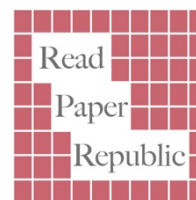


# Missing

《失踪》

BY LI JINGRUI 李静睿



Translated by Helen Wang

## 1

Ten o'clock in the morning, thick grey smog. I'd been to buy some crabs at the Baliqiao wholesale market, and on my way back checked the mailbox at the entrance to our apartment complex. I'd already checked it at nine on my way out. In the past two and a half months I'd checked the mail more than ten times a day. I checked whenever I went out to buy food, and when I took the rubbish down. I'd developed a bit of an obsession about taking the rubbish down. I'd eat an orange and take the peel down. And then go down again to throw away a couple of pieces of paper.

This time there was a black envelope. At last. It was tucked between my credit card statement, a Christmas card for Liang Yining and the new Ikea catalogue. The black paper felt a bit rough, and the envelope had no flap, no postmark, no addressee or sender. As soon as I was back in the apartment, I didn't bother about changing into my slippers, just sat on the floor and opened the envelope. Inside was a sheet of A4 paper, with a message written in the Songti font, in large characters, bold and black: **Liang Yining, officially missing. Burn after reading. Do not photograph. Violation will nullify this status.**

That was all it said. Those twenty characters, plus his name, told me what I needed to know. I read it again, focusing on the "officially missing". I didn't burn it immediately, but waited until I was steaming the crabs, then flushed the small heap of black ash down the plughole. The crabs were rich and juicy, and I sat down to eat one, with a ginger, black vinegar, and sugar sauce. Then another.

The day Liang Yining went missing, October 17<sup>th</sup>, we'd had a lie in, and he'd hugged me from behind and said, "How about some crab today? I really fancy some crab. Shall we go to Baliqiao together?" In the end I went by myself: Liang Yining had to reply to an email. As I didn't have anyone to carry the shopping, I went out in flat shoes. I was used to going out as a couple, and felt an emptiness by my side, as though someone had chopped off my right hand. At the market, crabs from Tai Lake cost 45 yuan a *jin*. I bought four - two male, two female - weighing exactly two *jin*. I walked another five minutes to the bird and flower market, and bought some gentians and lilies because Liang Yining likes these.

Liang Yining wasn't there when I got home. He'd left his watch behind. But his shoes were gone, and his flip-flops were placed neatly on the mat. His email reply was showing on his computer. The bamboo tea I'd made for him before I left had gone down by a third, and there were two cigarette stubs in the ash-tray. I put the four crabs in a pan. They tried to scramble out but the sides of the pan were too high. I didn't sleep that night, listening to the scraping of their claws, the air heavy with the scent of gentians and lilies.

Two days later the crabs died, and I finally accepted the fact that Liang Yining was missing. That evening I steamed the four crabs and ate them, but they had an off-taste that even chopped-chilli sauce couldn't mask. I had belly ache in the night, and got up and vomited. The room was pitch black, except for the flickering blue light of the wireless router. I sat on the side of the bed. I didn't cry. All was quiet, as it should be, but I was still hearing things.

Mindful that Liang Yining wanted to eat crab, I went every day to buy him one, putting out his flip-flops before I left the apartment. I took a pedicab to Baliqiao. I knew the guy and he only charged me eight yuan. The first few days he asked "How's your old man?", and I said "He's busy today"; after a few days of that he stopped asking, and gave me an all-in price, 15 yuan there and back, and he'd wait for twenty minutes at the entrance to the market. The winter wind was so cold it took your breath away,

but I had an electric pedicab, which had wind-up windows and a motor that pattered away. I sat inside on the left, across from the grubby driver's cushion, made of red material embroidered with two chickens. When I got home, the flip-flops were exactly where I'd left them, so I put them back in the shoe cupboard, and pretended this thing had never happened. And another day passed.

