ABSTRACT

THE FIRST PARTY

by Wei He

My thesis will consist of a selection of short stories that create a modern moral landscape where signposts point in the wrong direction and the landmarks have eroded, where characters are in search for the right path, baffled yet resolute, and stumble over each other in search of how to be loved, how to be true, and how to be brave. The stories do not share a single thematic bond, but I endeavor to establish subtle ties between themes and characters which will bring this collection coherence and lucidity. Some stories will present the geographical particularity of Inner Mongolia, which is my hometown, and its strong relationship with the creation of characters. For others, they will cross geographical and cultural boundaries and deal with moral and life concerns in the bigger setting of globalization. I will dedicate this collection of short fiction to the exploration of the trans-national, cross-cultural and modern forms of family, the examination of the roles played by each family member, and the moral dilemmas or stalemates faced by modern people.
THE FIRST PARTY

A Thesis

Submitted to the
Faculty of Miami University
in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts
Department of English

by
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Miami University
Oxford, Ohio
2013

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My husband, Mr. Hamilton, looked harmless and insipid as a scarecrow in a fallow field, or a reliable car on a quiet street. His shoulders were narrow but his legs were long and so straight that his jeans, bleached a faint blue by the sun and much washing, hung down free of wrinkles, as though they were empty. He drank ice water through a straw in public and looked to enjoy it immensely; he squeezed ketchup right onto French fries, never wasting a single drop; he would keep working uneasily on a stain on his shirt, if there was one, while talking to people he didn’t know well. They were all part of his way of showing his vulnerability. But I knew he was a killer, quiet, fast and professional. I guessed he had been doing this for a long time, long before we got married. I didn’t know whether he knew I knew his real identity. I only knew I loved him so much that I slept with our neighbor and ruined my husband’s career completely.

We had been married for three years and had lived in the city until one month ago, when we moved to this small town. Mr. Hamilton had been a manager at a supermarket since we married and was never home much before he suddenly quit his job and proposed moving. I thought he was having an affair and got some woman pregnant and was planning on leaving the mess behind. But I could never grab hold of any evidence of him cheating on me. He always looked like he had nothing to hide, never a sneaky and underhanded aspect to his behavior. Our sex life was fine. I never found perfume or a woman’s hair or lipstick on his shirts. One night he caught me burying my head in the pile of his dirty shirts, breathing in his innocent sweat. He said he was not happy being out all the time either and that his job was getting overwhelming and he was looking forward to a new start. I looked up at him and let out a sigh. He pulled me up and hugged...
me. But there was something about his hug, something subtle, uncertain and suspicious, and also a little bit awkward in how he squeezed me, as if I were a terribly-cut cigar that was unraveling.

Speaking of cigars, they were Mr. Hamilton’s weakness. He always laid the cutter on the table and stood the cigar up vertically to avoid cutting too much off of the cap, a circular piece of tobacco covering one end of the cigar to secure the wrapper. And I had a feeling that his target’s life was just like a cigar to him: he cut it with a double guillotine and lit it with a soft flame. The goal was to open up the cap without cutting past the shoulder, a visible line where cap and body met. He firmly squeezed the cutter closed. The cap came off neat and clean. He was very good at staying at this side of the line to leave the body as beautiful as a piece of art, for himself to appreciate. This vertical-cut technique might be too convenient and conservative for him, who was not a rookie any more, but he never abandoned it, a method of getting his business done securely and efficiently.

Compared to cutting a cigar, that is, which required precision and decisiveness; lighting one was a process of balancing and delicacy. A soft flame allowed more control with a slower and cooler burn which reduced the risk of scorching the wrapper. He placed the hottest part of the flame, the rippling excitement, the burning cordiality, the invisible danger, right above the top of the visible flame, under the cigar at an approximate forty-five degree angle towards him while holding the cigar at that same angle. The fire gently licked over the foot of the cigar, to erase the possible trace of any irregularity of the cut and its aftermath, the shocking, hideous effect to eyes.

It was all about beauty, Mr. Hamilton would say.

An aroma replaced the smell of raw blood. Then he rotated the cigar while puffing and blew on the end of it to ensure the embers were well lit, and to create an even ash so enticing that I would want to slide my fingers across it and leave my prints. But Mr. Hamilton would laugh at me if he knew what I was thinking. He would never leave a trace behind. He suddenly looked arrogant and cocky with a cigar between his fingers, and it may have looked to others that this
was his least vulnerable moment. But not to me. Actually this was when he let his guard down and gradually emerged from behind his camouflage. Pride goeth before a fall.

It looked as if my husband had few clients, but I know he had never failed. It might take him a couple of years to approach the target and draw the shiv out of its sheath. That was why he could get away with it every time (on the way to our new home, the small town, we heard the news of a dead body discovered two blocks from the neighborhood we just left). He never believed crimes on TV, I bet; they were too fancy, too complicated, too polished for reality. If my husband were not a professional killer, I was sure he would be an artist, who, just like a killer, was arbitrary (not necessarily selfish) and never consulted anybody else to decide which sacrifice to make, and when somebody got hurt as a result, they would argue that life itself was a damn arbitrary bitch. He might be a painter; I enjoyed his taste in colors. He was a man who could handle pink, the color of a little girl’s fake diamond ring, bright and cheap. He would use nimbus gray shirt to match his pink tie (a gift from a bad-taste client, I guess). But I wouldn’t be surprised if he ended up being a novelist, considering his outstanding ability of giving the smooth turns of one man’s life trajectory a hard twist then tying it into dead knots.

When Mr. Hamilton wrapped up his business in the city, we moved to this town. We bought a house here and settled down. Mr. Hamilton found a new job at a local supermarket. Our neighbors were normal and interesting people. Mr. and Mrs. Brown lived next door, and Mr. Green and his grandson lived on the other side. There was a goofy mathematician living in a big house across the street but I didn’t see him much. His neighbor, a skinny and painfully shy guy, also worked in the supermarket. I smiled and waved at my lovely neighbors whenever we saw each other on the street, in the post office and other places. Because I knew: the days of someone’s life among them had been numbered since our arrival. That must have been the reason we were here. What other reason could there be to move to this small silly town?

It was when the Browns came over to say hello that I figured out Mr. Brown was my husband’s new target. He was in his forties, tall and slender, didn’t smile much. He was
definitely not an ugly guy, but his face gave me a feeling that it would look different when in bed. He went to work in the morning and came home in the evening during workdays and drank beer on the porch on weekends. Mrs. Brown was five years older than her husband, tiny and a little hyper. She looked like a person who always knew how to put up a fine front to the world. When I opened the door, I could read both Mr. and Mrs. right away. Mr. Hamilton came out of the bedroom and joined us at the door. He asked them about the name of the flowers on their windowsill and the brand of the beer Mr. Brown had been drinking. When we conversed, he kept working on the stain on his T-shirt left by a chunk of sausage that morning. The Browns pretended they hadn’t seen that.

I once asked Mr. Hamilton if he had ever seen ghosts. He said they were only a piece of floating cloth that could be whisked away and shaken with a sharp popping sound. At first I was so disappointed in the shallowness of his thoughts. But now I knew his answer was damn smart. He thought I was asking him about the ghosts of all the people he had killed, and he skillfully dodged my question. A haunting memory could be easily shaken free of rippling wrinkles, yellowed lints, and settled dust of the dead and the buried. Then our conscience would be smooth and clean.

There was another aspect to his vulnerability that I failed to mention, the disguise he used when alone with me: He enjoyed watching cheap romance movies. The night following the Browns’ visit, we watched one in which a man begged a woman to marry him in a restaurant but she turned him down. But he kept begging. Then he said he needed to take a leak, and left. She wanted to say something, wanted to explain why it would never work out, but he had left, then she asked herself aloud if she still wanted to say no when he came back. She didn’t know the answer until he came back. She said to him, You’re such an idiot. He was about to cry, which made the woman despise him more. Hamilton threw his arms in the air and laughed. How silly he was! I had to keep reminding myself of the other layer underneath his skin, the more dangerous one, to enjoy the movie and his company.
I did think about divorcing my husband, both before and after I found out about his second profession, but for different reasons entirely. We met at a party at my friend’s place. That was the first party I attended since I moved to that city. I didn’t know many people there, nor did he. I went outside to get some fresh air and saw him smoking a cigar behind a giant green plant in the backyard. It was getting dark but there was still enough natural light for me to discern the shape of everything. What a beautiful moment! He looked almost regal. His cigar had a strange grassy smell sharpened by pine sap. His shadow slightly trembled in the changing light, the way a single droplet did before it gathered weight and fell from the spigot. Five months later, we got married, but I soon realized that I was only attracted to the Hamilton of cigar moments. The rest of time he was as vulnerable as a waterdrop landed on our cracked countertop, either sucked into a crevice or smeared on a wiping cloth.

The sharp contrast between these two Hamiltons inspired me to uncover his real identity. I didn’t realize how enchanted I was by the reality of my husband being a professional killer until I witnessed how he interacted with Mr. Brown. (I looked at my husband’s reddening ear, thinking he looked so dangerous and attractive when he was approaching his prey.) But I couldn’t allow him to jeopardize his life by being caught by police or killed by his targets. I wanted him to be stuck where he was now—always in a state of conspiring, planning his next move but unable to move forward, as if smoking an expensive cigar that would never burn to ash.

So a week after their visit, I stopped Mr. Brown at his doorstep one evening, to borrow his corkscrew; he told me he’d just gotten in from work and had to cook dinner himself that night since his wife was out of town to visit some girlfriends. I kissed him for the first time after he invited me in, and he said it might take a while to find the corkscrew. His lips were dry and stiff but standing in his big shadow felt like standing in a pool of water. I asked him if I was pretty enough to sleep with him. He hesitated and said yes. His answer saved his life. My husband, Mr. Hamilton, could never lay his hand on him now, since Mr. Brown had become my lover; if he died, people would suspect that my husband did it. I created a trail of evidence back to him, even
before the murder was committed. But I knew my husband could not give up on his target, for
the sake of his career and reputation. That’s the spirit.

