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WU NIANZHEN’S “SEIZE THE SPRINGTIME”

by

RYAN GLASSETT

Christopher Nugent, Advisor

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the
Degree of Bachelor of Arts with Honors
in Chinese

WILLIAMS COLLEGE

Williamstown, Massachusetts

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Introduction

The work that follows is a scholarly translation of Wu Nianzhen’s short story collection, *Seize the Springtime*. In translating the four stories presented here, I’ve tried to make the language as easily understandable as possible with an English-speaking audience in mind. Since Taiwanese culture is not easily transposable onto an American environment with American characters, I’ve left the names of people and places intact. Where possible, I’ve tried to preserve the cultural “flavor” of most forms of address, literary quotations, *chéngyǔ* (成語), and other idiomatic expressions, and where I have had to sacrifice literal translations in favor of more palatable English, I’ve attempted to leave extensive footnotes. When transliterating names of people and places, I’ve opted to use the now-standard Hanyu Pinyin Romanization system instead of the old Wade-Giles system (i.e., Jinmen instead of Kinmen), with the exception of names Americans wouldn’t recognize in their Pinyin form (i.e., Taipei, majiang). I’ve also tried to reflect linguistic differences between Mandarin and Taiwanese (a softer-sounding language, which I’ve tried to express with a lazy Southern “drawl”). As for English phrases that occur in the original, since I’ve kept readers conscious of the fact that these stories occur in Taiwan, it made the most sense to simply make footnotes in these instances.

In the remaining pages of this introduction, I’d like to familiarize the reader with the original author, Wu Nianzhen, and also share the fruits of my experience in translating these four short stories.

**Wu Nianzhen: A Brief Overview**

Wu Nianzhen (吳念真) was born August 5, 1952 in the mining district of Jiufen (九份), a part of Ruifang Village (瑞芳鎮) in Taipei County (台北縣). In 1967, after finishing elementary and middle school, because of the economic hardship his family faced, he moved to Taipei to work. There he used his earnings to complete his high school education at Yanping High (延平國中). In 1976, Wu became involved in writing short stories while he was taking night classes in accounting from Fu Ren Catholic University (天主教輔仁大學). During the daytime, he worked as a manager at the library of the Taipei Municipal Sanatorium (台北市立療養院). His stories focus primarily on
the lower class, and have been well-received by critics. He won the prize for short stories from the Taiwanese United Daily News (聯合報) three years running.

Wu has also been deeply involved in the Taiwanese film industry. He is best known as a screenwriter, but has also acted, starring in Edward Yang’s film Yi Yi, and directed two of his own movies: A Borrowed Life (多桑, 1994), for which he won the Grand Prize at the Torino Film Festival in Italy, and Peaceful Heavenly Kingdom (太平天國). Beginning in 2005, Wu also hosted These People, Those People (這些人，那些人), on Taiwanese public television, interviewing Taiwanese people of all classes and walks of life.

Seize the Springtime is the earliest of his short story collections, published in 1977, two years before his screenwriting debut.

Selected Works:

Books:

Seize the Springtime (抓住一個春天), 1977
A Special Day (特別的一天), 1988

Movies (director):

Peaceful Heavenly Kingdom (太平天國), 1996
A Borrowed Life (多桑), 1994

Movies (script):

Incense (香火), 1979
Classmates (同班同學), 1981
First Under Heaven (天下第一), 1983
City of Sadness (悲情城市), 1989

Movies (actor):

Puppy Love (青梅竹馬), 1985
Mahjong (麻將), 1996
Yi Yi: A One and a Two (一一), 2000
Two-Facedness in Wu Nianzhen’s Writing

The four stories that appear in this translation are all intensely character-centric, and one of their strongest features is the depth of the relationships between them. Wu’s writing shines not because he weaves a grandiose plot, but because the people he writes into his stories are people the reader can understand and relate to. The characters featured here all share something in common: in some way or another, they are all two-faced, and there is a disparity between the face they show the outside world and the doubts they must face within themselves. In public, they are overwhelmingly positive and sympathetic; in private, each has his own demons to live with. This duality gives a fair reflection of the energetic but sometimes stressful city life of Taipei, showing us both the public and the private in each character we encounter.

In public, Wu’s characters are pleasant, witty, and gregarious, qualities exemplified by the rapport between Junior, the main character of the title piece *Seize the Springtime*, and his classmates and siblings. When Junior needles his sister about her weight before walking out the door, it’s obviously in good fun, and it’s difficult not to smile at his crack about the outside world being a “demilitarized zone.” In *An Unspeakable, Joyless Life*, Tang Shigan’s good cheer and consideration toward everyone in the city, be they fellow bus-riders, vendors at the subway station, co-workers, or even his landlady, Mama Luo, make him equally sympathetic. These attractive qualities draw the reader in, making almost every character immediately likeable.

Although they might show warmth outwardly, Wu’s characters are not without their troubles. Three of Wu’s major adult characters (Lu Ji, Tian Qingxiang, and Tang Shigan) are faced with seemingly impossible decisions, where their own human nature and reality come into conflict. While these people are more than happy to share their joys with the world, their circumstances force them to be incredibly secretive about their worries, as Bao Ju (*The Wedding*) discovers only after beating his friend in a confused rage. And yet, from his point of view, Tian Qingxiang can never explain his reason for marrying He Jinhui, or else the other men in his village would have nothing to fear from continuing to abuse her as they did in the past: his loveless marriage is, as Bao Ju points out, a heavy cross to bear, but it is one he must bear alone in order to protect his wife and her children. Likewise, Tang Shigan’s story reaches a bittersweet conclusion when he
discovers his son is in a relationship with the new girl at work that he himself has fallen for; he is haunted by his loneliness and the recently rekindled memories of his lost wife, but to continue acting on his lust would jeopardize his relationship with his son, from whom he has long felt too distant. Finally, Lu Ji (Big Brother Goes Fishing), tormented by what he sees as his own worthlessness, would rather run away to make a name for himself than stay at home and live off of the kindness of his girlfriend.

In the end, the two-facedness of these characters brings them closer to the reader. The reader first sees the face they show the public, and develops a certain degree of sympathy for them; and yet, when their personal struggles and internal conflicts come into view, they change from cheerful dolls into real people with minds and emotions of their own. Wu uses this duality both to drive the plot and to strengthen the sense of verisimilitude within each story.

The Beginnings of the Project

I first considered doing a thesis project in Chinese toward the end of my junior year. At the time I didn’t have a particular project in mind, but I knew I would be going to Taipei over the summer to attend the International Chinese Language Program. My advisor, Professor Christopher Nugent, mentioned the possibility of a translation thesis, and it wasn’t long before I was convinced that I wanted to do one. The way I saw it, the benefits were twofold: on the one hand, I didn’t need to perform cultural or linguistic analysis (for which I had neither the background nor the fuzziest idea where to begin), and on the other hand, I could expose myself to Chinese literature and improve my sight-reading abilities.

I mentioned my plans to the teachers conducting placement interviews at ICLP, and they assigned me a class in contemporary Taiwanese short fiction. Surprisingly, I found that it took much more time to prepare for my fiction class than it did to prepare for Thought and Society (a class which focused on reading and discussing scholarly articles). Ironically, I found I almost had to translate pages at a time simply to grasp the basics of the plot. In the end, the difficulty of sight-reading fiction reaffirmed my decision to write a translation thesis (rather than a thesis on literary analysis, a field which remains firmly out of my grasp).
It was in this class that I was introduced to Wu Nianzhen. One of the stories I read at ICLP was Wu’s “The Wedding” (婚禮), which appears as the third story in this translation. What I found most striking was his lifelike representation of dialogue. Perhaps my view is tainted as a learner of Chinese as a second language, but when I read Wu’s works, none of the dialogue felt “forced” as it sometimes can on paper.

I found his first collection, “Seize the Springtime,” at a bookstore in Taipei, and it resonated strongly: when I read the first story and discovered that it took place not only in Taipei, but also at Yang Ming Shan (which I had climbed earlier), I knew I had found something I would enjoy working on over the next year.

A Few Words on the Translation Process

As a student of Chinese as a foreign language, I translate from English to Chinese almost daily. However, this was the first experience I’ve had translating a work of substantial content and length from Chinese to English. The process differed greatly from the work I was used to, and while in my classes I’ve learned to be flexible and use linguistic strategies like circumlocution and paraphrasing, I found myself so bent on keeping the translation as close as possible to the original that I had to completely re-learn them when translating to English. With time that I realized that on its own, an obstinate adherence to the original text wouldn’t always provide a smooth or even a good translation. The truth is that some things simply don’t translate, and while I was fortunate enough not to run into too many of those, I have no trouble believing that they are the hardest part of any translation to “get right.”

To give one example, I faced a dilemma when a character passed some food to another, using the phrase jiè huā xiàn fó, “借花獻佛,” which literally means “to present the Buddha with borrowed flowers.” No English speaker would say such a thing; then should I include the strict translation and sacrifice the reader’s suspension of disbelief, or devise a more “natural” English phrasing? In retrospect, I think the word “re-gift” works well, even if it does lose some of the scholarly wit of the original.

Translation and the Language Learning Process

The primary issue I encountered when studying literature at ICLP was that, while some of my Chinese-American classmates were discussing plot, characterization, and metaphors in their literature classes, I was limited strictly to plot summary and asking for
clarifications on the many, many phrases I didn’t understand. The fact of the matter is that learners of Chinese as a second language are only exposed to vocabulary expected to be useful either in everyday life or in the professional sphere; for good or ill, literature is largely neglected. Thus unprepared, my first exposure to literature felt a good deal like learning a new language.

Translation, I feel, is a useful intermediate step: it allows students to expand their lexicon at their own pace, without any pressure to rapidly acquire highly specialized vocabulary for analysis discussions. However, as much as I’ve enjoyed translating these stories, I do think there are a few excellent reasons for excluding translation from most Chinese curricula. Firstly, translation is time-intensive, not only for the student, but also for the teacher, who must pore over the original and the translation both, searching for inconsistencies and making adjustments. This puts an incredibly (and perhaps unreasonably) heavy burden on the staff of any Chinese department aiming to have students perform translations. Secondly, my personal experience is that while my sight-reading capabilities have improved through writing this thesis, only my passive (that is, listening/reading) comprehension has improved; my proficiency at producing oral and written output in Chinese has not gained significantly from the process. Thus, I believe that translation is a language learning strategy best suited to self-motivated individual learners interested in developing their literary proficiency, rather than an entire class of students, whose foreign language learning strategies and proficiency goals may have a significant degree of variability.

Resources and attributions

As to the actual mechanics of the translation, I was able to rely on just a few basic tools for the vast majority of the translation issues I ran into: for dictionaries I used a basic Oxford Pocket Chinese Dictionary and an online dictionary (http://www.nciku.com), which allows users to look up unfamiliar characters by using a mouse to write them in. When I didn’t have a good “feeling” for how certain words were used in Chinese, I went to the Chinese language database at Peking University (http://ccl.pku.edu.cn:8080/ccl_corpus/), which contains 477 million characters in language samples, in both modern and classical Chinese. This resource allowed me to better understand the subtleties of mood and tone of the original Chinese, and it’s an
excellent tool that’s sadly underrepresented in the Chinese language curricula I’ve encountered.

These tools, while useful, were on their own insufficient to clarify certain parts of the translation (particularly quotes and cultural references to plays, songs, and poetry); I sometimes conferred with native speakers (Lu Jyunhong, Li Nini, and Li Yibai foremost among them). They graciously helped me decipher some unfamiliar sentence structures and slang, introduced me to other helpful materials, and in general made my work that much easier.

Lastly, I also owe a great deal to my advisor, Professor Christopher Nugent, without whom this project would not have been possible. He has been my one constant reader, following pace for pace through both the original text and my translations, offering his comments and expertise along the way.
"Seize the Springtime"

The alarm clock went off with a ringing sound and it seemed I was drifting back from some other wonderful and cozy world, but my eyelids just wouldn’t open.

“Little brother, get up, how are you still asleep?!” Big Brother was on the next bed over, howling in a voice he thought must be “sexy”.

“Like hell I’m getting up, it’s Sunday!” I rolled over. “On the seventh day of creation, God himself had to rest!”

“Come on, if Mom comes in a minute and you’re not up it’s no big deal, but if I get yelled at it is!”

Really, brothers can’t kill each other in cold blood. The way he talked, Big Brother sounded like he had things really tough, too. Ever since Mom, from who knows where, learned about that admittedly extremely effective “new teaching style,” Big Brother became the “representative scapegoat;” in everything he did he was like a chicken for people to kill when they were bored. He kept on saying, “I’m at the mercy of other people, like meat on a chopping block.”

Actually I knew early on that I was the real target of Mom’s scoldings, and I only played dumb to go along with Mom’s process: she would deliberately assume that I didn’t know, and then have me “go think on things myself.” That so-called ‘indirect’ teaching style was really much more direct than the “direct” method. Kids like us should be the ones writing the book on child-rearing.

“You don’t have to sit there playing dead. Oh yeah, I’ll tell you a quick way to wake up. I learned it from Reader’s Digest, it works really well!”

“Forget it, I’m half-dead from exhaustion. If I had that kind of spare time, I wouldn’t need to sleep, would I?”

“What, isn’t five or six hours of sleep enough? Old man Thomas Edison only had to sleep three or four hours a night to recharge; or is there a break in your power cable?”

“Get off it!” I quickly pulled off the covers and jumped off the bed. The sound of Mom’s sandals had already passed from the kitchen to the dining room. I cried: “It’s freezing for this early in the spring!” It really was pretty cold out. I put on my pants while Big Brother stood to one side laughing. Mom started to climb the stairs, I put my shirt on, and then Mom got to the door.
“Mom! I’m awake!” I shouted, and Big Brother laughed again.

“Eat your breakfast,” Mom said, satisfied. The sound of her sandals went away, relieving my sense of alarm.

“Hey, unlucky high-school senior,” Big Brother said. Seeing him there, stretching out oh-so-comfortably and looking on with a cold eye, I was really envious.

“As the little kid I really do have the worst luck,” I said. I put on my sweater. Mom had made it herself; as the old poem goes, ‘thread in the kind mother’s hand became clothes on the wandering child’s body.’ I went downstairs to appease Mom.

“Come on, the whole world yields to you, everyone cares about you; if you do anything wrong there’s always someone to take the blame, and you still don’t think it’s enough!”

“Big Brother, you don’t even know, day in and day out I act out ‘The Third Wife’s Son’ for you all to see, but I’ve never gotten a chance to see any of you perform ‘Second Semester High School Senior’.”

“Little Brother, do you think we really like watching? Frankly, I just get emotional really easily.”

“Maybe it’d be interesting if only you weren’t so full of it!”

“Little Brother, I’m telling you the truth, I’m the only one in the family that understands you!”

“Thanks. Cheers!” I held up an empty coffee mug. “He needs to drink his XX coffee every morning…”

“Little Brother, you watch too much TV.” Big Brother sat down and lit a cigarette.

“I swear I don’t,” I held up my right hand: “when would I have the time?”

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1 In contrast to the American education system, Chinese and Taiwanese students only attend high school for three years. Thus, third year is students’ “senior year,” when they take the college entrance exams.
2 “老么,” the youngest member of the family. It is also the main character’s nickname among his family.
3 “慈母手中線，遊子身上衣” is a quote from a song by 孟郊, a Tang dynasty poet. The rest of the song reads, “临行密密缝，意恐迟迟归。谁言寸草心，报得三春晖”
4 “三娘教子” is a part of a traditional Bejing Opera in which a man’s concubine (“third wife”) painstakingly raises his child. “高三下学期” is likely invented by the narrator as a joke.
5 “XX Coffee” is a placeholder name used by the original author to avoid copyright infringement.
“Never mind that, get downstairs before Mom hears one of the girls start shouting again, or you’re gonna get it!”

“Hey, let me have a puff, how about that?” I said, looking at the interesting way he smoked.

“Cut it out, ask again once you’ve gotten into college.”

“Big Brother, let me ask you something!” I said.

“Say it, kid.” Big Brother flicked at his tobacco smoke; his movements were very stylish.

“Is it true that you can do anything once you’ve tested into college?”

“Yes—no,” he said. “You can’t do anything that’ll get you executed.” College students always talk like they’re on stage.

“Mom, Little Brother’s too lazy to get out of bed!” Second Sister called from the door. She was the kind of person who wasn’t happy unless the whole world was in turmoil. In all the world, only villains and women were truly incorrigible.