When the Tai Lake crab season was over, I bought swimmer crabs, jagged at the front and spiny at the back. Twice I caught my finger on them, and the blood oozed and ran over the cream-coloured plate. I ate too much crab: there was an icy ache in my belly, and I was drinking boiling water all day long, though the radiator was burning. Today's swimmer crab weighed six *liang*, and the person who sold it promised it was full of roe. In the kitchen I'd hesitated, then opened the door and let it go. I watched it scuttle down the hallway, hoping it would make it to the lift, and take its bellyful of yellow roe off to freedom. If you turn left out of the apartment complex you're right by the Tonghui River. Just 300 metres to fresh water – if it could get past the rubbish bins, the car park and complicated crossroads, and dodge the rubbish trucks that whizzed past and the suburban buses that forced other vehicles to change lanes.

No crab. I made a bowl of plain boiled noodles, and doused them in soya sauce. It was the evening of December 29<sup>th</sup>. There was a chaos of lights outside the window, and just as I felt an overwhelming need to sleep, I realized that swimmer crabs live in the sea, and I had sent it off to its death.

## 2

Officially missing is the best kind of missing, Liang Yining had said, snuggling under the bedcover, nibbling my ear. His mobile was out of reach, the room was pitch black, and the curtains were drawn tightly, blocking the moonlight.

What other kinds of missing were there, I asked, my arms wrapped round his waist. It was midsummer, our bodies drenched in sweat, our earlobes burning. We were aroused, not by desire, but by taboo and secrecy.

Unofficially missing, he whispered.

What did he mean?

He didn't know. But officially missing was better.

"Oh", I muttered, and pulled myself out from under the covers to get some air. Liang Yining got up for a cigarette. The smoke hung in the air-conditioned room. We started to talk loudly, about the TV series, *Black Mirror*. We were talking too loudly, even for our own home.

Qiu Yong and Lin Ling were coming for dinner that evening. They lived in the western part of town, and we lived in the east. It had been almost two months since we'd seen them. Lin Ling had phoned at midday and suggested it. It was short notice, and I'd simply bought a fish and made a pan of the red-cooked pork that Qiu Yong likes, but my hand slipped, and too much rock sugar went in.

At half-past six, when I'd just put the mandarin fish into the steamer and sprinkled it with slivers of ginger, Lin Ling arrived. She turned up on her own, looking smart in a flower-patterned silk dress, and 5-cm high heels, and bright pink lipstick, which made her face look even paler than usual. She'd brought a bag of grapes with her. I assumed Qiu Yong was parking the car, but when he still hadn't turned up by the time the fish was ready, Liang Yining gave me a look, and I quietly removed a place-setting.

The three of us ate without saying a word. No one touched the red-cooked pork, and with the air-con on low, the oil on the food gradually congealed, making the fatty meat even harder to swallow. Lin Ling picked intently at the fish, until she'd stripped the bones clean. Then she picked up the carcass in her

chopsticks, put it on her plate, put the chopsticks down, and fiddled nervously with the bones. I sat beside her, peeling grapes for her - the pale green flesh looked sour - but she didn't eat them.

Liang Yining started to clear the table, but Lin Ling motioned to us to come closer. We saw the fish bones on her plate arranged like the character *fa* (meaning "legal", the first character in "officially missing"). She looked up at us, her cheeks flushed, her eyes glistening, then scattered the fish bones again. Liang Yining did the washing up, and I took the rubbish down. Lin Ling wanted to come down with me, and we hugged beside the community rubbish bin, the smell of rotting food inescapable. Two cats sitting on a pile of banana skins looked at us with big eyes, and Lin Ling whispered, "Look after Liang Yining." The cats screeched and ran off, then looked back at us.

Later that evening, when Liang Yining was talking about "officially missing", we sensed a strange fishbone smell hovering over the bed. When we lay down again, he pulled me back under the cover, and keeping his voice low, said,

"I heard there's a black envelope."

"What do you mean, a black envelope?"

"If you're officially missing, your family gets a black envelope."

"What for?"

"I don't know. I just know there's a black envelope."

