Nanjing. The bitch would definitely bad-mouth me to that man to make it hard for me to land another job. Even so, I had to keep up appearances and would never beg her to take me back.

I didn't eat dinner, and I wept for hours that night. Yet I didn't regret having given Minna a piece of my mind. As I anticipated, my boss, Ning Zhang, called early the next morning and told me not to go to work anymore.

FOR SEVERAL DAYS I stayed home watching TV. I liked Korean and Taiwanese shows, but I wanted to learn some English, so I watched soaps, *All My Children* and *General Hospital*, which I could hardly understand. Using a friend as an interpreter, I talked to Father Lorenzo of our church about my job loss; he said I shouldn't lose heart. "God will provide, and you'll find work soon," he assured me. "At the moment you should use the free time to attend an English class here."

I didn't reply and thought, Easier said than done. At my age, how can I learn another language from scratch? I couldn't even remember the order of the alphabet. If only I were thirty years younger!

Then one evening Ning Zhang called, saying he'd like to have me take care of Mr. Sheng again. Why? I wondered to myself. Didn't they send over another health aide? I asked him, "What happened? Minna's not angry with me anymore?"

"No. She just has a short temper, you know that. Truth be told, since you left, her dad often refused to eat, sulking like a child, so we want you to go back."

"What makes you think I'll do that?"

"I know you. You're kindhearted and will never see an old man suffer and starve because of your self-pride."

That was true, so I agreed to restart the next morning. Ning Zhang thanked me and said he'd give me a raise at the end of the year.

Minna was quite friendly when I returned to work. Her father resumed eating normally, though he still wouldn't stop saying he loved me and he would touch me whenever he could. I didn't reproach him—I just avoided body contact so I might not hurt his feelings again. To be fair, he was obsessed but innocuous. It was the incurable illness that had reduced him to such a wreck; otherwise, some older woman might have married him willingly. Whenever we ran into a friend of his on the street or in the library, Mr. Sheng would say I was his girlfriend. I was embarrassed but didn't bother to correct him. There're things that the more you try to explain, the more complicated they become. I kept mum, telling myself I was only doing my job.

Once in a while he would get assertive, attempting to make me touch his genitals when I bathed him, or trying to fondle my breasts. He even began calling me "my old woman." Irritated, I griped to Minna in private, "We have to find a way to stop him or I can't continue to work like this."

"Aunt Niu," she sighed, "let us be honest with each other. I'm terribly worried, too. Tell me, do you have feelings for my dad?"

"What do you mean?" I was puzzled.

“I mean, do you love him?”

“No, I don’t.”

She gave me a faint smile as if to say no woman would openly admit her affection for a man. I wanted to stress that at most I might like him a little, but she spoke before I could. “How about marrying him? I mean just in appearance.”

“What a silly thing to say. How could I support myself if I don’t hold a job?”

“That’s why I said just in appearance.”

I was more baffled. “I don’t get it.”

“I mean, you can keep your job but live in this apartment, pretending to be his wife. Just to make him content and peaceful. I’ll pay you four hundred dollars a month. Besides, you’ll keep your wages.”

“Well, I’m not sure.” I couldn’t see what she was really driving at.

She pressed on. “It will work like this--legally you’re not his spouse at all. Nothing will change except that you’ll spend more time with him in here.”

“I don’t have to share his bed?”

“Absolutely not. You can set up your own quarters in there.” She pointed at the storage room, which was poky but could be turned into a cozy nest.

“So the marriage will be just in name?”

“Exactly.”

“Let me think about it, okay?”

“Sure, no need to rush.”

It took me two days to decide to accept the offer. I had remembered my aunt, who in her early forties had married a paraplegic nineteen years older than her and nursed him to his grave. She wasn’t even fond of the man but took pity on him. In a way, she sacrificed herself so that her family wouldn’t starve. When her husband died, she didn’t inherit anything from him—he left his house to his nephew. Later she went to join her daughter from her first marriage and is still staying with my cousin in a small town on the Yellow River. Compared with my aunt, I was in a much better position, earning wages for myself. Eventually if I moved into Mr. Sheng’s place, I might not have to rent my apartment anymore and plus could save eighty-one dollars a month on the subway pass. When I told Minna my acceptance, she was delighted and said I was kindness itself.

To my surprise, she came again in the afternoon with a sheet of paper and asked me to sign it, saying this was just a statement of the terms we’d agreed about. I couldn’t read English, so I wanted to see a Chinese version. I had to be careful about signing anything; four years ago I’d lost my deposit when I left Elmhurst for Corona to share an apartment with a friend—my former landlord wouldn’t refund me the seven hundred dollars and showed me the co-signed agreement that stated I would give up the money if I moved out before the lease expired.

Minna said she’d rewrite the thing in Chinese. The next morning, as I was seated beside Mr. Sheng and reading a newspaper article to him, Minna stepped in and motioned for me to come into the kitchen. I went over, and she handed me the agreement. I read through it and felt outraged. It sounded like I was planning to swindle her father out of his property. The last paragraph stated: “To sum up, Jufen Niu agrees that she shall never enter into matrimony with Jinping Sheng or accept any inheritance from him. Their ‘union’ shall remain nominal forever.”

I asked Minna, “So you think I’m a gold digger, huh? If you don’t trust me, why bother about this fake marriage in the first place?”

“I do trust you, Aunt Niu, but we’re in America now, where even the air can make people change. We’d better spell out everything on paper beforehand. To tell the truth, my dad owns two apartments, which he bought many years ago when real estate was cheap in this area, so we ought to prevent any trouble down the road.”

“I never thought he’s rich, but I won’t ‘marry’ him, period.”

She fixed her cat eyes on me and said, “Then how can you continue working here?”

“I won’t.”

“I didn’t mean to offend you, Aunt Niu. Can’t we leave this open and talk about it later when we both calm down?”

“I just don’t feel I can sell myself this way. I don’t love him. You know how hard it is for a woman to marry a man she doesn’t love.”

She smirked. I knew what she was thinking—for a woman my age, it was foolish to take love into account when offered a marriage. Indeed, love gets scarcer as we grow older. All the same, I nerved myself and said, “This is my last day.”

“Well, maybe not.” She turned and made for the door, her hips jiggling a little. She shouldn’t have worn jeans, which made her appear more rotund.

NING ZHANG CALLED the next day and asked me to come to his office downtown for “a heart-to-heart talk.” I told him I wouldn’t feel comfortable to confide anything to a thirtysomething like him. In fact, he was pushing forty and already looked middle-aged, stout in the midriff and with a shiny bald spot like a lake in the mouth of an extinct volcano. Still, he insisted that I come over, so I agreed to see him the next morning.