Later that evening, when I came home, Mr. Hamilton asked me where I had been, I said I
got to invite Browns over for a party. They seem to be such wonderful people, he said. Yes,
indeed, I said. Let’s throw a big party this weekend, I said. Great, I’d love to help, Mr. Hamilton
grinned. The prospect of being close to his target filled his face with good cheer and life. You
know, he added, I was actually thinking today that we should throw a party to get to know the
neighbors, and here you’ve already started the invitations. Isn’t it wonderful, I said, that we
always share the same ideas, the same thoughts? Mr. Hamilton looked a little surprised but kept
grinning. I continued, We’re more than husband and wife. We’re soul mates, we’re kindred
spirits. You’re the only person in the world who can understand me, and I am the same to you. I
walked closer to him for a hug. Mr. Hamilton circled my shoulder blades with his arms hesitantly.
I hugged him tightly, and he hugged back. We hugged for a long time. Such a wonderful hug
that it almost felt like we could live happily ever after.
SHUSH, SOMETHING YOU DON’T KNOW

I A Joke

Before we got married, Peach told me a joke. That was a muggy evening. We were eating beef noodles in a small restaurant at the corner of a street. I dipped the chopstick in the soup, then put it into my mouth, nibbling at it, while Peach was still eating. Waves of traffic swept by, like dots of light sliding down along the strips of a shirt. Peach told me the joke:

At noon, a baby was crying loud, which made the neighbor unable to take a nap. The mother began singing for the baby, trying to quiet her down. After a while, the neighbor knocked on the door. The mother opened it. The neighbor said, I prefer to have the baby cry.

Peach laughed loudly, greatly enjoyed telling the joke. The corners of her eyes disappeared into a web of wrinkles. I didn’t know how to react to the joke. It was funny but not funny enough for me to give an instinctive laugh. I grinned, and looked over her head. I saw sweat stains on the back of a man sitting behind her, on which a fly was standing, rubbing its feet vigorously.

We were sitting by the window and saw a yellow cat strolling on the windowsill outside, followed by a cloud. The cat walked an inch, the cloud moved an inch. I said the cloud was the kite, and the cat held the string. Peach didn’t follow me. But she married me anyway.

2 The Purse

Five years after we got married, I grew interested in her purse. I took everything out of it when she was not around. I wiped her wallet, lipstick, a small bottle of sunscreen lotion, and
keys with a wet rag and lay them neatly on the table allowing them to dry. I threw them back into her purse erratically, as if nobody else had ever touched it.

I read every crumpled receipt and candy wrapper. She ate pineapple-flavored candies for one month and six days. Then she turned to toffees. One day, I even found half a piece of melting chocolate wrapped in tissues on which a red heart was drawn. I pressed three fingerprints into the chocolate before I threw it away. Another day there was a receipt for a woolen men’s scarf, but she said nothing about it. I thought it would be my birthday present, but I got a CD for my birthday. I became depressed and kept thinking about it for three months. When it was Christmas, I got a scarf. I tried to look surprised when I saw it, the way Peach had expected, and I regretted all the time I spent thinking about the scarf in the past three months. I could have been much happier. After that, I didn’t touch her purse any more.

That was why I didn’t realize she was having an affair. Two months later, the cleaning lady in the company said my scarf was not wool at all. On my way home that day, the scarf got caught by a protruding nail in the subway station. I watched that fake wool string waving up and down in the speedy train.

3 Another Purse

I grew interested in purses again. But I didn’t go back to Peach’s. A woman who sat next to me in the office always carried a baggy purse with blue and yellow stripes. The curiosity about what was in her purse gnawed at me. One day I spilled a whole cup of tea which began to flow to the paperwork on my desk. She withdrew a bag of tissues from her purse and hurried over to my rescue. Another day, I ate some Mushu pork and had a stomachache. She fished two digestion pills out of the purse, and put them on the lid of my tea cup. After a week’s extra attention on her purse, whenever she took something out of or put something into it, I knew there was at least a tiny weathered irony pencil box, a lipstick, a Bible for children, a Chinese Literature Review, a floral-covered notebook tied by rubber band, a ballpoint pen with a black-and-white striped
donkey sitting on a spring on the top, a chain of keys, a plastic strawberry as big as a fist, a pink mini pillow, and one small bag of bait. One afternoon, when she was not in the office, I saw something struggling in the purse, probably trying to get out. I walked over and put hand on the purse, feeling the movement inside. It quieted down gradually. I patted it gently before I left.

There were three times that she sensed my gaze on her movement of fumbling in the purse. She turned to me and smiled. The third time she smiled at me I asked her if she would have dinner with me. On our way to the restaurant, I offered to carry the purse for her. It looked heavy, I said. She said thank you and handed it to me without much thinking.

When I was holding the purse in my arms, I felt something lurking inside, breathing softly. A current of warm air seeped out through the tiny pores of the leathery surface. The draft twirled between my arms, past armpits, around the neck, and climbed up to my hair. A silver spot of sunlight bouncing on the far corner of a grey building stared at me. I winked back, speechless. Nobody ever told me what I should do, or whether what I was doing was right or wrong.

4 Visitors

When I got home that night, Peach and her sister Cherry were chatting and giggling in the kitchen. Cherry’s husband Wu was sitting on the couch, flipping through the channels, cracking on pistachios like a squirrel. He nodded at me slightly and dropped a pistachio. When he bent down to pick up the rolling nut, a numbered hotel key fell out of his inside pocket. He picked it up hurriedly and then looked around. His eyes met my gaze and he mouthed some words to me, *Shush, something you don’t know.*

I nodded back. Wu stood up and went to the bathroom. The creases on the sofa cover where he had just been sitting looked like a smiling face. Stop it, I said, you’re no better than me. The face stopped smiling.

Cherry came in and told me about her bad dream the other night. I was walking along a corridor, she said, like in a hotel or something, going to meet someone. The corridor seemed
endless and I always stepped on flowers which made their puffy petals explode. She rolled her eyes, trying to put the image in her brain into words. The purple juice of those flowers dyed my ankles, she said. Just then Wu came back and Cherry stopped talking. She laughed loudly, obviously trying to cover something. I laughed too and said that was funny.

Wu asked what we were talking about. I said it was such a funny joke. I glanced at Cherry who was out of breath because of laughing, which made her sound more like crying. Wu didn’t ask about the joke. He went to the kitchen and asked Peach where the beer was. When I was about to ask Cherry what was going on between them, she said, *Shush, something you don’t know.*

They didn’t leave together. Cherry left first and went to see her girlfriend. I walked Wu to the subway station. A red moon jumped on a poplar tree, then tried to bounce off to the top of a building. But it was caught in the red milky light oozing out of the windows of a luxury restaurant, and melted like an aspirin.

It’s getting cold, I said.

Oh, yeah? Wu said.

Oh, yeah, I said.

She’s a different woman, Wu said.

I know, I said.

You know?

I know, everyone is different, like how you put different things in different purses.

He sighed and we got to the subway station. I said goodbye and he stepped on the down escalator. I watched him descending into the darkness of the station, a rock sinking into the black ocean. He didn’t turn around to wave goodbye.

5 A *Smell*
Peach was never a good liar. Every time she lied, there would be a kind of smell lingering around her that made me believe she was lying. Later she found that out and chose to tell me the truth. The truth that she wanted to tell and I wanted to hear. Or she would burn some scented candles to cover the smell of lying. I chose a bad time to ask her about the receipt of that woolen scarf. She was chopping onion.

You must be dreaming, Peach said. I didn’t respond. Or you must have a fever, Peach continued, you always say things that I don’t understand. But you married me anyway, I murmured. Peach put the chopped onion in the boiling oil to bring out the flavor. It smelled very good. I knew I couldn’t get the truth I wanted that time.

The first time I smelled that smell was when we were still in college. I wrote her a poem as her birthday gift; she said thank you. I still remembered the poem:

When I am looking at you with my eyes closed
I can see some lights
Like a piece of silk covering a red lantern,
Giving out
Those golden and silver
Broken lights

Judging from the poem, I thought I loved her. But when she finished reading the poem, Peach wasn’t so sure. Then I read the poem again, I was not sure either. I turned to telling a story, trying to convince her that I did love her.

I said, There was a boy who had a car accident when he was nine.

And? Peach raised her eyebrows. She was eating chicken soup noodles
And he survived the accident but became blind.
And? She had a cilantro leaf on her incisor.

I promise you, I said, I promise you that when I am thinking of you, I think of you the way that boy is thinking of the street and the sun and the clouds on the day he lost his eyesight.
Peach said now she understood. It looked to me that if I had told the story earlier, she could be much happier. She continued saying that I was encouraged to tell her a more touching story or read her a more beautiful poem as birthday gift the next year. That was when I smelled the smell. It didn’t belong to chicken or soup or noodles or cilantro.

6 Hotel

After I had dinner with the woman who carried a baggy purse in the office, the curiosity about what was in her purse started killing me. The moment she walked into the office, I could feel the vibration of the air caused by its breathing, subtle yet strong, like a cold slippery fish sliding over the back of my neck. When we were eating together, I saw her putting a metal spoon and a salt bottle with shiny lid into her purse when I came out of the men’s room. The thing in the purse gulped them down and I even heard it burping when I sat back at the table.

I asked her out again a week later. After we had steak, I took her directly to a hotel. I thought that after she fell asleep, I could finally uncover the secret of her purse. We checked into a hotel not far from the restaurant and we had to take the elevator up to the seventeenth floor. The elevator door was about to close so I stepped up quickly and caught it. We stepped in and found Wu standing there. He tried to pretend that he didn’t see me but he knew that I knew he saw me. He squeezed out a smile out of two clusters of wrinkles around his eyes. I nodded and looked away.

When we got out of the elevator, Wu followed me out and tugged at my sleeve. I gave the purse lady the key and asked her to get into the room first. I turned to Wu and mouthed What. He said, You know what I am thinking. I said, Shush, there’s something you don’t know. He grinned and knocked on the door next to the elevator. A fluffy head opened it. It was Cherry, though her hairstyle was different. I looked at her and didn’t know what to say.

Well, you look different today, I finally said.

Yeah, she is different since we started doing this, Wu said, eyeing his wife.
It’s a wig, actually, Cherry said.

It’s not the wig. You are different as a whole, Wu said.

When I got into our room, the purse lady was taking a shower. Her purse was on a sofa, like a wild animal hibernating. I sat on the opposite bed. I wanted to go over and open it, but something stopped me. I was just sitting there, watching it, like a cat waiting for the mouse to reach out its head from inside the hole. Suddenly the purse fell on the floor and everything spilled out. I saw clearly this time that there was nothing special in there, the notebook, ball pen, tissues, lipstick, the plastic strawberry, keys, so on and so forth. I left the room quietly and went home.