"Did Lin Ling get one? ... Why didn't she say?"

"She didn't dare."

Now I knew, and I didn't dare either. I had a restless night, and when I woke, I ran through the 20 characters in my head, trying to remember whether the name in the letter was really Liang Yining. The harder I thought, the less confident I felt. I don't like his name, because Ning has those N's and G's that people from Sichuan find difficult to say, and I always pronounce it Yilin. Then it sounds like Pan Yilin, who was an economics student in the class of '99. He was tall, spotty, had a crew-cut and played basketball. He'd pursued me for a while, quite seriously in fact. He blocked me when I went to the self-study room, sent me flowers on Valentine's Day, and had a song played for me on the college radio on Christmas Eve. I was in the canteen getting my food, when Sarah Connor's *Christmas In My Heart* wafted over the loudspeakers. "Tomorrow may be grey, We may be torn apart, But if you stay tonight, It's Christmas in my heart."

I was moved, but I was already with Liang Yining. He knew someone was pursuing me and wasn't too happy about it, but then he wasn't too unhappy about it either. After all, he and I were spending Christmas Eve together in a little hotel off campus. We'd saved a week's money, by sharing smaller portions - one dish and three *liang* of rice between us - until we had enough to pay for a room. After that, to avoid confusing him with Pan Yilin, I started calling him by his full name, Liang Yining, Liang-Yi-Ning. And now, in the quiet of night, I called his name: Liang Yining.

The room echoed. We had bought an apartment. I suddenly remembered that Christmas had passed. What did I do that day? I ate crab and had a sleepless night. That's what I did. That's all I did.

### 3

At half-past seven, I took the Line 6 eastern extension into town. People surged on to the subway. Someone in my carriage had just eaten a takeaway with garlicky chives. I could have avoided the rush hour, but I was in a hurry, and set out before the mist had lifted, before you could see anything of

Beijing. It was a new line that had just opened, after years in the making. The demolition work had left behind a vast area of rubble, and right up to the time Liang Yining went missing, we still hadn't been able to find the entrance to the station. Liang Yining liked to tell ghost stories late at night, and would say, "The ghost platform, you know, in the station right by our building, is like a ghost ship. People who go into the station go missing. They go in, and they disappear. After a while, they re-appear, one at a time, some living, some dead, some who could be living or dead, or perhaps ghosts." He didn't have a gift for telling stories, and he wasn't scary. I just yawned, and said "Boring."

There weren't any ghosts, but the station platform was surrounded by rubble, covered with yellow cranes. The entrance to the station was a gaping hole that swallowed people up. In I went, and out I came, an hour and a half later on the Changping line. I'd found a seat, and finished a romance novel which ended badly, with the man dying, another city type unable to adapt to his new life. I felt low, but I'd also noticed how the man opposite had been looking at me all the way. I was dressed smartly, wearing stiletto boots, full make-up, my lips bright red. I'd taken off my black coat in the subway, which I was wearing over an elegant green dress with a collar and nipped waist. I came out of the subway in the dress, and caught a local suburban bus. My window wouldn't close, and there was dust flying in my face. We drove on to where people were selling vegetables by the side of the road, and then gradually on to a place where there were no people at all.

The driver said we'd arrived. I got out and saw that a piece of paper had been pasted to an electricity pole, with "Heating charge, pay here" written in biro. A hand-drawn arrow pointed to a desolate single-storey building. Yet, I discovered when I went inside that it was crowded with people, mostly women, standing quietly in line. Up in front was a sheet of black glass, with a little window that opened, and when someone on this side handed over their money, you could see a hand on the other side reach out to take it.

