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Peregrine

An English Companion to Chutzpah Magazine

02

Sheng Keyi

A Village of Cold Hearths

Translated by Brendan O’Kane

23

Xu Xiaobin

Crystal Wedding Anniversary

Translated by Anna Holmwood

45

Liu Qingbang

The One Who Picks Flowers

Translated by Lee Yew Leong

Issue 6, February 2012

A Village of Cold Hearths

Sheng Keyi

1

DUSK SPREAD STICKILY over the village. Clouds gathered lazily. The setting sun eased into the Lanxi River, flecking its surface with gold. A swimmer split the surface of the water and paddled deep out into the sunset. Cicadas buzzed languidly on the banks. Locust trees cast their long shadows over the yards, their branches probing into the rear windows of the houses. A cat drowsed on a windowsill. Wicker chairs and benches were set out in the yards for warm days. Blue-grey smoke rose from a heap of grass set alight to drive off mosquitoes, rising to blanket the yellowy-green weeds that grew here and there on the thatched roofs.

The thin rice gruel sloshed around Liufu's stomach as he left the village canteen and walked through this scene of tranquility toward his own yard. The watery liquid was rinsing his guts clean. He wanted some meat, even more than he wanted a woman. He thought about catching a few field mice, roasting them over a wood fire until they were tender, and gobbling them down, bones, marrow, and all.

The hills now covered up the sun completely, replacing it with their silhouette. Lamps came on, chipping little holes in the twilight. Birds flew tiredly back to their nests. The village slipped into another silent night.

Mother was still hungry, but she belched as loudly as if she were full. She was deaf. Mother was like the hands of a clock, moving along in her circles without praising or scorning or passing judgment on anything. After sitting and belching for a spell she went back inside to her bedroom, and the sound of a palm-leaf fan smacking flesh emerged from inside, beating a rhythm against the night.

The crescent moon slanted like a woman's cocked eyebrow. Fireflies flitted back and forth through the melon patch. Bats chirped to one another under the eaves.

The river's waters gave off a dim, dancing light. Hunger swam around in Liufu's belly like a fish. He'd seen how fishes would come right up to the edges of the river to mate in spring, without a thought for their own safety. Field mice were too clever, he thought. Maybe fish would be easier to catch. Picking up a meter-long, pronged fish-spear, Liufu wended his way through the locust trees to the bank of the river and played the beam of

his flashlight over the water. The five tines of the metal fish-spear were sharp and slightly barbed at the ends; once they went into a fish's body there'd be no escape for the fish.

In the end he caught nothing. As Liufu sat against the rough bark of the locust tree daydreaming, he was startled by a sudden motion in the water like a huge fish swishing its tail from side to side and jumped to his feet to look. It was no fish; it was a girl, her head poking above the water as she pushed her wet hair back from her white face. There was nothing strange about people going for night-time swims in the river, but Liufu had never seen the girl before, and girls from the countryside didn't have skin that pale.

"Turn off that flashlight," the girl said, the beads of water on her body glittering like fish scales. "I can't see you."

Flicking it off would mean he wouldn't be able to see her lovely smile. Liufu couldn't bring himself to do it. He told her his name. "Where are you from? I haven't seen you before."

"I'm a fish," the girl said. She ducked her head under the water and kept it there for a few seconds. "You know Weixing Village?"

"Who doesn't? They get 3,000 *jin* of rice per *mu* from their paddies."

"They may *say* that... hey—don't shine that thing in my face." She splashed water up at him.

Liufu turned the flashlight off. He could barely see the girl now.

"You from Weixing?"

"I am and I'm not," she said. "I'm not and I am."

"Sounds like a tongue-twister."

"They're like any model village—anything you can do, they say they can do better."

The girl swam to the bank and sat on a willow branch that poked out into the river, dangling her legs in the water. Her skin and body were a snowy white in the moonlight, as if someone had drawn a human form on the night's curtain with a pen. The girl smelled faintly of fish-grass. She wore a black bathing outfit. Liufu had never seen such a bold girl in his life. For a while he had fantasized about Jiazhen back in the village, whose face was always red—sometimes from the sun, sometimes from embarrassment—and who looked like a rain-drenched apple when she was out working in the fields, beads of moisture dripping from her, steam rising off her, and a sharp sweet scent of fruit that you could smell from far away.

"What's your name?"

She said to call her "Fish."

Fitting enough, he thought. She swam like one.

"How many *jin* do you get per *mu* here?" The girl lifted her legs up onto the branch. Liufu *hadn't* noticed before, but she had webbed toes like a duck's.

"More than two thousand," he said.

“Stupid, making trouble for yourselves that way,” she said. “You’ll be the ones starving if you can’t produce that much.” Fish spoke of death in an innocent tone.

“That’s seditious talk and malicious gossip-mongering. Be careful they don’t catch you.”

“I’m only telling the truth, is all. Two thousand *jin a mu*—do you really believe that?”

“Believe it or don’t,” Liufu said. “How old are you?”

“That depends. What year is it?”

“Are you kidding? It’s 1959.”

She worked it out on her fingers. “Then I’d be 17. I’m not like the rest of you—I’m not the sort of person who lets her imagination run away from her. I’m not even a person, I’m a fish. Bye now.”

With that, she dived into the water, giggling to herself.

The surface of the river became flat and calm again. The weak light of the flashlight was swallowed up by the darkness after ten meters or so.

People in the village who sold fish they’d caught the night before used to try to sell stories about the strange things they’d seen at night. They said there were spirits in the river. Hardly anyone believed them. Liufu couldn’t make up his mind whether he did or not. Reading his old copy of *Strange Tales from Liaozhai Studio*, he didn’t see much difference between people and spirits—some of the spirits were better than some of the humans—and he thought a romance with Charm or Tranquilina or Sapientia or one of the other fetching young female ghosts in the book might not be such a bad thing.

He picked up the fish-spear and went home. He knew that a girl who went out swimming at night would be all right in the water.

2

LIUFU CONTINUED TO take his fish spear down to the river, though most of the time he just sat against a willow tree and waited for Fish. The sight of Fish filled his belly, filled his heart, filled his entire being. He became enchanted with the fish-grass scent that clung to her body like a faint perfume of jasmine.

From time to time Fish would appear, darting and playing in the water. Her body was always dripping, just like her voice. The villagers always spoke in loud, harsh voices, but Fish’s voice was soft as night and gentle as water. It quenched Liufu’s thirst to hear it. One night, when the moon shone brightly and the stifling heat was almost intolerable, Liufu touched Fish’s hand. He’d never touched a woman before, and was surprised to find her skin as slippery as if it were covered with a layer of soap. Her eyes were small, he thought, but then again there was nothing wrong with small eyes on a small face. Light skin on a girl made up for everything, and in all his twenty-two years, Liufu had never seen

a girl with skin as light as Fish's. Even the butterfly-shaped freckle on the tip of her nose was enchanting. He began to imagine how even his mother, who never gave an opinion on anything, would praise Fish, how the smile that died with his father would return to her lips. He told Fish that after the busy harvest season he would find a go-between to arrange the marriage. His mother could hardly wait.

Fish had replaced Jiazhen utterly in Liufu's dreams. When he kissed her on a moon-drenched night, her lips moist and cold, her saliva clear and sweet, he tasted the most exquisite thing in all the world.

The heat persisted, the cruel sun beating down from overhead and cracking the roads. Cicadas grew hoarse; plants began to wilt. The sky stayed a uniform dull blue.

Nights were electric, and filled Liufu with energy for work in the fields by day. He would run out of the house bare-footed, the earth scorching his feet, run excitedly down to the river, his happy secret dancing in his heart like a scampering squirrel. When the harvest came he scythed his way through the muddy paddies like a machine, faster than all the others. The thresher groaned happily under his pedaling. When it came time to drink he'd splash water straight onto his face from the spout of the kettle. His hard work inspired the other villagers, and after being roundly commended he was named team leader—the youngest village cadre, they said.

"IF YOU ALL don't tell the truth about how much grain you're producing, it'll come to disaster." So Fish was always warning him. She made all sorts of prognostications, as if she had second sight. There was something curious about her, some mysterious power that made Liufu play along. Especially the way she would look at her reflection in the river, brushing drops of water from her long hair, like a waving frond of river grass floating just below the surface. He always found himself drawing nearer for a closer look.

The only thing Liufu cared about was getting done with the harvest so he could marry Fish. For everything else, he thought, he couldn't go far wrong by following everybody else's lead.

There were a number of perks to Liufu's new status as team leader, foremost among them the chance to skim. Liufu could stuff a handful or two of freshly harvested rice into his pockets without fear of being caught, and had even gotten up the nerve to bring a few whole sackfuls of rice home under cover of night when nobody was around. Mother sewed the rice into old clothes, which she folded and placed at the bottom of their wardrobe or spread on the bare-board bed. Late at night she would grind small handfuls of rice in the palm of her hand and blow away the husks, humming to herself. Mother was fond of *guoba*, the crispy rice crust that stuck to the bottom of the cooking pot, and Father had liked to stir flakes of *guoba* into his rice porridge. Liufu wanted to cook up a pot right then and there, but could only imitate his mother in chewing a few grains of the

freshly husked rice instead, for fear that the cooking smoke from their chimney would give them away.

WHEN THE HARVEST was over and the rice had been stored away in the granary, the atmosphere abruptly grew tense. The village leaders held secret meetings and were always going around with unhappy looks on their faces. Not until after the meetings expanded to include team leaders did Liufu find out that rice yield was falling far short of the proud claims they'd made, that the higher-ups suspected the village of holding back, and that the consequences of this would be grave indeed. The village cadres had come in for criticism from the township leaders; the township leaders had been getting browbeaten by the county leaders, and the municipality-level leaders had branded them all troublemakers and said that their thinking was insufficiently clear; that they had failed to comprehend the arduous, complex, and long-term nature of the Socialist battle for grain production, to say nothing of the role of grain production as a focal point for the struggle against Capitalism in rural areas; that their mode of thought was paralytic. One of the more honest county-level cadres blurted out that there really was no grain at the lower levels, and was promptly sent for thought reform on suspicion of having a Rightist tendency to over-simplify issues.

Seeing that telling the truth led to no good, the leaders went back to the village to try to think of something.

The first village meeting Liufu took part in was held around a square eight-person table in the middle of the village head's home. There was a clay teapot on the table, and a few porcelain tea cups, and the village leaders sat in rings around these. In the outer rings the team leaders and commune representatives squatted, or stood, or sat on the ground passing cigarettes around, bumming lights, and chattering. The mood was slightly restless. A get-together like this right after the harvest was unprecedented. Clouds of smoke quickly filled the room. Ten minutes later, after the village's Party branch secretary finished his speech, the mood had grown serious. Even the smoke stopped drifting.

"They could kill us and it still wouldn't make up for a shortfall that big," Poxu Niu said when he heard the requisition figures.

Poxu Niu, the leader of Team Two, was a medium-sized, plain-spoken man with pockmarks all over his face. He and his wife had had five daughters in a row, three of whom didn't make it, and when the sixth baby proved to be another girl, Niu had delivered her from her mother's womb straight into the river without a word. Niu had been dead set on having a boy, but his wife had gone barren. People said you could hear a baby crying from the river at night, and some people said they'd seen a little girl swim past them, quick as a fish. More and more strange things had been happening these past few summers. A fisherman said he'd seen ripples on the river one time when there wasn't any wind, and a chill had come over him. Sometimes, he said, he could just make

out something that sounded like a young woman singing, and—most vividly—he said he'd stopped to squat down by the riverbank for a smoke one night when a dripping wet creature leapt into the river using his shoulder as a springboard and stained his shirt with muck. Not that the people who heard him really believed the story. Some people said he was making up spooky stories to scare off anybody else thinking of fishing there, because the river was getting fished out.

“What gives you the right to speak, Poxy? Or did you forget about the life you threw into the river years ago?” The doughy-faced village chairwoman had a knack for touching on people's sore spots that way. It may have been how she rose to her position.

This knocked Poxy Niu off balance. He looked as if he wanted to reply, but then sat there, red-faced and thick-necked, looking like a toad that had just swallowed a fly, holding in whatever he had been about to say.

But it was too late for Niu to take back what he had already said, and he was immediately relieved of his responsibilities, stripped of his title as team leader, and docked two days' worth of meals.

Nobody spoke up. Nobody knew what kind of dirt the chairwoman had on them. People made sure to be meek and mild in front of the village-level cadres, and in the presence of cadres from the township or the county they were as uneasy as slaves facing their masters.

3

AS A MEMBER of the Anti-Hoarding Squad, Liufu wore an olive-green uniform with a Chairman Mao badge at the breast. After a half day of training at the civilian militia base they began storming people's homes and searching their chests and wardrobes for hidden rice. They conducted surprise nighttime raids that left the whole village wondering who would be next. He could sense his power in their flinching gazes. Glory! It was like getting away with a prank: he could slap people and they wouldn't hit back, kick them and they wouldn't cry out. It was as if they submitted to the uniformed squaddies out of some instinct that told them they deserved it.

Thoughts of Fish made Liufu one of the more tenderhearted squaddies. He even encouraged the others to stick to searching for grain, rather than beating people. Someone reported him for Rightism, siding with commune members against the squad, and insufficient initiative in anti-hoarding actions. The team had a talk with Liufu, and—understanding someone had it in for him—he kept his mouth shut when the beatings started, and got in a kick or two when the opportunity presented itself, just to show where he stood. Soon enough his fists and feet grew restless, like hungry beasts looking for an opportunity to pounce on their prey. He couldn't say himself when it was that he got into

the habit of beating people.

One afternoon the squad found a half cup of peas at old herdsman Li's home and they dragged him to the drying ground to make him hand over the rest. A scorching sun hung overhead, and soon Li's legs were shaking and he was covered in sweat. "Those peas were from last year's harvest," he said. "I kept them for planting this year. Take them if you have to take them, but even if you beat me to death I won't have another kernel of grain for you."

A kick landed in his upper thigh before he finished speaking, and he fell to his knees. Like wild beasts swarming upon fallen prey, they punched him in the nose, slapped his face, pulled his hair, kicked him in the stomach, and tore at his clothes, and in the blink of an eye old Li lay flat on his back, blood streaming from every orifice. Liufu threw in another kick for good measure.

They sloshed a pan of cold water on him and it dripped down from his white hair. He came to.

"Th— there's..."—the words came out faintly—"there's really not... any more... grain..."

The word "grain" set the wild beasts to ravening again. They hauled the old man to his feet, yanked down his trousers, stuffed the peas up his asshole, and rammed them home with a stick. "That's them planted for you, you old wretch. You just wait for the harvest."

The old herdsman died late that night.

People said it had been a stroke.

4

THEY SPLASHED AROUND all summer, harvesting mussels, catching fish, chasing and racing one another, playing hide and seek. The lotus ponds, the lakes, the irrigation canals—all were their playgrounds. They picked lotus roots and water chestnuts in moonlit ponds, covering Liufu's body with bloody scratches that made him look like a whipped criminal. Fish was playful, even flirtatious in the water, dancing lightly around any obstacles and giggling as she showed off her agility in the water. Sometimes she'd hold a lotus leaf and dive underwater so that there was no sign of her but the leaf drifting along on the surface.

On land Fish was quiet as a virgin. She would get a faraway look in her eyes and begin to talk about the future. She said people were going to die, more than Liufu could even imagine. She described a village where death filled the air, where lives ended one after another like dead leaves falling to the ground. She said the people would become locusts, woodworms, aphids, ants, weevils, horseflies, fleas, overrunning the crops and trees, destroying every living creature in their path. They would kill everything they could

eat, and then everything they couldn't eat, and then they would turn on one another and underwater would be the only safe place.