I opened the door and flashed a dashing smile.

“Shut up,” I said. “Could you at least leave me a little bit of dignity?”

“You’re the kind of person who won’t amount to anything unless you’re scolded!” Second Sister said. She had always thought she was hot stuff, someone who really ‘amounted to something’. Then again, that’s not so weird; every school she had attended since childhood was first-rate, and she tested into her first choice college even without a prep course. Now that I think about it, I felt like nobody in the family seemed entirely normal (including her, of course). For example, everybody else’s family had “a strict father and a kind mother,” whereas we had a “strict mother and a kind father;” and in this generation where women were the “weaker sex,” both Big Sister and Second Sister were engineers, one chemical and the other mechanical; and as for darling Big Brother, dignified and upstanding, well, he was studying education. How dreadful! Pimples often said that everyone in the family was psycho, and I thought he might be right.

“Well don’t just stand there looking confused, run off and brush your teeth! You need someone to tell you to do everything; do you ever think about how old you are? I

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6 麻子, a nickname for someone with poor skin or a pockmarked face.
guess you really do put everything off until the last second. You really are someone who won’t shed a tear until you see the coffin!” Second Sister said.

I closed the bathroom door. Girls’ tongues are made of tempered steel, and boys’ mouths are toilets. That’s what our physics teacher said. It actually makes a lot of sense: one can speak forever without tiring; the other is both dirty and smelly.

“Sister,” I opened the door, at the same time squeezing out some toothpaste, taking advantage of the moment and getting ready to steal a little amusement from the morning rush.

“What are you doing?!” Second Sister was in the middle of combing her hair, as methodically and mathematically as ever: sixty-seven, sixty-eight, sixty-nine…and she would comb through it a hundred times.

“I’m not just trying to flatter you, but…” I said.

“What, do you have something nice to say then?” Seventy-one, seventy-two, seventy-three…

“You’re dressed awfully flirtatiously today,” I said. “Could it be that you’re going out somewhere?”

I locked the door as I spoke and started singing loudly; “Bristling with anger, leaning on a railing…” Outside I thought Second Sister would bring down the Apocalypse on us. I made a face at the mirror; damn, my beard had grown again. Ah, how I’ve gotten old.

The sun lit up the dining room window and the sky was a shining blue. The azure sky looked as though it had been washed clean. Mom pushed open all the French windows; the few bowls of flowers that had been on the windowsill just a moment ago were just then suffering in Mom’s sharp claws. Her movements looked just like they had when I was small and she had washed my hair for me, always clutching and pulling.

“Hey, they’re about to bloom, you old codger, they’re about to bloom!” Mom shouted loudly.

“What?” Dad had just been poking around in the editorial. Only peculiar people like my father ever read editorials.

7 “怒髮衝冠憑欄處” are the opening lyrics to an opera song called Man Jiang Hong (滿江紅) by Yue Fei (岳飛)
“The chrysanthemums, they’re about to bloom!” Mom brought the entire pot of flowers over from the window.

“I saw them,” Dad waved his hand and mom carried them away again. Actually Mom and I both knew that Dad hadn’t so much as glanced at them.

“Dad!” I said.

“Hmm?”

“You’re so distracted today!”

“What?” Dad threw his newspaper down, clenched his fists and jumped over.

“How dare you criticize me?!”

Although Dad had gotten older and fatter, his movements were still quite agile, probably because he’d been a soldier for a long time; just imagine how long it must have taken between starting as a private and retiring as a colonel. More than twenty years!

“I wouldn’t dare, Dad,” I tilted my head back and gulped down some milk. Dad would have liked to strangle me, with his well-practiced iron grip.

“Junior, when are you going to finish eating?” Mom said from the balcony, afraid I couldn’t think for myself. “What time is it? Will you be able to make it to cram school?” She sighed. “You need to think for yourself! A child as big as you shouldn’t need his mom to worry about him day in and day out, you’ll wear her out!”

“Junior,” Dad said in a low voice, “Eat quickly and run off to class!”

Second Sister came down the stairs. Big Brother came too; they were both in high spirits. It was Sunday, and for college students that meant a day to go out.

“Good morning Mom, good morning Dad!” Second Sister said.

“Good morning Dad, good morning Mom!” Big Brother said, always a flatterer.

“Oh, it’s still morning, is it?” Mom asked without turning her head.

“What great weather!” Second Sister said: “Spring dawns without our knowing, and all around the birds are crowing.”

“Very fitting, very fitting,” Dad said. “And the next half, Junior?”

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8 “春眠不覺曉，處處聞啼鳥”, a segment of a Tang dynasty poem by Meng Haoran (孟浩然) and one of the first that children learn.
“With nightfall comes the sound of Mahjong, and I don’t know who won!9” I said, knowing I couldn’t miss the opportunity. Anyway, a person without a sense of humor is no better than a walking corpse.

“Junior!” Mom shouted loudly.

“What a rebel!” Second Sister said.

Big Brother kicked me under the table and Dad shook his head and gave a laugh as colorless as a woman in the Empress’ palace.10 This family really is backwards; all the boys are effeminate, all the girls are masculine; even the chrysanthemums bloom in the spring.11

Textbooks, notes, red pen, blue pen, bus ticket, glasses: I had everything, except money.

“Junior, it’s eight o’clock!” Mom shouted in her high-pitched voice.

“I’m coming!” I said. Mom’s weakness was that no matter how angry or worried she got, as long as you said something to show you were listening, the fire would go right out of her and she’d be perfectly content.

That was Dad’s experience from twenty or thirty years of trial and error, and it was really very effective; I found it worked time and time again.

“Are you all coming back to eat lunch?” Mom asked.

“Not me!” We all said.

“Junior, you have to come back!” Mom was glaring at me.

“No way, it’s so far away that it would be a waste to come home! Go out for lunch, find a classmate and chat for awhile, compare study habits!” Dad said. This was the father that often made me so grateful that I could cry. My mother may have given birth to me, but it was my father who really knew me.

“Dad! Aren’t you afraid he’ll look for a girl to go out with?” Second Sister’s mouth was full of milk, but she nonetheless didn’t miss her chance to speak up.

“Sister, how about you stop talking?” Big Brother saw her attack and immediately rushed to my aid, frowning as he spoke. What a good brother.

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9 “夜來麻將聲，不知誰贏了”, a parody of the poem quoted by Second Sister (the original actually continues, “夜來風雨聲，花落知多少。”)
10 “六宮粉黛無顏色”: women in imperial palaces wore black and white makeup
11 Chrysanthemums are a seasonal flower that normally blooms in autumn.
“Do you have money?” Dad asked, simultaneously going through his pockets. What he meant was: Son, whether or not you have money I’m going to give you some.

“Nope!”

“Here, take this. Don’t spend it all in one place!” Dad quickly tossed it over and I hurriedly put it away.

“How much did you give him?” Mom asked.

“Fifty bucks or so!” Dad said. What a kind-hearted dad, he gave me two hundred!12

“Mom, I’m going now!” I opened the door. “Big Brother, ‘have a good time!’13”

“Thanks!”

“Second Sister!”

“What?! Any last words?”

“Your legs are looking kind of chunky, you should try eating a little less!” I said. I closed the door, sure that she would erupt like a volcano in there; but it wouldn’t affect me, because Dad kept the strict rule that the family children could only fight inside the house. We couldn’t let any family scandal get out! The entrance to the stairway was a demilitarized zone.

I counted the stairs as I went down, and the more I thought about school the less I wanted to go. This was supposed to be a high-school senior’s beautiful Sunday14 morning, dammit!

At the bottom of the stairs there was someone pushing a bicycle: the third daughter of the family on the second floor,15 another poor kid in her third year.

“Hi!” I said (a little too familiarly—otherwise I really couldn’t strike up a conversation with a girl. It wasn’t because I didn’t know how, but because I didn’t have the guts).

“Hi!” She lifted her head and looked at me; there were dark circles under her eyes. Eight to one she was another Edison. “Are you going to class?”

“Yeah,” I said: “You going too?”

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12 Money is measured in NTD; at the time of translation, 50 NTD is equivalent to about US$1.55, and 200 NTD is about US$6.00 – enough to buy an inexpensive meal for two in Taipei.

13 “have a good time” is printed in English in the original text.

14 “beautiful Sunday” is printed in English in the original.

15 “二樓的三千金”, this becomes the girl’s nickname later in the story.
“Yeah!”
Typical. We’d been in the same cram class for a whole term and asked anyway.
The weather was really fantastic. The trees on the traffic island had just sprouted
in a swath of light green; it made me so excited I felt like flying. Even better, I had a girl
walking next to me. I felt like I was in an art film.
“Cool against our faces, a mild breeze that gently moves the trees,” she quoted.
Another girl with literary tendencies.
“It’s really nice!”
“Hey! You really can’t get up in the mornings, can you?” she asked, smiling.
“No way, who told you that!”
“Then how is it that every morning I hear your mom over there shouting?” she
said. I noticed her hands on the handlebars of her bike; how sad, her bones were skinny
as matchsticks!
“She’s just gabby, like all women!” I said.
“Shut up!” she said. “Actually, I sometimes get so exhausted I can’t wake up
either.”
“You’re probably just too hard-working!” I said. Benevolence Road Section Four:
the most beautiful street in town, and I had a candid girl confessing to me. What a
beautiful Sunday!
“I really haven’t mastered a thing!” She tilted her head and asked: “What about
you?”
“Oh, you know,” I said. “Sometimes I feel like I’ve studied a ton, but I have no
idea how well other people have studied, so my thoughts wander all over and I get
nervous!”
“Me too,” she said. “Wait, hasn’t everyone in your family gone to college? What
are you afraid of?! You’ve got your own private tutors.”
“Whatever.” Red light, traffic stopped. “Big Sister doesn’t know her ass from her
elbow, Big Brother’s in social studies and his math’s even worse than mine. As for

16 An excerpt by a poem by the Song poet Zeng Zhinan (僧志南). The whole poem reads:
古木陰中繫短篷 杖藜扶我過橋東
沾衣欲濕杏花雨 吹面不寒楊柳風
Second Sister, she’s on her own program. I’ll be happy as long as she doesn’t hold me back!”

“You mean the one that’s into electrical engineering?” She asked.

“That’s the one. When she doesn’t have anything to do she comes around especially to bother me. What can she teach me?!”

“A lot of my classmates are the same way. Their siblings go to other peoples’ houses to tutor, but when they’re at home they just mess around!”

“I know, I really don’t get it sometimes!” I said.

A few little public middle school fuzz-heads wearing verdant green walked by laughing and shouting, looking like they were on a field trip. Wire-wrapped roast meat poked out of their backpacks.

“I’m so jealous of them!” She said.

“Whatsoever; in three or four years won’t they be just like us, faced with bitterness and difficulties?”

Green light. I waited for her to start walking and caught up.

“Hey, have you ever thought about what you’ll do if you don’t get into college?” she said.

“Of course I’ve thought about it, a boy should join the army!” I said. “For girls, it doesn’t matter!”

“You’re wrong,” she said, shaking her head and frowning. “My big sister took the exam one year and when she didn’t make it she just didn’t take it again. In the end she couldn’t find work; she just stayed at home all day, blaming everyone and everything but herself. I’m really afraid I’ll end up the same way. High school doesn’t count for anything on a résumé, you know!”

“So get married, then!” I said, laughing. “It’s a long-term meal ticket!”

“You’re awful!”

“Really,” I said. “It’s guys that have it tough. Once you’ve been in the army for two or three years, you come back and find you’ve already forgotten everything. And it’s not easy to go back and study it all over again!”

“So don’t go, then!” she said with a sincere expression.
“What, are you joking? Being a soldier’s not like a movie you can just walk out on!”

“But there are plenty of people who haven’t been soldiers!”

“They’ve got health issues, then.”

“So if you don’t want to go, just make up an illness,” she said. Women just aren’t up to debating big issues.

“Come on!”

“Actually I’ve thought about it sometimes, but it’s just like going to college, isn’t it? Just reading a stack of books? Read read read, and then what do you do?”

“I’ve thought about it too, but my big brother tells me not to think about it too much. Walk one step, and then plan your next. Thousands and thousands of high school students are studying for the college entrance exam. We’re high school students too, so we also have to take the test!”

“We’re all AP-level sheep!”

“It’s a little early to call us AP-level,” I said. “We’re just self-destructive. It’s like we’re walking toward a mountain of tigers knowing full well what’s there!”

“Hey, you know people who go to college, like your brother and sisters; what’s the next step they’re planning?”

“A lot,” I said. “For example, today’s Sunday. All they’ll talk about is, ‘who’re you going out with today, where are you going to go relax?’”

“Shut up!” she said, laughing.

The entrance to our cram school was always as crowded and varied as a junkyard; students both new and old filled the hallway.

A bunch of kids sat in rows downstairs. The boys had lots of excuses, claimed they were waiting for classmates. God knows they were just looking at girls. Nonetheless I was glad to see them. I could be so much more frank with them than with my family. On top of that, everyone had a tacit agreement: for example, if they all clearly saw me come in with a girl, they’d want to start an uproar, but they wouldn’t do it in front of her. They behaved well enough; only once she went upstairs, looking like a sick cat, would they start running their mouths, one after one.
“Damn, you’re making us wanna kill ourselves here!” “Not bad! Beautiful, intelligent, and with a fair disposition!” “Won’t you introduce us?!” “Cut it out, every day you cry about being tired, and here you’ve been chasing girls all along! How about it, am I right?”

“Stop!” I said. “Fellas, don’t misunderstand.”

“Come on, the real man here is up to a challenge!”

“Damn it, we were just walking the same way! She lives downstairs from my family, we just ran into each other at the door. Don’t get all delusional here, okay?!” I said.

“Right, after all the early bird gets the worm!” “You can spare yourself the trouble of asking her address!” “Yeah, it’ll be really easy to get together!”

“Damn it guys, my old man’s strict, I don’t even have a chance.”

“I believe in you!” the Head Boy said. I admired him for not going too far. “Just wait until after you take the entrance exam.”

“Yeah, that’s more like it!” I said, taking my book-bag down. “What classes do we have today?”

“English, math, chemistry, and physics!”

“Plenty of material to cover today,” I said. “Let’s head up!”

“Good morning, ladies and gentlemen!” our teacher said in English, though the entire class was in an uproar. I laughed and stroked my chin. I’d forgotten to shave again, and my beard was prickly against my hand.

Everyone liked English class—not because they liked English, but because they liked the teacher. He was humorous, but had a depth to him. Taking his class wasn’t at all tiring or boring, that was his strong point.

“Today’s weather would be really great for going out!”

“I know, I know!” Some energy came back to the litter of sick cats.

“Look at the spring sunrise over Yang Ming Mountain! The cherry blossoms are in full bloom and the egrets gather as the spring water begins to warm. Grass lawns brim with the welcoming smiles of spring; awaiting us are three months of gentle winds and the warm spring sun, and the entire land is invigorated!” He gestured with his entire

17 “班頭” is synonymous with “班長,” a title literally meaning “Class Monitor.”
body, eloquent and articulate, delivering a real masterpiece of prose; how admirable!

Pimples patted my leg and grinned: “He’s great!”

“In the meantime all of you submit yourselves to the torture of going to class, giving up and ignoring this beautiful world, watching teachers sing a solo opera. It really sounds quite pitiful; it’s all a soul can do to hold back tears of sympathy!”

“Yeah, yeah!” The entire class shouted loudly, and some of them even started clapping.

“However, you all need to look back and think.” He stopped for a moment and started pacing as though on stage. Suddenly he turned around, changed the rhythm of his steps and said, “Spring is here; can the college entrance exam be far behind?”

Everyone moaned like a sick cat, returning once more to reality. Pimples said, “This guy really knows how to abuse his quotes.”

“Everyone! You’re the best students of one of our best institutes of learning; each fiery, skillful youth among you has attained the height of perfection!” He said solemnly. I couldn’t help but stand at attention. “You also all know that the azaleas in the gardens at NTU are even fresher, even more beautiful than those at Yang Ming Mountain. Tomorrow is spring; when the time comes that each of you has a beautiful girlfriend and can stand in the NTU campus enjoying the spring scenery, you will profoundly feel that although you may have lost one springtime, you will have attained instead an eternal springtime!” Everyone who had felt like a sick cat only moments ago suddenly regained their spirits, shouted “hurrah,” and clapped almost without end.