I'd known for a long time that this place existed, but I'd only found the address yesterday. If you search for "black envelope" and follow all the links, you can find a forum. And if you read the posts carefully, you'll find a set of online questions, which are difficult, and include Plato, Kierkegaard, and quantum physics. When you are answering these questions you can't search on other webpages, and you have a time limit of one hour. When you get to the end, you enter the missing person's name, and the address flashes up on screen, just like the thirty-second scrolling prompt before you entered the maze on Chinese Paladin when you were little. I'd done this set of questions so many times in the last two months that I knew the right answers, but when I entered "Liang Yining" it always crashed. Until yesterday, when I received the black envelope. It was an interesting game of knowledge and patience, despair and risk. If it was only a game, Liang Yining would have liked it, and would have been impressed that I'd got so far, that I knew the answers about wave-particle duality, the Pre-Raphaelites, and the three problems in Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*.

Everyone in the single-storey building had got that far. We measured one another up silently, with a slight sense of pride, and a slight contempt for the people who hadn't been able to get here. Pitiful people, idly sitting at home, who burned the black envelope and had no way forward. As long as there's a way forward, there's something to work towards. For two months I'd been waiting for a black envelope, and now here I was, waiting to pay the heating charge.

No one knew how much the heating charge was, or what the heating charge was for. I'd read all the posts on the forum, and still not found the answer. I'd withdrawn 50,000, a very thick envelope, and had stuck a yellow Post-It note on it, with Liang Yining's name written in clerk script. There was only so much time I could spend on the forum in those two months, and I had a lot of spare time. In the middle of the night I practiced calligraphy, copying the characters on the Zhang Qian stele. Some effort had gone into those three characters.

People stood in the queue, clutching their black envelopes, not speaking. There was no heating in the room, but I was sweating profusely. In front of me was a young girl who looked like a caterpillar in her red down quilted coat and UGG boots. She couldn't have been more than twenty-five. She was at the window for such a long time. For some reason, her stuffed envelope was rejected. I watched as her face

suddenly turned deathly pale, and her lips turned black. She walked out very, very slowly; everyone stole a look, but no one said anything. In that cramped space, just a cough could shake heaven and earth.

I pushed my envelope through the window and waited for a response. I felt the sweat on my body go cold. My hands and feet were like ice. I could see my soul searching in terror for somewhere safe, though my feet were rooted to the ground. I shouldn't have come out in these boots, they were too thin and too tight, there wasn't even room for soft leggings. I waited, for what seemed a long time, and then a strip of paper was passed to me through the window. On it was written in beautiful clerk script, "Gate to the Lotus Market, 3 pm, this note is all you need."

I held the strip of paper tightly in my hand, and looked around me. I felt a bit lost. Did everyone get the same message? Perhaps the locations were different? Something like the left side of the incense window at the Southern Gate of the Yonghe Temple? Or the front gate of the haunted house at Chaonei No. 81? Or the little shop at the entrance to Dayunhe Forest Park in Tongzhou? Or the trees behind Wang Guowei's gravestone at Tsinghua University? No one answered my questions; I hadn't asked them.

Pinching the piece of paper between my fingers, I got back on the bus, with its window still wide open. I could have torn the strip of paper up and thrown it out of the window, but after thinking about it for a long time, I ended up swallowing it.

## 4

The lake was frozen, and the ice-sleds and ice-skates emerged through the mist, gliding over the grey surface. As every year, someone had broken through the ice across the way to create a space for winter swimming, but you couldn't really swim more than 15 metres without having to turn around. Liang Yining and I had taken a walk around Hou Hai after dinner, all wrapped up like soft, sweet dumplings, his scarf covering most of his face, and his voice muffled. "That's not winter swimming! It's a cold bath!" A person taking a cold bath heard him, and, annoyed, broke into a swim.

Now he was missing, I saw things in a different light, like seeing an ordinary photograph through a special filter. Liang Yining and I had been married for seven years, and were together for five years before that. There were trivial things that irritated us. Sometimes we argued, and when our arguments got heated, I secretly hoped that another man would appear and tell me to muster up the courage to divorce him. It was a genuine wish, but it never lasted long. We'd make up, and be the same old happy couple again. Before making love, he liked to write with his finger on my thigh, and ask me to read aloud his silent words of love. Now Liang Yining was missing, we could be a happy couple forever. Sleeping alone, my skin craved the sound of an icy finger gliding over it.