And then Fish talked about the world beneath the waves. Liufu listened attentively, playing along. Fish's fantasies were his favorite, like something out of Strange Tales from Liaozhai Studio, a whole other world—a whole other life—that he had never imagined.

“When the time comes, I'll let you eat me.” Fish didn't sound like she was joking.

“No,” Liufu said, “I won't eat you. I'll kill myself while there's still some flesh on my bones, and you can eat me and go on living.”

The atmosphere grew serious. A chill came over Liufu when he thought about it afterwards. He didn't believe that people would eat people, let alone the people they loved. Not unless they were monsters.

5

A COLD AUTUMN wind blew. Liufu stood on the bank of the Yangtze; behind him was a village of cold hearths where no cooking smoke rose. The crops were withered and brown. People's voices were weak and faint.

It had been Fish's dream to swim in the Yangtze. She'd never seen such a vast expanse of water—many times broader than the Lanxi River. Fog curled over the surface of the river, and the buildings on the opposite bank were only faintly visible. Birds passed through the mist and flew into the distance. Every now and then a massive craft would clumsily and arrogantly make its way down the center of the river, white smoke rising into the sky. The river churned behind the boats.

As he walked down from the yellowing grass into the river, the surface of the water suddenly became oily-looking. Squat black willow trees lined the river, and birds chirped from amid the leaves that remained on the branches. Liufu had hung his clothes on a branch and was clad only in his underwear. The water was even chillier than the wind, and he shivered for a moment. When he was waist-deep, he paused and splashed some water up onto his chest. A few dozen meters ahead of him Fish had already dived beneath the surface of the water. Embarrassed, he plunged resolutely forward.

Fish swam toward him, circling her body around his waist and spinning around behind him, her buttocks brushing against him. She stuck her head around over his shoulder and kissed him from behind. Then she was away. Another somersault and she was in front of him, and he thought of how fish looked when they were mating, their mouths round Os, their fins spread open, their bodies taut and quivering. Nearing each other, opening up, darting away, butting heads, tails lightly slapping... Fish was like a dancer caught up in her dance, her eyes filled with passion.

Try as he might, Liufu could not hold on to her. She kept slipping through his hands,

just like a fish.

He lifted his head up out of the water and caught his breath.

The mist had dispersed; the night was a clear, tranquil indigo; the distant scenery, visible in outline, looked like a woodcut. Liufu gulped mouthfuls of air. Fish grabbed the lower half of his body tightly, tracing the lines of his body with her head. He held her close, and the temperature of the water rose suddenly. “Ah—I’ve got to get onto the bank.” His legs had cramped up at the key moment.

Liufu lay on the grassy bank. The night was a light grey. Scattered stars shone overhead.

“That’s better.” He kissed Fish, his vigor returning. “Are you ready?” Fish’s eyes sparkled, maybe from nervousness, like stars that had fallen into wells.

“I’ve waited so long for this,” she said. “To be with someone who loves me—to have a whole new life.”

Love flooded over him. He didn’t see the guarded look in her eyes.

“Mm—a new life. Me too. So what if we don’t have anything to eat?”

Members of the anti-stockpiling squad were treated well: two bowls of cabbage-leaf porridge a day, with at least a few grains of rice in it. “We might not have any grain now, but we’ll get through it like we always do. We’ll have a proper wedding feast—fish, meat, and a big bowl of rice.”

“There you go, dreaming again.”

“I’ll marry you if it’s the last thing I do,” Liufu said heatedly, rolling over on top of Fish. “Promise me?”

The beam of a flashlight picked them out.

It was Poxo Niu. He dropped his fishing net on the grass, the weights of the net clicking like pebbles.

“What’s gotten into you, Liufu? Talking to yourself out here?” Poxo walked over, flashlight in hand.

Startled, Liufu glanced down at Fish, then jolted into a sitting position. Where Fish had been there was now only a puddle. The river water rippled faintly, reflected the light dimly.

“I don’t know how long I’m going to last, boy,” Poxo Niu sighed, sitting beside him. “Heaven’s going to starve me for the wrong I did.”

Liufu sat there dumbly, feeling an icy chill in the pit of his stomach. “You believe what they say about there being spirits in the water?” he asked.

“Why not? I’d believe just about anything these days. You could tell me the daughter I threw away seventeen years ago was still living, and I’d believe it. I wish she was. Maybe then I could tell her I was wrong. It was a terrible thing that I did. I looked for her body in the river, you know, but I never found it. Learned to cast fishing nets just so I could find her and bury her right.” Poxo Niu croaked out his words like a dying bird.

There was a sudden noise from the river, like a big fish leaping.

“Even if she was living now, I don’t expect she’d live through this. They won’t let us cook at home, won’t let us go out looking for vegetables, won’t let us leave the village... three more people died today, and I expect I’ll be joining them soon.” Poxo waved his flashlight beam back and forth over the river. “Not a single fish. And me not even able to cast the nets... tell me, boy, are we really just going to wait to die?”

“Of course not, Uncle Niu—how could anyone starve with these bumper harvests?” Liufu answered easily, his heart beating with excitement over Fish.

Poxo Niu got half a liter of soybeans from Liufu’s home that night, and Liufu began taking special care of the man from then on.

6

“GRAIN” WAS LIKE a magic word that held everyone in its sway. The higher-ups came for an inspection, and the starving villagers roused themselves and affected expressions that they hoped would show the perseverance and correctness of Socialism. The yards were piled high with grain: a thin layer of rice at the top of the baskets and heaps of chaff and weeds beneath. Having placated the higher-ups, the village leaders were awarded Major Commendations, and promptly went back to searching for stockpiled grain, beating and interrogating the villagers ever more harshly.

No wedding banquets. No gatherings. No congratulations. No farewells. No cooking smoke. The village canteen closed down. Some people lay down and never got back up, some people got fat all of a sudden, some people fell down all of a sudden, some people got locked up, some people got put on trial. It was all very quiet. The village was as quiet as the grave.

Sentries patrolled at the village gate, their guns fully loaded. Vultures circled. A growing wind shook the land.

The bark was gone from all the trees, and the white wood beneath it had gone brown and then black. The earth was scored and lined where it had been clawed at, the mud churned up like the ground around a mouse’s nest.

Liufu’s mother racked her brains to find ways to fill her stomach. When the weeds, rats, roots, and bark were all gone she began to chop up rice straw and corncobs, which she would cook and crush and mash into a paste late at night. She would go out and collect egret shit by the paths to wash and steam. The secret was to imagine that they were your favorite foods when you ate them. That the egret shit was egg custard.

Mother and son didn’t look like they were starving. That must have been why Jiazhen came to beg for rice.

“My father will die if he doesn’t eat something.” Jiazhen stood in the doorway, her hair disheveled, her lips pale. She swayed back and forth, like a piece of paper in the wind.

Jiazhen had gone to high school. Mother liked her, thought of her almost as a daughter-in-law. She pulled Jiazhen inside and sat down next to her, speaking loudly, as if to a deaf woman.

“Look how thin you are, my dear! Are you ill? *Aiya*—wait here and I’ll find you something to eat.”

Mother turned around and walked into the kitchen.

Indeed, the healthily glowing, faintly apple-scented young woman now looked like a gourd that had withered on the vine. Every drop of moisture was gone from her body. Liufu was rather startled not to smell her clear apple fragrance. He had never spoken to Jiazhen much to begin with, and had even less idea of what to say now. Mother emerged and broke the silence with a bowl of “egg custard.”

Jiazhen couldn’t thank her enough. She hesitated a moment on her way to the door, then steeled herself: “Liufu, you know the villagers haven’t been hoarding grain... you have to tell the higher-ups the truth... someone has to tell them the truth. Maybe the truth is the only thing that can help us.”

Her eyes were clear and bright, as if all the moisture in her body were concentrated there.

“Who’s to say what’s the truth and what isn’t?” Liufu said. “You want me to go against the government? To say we didn’t make any progress?” He began to grow agitated. “I’d be getting myself killed—and they’d never believe anything I said anyway.”

“Starving will kill you just the same...” Jiazhen turned to face Liufu. “Better to die telling the truth. Why not try it?”

Liufu pushed the door shut hastily. “You can’t go saying things like that—it’ll only make things worse.”

“Worse than starving to death? You’ve changed, Liufu. You’ve become one of them. You hurt innocent people, just like them.”

Jiazhen’s cold tone struck a nerve. He had known that his position had kept his family’s house safe from searches, had meant that they’d always have something to stave off hunger—and that the villagers had not looked at him the same way for quite some time.

“I... I’m just doing what I have to,” he mumbled. Jiazhen looked silently at the half bowl of “egg custard,” then set it down on the table slowly, unbolted the door, and left.

Mother had watched all of this knowingly. She patted her son on the shoulder to comfort him, then walked into her room and pulled something from the pillow: a lumpy black sock filled with snowy white rice.

“This is the last of our rice.” She poured out half the rice, then tied the sock tightly shut and handed it to Liufu. “Go give this to her. And don’t forget to tell her you’re sorry.”

Liufu stared at her.

THE SKY WAS a flat gray. All around were death rattles and ghosts. The silence seemed filled with a silent howling. The earth had become a black-and-white photograph. Lonely stragglers picked over the roads between villages, bent over in search of anything that could satisfy the hunger. The struggle against hoarding never ceased. Beatings and gunshots kept the people as quiet as cicadas in winter.

Fish had vanished after their swim in the Yangtze. Liufu waited for her on the banks of the Lanxi River every night. These past few days he'd been reading over *Strange Tales from Liaozhai Studio* carefully to see if he could learn more about water spirits. A shame so many of the love stories in the book were tragedies, he thought. The water spirits, too, were tragic figures, unable to choose their own fates. Their interactions with mortals were motivated by love, or gratitude, or sheer jealousy of the humans—though there was nothing to envy in the humans around him, all of whom were simply waiting for hunger to kill them. If he could have become one of the spirits or otherworldly creatures that filled the books, for the sake of Fish, he would have.

The autumn moon was moored in the middle of the river, casting its cold silver light over willow branches that hung down as fine and close as raindrops.

He stood there in the water waiting for her, not caring whether Fish's love for him was pure or not, and finally she appeared at his side.

"I told you before, I'm not a person." Her body glittered. "I've just had enough of cold and loneliness in the water. I like the sun, I like flowers and grass, I like fruits and melons and human laughter. I always knew you'd realize that I was just a mermaid some day..."

"I'd be happy with you even if you were a mermaid, Fish. And I know that you're the baby Uncle Niu threw away seventeen years ago. No matter what you are, I want you to be my wife." Liufu reached out his arms to embrace her.

"Let me finish." She ducked away from him. "I've always tried to understand why people act the way they do, but I've never found an answer. I'm only a fish. My world is a simple one. All I know is swimming. The elders told me I would only understand what it is to be human if I were born again as a human... and then, at just the right time, I met you."

"It's not easy here, Fish. Every day there are struggles..."

"The water is a cold prison. I can't just float up to the surface whenever I want."

"There are sentry posts everywhere here on land—and jails, and red-letter notices from the government. One wrong word and they'll have your head. It's not as wonderful as you think it is, not by a long shot."

"The human world is the way it is because you made it that way. None of you would speak the truth, and now disaster is upon you."

“Tell me how I can become a fish like you.”

“You can’t become anything else, not while you still live. You can only be a man. And I won’t be able to be reborn until I mate with the person I love... and then my body will become nothing more than a bubble on the water that disappears.”

“No, you mustn’t disappear. I want to have a simple life with you, to go swimming every day.”

“Forget your own problems, Liufu, and think about what’s happening to your village.” Fish dropped below the surface of the water for a moment, then stuck her head back out. “Have you never thought about how you might save other people, as well as saving yourself?”

“Me? Save them?” Liufu snorted. “I’m unarmed and powerless, and they have guns pointing at you wherever you go. What could I possibly do?”

“Where there’s a will, there’s a way. When I heard my father’s confession that night... I stopped hating him. He was right—you can’t all just wait around to die.”

“But then how—unless you use your... magic?” Liufu said, grasping at straws.

“I’m a cast-off body. The arts you speak of are forbidden to me.”

“But you know how to disappear.”

“I can’t live out of water for more than an hour.”

“We’ll find a way,” Liufu said, not believing his own words. “We’ll get by.”

“You can’t just lie down and accept your fate.”

“What should I do, then?”

“*Silence means death. Speaking out means death.* Both mean death—but they’re not the same thing at all.” Fish drew close and kissed him. “Go on, Liufu. You know what you have to do.”

She slipped from his arms back into the water.

8

SILENCE MEANS DEATH. Speaking out means death. Dead meat either way, Liufu thought. What was the difference? But then, Jiazhen had said almost the same thing.

Jiazhen lived at the end of the village. It was a five-minute walk around two lotus ponds and straight down along the redwood-lined irrigation canals to the grain drying ground outside their door.

There was a crowd in front—a festive one, it seemed. As Liufu drew nearer, pushing his way through the crowd, he saw someone from the anti-hoarding squad grabbing at Jiazhen’s chest and shouting that the lumps there must be where she had stored her illegal grain. Jiazhen covered her chest for all she was worth, biting her lip, biting back the shame and the humiliation. Everyone knew talking back or resisting would get them locked up

on charges of opposing the Party. Several times Liufu wanted to rush forward, but his feet were nailed to the ground, as if he were held in thrall by what was happening before him. He hardly dared breathe, until one of the squaddies ripped a white brassiere out from under her shirt and Jiazhen fell to the ground, crying piteously. But an even better show was soon to follow: Jiazhen's father, the soft-spoken old village schoolmaster, was stripped naked and trussed up like a hog, the nylon rope cutting into his rather ill-developed muscles. His face was covered with blood and dirt, and Liufu had only to look at his vacant eyes to know he had been subjected to the entire roster of techniques: dousing with ice-water, pulling the hair, cutting off the ears, bamboo splints through the palms, "brushing his teeth" with pine needles, "lighting heavenly lanterns"—splashing oil on his body and setting it aflame—and "stir-frying beans," a technique in which the squaddies would surround a person and jostle them back and forth violently, like a soybean being stir-fried in a wok, until they were shaken half to death.

Liufu was perversely impressed that the reedy old village schoolmaster had managed to last through all of these. He remembered literature classes with the old man, who wore a long, old-fashioned robe and a bookish pair of glasses, spoke quietly, and was always even-tempered. Even now he was calm, fixing his gaze on the ground as if death held no fear for him.

"Where? Where did you get the rice?" The brigade leader threw the loose end of the rope over the branch of a locust tree. It dropped down on the other side, slicing the mild blue sky behind it in half.

Liufu's heart stopped. *I'm done for!*

The old school master slowly raised his eyelids, blood beading on his eyelashes. He was smiling, almost apologetically. "S... saved it from last year. I kn... know it's a crime... I accept the p—"

"Pull!" At the brigade leader's order, the schoolmaster and his "*—unishment?*" were yanked up off the ground.

People craned their necks to look up at him hanging there like an oversized rice-dumpling, to watch how his face would go from white to red, from red to purple; how beads of sweat the size of soybeans would slowly form and roll down and drop onto the ground; how fine threads of fresh blood would unravel from their wounds; how the threads would suddenly be snipped.

If he died it would be like a lunar eclipse. Nobody wanted to miss a chance to see it.

Liufu watched more closely than anyone—as if, if the secret fell from the old schoolmaster's lips, he might be able to catch it in time.

But in less time than it would take to smoke a pipe, a cry from above dashed his hopes.

"I'll talk! Let me down, please, let me down and I'll tell you everything!"