For a whole day I thought about what to say to him. Should I refuse to look after Mr. Sheng no matter what? I wasn’t sure, because I was in Ning Zhang’s clutches. He could keep me out of work for months and even for years. Should I sign the humiliating agreement with Minna? Perhaps I had no choice but to accept it. How about asking for a raise? That might be the only possible gain I could get. So I decided to bargain with my boss for a one-dollar-an-hour raise.

Before setting out the next morning, I combed my hair, which was mostly black, and I also made up my face a little. I was amazed to see myself in the mirror: jutting cheekbones, bright eyes, and a water-chestnut-shaped mouth. If twenty years younger, I could have been a looker. Better yet, I still had a small waistline and a bulging chest. I left home, determined to confront my boss.

At the subway station I chanced on a little scarecrow of a woman, who pulled a baby carriage loaded with sacks of plastic bottles and aluminum cans. No doubt she was Chinese and over seventy. The cloth sacks holding the containers were clean and colored like pieces of baggage. A rusty folding stool was bound to the top of the huge load. On the side of the tiny buggy hung a string pouch holding a bottle of water and a little blue bag with a red tassel, obviously containing her lunch. There were also three large sacks, trussed together, separated from the buggy-load, and holding two-liter Coke bottles. All the people on the platform kept a distance from this white-haired woman in brown slacks and a black short-sleeved shirt printed with yellow hibiscuses. She looked neat and gentle but restless, and went on tightening the ropes wrapped around the load. A

fiftyish man passed by with two little girls sporting loopy honey-colored curls, and the kids turned to gawk at the sacks of containers and at the old woman, who waved her small hand and said to them with a timid smile, "Bye-bye." Neither of the wide-eyed girls responded.

The train came and discharged passengers. I helped the crone pull her stuff into the car. She was so desperate to get her things aboard that she didn't even thank me after the door slid shut. She was panting hard. How many bottles and cans has she here? I wondered. Probably about two hundred. She stood by the door, afraid she wouldn't be able to get all her stuff off at her destination. Time and again I glanced at her, though no one else seemed to notice her at all. She must have been a daily passenger with a similar load.

A miserable feeling was welling in me. In that withered woman I saw myself. How many years could I continue working as a health aide who was never paid overtime or provided with any medical insurance or a retirement plan? Would I ever make enough to lay aside some for my old age? How would I support myself when I could no longer attend to patients? I must do something now, or I might end up like that little crone someday, scavenging through garbage for cans and bottles to sell to a recycling shop. The more I thought about her, the more despondent I became.

The woman got off at Junction Boulevard, dragging her load that was five times larger than her body. People hurried past her, and I was afraid she might fall at the stairs if one of her sacks snagged on something. Her flimsy sneakers seemed to be held together by threads as she shuffled away, pulling the baby carriage while the three huge sacks on her back quivered.

NING ZHANG WAS pleased to see me when I stepped into his office. "Take a seat, Jufen," he said. "Anything to drink?"

"No." I shook my head and sat down before his desk.

"Tell me, how can I persuade you to go back to Minna's?"

"I want a pension plan!" I said firmly.

He was taken aback, then grinned. "Are you kidding me? You know our agency doesn't offer that and can't set a precedent."

"I know. That's why I won't go look after Mr. Sheng anymore."

"But he might die soon if he continues refusing to eat."

Pity suddenly gripped my heart, but I got hold of myself. I said, "He'll get over it, he'll be fine. He doesn't really know me that well. Besides, he has a memory like a bucket riddled with holes."

"Do you understand, if you don't work for us, you may not be able to work elsewhere either?"

"I've made up my mind that from now on I'll work only for a company that provides a pension plan."

"That means you'll have to be able to speak English."

"I can learn."

"At your age? Give me a break. How many years have you been in this country? Ten or eleven? How many English sentences can you speak? Five or six?"

"From now on I'll live differently. If I can't speak enough English to work for a unionized company, I'll starve and die!"

The determination in my voice must have impressed him. He breathed a sigh and said, "Quite

frankly, I admire that, that jolt of spirit, although you made me feel like a capitalist exploiter. All right, I wish you the best of luck. If I can do anything for you, let me know.”

When I came out of his office, the air pulsed with the wings of seagulls and was full of the aroma of kebabs. The trees were green and sparkling with dewdrops in the sunshine. My head was a little light with the emotion still surging in my chest. To be honest, I’m not sure if I’ll be able to learn enough English to live a different life, but I must try.

- Originally from Ha Jin, *A Good Fall*, Vintage Books, 2009. Copyright © 2009 by Ha Jin.

A Soul in Sakhalin

Guo Xiaolu

YOUR QUILT FEELS wet, your pillow smells sour. I lay beside your body, watching the winter rain obscuring the window. A crow cries three times. The damp and dark of England has a huge presence in your north facing bedroom. There is never a glimmer of sunlight visiting here. When I stay in your room, I cannot tell the difference between morning and evening. As I stay here, I am drowned in anxiety as the time passes outside the window without revealing any meaning. And when the famous drizzling English rain splatters on the window, I have no choice but to surrender to the winter. The heating is broken. You try to fix it, as you attempt to give me your love. You tell me that you love me so much that you feel like escaping and turning away from me sometimes. Me too, I feel the same. I feel life is almost unlivable in your room. My heart aches, like the Keats poem says: “a drowsy numbness pains my sense, as though of hemlock I had drunk...” We are each other’s hemlock.

Then the rain continues through to the next day. We roast brown rice in a pan. We eat expired tofu. During the night I feel hungry again. I cook dumplings, smothering them with soy and fish sauce. In the hours of deep darkness, we hug each other close and tight, your chest warming my cheeks. I fall asleep while counting the beat of your heart. Then I wake up, I search for you in the dim dawn light. Somehow you are not lying beside me. Instead, you are looking at an old and broken map, a map of Russia. You seem not to be looking at Russia, but studying the far east corner. It’s the prison island of old Russia: Sakhalin. From the sunken mattress I gaze down onto your map – the island you seem fascinated by is almost north of Japan. Why do you have that map? I ask you. No idea, you say. Someone forgot it in your bedroom, I urge. Who would that be? I light the stove. I am shivering, I need some hot coffee. Ten minutes later, I come back from your kitchen. Together we kneel down and contemplate the island – it’s shaped like a deformed molecule floating aimlessly in the icy water between the Okhotsk Sea and the Pacific Ocean. What a lonely island! The heating is still not working, and I feel my heart is thrown into that desolate place, Sakhalin, looming from your stained map.

