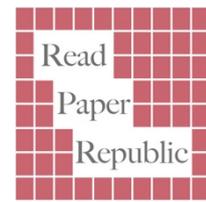


The One Who Picks Flowers

《挑花儿的》

BY LIU QINGBANG 刘庆邦

Translated by Lee Yew Leong



Around this place, to praise a girl's beauty, one doesn't need a superlative, one merely says: 'Ah, there's 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 below ground 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 stride 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 buxom 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 daringly call himself 'Big Brother,' or refer to her as 'Little Sis.' After this, 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) who was 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 booming. 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. Almost 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 mineworkers worried that she would not last long. Below ground, 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 of 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 stayed 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 behooved him not 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 brought in the 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 waitress 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 what?'

Song Tian'er said, 'Don't know, never measured myself.' 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 civilised?' The miner said, 'So what if the chairman's here. The chairman's human too.' The miner 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 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, and 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, '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, and only got to bed at one or two in the morning. It was no wonder he kept yawning, Song Jin'er 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.

Song Jin'er did not seem the least shocked at Sun Baiyu's words. He shut his eyes, shook off his shoes, crawled into bed. Sun Baiyu patted his cheek, '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 through Song Jin'er's mind that, were he to stand in the Chairman's way, not only would he have to put up with 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, and 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 gone to 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 villas, 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 scrape 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.' 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 it's 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.'

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/>