The secret squeezed past the old schoolmaster's lips and fell to the ground with a clatter.

9

THE VILLAGE CANTEEN was used for the interrogation and imprisonment of "criminals," as overseen by the anti-hoarding squad. Inmates had arrived on a number of charges: attempting to flee the village, or hoarding grain, or speaking snidely about the Three Red Banners, or claiming that the harvest had been anything but bountiful, or abandoning their children, which was called "attacking the government with hand grenades of human flesh." They were locked in the pig-pen behind the canteen. The pen had been cleared of everything except pig excrement, which covered the ground in pools; Liufu could smell the pig-shit stench through two walls. The schoolmaster had landed him here: to save himself, he had coughed out Liufu's name with the very last of his strength. The crowd had surged toward its new target. Not ten minutes later, the squad had turned Liufu's home inside-out like a pants pocket without finding a single grain of rice. This was taken as a grave insult by the squaddies, who revenged themselves by beating Liufu to a pulp and locking him in the canteen without another word.

You get rice from harvesting paddies, not searching houses. The squad seemed to have understood this, at least to some degree, or perhaps they had simply lost heart. The way they treated Liufu was practically kind: a halfhearted interrogation, after which they shaved him bald and threw him in the old canteen bursar's office with nothing but a threadbare old quilt. Length of sentence was determined by how long the prisoner could go without food or drink—a day if it was a day, a month if it was a month. Once the door had locked behind you nobody was going to come knocking.

The little window of the cell faced directly onto the Lanxi River. It was sealed off with wooden bars that gave off a scent of pine, drawing and quartering the cold-colored sky and the water. The opposite bank was completely empty. Liufu's longing for Fish was not diminished in the slightest by the damage done to his body. He leaned over by the window, staring out at the river, until his legs went limp. The temperature fell precipitously overnight, so he wrapped the quilt around himself as he stood by the window. Everything was unnaturally still, as if the entire world had stopped breathing, and for an instant Liufu had the terrifying sense that he was the last living thing on Earth.

After two days of loneliness and boredom, of not eating or drinking, of a cold that became a fever, Liufu's mind began to slip, and he began experiencing a sensation of giddy lightness.

One hazy night he dreamt that Fish came and kissed him. He felt the coolness and the moisture of the kiss continue down and throughout his body after the kiss was over.

A chill spread through him, his organs turned to ice, and he realized that this was death, that death was like a massive hand wiping every last trace of heat from his body. He tossed and turned, trying to escape, and began to scream. When he awoke he was covered in sweat. It had only been a nightmare.

In the pale, cold moonlight everything had an otherworldly glow. The air carried a faint scent of jasmine, and he sensed that Fish was near him.

The smell of roasting fish startled Liufu into sudden alertness, as if hauling him to his feet. Life flooded back into his limp body with a startling speed, and he sat up.

In the dim moonlight Fish had appeared as if out of nowhere, holding a large porcelain bowl in her hands. Her face was whiter than the moon, and her hair spilled down over her shoulders. Her lips were slightly open, as if gasping for air.

Liufu didn't rush for the food, or for the woman. He hesitated slightly. Fish uncovered the bowl, and the smell of roasting fish grew richer.

"I found this in the river. You're in luck..."

Abandoning all pretense of manners, Liufu snatched the bowl and buried his face in it.

"I don't know what you're waiting for," Fish began, watching him eat. "You've got to think of a way out of here. Those bars on the window wouldn't be hard to get through—they're only from a sheep pen."

"I was waiting for you," Liufu replied. "I knew you'd come."

"No, you were waiting for death. You could have..." She softened her tone. "I thought you'd break the bars on the window and come rushing out like a hero."

"They'd only drag me back here and put iron bars on the window."

This silenced Fish for a moment. "Your mother—"

"What is it?"

"Hunger."

"She won't go hungry. She always finds a way to get her hands on something."

"She fell into a pond. Only a shallow pond, but she didn't have the strength to crawl out."

"You mean my mother's... dead?" Liufu looked as if he were about to laugh.

"Nobody came to bury her. They cut all the flesh from her legs..." Fish seemed worried that her voice would bother people. "And... the schoolmaster drowned himself in the river an hour ago. People are dying one by one, falling like leaves."

Liufu found himself imagining falling leaves. He realized he'd never paid attention to how leaves fell from trees, just as he'd never imagined that death would have anything to do with him. It was as if he had only just realized that people could die, that simple, happy lives could suddenly end. He could only look up at Fish uncertainly, as if she were the only person he could believe.

“It’s the same in the water as in the mortal world. Big fish eat small fish, small fish eat shrimp. The powerful set the rules of the game, and the fish follow them. If I were as cowardly and compliant as you I’d have died long ago.” Fish spoke with a wisdom beyond her years. Nobody could know what trials she had endured in the world beneath the waves, what hardships and sorrows had befallen her as she grew from abandoned baby to mermaid.

Remarkable that she should have such a kind and generous heart. When in thought, she looked like an old witch-woman; when excited, she looked like a tender young girl; happy, she was innocent and free of guile.

She sat down, a tender young girl again, and leaned against Liufu’s shoulder. “Everyone knows the story of the emperor’s new clothes, Liufu. You have to be the child who tells the truth.”

10

THE VILLAGE LOOKED as if it had been sketched roughly in pencil, spidery lines in slate and charcoal. There were no birds in the sky, no fowl on the ground.

Belly distended, pale, dazed, Poxy Niu wriggled on the ground like some ancient, inhuman creature. At the sight of Liufu, he forced himself to open his vacant eyes, open his mouth, and make an indistinct croak, like the bats under the eaves. His hair had gone hoarfrost grey and he was monstrously bloated. He seemed to have been beaten senseless by something. Liufu could barely recognize the man.

“Y’eat yet?” had been their usual, cheerful greeting; deprived of this opening line, they could only size one another up awkwardly.

That afternoon Liufu had made his first attempts to escape the village. He drew near the exit several times, but shrank back, seeing guards at their posts. His heart beat out an irregular rhythm, pattering against the letter folded in his shirt pocket. The letter gave him a sense of calm but also of danger, as if it were part tranquilizer, part time-bomb. He wished he could tell Poxy that he was doing something important.

“Y’eat?” Poxy settled on this after a long hesitation, and followed it with “I’ve got food at home, good food.”

Poxy Niu having food at home was doubtful enough, but “good food” was still more startling. Liufu decided he would go there to lay low for a while before trying again to find a way out of the village after dark.

The two men walked quickly. The only sights along the way were the dry irrigation canals and the muddy ponds. The farmhouses were tightly boarded up for the most part. The open ones were deserted ruins without a sign of life.

Poxy Niu’s home was another scene entirely: dim and gloomy, and surprisingly chilly.

He was the only person living there: his wife and daughters had starved, one after another, and left Poxu Niu to haunt his own house.

Closing the windows and doors tightly, Poxu Niu said he was all alone in the world now, with nobody to bury him when he died. He'd been a bad man and done bad things in the past, but he remembered his friends and he paid his debts.

There was no sign that he was grieving for his wife and daughters. He grew animated, in fact, making no attempt to cover his excitement at having someone to share his food with.

"Heard they locked you up. Went to the canteen to look for you but you weren't there. I thought you were dead." Poxu Niu's love of chatter, at least, was undiminished. "You escape or something?"

"Jiazhen's father left a note saying he'd lied, that I was innocent... so they let me go."

"Long as you're alive. Won't have to worry about nobody buying me when I die." Poxu Niu smiled slyly. "Not that I'll ever die, mind."

They walked into a cluttered kitchen. A brick stove took up two thirds of the room. There were two ranges on the stove: one was an empty hole; the other supported a lopsided, cracked wok. Poxu crouched down by the stove and shoved straw and kindling into it. Liufu caught a faint whiff of decay, and as he remembered what Fish had said, became suddenly convinced that the man had stored his wife and daughters away and was eating them piece by piece.

His blood froze, and he kept his gaze tightly focused on Poxu's hands as he plotted his escape. There was a sudden flash of white flesh as Poxu dragged out a leg, straining against its weight, and the stench of rotting flesh became more pronounced.

Pale with fright, Liufu prepared to make his escape—only to see that the body Poxu Niu was hauling out had four legs. A dead pig.

"Found this lying around. Ought to last a while." Panting, Poxu produced a sharp knife. "It's your lucky day, boy."

Poxu drew his knife over the pig's belly and a clutch of piglets tumbled out—an unexpected bonus at which the speed of his butchering picked up happily. He counted: eight of them. He even laughed. Liufu's eyes lit up and his mouth watered, and he no longer even noticed the stench as he and Poxu Niu carved up the animals, sliced meat into the wok. A foul smell filled the room like fog, but neither man paid it any mind.

"Can't light the fire until it's dark out. Hang on a little longer, boy." Poxu flopped down on the ground, exhausted. "If we had some wine we'd be set for a New Year's feast."

The light outside the window was already growing dusky. The prospect of a feast of pork drove away the darkness of hunger, like the light of a full moon. A great sense of contentment came over Liufu, and he prayed that it would soon be so dark he couldn't see

his hands in front of him, so that they could safely light the cooking fire.

The night was black as ink, and it flooded over everything like water. Wordlessly, nervously, excitedly, the two men stoked the fire and boiled the meat. The firelight danced, and the aroma of cooking meat rose with the clouds of steam that came from the wok. They couldn't help but taste it as it cooked, and by the time the pork was done they were already full.

Several times, Liufu brushed against the letter in his chest pocket and thought how wrong Poxu Niu had been to abandon his daughter all those years ago. Fish was the perfect woman—or the perfect mermaid! If he were to tell Poxu, who didn't believe in spirits, that Fish existed, the man would only take it as more crazy talk in a world that had gone crazy. Liufu would only tell Poxu about the letter, he decided. But first—an idea came to him, and he filled a bowl with boiled pork and hurried to Jiazhen's house under cover of darkness.

11

HE COULD JUST make out the chalky grey path under his feet. The darkness was like a wall. From time to time he saw pricks of lamplight like distant will-o'-the-wisps. Liufu felt as if he were walking in a gigantic cemetery. He thought back to the village as it had been in summer, the paddies swollen with rice, how he had sweated in the paddies so that he would be able to marry Fish. The harvest had been far beyond his imagining, and the villagers had suffered more than in any lean year ever before. He had never stopped to think about it before; events had simply exceeded what he was capable of comprehending. It was Fish who had prompted him. Not to follow her plan, not to clutch at any chance of survival, was no different from awaiting execution in a time when people fell like leaves in autumn. And if he were to die like that, what would Fish think of him? He didn't want that. The letter in his shirt pocket warmed him now. It was a seed of hope, one that he would soon plant.

Liufu thought of the old schoolmaster's suicide note as he walked, and he began to worry about Jiazhen. Her house was dark now, and he assumed she must be sleeping to distract herself from the hunger. He hesitated a while before knocking on the door, which opened to reveal Jiazhen holding a kerosene lamp that gave off a faint, flickering light that made her features glow. She moved as unsteadily as the shadows it cast, but her sense of smell was as sharp as ever, and she instantly understood why Liufu had come. She opened the door to let him in, then closed and barred it behind him before eating the finest meal of her life.

"You were right, Jiazhen. There has to be somebody to tell the truth. I'll risk it—I have to try." Liufu withdrew a thick envelope from his shirt pocket. "I'm going to slip out

of the village tonight while it's dark and mail this from the township post office.”

It might have been the dim light, but he had a hard time understanding the mix of emotions that played over Jiazhen's face. The thrill of having a satisfied appetite remained, however, and she hastily wiped the grease from her lips and drew closer to read the letter.

“You're writing to the *governor*?” she asked, startled.

Liufu nodded solemnly. “You sign at the bottom too. A joint letter.”

“Who'd have thought it, Liufu!” Jiazhen laughed.

Liufu wanted to say that it had been Fish's idea, but he stopped, keeping the sweet thought of his mermaid to himself.

“Silence means death,” he said. “Speaking out means death. Both mean death—but they're not the same thing at all.” Fish's words.

“When you send this we'll have something to hope for. The sentries at the village gate are armed—be careful.”

Liufu tucked the letter back into his shirt pocket and was preparing to leave when he saw torches burning in the distance, at Poxu Niu's house. He and Jiazhen ran, but by the time they arrived it was almost over. The men from the anti-hoarding squad carried the rotting sow out of the house. Poxu Niu had been beaten for “theft of public property,” and he lay there, his face covered in blood, his body shaking, the ground around him covered with the vomit of his last meal.

They carried him inside, but Liufu saw a red bubble emerge from the corner of his mouth and heard him draw his last breath.

“He really *must* have been worried there'd be nobody to bury him,” Liufu said. “Had to make sure he died before I left.”

“Give me the letter,” said Jiazhen. “I'll send it.”

12

DEATH COULD BE no darker than that night was. The kerosene lamp dispelled the gloom, casting a bright world of its own. As Liufu cleaned up Poxu Niu's body he imagined the man's ghost meeting Fish, at last having a chance to be a father to his daughter, his sins forgiven, in that other world. Liufu didn't know how things worked in that world, or how many other worlds there might be besides this mortal one, but he hoped that death might be the beginning of happier things. For his mother, too.

He dozed after the sky grew light, and dreamed that he saw Fish in a gown of white lace, her black hair dripping past her shoulders, painting her lips with the water for a mirror. She said she'd seen her father, that he was preparing for her wedding. She said he had slaughtered pigs and sheep for a huge three-day wedding feast where all the villagers were invited.

He woke up happy. The dream had kindled his appetite. He went to look for something to eat, but the kitchen had been picked clean, and the bowls shattered on the floor for good measure. A faint whiff of cooked pork seemed to linger in the air. Holding his hunger in check, Liufu took up an iron spade and went to dig a hole in the back yard. A wind whistled down from the north, sweeping up fallen leaves and dust.

By noon he had laid Poxu Niu in the ground and heaped fresh earth over him.

Death hadn't been such a lonely thing before. In his mind Liufu lit firecrackers and boiled rich porridge, watched scraps of red paper fly through clouds of blue smoke, a raucous, busy banquet. But before him there were only withered trees and dry earth, and Liufu suddenly felt lonelier even than the dead man. Tired and hungry after his half day of labor, he thought about lying down next to the grave and keeping Poxu Niu company for a while, until he realized that there had still been no sign of Jiazhen. He rose slowly, propping himself up on the spade. He went to Jiazhen's house first, but there was nobody there; then to the entrance of the village, where he gazed beyond the security line, down towards the township as far as his eyes could see. He almost asked the sentries if they had seen her. He tried to walk out, but the sentries shouted for him to turn back.

Jiazhen had not returned. For the next three days there was no trace of her.

At a loss, Liufu spent his days pacing up and down the bank of the river, his eyes shut against the cold wind.

Fish had vanished. When he thought back to the nights he had spent with her, Liufu couldn't be sure that she had ever been there at all, and he began to wonder if he had simply imagined it after reading *Strange Tales* too many times. But he remembered kisses like ice, slippery skin, and a voice like water.

Liufu was dizzy and blurry-eyed with hunger. There was a ringing in his ears, and he could no longer be sure what was real and what was hallucination. The world in which he lived became ever more insubstantial.

Nights, he played the beam of his flashlight over the water listlessly, unsure whether he was looking for Fish or only for fish. He thought he might fall to the ground and give up at any moment from the hunger and the cold. At a sudden glimpse of a pale fish-back in the water, his stomach reflexively ordered his body to hurl his fish spear with every ounce of strength it had. He reached out, grabbed the spear tightly, and pulled it from the water to reveal a fish the size of a human infant. Blood dripped from it. It was stiff with cold, barely moving. Its tail was curled like a person bent over with an aching stomach, and its body trembled.