I leant against the stone balls by the entrance to the Lotus Market, waiting for devil-knows-who, and devil-knows-what. It was a compact, enclosed area. A plump pale-faced man started to sing Peking Opera to a two-stringed *Jing-hu*. It was the famous passage from the Empty Fort Ruse, and when he sang about Zhuge Liang playing the zither, he moved his hands through the air as though he were playing one himself. In the middle of the square was an old man with white hair. He had an enormous writing brush, which he dipped in water before writing on the ground. He was writing the famous poem by Liu Yuxi, and by the time he reached the line "Swallows fly into the homes of commoners" the first line "Plants grow wild by the Vermilion Bird Bridge" was already vanishing. Everything was normal, and made my abnormality seem random and out of synch, like someone in a group taking a cold bath suddenly striking a pose and breaking into a swim.

A man waved at me, I looked left and right, to check it was me he was waving at. He was wrapped up like a sweet black dumpling, with a black scarf covering his whole face. It gradually fell loose as I approached, and I fixed my eyes on him for a while. There was no mistaking this person, it was Pan Yilin. He no longer had spots, and his face was deathly pale, as though he'd spent the ten years since

graduation behind a sheet of black glass. He was still tall, but had a stoop; he probably hadn't played basketball for a long time.

Pan Yilin gestured for me to walk with him around Hou Hai, and for a while we walked in silence, past the sticks of candied haw and clouds of candyfloss, and the silkworms and scorpions that would be fried in hot oil. In the noisiest place, he suddenly started to talk: "When I graduated, I passed the civil service exams. I started as an accountant, and now I'm chief financial officer."

I was finding it hard to make sense of everything around me. I hesitated, then said, "I remember, you studied economics. Where are you chief financial officer?"

He didn't answer. There was a breeze blowing by the lake, and the weeping willow branches were swaying. Beneath the trees people were playing Chinese chess. We stopped to watch the end of a game. I was so distracted that I almost missed the clever cannon moves. It took a while for Pan Yilin to answer, "It's hard to explain."

That had been my excuse, my catchphrase. When Pan Yilin was pursuing me, sometimes things would get quite involved, and every so often he would phone and demand an answer "Why do you choose Liang Yining over me?" I found it awkward and offputting, and would say "It's hard to explain", then hang up. The last time we met before graduating, we were walking past the reception desk at the entrance to the library. I was embarrassed. Then he suddenly grabbed me, and with a big smile that squashed his mouth and eyes, said "Goodbye, Miss It's-Hard-To-Explain." The sunlight was dazzling, and I remember there was a rainbow shimmering in his hair. He was holding a copy of Kafka's *The Trial*. We had met in the optional Western Literature course, and in the first lesson, Pan Yilin just happened to sit next to me. After that, he always sat next to me. He remembered the *Introduction to Maoism* that I used to save the seat. He wrote love letters and left them in our departmental post. "If only you would sit on this small sofa beside me, and let me hold you, and look into your eyes, how delightful it would be." When we met, he admitted he'd copied this from Kafka's letters to his fiancée, but he'd made a mistake, and forgotten that he didn't have a small sofa beside him.

When the game of chess was over, the loser slapped ten yuan down on the stone table, and Pan Yilin and I carried on walking. I kept stealing glances at him, trying to find some proof that he really was Pan Yilin. The evening sun cast shadows on his face, and in the changing light all I could see for sure were the occasional white hairs in his sideburns. Then after another period of cold silence, he said, "I'm married as well, we live on Line 6, the last station heading west, if you come out of the southeastern exit, it's the apartment complex on the right, and the first building inside the gate. Come and eat with us some time." He took out his wallet, and showed me a photo of his wife, and although I couldn't see more than a blur of a white face, and a thick plait hanging over her chest, of course I said, "She's lovely."

