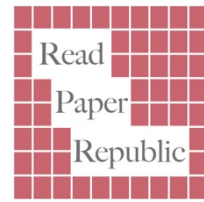


That Damned Thing She Said

《一句该死的话》

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Why had she said that? Xiao Xiangxiang was secretly annoyed with herself. Of course, Bun-face must have got the idea she was trying to seduce him.

The lift rose upwards, the indicator light winking at her. It seemed to be reading her thoughts. Xiangxiang looked down, her back tensed. Bun-face had his hand there, holding her lightly. There was a very masculine smell in the lift. Her toes gripped the floor through her shoes.

She had been surprised that Bun-face was still working the train after all these years. She remembered him very well. There must have been a high turnover of staff so she didn't expect to know anyone and was delighted to recognize him. It seemed quite natural. There was something, though, that she couldn't quite put a finger on; she felt very cagy about telling him about herself.

When she first met him, she had just graduated. A train trip was fun then. She did it twice a month, and it ate up all her month's salary. She didn't mind. Her parents worked on the trains so there was always someone she knew. If she could get away without buying a ticket, get a free ride, she did. It was one of those times that she met Bun-face. He was a transport policeman.

He started chatting her up. 'Who gave you that flower then?' he asked, looking at the flower in her hand. She had been embarrassed, because it was a plastic one. Couldn't he guess? 'Are you classmates?' he asked. 'Yes.' 'You're always going to see him, right? Why don't you get him to come and see you?' Xiangxiang was silent. She was an only child, just a girl. Her father made no secret of the fact that he had wanted a boy. 'Girls! A waste of space,' he used to grumble. 'They're gone in a puff of smoke with the wedding firecrackers, taking your money with them.' Xiangxiang always felt she was a source of conflict in her parents' marriage. She was living proof of her mother's failure to produce a son. When she got to university, she felt free at last, free to choose her own boyfriend. The fact that he was a long way off didn't bother her. She spent all her time working out how to see him. 'What's a girl like you doing so far from home?' she remembered Bun-face asking her one day when they were chatting in the restaurant car. 'I like going away,' she said, and thought that it was actually true – to get away, that was what she wanted. She didn't want to be married off, she wanted to choose a husband for herself, preferably someone at the ends of the earth.

Bun-face had smiled. It made his face light up and she realized he was quite young, hardly older than her at all. It was his coarse skin, his uniform and his stern expression that had made her think he was much older. He sat back and relaxed, stuck one leg out in front of him, and undid his belt. He put his gun on the table and asked: 'Have you ever fired a gun?'

'My dad had an airgun. When we did military training, I didn't need any lessons,' Xiangxiang had said, with a touch of pride. It was true. Her father used to shoot birds, and taught her as a child, so she knew all about guns. She'd been spoilt that way. No other girls in the compound where she lived got to play with guns. Guns were boys' toys. Her dad was treating her like a boy, letting her play with them.

'And you can shoot with your glasses on?' asked Bun-face casually, looking sceptical. 'I don't need glasses when I'm shooting. I scored a bull's-eye during target practice, and the trainer couldn't believe his eyes.' That was true. Her classmates had never forgotten it.

Bun-face pushed the gun over to her. She reached out and picked it up. What a weight, much heavier than she expected. When you saw pistols in films, they looked so light and easy to handle. It must take strength to aim properly. 'You're not holding it steady,' said Bun-face, smugly. 'It's not easy. I haven't fired it once in all these years.'

'Really? How boring!' Xiangxiang burst out, without thinking. She took the gun in both hands and made as if to take aim at something outside the window. Bun-face went pale. 'Don't do that!' he exclaimed, jumping to his feet and grabbing the gun back. 'You're reckless, aren't you? You don't have to fire a gun just because you've got it!' Xiangxiang felt deflated. How dull to have a gun and not shoot. Guns should be fired. She was disappointed too. She hadn't even had time to take aim properly. And all because it was a real gun? 'And I suppose if it was a fake, you'd let anyone aim it?' she grumbled.

'Hey, it's for looking at, OK?' Bun-face said, annoyed.

Xiangxiang looked at him sidelong. 'OK, if you don't want me to touch it, I won't.' So why did you show it to me? She thought to herself.