"Keep... sending out letters..." The fish's mouth opened and closed, and Liufu heard Fish's voice, faint and wet.

Translated by Brendan O'Kane

Crystal Wedding Anniversary

Xu Xiaobin

1

1996. TIANYI FOUND the gulf in the standards of living between China and America unbearable.

She was home again and within seconds her shoes had been muddied by the black pools of water around the vegetable market. These very same shoes had walked the streets of America for three months without collecting the merest speck of dust. Her husband, Wang Lian, walked with her, saying: “Don’t get caught up in your fantasies. This is it. This is China.”

Tianyi was becoming less tolerant of the realities of her life. Before, she’d had her ways of doing things and rarely let anyone into her inner world, but recently things had changed. The person she loved couldn’t come home, her circle of friends had scattered like birds, the atmosphere in her office was oppressive, and the two people she had to face every day without fail, her husband and her son, made her feel like she had a clump of cotton wool in her throat. She couldn’t swallow, spit, or say how she really felt.

Her son had recently taken to lying. She now vigilantly held guard over her purse at all times when at home, not something to make a mother happy. She examined her son’s face carefully and saw that it was slowly changing. It was no longer beautifully smooth, but neither had it become the pimply, pockmarked face of youth; no, there was a sort of viciousness growing from the outside tip of his eyebrows, or from who knows where. Yes, viciousness. This was no exaggeration. Secretly she watched him, and noticed he was always with an older boy called Zhao Liang. Zhao Liang’s face was particularly vicious.

One day she cracked her son’s password on the home computer. Her son had been surfing foreign porn sites! She clicked and clicked: one photo, one video after another. She could hardly breathe, her eyes rolled to the back of her head. *Oh my God! Do today’s young people really look at this stuff?* She thought of the stifling confinement of her own youth. *This is too ridiculous. We’re like ants, who knows when our lives are going to be crushed under the giant foot of time.*

But she was too scared to tell Wang Lian.

Wang Lian had become increasingly gloomy of late. His salary had increased tenfold

since starting at BO, three hundred was now three thousand. But it was a step down as far as Tianyi was concerned. Before, those three hundred had gone straight to her, but this three thousand was the stuff of legend, she never saw where it went.

Every evening Wang Lian would come home and slump in front of the television. He wouldn't say a word until the screen filled with static. So it went, day after day. Until one day he exploded. He went off like a rocket launcher, blasted Tianyi to the floor.

At around nine o'clock in the evening, Tianyi was reading when a voice thundered: "Mother fucker!"

Tianyi flew into the other room and saw Wang Lian's face contorted with rage as he shouted into the telephone receiver, one terrible string of swear words after another. "You fucking bastard, you still want to fucking control me? I'll tell you this for free, you don't have the power!"

Tianyi felt her whole body go cold. She marched up to Wang Lian and tried to prise the phone from his hands, but he pushed her away. She stood to the side making wild gestures, but he completely ignored her. *Damn it*, Tianyi thought, *there'll be no more peace in this family.*

2

WANG LIAN WAS, of course, shouting at Lu Qiankuan. He'd been finding Lu Qiankuan's stubbornness difficult to deal with for quite some time, and he'd done everything he could to hold himself back. As he had a tendency to go to extremes, this meant making himself low, grinding himself into the dust. The problem was, the lower he made himself, the more Lu Qiankuan trampled him down, until he went too far and humiliated Wang Lian in front of everyone.

Wang Lian had always been deputy manager of finance, the area of the business that made Lu Qiankuan most nervous. In fact, there were two things that worried Lu Qiankuan: first, that Wang Lian often seemed to be in a muddle, and second, that Wang Lian might fiddle the books. Wang Lian had a lot of friends, and Lu feared he'd use the company's reputation to borrow money. Lu Qiankuan's worries were not unfounded: Wang Lian had been wanting to do so for a while, but he just hadn't gotten round to it yet.

Lu Qiankuan hired a young man called Li Haibin, who had a master's degree in finance and practical experience. You didn't have to be an idiot to see what was going on, and Wang Lian felt sick to the pit of his stomach. So he found an excuse to explode at Li, shook the tree to see what might fall. Little did he know that Lu Qiankuan would scupper his plan. Li Haibin obviously didn't give a damn about Wang Lian, he listened to Wang Lian let off steam then chuckled and carried on as if nothing had happened. Then, to add

insult to injury, Lu Qiankuan proceeded to interrogate Wang Lian in front of Li Haibin and all of their colleagues, about some problem with their joint accounts. Wang Lian was utterly humiliated.

Wang Lian had buried this humiliation carefully in his heart. Now he had contacted a new company and was ready to jump ship, to exact his revenge.

Tianyi had never imagined her own husband could be so childish. And Wang Lian could not imagine the difficulties this one phone call would cause him for the rest of his life. and that it was nearly going to take his life from him!

Wang Lian threw himself enthusiastically into his new job, again as deputy manager of finance. During the first few weeks, when everything seemed to have calmed, Tianyi won herself a bit of peace. She found a quiet moment to talk to her son and gave him a stack of world classics she'd bought for him to read. But before long he'd tossed them aside like a pile of junk. *Nothing of real quality is worth anything in this counterfeit age*, she thought to herself. She couldn't let her son go on like this; she wracked her brain until her head hurt. *What could possibly replace pornographic websites?* She was close to admitting defeat.

Tianyi didn't dare look at herself in the mirror. She felt she was aging more quickly every day.

At last she hit on a solution. During the summer holidays she bought her son a copy of Jin Yong's *The Deer and the Cauldron*, casually left it where her son might find it. Once he'd picked it up he couldn't put it down, took it with him everywhere, including the toilet. She rejoiced in private, too delighted to say anything, fearing one word might break the spell.

Her husband and son thus occupied, she opened a notebook and started to write what was probably going to be the most important book of her life. A story about fate.

3

WHILE WRITING THIS book, Tianyi felt that pain was no longer something of the mind, but a physical substance stirring deep within her body. Sometimes she was in so much pain she couldn't write, felt as if she had contracted a terminal illness. In some ways she thought she might, in fact, be terminally ill, in much the same way as the society she lived in was terminally ill; the two couldn't be unrelated. Nor was there any medicine that could cure them. The strange thing was, many things from her past that had seemed long shrouded by the passage of time were now dancing in front of her eyes as if they had only happened yesterday.

Tianyi went back to the pictures taken when she was a newborn. She had been an unusually beautiful baby. When she was born the future had been so full of possibilities—that baby could have grown into a beauty famous throughout the land. But she hadn't.

And to top it off, Tianyi felt that she was getting more average-looking the older she got; before her marriage, when she'd still had some faint longing to be married, something, though indistinct, had enlivened her soul. But now everything had fallen away. There were no answers, and the vigour her face once possessed was slowly disappearing..

She studied her photographs carefully and made an unexpected discovery. Before the age of five she had been a beautiful baby, a small angel, but after that something about her face had changed. She'd thinned out dramatically, her milk teeth turned black, her eyes sunk into her head. This was around the time she'd lost her mother. After her brother was born, she'd lost her mother's love, and it was replaced with hatred instead. She didn't know why her mother hated her so much, but she sensed other people's love and hate acutely. Often she would sneak off to her room in the evenings and sit in the darkness crying, staring out at the red star on top of the Soviet Exhibition Hall. The Beijing Exhibition Hall was still known as the Soviet Exhibition Hall towards the end of the fifties, and as there were no tall buildings in those days the red star was clearly visible from her courtyard home. Back then she was too shy to cry in front of people. Her feelings were rich and delicate, and she wrapped them up carefully so as not to let them out. When she had to, she wouldn't let them out gently, but chose the coarsest method possible, exactly opposite to the softness of her feelings. Longing for her mother's love consumed her, turned into a kind of hysteria. From childhood all the way into adulthood, her heart had been filled with anguish. Without love, that cute, affectionate, lively young girl became ugly, and her temper did too. She became introverted, closed off.

Now she realized, with some desperation, that her whole being—her life, her appearance, her everything—had been ruled by her emotions. With love, she was a blossoming flower, she was beautiful. But without it she withered. She had the same face, the same features, yet she looked like a different person. The only time she had ever really been beautiful again was during her pregnancy. Now she was a faded old matron, with no life-force, just a belly full of resentment.

She would sit for twelve hours a day, so engrossed in writing that she forgot to eat. When food did pass her lips she couldn't taste it. This was her way of escaping the world, of escaping herself.

4

THEN, ONE DAY, Tianyi's writing was interrupted.

It was an ordinary evening, an evening like all the others, an evening full of uneasy noises, and Tianyi had already washed and made herself ready for bed.

Someone knocked at the door.

Two immaculately dressed men entered and politely presented a piece of paper.

Wang Lian, who was normally ready to fly off the handle at any moment, was visibly frightened. He slumped into a chair, a fawning look on his face.

Disaster was looming, Tianyi knew it. She caught a glimpse of the paper while pouring the tea, but all she could make out was a red seal: West District Procuratorate.

And that was how Wang Lian was taken away.

It took a while for Tianyi to recover, but as soon as she did she started making calls. In those days her telephone still had a circular dial, and her fingers were swollen by the time she found a way out—via Xie Tong, or rather Xie Tong’s third wife Jiao Mei, a famous lawyer. After asking the necessary questions in a cold, professional manner, Jiao Mei introduced Tianyi to a friend of hers from the West District Procuratorate. Friends are friends, but that didn’t preclude the need for money, so with some pain Tianyi handed over the money she had earned through sweat, tears and her pen.

Wang Lian was released forty-eight hours later. Without a word he drew Tianyi into his arms. Quietly she struggled free, she wasn’t used to being intimate with her husband. “You know what they say, babe,” he said. “The force of the wind tests the strength of the grass. You’re my sweet little hay-tuft.” His words made her skin crawl, they were so insincere. It was just like the days after they were married. But it was 1997, they’d been married for thirteen years. Thirteen years! Tianyi knew she hadn’t done a good job of road-testing the new merchandise.

The worst of it was that still, Wang Lian refused to talk about what really happened at the company. It hurt, it showed that he didn’t trust her. Sweet tuft of hay? To him she was more like a weight he could toss aside whenever he liked. Of course she’d picked up a few clues from Wang Lian’s endless cursing—something to do with the company sponsoring someone, which led Lu Qiankuan to accuse Wang Lian of “embezzlement of public goods.” Even though it was the late nineties, the words still evoked terrible memories for Tianyi. How could they be used against her own husband? She refused to let herself believe that a wave could rise without wind.

In addition to shouting at people, Wang Lian took to sinking into the sofa and mouthing off at his son. Tianyi found any excuse she could to get out of the house. Their home had become a barrel of gunpowder waiting to go off. One evening, as Tianyi nuzzled into the cold sheets, it struck her: don’t all marriages, all families, get to this point? Everyone is unhappy, but some people are good at pretending otherwise, while others let it out. These thoughts reminded her that a letter from Shang had arrived the previous day, which she hadn’t had time to read. She ripped it open. As always Shang had written on thick, yellow paper with light blue lines, with the same salutation: Dearest Tianyi. It was what came after that, though, that made her twitchy.

Her friend apologised for not having written in so long, saying she’d nearly had a breakdown. That Shang and Little Du had broken up after a year of living together

was old news. Shang was always going on about it. But now, Tianyi learned, Shang had married an American named Brown. For many reasons, some of which were difficult to talk about openly. But there was one reason about which Shang was clear: Brown wanted her to become a housewife. At first, she'd agreed with enthusiasm. Little did she imagine, however, that although she thought herself capable, Brown and his mother would think everything she did was shitty. It didn't take long for Brown to start calling her "lazy" and "dirty," completely humiliating Shang. Shang was frank: There was no way she was going to agree to a divorce, he would get more out of it than she would and she couldn't walk away from the marriage with nothing. At the very least she wanted him to suffer, really suffer, until she got American citizenship.

Tianyi put the letter down and stared into space. Two arms locked around her from behind. She knew it was Wang Lian, and she felt a shiver. She wasn't sure exactly when it had started, but for some time now she had hated it whenever he touched her body. She forced a smile and tried desperately not to let it show. Wang Lian's eyes fell on the letter. "Another letter from Shang?" he asked. She nodded. Wang Lian picked it up. She felt uncomfortable, but managed to stop herself from pulling it away. She couldn't keep him from knowing even if she wanted to. And he would talk about it. Wang Lian skimmed the letter. As she expected, his eyes lit up and a sneer spread across his face.

"I knew it! I knew Shang's marriage would never work. She thinks she's all that, but she's greedy and lazy. You know what, I think everybody's jealous of you."

"And what," Tianyi replied coldly, "do you think they're jealous of?"

"That you've got such a good husband!" Wang Lian said. "Which of the neighbours doesn't say that I'm the model husband? Carrying bags home for you every day. Where can you find another man like me?"

Tianyi gritted her teeth. She would suffer it out; her department had just informed her that she would be sent to the Czech Republic with a group of writers. She would say nothing. She was coming round to the idea that she was the real problem—she was too negative, preferred to escape problems instead of confront them. She couldn't be bothered to talk anymore. She'd already said goodbye to the chatty girl of her childhood. She'd sunk into silence, her complexion had gone yellowy-grey; she'd rounded out, she looked more like an old woman every day. She used to love her mirror passionately, now she did all she could to avoid it. Classical poetry was full of couplets to describe a woman like herself. There was Lin Daiyu: "How long do bright flowers bloom? / One day they will scatter, never to be recovered." Or: "When the flower opens, pluck it / Don't wait till it fades and drops from the stem." But who was going to pluck her? There was nothing to do but wither and fall.

HER ONLY ENTERTAINMENT was going out. These brief outings were an escape. Tianyi had first become conscious of her desire to flee when she was a child—whenever she and her mother weren't getting on, she would imagine a tunnel that linked her to her past, a place of tranquility. Only long after did she realise that place was called paradise. She was still far away.

At last there something on the horizon that gave her a chance to flee: her trip to the Czech Republic.

There would be three others going: two writers, old Zhao Ping who wrote novels and a middle-aged essayist called Wu Shanliang; and an older translator called Qiao Chun. They all seemed kind and capable. Tianyi was delighted to be going with them.

She'd only ever known Prague through novels and songs, but now she was really here. Her first glimpse of the city was at night. She wore a plum coloured velvet coat that evening, had combed her short hair and arranged the few curls on top of her head. It was a plucky-looking hairstyle, and her belted jacket showed off her slender figure. She looked young and full of energy, and the young man who came to pick them up, Tony, took an instant fancy to her. He was the son of one of Prague's most famous sinologists and had been given a Chinese name by his father: Lu Weida.

Tianyi's heart skipped when she first saw Tony. He wasn't handsome, but he had a gloomy, almost morbid sort of beauty. He was tall and thin, sort of how she imagined Kafka in his youth. She told him this later in the trip, and to her surprise he admitted, with a somewhat pained look: "Yes, I played Kafka in my school play." They looked at each other without saying anything. Then, as she wheeled her suitcase to her room, she glanced back and saw him still standing by the stairs, bathed in the last rays of the sun, looking at her intensely.

The rest of the trip was happy. Tony's father, the sinologist, was always with them, so they had no problems communicating. Their meals were fairly simple; the head of the Prague Writer's Association invited them out to dinner but the table was a wasteland, the best thing on offer was a plate of fried potato cakes. The next day the Chinese delegation bought dinner at a local Chinese restaurant. They filled the table with food, but to their amazement the head of the Association drew a plate of fried meat in front of him and started shovelling it in without looking up. They stared at him in disbelief. He kept eating. Tianyi looked up from her plate and caught Wu Shanliang's eye, and they traded half-smiles.