For months, we have been sleeping on this bed without any pillows. Each night my head tries to search for a comfortable angle. Then one day I buy two pillows. Yes, two new pillows. These fresh feathered things momentarily lift my spirits, and I start to remember reading Chekov’s letters.

He wrote that when one makes a very uncomfortable journey, one must bring two pillows and make sure that the pillow case is dark in color. Chekhov must have suffered from sleeplessness. He must have been laying his tired head against rusty train windows, and enduring frozen landscapes with a deep aching in his bones. But back here in dim and murky England, with these two new pillows I can now sleep, while listening to the snow falling on the lone oak tree in your backyard.

I begin to read Chekhov again. I imagine, no! Indeed, I see in my mind's eye those Siberian peasants: toothless, skinny, hunchbacked, quick-tempered. Sitting all day long, they complain about poverty and illness. In their kitchens the cabbages are as withered as their old granny, the tea smells of rotten fish, the sugar is dirty grey, the cockroaches run all over the bread. Everything is revolting and people are dying. These are the peasants of Chekhov's Russia. On the newly bought pillow I speak to you - I feel that if I change those Russian names into the names of my mother tongue, those peasants are just like the peasants of my own land, despite the difference of their religious background, and the fact that my peasants don't drink vodka, but are instead mad pork eaters. Either way, the destiny of the powerless life shows the same face of exploitation and hopelessness.

The snow thickens and covers the city more than ever. London Fields is hibernating under a melancholy sky, and I am slowly transforming into Chekhov. The year is 1890. I grow a spiky beard and put on a pair of solid glasses. I am wearing a sheep-skin leather coat. I have some brick tea with me. And I have embarked on a long journey, a journey the government has ordered me, as a trustworthy citizen, to make, in order to undertake a census of Sakhalin's residents. I am leaving all my relatives, grandmother and sisters and brothers. I must ride a horse whether I like it or not. The two-horse carriage takes me away from my comfortable home. For days, my bones have been shaken behind two trudging animals. I fear my soul will be shaken out from my head if this carries on much longer. Maybe that's why humans will invent airplanes. Airplanes will carry souls but not bodies. Now, we have left the cities behind us, and I am traveling across the vast tundra. The snow lies still on the ground, and the spring has not yet come. One can see the white birch trees here and there, bare and naked, without a single leaf. Sometimes, a lone pine tree stands on the horizon, extending its branches into the dismal vaporous sky. Hasn't the winter already finished? I have been told that in England the winter was over a month ago. I have heard the winter jasmines are already wilted in some European gardens. But above me, the sky is gloomy, carrying the unbearable heaviness of the clouds. Sometimes you see a string of cranes etching the sky, or wild geese flocking across the marshes. But for what purpose? It must be the call of spring. There is absolutely no hint of green in view. Not even a single green spot, apart from a soldier wearing his army coat and carrying a gun beneath his empty eyes. In an inn where I have had supper, nobody speaks about the spring, but just about ducks. The only thing of interest for the locals is how to capture and cook ducks. On this trip, the worst thing is the fact that there is absolutely nothing to eat. After days and nights in a horse-drawn carriage, sleepless and worn out, one arrives in a desolate town, hoping to have a loaf of hot bread, or warm cabbage soup, if not, then cold herrings or frozen sausages. But no, there is absolutely nothing to eat, apart from an offering of two tasteless cold eggs. Endless roads I have passed, and I have reached the end of the continent. From the mouth of the Amur river, I try to take a steamer to Sakhalin, but the steamer doesn't leave until next week.

So, I, Chekhov, a short-sighted man in the year of 1890, all I do before I reach Sakhalin is sit alone in an old inn, waiting forever for a steamer, writing to my sister and mother. The letters take

ages to arrive home, and one hope those emotions will not be wasted and thrown away on the road by some ill-tempered postman. Then, eventually, the steamer comes and takes me on the final leg of my journey. I step from the boat, I plant my feet on firm earth of the island. Ah, Sakhalin!

At once I'm struck by a dullness that seems as infinitely cold as the island wind. Dull, sad faces of the locals, the convicts, the wives, and the children. Those convicts, with their motionless expressions, what have they done? Some have murdered their wives; other committed petty crimes against their neighbours; the rest were thieves. Amongst all this misery, what I feel most intensely is hunger, an obsessive urge to eat. After two days of rest, I raise my head from an old pillow the locals have given me. And there, before me, is sugar, sausage, and beef. With these I manage to claim my soul back from the emptiness of my stomach. In a desolate and shabby shop, I have bought some coffee and milk too. Sitting alone, I eat with full concentration. I let the desolate wind blow through the broken wooden door. It is hell here, but a perfect, systematic hell, coherent from top to bottom. Every day repeats the same foggy, windy, hellish weather. Towards the evening the roads begin to freeze, and at night the air is so frosty that you feel the icy crystals stab your lungs with each breath. The mud is transformed into a hard unbreakable crust. When I walk in the darkening street, my soul is turned inside out... Have I ever been so lonely? I cannot say this is the loneliest, I am being accompanied by two kind inspectors most of the days. We knock on residents' doors and note down the family's status. No, I am not a lost lonely soul. But still, I feel this misery wrapped around me. All I need is an extra sheep-skin coat, and all I long for is a warm bed to crawl in and a warm place to write. There is no other passion in me, not even love.

The year is 1890. In Sakhalin, one out of four women is a prostitute, residents live by deceit, gambling, bribery, and murder. The population is 30,000, made up of Russians, Japanese and Koreans - of whom over 20,000 are Russian convicts, surviving alongside indigenous people. It's Russians in the north, Japanese and Koreans in the south. Every man here seems to be drowned in total, most cruel despair, and the only topic on their dinner table is poverty. The dinner would only be a pot of grey cabbage soup, not even a fish from the nearby sea. I have established that the Japanese are slowly leaving the island, although some wrecked Japanese fishing boats are cast up on the beach. The Japanese are whale hunters, unlike the lazy drunk Russians! Sometimes, on the shore, one can see the Asian fishing men eating hot rice, solemnly pouring dark plum soy sauce into their bowls. They don't drink as much cabbage soup as Russians do. They eat whales.

Every morning when I wake up, I think of leaving this place. Desperate as a convict, I have waited for the steamer to come, to save me from this misery. Every two days, I walk to the bank and I ask the man who's in charge of unloading the boat. With a blank face, he shakes his head. His beard is long, so are the hairs inside his nose. People here are forever waiting for letters to arrive, letters brought by that elusive steamer, sent from families in Siberia or Kiev, or Moscow. But I who have become Chekhov, I am waiting for letters sent from London Fields, sent from a north-facing window. No, there is nothing on the shore. I walk back to the house. Then I write more letters to London. Again, I wait for weeks. There is nothing on the sea apart from an impenetrable mist.