She was grateful to him, all the same, because in the end he never checked her ticket. It was as if he knew she hadn't bought one. Xiangxiang sometimes wondered to herself what it would have been like to fire that gun, did it make a lot of noise, could you take aim with one hand? Probably not. You'd have to hold it in both hands. Did it get hot when you fired it? How many shots could you fire at one go? She did not know if the gun had been loaded. If not, it must be a lot heavier with bullets. Her imagination ran riot, and every time she saw Bun-face, she thought about his gun.

Three years later, she left home for good. She was excited about that. She got herself a job in her boyfriend's city and began married life. She had made a permanent break with the past and would never go back. She certainly never imagined that, just a few years later, she would be back on this train, making repeated trips home.

It was weird to meet someone she had known back then, as if a dozen years had never existed. The trains were the same, even if the people had changed, and Xiangxiang wondered why she hadn't taken a plane instead. Maybe it was the slow pace of the train she liked, the way she could while away the time, letting it carry her along. She didn't need to make decisions, the train could do all that. It occurred to her that all those years she had been away had been like a train ride too. That train was slowing down but it hadn't stopped yet; she decided, on an impulse, to take a trip home.

When she was at school the teacher asked them what they wanted to do in life. She had surprised everyone, probably herself too, by announcing she wanted her life to have some ups and downs. That was a great way to live, she reckoned. You had something to look back on when you got old. But now, seeing Bun-face again, Xiangxiang couldn't help taking sidelong glances at her reflection in the window. Too much excitement in life made you look old. What a terrible thought.

There was no fairness in the way God treated men and women. Look at Bun-face: he'd always been swarthy and old-looking. And he was still the same. He hadn't changed a bit. But the exciting times she'd lived through showed all over her face, she thought. She didn't normally feel like this. But a woman had to care about how she aged, because men did.

Nothing so complicated was going through Bun-face's mind. Instead, his eyes lit up and he said: 'You haven't changed a bit! It must be all of ten years!' He shook her hand enthusiastically, and sat down to chat.

Maybe that was what started it all. Xiangxiang beamed back, and told him what she had been doing. Bun-face bent his head and listened. Suddenly, without looking up, he challenged her: 'How come your husband never shows his face?' He made it sound as if she was a child he'd caught out telling lies. She stiffened.

'We... we haven't really been together for two years.' What a euphemistic way of putting it, as if this was just a normal thing to say. But she hadn't meant to say it at all.

'Huh?' Bun-face raised his eyebrows slightly. He looked disbelieving, then nonplussed, then suspicious, and finally she saw a gleam in his eyes, quickly suppressed. It was at that moment that Xiangxiang's smile froze and she felt as if she had a stone stuck in her throat.

'Two years,' she repeated. She stopped, then started again. 'For two years, he hasn't touched me.' As the words slipped out, her eyes filled with tears.

Everything changed after that. Xiangxiang tried to get a grip on herself but it didn't work, it all came spilling out. It was as if she was telling someone else's story: about not wanting children, always going back home, always on his train, what a coincidence was that? And so on. When all was said and done, it didn't seem to matter whether she said these things or not, she really had no idea if Bun-face was taking it in. He turned towards her and rested his right hand for an instant on her neck, then took out a cigarette and lit it. 'Look at that rascal sneaking into the Forbidden City without paying!' he broke in, as if the big TV screen in front of them had suddenly caught his attention. The TV had been on all the time, but the sound seemed to have faded out until she could hardly hear it. As soon as he said the words, she realized that the TV was still there, and still on.

Embarrassment washed over her, even though Bun-face showed no emotion. Her heart sank and she was furious with herself for telling him so much.

'OK, when we get there, I'm inviting you for dinner,' Bun-face said, getting to his feet, and walked off without waiting for her to answer. Sure enough, she hadn't been back home long before Bun-face phoned her. There was a complicity between them, she felt, since she had told him. It was unspoken, of course. You didn't talk openly about stuff like that. It wasn't as if men hadn't been after her before now, but she'd put most of them off. Was she really so desperate that she was going to fall for it this

time? He was attracted to her, she knew that from the intense way he looked at her. She felt butterflies fluttering inside her, and it was as if their wings made dust particles dance in the air.

They finished their meal in the restaurant. She didn't make a move and Bun-face took charge of paying. This was the first time in years that she had not paid the bill herself. She had always made a point of insisting, as if to show she was independent, and equal. She didn't feel that any more. All the same, she told herself, if Bun-face hadn't made a move, in other words if he'd waited for her to pay, that would have been all right too. It was as random as betting.