Tony had a refined table manner. He'd be full after two bites, after which he would turn to his coffee, sipping at it endlessly, eyes half-drooping and seemingly lost in thought, at least when not glancing in Tianyi's direction.

A Chinese student washing dishes at the restaurant was, in turn, staring at Tony. She was brave. She walked straight up to him and took a camera out of her pocket, said: “Do you mind having a picture taken with me?”

Tony looked at her blankly, and in the meantime Tianyi accepted the camera and took a few shots. Tony was solemn, the girl exuberant.

Tony’s father went by the Chinese name Lu Hua. When the elder Lu suggested they go pay their respects at the grave of another famous sinologist, Dvorak, the Chinese delegation readily agreed.

That day the rain formed a hazy curtain, and Prague was swallowed in grey mist. The greyness made Tianyi think of *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* and *The Joke*, though this Prague was no longer the gentle Prague of Milan Kundera’s novels. But, as Qiao Chun kept emphasising, the Czechs were gentle people. *Indeed they are*, Tianyi thought. The old sinologist and his son were very gentle. Two days before, when they were visiting the Czech National Library, Tianyi had spoken to a group of Czech students who were studying Chinese, Tony among them. Each in turn explained his or her Chinese name. Tianyi praised each one, hesitating only at Tony’s. She told him it was a bit average. Tony became anxious, explained that his father had given it to him, that it had a good meaning. Tianyi rushed to correct herself. Yes, after a bit of thought it was clear what a good name it was. He smiled, his smile shy and gentle.

It was cold and rainy at Dvorak’s grave. They arrived with flowers and candles to leave before it. To their surprise, the silver-haired Lu Hua was standing among the gravestones. The head of their group scuttled up to him to shake his hand. They had no idea how long he’d been waiting in the rain.

When they’d left she hadn’t realised how cold it was. She wasn’t wearing enough and was now shivering. Tony removed his down jacket and draped it over her shoulders. Tianyi made a vague attempt to refuse it, but she hadn’t expected the gentle young man to be so forceful, stammering in his stiff Chinese: “You... must wear it... because... you are a woman.... I am a man.... You are a guest. I am a host...” She wore it and it warmed her almost immediately. His reasons were excellent, in fact. That she should be wearing his coat felt suddenly amusing, and their group leader said she looked just like the Good Soldier Schweik.

They took a group picture before leaving the graveyard. Tony hadn’t forgotten to light a candle before the grave, its small globe of light translucent in the grey rainy mist, making the gravestone glitter like crystal.

That gravestone in the mist was warm, gentle, and unforgettable.

Many years later, Tony would come to Beijing. With him came the young Chinese girl who had washed dishes in the restaurant in Prague. He had married her.

AUTUMN IN KARLOVY Vary was bathed in stately gold. A golden wind blew golden leaves onto golden rooftops. Under golden rays of sunshine, Tianyi walked past stalls lining the streets, full of glinting glassware like melting snowy peaks. She spotted a particularly fine and very cheap set of tall stemmed glasses with gilded rims. Everyone knows about Czech glass, but not everyone knows that the glass from Karlovy Vary is the most beautiful.

The walls of an ancient fortress lined the shady side of the street. Here the magic of the town was located—the springs. Drinking from them required a special procedure, starting with the purchase of a ceramic pot. The market stalls around the springs were loaded with these pots, all different styles of them. The clay was different than that used to make Chinese pots, not cold to the touch, and in the sunlight it looked moist. Tianyi bought an extremely cheap but charming one that was dark red, almost the colour of red bean paste, and decorated with a bluish-grey rose. According to the embassy's secretary, Little Gao, people scooped the spring water in these pots, and although it tasted a bit salty it was warm, smooth, and pleasing to the tongue. As Tianyi approached the springs, something mysterious happened: a Czech woman put a rose into the spring water, and it changed into a yellowy-ash colour right before their eyes. These withered, defeated flowers might have lost their fragrance, but they had a strong enough smell. So this was what Karlovy Vary was famous for! Little Gao told them that all the shop windows displayed these petrified roses, which had become a symbol for the town.

After lunch they went shopping, and there they saw proof, petrified roses were everywhere. But for some reason, even after asking a shopkeeper to let them take a closer look, Tianyi couldn't muster the interest to buy one. These once-beautiful flowers had been changed forever, changed into something else entirely. It was fun to watch them change colour, but once they'd been petrified there was nothing special about them anymore. It seemed her companions felt the same way. Those piles of roses were like scraps of iron, there was nothing beautiful about them at all.

Tianyi sat peacefully by the hot spring and thought, so this is Karlovy Vary. This was the place where she'd won her first-ever prize, for her film *Intelligent Tree*. It should have a special place in her heart, she should feel that they knew each other. That prize had awoken a desire in her heart—even, one might say, a wild ambition.

But that was all in the past now, it would be silly to long for change now. Any change would probably result in the opposite of what she wanted. In this world, how many fresh flowers turn into scrap iron in the end?

SHE STILL WANTED to go home.

The strange thing was, no matter where she was, she couldn't for the life of her remember her husband's face. She had completely forgotten him. It frightened her.

Cooking had become a firecracker fuse. Wang Lian refused to continue being a model husband. Whenever he was at home he would lie on the sofa with his head turned to the television. The house was like a powder keg, even the slightest spark and it would explode. Tianyi had always been sensitive, and now she was a nervous wreck. In order to overcome her nerves she hired someone to come every day and cook. The cook was from Anhui, a very capable woman, though a bit rough around the edges. But it only took her two hours to wash their clothes, cook the food and tidy up, enabling Tianyi to relax somewhat. These days she had to do her writing in secret. Wang Lian didn't say anything, but she spent every day in an anxious knot. Only once her husband and son had gone to sleep did she feel free to sit in front of her old Sitong 2403 word processor. She would stare at its long, thin screen, type with her podgy peasant woman-like fingers. Here, she could enter into another world, one that she had created. She knew it didn't exist, perhaps it was the magic, perhaps it was the suspense, but whatever it was it was stronger than reality. At least in that imaginary world she could force herself to go on living.

Wang Lian didn't give her a penny, she had to provide for the household all by herself. She couldn't say anything, she knew that, but Wang Lian was waiting for her to say it. After all, the barefooted don't fear the shod. Wang Lian had nothing—what did he have to fear?

Tianyi, however, was becoming more and more scared. Their building was full of Wang Lian's colleagues, she didn't want them to hear Wang Lian shouting, she didn't want to lose face.

Wang Lian, on the other hand, seemed to be possessed. He kept doing one stupid thing after another. One day he came back with a gigantic fridge-freezer, then started buying the cheapest meat he could find from the morning market. The problem was, he kept forgetting about it, so it went bad and he would have to throw it away. Every time he had to throw it out he would shout at Tianyi: "What are you doing? Isn't this your home too? Here I am buying all these groceries, why don't you defrost them and cook them once in a while?" Every time he had these tantrums Tianyi would think of Tianke. Back then, her husband had been docile and obedient. How had he changed into a violent beast like Tianke? Was this his true personality? Had he been hiding it all these years?

Every morning he rode his bike to the market to buy all sorts of rubbish, filling the space underneath their bed with it. Seeing this dirty rubbish, Tianyi felt sick and upset, thought: *there will come a day when...* She thought back to before they were married, when

she would say just that. “There will come a day when...” She was thinking, there will come a day when I will leave you all, leave all you people, go to a happier, freer place with no worries, a world that belongs to me. God, what world is that? Tianyi began to tremble—was it paradise? She’d dreamed about it so many times as a child. Was death all it took for people to enter a world of contentment? She made the decision there and then to leave her mother and brother, find a world that belonged to her alone. Even though she was still young, her youth had long since faded. If she left the people around her, would she still have the energy to create a world that belonged to her? She doubted it, and that scared her. Really scared her. Better keep holding on. Force herself to carry on. Be patient. Stick it out. Back when Lin Biao was giving advice to the Vietnam People’s Army, he used one word: “Endure.” But what did it mean to endure to the end? Become a white-haired, simpering old woman? It didn’t bear thinking about.

Her son was, just like her, keeping a low profile. He was just about to sit his high school exams, but his grades were sliding downwards rapidly, adding to Wang Lian’s worries. He had to let those worries out somehow, so he stood over his son every day as he did his homework. He may not have been able to satisfy his desire to give orders at work, but at home he could—not realising that to his son it was like having a monster at his shoulder. How could he possibly do his math homework with his father breathing down his neck?

She had to stick it out. She had another group trip coming up, this time to Taiwan. But all these worries at home were disturbing. Her son wasn’t going to make it to high school, and she knew exactly why, and there was nothing she could do about it. She couldn’t possibly poke her nose in and risk the consequences, because in some ways she still relied on Wang Lian. If she left, he would still have to look after their son. So, she had to stick it out.

The day before she was about to leave, he gave her the new business cards he had printed for her. She looked them over. They were extremely ugly. Was this really the same man she had married, that not ten years ago had such good taste? The worst of it was she couldn’t keep her mouth shut.

The aftermath was ugly. He went crazy, threw the box of cards to the ground and scattered them everywhere, stomped on them, twisted his ankle as he ground them into the floor, all the while barking wildly: “I was just trying to help you! Well, from now on, your husband is not going to wait on you any longer!”

Her chest hurt as if it had been stomped on too. It was a dull sort of pain. She could no longer avoid the issue, she thought. When she got back she’d have to solve it. But one thing was for sure, she couldn’t give her life over to this marriage.

TAIWAN WASN'T AS great as she'd imagined it would be. Taipei was much like Beijing, and her biggest harvest turned out to be the collection of coins with Chiang Kai-shek's face stamped on them. Not as nice as Kaohsiung. There the air was clean, the people simple and honest. Maybe she had been influenced by her uncle, but the place gave Tianyi a warm feeling.

But things don't go the way we always want them to; her aunt had already passed away and her uncle was living in an old people's home. Uncle didn't recognise her. Tianyi placed the carefully selected presents in front of him, her heart drowning in a wave of sorrow. She unwrapped the dried longans one by one and slipped them into Uncle's mouth. If only she could have helped him chew. But he soldiered on, saliva dripping from the corner of his mouth. Tianyi sat wiping it up gently with tissue paper until sunset, when the home was closed to visitors and her cousin, her Uncle's only daughter, took her by the hand and pulled her away from the miserable scene.

Her cousin had grown up to look just like her mother, which wasn't to say she was pretty exactly, but kind-looking, of the type rarely seen on the mainland. She had a sort of Republican-era look, a kindness of days past, a snowy white complexion as if her skin had never seen the sun, a mark of her true Chinese heritage. The women on the mainland had been transformed by hard labour, the times had bathed them in dirty water; in order to survive they'd had to become more masculine than men, stronger than men, more resourceful than men. It was only when seeing her cousin that Tianyi understood her own transformation. Which girl wouldn't want to hide behind a man and be doted on like a little child? But women from the mainland, women like Tianyi, were tenacious instead. You couldn't escape your fate.

Fate! It's all fate! Tianyi had always despised this phrase, but now it leapt up at her, and she couldn't help but believe it.

Well, at least Taiwan had the beautiful mountain Ali. Its views cleared the fog from her mind.

She could smell Ali Mountain from far, far away.

The sweet fragrance of fresh green. Wet as if dripping with water. That endless stretch of green was so beautiful, it reminded her of a line from a Lu You poem: "Towering green mountains, five thousand *ren* high."

Tianyi and her companions walked across Ali Mountain, taking pictures. It had been such a long, long time since they had seen such pure verdant greens, such bright moist greens, greens without a smudge of mud or dirt, their refreshing fragrance brushing against their cheeks like a moisturising beauty mask. Greedily they breathed it in, letting it clear them from the inside out, making their bodies shine, reminding them that Ali

Mountain once had its own spirit. To visit it was a pilgrimage, you had to light incense and bathe until not a trace of dirt remained on your body.

The most surprising thing about Ali Mountain was its odd-shaped trees. One in particular lay horizontal, its long graceful branches reaching out and into the ground. On a twisting mountain path it looked like the perfect modern sculpture, like those ones made of twisting tubes of metal you find in cities everywhere, though even the most imaginative artist would find this tree fantastic. *This must be the work of a higher power*, she thought. She was careful when taking pictures of the trees, lest she disturb the forest spirit. Looking upwards, she saw layer upon layer of canopy. Towering trees and squat shrubs created a scene reminiscent of a Corot painting, in and out of which surely the beautiful golden forest spirit crept as night approached.

At last night came to Ali Mountain. In a restaurant halfway up the mountain, their host laid out a banquet. The mountain's sweet smells made them feel drowsy; it was a luxuriously lazy, comfortable feeling. One of the Taiwanese men who organised the trip was as warm and friendly as if they had all been neighbours. Miss Wang spent the day whispering to them about the indigenous people's customs. She gave them all presents of fake glasses or embroidered cases for their mobile phones. According to custom, they made toasts and said their thanks.

Everyone present was particularly eloquent; only Tianyi wasn't talkative. But up here in the fresh mountain air, she thought of the song:

Mountain green
Stream so blue,
Ali Mountain girls pretty as water,
Ali Mountain boys strong as mountains...

The forest and her excited companions made her heart swell. She stood up and sang "Tomorrow Will Be Even Better."

A Taiwanese poet grabbed hold of another microphone and joined in, and a local girl wearing an embroidered outfit stood beside him, singing. Tianyi had forgotten that it was a Taiwanese song. Everyone sang:

A gentle drumming wakes the sleeping soul
Slowly open your eyes
See if the busy, lonely world is still turning
Spring winds are unaware of love's glances
Burning up youth's heart
Let yesterday's tearstained cheeks

Dry in the wind, just like your memories
Sing out your heart's passion
Reach out your hands and let me embrace your dreams
Let me possess your honest face
Let our smiles be filled with the arrogance of youth
Let us hope that tomorrow is going to be better!

It was fun, singing a song popular on both sides of the straits together with their Taiwanese friends. The stars were already alight in the black sky. *The beautiful forest spirits must be about to come out*, Tianyi thought, *were they the ones who lit these small lanterns, to light the way for their compatriots who'd come such a long way? Was it their way of welcoming them too?* Did they want to join in this enraptured, giddy celebration? It would only take a few drops to become drunk and sleep deeply in the fragrance of the forest.

Night on Ali Mountain was steeped in rich and fertile beauty. Tianyi, caught up in her own fantasies, thought: She could jump on a flight and come here any weekend she wanted, to this restaurant halfway up the mountain; it would be just like heading to a bar in Sanlitun. She could brew a pot of tea just picked from the mountainside, spend hours chatting. If it was a snowy winter's day, she could order a couple of drunken crabs with wild Ali Mountain mushrooms, and while away the day conversing about the illustrious, dust-covered past.

Tomorrow, at least, this wouldn't be impossible.
Tomorrow would be even better.

9

BUT TOMORROW WAS not better at all.

On the way home, she stopped in Hong Kong to see her childhood friend Shang. Shang had suffered a resounding defeat in her battle against Brown and, feeling depressed, had headed for Hong Kong where she could at least get a long-term resident's permit.

Two thoroughly middle-aged women, they sat in a bar on the Wan Chai pier sipping cappuccinos. Their bodies and hearts bore scars of time's cruel changes.

Shang told Tianyi that her war with Brown had lasted ten years, though their marriage hadn't lasted but six months. Originally she'd been determined to get an American green card, but when, after ten years, they finally went to court, the court decided that she had no right to one. She should have guessed as much. Brown had worked for the American government, he was a man protected by the laws of his own country, and she was just a guest.