7 The Joke

I wore that scarf again when it was winter time. Peach cut the loose string and stitched a tiny peach on it. We had a daughter that winter. We called her Apple. On mornings, when she woke up and hadn’t quite got into the mood of crying, she would look at me and it was as if lake water softly swept over me before receding into the dark corners of her eyes, leaving moisture on the bridge of my nose and my forehead. The baby blanket made her little body itchy. Peach wrapped her with a brand-new woolen scarf first before putting her under the blanket. I fingered the tassels on the edge of that scarf when watching Apple breathe softly in sleep.

I still said strange things to Peach that she couldn’t understand. I said them to Apple too. When she was big enough to lift a pencil, she drew pictures and some of them were about what I had told her: a cat flying a fish-shaped kite, a chicken drumstick that had legs of its own and could jump off the plate, a kiwi reaching its eyes out of a sky-blue freezer. One day she drew two purple balls of fur. I asked her what those two balls were, and she said they were her Mommy and Daddy. Apple showed her pictures to Peach and Peach said they were amazing.

One night, Apple cried after spilling milk on the carpet which drowned her Fluffy-a cotton-stuffed puppy. I drew a smiling face on an old white glove and pretended it could speak.
Apple was still unhappy. So I made the glove puppet sing. I was such a bad singer that Apple started laughing. Out of the blue, I remembered the joke Peach told me before we got married and now understood why it was funny. I finally gave it a good laugh and watched the laughter bouncing between the two walls which made them slightly shake.
That morning, Aunt Guli woke up and went crazy. She said she needed to find a pair of shoes.

“Your shoes?” I asked, pointing to her slippers by the bed.

“No, no, no,” she said, agitated. “Not mine.”

The red birthmark on her forehead twitched like a third eye. It was in the shape of a gold fish, originally, right above the eyebrows. When she was little, she hated that birthmark and tried everything to get rid of it. One day, she took a loaf of newly steamed bread and put it right on the birthmark and screamed. This is what she told me. A piece of skin came off with the bread. Her mother took her to the doctor in the village and asked him to be very careful with the wound to avoid a scar. The wound healed fast, but the birthmark was still there. It didn’t look like a gold fish any longer…more like a carp.

After my parents died in the Anti-Japanese War when I was seven, I came to live with Aunt Guli. I had never seen my uncle; Aunt Guli seemed to have been living by herself for many years. There was a black-and-white picture of a young man and woman glued to the inside of the door of the wardrobe. The man wrinkled the bridge of his nose when smiling, his eyes as bright as burning coals. The woman didn’t smile, but gazed at the camera like a surprised gazelle with her mouth half open. The rouge on her cheeks was not applied evenly, which you could see even in black and white.

I looked at the fish-shape birthmark on her young forehead in the photograph and touched my eyebrows almost unconsciously whenever I looked at it.

Aunt Guli usually got up with the crow of the rooster and never missed it. She always finished her breakfast when the sun only showed a thread of her white belly on the horizon. Then
she carried the hoe to the farmland and washed her face with the chilly water in a pond before the
dew settled the dust.

But that morning, the morning she went crazy, Aunt Guli got up late. I had just gone in to
check on her and to sit down beside her, watching her face checkered with the shadow of the
tracery pattern of the wooden window, her face awash like a river with weeds swinging in
currents and a fish swimming in it.

She suddenly opened her eyes and sat up. I told her that she got up late and my stomach was
growling.

She said she’d lost a pair of shoes and needed to look for them, like I mentioned before. She
said it was not her own shoes.

“Okay then,” I said. “Not your shoes. Then what kind of shoes?”

She said: “It was a pair of military galoshes.”

She closed her eyes, eyeballs rolling beneath the swollen eyelids.

I asked where she last saw them.

“In a cluster of reeds beside the river.” She opened her eyes.


She said: “The river dried up, the year Lin Aiguo left.”

That was the first time I’d heard that name. Lin Aiguo.

“Who’s he?” I asked.

She ignored my question and said he lost his shoes on his way home.

“I have to find the shoes for him, so that…”

She straightened her back then and practically jumped out of bed and into her red plastic
slippers. Then she rushed out of the door, swallowing the second part of her sentence.
Later that afternoon I went to the secretary to the head of the village to ask him who Lin Aiguo was. I was concerned about Aunt Guli’s strange behavior, and while I was still just a child—fourteen—I was nevertheless the man of the house. I thought that the secretary might be able to fill in some of the blanks left when Aunt Guli had swallowed her sentence, and maybe help me figure out what had her so upset. So I told him the story as I’ve told you and started by asking the obvious, if there was a river around here, and if he knew anything about my uncle, who I’d guessed was this Lin Aiguo. The secretary thought for a moment with his eyes closed and the butt of cigarette bobbing up and down between his lips. Then he suddenly stood up and withdrew a thick notebook from the bookshelf. He spat out the butt and put it out with the heel of his right foot when looking through the yellowed pages of the notebook.

“We keep good records here,” the secretary said. “The whole story of this village is contained within the volumes I keep here in my office. The official accounts, my boy. The real accounts. Just in case anybody wants to come along later, stirring up trouble by telling some whopper about us.”

I felt the need to speak up then, in case he was implying something.

“My Aunt Guli isn’t trying to stir anything,” I said. “She’s old, and she seems confused. That’s all.”

“You’re sure about that?” the secretary asked.

“Am I sure she’s confused?” I asked him. “I’m sure she’s upset, and I don’t like it when she’s upset. She’s the only family I’ve got…we’re all the either of us has. We take care of each other.”

“That’s nice,” the secretary said, but he sounded disinterested. Instead he started flipping pages of the notebook, licking his thumb after each page to grab the next. The pages sounded brittle.

“A…Ai--,” he said. Then he stopped all of a sudden and moved his eyes away from the notebook. He paused and shouted, “Who ripped half this page out of my notebook?” Then he
showed me the uneven edge of the half page left, which was nearly blank. I saw the half of the character Ai on it. No Lin Aiguo.

“Well, there you go,” the secretary said, lighting another cigarette and inhaling deeply. “Half an answer. That’s the best I can give you today, child. But really, that’s not too bad for government work.”

When I came back home, Aunt Guli was sitting on the bed, twisting dough sticks. She looked normal. I asked her whether she had found the shoes. She asked me whether I was hungry. I told her I went to the secretary to the head of the village to ask him who Lin Aiguo was.

She narrowed her eyes.

“Which secretary?” she asked.

I said the tall one who loved smoking.

“I don’t know how you could manage to talk to him,” she said matter-of-factly. “That one died thirty years ago.”

“That is impossible,” I said, “I just saw him.”

“Did you see his shadow on the wall? Dead people don’t have shadows.”

I didn’t pay attention to his shadow.

Aunt Guli asked me why I thought that everything I got from an official was true, when there was nothing less believable on any subject than an official report.

“There was no official report,” I told her. “The secretary was going to look up uncl-…I mean, Lin Aiguo for me, but the page was missing.”

“A half-truth is all you would ever get from that office.”

“Yes, it seems that way.”
Aunt Guli then insisted that what she’d told me was true. She said Lin Aiguo had lost his shoes, and she’d seen with her own eyes, very clearly, that they were hanging right there on the tree beside the river that wasn’t there anymore.

“Why did he take off his shoes in the first place?” I asked.

“He has been walking for three years and felt tired yesterday. He was walking along a river and wanted to have a bath. When he got out of the river, he couldn’t find his galoshes. Without them, he can’t walk back. They must be still hanging on that tree. I have to take them down for him.”

She put down the half-finished dough sticks and walked outside, gazing at something I couldn’t see mid-air.

I steered her back inside gingerly.

“Where is the river? Why can’t he see the shoes?” I asked.

She landed her gaze on me, moved it somewhere else. Seemed distracted, then landed it on me again.

“Huh?” she said.

“Where is the river? I have never seen a river around our village.”

“Follow me.”

She took a hoe from behind the door and walked outside. I followed her to an ash tree outside the village. I was told the ash tree was thousands of years old and survived hundreds of droughts. The ash tree was once taken as the God of the village, she said. “What silliness is that,” she added.

Then Aunt Guli swung the hoe at the root of the ash tree, which greatly surprised me. After three swings, a thread of water flew out from beneath the tree.

“The tree locked the whole river, to protect it against the great drought in 1944. The farmland turned barren like it was swept over by a big fire. Thousands of people starved to death. But this tree survived.”
Aunt Guli threw down the hoe and squatted beside the workflow, which seemed endless.

“You know what?” Aunt Guli suddenly lifted her head and stared at me, “Lin Aiguo was walking along the river, looking for his shoes, and suddenly the river was sucked dry by the tree. That’s why he got lost.”

She dipped her fingertip in the river and put it into her mouth.

“The water tastes moldy.” She shook her head.

She patted her forehead with her wet hand, and I seemed to see the fish-shape birthmark shake its tail.

Then she stood up and circled the tree, looking for something among the branches.

I heard somebody calling my name and I turned around. It was the head of the village. He said the village secretary had asked to see me right away.

“I’ll be right there,” I said. “We were just looking where the river used to be.”

The head of the village said, “What river?”

When I stepped into the office of the secretary, he was facing the wall with a wisp of white smoke swirling above his head. A long skinny stretch of his shadow was lying on the brick floor which didn’t look like him as if borrowed from somebody else. I jumped over his shadow by raising my left leg but bumped my knee into the leg of the wooden table. The secretary turned back and gave me a faint smile.

“Sit down, please. I think I’ve found what you are looking for. That half page. About your uncle-in-law.”

I sat down on a loose wooden chair and squirmed uneasily. Until then I hadn’t realized that the seat of my pants had been drenched with sweat.
The secretary took out a piece of neatly folded paper from a drawer and handed it to me carefully.

“I found it under the foot of my bookshelf. The bookshelf is too old, and its legs are not of the same length because of moisture.”

The handwriting on the document was greatly blurred and I couldn’t read it. I handed it back to the secretary who opened the notebook and tried to glue that half page back.