Bun-face was very attentive. 'Is there anything else you'd like?' he asked. 'No thanks, I'm full,' she answered. She watched idly as Bun-face called the waiter over and settled up. She relaxed and knew that she was half-way to giving in. So when he suggested they should go upstairs and chill out a bit, she heard herself say: 'Uh-huh.' The sound vibrated like a mosquito in her mouth. The hotel accommodation was just above the restaurant. Bun-face had said 'chill out', nothing more. She liked the way he put it and found his voice soothing. Why refuse?

Xiangxiang felt the butterflies take off and fly her towards the lifts. Inside, there was a smell of lubricating oil. As she breathed it in, it brought her to her senses, and she felt crowded. There were mirrors on both walls, turning the two of them into six. There was a CCTV camera in one corner at the top. Their multiple images, and the fact that they were being monitored, gave her a frisson of excitement. She leaned closer to Bun-face. His hand was around her waist, rubbing gently up and down, as if he were lighting a match. Her back muscles felt pleasantly numb.

Suddenly, she pulled a little apart from him and he tightened his hold, as if afraid she would fall. That encouraged her and she relaxed. The floor numbers, lit up in red, flitted by as the lift creaked upwards. It was moving more quietly now. She could hear both of them breathing, and wished the lift would get there. The butterflies in her head turned into hummingbirds with fast-whirring wings.

What was she doing coming to a hotel room with Bun-face? She had plenty of other friends of the opposite sex, after all. Why Bun-face? It was weird. Maybe she'd had this in mind all along, otherwise, why would she have told him? She had not breathed a word about it to any of her other male or female friends up till now. What had made her spill it all to Bun-face? Was it a hint? The hummingbirds were chirping more energetically. The lift flew upwards, faster, faster, don't let it stop. Then she changed her mind. It hit her like a gust of wind, but before she had had time to figure out what to do, there was a 'ping' and the floor number flashed up. The lift stopped and the door opened silently.

Bun-face was out of the lift in a flash. The gust of wind blew Xiangxiang out too. She saw him give a glance to left and right, checking where his room was. She pulled herself together, and followed him nonchalantly down the corridor. His shoulders swung to and fro as he walked. From behind, he looked like a stranger. That was better.

The thick corridor carpet absorbed their footsteps. As she caught up, Bun-face gripped her left hand with his right. They walked forwards, she sticking close at his side like an obedient child. They were walking on endless clouds, utterly alone. Xiangxiang suddenly felt a rush of warmth. It was good to have a man. Whenever had she become so womanly? It must have been when she said those words... she couldn't help thinking that walking like this felt so good.

Then Bun-face started humming a love-song. She found it distasteful and began to drag her feet. She looked at him, unable to tell if he was excited or anxious. He stopped at the door, released her hand, switched the card key from his left to his right hand and tried to insert it into the slot. It would not go in. He tried again, but still it would not go in. He wiggled the door handle but it did not budge. Xiangxiang could see he was putting the card in upside-down. She was irritated, but gloating too. Idiot! She said to herself. When Bun-face was sweating with anxiety, she glanced up and down the corridor, then said: 'Let me.' She turned the card other way up, and inserted it in the slot.

There was a click and the green light flashed twice. She sensed Bun-face's embarrassment as he strode into the room. He seemed in a hurry to get away from something behind him. Inside, they were in another, short, corridor, in darkness. 'I'll do it,' said Bun-face hastily, and, taking the card off her, dropped it in the wall slot, and switched the lights on. Xiangxiang screwed up her eyes, almost blinded by the glare. She felt Bunface's arm around her waist, and allowed herself to be pushed gently into the room.

The door clicked shut behind them. Two beds came into view, the coverlets so snowy white that the night sky through the window looked pitch-black. Bun-face quickly went back to lock the bedroom door, then drew the curtains. They were double, the outer ones red velvet, the inner, white muslin. When they were drawn, they took up half the wall, and made the room shrink. Why put red with white? Xiangxiang thought. So vulgar. She stood motionless by the TV.