Shang had aged more than Tianyi could have imagined. She looked at Tianyi and

continued: “You haven’t been suffering these years, have you? You haven’t changed a bit...” Tianyi laughed bitterly, sipped her coffee. “I don’t know. Until now this life hasn’t been the one I wanted.... I’m not living, I’m making do. Does that make sense?”

“Of course. Total sense.” Shang nodded. “Everyone is making do. If you can make do, you’re doing alright. Look at me, for the last ten years I haven’t been able to make do...” The tears started to run. They were cloudy.

“Don’t think about it, you’re doing well now, aren’t you? You’ve got a Hong Kong resident’s permit.”

“But I’m beginning to wonder, what’s the use?” Shang suddenly became agitated. “Ten years, ten of the best years of my life, all for a resident’s permit. By the time I got a Hong Kong resident’s permit the island had already been returned to the mainland. What was the point?”

“There has never been a point to any of it, you fighting for a resident’s permit or me writing for a living. There is no point. But we have to find a reason for living, right? We have to have something to do, right?... Oh yeah, I met Huazheng in America.”

“Oh... you met him? Has he changed? It must have been quite a shock to see him after all these years.”

“Not at all, I don’t know why. I think we all live in our own imaginations, really. I can’t tell anymore what’s really happened and what I’ve imagined... Everything’s so confused.” She suddenly stopped talking. Out where the sea met the sky she caught sight of a large, rosy pink cloud.

I didn’t catch the sun, but I caught the sunset clouds, she thought she heard someone whisper in her ear.

Those were Huazheng’s words. Three years ago in the Metropolitan Museum of Art. They were in the downstairs cafe, sipping their drinks and looking at the sunset sky.

Clouds at sunset are pretty nice, I’m just worried I won’t be able to catch them either, the only thing I can wait for is the darkness.

“Sorry, what are you saying?” Shang was mesmerized by Tianyi’s distracted expression.

“Nothing...”

“You may live in your own imagination, but I don’t. I live permanently in reality.” Shang brushed a hair from the side of her mouth. She wore her hair short these days, and her face was covered in deep brown spots which contrasted with the pale purple woollen jumper she wore. “I’ve got a secret to tell you. For a while I was close to dying. Really. It wasn’t scary. Death is only a window, once you open it and look in...”

Tianyi looked at her, said nothing.

“I’ve come face to face with death quite a few times now. When Brown and I had our worst fights, I wanted to open the window and jump right through. We lived on the

twenty-fourth floor back then. It was really high, and once when I looked down a young girl in red looked back up at me. For some reason I thought it was you! In an instant I was back to the time when you used to wear that red skirt, and my sister and I used to wear the patterned ones. You'd just moved in, and the house wasn't yet unpacked. The place was empty, and the three of us used to play in there."

"Shang Xian... I haven't seen her in ages..."

"Mum says she's got herself a boyfriend and is about to get married."

"She's brave! She dares to get married?"

"Of course, she was always the bravest of the three of us. Have you forgotten?"

Tianyi didn't reply. The sunset clouds had already disappeared. Before long darkness would sweep across the world again.

10

SHE RETURNED HOME, and the suffocating smell was back.

Her son was thinner, and didn't show much affection when he saw her. Wang Lian was as miserable as ever and ignored her.

She forced herself to put on a generous display, laid out the Lacoste shirt and t-shirts she had bought Wang Lian. He turned and left without as much as looking at them.

He fetched a piece of paper and threw it before her.

She glanced at it, her pupils dilating. "We are sorry to announce the death of People's Liberation Army General Staff Headquarters Comrade Vice-Minister Yang Huairen."

"Uncle? Uncle is dead? When did that happen?"

"When? When you were off on your travels, that's when," Wang Lian said, curling his lips sarcastically.

She looked at the date. The third day of her trip to Taiwan.

"What about Auntie?"

"Your other uncle wrote a letter saying your Auntie wanted him to inform us. There's no need to go visit apparently, she just wanted to pass on the information and then cut all contact." Wang Lian seemed rather pleased to be the messenger in this case.

"No, I'm going to see her, immediately." She jumped to her feet. "Don't wait for me tonight, you go ahead and eat."

The sound of Wang Lian's sneering laugh came from behind her: "You're taking off just like that? Have you thought this through? She doesn't want to see you, it'll be completely humiliating!"

Heedless of Wang Lian's laughter, she rushed over to Uncle's courtyard. It was a place filled with such happy childhood memories. Now, though, it was dead; apart from some stationary model guards, there wasn't a breath of life in the place. Even the trees

and flowers were gone.

After Lin Biao's plane crash in 1971 Uncle had been deemed indirectly implicated, was demoted to chief of staff and moved to Fuzhou Province. She'd gone to visit them once back then. Auntie had seemed much more withdrawn, though they'd joked as Auntie made chicken and mushroom stew. Her food had been as good as ever. She'd put on a lot of weight, and as soon as they'd finished eating she lay down to watch *Anna Karenina*.

"Your Uncle, that old codger, he's just like Karenin, he never gives me a moment's freedom. He's crushed my life in his palm. If it hadn't have been for him, I would have gone to university!" Puzzled, she'd looked at her aunt, wondered when the hate and sarcasm would abate. Now she finally understood.

Uncle had only returned to Beijing after he'd retired. What he didn't know was that his best friend and comrade in war had become his woman's Vronsky.

At Uncle's place Tianyi only found one of his old functionaries, a field officer. He said hesitantly: "Tianyi, don't go looking for Zhu Hui, she's with Minister Chai."

Minister Chai was Uncle's old comrade in arms, Auntie's Vronsky.

Tianyi was shocked. She had a rich imagination, but she'd never imagined her sixty-something year-old Auntie could be an *Anna Karenina*. Just the thought of it was incredible. Her Uncle's body wasn't yet cold and she'd already left, leaving behind only an empty, lonely building, a desolate ruin.

Her mother, Jiang Siqin, was a goddess of virtue by comparison.

She thought of her Uncle's last days. Did he know? There wasn't much point in speculating about it now, but she still hoped he didn't. That way his insides would have been untouched, he wouldn't be buried with a broken heart no one could mend.

Tianyi remembered Wang Lian's sneering remarks. He may have said some ugly things, but he always spoke the truth of the era. He was a wizard, but alas he could only see through other people, not himself.

11

THE NEXT EVENING Wang Lian had a dinner engagement. Tianyi made her and her son a simple meal of noodles. He snuck over to her, leaned over her shoulder and said, "Mum." Then he buried his head in her chest. Tianyi embraced him, stroked his hair gently. Suddenly he raised his head and said something that made Tianyi's heart shudder. "Mum, I don't want to go on living."

Tianyi was in shock. She looked at her son's thin face; it was a knife twisting in her heart. She waited for him to continue, but he didn't say anything. When did her little boy become this reticent young man? "Has dad been giving you trouble?" He shook his head.

Her son's words were molten lava gushing under the surface.

One day, it was bound to burst out.

One evening, Tianyi remembered vividly, her son had come back from school and called out mum and dad as usual, then gone to his room. Closed the door. This was a mistake—at that time Wang Lian wouldn't let anyone in the house close the door. If they closed a door he had the right to open it. It was proper to have the door open; indeed, he would kick it open if necessary! That day, he kicked the door open and discovered his son's secret. He hadn't passed his physics test, and was in the process of changing the grade on the paper.

Wang Lian grabbed him by the collar and threw him out of the room. A fight was sure to follow. Tianyi rushed up to them and shielded her son with her body. "Wang Lian, just say what you want to say, okay? He's a big boy now, if you keep hitting him he'll hate you!" Within seconds the whites of Wang Lian's eyes had turned a frightening yellow. He pushed Tianyi aside; she staggered back a few steps and fell on the bed. Now she could see nothing but Wang Lian's huge mouth, spit flying as he cursed: "I'm not afraid to be hated! I don't care who hates me! I'm not scared! If we don't take care of this he'll be done with. Done with, get it? With grades like these he won't get into high school, and if he doesn't get in then he'll only ever become a criminal! Bloody tramp!"

Wang Lian had said a lot of ugly things that day, but now she couldn't remember them. The only thing she remembered was her son silently opening a drawer and taking out a knife.

It was only after she saw blood that she rushed forward. Luckily it wasn't too late, the blade had cut through her son's tender flesh, but although it was bleeding it hadn't gone too deep. She was quick as a leopard, a policewoman couldn't have beaten her to it; a mother's instinct to save her child makes her strike quicker than lightning. In that moment she saved her son's life, and threw away fifteen years of marriage.

"We're getting a divorce. Now."

The change in her voice surprised her. Her voice was deep, sounded as if someone had covered her mouth. But it was loud, so loud that the neighbours downstairs heard her.

This time Wang Lian didn't refuse. "Okay," he said, "let's go now."

Her face turned green, his grey. They biked, one on the seat one on the back, just like they'd done fifteen years earlier when they first started going out. One turn of the wheel, and they were back to nothing.

This wasn't the divorce registration office of legend, where the people try desperately to save your failing marriage. A middle aged man asked them what had happened and within minutes had made them an appointment to deal with the paperwork. They parted at Haidian Library; he went to buy books, and she to visit her mother with her son.

Mother was old, and walking was a struggle for her. The sight of her limping made

Tianyi's heart ache. Just as she had fifteen years previously when she was about to marry, she told her mother as calmly as she could: I'm getting a divorce.

Even though she did her best to be calm and decisive, she couldn't help breaking into sobs. She cried so hard she lost her voice, she couldn't control it. Until she saw the frosty look in her mother's eyes. Again she tried to control herself, stop her tears.

"What are you crying for?" Her mother asked coldly. "You can't do without him? If you can't..."

This was enough to make her go to the kitchen. She started hacking at vegetables, but still the sound didn't drown out her mother's ridicule. "Listen to her! She wants a divorce, but she cries?"

The thing that really scared her was that she felt no pain. She was numb. Why were there mothers like this? Why did God choose to give her this kind of mother?

Once she finished cutting the vegetables she took her son and left. They weren't going to stay for dinner, she'd decided, though still her mother tried to persuade her to stay, as she always did. She could at least wait until her brother, Tianke, came back. She couldn't look her mother in the eye, lest her resolve waver.

Instead, she decided to take her son out for a nice meal.

She chose an expensive Macau restaurant nearby, but it was only after they sat down that she discovered the look of displeasure on her son's face. Every time she suggested a dish, he answered "I don't like that," but he refused to order for himself. The waitress stood for a long, long time, watching this strange mother and son fail to order food.

Suddenly he stood up and left, his mother's perplexed gaze following him out the door. The waitress watched in shock. It took her a while to react, but eventually she sprang to her feet and ran after him. Reason deserted her. When she pulled even with him she slapped his face, right under his glasses.

This was the first time she'd ever hit her son. The first and only time.

Time stopped.

He was already grown up. They stared at each other. She was shorter than him by one full head. All of the anguish and resentment that she carried in her heart turned to anger. His glasses had fallen to the ground, and a passerby was staring at them. Her son couldn't cope with the humiliation, and desperate as he was to give off a macho air, he started to cry. This didn't soften her heart, though. She shouted, "Leave! Go wherever you want to!"

She thought she was going to collapse to the ground. She had no idea how she got home that day, the only thing she knew was that Wang Lian was away on business, was using the trip to delay the divorce proceedings. He was having regrets.

She looked at herself in the mirror and wondered how she could have aged so much in only a few short days. But she didn't pity herself. At that moment she didn't pity anyone.

Suddenly she remembered the fortune teller who had told her she'd marry the man she met on the tenth of October, 1984. Why hadn't he said how long they would be married for? Or when they would divorce?

She lay slumped in front of the mirror. She was bored, exhausted. Her eye caught sight of a piece of paper covered in writing. She took it and read:

24 Wedding Anniversaries

Year One, Paper: First joined, the bond thin as paper.

Year Two, Poplar: Wavers like the leaves of a poplar tree.

Year Three, Leather: The beginning of resilience.

Year Four, Silk: Tightly entangled.

Year Five, Wood: Hardened.

Year Six, Iron: Feelings firm as iron.

Year Seven, Copper: More durable than iron, less likely to rust.

Year Eight, Ceramic: Solid and beautiful as ceramic.

Year Nine, Willow: Can withstand rain and wind without breaking.

Year Ten, Tin: Pliable, unlikely to break when dropped.

Year Eleven, Steel: Does not rust, stronger than copper and iron.

Year Twelve, Chain: Tightly linked.

Year Thirteen, Lace: Not just strong, but beautiful.

Year Fourteen, Ivory: Becomes more beautiful and radiant with age.

Year Fifteen, Crystal: Lustrous, bright and dazzling.

Year Twenty, Enamel: Glossy and flawless, but don't drop it.

Year Twenty-five, Silver: Of permanent value, the first major wedding anniversary.

Year Thirty, Pearl: Round, precious, attracts admiration.

Year Thirty-five, Jade: Bright red, precious, especially eye-catching.

Year Forty, Ruby: Rare and precious.

Year Forty-five, Sapphire: Rarer and more precious than ruby.

Year Fifty, Gold: The second major anniversary, often with the whole family, including grandchildren, joining in celebration. Much more significant than Silver.

Year Sixty, Diamond: One of life's rarest, most precious occasions; a couple's grandest celebration.

She stared at it blankly.

1984 to 1999, fifteen years. A lustrous, bright and dazzling crystal anniversary! The name was lovely, but surely glass would have been a better name? So easy to break.

Where had this piece of paper come from?

She turned it over and found more writing on the back. *Look in the mirror tonight between the hours of 1 and 3 am, and you will find the answer.*

She dropped the paper and looked all around her, sweating from fright.

12

AT TEN THIRTY that night, her son came home.

He entered with head hung, glasses at an angle, bag slung across his back. He seemed aware that he had been in the wrong.

She acted as if nothing had happened. "Food's on the stove," she said quietly, "take a wash once you're done."

He grunted in reply and went to eat. He ate and ate. She stood to one side watching him, as she'd done now for many years. She was used to it, liked watching her husband and son eat. When they ate they savoured the taste of her food, but for some reason when she ate it was like chewing on a candle.

She made her son's bed and then fetched her marriage certificate from a small cupboard; she needed it to prepare the divorce. First she had to prepare all the documents, that way Wang Lian couldn't make any excuses. Once she made up her mind to do something, not even a band of oxen could pull her off course.

Before long her son was asleep and snoring sweetly. She sat on the edge of the bed and watched him, surprised that this little boy had grown up so quickly. Thin whiskers already lined his upper lip. He had his own fate, his own tomorrow, one that the people in his life couldn't change. Not long ago he'd been kicking his little legs, making it hard for her to put his socks on. She still had those little pocket-sized blue socks in a drawer somewhere, but now they'd only cover one of his toes.

Tears poured down her cheeks.

She wasn't aware of time passing, but all of a sudden she looked up at the clock; it was two in the morning. The time had arrived. She rushed into her room and grabbed the mirror.

There was nothing in it apart from tears and a puffy face.

Just as she was about to put it down again, she made a surprising discovery: in the mirror, she glimpsed their marriage certificate. Their shared happiness seemed to be a thing of the past. Had they just been pretending?

Yes, happiness is this fragile. Fragile like glass, breaks as soon as you touch it. No wonder they call it a crystal anniversary.

She recalled what Shang had said to her on the pier in Wan Chai. "Ten years, ten of the best years of my life, all for a resident's permit. What was the point? By the time I got a Hong Kong resident's permit the island had already been returned to the mainland.

What was the point?”

Shang was a changed woman. When Tianyi saw her now, the second sentence out of her mouth was always how busy she was. Sometimes Tianyi came close to saying, “Sorry, I didn’t mean to hold you up, don’t get too high and mighty.” But she swallowed these words, let them sink deep into her belly.