When we arrived back at the open space by the gate to the Lotus Market, the old man doing brush and water calligraphy was about to pack up. Pan Yilin hurried over. "May I have a go?" he asked. He dipped the brush in the water, and it was only when he'd written several lines that I recognised it as a poem by Akhmatova, one that the teacher had analysed in class:

"Lord! You see I am tired  
Of living and dying and resurrection.  
Take everything, but grant that I may feel  
That freshness of this crimson rose again."

After the red rose, Pan Yilin started a new line, and, wrote in a much smaller, much faster hand, just four characters: "Wait for my news". In the heart of winter in Beijing, there is not a thread of moisture in the air, and the poems and those last four characters and then Pan Yilin himself vanished. As the water dried and the concrete whitened, I wondered if that afternoon had been a dream.

## 5

I sat at home waiting for news from Pan Yilin. I didn't know how he would contact me. He hadn't asked for any contact details. By mobile? Landline? Post? WeChat? QQ? Weibo? Facebook? Kaixin? Knocking at my door in Morse Code? Using Schopenhauer's thought? There were no clues, and I could only sit there waiting, struggling to learn Morse Code and all kinds of acrostic poems. I didn't dare go out, and even did my food shopping on Taobao. I looked forward to the express delivery men coming to the door, and imagined they might have a secret identity, that they might check left and right, before lowering their voice and delivering the "news".

But it wasn't like that. The delivery men were just delivery men who, as soon as I signed, had to hurry to the next delivery. I opened the cardboard box. The pak choi was just pak choi. There were no paper messages hidden in the perch's belly. I broke the florets off the cauliflower and put them in water to soak, and when I checked half an hour later, nothing untoward had happened. Once, I'd half-cooked some streaky pork when I discovered there was a purple mark on it. I was so surprised that I scooped it out to take a closer look. It was a round quarantine stamp with Meat You Can Trust in rather indistinct characters. Perhaps there had been other stamps whose deep significance I had inadvertently boiled away.

That piece of meat played on my mind for three days. I found it hard to eat anything. My belly was empty, yet at the same time raging with fire, though I didn't know what kind of fuel could keep burning like that. I stood by the floor-to-ceiling window looking down at the fruit-seller, the pancake-maker, the shoe-repairer, the doufu-seller. But I couldn't be sure it was them. Perhaps there was a dagger hidden beneath the wooden board with the doufu on it. Or a listening device hidden among the sweet oranges from Hunan. As for the woman from Tianjin who spread batter with her bare hands – the one who wears a red Mickey Mouse apron all year round, has bright red cheeks, and her hair scooped into a ponytail, who asks me in her Guo Degang accent if I want chilli strips or sausage. Who knows, perhaps when she packs up at seven in the evening, she has a wash, curls her hair, puts on shimmery tights and goes to Shin Kong Place.

A month passed, and there was no "news". I was starting to panic, and tried every way I could to search online for "Pan Yilin". I found Pan Yilin, manager of the Riteng Yinshan (Sun High Over Silver Mountain) specialist honeysuckle growing co-operative in Wenling city, whose mobile number was on a couple of webpages, so I called, and spoke to someone who really did sell honeysuckle, minimum order 300jin. And there was Pan Yilin, Member of the Shigang Management District of the Jieshi People's Commune in Baxian, who was the sowing champion of the Rural Youth First Spring Production Games, and held the record for planting half an acre in seven hours. But there was no Pan Yilin, chief financial officer. No Pan Yilin, who worked behind black glass. No Pan Yilin, my contemporary at university.

In the middle of the night, I was watching a repeat of an international university debate. It dawned on me that Pan Yilin had once taken part in this debate, and that our university had won. He was the third speaker, and was commended during the judging of the competition. When he came back to the university, he came to my dorm building looking for me. He wanted to show me his medal. I was so proud of him, but behaved as though I couldn't care less:

"What are you showing it to me for? It's nothing to do with me."

"I thought you'd be pleased," said Pan Yilin, awkwardly.