Bun-face went between the two beds and clicked some switches on the bedside cabinet. Lights came on all over the room: table lamps, floor lights, ceiling lights. Finally, he switched them all off again, and twiddled some buttons beside the beds until two wall lights came on. Then, without speaking, he walked up to Xiangxiang, took her in his arms, and began to rub her breasts, hard.

She had known that something like this was going to happen, ever since she said those damned words...and now it was. But it was all going too fast. There was no lead-up to it. She tried to struggle free, and Bun-face let go. 'I'm going to have a wash,' he said and, stripping down to his underpants, went into the bathroom. He left the door ajar, and she heard him pissing. She wanted to open the room door and leave.

Her breasts felt sore from where he had been rubbing them. She suddenly found she could not move her feet. In any case, before she had time to, he came out. 'Are you going to the bathroom?' he asked. 'No!' she said, very firmly. 'What's up? Relax.' He took hold of her again and pulled her towards the bed. Suddenly, Xiangxiang felt an immense surge of energy and put her arms around him. She let him loosen her clothing.

Bun-face climbed on top of her, and she heard herself give a little gasp. She lay back, and closed her eyes. Bun-face's frenzy and strength came as a shock. He finished, and kissed her hard, muttering in her ear: 'What a waste!' Then he got up and went to the bathroom. He didn't shut the door this time either, and she heard the sound of pissing. She felt disgusted, as if he was pissing on her head. She stared around her, dazzled by the whiteness. How did that happen just now?

Bun-face came out, picked up the kettle and went back to fill it and put it on to boil. He lit a cigarette and came and sat next to her, taking a puff. 'What a waste!' he said again, caressing her breasts with his other hand. Xiangxiang breathed in the smoke and coughed, twice, pointedly. 'I'll put it out!' Bun-face hurriedly stubbed out the cigarette. The kettle started to gurgle and he jumped up and went to wash the cups, then put in the two tea bags that were on the side table. He was still naked. Xiangxiang averted her eyes. When Bun-face had his back to her, she quickly got out of bed, went into the bathroom and shut the door.

She ran the water. She had the feeling that her body, her life, had somehow changed into something different. It had all started when she told him about her husband, and cried. She wouldn't be where she was now, would she, if she hadn't? She came out and picked up her clothes. 'Don't be in such a hurry, let me look at you,' said Bun-face, taking the clothes from her. He swallowed hard: 'You're really sexy.' He brought her the cup of tea. 'Drink some.'

She took the cup and sipped. The steam wafted into her face, acrid and stale. Did people really drink stuff like that? She put it down on the bedside table. She was aware of her heart beating faster than usual. It started when she entered this room, no, in the lift, or even earlier, when she spoke those words. 'It' was what had happened with Bun-face. How had she let him just jump on her like that? She was annoyed, mainly with herself. A flicker of hostility crossed her face.

'What's up,' Bun-face asked her, puzzled. He reached out to stroke her hair. She turned away. 'Have some tea, you'll feel better,' he said softly, and held the cup to her lips. 'Don't think so much. Drink up.' Xiangxiang obediently drank, one sip, then another, and another. She seemed unable to refuse him. 'Next time, don't be so silly. If the right person comes along, don't let him go.' He sounded genuinely concerned, quite different from his normal jokey self. It took Xiangxiang back to the moment when she had said that thing to him, and she felt like crying again.

She heard: '*I just called, to say I love you...*' It was coming from his phone. 'Hello!' Bun-face got up to answer it. 'I'm still in the car. I'll be a bit late. OK, right. Bye.' He sounded warm, and considerate, but Xiangxiang thought he looked tense. 'My wife,' he said as he put the phone down. Why was he making such a point of telling her? She wasn't convinced, and it made her uneasy. She had assumed at first it was his wife, but she knew perfectly well how couples talked to each other. Even if they used those words, it would be in a different tone of voice. She felt a tightening in her chest.

Bun-face didn't notice and rolled on top of her again. He seemed determined not to let her think or speak. Xiangxiang gazed at the ceiling, as dazzled by its whiteness as if she was looking directly into the sun. There was white everywhere, even the bed covers. Were they trying to prove the rooms were clean?

'Don't think so much,' said Bun-face in a muffled voice, pushing inside her. Xiangxiang began to enjoy it, much more than before. Her body felt soft and supple. He did not kiss her, and she did not want to kiss him either. It was the way he got stuck in, without any preamble, that really surprised her. Lust and love really were very different.