Pimples said, “He’s definitely studied his social psych, he’d make a fantastic politician!”

“Excuse me!” Someone raised their hand.

“What is it?”

“Teacher, does Tsinghua University have azaleas?” he foolishly asked.

“I’m not sure. Did you have an objection?” the teacher replied, baffled.

“It’s nothing, I’m just thinking of putting Tsinghua down as my first choice college on the exam, but I’m afraid that after I give up this springtime, I’ll have lost the eternal springtime, too!”
After he finished speaking, the idiot sat down, still with a straight face, and the entire class exploded like a nuclear bomb, an absolute uproar: everyone was slapping their desks, clapping their hands, and whistling, seizing the chance to express themselves. “You know, I sort of admire this kind of dedicated, unassuming martyr!” Pimples remarked. I agreed, but I still couldn’t figure out whether the kid was actually that stupid or just playing. “Ok, now,”\(^{18}\) let’s get back to business. Open your textbooks to page fifty-four, adverbs and adjectives…” the teacher said with a sheepish grin.

Pimples made a face at me and said, “The comedy’s over, now the tragedy begins.”

At noon, a group of people gathered together again and took an hour’s break, not too long and not too short. It was disorganized, too. Nobody could come up with anything interesting to do.

“What do you think about skipping class?” Pimples said, straightening up suddenly, his spirits lifted.

“I’ve never done such a thing,” the Head Boy said without even lifting his head. “What’s the matter, it’s only half a day! What about you, Chief?\(^{19}\)”

“Either way, doesn’t matter,” Chief said listlessly.

“The hell’s wrong with you?”

“What classes do we have this afternoon?”

“Chemistry and physics!”

“I don’t mind,” I said. I actually understood a little bit of chemistry and physics.

“Where to?” the Head Boy said, lifting his head.

“Think about it.”

“Yang Ming Mountain, we’ll go seize our last springtime!” Chief said.

“Like hell!”

“The teacher said it himself!”

“It’s okay, we can go relax a bit, save our energy for tomorrow!” I said. That weather, my God, it really made me want to go out and just run.

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\(^{18}\) “Ok, now,” appears in English in the original.

\(^{19}\) “魁漢”, a nickname.
“What do you think, Head Boy?”
“All right ‘gentlemen’, I’m putting my life on the line to keep you company.” He lazily got to his feet.
“How loyal of you!”
I don’t know how I got around to it but I wound up thinking about the girl from downstairs and her pitiful expression; she seemed like she needed a good walk, too.
“I’m gonna go look for that girl to come with us!” I was actually way too up-front about it, I have no idea why.
“You’re going overboard, now!” the Head Boy said: “Where are you going, on a date?! That’s enough!”
“No way!” I said. “The poor thing just looked like she really needed a chance to get out and relax!”
“Head Boy, could you relax a little? You’re a senior, so’s she. I know you’re worked up, she is too; there’s nothing wrong with asking her to come relax and chat for a while,” Pimples said.
“Yeah! Head Boy, there must be something on your mind for you to be so prejudiced against her; you’re just as bad as the head tutor!”
“Go, then! If you want to die, everyone may as well die together,” the Head Boy said.
“Go on, kid.” It seemed like Pimples’ excitement had driven his blood pressure up. Over his shoulder, he said, “See if you can get a few more to come with her, so she won’t get too exhausted.”
“Pimples, you’ve got real issues!” I said.
“Hey, it’s just that it’s hard to find good weather like this,” Pimples said.
That sick cat had just been lying by the fence and soaking up the sun; again she looked half-dead.
“Hi!” I said.
“What’s up?”
“You brave enough to cut class?”
“Am I brave enough?” She looked as though the Apocalypse had just arrived.
“Weren’t you talking about how refreshing the breeze was this morning? Don’t you want to go enjoy it?” I asked.

“You’re crazy, no wonder your mom yells at you!”

“I’m being honest here, it’ll be really nice to jog up on the mountain, but it’ll be as bad as dying if you just bury yourself here. Anyway we’re both well-behaved, not like those kids who do nothing but run around all day!”

“Cut it out,” she said, but her conviction began to waver. “I have class in the afternoon!”

“What class?”

“Geography and history!”

“What’s so great about those classes? Read it yourself and it’s just about the same, your teacher’s not gonna rewrite history. You’ve gotta get out and move around, trade half a day’s time for a few days of high spirits. Think about it, you’ve gotta take care of your own body!”

“Which mountain?” she said. Look, people follow their hearts and her heart followed my logic. That’s what I call a mortal struggle.

“Yang Ming Mountain ‘to which the births of heroes have brought glory’!”

“When are you leaving?” she asked. I turned around and started walking.

“Right now. go get ready. I’ll see you at the door. Oh yeah, and go find a few more sick cats; after all, ‘there is greater merit in saving one life than in building a seven-tier pagoda,’” I said.

“All right!” she said, and hastily ducked into the classroom.

“How’d it go?” Everybody stood tensely at the entrance to the stairs, as though facing a great enemy.

“It worked!” I said.

“Yeah!” Chief shouted, unable to keep himself quiet. “Look, the sick can pity each other after all!”

“Keep yourselves under control, all right?!” the Head Boy said. “Don’t go crazy. We’re just taking a break, not going on a field trip. Don’t forget about next semester, we still have to push ourselves to make it into college!”
“Head Boy,” Pimples said, looking like he was about to cry, “you’re no Paul Newman either, to think you can rein in your emotions in just one afternoon. You need to keep your word, too!”

“Yeah, yeah!” Chief said.

“Yeah right.” The Head Boy, shamed into anger, gave Chief a shove. Everyone whistled as they went down the stairs; goodbye, cram class! Goodbye, textbooks! Ahh, springtime!

“Springtime isn’t the time to study!” Chief said plaintively as he pulled his bike out.

I was thinking about whether or not I’d faint if the principal showed up and saw our band of rebels. Nine idiots: five girls and four boys with only a hundred days until their placement exams, grinning and going to take in the sights.

There was a flood of tourists at the peak of Yang Ming Mountain. In order to keep track of each other, we spread out front to back in a line about 18 meters long.

“What a great view!” Chief said, looking dumbfounded.

“Look at that floral clothing, those smiles! We’ve already gotten our money’s worth,” Pimples said. “In the springtime, there’s really no place where flowers don’t fly.”

“Except for our cram classroom!” the Head Boy said.

“Our third-year high school classroom, either!”

“Third year is like a funeral parlor!”

“Screw you! Be a little more optimistic, okay?”

“Yeah, better to say the third year of high school is a premonition of college, the top class at NTU!”

“Utopia!” the Head Boy said. “A bunch of people who don’t know life and death comforting themselves.”

“God, cheer up!” Pimples said. “Since you came here, at least enjoy it.”

The flowers were red, the trees were green, and the air was pure. Each breath was like drinking a hundred cups of coffee, like taking a hundred vitamins; every cell in my body came alive, and it felt magnificent.

“Hey guys, don’t walk so fast, all right?” my neighbor gasped from behind.

“Damn,” Chief said. “we’re leaving people behind!”
I looked for a place to sit down and rest a bit.

“How about we go down to the Xinhai Guangfu building?” the Head Boy asked.
“Let’s go get some coffee!”

“Coffee? Damn, I oughta kill you!” Pimples objected for me.
“I refuse to go indoors,” one of the girls said, her eyes level, her face pale. As a high school senior, at one glance I knew why: “It’s been a long time since I’ve gotten out to tan!”

“Don’t try to tan, you’ll get sunburned and we’ll get caught when we go back!” my neighbor said.

“No way, my mom already knows I’ve gone out walking before, she’ll be perfectly happy!” the other girl said.

“What a good mother!” the four boys said as one.
“I wish your mom would adopt me,” Chief said.

Everybody started smiling so broadly that people on the road turned their heads to look. I really envied them; they were about as old as we were, but they didn’t have to face the threat of the entrance exams. College, college…

“Hey, how great would it be if we didn’t have to face the threat of the entrance exams, either?” Another girl said: “We’d be so free!”

“But they’re jealous that we can still study; it’ll put money in our wallets and food in our mouths.”

“People don’t know how good they really have it!”

“Oh yeah, have you all ever thought about whether or not going to college makes a difference?”

“It does! At least if you’ve gone to college, if you ever want to study something, just grab a book and you can understand right away!”

“Not necessarily. Do you mean books in foreign languages?”

“Yeah?”

“Well, what if you major in Chinese, or something else where you don’t have to read in foreign languages?”

“At least you’ll have the ability to study whatever it is you want more deeply.”
“So what’s the difference, then? People who make money specialize in making money. We say they’re unschooled, that they have no enthusiasm for life; but I study management, and if I test into business school, isn’t that learning how to make money? So what’s the difference?”

“And even if you’ve studied a lot, you won’t necessarily make more money,” Chief said. “Wang Yong-qing20 didn’t go to college, but how many college graduates do you think he had in his employ? People with masters’ degrees and doctorates, too!”

“You can’t talk like that,” the Head Boy said. “No matter what, you can’t argue a reason for going to college. I believe that there are too many contradictions in the world. For example, people say there’s no point in studying history, that we should aim for future success; then there are people who say we should be like Wang Yun-wu21, that we should study hard and independently. But every year, tens of thousands of people rush to the gates of college. So my philosophy is, since you’re studying, study hard. It doesn’t matter whether or not you get into college. Anyway, ‘there’s a shortage of rice and a surplus of monks to eat it’; all that matters is that everyone can put themselves to use in a career they like: so what’s the difference between having a college education and not? On the one hand, you can study within the walls of an institution; on the other you can study outside. That’s it!”

“Head Boy, do you mean to say you’re a martyr? That if you make it, you’ll go to college, and if not, you’ll give up?”

“You could put it that way.” The Head Boy lay down. “For my majors, I’m only listing those I like. Mom and Dad can’t do anything about it. Because, you see, if they tell me to go study something I don’t like, that’s even worse than not going to college. I could use those four years to get some experience or cultivate some interests!”

“I’d never thought about it that much!” my neighbor said.

“Me neither,” I said. “I still don’t really understand. But if I did get it, and if I then walked into the fire and didn’t so much as touch a book, it’d be as bad as dying. Because I know my family and teachers wouldn’t want me to study outside those walls.

20 A Taiwanese entrepreneur who had no formal schooling past elementary school. He became one of the richest men in Taiwan, worth around $5.5 billion.
21 A famous Chinese scholar and politician who invented the Four Corner system of Chinese typography.
I’d lose my dignity! Even if I studied more than everyone else, nobody would know, because I wouldn’t even have so much as a degree!”

“I agree!”

“How pitiful you all are!” Pimples said. “You’d all die without knowing why, too.”

“Stop!” the Head Boy said. “Don’t talk about these things, take it easy! It’s hard to come by a half day of leisure like this. Get some sun or whatever. And Chief, stop blocking my sun!”

“All right, Mr. Philosopher.”

Everyone went quiet. Nine people, nine bodies, nine dreams, and one goal.

Interesting.

“Hey! I just thought,” Pimples said, “getting into college is like when we play basketball: the winner wins, the loser loses. But after everyone showers off and changes clothes, they’re all the same. The only difference is that the winners remember that they won a game, but when the next game comes around they don’t remember who won and who lost!”

“So what do you mean by ‘the next game’?” that pale, four-eyed girl said.

“Stop!” the Head Boy said. “We have no right to talk about these things. Let adults do the discussion, go out and tan or something! Just imagine it’s a warm-up exercise before our basketball game. If you can’t get it right then just cancel the game, then there are no winners or losers!”

“Yeah, let’s not talk about this!”

“What a pity, my mom only knows that if I don’t study hard I’ll die, but she doesn’t know that if I don’t photosynthesize I’ll die too!” As Chief spoke, the girls all started laughing.

“Come on, what do you think you are? A cactus?”

“Nay, it appears I be a sliver of duckweed in the sea,” Chief sang.

The Flower Clock pointed to three o’clock. The sun over Yang Ming Mountain was great, and I really didn’t want to leave. There was no textbook, no classroom, no cram class; just the blue sky and a group of people with smiles on all their faces.

“Hey, your Second Sister!” my neighbor tapped me and pointed ahead.
“Kid, you’re really dead meat now!” Pimples said, relishing in my misfortune.

My Second Sister glanced at me with one eye, probably to avoid spreading any family scandal. She took the poor unfashionably-dressed thing next to her, pushed him to one side, and came over at a half run. The expression on her face was more awful than that of a widow. This time I was indeed dead meat.

“Junior, get over here!” She stood in front of me, looking all high and mighty.

“What’s up?” I rubbed my temples as I walked over.

“You still have the nerve to ask what’s up? Has your class moved up here?!” She looked over my right shoulder and said, “You’ve brought a girl, too! Are you looking to die?”

“Sister, don’t get worked up, all right? We just came up to relax, is all!”

“You still have the entrance exam to take! Or have you forgotten?”

“Shut up, it’s only because I’m dead tired from studying for the entrance exam that I snuck up here for a change of scenery. I’m just getting some sun—photosynthesizing, that’s all!”

“Why are you still smiling? I think I see your future on the ground there, go pick it up!” Second Sister said.

“Isn’t going to college like giving up your life?! College may be valuable, but life is even more so; ‘as long as there’s a green tree left on the mountain, you needn’t fear that everything was burned.’”

“Fine, go home and we’ll see if you can still defend yourself with such poetic rhetoric,” Second Sister said and then turned around to leave.

“Second Sister!” I called.

“What now? Are you going to repent?” she said, looking gleeful.

“Your boyfriend’s really plain!” I don’t know where I got the inspiration to say it.

“You really won’t shed a tear until you see the coffin!”

Go then, I thought to myself. If you can enjoy the springtime, so can I.

“What’d your Second Sister say?” Pimples asked.

“She said a little relaxation is necessary. True health lies in the balance of both body and mind.”
“No wonder she made it into electrical engineering,” my neighbor said. “She really knows her Three Principles22!”

When we returned at dusk, we pedaled even faster than we had earlier.

“Hey, I’m feeling much better, and way more energetic!” my neighbor’s daughter said, her face bright red.

“Me too,” I said, but I was thinking about something else. To tell the truth, I had no idea how badly Second Sister had blown things up back home. Mom had probably already poured the loquat oil and gotten ready to put it to use23; Dad would definitely be disappointed, lying on the sofa to recover from the shock. But on the other hand it was still worth it; I was feeling relaxed after filtering out all my worries. Even if I was in trouble, I still couldn’t complain.

“Hey, what’re you putting for your first choice of major?” she turned her head and said.

“I haven’t decided yet,” I said. “I’ll probably just go with the flow.”

“Since elementary school, haven’t we all been writing essays about what we want to be when we grow up?”

“Yeah, I want to be a dreamer!” I said.

“Be serious!” she said.

“I don’t know. Seriously,” I said, turning my head. “What about you?”

“International relations.” she said.

“So what career is that, then?”

“Let’s go home!”

She started pedaling like the wind, and the dusk got cool again. It was a really poetic moment.

“Hey, you getting tired?” my neighbor asked.

“Nope!”

“I’ve got to get through a whole pile of homework tonight, too!” she said. “What do you use to stay awake at night?”

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22 The Three Principles of the People: Nationalism, Democracy, and the People’s Livelihood, put forward by Sun Yat-sen. Here the character emphasizes the last of these.

23 In traditional Chinese medicine, loquat oil is used to soothe the throat. The author’s meaning here is likely that his mother will shout until her throat is raw.
“Coffee, sometimes Stresstabs, though the latter was my mom’s idea. What about you?”

“Tea. Strong tea with lemon,” she said. “My sister’s idea.”

“If, after giving up, I somehow make it into college, you know what the first thing I’ll do is?”

“I dunno, but the first thing I’m doing is burning all my textbooks and notes!” she said with a stern look, clenching her teeth.

“Yeah, we’ll do it together! Shake on it?”

“Shut up!” She opened the door just a tiny crack, her hand went back and waved a few times, and the lights died down.

I went upstairs carrying my book bag and put an apathetic look on my face.

“You’re back!” Mom said. “You must be tired, why don’t you go take a shower?”

That was rich. “You must be tired” must be a part of Mom’s ironic “teaching style.” She was probably sharpening her knife and preparing to slaughter me. But looking at her face, I couldn’t see that there was anything on her mind. Mom was no actor, she couldn’t fake anything.

“Mom, has Second Sister gotten back yet?” I tried to gather some intel.