Then one day, it comes. A sound louder than any sound known on earth. A sound of a god striking the earth. The sky explodes above the Tunguska river. I am on duty when the "event" occurs, noting down the status of a family who came to Sakhalin 20 years ago; the man stabbed his brother during a quarrel, and now he is out of jail, living wordlessly with his wife and two

daughters. I drink tea with the wife while a daughter is peeling potatoes. Suddenly, a strong whistling wind shakes the house. The wife says: “Can you hear all those birds flying overhead?” We walk outside. The sky is darkened by a most ominous cloud, a cloud made by a huge swarm of black birds escaping, in panic; broken branches and flapping chickens are blown through the sky. We are terrified. The daughters start to cry out for their father. Trees are blown down like grass. Then thunder strikes with deafening force. After that we hear the roar of burning flames somewhere in the distance. The Earth begins to move and rock, wind hits our hut and knocks it over. I run outside, staying away from all the houses, nervous as hell. The birch tree branches are on fire, the sky lights up and becomes as bright as if there was a second sun. My eyes hurt, my blood is pumped out from my veins. Then there is a second thunderbolt, and a third. I'm losing my mind; I no longer know if I am on earth or, indeed, in hell.

And so, my house is destroyed, as are the fragile huts where poor people live. I end up rehoused in an official dwelling, with the superior police commander who has been monitoring me since I've come to the island. He likes my plays. He has seen “Ivanov” in a theatre in Vladivostok. I call him the supreme inspector. The night after the Tunguska disaster, we decide to lie side by side on his ground floor, in case the fire and the wind come to hit us a second time. We two lie awake till morning, but do not utter a single word. All night we feel the gods are walking about around our house. All night we are waiting for the savage god to knock down our house. But he doesn't.

Before the Tunguska disaster, there had been much talk amongst the convicts in Sakhalin that the world was about to end. But Sakhalin was not destroyed despite the desires of its inhabitants. Yes, the Tunguska Wind – you in other continents may have heard that it destroyed 80 million trees across Russia, that it flung cows and roosters across sky, as well as scooping up the roofs of houses and small children.

I long for you. I long for those bones on your chest. I long for the two new soft pillows on your bed. I long to return to you. Hell, I long to finish my duties in the east-most island. And here I am, I have come back from Sakhalin. I have come back through Siberia, I have passed through Ulan Bator, Irkutsk, and Moscow, and have flown over the Black sea and the Balkan Mountains. Yes, here I am, I have come back. With the Tunguska wind still whirling in my head, I have left behind my numb and frozen heart on the edge of the world. Here I am, with you to make love through the everlasting winter, to make love in this room, with a stained map, now forever folded in a drawer, to make love while the city around us wakes from its long night of dreams.

- *This story was read by the author on BBC Radio 3 THE ESSAY programme January 2010.*

The Winged Seed

Li-Young Lee

2:00 A.M., I wake to rain, apartments dark where other travelers sleep.

In my dream my father came back, dressed in the clothes we'd buried him in, carrying a jar of blood in one hand, his suit pockets lined with black seeds.

His gray wool suit seemed hardly worn, except for the shoulders and elbows, which were buffed smooth, I guessed, from rubbing against his narrow coffin. And then I saw his shoes. They were completely wrecked; their leather cracked, nicked, creased, cross-creased; their puckered seams, where the stitching came unraveling, betrayed his naked feet. Sockless, his ankles were frightening, and only the thinnest soles kept him from walking in bare feet.

I began to cry, realizing *He walked the whole way*. I thought of him climbing alone the hundreds of identical stairs up from his grave in Pennsylvania, and then, obeying some instinct, walking west to Chicago, toward his wife, children, and grandchildren. When did he begin his journey, I wondered. In the dream, I felt ashamed, disturbed by the thought that while he looked for me, for us, his family, we were quite unaware of his arrival, which might have taken him years for all I know, since no one ever told him where to find us. It hurt to think of him walking for years along the blind shoulders of highways, through fields, along rivers, down sidewalks of North American cities and villages; walking day and night; talking to no one; walking; a dead Chinese man separated from the family he brought to this country in 1946; a stranger to most when he was alive; an Asian come to a country at war with Asia; now stranger in death. I kept looking at his shoes.

The family began to gather for a photo to commemorate his return, during which commotion he seemed distracted; he had an appointment to keep. While everyone stayed busy seating and reseating before the camera, crowding to fit into view, I saw he sat not in his accustomed place, at the center, but, instead, at the end of the front row where he seemed not only comfortable but uninterested. I thought to myself, *I hope his shoes don't show up in the photo. That would shame him, such shoes, and the raw ankle bone*. And then I was certain he'd soon ask me a question and I wouldn't know the answer.

Immediately after the photo was taken, he stood up and walked over to me, who, come to think of it, had been sitting in the dead man's accustomed place. He told me to say good-bye. We

had to go. I would be going with him. His words were a blow. I didn't move. Noticing, he asked if I wanted to come with him after all. I answered, *of course*. I lied.

He said, *Very well. I'll wait for you by the locks*. Then he went out the door.

I looked at the thirteen people I call my family, and felt suddenly excluded. But then I felt, like miles of water rising in me, a feeling that I could never leave them.

But my father's shoes. How wrecked they were, how old and battered. I said out loud, *He's so poor. His shoes, poor father, his shoes*. I felt I should go with him, and began to think over the many names and faces of people I'd have to say good-bye to, concluding that going with my father was what I *must* do. But when I walked over to say good-bye to you, Donna, I could not touch your face.

If it meant leaving, I could not bring myself to touch you. I began to tremble; trembling, I needed to touch you. Yet, I could not, no matter what if...yet it meant...as it is...

Love, what is night? Is a man thinking in the night the night? Is fruit ripening in the night the night?

I remember fishing with my sister by the light of paper lanterns, the bamboo jetty at the beach in Ancol. Lying on our stomachs, below a surface of many tiny waves, schools of octopi, their eerie bulb heads glowing.

Night is night as is, without hands. Night is night even if it's a basin of fire. Night is night though it's tentacle and maelstrom, night even a bloody custard, the body, dear trough, even if my hand a possible face...night past the color of archipelago. O, how may I touch you across this chasm of flown things? What won't the night overthrow, the wind unwrite? Where is the road when the road is carried? What story do we need to hear, so late in childhood? This early in the future, roses exact all our window, night the wound and way in, night my pink, rude thumb stopper and sink, mustard and ache, my club and good yam, the radish king in his red jacket and green embroidered slippers, writing his letter to the queen of the snails, saying, *I crave your salty foot, suffer me a drink from your horn*. Night, mobile, changes. Though night is night. Even if it's fever and teaspoons, hobbyhorse and train track, the train car empty except for our family and two passengers at the other end, a young woman in a trench coat and the baby in her arms, wrapped in the piss-sodden pages of a Spiegel catalog.