This time, Bun-face was exploring her body, with less of the rough urgency of the first time. Gradually she melted. Afterwards, she actually slept. She did not know how long she had been asleep when there was a knock at the door. Before she could get up, it was pushed open, and in came her husband. 'You bitch!' he shouted. His face was creased in hard lines, and he was spitting with rage.

Xiangxiang sat up with an exclamation then, realizing she was naked, pulled the covers over herself.

Bun-face rushed at her husband, and Xiangxiang shut her eyes in fright. Then she thought, let them fight. It didn't matter who hit whom, it was all fine by her. Her husband had cheated on her, leaving her all alone, but she had stayed faithful to him. Men like that deserved a beating. As for Bun-face, she did not know who he had been lying to on the phone. If it was his wife, then he deserved a beating too, even more so. She felt the injustice as if she were the other woman.

But even though she strained her ears, she could not hear any blows. That was because there were none. Instead, she caught words like: 'Hey, mate, what you doing?' (This was from Bun-face.) 'Women!' He sounded conciliatory. 'They're weird.' How extraordinary! As if it was the woman's fault.

'You're a fine one!' Her husband's tone had changed. 'It's like you just think of something you want and go right ahead and do it!' He burst out laughing.

And he backed out, just as if he had stumbled into the wrong room. Xiangxiang couldn't believe her ears. Why aren't they beating each other up? They not only hadn't hit each other, they hadn't even shouted at each other. She actually felt a sharp pain, as if she had torn a muscle. She got up to dress and go.

'What are you doing?' Bun-face caught up with her before she got to the door. She gave him what she thought was a fierce look. Bun-face was puzzled. 'What's up with you? I never forced you. You came of your own accord.' He looked scornful, a bit smug too. 'Honestly! You were the one who was so keen.'

Xiangxiang was shocked, even more than when her husband came in. Her head felt like it was going to burst. She tried to raise her hand to hit him, but it was as heavy as lead. With a start, she woke up.

It was all because of what she'd said. Why had she said that to him? Her body was hers, why had she talked about it to someone else? She should never have said anything. The women around her always went on about their menfolk gambling and so on, but they never talked about the physical stuff. 'Gamblers don't go whoring,' supposedly. But once, in the middle of the night, her husband's aunt had called, complaining she had spent ages trying to get her husband on the phone but he wasn't answering. Xiangxiang obligingly tried to ring him, but didn't get any answer either. The aunt never talked about her private life. She was a comfortably fat woman who had a clever, obedient daughter, and a husband who was section chief. She made sure everyone knew just what a happy family they was. Xiangxiang's own husband had held them up as an example, in the hopes that she would behave more like his aunt and stop nagging him all the time. Now, suddenly, Xiangxiang realized that it wasn't like that at all. Women like her aunt-in-law were just better at pretending. That was why they were happy.

What was up with her? Why had she said that to Bun-face? She'd just turned her life upside down. Well, not exactly her life, her... Xiangxiang felt her arm trapped beneath Bun-face's body. She was hot. She looked at Bun-face lying asleep beside her. His face shone. He had pimples. One of them had burst on his right cheek.

Xiangxiang shivered. She had foreseen quite a lot of this during their meal, but not that she would feel so angry. Get off me, she thought to herself, and gave him a shove.

She seemed to hear a roaring, as far away as if it was coming from the sky, a low, muffled sound, like a stone rolling in the silence of the night. It sounded like a train, but how could she be hearing a train from this high up? She strained her ears... she wasn't mistaken. It was a train. In her mind's eye, she saw a night train bursting out of the darkness, plunging back into the darkness. Through the windows she could see light, and all kinds of passengers, exhausted, apathetic, being hurtled along by the swaying train, to who knows where. Wasn't that exactly what all marriages were like, trains roaring along?

When she awoke, Bun-face was already up. Aaah...aaah....aaah...Sounds were coming from the room next door. Bun-face must have heard too. He was just about to fill their cups from the kettle, and his hand paused in mid-air. More moans...and a woman panting. They both looked at the wall. In a regular hotel room like this one, the beds were arranged head-to-head against the partition wall. It felt like the wall was shaking too.

She opened her mouth to say something but then decided not to. She wondered how many couples like Bun-face and her there were in this hotel. The faintest of smiles crossed his face. He looked at her. 'What a waste!' his words went through her head. Why had he said that? Damn him!