“Oh, and when did you learn to care about other people? She got back earlier,” she said, “Go take a shower already. The weather’s been good today, nice and balmy.”

I really didn’t get it; I decided to ask when I got upstairs.

“Junior, what do you want to eat tonight?” Mom called from downstairs.

“Stresstabs broiled in red sauce, with coffee!”

“Junior!” Mom said. “What’s wrong with you?”

“Vegetables, Mom!”

“When are you going to grow up?” Mom said doubtfully.

I really couldn’t think this through. All was quiet on the Western Front; everything looked safe.

“Junior!” Second Sister stood there; she had changed clothes for a swan-yellow outfit. It had a very springtime style. College students really had it good.
“What are you up to, do you have a reservation at the theater? It’s free entertainment!” As I spoke I threw my book bag into the room, and Big Brother called from inside.

“Junior, I hear you skipped class today!”
“Yep!”
“Well, that was brave of you!” Big Brother said. “You’re truly a worthy brother!”
“Come on!”
Second Sister came in with us. The family trial was about to begin.
“I didn’t tell Mom!” Second Sister said charitably. …Weird.
“Junior, studying is your affair, not anyone else’s,” Big Brother said. “I know you’re tired, but you have to keep it up. Don’t let yourself get soft!”
“Actually I’ve done the same thing before. There was a while where I couldn’t take it anymore,” Second Sister said. “But I still kept with it.”
“Junior, to tell the truth, you might doubt what I say now, but going to college does have its own meaning and its own rewards.” Big Brother wiped a few bits of grass off my book bag.
“I know,” I said. “To be honest, I want to go to college, because I’ve walked this long and winding road for twelve years already. What’s another four years? It’s just that I couldn’t resist the call of today’s weather, so I went to relax—that’s all. So why are you two so tense?”
“So why’d you bring girls with you?” Second Sister asked. Uncalled for.
“Sister, they were only going up to relax, just like us!” I said. “Relax, you two! I know what I’m doing.”
“So it was a case of senior-itis!” Big Brother said. “I forgive you.”
So it was no big deal. The family was still warm and caring after all. Spring orchids and autumn laurels scented the breeze.
“Junior, what’d you think of my boyfriend?” Second Sister said.
“Is he a classmate?”
“No, he’s in civil engineering!” Her expression was self-satisfied. She really didn’t know how to pick a guy.
“The Taiwanese Alain Delon!” I said. I wanted to laugh. A civil engineer? No wonder he was so rustic, he was totally inept! But I had to take extra care with my social graces around Second Sister.

“Thanks!” Second Sister turned around, left with perfect bearing, and I let out a nervous breath.

“So you’ve seen her ‘him’?”

“Yep, I’ve seen him.” I lay down on the bed.

“How’s he compare to me?”

“Shit, like a sculpture with a huge chunk out of it; he was both plain and coddled,’ I said. “Big Brother, I’m not trying to flatter you; you’ve just got this style, especially when you smoke!”

“Thanks, want to come try some tobacco?” Big Brother’s face lit up at the comment. College students are still easy to deceive.

The night was cool like water, and after my shower I stretched out comfortably. Springtime was truly the time to study!

“Big Brother, isn’t it true that after going from college you can do a lot of things?” I asked.

“It’s more than just that!” Big Brother said, lying on his bed. “Going to college is growing up.”

“All right, then I’ll go to college just like you!”

“What? I thought you were going to burn your bridges, have some willpower!”

“Not bad, I’ve taken one springtime, now I just need to make it to the eternal springtime,” I said to myself.

“What?”

“I said, my beard’s getting prickly.”

“Yeah, right!”

It was a beautiful springtime, a beautiful Sunday. I wondered what kind of spring day tomorrow would be!

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It was one of those rare days when it didn’t rain in Keelung; the sunset even broke through the gray, overcast sky. When Lu Ji threw his cigarette butt out over Ming De Bridge and onto the garbage and oil that beat at the pier, Xiao Zhong was just dashing over from the big passenger transport building. Her hands were in her pockets and a twill traveling pack hung heavily from her shoulders. Her long hair fluttered in the gentle evening breeze, contrasting with the shade of the wharf and the mouth of the harbor. She looked gaunt and helpless, lowering her head and dragging her feet as she walked over.

“Xiao Zhong!” Lu Ji shouted, and he went over to meet her. As he took her travel bag he said, “Whoa, what did you pack in this thing, bricks?”

“Wait a sec and I’ll tell you, all right?” she said, lifting her head and looking at Lu Ji. Her eyes were unbearably sad.

“Hey, don’t look at me like that, all right?” Lu Ji wiped her nose and said, “Smile, it’s not raining here in Keelung today!”

Xiao Zhong looked at him and managed a miserable smile. Mom had explained to her when she left, she wasn’t supposed to depress Lu Ji by looking sad. He was just naturally happy-looking, but could he really bear to leave Keelung? To leave her? Yet she never was very good at restraining herself. All she needed was his mischievous expression before her eyes, and she would start to tear up.

Lu Ji lifted the travel bag, threw it over his shoulder and walked with one arm around her, unconsciously tapping his fingers on her right shoulder. Xiao Zhong thought to herself that this might just be the longest he’d done this, after these two years (or maybe more). Only now could she smell once more the fragrance of laundry detergent on his body, hear again his totally unrestrained laughter, or even think about stumbling into his sudden embrace. The pain of separation was that whatever she did, she always felt like he’d been swept away again.

“What about your crew of rapscallions, then?” Lu Ji said. “Weren’t they coming?”
“Lu Ji, I didn’t want them to come,” Xiao Zhong said. “I don’t want anyone else to come.”

Afraid? She was genuinely afraid, afraid of forcing herself to smile and hold back the sorrow of parting. It was just like the time when he was about to serve in the navy, with a crowd of people gathered at Jin Ma Station making fun of the two of them. Even after everyone was done laughing, she still had her own dreams, but did they? Nevertheless it was even more sombre after they were done laughing.

“Look, the little girl’s jealous,” Lu Ji said. “They said they wanted to take me out, do you know how long it will be before the next time I can go to the temple courtyard and really eat my fill?”

Xiao Zhong slid her hand down from her waist, stuck it back in her pocket and walked with her head down. The hem of her jeans dragged on the ground; the wind blew against her yellow silk scarf, and her long hair, and her wide blouse.

“Xiao Zhong, did you say,” Lu Ji stopped and looked at her, “whether you changed clothes after going back?”

“No.”

“What a coincidence, then, that you came wearing this top.” Lu Ji said. “Don’t wear it too often in the future, people will make fun of it!”

“Okay!” She said softly.

Xiao Zhong might have forgotten, because she often forgot what she had done to make people soft-hearted; Lu Ji, on the other hand, couldn’t forget the feelings that pure girl had brought him. Originally it had been a cream-colored blouse; there was a time she had worn it over to his house. Lu Ji had just been painting, and he jokingly said to her, “That color’s too dull, do you want a few brush strokes?” He hadn’t expected that she would so unflinchingly take it off in front of him and say, “Paint something a little prettier…” Lu Ji could only stare blankly at the sincerity in her face and think about how dirty he was. Then the two of them leaned over and started painting on the floor. Lu Ji painted the words “Jet, Alme” in trendy lines.

“What’s that mean?” She said as she picked it up and looked at it.

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24 In Taiwan, temples are not only places of religious importance, but social centers as well. The courtyards (廟口) of many temples are surrounded by night markets (夜市), which are home to a variety of shops and stalls, including a number of specialty foods.
“I don’t know,” Lu Ji, face reddened as he looked at her frail white torso, covered only by underwear, and he said, “I saw it on a record; maybe it means ‘love’?”

“Oh,” she said, putting it on. As she ran off to the bathroom to find a mirror, she said, “Hey Lu Ji, you’re really talented!”

Happy memories are always hard to wipe away. How long ago was that? Probably four years—about one or two months before he had joined the army. But Lu Ji always remembered the serious, unreserved way she took off her clothes, so pure. It was enough to make a boy engrave it in his memory without a single impure thought.

“Where’s your boat?” She turned her head to look at him and searched the harbor.

“Silly, we’re still in Keelung, what would a fishing boat be doing here?”

‘I just want to see what it’s like, is all! Will you be able to get used to staying on it?’

“Hey, aren’t you always barking down my ear about how if you’re at peace with yourself you can handle anything, and how contentment brings happiness?”

“Don’t just sit there thinking of ways to get a rise out of me.” She stood there, her eyes reddening. “I know you’re sad too, you’re only putting on a show!”

Lu Ji looked at her, stroked her face and said, “Okay, rascal, let’s sit down!”

A tugboat’s steam whistle went off and started a wave that traveled to the middle of the harbor. A yacht at the shoreline drifted in time with it on the surface of the water; the foreigner on board, holding his coffee mug, waved at them, and Lu Ji smiled and shouted a greeting back. Atop the slender mast, triangular banners fluttered in the gentle breeze: dusk had fallen serenely on the harbor.

That year, on a night when he was to be dispatched, the two of them had sat down there, saying nothing as the boat’s fog light gently illuminated, then slowly faded again, until finally they went back, holding each other as they walked. Back then, they had known that they would still see each other again; they were just reluctant to part ways. And now? After the oars of the fishing boat *Ming Dynasty* sent out their white wave, it would be at least two years, if not longer, before he would weigh anchor in the waters of Keelung harbor again. When he would get off the boat after a year-long trip to Jinmen,

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25 Throughout the story, Lu Ji calls Xiao Zhong various kinds of stupid: “傻头”, “傻瓜”, “傻蛋”, etc. His tone is affectionate, so I’ve translated these as “silly,” which in English is less abrasive than “stupid”.
the coastline would fill with the deafening roar of footsteps; people have always prized that first step back on their home turf, that inexplicable feeling of excitement and satisfaction. And when Lu Ji came back? Who’s to say that, in his excitement, he couldn’t sink the dock to its foundations with just one step?

“Did Auntie say anything?” Xiao Zhong asked with her head lowered. She scraped her feet aimlessly about on the ground.

“Nah, just that I have to take care of myself or whatever. Anyway, uh, Xiao Zhong,” Lu Ji said, holding her gently. “Let’s not talk about her, okay? There’s no point anyway!”

“Do you have everything ready?”
“Just about.”
“What’d you bring?”
“The company regulation stuff, lined paper, a harmonica, and a stack of pictures of you!”

“Lu Ji, can you take this bag of things on board with you, too?” Xiao Zhong said as she pulled off her backpack.

“Xiao Zhong, what’s this?”
“Envelopes, gloves, scarves, and a stack of photos of us.”
“Why is it so heavy?”
“The envelopes are heavy. I’ve already written out my address, so when you send them all you have to do is put a stamp on them.”
“How many?”
“Seven hundred and three.”
“Xiao Zhong, are you crazy!?” Lu Ji opened the travel bag, and inside there really was pile upon pile of airmail envelopes, each with her address written neatly across the front. Lu Ji’s name had even been written in the top left corner. He turned his head and gazed at her with deep infatuation “You dummy, how long were you planning this?”

“I started the day you had your appendectomy,” Xiao Zhong raised her head and said, sincerely. “Lu Ji, I didn’t want to use a typewriter to type them, that way you wouldn’t be able to tell that I had written them!”
“Xiao Zhong, how old are you, to still be so dumb? The boat’s in the middle of the ocean, how will I send these?” Lu Ji said. “Wasn’t it exhausting, writing all of these?”

“You’re the stupid one, Lu Ji. Think about it: if you write a letter, you only have to write a few words.” Xiao Zhong laughed bitterly. “Anyway, write everyday when you have time and just send them all together when you dock; that way I’ll know which days you’re busy, which days you have nothing to do, which days you’re feeling sad, and which days you’re happy.”

“All right, idiot, everyday I’ll put a fishy smell on this letter paper for you and we’ll see whether or not you vomit,” Lu Ji said. “But, Xiao Zhong, if by some chance the boat doesn’t make port for a few months, or if it sinks, I’ll have to find a barrel to put that stack of letters in and let it float over to Keelung. Isn’t that too much effort?”

“Lu Ji, you’re getting on a boat, can you please not joke around?” Xiao Zhong said. “You always find flaws in everything; you don’t even care about the people next to you.”

Xiao Zhong had said the same thing in the summer of the year when she met Lu Ji for the first time.

Back then, Xiao Zhong had just started working at the kindergarten, taking advantage of her vacation to go camping at Fulong. When she got to the campsite, there was a flock of girls staring blankly at the giant, orange-colored tent with no idea how to pitch the monstrosity. Lu Ji’s campsite happened to be right next to theirs; he looked like he had already been there for a few days; his whole body was already red with sunburn. He intentionally moved a rock over and sat under the trees, watching the clueless girls fumbling about and laughing to himself. Xiao Zhong ran over and said, “Are you really going to just look for flaws in everything, without caring about the people next to you!?”

Lu Ji, motivated by the insult, stood up and ran over to help them pitch the tent, move their camping supplies, and he even helped them find sulfur to spread around the campsite. But it was always with a frivolous expression, and he used coarse language, as though the girls were a pack of boys at play.

“Goddamn, don’t you have any idea how to angle the tent stakes? Didn’t you ever study mechanics?”

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26 Sulfur is sometimes used in camping to ward off snakes.
“Pull! Pull harder! Miss, a little harder, please?! Goddamn, this is your tent, not mine!”

“Hot damn, whose stuff is this? Did you bring your entire makeup drawer?”

In the middle of the night, when it was time to sleep, the entire camp was full of mosquitoes, and when Xiao Zhong stepped out Lu Ji spoke to her from a distance: “Hey, Miss, how’d you like some mosquito repellent?”

Xiao Zhong suddenly found him cute, in a coarse but tender way. When he left to walk back, a boy playing guitar said: “Hey, Stewed Chicken⁷, you’re a hell of an obedient boy, going home this early!” Afterward, the thin, tanned image of a man named “Stewed Chicken” remained in Xiao Zhong’s heart.

“Xiao Zhong,” Lu Ji said softly. “I’m leaving. Find something to do tonight, okay? Study or whatever, just don’t waste the whole day being depressed. I know you can get pretty bored!”

“Really?” As Xiao Zhong spoke, tears flowed down her cheeks and dripped onto the hand Lu Ji had rested on her leg.

“Don’t cry, all right? If you cry again I’ll stop talking to you.” Lu Ji pulled out his handkerchief and gave it to her. “As old as you are, you cry whether you’re happy or sad, just like those kids you hang out with”

He recalled the time he came back from Jinmen on leave from his tour of the outer islands; the two of them had hugged and danced in front of Xiao Zhong’s mother. Xiao Zhong had cried until she was covered in tears. Lu Ji, paying no attention to her mother’s presence, had kissed her passionately until, grasping her shoulder, he said: “Hey now, don’t cry, okay? If you keep crying I’m going to drown in all these tears!” At last Xiao Zhong’s tears gave way to smiles.

“How will I send you things?”

“You don’t have to, Xiao Zhong,” he said. “Give it to me when I come back. Do you want me to bring anything back for you?”

“Oh, I know, bring back a Shandong stewed chicken!” Xiao Zhong forced a smile.

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⁷ “Stewed Chicken” (Lǔ Jī), except for a difference in tone, is almost homophonic with Lu Ji’s name.
“Nah, how about I bring a mixed-blood kid: yellow and black, or yellow and white!”

“Oh, come on! Besides me, who would want you?” Xiao Zhong said. “Lu Ji, you know what? You’re a psycho and I’m a moron!”

“No, you’re the crazy one!” Lu Ji said.

Until they’ve fallen in love, boys can’t comprehend the heart of a girl—in much the same way that Lu Ji, before he met her, was always unaware that girls had such delicate emotions. In his eyes, it seemed women were only able to sit at tables and clutch at Mahjong tiles, smoke tobacco, and shout “Double Dragon.” As for Xiao Zhong, on the other hand, it was as though she were fated to live her entire life tolerating Lu Ji’s emotions, his tenderness hidden within his crassness. During one year at the outer islands, she sent two or three hundred letters. There were so many that his drill sergeant stopped even asking about them.

“What now? She loves you, she’s waiting for you to go back, she bought a pair of pants; or did the little girl piss her pants again?” The drill sergeant always talked like that when he tossed the letters to Lu Ji. “How could a tough guy from Shandong stand such bland, fussy drivel? Weirdo.”