The woman and child had obviously not bathed in days, and the child, who had been bawling on and off for hours, would sometimes convulse, its arms and legs making a frantic swimming in the air, its hands now clawing, now stuck inside its mouth. The woman sometimes opened her coat and unbuttoned her dress to give the child first one breast, then the other, but both were dry. We guessed that both the mother and the baby hadn't eaten in a long time. The woman's eyesockets were bruised by lack of sleep; her teeth and jaw jutted under her skin. The child looked sickly, thin, but its cries were strong. And when it grew exhausted from crying or sucking at its mother's dry paps, it whimpered in her lap, while she stared out the black window, past her own face, to the country passing outside, the country in which our family had so recently arrived.

Earlier, at the station in Seattle, we'd seen the woman peel layers of cold newspaper from the infant's naked body, then wrap the freezing child in a drier, more recent edition someone had left folded on the waiting-room bench. The child's sallow, puny body was smeared with newspaper ink. The mother, dirty, gaunt, looked wild.

On the train, she would almost nod to sleep, but the baby squirmed on her knees, nearly

falling off, and she would start awake, and pull the child closer. I realize now she herself was a child, not much older than my sister, who was fourteen at the time.

WE HAD BEEN living on butter cookies. We had two tins of them we'd eat among the six of us, my parents and their four children. Butter cookies and the sixty dollars in my mother's purse were to see us through the next of few days until my father found work. But my mother decided we could spare the unopened tin. So she untied it from our bundle, and rummaged a sweater from her suitcase and gave the things to my sister to take to the girl, who wrapped the child in the sweater that must have smelled of my mother's perfume. And then the girl began to wave a cookie in front of the baby's face, meaning to feed him. But he, who couldn't have been more than four or five months old, wouldn't eat the cream-colored square held before him.

The girl grew more impatient, the baby bawled louder. Finally, she, who'd said nothing all along, not a word, not even to hush the child, looked over her shoulder at us and, exasperated, pleaded, "He won't eat." Only my father spoke English back then, and he told my mother what the girl said. After a few seconds, my mother went and sat down beside the girl. She asked if she could hold the child, asked in a language the girl most likely had never heard before, and one mother passed her burden to the other. I saw my mother chew up a biscuit and, all the while humming to the child, and lightly rocking, pass the spit-brightened, masticated paste of her mouth into his.

At first the child didn't take it, but after a few more tries, he ate. The younger mother followed the example. Mouthful by mouthful, the girl fed the child, and eventually they both slept. That woman and child had a further destination than we had that night. When the train stopped in Chicago, we gathered our belongings and walked past without waking them, and continued out through the waiting room of Union Station, and passed through the vaulting arch flanked by statues of two women, one holding her head bowed and bearing an owl on her shoulder, the other raising a naked arm, on which is perched a rooster.

Night is the night and restless. But whose restlessness is this? Mine or night's own? What is night?

My mother and my night are deciding which portion of my fate they'll keep, she in a jar with her celeries and bitters, he in a coat pocket, next to his liver and other vestigial organs. Either she'll divide me with a kitchen knife, or he'll filter me through his teeth. Soon, I may have to rock them both to sleep.

My mother and my night are weighing the separate portions of my fate they own, she as the darker wing to her black hair, he as one more finger to his scary hand. Will she fuss to sew what's mine to me? Will he join me to my shoulder bone? Don't they know I've hidden my fate inside a peach, which isn't round because it's in search of a theme, or a stem, or sugar, or a leaf, but a destiny? Whose night is it forming inside the fruit? Night is the night's peony and monstrous forehead, so our brief bowls, shattered, might spill the sea.

Night is the night carried, death by the rectangular, black-lacquered trunk my father hauled on his back until he got tired, and then my brothers and I took turns shouldering it. It sits now under the living-room window of my mother's apartment, its lid inlaid with jade and mother-of-pearl, depicting a scene from a Chinese opera. I'm dying of the white bedsheet my mother uses to cover it, and the potted white begonia that sits on the sheet, dropping its flowers that lie like lopped

ears pressed to a story. Inside the trunk, between many layers of blankets, wrapped in cloth and old newspapers, are the cool jades and brittle porcelains my parents carried over the sea, and a box that used to hold a pair of women's boots. In that box are hundreds of black-and-white photographs of people I've never met, pictures like the one that sits in a gilded frame on the cabinet of my mother's big screen TV. It is a picture of my mother's family, a complicated arrangement of aunts and uncles, first and second cousins, concubines and slaves, and each member sits or stands in strict accordance to his or her relation to my mother's grandfather, the Old President, Yuan Shih-k'ai. It is a feudal hierarchy impossible for me to understand completely, but which my mother grasps at a glance, remembering exactly if it was the Old Man's sixth son, Supreme Virtue, by the fourth wife, Rich Pearl, or the second daughter, Jade something, of the ninth concubine, Have Courage, who killed with a slingshot all the goldfish in the ponds that decorated the twenty acres of formal gardens my great-grandfather owned. And she know exactly which wan face belongs to the uncle who, forbidden to marry his thirteen-year-old niece, in grief gave up his inheritance, left for Mongolia to live in a hut, let his hair grow to his knees, and wrote page after page of poems and songs about the one called Exquisite Law, who, in the photograph, is carried in the arms of a servant whose face has been blacked out, as all the servants in the photograph have been blacked out, so that the babies they hold (not their own, but the children of the masters) look like they're floating. And my mother remembers who it was that hid among the peonies to avoid having to kiss the corpse of the Old President's fifth wife, who was mourned publicly when she died, as befitted her station. Her fists stuffed with money, her mouth filled with pearls and coins, she was arrayed in her best silks, laid in a coffin of one hundred lacquer coats, and displayed in the living room for one hundred days, during which a procession of mourners, professional and personal, made their way in from the southern door and streamed out though the circular northern portal. Meanwhile, in the chrysanthemum garden, a population of paper figures were erected to mourn in silence this lady who had ruled the fifth household. Her family, as was custom among the very wealthy, had hired artisans to construct out of paper life-size figures of ladies-in-waiting, eunuchs, warriors, scholars, magicians, servants, courtesans, goatherds, and gardeners in every possible posture and attitude of reading, pontificating, viewing flowers, singing, grooming, meditating, sitting, standing, and serving tea. A host of paper mourners and their dogs, cats, peacocks, monkeys, and horses. An acre of figures so detailed and finely made each bore a different expression and distinct hairline. On the one hundredth day of mourning, the day of burial, all of them were to be burned, sent into the next world to attend the old woman whose death had demanded they be cut, creased, folded, and glued into presence. But my mother remembers that on that day, while monks from the local monastery prayed and chanted, sixteen elders banging and blowing shrill instruments in the smoke of thousands of bundled joss sticks reeking bitter sandalwood, a smell only a god could love, clanging and singing amid the smoke, all their words getting blown away on one of the windiest days of the year, while the family members began to dismantle the paper throng in order to carry them to the pyre, a wind came and began to blow the paper statues away. The figures were not made so flimsily that they could not withstand a little wind; in fact, the best artisans were so skilled at their craft that their handiwork could stand for months outside their shops as advertising. But the wind that attended my great-grandmother's burial was so great it lifted an entire paper pavilion, weighing several hundred pounds, along with the members of the court inside it, and straight up carried it