Bun-face carried on filling up the teacups. The glug-glug made her think the tea cups were empty. Then he put the kettle down heavily as if it were a lead weight.

Xiangxiang felt like she needed the toilet and she got up to go. But Bun-face swung round and grabbed hold of her. He plastered his mouth onto hers, and slobbered wetness into it. What kind of kissing was this? They'd gone from not kissing at all, at the beginning, to this over-the-top kissing. She found it horrible, and pushed him away, hard.

'Why do women shut their eyes when they're being kissed?'

This was ghastly.

She thought back to the way she and her classmates used to joke about it. It sounded ridiculous back then, but today proved it was true: you had a wash, a bit more red wine, flirted some, then went to bed... Though men only flirted in films. In real life, you could forget the foreplay, they just jumped you and got stuck in, and were as rough as they liked. Her sex-life with her husband was long in the past. They had had separate bedrooms for two years. Maybe she should count herself lucky! She was not entirely convinced by the thought.

She looked at the curtains, no longer bothered that they didn't match. Feelings were the only things worth bothering about. Like the way she felt about the whistle of a train rushing past in the night. She had once read a novel called *Whistle Mountain Village*, just because it had the word 'whistle' in the title. Sex with Bun-face, she thought, was that kind of a whistle, wasn't it? Most of the time, her head was filled with a roaring noise, not a proper roar, but a deadly boring, monotonous sound that sapped her energy. Bun-face was boorish, but he was real, he was full of strength. He made her feel excited... wired even, and she needed that in her life.

Bun-face stopped kissing her. Maybe he wasn't enjoying it either. Instead, he pressed her back on the bed, pinning her down with his legs. Xiangxiang felt her body relaxed and supple. She put her arms around him and held him. There was no more roaring in her head. She was serene. Her body was moving. She only wished she was heavier so that they could get rougher.

It was just a one-off.

She heard a flock of pigeons calling, coo-coo-coo... Did Bun-face have a dove-cote in his throat? Fuzzily, she saw a large masculine face, gleaming with droplets of sweat, above her. Some of them dropped into her mouth. They tasted salty and muddy. That damned thing she'd said. She suddenly felt like laughing out loud. As if she had been hit head-on by the train, she gave an almighty shove, with a strength she didn't know she had, and pushed Bun-face off her.

As if he sensed something, Bun-face held onto her. He began to wheedle. 'I won't interfere with your life.' She could hear plaintive longing in his voice. This was not the Bun-face she knew. 'I remember how plucky you were, not afraid to play with guns.' Guns? Xiangxiang could hardly believe her ears. She had almost forgotten his gun, since he hadn't brought it with him. Probably he had to hand it in when he went off duty; he was out of uniform. The unfamiliarity in someone she knew made her mind race.

The mention of the gun made her angry again. 'You're seriously overrating yourself if you think you could have any influence on my life,' she wanted to say. She didn't know who she was angry with. She was trembling, but at the same time, laughter was bubbling up inside her. She burst into peals of laughter, as if she'd heard the best joke in the world, as if she was ringing a string of silver bells.

Bun-face looked at her in amazement, before joining in and laughing too. Then he got up and went into the bathroom. The squeaking started again. Xiangxiang looked at the two wall lights, feeling like she was flying towards them, and the white bed had turned into a light too, its bulb shining, spinning, in front of her. There was an indefinable smell wafting round the room, like the tea bags they'd been using, like the taste of Bun-face's mouth. It was all over the room, whatever it was.

Finally, her eyes alighted on the tea cups. Her dream came rushing back at her. She remembered how they had acted like old mates and refused to beat each other up. It was disgusting, even more disgusting than the way he never shut the bathroom door, than the way he had sex with her.

Steam continued to eddy up from the tea cups. Xiangxiang stretched out on the bed, pleasantly tired. Suddenly her mind felt clear as a bell. 'Damn!' She swore, hearing her own voice, exploding like a gun into the silence. She felt suddenly happy. 'What did you say?' Bun-face came over to the bed.

The tea bag sat in the cup on the small round table, the thread hanging over the rim of the cup looking just like a fishing line. Well, it's certainly hooked me, hasn't it? She shook with laughter again. The peals burst from her mouth and hung, trembling, in the air.

At the same time, she thought she was going to throw up.

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