But Lu Ji liked just that kind of nearly luxurious tenderness. The envelopes often contained some things that only she could have thought up. A note: “Hey Stewed Chicken, I went to the Dragon’s Palace to watch ‘Les Fous du Stade,’ I laughed to death.” A ticket and a small lock of hair: “I don’t know how, but yesterday as I was combing my hair some of it fell out! Hey, Lu Ji, what do you think, could there be a woman Yul Brynner?” A handkerchief: “Do you believe it? There are tears on it! It’s not that I miss you, a ghost just possessed me and made me cry.” The tag off a new piece of clothing: “Inflation has driven up prices. Lu Ji, I’ve moved all your blue jeans over. They just came into fashion in Taiwan, along with gold-rimmed glasses.”

Lu Ji depended only on these assorted items. They made his emotions stay even more constant, because he could smell her presence on them.

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28 “雙龍抱”, a phrase often shouted while playing Mahjong.
29 The name of a movie theater in Keelung.
First love is merely a trickle in the stream of life, but Xiao Zhong kept him going, creeping in through his heart’s door.

“Do you have money with you?” she asked.

“Oh, whoops, I’m all out, can I borrow some from you?” Lu Ji said sarcastically.

“You’ve given me more than enough!”

“Did Auntie say anything?” Xiao Zhong asked. “About money?”

“No,” Lu Ji said. “I think she knows I’ve made an important choice, to make money.”

“Wouldn’t it be great if money weren’t so important?”

“If I said you were stupid you’d be sad again,” Lu Ji said. “But Auntie was right: in everything people do, their highest goals are money, love, and fame. And money can buy the other two!”

Lu Ji knew that Auntie had no ill intent, she was just practical. Really, he’d never imagined that rich people could use so little money to buy off other people’s rationality, knowledge, strength, even their self-respect. As soon as boys finished their military service, the days of money coming into outstretched palms and food coming into open mouths grew distant; and the inability to be independent is an even greater humiliation. It was just that Auntie didn’t approve of his own hopes. “Little Ji, if you work all day for that little bit of money, when will you finally be able to settle down and relax? I know I’m not your real mother, but you need to help support me, just like I helped support your father!”

Really, who wouldn’t want money? But Lu Ji felt that that path was too slow, and required opportunity. After all, pyramids had to be built from the ground up.

“Little Ji, run away for awhile and stop, in a month Auntie will have to pay five or six hundred dollars!”

“In another two years you still only be twenty-six or seven! That money’s enough to serve as a starting point!”

Sometimes, Lu Ji would often dream of getting off the boat, holding a huge stack of Taiwanese dollars, and saying to his aunt: “Don’t worry about me, I only got on the boat for you!” But he didn’t dare, and he wasn’t willing, he always had some intuitive sense of right and wrong. Even though she was only his stepmother, she had after all
taken care of his own beloved and respected father and fed him three square meals a day; and favors always had to be repaid. People didn’t care what his older brother did; after all, he was her own flesh and blood. But things were different for Lu Ji. If he defied her will, people would always say: “That child doesn’t know even the slightest bit of kindness!”

Wasn’t it just so? Back then, Xiao Zhong’s mother had said, “One’s blood mother can step aside, but a stepmother’s kindness is greater than Heaven itself.”

So it was decided. He was trained, assigned a post, he had his appendectomy. It was all very confusing, and only on the day that he boarded the boat did he wake up and tell himself: “Don’t make Xiao Zhong unhappy!” Could he do it? In the end, he did.

“Actually, I’m only capable of these few things,” Lu Ji said. “When you have nothing to do, go keep her company, okay? When you say it like that, she seems quite lonely enough!”

“I will, she’s great to all of us, it’s just that she has her own worries,” Xiao Zhong said. “When will your brother get out of prison?”

“I don’t know. Not for a long time. But even if he does get out, there are still things I simply should do.” Lu Ji held her arm as she leaned her head on his shoulder. “If Dad, under the south Pacific Ocean, knew what I was doing, I think he’d be happy too.”

“Lu Ji, don’t talk about the bottom of the ocean, okay?”

“Fine,” Lu Ji said. “Be smart when you invest the money I send you. It’ll do you no good if you just sit on it.”

“Okay.”

“Xiao Zhong, I know you don’t want me to leave, but all you need is something to dream of, and then you won’t be so sad!”

“What dream?” Xiao Zhong turned her head and asked, surprised.

“How old will you be in two years?”

“Twenty-five.”

“When that day comes, I’ll go to Jiufen, or find some place where East Ruifang Road runs along the mountainside, and I’ll start making payments on a little house.” Lu Ji’s eyes searched the harbor as he spoke, as though his vision would rush out at him from somewhere between the water and the fog.
“What for?”

“Xiao Zhong, tell me that when you’re twenty-four, twenty-five years old, you won’t marry me, okay?” As he spoke, Lu Ji stroked her cheek and gently tucked her hair behind her ear. “Then, I’ll go to the market to sell fish, you’ll go back to the kindergarten to keep recruiting children. Can’t we just live on like that?”

“Screw you!” Xiao Zhong said. Afterward, she started to cry again. “Lu Ji, can’t you stay?”

“Silly, there you go again,” Lu Ji said. “If I don’t go, how will Auntie pay her debts? And my dream will have no way of coming true, even if it is just a dream.”

“Does Auntie know you’re splitting the money into two parts?”

“She knows, I’ve told her. Frankly, the more I give her the more she gambles,” Lu Ji said. “Xiao Zhong, sailors’ wives all like to gamble; do you?”

“No way,” she said, looking at the harbor dully. “I’ll be a sailor’s girlfriend, not a sailor’s wife!”

“My good companion, you’ve pierced my heart!” Lu Ji said. “Then in two years it’ll be just like when I first got back; I won’t be able to find work and I’ll have to live off your charity again!”

“Well then, this time Auntie won’t be hitting you up for money. You can look for work on your own terms, and if you don’t have much money, what does it matter anyway?” Xiao Zhong said, sincerely.

“You’re right, Xiao Zhong!” Lu Ji hugged her tightly as he spoke. The foreigner on the yacht laughed at them. “Then I’ll have a wife who can make money!”

Wife? Sometimes Lu Ji found himself deeply confused. He had thought about it long and hard and didn’t think he was good enough. In front of his friends and in front of Xiao Zhong, he had the courage to loudly and even jokingly say, “This is my wife, Xiao Zhong!” But sometimes the word seemed to make him wake with a start. At midnight he asked himself if he could be worthy of Xiao Zhong. Emotionally? The answer was definitely yes. At least, ever since Xiao Zhong had made her first step into his life, he had never let her down. But the goddamn question he often asked himself was, can you really handle the responsibility?
Even though this was a new era, no matter what you said you couldn’t change the deep-rooted idea that men should take care of their wives and children. And as for him? While he was in the army he had so much support, and that wasn’t even the whole of it; after he was done with his term of service, how much of her money did he use just pacing around and looking for a job? The thing he was most afraid to see was always that Xiao Zhong would look around and open her purse, then turn her body and stuff a wad of cash into his hand. “Lu Ji, take it, and stop fantasizing!” Didn’t he always, though? His face always went red when he daydreamed. “All right, how about this! Later, you can pay it back with interest. Remember, eight percent!” That was Xiao Zhong, the girl who could see through to his heart’s inner-most thoughts.

“When you’re gone I’ll go down to the fisherman’s wharf often!” Xiao Zhong said.

“What for? Go down there to read? The sky is so dark, the wind is so strong, and your man’s gone fishing; why wouldn’t you go home?”

“No, I’ll go ask the people coming back if they’ve seen you! Or I could look at the boats and think about how you’ll be coming back on one of them someday,” Xiao Zhong said. “It’ll be just like those days when I used to go look at the Navy ships.”

“Xiao Zhong, you read too many stories!” Lu Ji grabbed her hand and patted it as he spoke.

“Honestly, Lu Ji, have you thought about what Keelung will be like the day you come back?”

“No, have you?” Lu Ji asked.

“Yeah, ever since the day you had your appendectomy.”

“Let me think, then,” Lu Ji said. “Well, there will be a woman named Xiao Zhong, already old and ugly; she’ll be wearing the same thing she is today, holding a child in her arms. They’ll watch a weather-beaten old fisherman, stinking and filthy, as he walks down the gangplank, and she’ll say to the child: ‘Go on, say hello to your uncle!’”

“Don’t you trust me?” Xiao Zhong lifted her head with a hurt expression on her face. Her nose was red and her tears started to fall again.
“I’m just joking, Xiao Zhong,” Lu Ji patted her on the back as he spoke. “Who says you’re stupid and unlucky just for knowing me?”

“The day you come back,” she sobbed, “I’ll take a big flag up to the park on the mountaintop, so you’ll be able to see me!”

“All right, Xiao Zhong,” Lu Ji said, “As soon as we get back in our home waters, I’ll look toward the park.”

“You promise?”

“I promise, silly,” Lu Ji said. “Look how old you are, and still given to flights of fancy!”

The sky had grown dark, and the lights on the boat lit up the harbor, casting a twisting pattern on the pounding waves. The foreigner got off the yacht and smiled at them. “LOVE, thank you, goodbye, thank you!” Xiao Zhong lowered her head, and Lu Ji stood up, shook the man’s hand, and said “Welcome to Keelung!”

“Aren’t you cold?” Lu Ji asked.

“Yeah,” Xiao Zhong pressed up against him as she spoke. “When are you leaving tomorrow?”

“I get on the boat at three.” Lu Ji looked at his watch. “I still have seven hours.”

“And you’re not coming home to say goodbye to my mom?!” Xiao Zhong said.

“No, I’m afraid she’ll be just like you, take it too much to heart,” Lu Ji said. “I’ll take you home, but I won’t go in.”

“This early?”

“Don’t be silly, I still have to go back, grab my things, tidy up and call a bunch of friends.” Lu Ji smiled and gave her a pat.

“All right, Lu Ji,” Xiao Zhong said, choking back sobs. “You can go first, I want to sit down for a minute.”

“Okay,” Lu Ji said before standing up and patting her face.

“Lu Ji,” Xiao Zhong lifted her head and the tears streaming down her face shimmered by the light of the harbor. “Kiss me, won’t you?”

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30 “LOVE” and “Welcome to Keelung” appear in English in the original.
31 When Xiao Zhong says “Kiss me,” she says it in English.
“Silly, let’s leave it for next time, okay?” Lu Ji said without turning his head. “I promised myself.”

“I’m begging you!” Xiao Zhong shouted with her head buried between her legs.

Lu Ji turned around, helped her up, and gently tidied her hair before kissing her passionately. He put his face against her shoulder and hugged her tightly.

“Lu Ji.” Her shoulder moved when she spoke.

He looked through her hair at the harbor.

“Lu Ji, wipe your tears,” Xiao Zhong said. “They’re running onto my arm.”

The tugboat came back again and sounded its foghorn. Lu Ji picked up his travel bag and rushed off without looking back.

The Wedding

When he got Tian Qingxiang’s wedding invitation, Bao Ju almost jumped in shock. Firstly, he hadn’t thought about or even seen him for a year, and now he was suddenly so far away and getting married, too; secondly, the invitation’s appearance was absolutely jarring.

It was a folded piece of yellow card stock with bright blue cartoon lettering. He guessed it was stenciled on—as soon as he touched it, his entire thumb was covered in ink. Inside was written:

“The two of us have truly enjoyed God’s guidance in allowing us to meet each other and fall in love. Now the time has come that a life apart cannot fulfill our love. Therefore, we invite you to come share a glass of matrimonial wine and serve as our witness. Your presence at our wedding would be an unparalleled honor.

- Regards,

Tian Qingxiang and He Jinhui”

The card was bordered by flowers and vines, and in the lower right-hand corner, under the feet of some angels, the date and time were tucked away in a thin and airy script. Smiling, Bao Ju did a double-take and then took out the attached letter. Tian Qingxiang’s writing hadn’t changed a bit—it was still the same old careful, blocky script. The letter briefly went over how he was getting married, explained which buses to take and how to walk there after getting off, but at the end his tone grew more serious: “I don’t mind if other people don’t show up. But, Little Bao, you are obligated to come.”

At that moment Bao Ju was intensely confused. He lit himself a cigarette, lay back on his bed and thought about it for half the day, but he still couldn’t have imagined that Qingxiang would have had such luck with women! A letter had come from him not long after he left the military, but it only mentioned that his elementary school teacher had sent him to some rural school to substitute teach and whatnot, and he’d had no word of him since. And now, the first news he’d heard of his old friend came as such a surprise that it knocked him into a daze. Blinking, he looked at the smoke drifting up from his cigarette, and it was almost as if he could see Tian Qingxiang standing before him, hand
in hand with a pure and perfect white bride (another teacher, likely as not). Bao Ju thought to himself, her name sounded rather pretty.

Reality only broke through Bao Ju’s daydream when his roommate, carrying a washbasin, pushed open the door. He pushed the basin under the bed and flipped the invitation over a few times before saying, “What’s this, is the kindergarten having a sports meet?”

“Don’t make fun of it, goddamnit,” Bao Ju said, irritated. “It’s an honest-to-goodness wedding invitation!”

“A wedding invitation?” He got up, grabbed a towel, rubbed his head and laughingly said, “Wow, looks like there’s no shortage of talented people these days! This design is really a complete break from tradition!”

Bao Ju flashed him a glare and decided not to pay any more attention to him, but he also thought the invitation’s designer must have been pretty bold: it was just a little too crude and simple. Regardless, he should have used better paper, and more red. As for the print, it was forgivable, and anyway, who could have guaranteed the shop that printed the thing would use that kind of phrasing, at once both romantic and godly.

* * *

As for how they met, it was actually kind of coincidence, or perhaps, like it said on the invitation, it was “God’s guidance.” Bao Ju had just finished a year of military service, and back then he’d been making an honest living as a secretary. Once, he went down to Liaoluo Wharf to meet new soldiers. Originally, Tian Qingxiang hadn’t been assigned to him, but nobody ever sees these things coming. Bao Ju brought the recruits to the outer islands and as they were getting on the car, faces full of doubt and confusion, he suddenly realized he didn’t fit in with everyone else, and sat in the corner smoking with a totally careless expression, idly inspiring rebellion.

“What’s your name?” As Bao Ju walked over, he didn’t even stand up; from a new recruit fresh out of the training center, this was as good as a cardinal sin.

“Tian Qingxiang!” he said.

“Level of education?”

“High school.” At this he finally stood up slowly and said, “…And night school.”
“Write your name and school of graduation here!” Bao Ju handed him a pen and paper and said, “now that you’re in a new environment, don’t you want to ask about the state of affairs here?”

“I’ve gotten used to moving around,” Tian Qingxiang raised his head and looked at him, took the pen, put his hand down by his leg and said, “Ever since I was this little!

“Where’d you learn to write like that?” Bao Ju said, looking at his meticulously neat printing.

“Captain, I earned half of my high school tuition printing!” he said with a self-satisfied expression.

In that pack of nobodies, he was suddenly another “somebody” in the back of the car. As the car flew by on the highway and all the new recruits curiously looked at the scenery outside, Bao Ju watched him sleep with his head buried in luggage and, smiling, he thought to himself, “Just great. Now we’ve got one more soldier who can print, and one more ‘problem character.’

That night, after Bao Ju had looked over his file, not only did he forget his resentment and jealousy, he even began to feel sympathetic for him. The dossier read, “Tian Qingxiang: parentage unknown; childhood spent alone in an orphanage. Has a reserved personality and an inferiority complex. Has a special need for guidance, but capacity to perform duties and leadership ability are both particularly strong. Not a security concern, and shows no signs of inappropriate behavior.”

After he had finished reading the file, Bao Ju pulled out a few cookies and rank badges and walked over to the recruits’ barracks to look for him. The recruits in the barracks were all laughing out loud, stitching on their rank badges, and some others had already started writing letters. He was the only one who had turned down his bed, and he sat on top of it smoking.

“Aren’t you going to stitch your rank badge on? They’ll definitely check it when they call roll tomorrow morning!” Bao Ju said, looking at him. He laughed and looked back at Bao Ju, then pulled out a needle and slowly threaded it.

“And the badge?” Bao Ju said.

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32 Tian Qingxiang made his money by writing on printing templates (probably for exams or official school documents).
He looked at Bao Ju again, put the needle down, lowered his head, and murmured, "I didn’t have the money to buy it."

“What happened to your money?” Bao Ju said quietly. “It’s only the beginning of the month!”

“I lost it at basic!”

“Did you report it?”