away over the walls my great-grandfather had built to enclose the nice mansions of his nine wives and the satellite buildings where the servants were quartered. Family members, frantic, ran all over the grounds chasing paper ladies and paper oxen of assorted colors. But the old lady would have to make her final journey alone, for not even one of those mourners was left intact. The wind set them all free, and tearing.

WHEN MY MOTHER, Jiaying, is a girl in China, she loves the summers in the mountains. The rest of the year, she lives in the city below, in the haunted mansion ruled by her father's mother, a woman as cruel as she is small and desiccated, and as selfish as her feet are twisted to fit into tiny hoof-shaped shoes of brocade. It is because of this woman, my mother insists, that drafty ghosts inhabit the countless rooms and myriad corridors of the old house, whose ceilings and rafters are so high that light never reaches them, giving Jiaying the feeling of living perpetually under a great, dark, impenetrable hood. It was from the rafters in the sewing hall, the darkest room in the entire complex, that a maid, fourteen and newly hired, hung herself after only three months of waiting on the old woman.

The sewing hall is a building whose front face is wood and whose other three walls are windowless brick. Two double-door front entrances lead into a cavernous room of stone floors and two rows of three pillars each, painted thickly red, and spaced ten feet apart. Lined with tables at which thirty women sit behind mounds of various fabrics of any color, the room whines and rings with the rapid pounding of several hand-operated sewing machines. Forbidden to wear against their bodies any piece of cloth cut or sewn by men, all the female members of the nine households have their clothes made by women in the sewing hall. Thirty seamstresses, every day all year round making and mending the clothes of births and deaths for every female Yuan, cutting and sewing from patterns handed down generation to generation without mutation for nearly a century, so that almost everyone in Tientsin knows that the less fashionable you are, the older the money you come from. Thirty indentured workers, bought or born into bondage of cloth, sew in the great hall, drinking little cups of tea that amount to green seas, gossiping and telling stories. All day long, necks bent and fingers crooked to meticulous mending or making, by machine and by hand, embroidering, and weaving, and stitching, threading endless miles of spooled thread of all different colors and thicknesses. All different ages, the workers sit according to years of servitude and age, the oldest, having been there the longest, and whose eyes see the least after years of strain, sit at the front of the room where there is the most light from the windows and doorways, while behind them in progressive densities of shadow sit the younger and younger ones less and less blind. Deepest, where the sunlight never reaches, sit the youngest ones twelve and thirteen, the newly arrived, the tenderest with their sharp, clear eyes, sewing in shadow. Soon enough, though, they'll get to move forward more and more as the very oldest grow so blind they have to quit, just as they themselves, the younger ones, will see less and less, even as they move nearer and nearer the sunlight. By the windows sit a few women old and almost completely blind and whose hands are so twisted as to be not recognizable as hands anymore. Useless and used up by years of service, they tend to the countless cats that live in the sewing hall. Cats of all different sizes and shapes and colors, living on a gruel of rice and fish, or mice, or sometimes their own litters, they far outnumber their keepers, none of whom knows how they came to live there in the first place. Nameless and nondescript,

they endlessly prowl along the walls and the legs of the tables, so that the workers sense a constant motion at their feet, a continual brushing past of fur.

Jiaying hates the sewing hall because of the cats. She hates the smell and the hundreds of little eyes behind the tables and in the shadows. She hates the countless tails curling and brushing past her when she is there on an errand. There are so many of them they can hardly be called pets. The ones who have the job of tending the brood sit by the windows sipping tea, chewing their gums, and squinting. The oldest of them, who swears she remembers having sewed the President's scholar's robe for graduation, sits absently grinning to her toothless self. Whether she is recalling better days, or smiling in the knowledge of the fate of all those young pretty girls in the back, no one can tell.

It was here one morning someone looked up into the ceiling and there, where the swallows build their high unseen nests in the dark of the rafters and brackets, was one white sock dangling in midair. It was the white-stockinged foot of someone hanging from the rafters. Screaming and turning over chairs, the women cleared the sewing hall like frantic birds sprung from a box. Members of the nine households assembled in the yard and someone took the body down. The fifth wife's new maid had hung herself. Judging by all signs, she'd done it early in the morning. It must have been just light when she climbed up on a chair set on a table and scaled the rafters and scaffolding. Everyone speculated on what insanity made her go to so much trouble to hang herself from the highest ceiling in the whole complex. For days afterward everyone kept looking into the ceilings of whatever room or corridor they were in. And then people began to see the girl walking around. Even Jiaying's grandmother, who used to make the girl stay awake entire nights rubbing her feet, and beat her pitilessly if she fell asleep, claimed to have seen her once, but just once. She said she woke from a restful afternoon nap and had the feeling someone was in the room. Furious to have an uninvited guest, she opened her eyes to find the Little Ugly, as she was fond of calling her because of her pocked face, sitting next to her. *What did you do, Nai Nai?* the granddaughters gasped who were listening to the story. *What do you think I did? she gloated. I told her if she didn't behave I'd make her mother who sold her to me my maid as well.* The girl never visited the old lady again, although others continued to see her.