“Lin Aiguo, your uncle-in-law, joined the army during the Anti-Japanese War. One day, after a battle, he took a pair of military galoshes off the feet of a Japanese officer and put them on his feet. At that time, most Chinese soldiers preferred to wear dried grass-woven shoes than Japanese thick-bottom galoshes. But Lin Aiguo had blisters on his feet, and grass shoes made it too painful for him to walk. When he was having a bath in a river, a Chinese soldier threw his galoshes away. Just then a group of Japanese soldiers passed by. Lin Aiguo didn’t run very far without his shoes, and he was shot to death. His chest was shot through by hundreds of bullets which turned him into a sieve. But none of this happened here. He never made it back to the village or your aunt again, I’m sorry to tell you. Just as many men never made it home.” The secretary lighted another cigarette but didn’t smoke it. He lost himself deep in thought, with eyes closed and the corners of his lips stiffened. I found his shadow against the wall got paler and paler, thinner and thinner. There was something unearthly about him.

When I came back home, Aunt Guli was lying under a pile of clothes and quilts. She opened all the windows to let in the night wind and moonlight. She beckoned me over by mouthing the word come. I stepped over the small pools of moonlight collecting on the floor, climbed over those hanging over the edge of the bed and sat by Aunt Guli. She looked weak. Her face was as pale as the flashlight in the dark night but the birthmark was bloody red.
Aunt Guli said she felt cold. I held her hands tightly. They were cold.

“I found the shoes,” she said.

She tried to smile, but could barely raise the corners of her lips.

“We have to get you to a doctor,” I said, pressing her hands into mine. “You’re not well.”

“It’s my time,” Aunt Guli said. “That must be why I saw that Lin Aiguo needed his galoshes. A doctor can’t do anything when it’s your time. He doesn’t have that kind of power, does he?”

I began to cry.

“Put me in the river when I am dead. Promise me.” I could hardly hear her voice.

I nodded.

“He’s still waiting beside the river. He could walk back home in that pair of galoshes. We can walk back together.” Then she let go of her last breath, as if in sleep.

The silver glow in her eyes dimmed to dead grey. The birthmark turned black. Just at that moment, I heard a loud thunder rolling over from the horizon. Then it started pouring.

I didn’t know when I fell asleep. Or how. I must have curled up with her, wanting to be close to her just a little while longer, but when I woke up, Aunt Guli was gone. It was just me sleeping there alone.

All I found of her was a piece of fish-shaped red jade under the pile of clothes and quilts.

So I took the jade to the ash tree outside the village. The thunderstorm had flooded the stream of water dug out by Aunt Guli and made it into a big river. I wouldn’t have believed it myself unless I’d seen it with my own eyes. Oh, it will never show up in the town’s official records. Don’t try to go there to find any mention of it, little one. But I tell you there was a river there that night, churning from the spout of the tree mixed with the rainwater. I let the red jade slowly slip off my palm into the water, the same way I’d let go of Aunt Guli’s hands when she died, and I watched the jade turn into a huge red carp. It swung its tail hard to splash the water, then disappeared under the silver currents.
SALESMAN

The bus was late. I had waited for forty minutes. I was standing still so long that a spider made a shiny string out of its spittle with one end glued to my protruding belly and the other end swinging happily in the air. I didn’t want to sabotage its sweet merriment in the early morning so I breathed gently in order not to put my abdomen into wavy motion. Actually I didn’t care if I would be late. We had only one company-wide meeting every three months and we spent the rest of the time selling things across the country.

The sun in the late fall was a small silver plate, tinged with a hint of blue. I squinted and saw a dark figure in the sun like an insect floating in the water. I blinked and found the figure was gone.

When I arrived at the company, the meeting was already over. I knocked on the door of the manager’s office and nobody answered. I sat on the wooden bench in the hall waiting for her. Greasy Head was also sitting on the bench, reaching out his watermelon vine-thin neck to read comics in last month’s issue of Turtle Town Herald which was still glued to the wall. There was a suspicious stain on the newspaper, which looked like someone squashed a fly there a long time ago. Apart from his greasy head, this habit was another reason I looked down on him, reading comics in an old, dirty newspaper. I was sure if I had oiled the metal parts of my bicycle with his hair, instead of leaving it in the basement, rusty and covered with cobwebs, I could still ride it to work.

“Hey, move over a little,” he said, nudging me. He finished the left column and wanted to move to the right.

I just closed my eyes trying to grab a ten-minute doze. I was annoyed by his nudge. I didn’t reply or move.
“Okay, I get it, fatso. You need to hog the bench!” he shrugged and took down his beer bottle-thick glasses and wiped them clean on his shirt. This is the fourth reason I didn’t like him, wiping glasses on his shirt, plus calling me fatso.

“I’m not fat,” I said, “I’m just fluffy.”

He let out a high-pitched giggle. The fifth reason to hate him.

He put his glasses back on and patted my shoulder. “You’re funny, Po. I know many fat guys and you’re the funniest.” His sarcasm made my butt itch.

The manager, Zi, showed up at the end of the hall and walked toward us. She was wearing a coat with a lot of buttons and zippers, and she buttoned all the buttons and left the zippers open. Her brown hair stuck out from under a man’s felt hat in a funny curl. She fished a candy out of her pocket and handed it to me. It was a toffee stuffed with melting chocolate. I knew its brown and white wrapping very well, on which, back in high school, I wrote the names of girls I liked and drew small hearts.

Before I took the candy, she re-handed it to Greasy Head who smiled broadly. I didn’t know what made her change her mind. Did I show any trace of hesitation in taking the candy that she interpreted it as rejection? If I also showed my incisors in my smile, perhaps it would be mine. This was the sixth reason to dislike him, taking leftovers. Zi fished another candy out and gave it to me. It was a nonfat and sugar-free nougat. Ouch. Why would a person want to eat candy if it was nonfat and sugar free?

Zi asked Greasy Head to follow her into the office and signaled me to wait outside. I heard Greasy Head say something and Zi laugh loudly. I never found his jokes funny. I started to worry about what product I would be assigned to sell this time.

Something small and used widely in daily life always sold fast. Three months ago I spent only twenty days selling out a new lock that produced a siren sound if jimmed by a wire. Last month, I didn’t have to travel at all to sell out a new kind of organic and edible toothpaste. People only needed to squeeze a worm of that toothpaste into their mouths, chew on it for a few
seconds and swallow all the bubbles to clean their teeth. Every morning, through my kitchen window, I could see my neighbor giving his wife a bubbly kiss on the cheek.

Greasy Head came out of Zi’s office in high spirits with a small white box tucked under his arm. He waved goodbye to me and bounced downstairs. I could still hear his shoes clicking after his head disappeared down the flight of stairs. This was the seventh reason he disgusted me, wearing clicking shoes like a woman.

I walked into Zi’s office. The strong smell of scented candles made me dizzy. I tumbled upon a piano and a splash of key notes danced in the air. Zi sat there smiling like a Buddha without a potbelly.

“Do you have a tail?” she asked.

“What?” I gathered myself from the piano.

“If you have a tail, pull it in and close the door. If you don’t, close the door directly.”

When I reached out and closed the door, I suddenly found that my hand was glued onto the doorknob.

Zi laughed.

“Hope you enjoyed the joke!” she said. “Haw haw haw!”

Zi was almost out of breath from laughing.

I thought this was what she and Greasy Head had laughed about. I just got another reason to hate him. How many reasons were there? I’d lost count.

Zi poured some water on my hand and the doorknob let go of it.

“Did you have fun? This is the thingy Greasy Head is selling this month. What a star product! So much fun!” she said, then indicated me to sit down.

I checked the chair before I sat. I didn’t want my pants to get wet in such cold weather; besides, wearing wet pants was not appropriate in any season.

“Since you missed the meeting, I’m afraid you’ve got no options,” Zi said.

I wiped two beads of sweat off my forehead.
“That’s the baby you’re going to sell this month.” She pointed at something behind my back. I looked back and saw a painting of a melting clock in a pot on the wall.

“Oh, I don’t have any experience selling art. But since it’s small and…interesting, obviously, I can give it a shot.”

“What did you see? No, no, not the painting. I mean the piano you tripped over.”

“What?” I said. “We usually sell stuff that’s small and weird. Why different this time? Can this piano become invisible or shrink to fit in a matchbox?” I asked.

“No, it’s just a piano. A normal one. One that could only sing, not fly. Our business is expanding its horizons,” Zi replied coldly.

I looked at the piano and the dots of sunlight dancing on its dark glossy top as if it were blinking at me. I blinked back, trying to build a bond between us.

This was what I had to do to come up with the strategy of selling a product. I needed to fall in love with the thing first, then I could break up with it. This bond could be using the toothpaste myself before introducing it to others, or having my hand glued to a doorknob and crying for help before coaxing kids to buy the magic glue with their pocket money. But how could I build a bond with a piano if I knew nothing about music? If I were a mechanic, I could break it down to pieces and sell the wood and metal separately, but I couldn’t even fix a lamp, let alone something that complicated.

I had to go right home after I left the company to wait for the delivery of the piano, Zi said. “It’s a pain in the ass to move a piano,” she said. “So make sure you’re home, or they’ll just leave it out on the street.”

“How am I going to move it to sell it, then?” I asked. “Door-to-door piano salesman? How the hell would I even know which homes have someone who could play it?”

When I was walking to the bus stop, the mosquito bite on my butt began itching badly. The most annoying thing was not the itch, but that I couldn’t scratch it in the public, especially when in winter my pants were so thick that my hand couldn’t get to the spot from scratching outside.
Mosquitos had normally already died this time of the year. Maybe that mosquito was the transformation of Greasy Head; he flew to my apartment with his greasy wings to bite me at night. The itch made my gait look like a worm, my legs wriggling forward. Suddenly it started raining. This would probably be the last rain the year; winter was coming.

I was on the balcony. A bee was buzzing around my head. I gave it a slap. It fainted away and fell toward the ground. A twig broke its fall and it bounced off into the cold night. I cast a glance at my bedroom. The bed and the piano were like a couple of sleeping elephants, one white, one black. Then I looked down at the 24-hour grocery store across the street as I drank from my third bottle of beer. Jie stood outside the store, leaning against the wall and smoking. She worked only the night shifts and always grabbed a cigarette at the time when the shadow of the tree in front of my apartment filled up the yard and crawled up to reach the banisters of my balcony.

The first time I met Jie, when I went to the store to buy honey, she showed me the tattoo of a hummingbird on her inner arm. The next day, I went to the grocery store to ask her out. But I saw her showing my neighbor, a college student majoring in pottery, the tattoo of a thorny rose above her belly button. So instead of talking to her, I bought a bottle of ketchup and didn’t say anything. When she asked me what I was cooking with honey and ketchup, I didn’t know how to answer. Then I saw a fellow shopper’s hairy chest and well-tanned skin wrapping his ribcage, so I said I was trying a new recipe for barbecued ribs. Jie smacked her lips and said she would like to have a taste of it if I succeeded.