The three girls had known each other since they were small. Found boyfriends, got married, divorced, one after the other. God gave them life, gave them time—but for this?

Nothing strange about that. Against the background of infinity, everyone is tiny, helpless, drifting, changing, insane, in pain, stressed, depressed, abnormal, without choices, without alternatives, undecided, helpless, self-betraying, self-betrayed, able to do evil. She was all of these things; so were her sisters, Shang, Wang Lian. Even Huazheng. She pondered. She looked at this woman in the mirror, scarred by life’s tortures, who was now being given a new lease of life, from whose red, puffy eyes rays of light now shone. The light was getting stronger, illuminating the whole room, lustrous, glittering, like a huge piece of uncut, unpolished crystal piercing the night sky.

Translated by Anna Holmwood

The One Who Picks Flowers

Liu Qingbang

AROUND THIS PLACE, to praise a girl's beauty, one doesn't need a superlative—one merely says *ah, there's the one who picks flowers*. “The one who picks flowers” being local idiom, directed at the fairer sex; not, mind you, referring to “flowerpickers” who embroider floral patterns, but used especially to describe a girl of outstanding looks. The phrase brings instant clarity to the minds of those who hear it; one sees, in a flash, Spring's first apricot blossom, or a lamp lit against the night sky. No one within earshot can resist rubbing his eyes and giving the object of such praise a look-over.

In her village, Song Tian'er was the one who picked flowers, and when she came to the mine, she was also the one who picked flowers.

Song Tian'er worked in the canteen for mine workers, and this is what passed between her hands every day: steamed buns, rice, noodles, tofu, cabbage and fried pork slices. The work of this particular flower-picker had little to do with flowers. What about cauliflowers? you might ask. Bah—stir-fried, they look nothing like flowers. We have a phrase for that sort of hair-splitting, by the way—“poling it.” While Song Tian'er busied herself handling food, the men belowground carried heavy objects on poles. As they hefted their poles hither and thither, they all imagined they were holding the same thing: the lithe, slim body of Song Tian'er. If they'd never set their eyes on Song Tian'er they'd probably have been better off. Carrying such weight on a pole is wont to cause hunger. The men working in the mines weren't just stomach-hungry; they were eye-hungry. It's often said that black is the color of colors, made up as it is of all the rest combined. But in the darkness lit by the mining lamps, black was just black. Forget about flowers, one couldn't even see the green of a leaf. It's terrible when a stomach goes empty, but it's unbearable when eyes are starved, when there is a gnawing emptiness between upper and lower lids. These miners couldn't wait to clock out and rush to the canteen, where they could first feed their eyes, and then their stomachs.

When at long last the day was over, the miners, as if gripped by some *idée fixe*, would fall silent and rush with big strides towards the exit. Once out of the mineshaft, they would hand over their gear, go to the locker room, wash up hurriedly, put on clean sets of clothes, then troop one after the other into the canteen. In the dining hall, the two televisions would be tuned to a comedy, and a full-figured cleaning lady would already be

at work. But no one paid heed to either; their eyes would go immediately to the window at the front of the line, and, object of desire sighted, shine. The object was of course none other than Song Tian'er. The only person at the food counter was Song Tian'er, and at the counter she stayed all day long. The canteen's kitchen and food counter were separate from the dining area, which did not affect the diners' view of Song Tian'er, because what separated them was not brick or wood but glass, mercifully transparent. If at any one moment too many customers came, they would have to line up to see Song Tian'er.

In the past, when Song Tian'er's sister-in-law Sun Baiyu had stood behind the counter, the miners would get restless, nervous about the food running out; some would fuss about portions being diluted, or about how slowly the food was being served. Some even claimed that a takeaway bought from the counter had turned into "a big lump of fat" when they reached home. But now that the person at the counter was not Sun Baiyu but Song Tian'er, order reigned. All the diners' heads were raised like penguins', and all the diners kept quiet, like penguins too. Nobody was in a hurry.

As the flower-picker of the entire mine, Song Tian'er was distinguished by her height. Someone would say she should be a volleyball player; at this she would smile. Another would suggest: a model! At this she would also smile. A third would say: what do you need to be so tall for, little girl? She would smile again, saying she didn't know. Because she was taller than the average male, even the last person in line could see her. Song Tian'er kept her hair unpermed and undyed—*au naturel*—and tied back tightly with a rubber band, revealing a shiny forehead. She didn't pencil her brows, use eyeliner, or touch lipstick to mouth. But her brows were black as could be and her teeth sparkling white; her cheeks and lips were naturally red. The miners couldn't see what Song Tian'er wore; a sort of apron that served as a workplace uniform covered up her clothes. It had long sleeves, finely checkered in pomegranate red. The way the apron was reflected in the glass made it seem like the glass itself was bursting with fresh red pomegranate juice, so irresistible one couldn't help but drool. As the saying goes, the saddle is to the horse as the clothes are to the man, and in the eyes of these coal miners, nothing suited Song Tian'er more than the apron she wore; nothing could better complement her beauty. They would linger in line as long as possible, feasting their eyes on Song Tian'er. Sometimes one would reach the window and then couldn't for the life of him recall what he'd wanted to order. Thinking only of his eyes, he'd forget his duty to his stomach. When Song Tian'er would ask him what he wanted, he'd stutter out a string of random noodle dishes. Rather than picking for him, she'd wait until he had emerged from his daze and articulated his request, then sell him his food. Some people were only cut out for looking at Song Tian'er from behind other people's backs; close up, they would shrink, unable to raise their eyes, fussing with their hair, blushing like mad. Song Tian'er knew about men who go tongue-tied in front of girls, and instead of laughing or commenting she would wait patiently for

them to speak, then carefully serve them their orders. There were the opposite kind too, who spoke loudly and brashly, and divided their meals into two shifts. This kind of diner would line up first for a beer and appetizer, then get in line a second time for the main course. In front of Song Tian'er, he might call himself "Big Brother," or refer to her as "Little Sis." After such a stunt, no matter how Song Tian'er reacted, he would sit down with his food, beside himself with glee. But regardless how each diner performed in front of Song Tian'er, nobody harassed her. This was different from when Sun Baiyu had stood behind the window, when some had clowned around, made rude gestures with hands and legs, cracked crude jokes without a shred of decorum. Something about the new girl, though, made them hold back.

All this did not go unnoticed by Sun Baiyu, and she couldn't help feeling a bit proud of herself. But like a dumpling whose skin tightly wraps the dollop of meat even as its fragrant oil seeps out, she did not let anyone know what she felt. She ran the canteen with her husband Song Jin'er, surrendering up an annual rent to the mine, and keeping what profits she could. The canteen was leased in Song Jin'er's name, but Sun Baiyu actually ran the business. Song Jin'er was an honest man, given to honest work; he had nimble hands but was not so quick when it came to the mouth. In the time he took to make ten steamed buns he might not utter a single word. But to run a canteen, you not only have to make steamed buns, you have to know how to talk. This was where Sun Baiyu came in—when someone had to say something. They didn't have many employees; apart from Song Tian'er who'd just joined, there was the spatula-wielding chef and the cleaning lady (whom Sun Baiyu had recruited with an ad) responsible for scrubbing bowls, washing dishes, wiping tables and sweeping floors. Sun Baiyu had very early on broached the idea of getting Song Tian'er to help out at the canteen, saying that Tian'er, all grown up now, could probably do with prettier clothes—clothes that she would be able to buy if she earned her own money. Song Tian'er was Song Jin'er's sister, so Sun Baiyu had to get his agreement first if Song Tian'er were to work at the canteen. But about this Song Jin'er refused to say a word, either to agree or disagree. After a period of incessant nagging, Song Jin'er put his foot down and said he did not want Song Tian'er to report to the canteen. Song Jin'er's mother had died from an illness just two years before, and now it was just their father and Song Tian'er at home. The implication being: Song Tian'er had to stay home to prepare meals for their father, and if Song Tian'er went outside to work, who would cook for him? Sun Baiyu pooh-poohed the idea: oh my, do you mean that Song Tian'er must never leave home for the rest of her life? Would she never marry? If she really were to leave, would their father stop eating? Song Jin'er did not respond.

Then one day Sun Baiyu sprained her ankle, and the doctor at the hospital cast it in plaster. The ankle thickened overnight, whiter than white jade. A crutch was needed to sit, stand, and of course to move around. Sun Baiyu knitted her brows, sucked in her

breath, and brandished her plastered ankle to Song Jin'er, scolding him for being heartless. In such circumstances, Song Jin'er had no choice but to let Song Tian'er report to the canteen. Although it was now inconvenient for Sun Baiyu to move her legs, her eyes and her tongue remained as lively as ever. Armed with a crutch, she sat on a square stool behind the door, where she could survey everything going on in the canteen. Wielding the crutch like a baton, she continued to orchestrate the activities of those around her. Sun Baiyu also saw clearly the effect that Song Tian'er had on business: after Song Tian'er reported to work, the number of customers had grown with each passing day, and the canteen now attracted three times the number of diners as before. Sichuanese miners were picky about food; in the past they'd found fault with the meals at the canteen and opted instead to prepare their own tastier dinners. The average miner did not come to the canteen for sustenance. But that was then. Now they bought meal tickets and filed into the dining hall. Also, there were mahjong players from the mahjong halls, who in the past would simply have found a stall next door and made do with any grub. Now they too showed up at the canteen for food, abandoning nearby grazing grounds in favor of more distant pastures. From the canteen's soaring sales, it was clear that business was roaring. It didn't matter that Sun Baiyu's ankle had thickened, but as profit margins widened, so too did her waistline.

Sun Baiyu was well aware that this was due to Song Tian'er. The truth was she had expected everyone to fall for the Song Tian'er brand—that was why she had plotted to get her on board to begin with. Nowadays, be it in food or clothes, branding was all that mattered. In a product's brand lay the crux of its competitiveness! Song Tian'er, being the picker of flowers, lent the canteen her brand by dint of showing up every day. No wonder business was so good. In addition to feeling proud of herself, Song Baiyu saw the humor in the situation. After all, the steamed buns that moved across the counter were the same steamed buns as before, the cabbage the same cabbage as before. All Song Tian'er did was serve food. No extra ingredient had gone into the meals. How unthinkable, the droves of people coming in just for her! *You came here to eat food, didn't you, not to eat a person!* she felt like saying to all of them. *What does the attractiveness of the foodseller have to do with the food?* At the end of the day, though, men must have their cheap thrills. What full-blooded man can resist the sight of a pretty girl? It must be remembered that Sun Baiyu had herself capitalized on this irrational urge that caused men to part with money. Indeed, cheap thrills could be used to another's advantage!

As the saying goes, a pretty flower attracts butterflies, a big tree invites wind. As the one who picked flowers, Song Tian'er was in a dangerous position, and the mine workers worried that she would not last long. Belowground, they pooled bets; some said she would be at the canteen for at most half a year, some said three months. As for where Song Tian'er would go, this was harder to say. Everyone was in agreement about one

thing, though: best keep their boss, Chairman Xiong, away from her. Chairman Xiong had a reputation for plucking flowers. If Chairman Xiong chanced to see Song Tian'er, no way could she carry on in the canteen. The mine was a private mine, and Xiong was not operations manager, but C.E.O. Its operations manager, deputy operations manager, chief engineer, etc. had all been poached from a government mine. In this capitalist age, Chairman Xiong believed, you could poach anyone if you had enough capital. He didn't care much about the details of the mine's day-to-day operations, was more interested in converting black coal into red cash. How much he was actually worth, no one could tell. It was said that apart from operating the mine, Chairman Xiong used the mine money to invest in real estate. To an investor like Chairman Xiong, owning a couple houses was nothing. Rumor had it he owned property not only in the city and the provincial capital, but in Beijing too. Upon arriving in any of these places, Chairman Xiong required no five-star hotel; he could just check into any of his own homes. At the mine too, Chairman Xiong had his own apartment that doubled as an office—though he was seldom at the mine, appearing only on special occasions like the first and fifteenth of the Lunar New Year, when firecrackers were set off and paper offerings burnt to appease the mine gods. He had never eaten at the canteen, let alone stay the night, he just did what he came to do and then left. Most of the miners had never seen Chairman Xiong in person, just sighted from afar his imported SUV. It was said that Chairman Xiong's car alone cost more than a million yuan.

One day, though, several city council members showed up at the mine for a safety inspection. Chairman Xiong happened to be at the mine too. Nowadays, it was no longer necessary for safety inspectors to call ahead, and Chairman Xiong had no idea that an inspection would take place that day. If he had known, he would have steered clear. But as the city mayor had come in person to visit the mine, it didn't behoove him to sneak off without saying hi. He could presumably hide in his office, but with his car stationed in the parking lot outside—he couldn't, after all, take his car into the office—any visitor could tell he was in.

Capital may be bull-headed, but it still has to shake hands with Authority, in order to give Authority face. If Capital, inexperienced in the ways of the world, omits this vital step, then Authority, provoked, might cuff Capital's ear—and Capital would still be the losing party. That's how Chairman Xiong came to share a meal with the city mayor and his safety inspectors. In one corner of the canteen a small space had been partitioned off with a wooden board, and this makeshift private room was where the higher-ups dined. Song Tian'er entered to bring food, and it was then that Chairman Xiong first set eyes on Song Tian'er. Having traveled far and wide—what delicacies hadn't he eaten?—he did not care for canteen fare. It behooved someone of Chairman Xiong's position to treat the waitstaff as perfectly invisible, so he did. Only after Song Tian'er had left the room and a

safety inspector, eyes alight, remarked, “Even the waitress here has high heat-generating capacity!” did Chairman Xiong become aware of Song Tian’er, though his initial reaction was of doubt. *Really?* he thought. *Or was the inspector just brown-nosing?* When she entered the room with another dish, Chairman Xiong saw her clearly for the first time. A conversation ensued. “You must be new, aren’t you? I haven’t seen you around before.” Song Tian’er nodded, yes she was new. Chairman Xiong looked her up and down, said, “How tall are you? One meter point what?” Song Tian’er said, “Don’t know, never measured.” Chairman Xiong said, “You’re young, you should be in school.” Someone interrupted: “Yes, let Chairman Xiong send you to university, get yourself a Ph.D., then come back!” Song Tian’er said, “I don’t want to go to school.” The person who interrupted asked, “Why?” Song Tian’er said, “No reason. I just don’t feel like it.” Everyone laughed. Song Tian’er set down the plate and turned to leave, but Chairman Xiong hadn’t finished yet. He asked Song Tian’er what her name was. Song Tian’er said her name. Chairman Xiong appeared to think for a while, then said, “I know! Song Jin’er is your brother, you’re Song Jin’er’s sister. I can’t believe you and that mute dimwit are related.” Indignant, Song Tian’er replied, “My brother’s not a dimwit. He’s just not good with words.”

Director Chai from the office spoke. “Girl, where are your manners? Do you know who you’re talking to?” Song Tian’er said, “No.” Director Chai said, “Well, I’ll tell you. This man is our boss, everybody’s boss. A strand of hair from his body would be thicker than your waist. Smile when you speak to him, and give him your best service.” Chairman Xiong said, “No, no, the city mayor is the one we’re all here to serve. All right, just bring us more food, bring the best you have to offer.”