But, *Let's not talk about old things*, is my mother's response most of the time I ask her about her childhood. *Don't make me go back there. Like those evil-smelling, greenish black potions the servants cooked and served hot to me in winter for coughs and headaches as a child, the past is all one bitter draft to me*, she says as my sister combs my mother's hair in the morning, by the window looking onto her garden. When I press her, she says, *I can't tell if your head is an empty house, or a pot of boiling glue*, and then inserts the alabaster comb into her loosely piled-up hair, a black nest, and waves a silver stray back with her hand summarily, as though to dispel so much cobweb or smoke. *Now let's go buy some fish.*

At the Beautiful Asia Market in Chicago, the refugee grocer is a bent, brown-colored man with a big black mole on his right jaw, and the fish tank is empty, except for some filthy water. The only fish I see are two carp afloat in a bucket propping a mop in it. So we'll buy the gnarled man's perfectly trimmed napa cabbages, but have to get our fish elsewhere. *Elsenhere*, my mother says, *your head is always elsewhere, in the past or in the future. Why can't you be here?* I wonder about an answer while I push a tinny cart with a crazy wheel down the fragrant lanes of tea, aisles of lemon grass and sandalwood, musty narrows of spices and medicinal herbs, rows of shelves, and shelves of

jars of chopped pickled mudfish and shrimp ferment, soybean paste and preserved monkfish, eel eyes staring out from brine, sealed stacks of biscuits and cocoa from Belgium and England, and cartons of instant noodles stacked to the ceiling. I browse with my mother, each of us keeping the same things we need for dinner as different lists, Chinese and English, in our heads, and my mother, because her eyes are bad, inspecting the goods with a spyglass.

In my mother's dreams, she wanders that old ground, the family compound, and it's evening, and becoming more evening. She's on an errand to the sewing hall, and the cloth in her hands is poorly folded. And I know by her description that it's the same path I walk in my own dream. In my mother's dream, she walks in the general direction of the sewing hall, but avoids it. In mine, I'm sitting on the steps and the doors are locked. In my dream, I sometimes stand among trees the way I stood three summers ago on Fragrant Mountain, and look across the valley to another mountain face, where my wife leads our children up a winding path. Below, my grandfather's bones scattered by the People's Army.

In my mother's dream, she is again a girl of sixteen in China, where she spends summer with her family on Fragrant Mountain, making the final two-day leg of the serpentine ascent through dense forests on muleback, in a train of twenty-five mules bearing her father, her mother, her father's concubine, three aunts, one brother (the other having been banished by the grandmother), two of her sisters, fourteen and thirteen years old (the other two attending boarding school in France), her favorite cousin, the same age as her and recently orphaned, two of her brother's friends whom he met in New York while attending school there in the fall at Columbia University, three bodyguards armed with rifles and pistols, four household servants, one cook, three dogs, and various equipment and supplies. On the trip up the narrow path, while one of her sisters reads aloud from Zola or Balzac, Jiaying nibbles on fresh lychees, which they carry up the mountain. The mule bearing the burden of Jiaying's favorite fruit can't tell as that burden imperceptibly and gradually lightens, as Jiaying fills her mouth with its sweetness.

When she is a little girl in China, Jiaying's favorite food is lychee. For one brief season a year, the markets are full of that globose, hard-skinned fruit tied in pink string at the bundled stems, and her father sends the servants to buy them for her each morning. Unlike all the other fruits that smell and taste of sunlight compacted, then mellowed to sugar, lychee yields to her tongue a darker perfume, a heavy redolence damp with the mild edge of fermentation. How wonderfully fitting it seems to her that such milky, soft meat should be surrounded by a rough, brown reptilian leather of a slightly red cast when ripe, and made almost impenetrable by being covered in tiny rivets and studs. Summertime, she grows thin on nothing but lychee flesh. She waits each morning for the servants to bring bundles of it home, and rather than have the fruit peeled and served to her in a porcelain bowl that fits precisely the bowl of her hand, she prefers to peel for herself the tough skin, rough to her fingers. Using her fingernails to puncture the exterior, she splits it open and takes with her teeth the white meat slippery with nectar, the whole plump bulb of it in her mouth, and eats it to the smooth pit, which she spits out, leaving on the verandah each morning a scattering of black stones and empty husks, sticky with sugar and swarming with bees. A servant sweeps the verandah, scolding her.

Ordinarily forbidden to go out beyond the confines of their home, a complex of nine mansions and attendant satellite buildings housing the families of the nine wives of Jiaying's

grandfather, Jiaying and her sisters' only contact with the rest of the world has been for years through the private school they attend, where they make friends with two girls who, while their families can afford the cost of private school, do not belong to titled households of rank, and who, as a result, are not bound to traditional ways and attitudes the same way Jiaying and her sisters are so strictly bound at home. When each of the Yuan sisters distinguishes herself in her studies, and is encouraged by her parents and her grandmother to continue her education after middle school, naturally, each of them takes advantage of the opportunity by enrolling in fashionable French and British boarding schools. All five of them except Jiaying, the oldest, who decided to stay home, where everything that surrounded her was so old, she was certain it must be permanent. The poems she read were thousands of years old, the calligraphy she practiced was practiced by smart refined girls like her thousands of years ago, the house she lived in and the grounds surrounding it looked to be as old as anything else in the whole country, and as half buried. During the summer sand storms, when all the tiles, the latticed windows, the carved railings and figured eaves were packed with sand, and little dunes formed against the buildings, she knew it was sand broken off eternal mountains and then driven the whole way from the Gobi, that old fabled desert, and was on its way to that most ancient of bodies, the sea. And her grandmother, only forty-five but already walking with the aid of a cane and three or four servants, seemed to be some eternal fixture in the universe with her medicinal odors and old ways. How could she conceive of a future when everything around her felt like the end of things, the world's very culmination.

Of all the things packed onto the sweating mules, Jiaying writes in her diary dated June 6, 1939, an individual lycee is probably the lightest. Or else the calligraphy brushes. Only the little bamboo-handled goldfish nets are as light as the brushes. Next would certainly be the butterfly nets. Then Auntie's opium in its beautiful paper wrappings. Then the pipes. The weight of the rest of things is distributed as evenly as possible: zithers and lutes, flutes, Ba's typewriter, and tea, mirrors, telescopes fishing poles, and jars of embalming fluids, empty bird cages, dictionaries and books in Chinese, English, and French, subjects ranging from poetry and astronomy to The Art of War, and magnifying glasses, boxing gloves, chess and mahjong sets, bows and arrows, slabs of salt-and-sugar-cured meats, squat clay pots sealed in wax holding assorted preserved fruits and vegetables, and pages of rice paper bound in boards, ink blocks, and a monkey to grind the ink.