I tried a recipe that night, which turned to be very delicious. I mixed ketchup, honey, beer, and sugar to make the sweet and sour sauce. Then I stewed ribs with chopped garlic for an hour before I spread the sauce on them. I put some ribs in a yogurt carton for Jie and ate the rest while watching commercials on TV for inspiration on how to sell the piano. When I went to buy beers
at midnight, I brought the yogurt carton to her. The next night when I went there for Coke, she told me she and her Wizard loved the ribs. Wizard was her pet lizard. And she asked me what I would do with beer and Coke. That was how later I came up with the recipe of beer-Coke wings. I submitted two recipes to a magazine and they were published. I can be very creative when pushed.

I looked back into my room and saw the piano and my bed eyeing each other. There were the only two giants in my room when I was not in there, the king and the queen. This might not be an effective way to build a bond between me and the piano. I didn’t want any solemn faces like kings and queens in my room. The home was for carnival and dreams of carnival. My two chairs were round-edged so they wouldn’t hurt the cushions. Books were always willing to back up to give room for bronze animals and colorful pebbles. Before I put the piano in the room, the irregularity and the imbalance of the layout in my room gave me a feel of a river, which helped me fully relax after long business trips. Everything was flowing everywhere. Why did the bookshelf have to stand upright clinging to the wall instead of tilting at an angle of ten degrees in the middle of the room? Why did the bed have to be parallel with the wall instead sticking out from one corner toward the table? If I took a picture of my room, you would get a feel that all the things were about to fall out of the frame. But now I had to move my furniture around to make room for the piano which completely balanced the room. The two corners of the bookshelf landed on the floor. I couldn’t feel that I was in a canoe on a river watching stars when I lay on bed looking outside. I had to sell the piano as soon as possible.

When I looked down again, Jie had disappeared. I remembered one day I went to the store for pineapple, I asked her about the expiration date of a canned pineapple that was partly smudged. The can was just taken out of the fridge and the metal made my fingers numb. She leaned across the counter close to my head to read the numbers. Her warm breath touched my ear, and it felt as if they were burning. I could even hear buzzing. She couldn’t read the numbers either and took the canned fruit from my hand and stuffed it under the counter.
She said, “Go get fresh pineapple. Only ice cream factories buy canned fruits to save money and the trouble of peeling them.”

I just stood there holding the cold air left behind by the can.

“Oh, your ear and cheek are so red. Do you feel hot? Let me give you a breeze.” She took out a fan covered by dust and plugged it. She held the fan toward me. I sneezed.

“Maybe too much. After all, it’s winter.” She unplugged the fan and smiled embarrassedly. A cluster of tiny freckles beside her nose wrinkled up.

I sneezed again. I must have caught a cold. I went into the room and took a pill and went to bed. I raised the lid of the piano with one foot and pressed the keys at random with the other. The college student pounded on the wall. I let down the lid and fell asleep.

The next morning, I covered the piano with a white tablecloth. Then I stood on the balcony, eating a bamboo-shoot sandwich. Three days ago, Jie asked me how she could sell twenty-two canned bamboo shoots that would expire in three days.

I said: “You know what? Bamboo shoots are a natural fat scraper. They are perfect for those who want to lose weight.”

“Really?” She was turning a shiny can in her hand.

“I think so. And the slogan can be, ‘I’m curvy, and I like it’.”

Later that day, I went back to ask her if my idea worked. She said she only sold one can.

“There is a woman who bought two cans on her way to the zoo. Then she returned one on her way back.”

“Why? Have you told her it takes time for bamboo shoots to take effect? And did you tell her that one can is obviously not enough?”

I was sweating all over.

“She said she saw pandas in the zoo and they love bamboo shoots. They don’t look curvy at all. And,” Jie added, “that woman said we could sell the bamboo shoots to the zoo. The pandas love them. They even licked clean the can lid.”
Instead I bought all the bamboo shoots she had. Jie said I didn’t have to do this. I said eating bamboo shoots made me feel as if I were a panda, a national treasure.

I came up with ten recipes using bamboo shoots the day before yesterday, and eight yesterday. A gooey casserole didn’t taste very good, but the spicy bamboo shoot soup was a great success.

I finished a sandwich made with the shoots and crossed out the “Good Morning Mysterious Energy Bamboo Shoots Sandwich.” I crossed out all the failed recipes and planned to send out the successful ones. Then I sat down by the piano. I pressed my palm on it and felt a vein of warmth flowing down there. I looked under the cloth and only saw the shiny black lid. I whisked the cloth away and threw it in the air. I started playing the piano and watched the tablecloth falling. Not until then did I realize that this was a magical piano, because my fingers suddenly spidered over the keys into a solemn, beautiful chord. I didn’t know what the chord was, because I don’t know a bit of music, but it was the kind of chord you hear in mournful pieces on the radio when the deejay is in a mood. I dropped one finger only, and the chord shifted somewhat, the tension and sadness of the first chord becoming a different one, then my hands found a completely new chord, the next in the song, as if by instinct. My fingers ached, they were so spread out, but the sound resonated through my apartment, off my balcony, up into the world.

Just then there was a knock on the door.

I opened it and saw a man standing there. He waved a magazine in his hand.

“I tried your recipes and they are great. So, so, I think, I have come to offer you a job.”

“What?”

“These,” he waved. “These.”

He didn’t mention the fact that I had just a moment before been playing the piano, but I wondered immediately if the piano hadn’t brought him here somehow. It seemed like a great coincidence. Maybe that particular song had been one that resonated for him alone, and the first two chords were enough to get this stranger to my door.
I invited him in.

“I’m the manager of the zoo. And I want to invite you to make recipes for the animals. If you can cook for them, that will be better. You must be a super-good cook.”

“But my recipes are for people.”

“I made that honey-ketchup ribs for the lion for his fifth birthday. He loves it. The animals have to stay in cages all day long, and I should at least give them something delicious to expect every morning when they open their eyes.”

“Oh. That makes sense, I suppose.”

“This is a full-time job. A stable one,” he smiled. “Many animals love people food. But, there’s a rule.”

“What rule?”

“You can’t make a braised-bear-paw recipe for bears. That will be too big a sacrifice for them.”

Before the manager left, I told him I would think about the offer. I gave him the recipe for bamboo shoots soup and asked him to remember to tell me if pandas liked it or not. And I apologized for the loud piano music just before he’d knocked on my door.

“Piano?” he asked, confused.

That evening, I went to the grocery store to buy Band Aids.

“Did you cut your finger?” Jie asked.

“No, no, I’m just practicing playing the piano a lot,” I said, “and my fingers hurt.”

“But there are no cuts…”

“I just put the Band Aids on my fingers to make the keys feel softer.”
No one else had showed up at my door that afternoon, throughout the rest of my playing. But I’d played for over an hour just as skilfully as before; beautiful and mournful songs I had never heard before, and didn’t know, came pouring from my fingers until it hurt to pad them down on the keys.

“Wow. I didn’t know you were an artist, salesman.” She gave my chest a punch. “Let me see your magical hands.”

“What, my hands?”

“Yeah. I love music and love all musicians. I wish I could play. It’s always been my dream, but I didn’t get any talent. Not even an ear for it. Just a desire, and no way to fulfill it. How sad it that, you know?”

Of course I knew. I knew exactly that sad feeling.

“So let me have a good look at the hands of a pianist.”

“You want to…?”

I gave her my hands.

Her fingers were cold and smooth. There was a spot in my stomach burning, as if I just ate something spicy or got shot in the belly.

“You don’t have any calluses on your fingers! I’m surprised. I would give anything in the world to be able to play. Maybe I would become a great player, and I could leave my job here and go on the road. To make a living, traveling and playing beautiful music.”

So I’d found a buyer for the piano after all, and in record time—I could tell her about the magic piano, and how it would make her dreams come true, and then maybe she would buy it, and I will have proven myself (again) someone who can sell anything. But I hesitated. Because as interested as she would be in the piano, I much more wanted her to be interested in me. I could be the one on the road, the musician playing beautiful music for crowds, and people would come out to hear me play and weep. But more importantly, Jie would be with me. She would fall in
love with me because she believed I was a great musician, and I would have a new career, a new
wife, a new love, a fresh start.

So instead of saying, I have just the thing I can sell you, what I said was:

“You can come to my apartment to listen me play some day, if you want.”

I couldn’t believe I was saying it, even as I heard myself say it. The sentence was churning
in my throat.

After I got back to the apartment, I forgot whether I really said it or not. I tried hard to
remember but wasn’t sure. Maybe I said “hear me play” but not “in my apartment.” But this was
the only piano I could play. She would have to come here to hear me, or I’d have to hire movers
to carry it around for me. The only thing I was sure was that her temperature was still lingering
in my hands and the press of her fingers branded that patch of my skin. I played the piano for a
while before I went to bed. The college student didn’t pound the wall, even though I played
thunderously. When I was lying on the bed, everything started drifting again, floating in the air
like notes. I hummed a melody even in my sleep.

The next day, I went to the company to quit my job.

“Why?” Zi was surprised.

“Well, I’ve found a new interest.”

“Like working out?”

“What?”

“You seem to have lost a lot of weight recently.”

I looked down at my belly, it did look smaller. I rubbed my belly and the twenty-one cans of
bamboo shoots in it and smiled.
I ran into Greasy Head in the hall. He asked me whether I had sold the piano. He was the first one who finished the assignment this time and became the Star of the Month. I told him I had quit the job.

“Why did you quit?”

“I couldn’t sell the piano. It’s way beyond my ability.”

“No, no, no. You’re not that kind of person, fatso.” He looked at me distrustingy. “You always finish your assignment. You’re the only one in the company that I truly admire.”

I just had a new reason to hate him. A hypocrite.

“By the way, you look much smaller today. How did you lose weight? I should give you another nickname. But, but, we don’t work together anymore and I’m gonna, gonna…”

He gave me a tight hug and shed a tear before I left.

Then I remembered I should tell Zi that I would keep the piano so she didn’t need to mail me the paycheck this month.

But when I was about to knock on the door of her office, I heard Greasy Head talking about me.

“He’s the best salesman I’ve ever seen, you know. He can sell anything. He must be in love. He quit his job and starts working out. Do you find that he smells like bamboo shoots today?”