I tried to remember exactly which year it had been, then searched for information about that competition. There was a photo of the winning team, and I enlarged it as much as I could. The third speaker was a boy with nice eyes, and Pan Yilin had been a boy with nice eyes, but that was not Pan Yilin in the photograph. As I closed the webpage, the click-click of the mouse surprised me, perhaps there was some deviation in my memory, perhaps they had built a new world that would block my memory? But who were they?

The next day I set out while it was still dark, ate a pancake at the Tianjin woman's stall, with chilli strips and sausage, and while the street lamps were still on, I took a good look at her face, trying to find traces of another face floating there. I took Line 6 west to the last stop, took the southeast exit, and found the apartment complex on the right, and the first building inside the gate. I couldn't open the door, and didn't know the code, so I asked everyone who went in or out, "Excuse me, does Pan Yilin live here?" There was a bitter wind blowing, my hands and feet were numb, and I stood stiff as wood at the entrance. No one answered my question, but then who stands outside like that, waiting for someone at eight o'clock in the morning? People have mobile phones these days and can call the person they are visiting. Eventually a woman with a thick plait, and a burgundy wool coat appeared. I watched through the glass door as she carefully checked the mailbox. The 30 square cm box looked empty, though she must have searched it for a full five seconds. Then she opened the door and came out. Her eyes were red and swollen, her lips dry and cracked.

"Excuse me, does Pan Yilin live here?" I asked her.

She flinched, and walked on without saying a word. I noticed that her top half was dressed in smart formal wear, but her feet were bare and in cream cotton slippers.

I took the subway again, riding the same line as before, to Changping. Then the same local suburban bus, to the same electricity pole, with the same notice pasted on it: "Heating charge, pay here." I walked to the end of the passageway, and could hear a racket of human voices inside. I went in, and found a brightly lit hall, with open counters, and young women in uniforms on the other side, who were counting money, and stamping papers at top speed.

"What are they doing?" I asked the old woman in front of me.

She looked me up and down, then said,

"Are you right in the 'ead? Didn't you see the sign on the door? It's where you pay for heating. Did you forget to bring cash? They don't take cards here. If you go outside, turn left, and walk for a bit, there's a cash point. You know what they charge? 25 a square metre. Make sure you take out enough, or you'll have to go back and get some more."

I asked, "How long has this place been taking the heating money?"

The old woman looked me up and down again. She seemed genuinely concerned.

"Hey, are you sure you're all right? This has always been where we pay for heating. I've been coming for years. Are you feeling a bit woozy? There's a lot of people, and there's quite a wait. There's a seat over there, why don't you go sit down for a while, I'll keep your place in the queue."

I was actually feeling a bit lightheaded, so I did as she said, and went to sit down. Just before it was my turn, I said, "Oh no, I forgot to get some cash out of the machine." I went out and as I walked down the road, the wind was blowing away the cloud, and everything looked clearer in the blue sky. The world was a wide open mystery.

## 6

Liang Yining got home about ten o'clock. I had gone downstairs at 9:50 to buy a few essentials, and when I came back at 11:15, there were his shoes neatly placed on the mat, the room was thick with cigarette smoke, his soft pack of Yuxi cigarettes was still by the computer, unfinished, and Liang Yining was in bed, under the cover, eyes closed tight, curtains drawn tight, the room dark as night.

I changed into my pyjamas, and, clutching a corner of the cover, inched my way on to the bed, keeping close to the edge. At first, all was still, then he came closer. He held me from behind, and then started



to write on my thigh, the tips of his fingers cold as ice, making my skin break out in goosepimples. In the silence, I could make out his writing. He said, “I told you, officially missing is the best kind of missing.”

And that was it. Liang Yining was back, which meant he had never been missing. We closed our eyes, locked the world outside, and never spoke about it again.

*You can ask questions to the author and translator of this story here:*  
<https://paper-republic.org/nickyharman/that-damned-thing-she-said-four-short-stories-from-china-to-celebrate-international-womens-day/>