They ride slowly through increasingly clearer air, making frequent stops to picnic, shoot small game, and take photographs. The cool, immense night they spend at a rest station manned by servants they sent ahead days ago to prepare for their arrival. By candlelight, Jiaying writes in her diary, which she reads to her cousin: *Miles up from the city. Many more miles to go. Here a place to rest. Ahead, another. And farther, another.*

Their last stop before reaching the summit is the ancestral graveyard. An acre of meadow bounded on three sides by woods and on the fourth by the gravekeeper's small farm, on it stand the twelve-foot-high marble headstones of various shapes. The cemetery gate is a huge nail-studded crossbeam set by wedges into twin two-story posts hewn from whole trees, the entire thing tooled and painted with patterns, symbols, and signs resembling eyes or flowers or clouds, and flanked by a set of stone mythical beasts. Half dog, half lion, half scowling, half grinning, standing on their platforms taller than the gravekeeper's house, both guardians look as though they were peering over his roof.

Once at the site, Jiaying and her family burn incense and paper money, and pray to a long

line of illustrious and men and women whose severe portraits hang huge and forbidding in the tall, gloomy corridors of their home in Tientsin, a city far below them now as they stand in a high meadow in the mountains.

In the whirring and clicking of grasshoppers, they walk at the feet of the white marble stele. On each is carved a poem commemorating the one who lies underground shrouded in countless layers of silk and enclosed in a box filled with money and precious jewels. As well as flowers, birds, and animals, human figures are etched in various depictions of filial piety. Even as Jiaying stands bowed at the foot of a stone slab two and a half times her height and wide as a double door, above her eternally is the figure of a young girl not unlike herself, clothed in a style hundreds of years old, paying her dutiful respects to the unanswering dead.

While Jiaying and her family linger over the names and poems, no one thinks that Jiaying's father and grandmother will be put in this ground soon. Even less would any of them believe that on an afternoon years from now, a group of student revolutionaries will casually pass through the gates of this place, and dig up the graves and rob them, dragging up the corpses of her father and grandmother to strip and tie them naked to a tree. Jiaying, who will have left the country by then, will have to hear about it almost half a century after the fact, from the gravekeeper himself, who after so many years still recognizes her, and falls to his knees to bow to her, calling her by her title, when she comes back here a woman. She'll have arrived by car then, accompanied by her own children, her husband dead, to be greeted by the man who has lived on this farm ever since the one day he climbed up the mountain to work for her family and never came down again. He'll walk with her over the ground, which has been turned into a pig farm. A few feet behind one of the sties, he'll take her through shoulder-high cannabis plants to see the few smashed and overturned monuments that haven't yet been removed. She'll stand in the glare of afternoon and squint to make out the pieces of names and poems in stone. She'll walk ahead a few feet and suddenly find herself standing dumbfounded at the gaping pits of concrete vaults of defiled graves. Then the old man will show her where he buried her father and grandmother after he untied them from the trees. He'll point to a strip of ground under three feeding troughs, apologizing that he can't remember who is under which trough. *But they've all been punished by heaven*, he assures her. One by one, he says, the looters died from wearing the silks they stripped off the corpses.

In my mother's dream, she is always shocked to find the graves gaping. In mine, I'm sitting again in a green pavilion in the park in Ho Ping District, drinking tea of leaves my nieces picked in the mountains north of Tientsin, nibbling dates my uncle has brought back from Turkey, where he sailed with a cargo of radios. I'm playing go at a card table with my cousins Shwen-dze, Mandze, and old Lao himself, go-masters every one of them. In my mother's dream, she sews a sail for a boat. In mine, I weave all day in view of night. Come night, I'm all alone, the material coming undone in handfuls of human hair.

Is night my ancestors' gloomy customs, then? Will I ever be free of their tortoiseshell combs and smoking punk, hand-tooled jams that stalled and amazed me at temple thresholds in a provincial capital? Will I be free of my great-grandfather's three thousand descendants? Soon, there will be so little of me I may actually arrive. Soon, I'll be born. Soon, I'll know how to live. Soon, my teeth may stop hurting me. Soon, I'll be able to sleep. At the moment, something I never read in a book keeps me awake, something the night isn't saying, the wind is accomplice to, and the rain

in the eaves keeps to itself, an unassailable nacre my woman encloses, a volatile seed dormant in my man, something I didn't see on the television, something not painted on billboards along the highways, not printed in the magazines at the supermarket checkouts, something I didn't hear on the radio, something my father forgot to tell me, something my mother couldn't foresee owns an unbroken waist and several ankles, a stem proclaiming an indivisible flower, a lamp sowing a path ahead of every possible arrival.

How many nights have I been nudged awake by some thought, like a boat evenly rocking suddenly bumped from below, and hearing the hems of gowns shift outside the window, turned to my wife beside me and said, It's raining, and she answered by setting her sole's arch against my instep. How many nights have I lain here like some drowned cabin of a ship through whose portals fish big and small swim in and out in the dominion of the octopus and clam, and allowed myself to remain an unguarded room, open to thoughts coming and going, passing head to toe, no single thought as shapely as the course of a various thinking, no one idea as grave as this dark traffic, in whose current I drift, wondering, Did I close the windows downstairs? What time is it? Is the basement flooding? Did I put the garden shears away? Did I leave them in the rain to rust? Did I finish writing that letter to my father, or did I let the pencil fall from my hand? My love, why can't you sleep? Why does each night lead into a sister night? Is there nothing one can say about tonight or any other night the night won't unravel, every effort undermined by night itself? What were those seeds doing in my father's pocket? What is a seed?

I remember, as long as I knew him, my father carried at all times in his right suit-pocket a scarce handful of seeds. *Remembrance*, was his sole answer when I asked him why. He was pithy. He slept with his head on a stone wrapped in a piece of white linen I washed once a week. Up until I was nine years old, I napped with him, making myself as small as possible so as not to wake him. I remember how, when he turned over in bed, I made room, wedging myself against the wall, my left arm under my head for a pillow, my legs numb. I lay very quietly while he snored. I lay wide awake against his flesh while he slept with his head on the stone wrapped in the cloth which smelled of his hair, a rich oil. When he died, the stone kept a faintest impression that fit the shape of his head. My mother carried it out, and left it under one of the thirty-six pines that enclosed two sides of the property on which our house stood, the third side the fence where the morning glory climbed. Some days the depression in my father's pillow must fill with rain, just enough to give a cardinal a drink. Or maybe somebody has found it by now, has used it as part of a wall, where it fits to another stone shaped like a man's skull. We burned most everything else before selling the house and moving. Out of the heap of his papers, notebooks, manuscripts, photographs and letters, my sister Fei, almost obligingly, chose one scrapbook of newspaper clippings to keep, which none of us ever looked at after we left Pennsylvania. Everything else we fed to a roaring fire we'd made in the backyard between two apple trees. While we all stood about the fire, which we kept alive two days and two nights without sleeping, one hot mote shot out and creased my youngest brother's thigh, burning through the cloth of his pants and several layers of skin. His leg owns the scar to this day.

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