I knocked and went in. I suddenly noticed that the hair of Greasy Head was not greasy at all today.

“Did you wash your hair this morning?”

“Yeah. I tried the shampoo I’m selling this month.”

He needed a new nickname now, but what was the point? I’d probably never see him again.

On my way to the zoo, I decided that I would go to the grocery and tell Jie again, or for the first time, I wasn’t sure, that she could come to my apartment to hear me play the piano if she wanted. And also that the bamboo shoots worked. But when I arrived her boss told me that she hadn’t come in for the day. No phone call, just a no-show.
“What?” I said. “Did you send anyone to check on her?”

“Do I look like that’s what I’m paid to do?” the boss said gruffly.

So I asked where she lived, and one of the girls working there told me, and I went right to Jie’s apartment and knocked. No answer. I thought about calling her, but I hadn’t even thought to get her number, I’d always been far too timid to ask for it. I knocked for a while, until her next-door neighbor came out and gave me a look.

“Have you seen Jie today?” I asked the neighbor.

“No,” the neighbor said. “But if you see her, please tell her not to practice during the morning, would you? Some of us work the night shift and sleep in the day.”

“Practice?”

“Her piano,” the neighbor said.

Those words hit me flat in the chest.

Even before I made it back to my apartment, I knew what had happened.

Sure enough, the door to my apartment was opened, the furniture in my living room rearranged, clearing a path. I knew even before I went back to my bedroom that the piano was gone. How had this happened? Had one of the songs I played the night before been the one that resonated with Jie, triggering in her the kind of deep desire I had never been able to? Had she run off with my piano, as she might run off with a lover? It didn’t matter how it happened—the fact was that I never saw Jie, or the piano, again. And, with the magic piano gone, that had promised such possibility for a new life, my life instead went back to what it had been before, which is to say, a sad and lonesome affair where nothing goes right. The zoo called and said I could forget it; my recipes had given every animal in the park terrible diarrhea, so much so that people there to see the animals left in droves holding their nose, swearing at the zookeepers. I went out that afternoon and bought another piano and had it delivered the next day, hoping I could find a melody that might lead Jie back to my door, but it was no use; my fingers were like a toddler’s banging away. Nothing like music at all. And the weight I’d lost slowly came back to my middle,
and it wasn’t long before I was back to being called fatso by Greasy Head at the company, which had fortunately agreed to give me my job back even after I’d quit so suddenly, though at a reduced rate of commission. So there I was, back to selling items door-to-door, trying to convince people that what I had in my valise was exactly the thing they needed. The thing that would make them look better, feel better, fall in love, meet with success, unleash their talent, ward off depression, give them purpose, and help them make it in this world.
Dear W:

I am writing you something, something that you can take as anything: a letter, an excerpt from my burnt diary, a cluster of brain cells, something I only saw in a dream, or a piece of my mind. I don’t know when I started writing this or when it will end. I hope that when you are reading it, I have finished it.

Have you ever thought of looking for feet for a pair of leather shoes? Looking for a wall for a framed photo? Looking for a house for a wooden chair? Looking for a cage for a gust of wind? Looking for a smile for the way you look at me? Have you ever thought of looking for a piano for a note? Looking for a poem for a color dripping off the first blossom I see this spring? Looking for an old ash tree for a trace of time creeping over my skin? Looking for a desert for a sliver thread of water? Looking for a city for the way you look at me?

I think about these questions every day, trying to figure out your answers to them. When I am thinking about them, I go to work. Now I am a postman in this small southern city, and when I get off work I go to that small restaurant around the corner to eat a bowl of fried egg noodles with extra cilantro and light red pepper. The noodles always make my nose sweat and my glasses foggy. I clean the spectacles with my left sleeve or the right coat corner, whichever is cleaner.

Some families always receive letters. Some families never receive anything, even advertisements. Some families read everything they receive, even advertisements. Some families seldom read things they receive in mailboxes. They just let all the stuff stack high, so that you will find it difficult to insert even a one-page letter. You can know what a family is like through all their mail, their happiness and sadness. There was an old man who lived alone in an apartment built in the 1960s, and he painted his mailbox every year on the Chinese New Year’s Eve with white
lacquer, as carefully as painting a coffin. There was never a single letter for him. After he died, nobody did that for him and the paintwork began to flake. Last week, I got a letter for him from abroad. It was a plain white letter addressed in a woman’s curlie-cue handwriting that took up most of the space. The letter smelled like ocean.

I miss the way you applied color on your lips in the public bathroom. I lied; I have never followed you into a bathroom. Yesterday I watched a movie in which there was a woman applying lipstick on her lips. I thought she was you. I watched you riding a horse, shooting two bad men to death without pulling at the rein. I watched you picking at the food stuck to the roof of your mouth like a Mongolian man or a woman from deep in the desert. I watched you drinking without rolling your throat or heaving your chest. I watched your back dissolve into the sunset.

I buy a piece of goat cheese every day from a local farmer. He wraps the cheese in paper-like parchment which smells like dried grass. After finishing the cheese, I always score the wrap paper before folding it. I have already saved a stack of folded wrap paper. I don’t know what I am going to do with it. Maybe someday I will draw some pictures on it or make it into whistles. I keep a very small picture of you in my favorite book, together with a few yellowed stamps. The stamps were cut off the envelopes sent by an uncle who has a mole on the bridge of his nose and who used to run sound for documentaries about nature and wild animals. He is my only remaining connection I have to our city. He stopped sending me letters three years ago. Half a year ago, he sent me a postcard from Nepal. He wrote, “The bleating of local sheep sounds like laughing” on the back of the postcard. At night, when I don’t think of you, I will imagine the laughing-like bleating of those Nepalese sheep and see their shadows overlapping in the darkness.

Sometimes when the sky is clear, I hold your picture between the tips of my thumb and index finger and look at it until my palms sweat, with the book open on my knees and one or two stamps landing on the floor. I wipe the sweat on the side of my pants and bend down to pick up the fallen stamps. They stick to my fingers.
The last time I saw you, we were at the train station. I hid behind the huge marble pillars and watched you carrying two babies in your arms with a strange man standing by you, like any ordinary woman. One child was holding a ball. The ball dropped out of her hand, rolled on the ground, stopped at my feet. You put down both children and walked toward me for the ball. I ran away and never knew if you saw me. I didn’t go back to the platform until your train to Beijing pulled out of the station. That is the last time I saw you. That is also the day I left our home city. I won’t go back any more, because I would see you there. I would see you everywhere, though I don’t know where you are. Now I am tucked away in this small southern city where the rain lasts for three months.

I don’t know when I began to feel the texture of this city. The texture of a whole city is not the accumulative effect of everything in it. In this city, everything is moist, uneven, and bumpy, even paint on windowsills, tips of wings of pigeons, and half a poem written on the back of a napkin. You can’t simply touch a wall or a stone with your cheek or palms and claim that you feel the city. You have to stand on the street, at sunrise or sunset, with colored wind around you, the throb of the city tucking at your sleeve. I am trying hard to find accurate words to describe what I feel about the texture of the city and come to realize that there is no such word. It can be anything. It can be a piece of breath the city lost thousands of years ago which hid in the folds of an umbrella of a tinker. It can be a slice of moonlight hanging over a metal hook on the wall of my bedroom. It can be the ripples the black bean garlic sauce makes when I swirl it with a spoon. It can be a drop of dew sliding down the vertical rib of my cactus in the early morning. It can also be you, when you are sleeping, dancing, eating and talking. You can be the whole city.

I love you. Can I pretend that you also love me? Can I see you again? The city. You are the city.

I may send the letter out this afternoon, maybe not. Maybe tomorrow. Maybe next week. Maybe some time when I think I have finished the letter. I will just leave some space here, in case I want to add something later in the day.
Yours forever,

I love you,

Yours,

Come back to me,

Yours forever,

Love you,

H
THE MATHEMATICIAN’S WIFE

I wasn’t seriously hurt, just a few bruises on elbows and thighs from leaving the building hastily, but I felt everything changed after the fire. I didn’t feel safe in my apartment anymore, which was devastating to a young man. I started hearing people whisper in the corners of the room, but they never took shape. I started playing with food on my plate. I laid chicken nuggets, baby carrots, and potato chunks into a wall and cemented it all with ketchup, then watched it tumble into a colorful splash. I started braiding my pubic hair when I couldn’t fall asleep, though the process was always frustrating. Then I realized all of this was a direct result of the fire and I needed to start over someplace new and leave all that trauma behind.

Two weeks later, I moved to another town and found a job at a grocery store. I worked three shifts and slept only five hours a day, so I was too tired to hear voices or play with any of my body parts. I took home the expiring cans of corn, beans, and stewed beef from the store and poured them onto one plate, then I had the grayish goo, too slimy to make a wall, for breakfast, lunch and dinner. However, just when everything seemed to go back to normal, this woman showed up and shattered my world again.

My neighbor was a mathematician and she was his wife. I was very bad at math so this mathematician intimidated me, which weirdly made me want to sleep with his wife. She wasn’t even pretty. Dirty-water blonde hair, double chins, normal boobs and normal ass. I had an impression that good artists always had beautiful wives, but I hadn’t yet known a mathematician, so judging by his wife’s looks I didn’t know how good he was at math. The first time I met the mathematician, he was standing outside his house alone clipping his fingernails, and I hadn’t realized I wanted to sleep with his wife. I said Hi and told him I just moved in and that I worked at the grocery store on Applewood Street and I lived alone, no pets, no woman. He said he did
math. Math was a word so far from my life that for a moment I thought it was his wife’s name. Then he said they moved here only one month ago and were pretty new to the area, too, and that his wife was a freelance photographer.

The first time I saw Lisa (that was her name) she was carrying groceries from her car into her house. When she bent down to pick up paper bags from the trunk, her trousers stretched tight across her buttocks and the squiggly seam in the middle looked like a giant earthworm. She had four or five huge bags to carry, so she bent down four or five times. I half-hid behind the curtain watching her and thought about buying a telescope. That night, I started an observation diary and took down every detail of her: how her jaws moved when chewing the greens full of rubbery fibers, how she fingered the tassels of her scarf in front of a mirror as if she knew somebody was watching her, how she balanced the tea cup precariously on the arm of her chair when she sat there thinking something or nothing.

Though my desire for her was getting stronger every day, I still spent some time thinking about my life before the fire, a time when I had expected to be caught off guard, by women, or money, or alcohol and weed, but that made me see wavering smoky shadows in dreams, muted figures and distorted objects appearing and disappearing.