“Report it?” he said. “Someone would have to really need money to take mine, so why should I go report it? If they couldn’t find the thief, people would think I was lying; if they found him, not only would he have no way to do what he needed to; he’d also be punished! Captain, is that really necessary?”

Bao Ju was stumped by this non-explanation.

“Captain,” he said, lifting his head and laughing, “I don’t believe you’ve never thought of taking other peoples’ money!”

“Well, have you?” Bao Ju asked him.

“Yeah,” he said, “often! Especially when I can’t pull together registration fees, or when I’m starving to death!”

“Are you often hungry? Doesn’t your family look after you?” Bao Ju asked, already knowing the answer.

“My family’s fine to me, Captain,” he said, “but the younger kids need even more taking care of than I do!”

Bao Ju felt like that kind of unconscious cover-up only increased his honesty; of course, in the entire barracks, only Bao Ju knew who his so-called “family” was. At that moment Bao Ju turned around, pulled out fifty dollars, folded it up in the rank badge, gave it to him and said, “I found this on an old piece of clothing I tore up, go ahead and put it on!”

Qingxiang looked at Bao Ju and accepted the badge; when he discovered the money wrapped inside the rank badge, his eyes began to redden.

“Captain, I’ll pay you back!” he said.

When Bao Ju walked out of the barracks he heard one of the recruits inside say, “Hey, this captain’s not so bad! When you pay him back, you really ought to buy a new one!”
From that moment, their friendship only grew. It was just like the commander said: when a person desperately needed comfort and support, you only have to give him a little bit and you’ve won over his entire heart. Perhaps this was just human nature. Later on, Bao Ju often thought this, especially when he discovered that Tian Qingxiang, out of everyone in the unit, listened only to him.

* * *

“Marriage is a good thing!” Bao Ju said.

“I guess it’s okay.” His roommate was clipping his fingernails as he replied: “At least you wouldn’t have to cuddle with your pillow and feel cold at night!”

“Don’t be so crass,” Bao Ju said. “I meant that friend of mine.”

“What about him?”

“He’s been alone long enough.” Bao Ju said, “God says that people who’ve suffered will also have their fortune.”

* * *

It was the middle of May, and it was already as hot as the peak of summer. The shoulder pads of his newly-made suit were so stiff he looked like Frankenstein. As Bao Ju walked, he took off his coat, loosened his tie, and incessantly wiped away sweat. He couldn’t have imagined just how remote the place was; he took the bus directly from Taipei to Badu, from there to Ruifang, and he finally got off at Jiudao, and from there he still had to walk a long way up the mountain road.

It looked like a dilapidated mining town; a radiant history might have been reflected in the flat, neatly piled stone stairs and the exquisitely carved earthen temples, but now weeds overwhelmed everything. It was terribly bleak, and by the side of the road one could always see abandoned mining roads. Water babbled along some of them, and the reeds by the entrances had grown as tall as grown men.

The road wound upward along the ridge of the mountain before turning into a section of flat pavement from which Mount Keelung, Ruibin Harbor, Jinguashi and the Shen’ao power plant could all be seen at once. The mountain wind was cold, and as Bao Ju sat resting on a stone by the roadside, lighting a cigarette, he wished he had come during the nighttime, when there would have been some fishermen’s lights; wouldn’t that be a sight!
The level road he’d been on gave way to a steep downgrade. The little village that Tian Qingxiang had mentioned was at the foot of the mountain, the school’s flag standing boldly against a swath of emerald green. A shrine to a local god stood at the side of the road, and sitting on a stone bench was a deeply tanned, fat woman in the middle of breast-feeding her child. When she saw Bao Ju she smiled; he, on the other hand, suddenly felt awkward. He looked at the two overfilled baskets of vegetables by his feet and looked for something to say: “You must have been at the market buying produce!”

“Yup!” she said, simultaneously putting her breast back in her shirt.

“Did you go to Jiufen to buy them?” Bao Ju said dubiously, helping her lift the child onto her back.

“Yup*, there ain’t no market* here!” As she spoke, she twined her back strap around the child with a practiced hand.

“Excuse me, do you know where Mr. Tian, the teacher, lives?” Bao Ju said. “Mr. Tian Qingxiang, he’s getting married today.”

“Ah shore do know* where he lives, ah do.” She broke into a blushing, red-faced grin.

Then Bao Ju helped her pick up her baskets of produce to carry down the mountain, and asked her, “Do you know Mr. Tian?”

“Yep, ah know him!” she said, scratching at her leg where the surface of her skin had grown bubbly from mosquito bites. Each scratch left a white mark behind.

“How is he?” Bao Ju asked jokingly. He thought she was cute in a plain, simple way.

“He ain’t bad.” She blushed and smiled, and said, “Are you that friend o’ his from Taipei?”

“So you know?”

“He’s talked about a good friend of his, an army friend from Taipei,” she said, smiling and pulling the child’s down away from her hair. “His last name is Bao, like Bao Qingtian!”

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33 The original author indicates a heavy Taiwanese accent by replacing some words (such as 是, here) with others (here, 素) that sound similar to the mispronounced syllable. Hereafter, I’ve marked such words with asterisks (*) and attempted to convey the sense accent (southern Chinese) through a southern American accent.

34“Bao Qingtian” is a name that may be stylized in various forms; this is a close approximation based on the provided text.
Bao Ju laughed along with her; by the looks of things, Tian Qingxiang wasn’t getting along too badly with the townspeople at all! Bao Ju thought to himself, it was rare that his friend was so extroverted. It reminded him of a quote: “even though parted for only three days, people should look at each other with new eyes.”

The village was cold, a desolate scene of broken walls and debris in every direction, but among the fallen pillars and walls, some of the stones were engraved with remarkable elegance. A circle was carved on the edge of one house’s lintel, in the center of which the surname “Guo” was etched in enormous letters. Bao Ju thought to himself that it must be a big family compound; it was a shame that everything had already collapsed except that one bit of wall. A few sponge gourds had started sprouting up in the soil under the doorway, and light green tendrils had already climbed up the entire shack.

“Mr. Tian is over there, Mr. Bao!” The woman turned her head to shout back at him. “Qingxiang, there’s someone lookin’ for you! The one named Bao, from Taipei! Bao! Hey!”

Only then did Bao Ju discover that he had walked onto a school athletic field; the school wasn’t big, but the field wasn’t small, either: this was one way in which it was a blessing to have a school in a rural area. Cherry blossoms were planted on all sides of the field, which was itself a lush green. Tian Qingxiang was standing under a tree speaking to a few elementary school children, and as soon as he heard the woman shouting he flew over, still with the same pale and skinny countenance, khaki pants, white shirt, hair combed back and glossy.

“Hey!” He ran over, clapped Bao Ju on the shoulder and said, “Hey, I knew you were sure to come, but I never thought you’d be so early!”

“Hey, fella, you’ve really played your cards close to your chest on this one!” Bao Ju said, and gave him a friendly punch to the shoulder.

“Little Bao,” he said, suddenly serious. “Don’t talk about it, not right now. Go relax for a while first, and I’ll take care of the students for a bit. When I come back I’ll chat with you again. Anyway…Yeah!”

“I can’t wait to see the bride!”

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34 A government official of the Northern Song dynasty, known for being honest and uncorruptible.

35 Literally, “the special favor from heaven”
“The bride?” Tian Qingxiang turned around and gloomily looked at Bao Ju. He smiled wryly and said, “Little Bao, you’ve already seen her.”

“Already seen her? Where?” Bao Ju asked skeptically.

“Didn’t you help her carry a basket of produce down here?” Tian Qingxiang finished calmly, turning around and leaving Bao Ju stunned under the shade of the trees. Still sweating, he watched Tian Qingxiang walk into the classroom as if in a dream he still hadn’t woken from, disbelieving and still stunned.

“Mr. Bao?” Someone behind him asked, patting his shoulder.

“Oh? That’s me,” Bao Ju turned his head, looked at the person behind him and asked, “And you are?”

“The name’s Jiang. I’m an art teacher. I’ve often heard Little Tian mention you,” he said, blinking and holding a cigarette in the corner of his mouth, swinging a keychain noisily around. “It’s a rare pleasure to have you come so far. The way you’re dressed, one would think you were the bridegroom, ha! An honored guest, indeed!”

Bao Ju looked at his expression, and his instincts told him to be cautious and merely smile at the man.

“Hey, did you see the invitation I put together?” He suddenly slapped Bao Ju on the shoulder and said, “How was it? A real first-class masterpiece, wasn’t it!?”

“It wasn’t bad,” Bao Ju shuddered for a moment, then self-consciously sat down on a stone in the flower bed and said, “Did you send many?”

“No, only three,” Mr. Jiang opened his mouth to spit out his cigarette butt, and with it still hanging open he glanced sidelong at Bao Ju. With shaking fingers he said, “One for his old man, one for his mother, and one for you!”

“His mom and dad?” Bao Ju asked skeptically. “He found his parents?”

“Hell knows,” Mr. Jiang pulled Bao Ju’s hand, then suddenly held out his right hand and lifted up his hair. Bao Ju tensely jerked his head back, put off by the oddity of the old man’s actions. He was definitely out of line. Mr. Jiang looked at him and laughingly said, “The day I printed them, he stood on the wall and tore up the other two, then shouted at the top of his lungs, ‘Dad, Mom, I’m getting married!’ Then he sat down there and cried; he sounded so pained that the entire village was about to die of anxiety!”

“And then?”
“No one knows. Anyway, after it got dark he was still there sobbing, but the next day he was as quiet as ever!” Mr. Jiang said disapprovingly.

Bao Ju was suddenly and inexplicably anxious. He felt like he was walking onto a stage to the deafening pounding of gongs and drums, but the lead had vanished like a yellow crane.

“Mr. Jiang,” Bao Ju asked earnestly, “I’d like to ask, how are things between you and Little Tian?”

“We’re friends! What’s more, we’ve been together for a year now.” Mr. Jiang raised his hands defensively and said, “What I mean to say is that we’ve lived together almost a year, but, Mr. Bao…”

“Call me Little Bao, it’s what Little Tian calls me.”

“All right, Little Bao. To be frank, we don’t get along.”

“What’s the matter?”

“I don’t know, but I’ve always felt like he’s a bit…touched,” Mr. Jiang said, and pinched Bao Ju’s hand again. “You know, I’m pretty easygoing, he’s just antisocial, and he’s not very emotionally stable; it’s like there could be a sudden rainstorm on any clear day.”

“How did he get together with the bride, do you know?” Bao Ju tactfully removed his hand from the teacher’s grasp and absent-mindedly wiped it on his pant leg.

“Little Bao,” Mr. Jiang shook his head, smiled insincerely and said, “It’s a long story. Actually, I came looking for you so I could tell you about it. You’d best prepare yourself; today’s wedding isn’t going to be a respectable one.”

“What do you mean?”

“Anyway, the townspeople are all going to spectate from the sidelines with a playful spirit.” Mr. Jiang saw Bao Ju’s confusion and said, “They all say that they’re just two crazies playing house!”

“That’s funny,” Bao Ju said, biting his finger. “Tian Qingxiang is odd, that I know; but that woman…”

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36 The immortals of legend were said to fly away on yellow cranes, never to return again.
37 Literally, they have been roommates for a year, but his word choice also implies that they have slept together.
“Little Bao, that woman is the real crazy,” Mr. Jiang said. “She doesn’t even know who fathered her children! Ha!”

“Mr. Jiang, should you really be laughing at that?” Bao Ju retorted. “If it’s really true, she deserves sympathy, not ridicule; isn’t that right?”

“Sorry, sorry,” Mr. Jiang said with a disingenuous chuckle. “This is how it is: her previous husband was a coal miner. They had two children, but later on there was a disaster in the mine, a real big one – it was a pretty big deal in the paper. On the day of the funeral—it was pretty crowded—there were about twenty or thirty caskets. As for the band and the floral wreaths, well, I needn’t say more. Everyone from high to low status had a funeral banner, at least twenty or thirty in all: that wasn’t a happy day at all…”

“Right, and her husband was one of them?” Bao Ju interrupted.

“Exactly,” Mr. Jiang shook his head and said, “not long afterward, she started acting like a total lunatic, and the two years in a row she had another couple children. Nobody knows who sowed the seed; as soon as I got here, I heard people saying that she was everybody’s public rice field you take my meaning?”

“Yeah,” Bao Ju began to feel more and more sickened. “When Little Tian came, did you tell him too?”

“I didn’t just tell him,” Mr. Jiang straightened his torso and proudly said. “I made especially sure to warn him that he could fool around, but he had to put all his humanity and morality aside if he wanted to really have at it. Little Bao, you understand: we’re here in this poor and remote place, nobody can guarantee a bachelor won’t go bad, much less that she wouldn’t become the bitch everyone talked about…”

“Mr. Jiang,” Bao Ju stood up and said brusquely. “Isn’t it just a little excessive for this kind of talk to come from you, a teacher and a role model?”

“It’s the truth!” he said with conviction.

“So you’re saying you’ve had your way with her too?” Bao Ju started to feel angry in earnest.

“I don’t know!” Mr. Jiang said emotionlessly.

“And then? Little Tian, he also…”

“Not long after Little Tian got here, he asked her to live in the empty house next to our apartment, and he came to discuss it with me. Every month we were to pull out
five hundred dollars to give her, and she would come help us cook, do laundry, sweep up and stuff,” Mr. Jiang said. “I’ve already told you I’m an easygoing man, so of course I agreed to it. Anyway, helping others is the root of happiness, wouldn’t you say, Little Bao?”

“So then he decided to marry her, just like that?” Bao Ju asked, giving him another cigarette.

“Would Little Tian be so stupid?” Mr. Jiang let out a puff of smoke and laughed grimly. “It wasn’t long, ha, before that woman started carrying another watermelon in her belly.38 Back then the entire village was in an uproar, all right. There were ten thousand fingers pointed at Little Tian, and then he had no choice but to ask you to make this trip, wearing such an expensive suit. Speaking of which, how are wages nowadays?”

“Were the townspeople certain it was Little Tian’s child?” Bao Ju asked.

“Little Tian didn’t deny it, anyway!”

“He didn’t deny it; is that the same as admitting it? I’m glad people are so logical nowadays!”

“Aren’t we, though?” Mr. Jiang asked skeptically.

“Do you know the story of Jesus’ crucifixion?” Bao Ju said, intentionally trying to embarrass him.

“Well, he was one of a kind,” Mr. Jiang said. “If he didn’t do it, Little Tian wouldn’t be so unhesitating in spending his money, taking everybody’s insults, or making such a burden for himself. He’s not stupid, Little Bao.”

Just then, Bao Ju wanted to stop paying attention to him. He thought the invitation had been mockery enough. Regardless, God had spared no insult in all this.

The sound of cicadas echoed in all directions, and the wind was cool enough to make one drowsy. Bao Ju thought to himself that maybe he should take a nap. His head was plenty mixed up, and the world had been just damned terrible lately.

But Tian Qingxiang walked over just then. He didn’t say anything, just stood ramrod straight in front of Bao Ju.

“What the hell is this?!” Bao Ju said impatiently. “You still haven’t changed clothes?!”

38 “Carry a watermelon,” “Walk carrying a ball” – euphemisms for pregnancy
These are fine,” Tian Qingxiang looked ahead and said. “It’s fine as long as there’s a ceremony. It’s enough that you came.”

Bao Ju stood up, grabbed him roughly by the shoulder and said, “Little Tian, when are you finally going to grow up and be an adult?!"

Tian Qingxiang only looked at him, and whatever he wanted to say, he couldn’t make it come out. Finally, he spat, “Go on in, the mayor 39 is already there. We’re only waiting for you.”

“The mayor?” Bao Ju laughed unrestrainedly. “Is he supposed to represent all the people in there watching the show?”

“He’s the chief witness.”

“And me?”

“Standing in for the groom’s father.” As he said it, Bao Ju put out his hand to pat him on the back, shaking his head and at a loss for words.

The classroom served as a chapel. When the two of them went in, there were already more than twenty people sitting inside, minding the fuzzy-headed students, holding little plates of candy and standing idly in the middle of the pathway. When they saw the two of them enter the room, they offered a bow and said, “Good afternoon, Teacher! Good afternoon, commissioner!”

Bao Ju smiled, scratched his head and said, “I’m not an academic inspector, I’m the groom’s proxy!” The children stared at him for a moment before lowering their heads again.