Song Tian’er hadn’t yet emerged from the private room when a ruckus broke out at the counter outside. Someone was demanding a refund, insisting that the vegetables he had just bought were too salty. Standing in for Song Tian’er was Sun Baiyu, hopping around on a crutch. “Out of the question,” she said. “You’ve already eaten from the plate.” The miner said he hadn’t eaten, just tasted a little of the soup. Sun Baiyu shot back, “If you’ve tasted it, your lips touched it, that’s as good as eating it. Our vegetables are cooked the same way day in and day out. Don’t make a fuss.” The miner said, “I don’t care about how the food is day in and day out, I just care about today. I’ve got high blood pressure, I can’t eat anything too salty. You can’t not give me a refund.” Sun Baiyu lowered her voice. “Our chairman is here today with the city mayor, would you *please* act more civilized?” The miner said, “So what if the chairman’s here. The chairman’s a human too.” The miners broke into laughter. Sun Baiyu said, “What did you say? I dare you to say it again!” The miner said, “I’m not scared of repeating what I just said. I’d say it a hundred times more if you wanted me to. I said the chairman is a human too, what’s wrong with that? If anyone else agrees, give a shout!”

Now Director Chai stepped out of the private room and looked around severely.

“What’s with the ruckus here?” Sun Baiyu filled him in. Director Chai shot a look at the miner with the plate of vegetables, then turned to Sun Baiyu: “Why not give him the refund? Give him ten times the money. That should settle it.” The miner knew that Director Chai was being sarcastic, and withdrew from the counter, carrying his plate. But instead of resuming his seat in the dining hall, he walked straight to the used plates depository, tipped the entire contents of his plate into the sink, then made for the exit. Feeling affronted, Director Chai commanded the miner to stay put and identify his name and team. The miner didn’t stay put, said nothing, left.

The afternoon of the next day, Sun Baiyu received a memo from Director Chai asking her to see him at his office. In the memo, Director Chai didn’t call her Baiyu; he called her by a nickname, Baigua—“white melon.” The moment White Melon showed up at Director Chai’s office with her crutch, Director Chai closed the door and drew the curtains. She smiled, saying, “I’ve got three legs now instead of two, I’m afraid I can’t provide any service.” Director Chai said, “Three legs? Better if you had four!” White Melon said, “You’re the one with four legs!” There was a bed in his office, and he helped White Melon to it, saying, “Today you don’t need to provide any service, let me be the one to service you. There’s a favor I’d like you to return me in the future.” Sun Baiyu asked, “What do you mean?” Director Chai said nothing, but his fingers began to pleasure Sun Baiyu. Pleasure before talk. Dying to know the answer, Sun Baiyu covered her melon and refused to let Director Chai continue, insisting he tell her first. Director Chai said, “Do I really need to spell it out? You’re an intelligent person. I’m sure you’ll figure it out.” Sun Baiyu said, “Do you mean Chairman Xiong has taken an interest in Song Tian’er?” Director Chai said, “You see? Didn’t I say you were intelligent? That’s why you’re my little baby.” Sun Baiyu said, “That Chairman Xiong, I can’t believe it. Plucking any flower that comes his way. When will enough be enough?” Director Chai said, “But he didn’t ask to pluck you, what are you scared of? Pickers of flowers are meant to be plucked, it’d be a waste if they weren’t!” Baiyu said, “Even if Chairman Xiong wanted to pluck me, I wouldn’t necessarily give in!” Saying this, she gave Director Chai’s pants a good tug. Director Chai in turn resumed giving her “melon” his complete attention, and praised it for being juicy. Afterward White Melon sighed. “When I got Song Tian’er to come to the mine to help out, I was afraid of just one thing—her being seen by Chairman Xiong. It’s true what they say about your deepest fears coming true! Now there’ll be hell to pay.” Director Chai said, “We’ve been seeing each other for so long, you think you can pull a fast one on me? You deliberately let Chairman Xiong see Song Tian’er, so he’d want to pluck her. If Chairman Xiong had acted like Song Tian’er was no different from the rest, you’d be complaining he had no taste!” Sun Baiyu said, “Bullshit! If you keep saying that, I’ll get rid of her immediately.” Director Chai smiled, saying, “Small matter. As soon as you kicked her out I’d send a car to bring her back. As long as Song Tian’er is on this planet

she won't escape from Chairman Xiong—you know that. But at that point you'd be out of the picture. Just think about it." White Melon fell silent.

That night, before getting in bed, Sun Baiyu asked her husband, "How much is one hundred thousand yuan?" Song Jin'er said, "Go to sleep." Sun Baiyu raised the stakes: "How much is five hundred thousand yuan?" Again Song Jin'er said, "Go to sleep." The miners at the coal mine divided their work into three shifts, but at the canteen there was only one shift. Song Jin'er and Sun Baiyu woke at five in the morning, only got to bed at one or two, past midnight. It was no wonder he kept yawning, he was so tired. Sun Baiyu said, "It's like you're a pig, all you know how to do is sleep! How about some interaction every now and then? What good is a hubby like you?" Song Jin'er blinked, asked Sun Baiyu to explain the nature of the interaction she had in mind. Sun Baiyu said, "Use your mouth to interact, I mean. When I ask a question, listen, then give me an answer." Song Jin'er said, "Okay." Sun Baiyu asked, "How much is one hundred thousand yuan?" Song Jin'er said, "One hundred thousand yuan." Sun Baiyu asked, "When will we ever earn that much?" Song Jin'er said, "Not in our lifetime." Sun Baiyu nodded—it was the right answer. She proceeded, "Some people can earn one hundred thousand yuan in two years." "Who?" asked Song Jin'er. Sun Baiyu said: "Your sister Song Tian'er." Song Jin'er pooh-poohed the idea, saying she must have gone mad lusting for money. It was at this point that Sun Baiyu brought up Director Chai's suggestion. Chairman Xiong had recently bought a property in the provincial capital, a lakeside bungalow. This bungalow was uninhabited. Chairman Xiong wanted to hire a house-sitter for the bungalow, and was willing to pay a fee of five hundred thousand yuan a year, which would make it one million for two years. This one million would be on top of living expenses (including upkeep of pets and flowers) incurred within the two years that Chairman Xiong paid for Song Tian'er. If, after two years, Song Tian'er wanted to continue house-sitting for Chairman Xiong, great. If not, Chairman Xiong would find someone else. Hearing Sun Baiyu's words, Song Jin'er did not seem the least shocked. He shut his eyes, shook off his shoes, crawled into bed. Sun Baiyu patted his cheek, said, "What's the matter?" Song Jin'er said, "Nothing's the matter. I told you I didn't want Song Tian'er working at the canteen, but you were adamant, so I let you have your way. Now look at this mess!" Sun Baiyu said, "What mess? I think this is a good thing, a very good thing. I should congratulate you for having such a flower-picker for a sister." Song Jin'er said, "Sun Baiyu, don't you take me for a fool." In his heart, he knew well what looking after a bungalow entailed—being Chairman Xiong's kept woman! Song Jin'er had heard of Xiong's womanizing ways from others; it was said that once he took interest in a girl, he would resort to money to make her his own. The properties he bought were abodes for the women he kept. He seemed to want to live like an Emperor, taking turns with different women in different houses. Some even bore him children. Never mind that Chairman Xiong had short legs, a big belly, a

coarse neck, that he was a dwarf whose head wouldn't come level with Song Tian'er's shoulder. Never mind that Chairman Xiong was thirty years Song Tian'er's senior, older than her father. Chairman Xiong had a supreme belief in the power of money, that as long as you had money, there was no one you couldn't buy, and no one who wouldn't accept you for who you were. But—was a human being with money no longer a human being? Could he do anything his heart desired, to the point of committing evil? The thought flashed in Song Jin'er's mind that, were he to stand in the Chairman's way, not only would he weather Sun Baiyu's incessant nagging, his lease for the canteen might not be renewed. It was true, Song Jin'er had to admit, one million yuan was a lot of money, a sum that his and Sun Baiyu's lifelong slogging could never yield. But, on the other hand, some things can't be measured by money, or bought with money. Now that Mother had passed, and Little Sis worked with him, he ought to be her protector. If he let her go down that road, how could he face her? Sun Baiyu wanted an answer before Song Jin'er went to sleep; Song Jin'er, provoked, blew his top and cried, "You made your own bed, now sleep in it! If you want Song Tian'er to agree to Chairman Xiong's proposition, talk to her yourself!"

Sun Baiyu bought Song Tian'er a new blouse and a new scarf. Only after getting her to change into them did Sun Baiyu tell her about Chairman Xiong's proposition. She didn't mention the exact sum of money involved, afraid that Song Tian'er would be shocked. Song Tian'er asked, "Who else will be looking after the house with me?" Sun Baiyu said, "Just you, probably." Song Tian'er said, "It's not like I know kungfu, what if a burglar breaks in?" Sun Baiyu said, "You don't need to fret about that. If the boss chose you, he must have his reasons. He's a man of taste, whoever he chooses will be the one Lady Fortune smiles upon." Song Tian'er cried, "I won't go!" "Why?" asked Sun Baiyu. Song Tian'er said, "He's so ugly." Sun Baiyu acted surprised, shook her head in amazement. "Silly little sister, you should never say that out loud. What good are looks in a man? Your boss is always good-looking, whoever has money has looks. If you ask me, Chairman Xiong is the handsomest man in the world! You don't know the market, so you can't see his value. I've heard the watch on his hand is worth two hundred thousand yuan!" Hearing her sister-in-law proclaim Chairman Xiong the handsomest man in the world, Song Tian'er couldn't help but laugh. "Why don't *you* go and look after his house then?" Sun Baiyu said, "I'd like to of course, but it'll never be my turn. You're the one who picks the flowers, not me." Song Tian'er protested. "No, I'm not the one who picks flowers, you're the one who picks flowers!" Sun Baiyu said, "Don't make fun of me! How can I be the one who picks flowers? I'm not even the one who picks melons!" Song Tian'er had only heard the phrase "the one who picks flowers," not "the one who picks melons." She saw the likeness between her sister-in-law's roly-poly figure and a melon, and almost burst into laughter, covered her mouth with her hand. What an obstinate girl,

thought Sun Baiyu. Finally she brought her mouth close to Song Tian'er's ear and divulged the sum at stake. Hearing the figure, Song Tian'er was speechless. She stared at her sister-in-law. Sun Baiyu said, "Now you see how Fortune smiles on you? The lucky can be lazy, the unlucky stay busy. Once you have your riches, both your brother and I, not to mention your nephew and niece—we all stand to gain a little. Just think about it. If your nephew ever needed money to build a house, he'd have someone to borrow it from." Song Tian'er stopped her sister-in-law, said she understood. Sun Baiyu said, "Good girl. You wised up fast. Much better than your brother. If you need anything, let me know, I'll buy it for you." Song Tian'er said, "I don't need anything, and I won't look after Chairman Xiong's house. I already have a boyfriend, his name is Guo Shulin. He came over just a few days ago, both of you've seen him."

Guo Shulin was Song Tian'er's classmate in secondary school. After graduating, he had entered a polytechnic to specialize in coal mining. Song Tian'er hadn't continued her studies. Sun Baiyu had heard that the two of them had gotten along famously in school, so much so that everyone called each by the other's name. Sun Baiyu once asked Song Tian'er about this; Song Tian'er only blushed. The last time Guo Shulin came to the mine to look for Song Tian'er, Sun Baiyu had appraised the boy. Apart from being a bit thin, his looks were impeccable. But Guo Shulin's family was poor, without the means to build a home. Others went from grass huts to brick houses, then from brick houses to single-storeyed houses, then from single-storeyed houses to many-storeyed bungalows, having climbed several rungs up the hierarchy. Guo Shulin's family, on the other hand, seemed to have stagnated at the brick house stage. Guo Shulin wore an old tracksuit; he didn't own a single new shirt. Most embarrassing were the running shoes he sported, one of which had a gaping hole in the upper heel. How could this pauper be a match for Song Tian'er, the picker of flowers?

Sun Baiyu nagged Song Tian'er. The more Song Tian'er resisted, the more she nagged. Sun Baiyu said, "Isn't life just spending money? With the security of one million yuan, you'll never have to lose face again, or lack for anything for the rest of your life! Your brother and I, we keep busy from morning till night—but even if we work till old age we'll never be able to scrap together a million. Our rice bowl rests at other people's feet, and if one day they aren't happy with us, they might kick it away. Just think, if you don't accept Chairman Xiong's proposition, he wouldn't let us off the hook—not to mention his underlings. We'd probably lose the lease on the canteen. If that happened, how would your brother and I earn our living? How would we get by? Even if you don't think for your future, spare a thought for ours! Dear sister, your brother and I are begging you!" Song Tian'er would not be swayed. "Even if the heavens fell," she said, "I still won't look after Chairman Xiong's house. If you won't let me sell food at the canteen, I'll leave tomorrow." Hearing this, Sun Baiyu cursed Song Tian'er silently.

Director Chai asked Sun Baiyu when Song Tian'er could move into Chairman Xiong's house. Chairman Xiong, he said, had already opened for Song Tian'er a hundred thousand yuan bank account for shopping; before she moved in, Song Tian'er might buy some clothes and accessories to doll herself up. When Song Tian'er had fixed a date, Director Chai added that Chairman Xiong would accompany Song Tian'er to the bungalow and personally go over the details of the house-sitting with her. Sun Baiyu lied to Director Chai, saying that Song Tian'er was still thinking about it. Director Chai said, "What's there to think about? The more you think about a good thing, the more likely that good thing will slip away... if you wait too long, the flowers are going to fade!" Sun Baiyu sighed. "If only I were twenty years younger, I wouldn't mind looking after his house for the rest of my life!" Director Chai said, "This is not a matter of being young or old. It's some people's fate to be a flower, others a melon. If you were born thirty years later, you'd still be a melon!" Sun Baiyu shot back, "All you do is cry 'melon', don't you! Don't call other people melons when they're not."

Sun Baiyu decided to turn up the pressure on Song Jin'er, let him convince his own sister. She did this by going on strike in bed, crossing her legs tightly and pursing her lips. Attacking the soft spot via the hard part—that was Sun Baiyu's strategy. And what a good strategy it proved. Song Jin'er spent all day long bottled up in the canteen, and it was only in bed, with Sun Baiyu, that his hands and legs were free to express themselves. From Sun Baiyu's body, at least, he got a little joy. Now that Sun Baiyu was on strike, his joy was confiscated. Song Jin'er well understood the reason for Sun Baiyu's strike, and for the first two days gritted his teeth and bore it, saying, "Suit yourself. You're starving yourself too." Sun Baiyu unclenched her mouth, said, "Not me!" Song Jin'er said, "Who feeds you then?" Sun Baiyu said, "None of your business." Song Jin'er asked, "Is it Director Chai? Ever since I first set eyes on that guy, I knew he couldn't be up to anything good. Has he fed you before?" Sun Baiyu said, "None of your business, I already told you. A husband has no say over what his wife does out of his sight!" On the fourth day, Song Jin'er could take it no longer and plotted to take Sun Baiyu by force. Sun Baiyu saw what Song Jin'er was up to, said, "A melon that's plucked before its ready won't be sweet! If you're going to do it the rough way, I'll shout your sister's name and let her know." Now at the end of his tether, Song Jin'er swallowed his pride and agreed to do what Sun Baiyu wanted. But Sun Baiyu still kept her door closed tightly against him, saying "Try me when you've convinced Song Tian'er. I'll give you a good time then."

Song Jin'er found Song Tian'er and sat her down for a talk. Before Song Jin'er could begin, Song Tian'er said, "Brother, I know what you're about to say. Save it. Go back home, to our mother's grave, tell it to her. See if you can bring yourself to open your mouth."

Peregrine

An English Companion to *Chutzpah* Magazine

Editors: Ou Ning, Austin Woerner

Published by *Chutzpah* Magazine

In association with Paper Republic

Issue 6, February 2012