Sometimes I saw Lisa in the grocery store. She pushed a cart and strolled between the racks in flats, as quiet as a cat. When she took things off the shelf, something like chips or disposable cups, she was being so careful as if they were crystals and would shatter by her touch. I was enchanted by her carefulness. I followed her around the store in my dungaree. Once when I was stacking cans of sweet corn on shelves, she bumped into me and said “Oops.” She still didn’t know me at all, which made it easier for me to pretend to be working and follow her.

The first time she talked to me officially I was not sure if she knew who I was. She had seen me working at the grocery store a lot, but never around my house. She asked me where the Kung Pao chicken was. The frozen one, and microwaveable, she added. I took her question more as a flirtation since I considered it no coincidence that she asked me about Kung Pao chicken. I took
chicken as the sluttiest word ever, even before the fire. I told her she might find it in the freezer down the aisle. And the yogurt was on sale, I added. Yogurt was a slutty word too. Simply because of its pronunciation. I once Google-translated it into tens of languages, Arabic, Russian, Mandarin, Japanese, and so on. They all sounded dirty and I got goosebumps on my arms and thighs. But Lisa didn’t get it. She said thank you and walked away.

Lisa and the mathematician never came to the store together. Actually I only saw him there once when she was out of town. That day, he wanted to check out but hesitated when seeing me at the register. He knew I saw him too. I smiled broadly. He responded with a jerky unreadable gesture. Just then an old woman came to ask me about the code of the sweet potatoes on sale. The mathematician looked relieved and veered his cart toward another register. But when he was about to leave the store, carrying four or five bags, one bag ripped open and a bunch of colorful boxes scattered all over the place. His miserable face reminded me of a rat being swallowed down a snake’s throat. I was glad to live to see this. And I happened to be the creature nearest to him that was supposed to go over and help him. I did and found the boxes were all condoms. Different brands, some strawberry and chocolate flavored, some just plain, some ribbed, some smooth. He was such an awkward lover! But I arranged the most naive look in the world on my face, which he appreciated very much, and it was as if the mathematician and I were suddenly kindred spirits. And I wanted to sleep with his wife, which made the experience more thrilling.

That night I set up my telescope on the windowsill and saw the mathematician sitting at the table all night, building a house with those condom packages. There was a bottle of wine and a wineglass on the table. But his face told me that he was expecting someone who failed to show up. He sipped some wine and laid one brick then sipped some more wine. I wrote a few sentences in the diary about what I’d seen and went back to watching, then put down more sentences. I had a feeling Lisa knew about this, about his efforts of trying to please other women, his frustrations and rare success, but she never wanted to leave him. I remembered a record I used to love a long time ago that had a song named “Grey Is What You Are When You Are
Alone”, which read like a poem. But now I couldn’t appreciate the music any more. I was afraid it would turn into a vein beneath a patch of scarred skin, not painful, only lively throbbing.

I still had dreams. But if I didn’t think much in the day, they became less clear at night, and in the morning I only had a feeling of my throat clogged with a humid cloud. I started watching a lot of movies. I watched the same men and women on different streets and in different cities. I watched accidents and coincidences, whispers and cries. I watched suns and moons, winds and rains; they all seemed so far away. At the end of a marathon of movies, I felt too tired to know where I actually was.

When I couldn’t get satisfied from watching Lisa, I felt I was standing in a lake, my head a little above the water, my feet deep in the mud. I splashed the water with my arms. My hair and eyelashes got wet. My arms felt sore. And I couldn’t move a damn inch. So I planned to steal something from her to feel how good she really was, but I didn’t foresee that I would lose and regain her. The whole experience was like riding a roller coaster.

That morning I saw her leave the house. Before she got into the car, she looked around, as if abruptly waking up from a deep dream. She was kind of sneaky. I put this down in the diary and went back to my cereal. Half an hour later, the mathematician left too. I saw my chance and crept over next door and broke into their house through the back door. I went to the bedroom directly and fumbled in the closet looking for her underwear. I laid her bras and panties neatly on their bed and took pictures of them. Then I suddenly heard people open the door and come in. I climbed up on the windowsill and wanted to jump out. But I hesitated when seeing I would land in thorny rose bushes. The roses had blossomed, and they all looked at me, whispering a holy hush.

I heard the mathematician and a woman talking. It was not Lisa. This woman sounded a little younger, but not necessarily prettier. Then something bumped into the wooden furniture and landed on the floor with a thud. They had a long, loud laugh. The noise was closer and closer to the bedroom. I closed my eyes and jumped. I passed out before I reached the ground.
The first thing I saw after I regained consciousness was Lisa looking down at me. I groaned among the pretty flowers. She asked me what I was doing outside her windows, but before I could answer, we heard the couple come into the bedroom. The mathematician said the wind was blowing in and asked if the young woman if she wanted him to close the window. I laughed quietly at his clumsiness which would ruin his prime time, while Lisa froze, her nose reddened, and she started whimpering. It was heartbreaking for me to see all this. She said, like a radio whose power was flickering on and off, on and off, that he never asked her if she wanted him to close the window before they had sex. Once the window was open the whole time and her neck ached badly the next day. “It’s not about the window, you know.” She looked at me. I would never forget that pair of eyes and the way she looked at me. I thought she must have known my secrets all along: my telescope, my diary, my chicken and yogurt. Then she asked me if I had tissues, she wanted to blow her nose.

Sitting on the grass, surrounded by thorns and roses, I officially introduced myself to Lisa as her new neighbor. Then she asked me in a friendly way what I was doing outside her house. I said I was taking pictures of the roses but I was not good at it. (Actually I wasn’t lying; there were tiny roses on her underwear.) Then I realized the fact that she was a freelance photographer and would be very curious to see the pictures. Before I could snatch my camera back, she had seen the pictures of her bras and panties. She didn’t say anything but only examined them carefully to make sure that they were hers. Her face looked like a beautiful cloud passing by in the sky that had caught me peeing in a public swimming pool.

I like you a lot, I said. She narrowed her eyes and tipped her head backward a little. Her double chins disappeared, You...like me? I swallowed my saliva hard and heard it gurgling in my throat, Yes, I want to sleep with you. She said, You’re almost a saint.

She returned the camera to me and unbuttoned the top three buttons of her blouse to reveal a lot more of her cleavage. Then she kissed me on the lips. What a pair of flaky lips! My breath went thin and papery. We kissed for twelve seconds then she stood up and walked to her car.
Before she got in, she slapped her hips hard, which rippled, lively in her tight jeans. The sound echoed in my ears while I watched her car pull away from the curb and disappear around the second curve of the road.

That was the last time I saw her. She never returned to the mathematician who continued living next door. I saw him a lot loitering in the grocery store, trying to pick up lonely widows. I was never convinced that he was good at handling women, and after his wife left, he became only clumsier. But the problem was, he would live a long life, just like me, like those who survived all kinds of mishaps. What a shameful camaraderie! We would close in upon ourselves over time the way a piece of paper did in fire, browning, warping, until it gained the whole shape of time. People like us could survive time.

Three months later, I received mail from Lisa. No words, only a photo of her. She was lying in bed, stark naked, and about to bite a strawberry. I kept it with my watching diary and the telescope and only took a look at it when I wanted to slow down the burning of the fire. It reminded me of one of those days before the accident, when I was delighted by everybody being beautifully flawed.
Ashram is a small island in the Indian Ocean, only a speck if seen on a map, four hundred miles away from the Indian Peninsula. Populated by three thousand islanders, the place has an exotic and hermitic aspect to it.

Abhihita, a good young Indian man, who was trying to become a ghost story writer, came to Ashram one day, to look for inspiration. He took a ship to get to the island and found an empty room in an inn. The next morning, he woke up and saw creeks of light oozing in through the thin curtains. He drew the curtains and opened the window. A gust of wet, salty wind rushed in. He took a deep breath, which slightly hurt the inside of his nose. He poked his finger into the nose and took it out. There was no blood.

He sat back in the bed, took out a notebook and began writing:

_The wind transforms into a sharp blade before it reaches his nose. The blade swishes past and disappears in the darkness. His nose begins bleeding out of control like a pipe disposing of dirty water into the ocean. The pain is unbearable. The pain is like the tongue being ripped out which is one of the greatest pains a human can experience together with giving birth and testicles being kicked by kneecap since its nerves are directly connected to heart._

It didn’t feel right, he thought. He was trying to write a very, very scary thriller, not a comedy. Balls being kicked by a knee was not scary, it was funny. A laugh, no, not a laugh, even just a flicker of smile would ruin the ghostly atmosphere he had built in the previous twenty pages. He told himself that this trip would definitely give him new ideas for the new book. Thinking alone for a long time usually scared him; he couldn’t help thinking about a hand reaching out from under the bed, or a cold draft sweeping by his nape. These personal experiences were at the center of his new book…in fact would be absolutely helpful to the book,
though right now the book was like an egg still between the buttocks of the hen.

Damn it, he thought, I can’t control myself of being funny.

He dropped the pen and started dressing.

The inn’s owner hadn’t yet made breakfast, so Abhihita decided to take a walk first. The cloud along the horizon looked like a book with the wind turning its pages. The rising sun set fire to it; every page turned by wind was burnt to ash in a second. He stopped in a pool of lamplight, reading posts tacked on a dark brown wooden lamppost. One flyer advertised sandalwood cases of various sizes, another illustrated the tiny sculptures of little boys on sale.

An old man was delivering water to each house. His horse cart was loaded with tin water barrels with mauve and yellow petals floating on the surface. When he poured the water into the wooden barrel outside each house, he sang to the sleepy horse who could hardly keep his eyes open: *One apple, two apples, three apples, growing on the tree; One apple is walking on the street, two apples are running on the river banks, three apples are in a theatre, one performing, another singing, the third one watching and applauding.* Abhihita saw the horse blink and heard him swallow saliva loudly at each mention of *apple*.

The hinges of a door creaked. A pair of hands reached out and took the filled water barrel into the house. A flash of sunlight rolled on the back of those hands, making them appear silver. On one wrist was a bracelet with bells tied on it. Abhihita ran to the door without thinking, trying to catch a glimpse of the hands’ owner. A white figure closed the door before he could see the face. But he was sure it was a woman’s figure. Abhihita rubbed his chest slightly, as if those hands just pressed it and he could still feel the warm print they left. He took out the notebook and wrote:

*She’s dressed in white all the time like a piece of moonlight. She only appears at night, pale, thin, soundless, sliding between buildings, over treetops, under bridges, through my window. Every morning, when I wake up, I see the hand prints on the window glass and I know she was here last night. Once I tied a string of silver bells onto the window frame, thinking that she would*
ring the bells when she arrived so I could catch a glimpse of her. She smashed the bells without waking me up.