The interior had had quite a makeover. A few “double luck” characters had been cut out of red paper and posted on the blackboard, some candles were lit on the lectern, and the dilapidated ceiling was hung all over with children’s art projects. As soon as the wind blew in, they began to rotate ceaselessly. Tian Qingxiang led Bao Ju to the very front of the room, stopped in front of an elderly man’s seat and said, “this is the mayor.”

“Hello, hello,” the mayor said in Taiwanese. “My Mandarin ain’t too good.”

“Thank you so much for taking care of Little Tian here!” Bao Ju said, also in Taiwanese.

39 里長, an elected official who serves a four-year term in Taiwanese villages. Translated here as “mayor” for ease of comprehension.
“Don’t mention it, everyone in the village is family!” He turned his head and said to Little Tian, “Can we start now? It’s already noon, I’m getting thirsty here!”

“Sure we can.”

“Hey, go call for the bride’s son!” The mayor said excitedly, facing the women in the crowd. “She’s getting married!”

The women went out laughing and chattering amongst themselves. The mayor warmly took Bao Ju by the hand, leading him to the lectern. He stood there looking at Tian Qingxiang, his mind in chaos.

Almost immediately the woman Bao Ju had seen before was being pushed in by the others, busying herself by supporting her children on her back, taking her back-strap and tying a knot around her waist. In that moment Bao Ju examined her closely, but saw nothing different from his first impression. She was darkly tanned and chubby, with thick lips; but what was really intolerable was her dull, wooden gaze. Even though she was smiling, her eyes still had a resigned and careless look to them.

The ceremony was performed stiffly between laughter and other background noise. When the mayor called the groom to seal the marriage certificate, a sad, piercing cry came in from outside.

“Mom!” A child came running into the room at full tilt, and crying, said, “Mom, I’m hungry!” He clutched at He Jinhui’s leg as though his life depended on it.

The women sitting around on the side inconsiderately started laughing so hard that she could scarcely react; she didn’t dare to turn around, so she could only nervously turn her head to look between Tian Qingxiang and Bao Ju, and even the mayor covered his mouth with his hands as he began to laugh. Bao Ju angrily flung off his hand, walked over and picked the child up off of the bride’s leg, slowly walked over to the bride’s side and released him into the arms of a woman who flashed a smile full of gold teeth. He said, “Stop smirking and hold him for me!”

The woman stopped, and just like that she held the child and said, “Don’t cry, don’t cry! Your mom’s getting married and you’re still crying?!”

The women followed her hand, looked at Tian Qingxiang and laughed out loud again; but on the groom’s side, someone said, “Don’t mess this up, stupid women!”
Bao Ju could only close his eyes and let his sweat flow. He desperately wanted to make his exit soon, but when he opened his eyes and saw the bride and groom still standing just as seriously as ever, he wanted to start crying out loud.

“Would the chief witness please deliver his speech!” Mr. Jiang shouted.

The mayor straightened his clothes, scratched his head and saluted Bao Ju. He very properly walked in front of the lectern and with clocklike precision, he said, “Mr. Bao, ladies and gentlemen; our own He Jinhui, former wife of Kunzai…Today, Miss He…”

Bao Ju closed his eyes tightly and ground his teeth.

“It seems it’s true what people say about bastard children being smart! Look how bright this little devil looks, even at such a young age!” one of the women said.

“Miss He is of good character, and Mr. Tian is young and accomplished…”

“Nonsense, people say that mixed-blood children are smarter…”

“Today, the two families become one! May they soon have an honorable son…”

“Mixed-blood children are better-looking, that’s the truth of it.”

“The bond between the betrothed was preordained. They shall be in each other’s eternal debt. For the new wife and husband, we must all…”

“Mixed-blood children, you have to have one with a foreigner for it to be called mixed-blood…”

“May their familial harmony lead to prosperity, and in conclusion, to put it simply…”

“Ah, that’s not the same then. You only mix two bloodlines to get a mixed-blood child, whereas Jinhui here has mixed so many…”

“Thank you, everyone!”

“Would our honored guest Mr. Bao Ju please speak for us!”

“God damn you all!” Bao Ju restrained himself, forced a smile and said, in Mandarin, “Damn all of you! You should all go to Hell, just like Miss He’s ex-husband. And don’t forget, this place is full of gates to Hell!”

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40 Probably referring to the abundance of mineshafts in the town.
A round of clapping started below the stage. Mr. Jiang walked over and, grinning, said, “Most of them can’t even understand Mandarin!”

Bao Ju didn’t reply. As Tian Qingxiang stood to one side, a blush rose to fill his face. He slowly pulled the bride’s hand and quietly asked her, “is dinner ready?”

“It’s ready!” she shook her child, reached behind herself, and softly patted him on the back.

“Mom!” the other child jumped out from the guest’s arms; hugging Jinhui’s leg, he said, “I want to eat, Mom.”

The mayor, laughing, pulled Mr. Jiang aside and said, “What are you drinking this afternoon?”

“Double Deer!” Mr. Jiang said, patting the mayor’s shoulder. “Hmm? How’s it taste?”

“Outstandin’!”* the mayor said, smiling.

It would be more appropriate to call it a produce market than a wedding reception, Bao Ju thought as he chewed.

While the ceremony was going on, everyone had still been adults, but as soon as they started eating, Bao Ju was struck dumb trying to figure out where all the children had come from, greedily snatching up hors d’oeuvres.

“Eat! Don’t you spend all day whining about how you never get to eat fish balls? Really boy, the only time you’re not hungry is when I want you to eat!” a woman at the next table over said loudly, and her child, cheeks stuffed full with food, shook his head from side to side.

“Mr. Bao, come on, a toast to you!” the mayor said before taking a drink and downing a gulp of soup. He slurred, “Drink first, drink first!”

“It’d be my pleasure!” But as soon as Bao Ju lifted his glass, the mayor had already grabbed another cup and gone to the next table, shouting “drink first” as he went. Bao Ju could only put his cup down and watch the villagers eat and drink.

The groom’s guests were shouting loudly, playing a finger-counting game in Japanese, and it seemed like the whole table was covered by a swirling mass of twirling

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41 A brand of wine
42 Taking the first drink is a sign of respect in Chinese culture.
fingers. Bao Ju felt dizzy, and the mayor went up to Tian Qingxiang and said, “Come on, ‘ready-made papa,’” here’s to you! Drink to show your good faith, haha!”

At these words, Bao Ju felt a tickling at the back of his throat and his stomach began to churn violently. He put down his glass, ran over to the field, leaned over the wall and vomited unceasingly, until finally he had thrown up to the point of crying.

It was shady and cool under the cherry trees, and Bao Ju thought, it would be nice to sit down; I’ve really got to take a breather here. What the hell kind of place is this?

“Little Bao,” Tian Qingxiang said gently. Bao Ju didn’t know when he had started standing there in front of him. Little Tian said, “Go in and eat!”

“Wait a minute.”

“Now!”

“Wait.”

“I want to make a toast to you!”

“Wait.”

“You have to accept!”

“Wait.”

“You have to go now!” Tian Qingxiang said, agitated.

“Wait!” Bao Ju said, raising his voice.

“You have to go now!” Tian Qingxiang, red-faced, grabbed Bao Ju and shook him desperately.

“Goddamnit, you bastard, I’m gonna kill you!” Bao Ju suddenly tore Qingxiang’s hand off his chest, bent down, picked up a branch and started moving at Tian Qingxiang, swinging it through the air. Tian Qingxiang got out of the way and retreated a few steps. Bao Ju threw his coat onto the ground and took up the attack once again while Tian Qingxiang kept striding backward. Bao Ju shouted after him as he chased, while everyone in the classroom kept eating to their heart’s content, the words to their game echoing across the sky.

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43 The nickname refers to the villagers’ presumption that he has already fathered one or more of He Jinhui’s children.
He didn’t know how long he’d been running, but Bao Ju was so tired that he wanted to break down in hysterics. After climbing over a set of dilapidated stairs he saw Tian Qingxiang, sitting under a mulberry tree and sobbing miserably.

Gasping, he walked over in front of him, pressed his head against the tree trunk and said loudly, “You’re crying? Cry your fucking eyes out! I’m the one who should be crying—haven’t you tricked me enough?! You’ve made quite a clown out of me!”

“You’re really a sight, huh. Before, from dawn until dusk you were all benevolence and righteousness, all morals…fuck, but you’ve changed a lot since I saw you a year ago!”

“You’d still get up on your high horse and lecture back when you were screwing a textile worker, and now look, you’re screwing around with a miner’s widow, a woman who barely knows what’s going on around her. You should die in a fucking mineshaft just like the rest of them!” Bao Ju couldn’t restrain himself and slapped him around the face a few times as he scolded him, until finally blood started to drip from the corner of his mouth.

“Let me ask you this: do you actually love her, or do you treat her like a sex toy, like those other fucking scoundrels?”

“I don’t love her! But…” Tian Qingxiang finally mumbled.

“All right, man, you said it with your own mouth!” Bao Ju, enraged, closed his hands around Tian Qingxiang’s throat and shouted, “You knocked her up, held a wedding, and now you still have the guts to say you don’t love her! Are you fucking human?!”

“The child in her womb isn’t mine!” As Tian Qingxiang managed to choke out these words, Bao Ju backed off a bit, tossed him to the ground and pointed at his face.

“Whose is it then? Mr. Jiang’s? The mayor’s? Or was it the whole lot of them?!”

“I don’t know!” Tian Qingxiang shouted and started sobbing again.

“What kind of horrible world do we live in?!” Bao Ju shook his said and said, “Then why would you go and marry her? Do you really want to carry that cross on your back? Little Tian, listen to me, you can’t!”

“Little Bao,” Tian Qingxiang said as he lifted his head, “I have only pity for her. But I pity her children even more.”
“And you can solve everything by marrying her?” Bao Ju said. “Little Tian, think about it, this is a responsibility! This foolishness isn’t the way to show pity; and anyway, who out of these guys can understand you? In their eyes, you’re only picking up someone else’s trash, like nothing more than a shameless scoundrel!”

“Little Bao,” Tian Qingxiang said evenly, “back when you asked me about my parents, and when you gave me those fifty dollars, who was there to understand you?”

“That’s different!”

“No it’s not.” Tian Qingxiang said. “It all comes down to helping people in their moment of need!”

“But that woman will never know, she’ll never wake up and stop being debased!”

“That won’t happen. I know these townspeople. All I have to do is use this entirely meaningless ceremony and I can put an end to their debauchery.” Tian Qingxiang used a corner of his shirt to wipe the blood from the corner of his mouth and, gasping, said, “The most important thing is that I’m unwilling to see her bear any more children, each totally devoid of sensibility and self-confidence, only to spend their lives feeling inferior. Little Bao, I can’t let them turn out like me. Don’t you understand? I’ve been through enough already. You only stand self-righteously to one side, encouraging us with your words, but you can’t understand the bitterness of our existence. Little Bao, I’ve respected you my entire life, so I asked you to come—because you’re a brother to me. So when I tell you this, I only want you to understand, regardless of whatever other people might think. I’ve been used to being misunderstood from the very beginning!”

“Hey fella,” Bao Ju weakly sat down and said, “you’re pretty damned optimistic, huh?”

“Little Bao, I just can’t watch this tragedy go on forever, that’s all,” Tian Qingxiang said. “It doesn’t matter if you think I’m right. I didn’t think I was doing anything wrong, so I did it!”

“Stop it, man. The world is a bad place, I know.” Bao Ju rested his head on his knees and said, “but with morons like you around, other people sure do seem smart by comparison!”

“You’re not so dumb either,” Tian Qingxiang said, smiling wryly. “You really chewed everyone’s heads off at the wedding, there.”
“They didn’t even understand!”

“All you’ve gotta do is stand up straight, and then it doesn’t matter whether or not they understand. In the eyes of everyone else watching, they’re all a bunch of maggots!”

Bao Ju pulled out a squashed cigarette and lit it carelessly. He thought, I’ve got to calm down here; this kid is pretty dedicated. He lay back comfortably, and discovered that a child had been timidly sitting down on the stone steps and looking at him for who knows how long.

“Uncle Tian!” he called out quietly, “Come back and eat, there’s still meat!”

Tian Qingxiang pulled him over and said, “You’re right, we should go back!”

Bao Ju walked behind them. The reception was probably already over; people were filing back along the road.

“Little Bao, stay awhile longer, won’t you?”

“What for?”

“At night you can see the fishermen’s lights at Lunding! Just like that time up on Taiwu Mountain.”

“Actually, I’d like to see that.” Bao Ju said, “It’s been awhile.”

“I want to go see the fishermen’s lights too!” the child innocently said, smiling at Bao Ju.

“Okay,” Tian Qingxiang said. “Later, Daddy will take you there often, all right!”

The child smiled and leaned against Tian Qingxiang’s shoulder, hugging him tightly.

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At the beginning of the year, Taipei’s weather took a turn for the strange; this winter had been nothing if not cool and dry, nothing like the dreary, cold wetness of years gone by. When the spring flowers began to bloom, while people were still celebrating and wondering at how mild the winter had been, the rain followed the warm, moist spring air, bringing with it everything that hadn’t fallen during the winter. It rained day after day, from dawn until dusk.

Tang Shigan got off the bus, carefully hopping over a puddle on the ground; when he stood up and thought to say goodbye to the people still on the bus, it had already squeezed its way through the intersection, beating out the yellow light. He thought absentmindedly, I wonder if they think I don’t have even the least bit of common courtesy. But afterward he remembered he said goodbye everyday, and what did it matter if he missed one? As he thought this, he smiled with relief and walked toward the marketplace swinging his tightly-wrapped umbrella.

People getting off of work and out of classes completely blocked off the hallway; it was raining outside, and the people standing by the stop waiting for a bus all retreated up to the hallway. A few middle school kids took the opportunity to loiter by the newsstand, flipping through colorful magazines. Others were sitting in the pink radiance of a barbecue joint’s kitchen window, staring open-mouthed at the glistening meats within. One girl said, “That’s weird, it’s like we ate the entire chicken, skin, bones, and all!” The boy next to her said, “Your family even eats the feathers?!” Afterward, the two of them jokingly argued for awhile. The store’s chubby owner listened for awhile and he thought it was funny, too; he saw Tang Shigan walk by and said, “Hey Sir, why don’t you buy something? The barbecue’s not bad today! Take some home and save your wife the trouble of making the same thing!”

“No thanks, maybe next time!” Tang Shigan said.

“How about some chicken feet, then, or some wings?! Women really like snacking on that stuff.”

“Next time!” Tang Shigan said. “I’ll definitely buy some next time!”
Ordinarily he rarely came to the market, because food at home was generally prepared by Mama Luo, and he wasn’t picky anyway. Even though there were some things he couldn’t get used to eating, he never thought to say anything, he’s just take a little bit less than normal when he ate them. But the biggest reason was still that as soon as he got to the market, he felt like Ming Yi was at his side, and then he couldn’t keep from talking to himself, as if Ming Yi really was there next to him. He would intentionally pick out some things he didn’t like, laughing and scolding himself; the people in the shop would always look at him as if he were strange, and some would even ask him, “What’d you say, sir?”

But today was different, it was Ming Yi’s birthday. Ming Yi was four years younger than he was. He did the math; she’d be thirty-four, if she were still alive.

At twilight, the market was cold and lonely. The flower stands by the entrance had put away most of their stock, so that only a few lonely baskets were left, but even in the light rain, they still looked vivid and full. He carefully selected a few yellow roses, violets, and a big bouquet with thin leaves and white flower petals surrounding brilliant yellow circles. Ming Yi had been partial to yellow roses, and even on the day of her marriage, she had insisted that they exchange the red roses the florist had sent and buy another bouquet of yellow roses for the flower bearer. The violets didn’t have any particular meaning, but they symbolized his longing for a certain pure soul that he had lost; and those little flowers were in fact Tang Shigan’s favorites. More than once, people had told him they were “forget-me-nots,” but he didn’t care, he was simply partial to them, pitiful-looking and fragile as they were. He didn’t know the first thing about the art of floral arrangements. He bought the same few flowers every time, and without adjusting them he’d open the bouquet and put it into a wide-mouthed translucent vase, drizzle some water over the leaves, and put it on top of Ming Yi’s dresser. Sometimes, in the pale yellow light, he would face these flowers and become almost entranced. He’d always thought they needed a lot of watching over, and he would sit there with his thoughts, and hours would pass before he knew it.

“How much?” He asked.

“It’s already twilight, I’ll give you a discount!” the woman selling him the flowers picked up another two fresh red roses and said, “That’s fifty all together!”
Tang Shigan handed her fifty dollars, put the two red roses back in the basket and took a few more white flowers instead. He timidly said, “Can...can I exchange them for these?”

“Do you like that kind?” the woman asked.

“Yeah.”

“All right, as long as you like them. Anyway, not a lot of people like them. Is there something wrong with red roses?” the woman said to him, smiling. She then lowered her head again to deal with the crumpled, greasy money scattered across the counter, smoothing it out one bill at a time and finally tying it up with a rubber band. After a moment she realized someone was staring at her, so she lifted her head and said, “Is there something else I can help you with, sir?”

“Oh, it’s nothing, it’s nothing. Goodbye!” Tang Shigan said, and left. The woman gave him a strange look before lowering her head to count her money again.

The house seemed empty, but when he opened the door and walked in, Mama Luo was there on the couch snoozing. The sound of the door closing woke her. She opened her eyes and said, “Sir, you’re back! You’re a little late today.”

For the last few years, Tang Shigan had gotten used to hearing these words each day at dusk. It was almost as though Mama Luo didn’t even think to say anything aside from “Sir, you’re back?”

“You’re right, I’m a little late. I took a trip around the market.” He put his briefcase on top of the shoe cabinet and said, “I bought some flowers!”

“Ah, I’ll go start cooking then!” she said, then suddenly had a thought and added, “A letter came from Little Brother, won’t you read it first?”

“Huai Ming sent a letter?” he said, taking off his shoes. “I guess I’ll take a look at it. He hasn’t forgotten his mom’s birthday after all!”

He loosened his tie, leaned against the sofa and started to look at the letter. Huai Ming was studying away in Tainan, and even though he came back once a month or so, he never forgot to write once a week. Tang Shigan often thought to himself, “I have a good son, if only I hadn’t lost a good wife!”

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44 In reference to Tang Shigan’s son, although he and Mama Luo aren’t related.
The paper had been torn from a notebook and was covered in thin, elegant script. In some respects, Huai Ming had always been lacking the carefree air typical of boys. On the contrary, he was like his mother: fragile, given to worrying, and indecisive. Sometimes it even seemed he went out of his way to find things bothersome. Ever since he was little, he had appeared excessively weak and frail. He all too easily fell into inexplicable depressions, and it was rare that he completely opened up to anyone. Shigan often thought that perhaps he had suffered emotionally after his mother passed away. Therefore, starting in middle school, he had sent his son away to boarding school. Although it might dilute the boy’s sense of family, Shigan thought that it was worth it as long as it was of some help to his personal development. Children always needed some friends in their own world; but when he had lost his mother, to a small child like him, he had lost everything. His father was always at a loss for ways to provide him with any sort of comfort.

“Dad, remember to tell Mom I’m doing well,” Huai Ming wrote. “At the beginning of next month I can’t come back home, I’m heading to a coastal village with some friends to do survey work…are you lonely? Get out of the house sometime, Dad, or else come down south and take a little vacation. We get a little more sun down here. But anyway it’s like they say, go find a partner! You know that not only am I not opposed, I’d really like there to be one more person around to listen to me!”

Shigan folded up the letter and placed it on the coffee table, then walked over to adjust the flowers. He put the roses and chrysanthemums on top of the dresser and put that bunch of small flowers on the windowsill. Their thin stalks interwove in the transparent glass, with an emerald green that was heart-breakingly beautiful. As he watched, hot tears grew in his eyes. “Happy birthday, Ming Yi,” he said. “Huai Ming and I…we’re both doing well!”

The office was Tang Shigan’s second home, and also his second world; just as his co-workers said behind his back, he thought his world was anchored to only two points: his home and the office. At most, he might also count the rolling, uncomfortable seat he took on the bus to work.

For the first few years, there were times he truly couldn’t stand the heart-wrenching loneliness; it cut him to the bone and filled him with burning desire. On the
weekends he would make excuses to say a few words to Mama Luo and not come back, until one time he overheard her talking with a neighbor, talking about him in a nearly obscene tone of voice. Ever since, he hadn’t dared take one step out of his little world. Tang Shigan was nothing more than an ordinary person, but he had a more severe inferiority complex than ordinary people. If he was going to be honest about it, he was sometimes close to being a coward.

However, in the eyes of his co-workers, although Director Tang was a meticulous and strict director, he was also a good person, the sort who would respond to every request; but none of them would ever know that the stony-featured man standing behind the conference table was in fact a lonely one.

‘Director Tang, I’ve brought you a new employee!’ the Director of Human Resources told him, gesturing toward a long-haired girl behind him. “This is Miss Gu Yanfei; she was assigned here after passing the civil service exam!”

“Wasn’t she assigned here a while ago?” Tang Shigan said as he got up from his chair.

“She fell ill and stayed in the hospital for awhile, so she postponed her registration. But she’s here today!”

“Is that so? Miss Gu, please, take a seat!”

Tang Shigan sat down together with the HR director, then extended his hand to indicate the seat in front of him.

“Thank you, Director,” the girl said. “I’d be happy to accept whatever guidance you have to offer, I…I’m really quite clueless!”

Tang Shigan suddenly became completely uncomfortable, as though overcome by a spell of loneliness and sorrow, which he had tucked away deep in his heart these twenty-something years, suddenly gushed out; that voice, it sounded just like Ming Yi was talking! Tang Shigan clutched his hands and forced himself to calm down and carefully evaluate the new employee sitting in front of him. Perhaps she had just recovered from an illness: her face was quite pale, and her lips were covered in a faint layer of lipstick, moist and glistening. Her gaunt shoulders were both covered up by her hair, and from under her deep blue V-neck sweater protruded the beginnings of a white
blouse and a fair, elegant neck. Her entire upper body seemed possessed of a beauty so frail that it filled people with unbearable concern.

What made Tang Shigan’s heart jump, though, was the pair of beautiful earrings hanging from her earlobes; by chance, they were the very flowers of which he was fondest. “What beauty,” he thought to himself, “those flowers against that pale skin, matched with that sleek black hair...so beautiful!”

“Director Tang,” the HR director said, interrupting his reverie. “Why don’t you two chat for awhile, and in a bit you can send Miss Gu over to me to fill out a few forms.”

“Thank you, Director!” Miss Gu rose slightly and in doing so, her right hand lightly brushed the back of her skirt.

Thereupon the HR director walked past Tang Shigan and, not knowing what to say, just looked at her before stiffly turning and walking away. He hesitated a moment and abruptly said, “It’s nothing. Anyway, we have a little more time together. After a while, everyone will know each other!” he forced a laugh, then waved over a woman employee to show her around the office and introduce everyone to their new co-worker.

Sitting on his chair, Tang Shigan felt depressed; he strolled over to the window, looked at the flowers blooming outside, and whispered softly, “Ming Yi, Ming Yi!”

After the girl had gone to the HR office, the entire office erupted in the kind of commentary that appears every time a stranger leaves the room.

“She’s so thin and frail!”

“So thin I want to feed her some dinner!” Miss Wang said as she typed, and everyone laughed.

“Director!” one of the young workers shouted. “Director!”

Tang Shigan turned around and said, “What idea do you have this time, Little Ke?”

“Why don’t we find a day to go out for tea and welcome the new employee!” As he finished, everyone looked up at them.

“We could do that,” Tang Shigan said. “Why don’t you all figure out a time with her? It’ll be my treat!”
“Yay!” Little Ke shouted excitedly. “A round of applause, everyone!” And everyone did in fact stand up to applaud Tang Shigan. Smiling, he waved his hands and motioned for everyone to quiet down, then he sat down and flipped a file open.

That night, Tang Shigan sat once again in front of Ming Yi’s dresser, entranced by the flowers. He left for a moment to retrieve a pen and paper, then began slowly sketching a woman’s face, framed by long hair. After he finished drawing, he felt profoundly attracted to the lush and beautiful face of the woman within. He used his pen to poke two holes on her ears, then took two little flowers from the vase. He placed one of them in one of the holes, then gently placed the drawing in front of the mirror and took a few steps back and looked at it. Suddenly overwhelmed by passion, he snatched the drawing up and kissed it violently until the entire drawing and the flower had both been torn to pieces. Only then did he begin carefully tidying up. He went to the bathroom to wash the ink off of his mouth, then went to sleep.

The next day as soon as he got on the bus, he nervously scanned the entire cabin, but he didn’t see a trace of the girl and finally relaxed. But when the bus reached the halfway point, she got on together with the others at the stop, and timidly asked, “Director, do you mind if I sit here?”

“Go ahead!” Tang Shigan excitedly looked behind him and said, “Anyway, there aren’t any other seats, are there?”

Smiling, the girl sat down and silently looked ahead; but Tang Shigan couldn’t help but stare at the hand holding her purse. Her fingers were long and thin, and blue veins were visible through her fair skin. Her nails were a moderate length, and she didn’t put any nail polish on them; Tang Shigan loathed it when women with a pair of perfectly beautiful hands insisted on painting them a garish blood-red. Each time he saw this, he was always reminded of some tasteless movie or another.

Suddenly he snapped back to attention and looked out the bus window, where the girl’s thin profile was lightly reflected in the glass. He gazed, reached out with his fingertips and touched her reflection’s head, tremulously stroking the lips of the girl in the glass, and said, “Look, these new buildings are looking better all the time!”

Starting that morning, Tang Shigan began to feel he had never lived so fast; his mind was clear and he was in high spirits. He would often tense up and single-mindedly
watch her going about her work, and the office seemed to have changed into his own little world, just like his mind would lend itself to flights of fancy in the space of his tightly shut bedroom, his face ruddy and his eyes seemingly coated in a persistent film of tears. “Ming Yi, Ming Yi!” he called out, quietly. After lunch he went out for a bit, and when he came back the employees all looked with surprise at the flowers he held in his hands.

“Director,” Little Ke said, “These flowers aren’t very bright, will anyone notice them in an office this big?”

“I will,” Tang Shigan said mysteriously. “Just put them over there on my desk!”

“Actually, red roses are a little more sentimental!” Little Ke said.

“Really?” Tang Shigan’s reply was slow; he was only paying attention to taking care of the flowers.

On the weekend they did indeed go out for tea. The entire office went, and a few even went home first to bring their children, and there were exactly enough of them to fill three tables. Tang Shigan seemed quite unaccustomed to this kind of chaotic occasion, and kept repeating, “Help yourselves, everyone, help yourselves!”

“Let’s have our leading lady take the seat of honor, shall we?” Little Ke said, and suddenly everyone’s gaze was on Gu Yanfei, who smiled and nodded before standing up and walking over to Tang Shigan’s side. She removed her sweater, hung it on the back of her chair and sat down. Tang Shigan shifted his chair to face her and said, “You’re the star today, eat as much as you like!”

The girl smiled and timidly said, “Thank you, Director! I hadn’t imagined that the office would be so welcoming!” As she spoke, she teased her hair back with one hand. “I didn’t think that I’d be making such a fuss as soon as I got here…!”

Tang Shigan merely stared at her movements, when she put her hand back after moving her hair, he nearly went over to hug her! At that moment, with her pale neck and soft ears so close to him, he could clearly see the individual hairs left on the edge of her ear, tamed and fitting against that skin; he could even smell faint traces of a fragrant, entrancing shampoo. Tang Shigan suddenly thought back: a long time ago, he had buried his face deep within the wispy black hair of a woman like this. Many fond memories were hidden within the depths of his heart, and they all suddenly rose up, and look, on her
earlobes, those ornaments, were precisely the flowers he cherished most. “If there were a few dewdrops on the petals, wouldn’t that be more radiant and beautiful?” Tang Shigan thought, his heart fluttering and his hands oozing sweat.

“Director, your tea!” The girl abruptly turned around and said. Tang Shigan suddenly discovered that his teacup had overflowed, staining the white tablecloth with a patch of faint yellow.

“Oh! I’ve overfilled my cup!” he said. The people next to him at the table were eating enthusiastically, and nobody noticed his slip-up. Furthermore, the light in the teahouse was faint and dim already, otherwise everyone would have seen that Tang Shigan’s face was so red it looked ready to bleed.

The girl, smiling and clasping her plate, took a piece of Mala cake from the person next to her, then turned around and said, “Director, would you like a piece?”

“You take it; actually I don’t much like sweet foods!”

When the girl bent over and gently took a bite of it, her hair fell gently forward, and through her hair he could only see the straight bridge of her nose and her full, round lips, and when she was carefully chewing, her nostrils expanded and contracted slightly, and her lips formed an intoxicating contour, and when her tongue timidly emerged from her mouth to lick up the cake remaining on her lips, Tang Shigan looked at the cake on his own plate, and suddenly felt it was that fair softness that made people desirous, and thereupon he gently took a bite, carefully leaving some of the cake at the corners of his mouth, and only then did he quietly begin to chew.

“How is it?” the girl asked, wiping her lips with a napkin.

“It’s been a long time since I’ve had it,” Tang Shigan said. “Actually it’s particularly good!”

The girl listened, reached out to put a piece on his plate, and said, “Director, here’s a little white elephant gift for you\(^{45}\); thank you for treating us!”

Tang Shigan looked at her, but no words came to his mouth; he merely continued chewing.

When he returned home the sky was getting dark; Mama Luo was locking up and getting ready to go home: she didn’t work on weekends.

\(^{45}\)借花獻佛: literally, “to present the Buddha with a gift of borrowed flowers.”
“Sir, you’re back,” she said and opened the door again. “It’s the weekend, why are you back so late? I thought you were busy and wouldn’t come back tonight!”

“I did have something to do, Mama Luo,” he said as he was taking off his shoes. “There’s a new employee at the office, and we all went out for tea together!”

“Ah, it’s been a long time since I’ve been out for tea,” Mama Luo said. “Let’s all go out for tea when Little Brother gets back, all right?”

“Sure!” Tang Shigan said with a smile.

“Oh, right, I almost forgot, another letter came from Little Brother, by express mail this time!”

“All right, I wonder what it is this time!” Tang Shigan replied slowly, watched Mama Luo walk out the door, hurriedly shut the door, then worriedly ran into the bedroom, grabbed the flower vase, and gently set it on the end table. It had been a few days, but they had kept their bright color; only a couple had lost some of their rigidity, and a few leaves had fallen off; taking pity, he pulled them out and discovered that there were two stems missing flowers; the tips had already withered, and he thought back to that night, smiled sadly to himself and pulled it out.

Finally he carried the vase to the bathroom and drizzled some more water on the flowers, placed them in the window, moved a chair over, and sat next to them. He looked again at the flowers, until finally night fell, and only then did he return inside, turn on the lights, and discover that everything in the room was surrounded by a haze, and then he realized he had started crying again.

Huai Ming’s letter was on the end table, and his writing seemed somewhat different from before, as though he were in a rush. Confused, he opened it, and inside there was only a single piece of flimsy stationery.

_Dad, did you get my letter the other day? Originally I wasn’t going to come back this weekend, but now it seems I have no choice._

_Dad, please forgive me, I never told you, but there’s a girl I’ve been going out with for a long time now. Yesterday I got a letter from her saying she already registered at the place where she works (she was sick for a few days; frankly, her health is really poor), but my goodness, Dad, can you believe it’s your company? She says she wants to take me out, to celebrate her recovery and her new employment, so I have no choice but_
to make a trip. I’m taking the late night express train this weekend so I can make it home by Sunday morning. Dad, don’t go out; let’s go eat together for lunch, and I’ll give you a proper introduction. Oh, right, if you already know this newly-registered employee at your workplace, named Gu Yanfei, that’s her. I’ll tell you the rest when I see you; and by the way, she also hopes you can help her work her way up the ranks!

Sincerely,

Huai Ming

Tang Shigan shut his eyes, leaned against the sofa and let out a sigh; eventually he took the stems he had put on the end table, put them away in the envelope and as if in a trance, he threw it into the wastebasket. He stepped over to the window, picked up the flower vase, carried it into the bathroom, poured the water out, pulled out the flowers and threw them into the wastebasket as well.

“Ah, I’ve had them out for so many days, I should switch them out anyway,” he said to himself. “I’ll have Huai Ming run out and get some more tomorrow morning!”

When Huai Ming came in the next day, he discovered that Tang Shigan had just fallen asleep in his clothes on the sofa, and the wide vase on the end table was all alone in the morning light.

“Dad, get up, it’s already bright outside!” Huai Ming said. “Did you just wait for me like this all night?”

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