This was not good...too fanciful an opening for a thriller, he thought.

He sat down in a small restaurant across from the woman’s house. His baggy pants were dampened by the moist air. Squirming uneasily on the bench, he ordered a bowl of rice with chopped marinated pork on top. He waited to see those hands again. The rice was sticky and chewy and the pork had an aroma of osmanthus. The soup smelled more like alcohol than the flower. The cook told Abhihita that the pork was buried under a pile of fresh osmanthus for forty-nine days. The islanders believed the aroma could fight off insects and evil spirits. Abhihita replied that he kind of hoped the evil spirits would come to him so he could have inspiration for his book. The cook was so startled that he refused to take Abhihita’s money, and gave him the soup for free. Abhihita fed a chunk of pork to the cook’s dog and finished the rice and the soup. The woman hadn’t appeared yet when he was about to leave. The cook begged Abhihita to go to the temple on the top of the island’s only mountain; he made a wreath with the flowers of the same kind that floated on the water and put it on Abhihita’s head. Abhihita looked at the bright sunshine outside and thought the wreath could shield him like a hat.

The sun was beaming down through the cracks in clouds. The air became steamy and a long breath dampened his throat. The road was paved with irregularly shaped dark blue and green marbles on which there were milky streaks like creeks in spring thaws. Nobody on the street was wearing shoes. He passed a small store selling rouge, red cloth and sandalwood cases. The owner was an old woman who smiled like a sunflower. Every bride on the island would go to see her before the wedding, so that she could draw pictures of animals and plants on the back of the bride’s hands. Abhihita felt that something just sprouted in his chest. He could even hear the sizzling when the imaginary plant absorbed water. He made a few hops, feeling the edges of the leaves sliding over his rib cage. He looked around; nobody was paying attention to him. He tried to take the wreath off but failed. It had rooted in his scalp.
Abhihita sat down on the curb, closed his eyes and took out his notebook, but he didn’t know what to write. The words he wrote this morning had been blurred by the humid air; they now looked more like a charcoal painting of grapes and raisins. Abhihita took off his sneakers. The warmth of the marbles made his feet itchy. The plant in his body was dipping its root into his stomach to take nutrients from the osmanthus soup. He took out a small bag of crackers from his coat pocket. The crackers were double-decker and strawberry flavored. He bought ten packs at a time when they were on sale. He put one cracker into his mouth and it melted at the tip of his tongue because it had been soaked in water for a long time.

Abhihita walked to the temple barefoot. A few islanders knelt in front of a statue of Buddha. There was a tiny crack on the potbelly of the statue and Abhihita saw an ant crawl into it then reach out its head and wave its antenna at him. He hesitated for a second then waved back. An old monk came out from behind the back of Buddha and walked up to Abhihita.

“Can I help you?” the monk asked.

“No, no. I’m, I’m just waving away the...the fly.”

“You are looking for something,” the monk said.

“What?” Abhihita reached his fingers under the wreath and scratched the back of his head.

“The heart doesn’t ask for throbbing, it’s the rule of the universe.”

“What are you talking about?”

Abhihita looked at the smear of light on the top of the monk’s bald head and narrowed his eyes. It was bright.

“Could you,” Abhihita asked, “could you take the wreath off for me? It seems to have rooted in my hair.”

The monk laughed. The laughter broke the phlegm in his throat and came out in incoherent chunks.

“I’m serious.” Abhihita stared at him.

“Oh, sure,” the monk cleared his throat and answered. Then he rubbed his hands on his
earthy yellow robe.

Abhihita was much taller than the monk so he had to bend his knees. The monk’s fingers were hot when they touched Abhihita’s head, like burning coals. But it was not painful. Abhihita smelled smoke rising from his hair. The monk put the wreath on the top of the Buddha.

He said to the wreath: “Every flower is the breath taken by the Buddha. You need to go back to where you come from.”

Abhihita wanted to ask the monk to put his hot hands on his pants to make them dry, especially his bottom which was getting stickier, but he didn’t.

As Abhihita went down the mountain, he could still feel burning where the monk had touched him. He touched the spots with his fingertips carefully and was relieved to discover there were no blisters. He passed the old woman’s store and saw the hands again, the hands belonging to the morning’s mystery woman. The old woman was drawing flowers on the woman’s hands. They were such beautiful hands, totally unsuitable for a ghost story. He sighed and walked on.

That night, Abhihita dreamed of the plant in his chest. It had many leaves and flowers as tiny as millets.

The next day, Abhihita boarded the ship to return home. From afar, the island looked like a tropical-fruit candy that had melted in the heat of sunlight. Before he got off the ship, he wrote two jokes, one about a hen and her eggs, the other about the conversation between an ant and a Buddha. He decided to send them out as soon as he got home, and he would buy his favorite crackers to celebrate if the jokes got published and the crackers were still on sale.
WHAT A GOOD TIME WE HAD

On Thursday night, Joe was eating potato chips on the couch when Xiao suddenly called, saying he wanted to visit on Saturday and asking if Joe would be available. Joe wiped the crumbs off his lips and said yes. He meant no, but he just couldn’t correct it. Then Xiao said maybe he could even have a look at Joe’s dorm. Actually he used the word “coop,” but Joe knew what he meant. Joe said he lived in an apartment off campus. Xiao asked why. Joe said he had a sleeping disorder so he moved out. He put a chip in his mouth and sucked on it so he could then chew on it quietly. Xiao hung up without response. That was one of his quirks—hanging up when you least expected it.

We are not even friends, Joe thought. Though Xiao would absolutely disagree. They didn’t talk in high school except on graduation day. Xiao was standing beside Joe and asked him to hold his graduation certificate so he could lace up his shoe. Xiao was a little off in others’ eyes, but he had a rich father. Then they saw each other on a flight from Beijing to Chicago three months ago. Xiao switched the seat with a huge American woman and sat beside Joe. On the plane, Xiao asked Joe if he would give himself an English name such as Tom or John. Joe said he thought Joe was a cool name. Xiao said he would just stick to his Chinese name. At that time he hadn’t realized that Xiao was such a hard word for English speakers to pronounce and the best they could do was Shaw. Then they separated in Chicago. While licking the crumbs off the plate, Joe thought, Maybe I should ask him where his college is and how he will get here, but he shrugged the thought away.

Joe took out his textbooks and heard the couple next door fighting again. They stomped across the room and shouted at each other. The wife named Sarah came to talk to Joe a few times after she learned he came from China. Joe thought she was pretty though the skin around her
eyes rippled when she laughed. That afternoon, she held a pack of dried kiwi fruits and asked Joe what those curvy Chinese characters meant. The fruit was imported from Taiwan, but Joe didn’t know traditional characters very well. He told Sarah the words meant yummy. Joe had never seen her husband.

Joe read again the paper he turned in last week and tried to read the squiggly comments from the professor. After a while, Sarah and her husband turned on music, metallic and thundering. Walls and windows danced along. But Joe knew they weren’t done with fighting yet. Joe put on his headset and went through the article he had to read for the next day’s class. He highlighted the new words and started looking them up in an online dictionary. When he got to “effervescence,” the music died. The walls and windows died too. Everything was so quiet. Joe didn’t hear Sarah cry. It seemed that she never cried.

Joe finished all the words and read them loud twice. He made a peanut butter sandwich and put it in his lunch box. He hummed a Chinese song he heard on the internet in the shower and watched hot water streaking his arms and legs. Joe wondered if Sarah could hear him humming if she happened to use the bathroom too. He hummed louder and sang a few lines and imagined she would come to him the next morning asking what song it was.

He called home while drying his hair with a towel. It was morning in China. His father was driving. He complained about the traffic and asked Joe how school went. Joe said it was not bad and that he had to go to bed now, since the class started pretty early in the morning. Before he hung up, he told his father that he would have a high school friend over that weekend. His father said it was not easy to find a high school buddy in another country and they should take care of each other. After Joe turned off the lamp, he suddenly heard the couple laughing. The laughter continued for at least twenty seconds. But it sounded further and further away from Joe, as if he was on a ship sailing off into an ocean of the unknown.
In the class that met on Friday afternoons, Joe was the only international student. He picked the seat tucked in the corner and took out his books and notebook. The professor came in and started the class with a joke but Joe missed it and didn’t laugh. The girl sitting in front of him had a spider tattoo at the nape of her neck. Her sweat made it look like it was crawling. Joe wanted to have a tattoo too. It looked so cool. The professor asked students what they thought about the article. The article was about poems by a French poet at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Joe looked at the portrait of the poet, whose name he didn’t know how to pronounce. He decided, if the professor picked him, that he would say this French guy seemed to be a good writer, according to the article, and his poetry was colorful and full of vigor. He wanted to use the word “effervescence” but suddenly forgot what it meant.

When class was over, Joe wanted to ask the professor what she had written on his paper. He couldn’t read her handwriting. But he felt tired and wanted to go back to his apartment. He bought a bag of peanuts and two cans of Coke from a convenience store around the corner. The cashier didn’t look at him when saying Have a good day. Joe blew You too quietly into the wind after he exited the store.

Joe saw Sarah smoking outside the apartment. Joe liked the way she tapped the ash off the cigarette.

“Hey, Joe!” she waved at him but didn’t smile.
“Hey, Sarah!” Joe looked at her.
“Want a smoke?” She blew out a string of smoke rings.
“No, thanks. I don’t smoke.”

Joe hoped that she would ask him some Chinese words, such as cigarette or smoke. But she didn’t.

“Any plans for the weekend?” she asked, but looked into the distance.
“My friend will visit me tomorrow.”
“Good. Friends are good. Good for you.”

“So...see you.” Joe didn’t want to go but had nothing more to say.

“See you, Joe.”

Joe started going upstairs but stopped at the second landing and looked back at her. She sat down on the curb and took out from her pocket a handful of scraps of paper, lint, and wrapped old gum and started going through them. Joe suddenly felt so sad.

He finished one can of Coke while watching a Kung-fu movie. Then he lay in the bed staring at the ceiling, thinking nothing. There was a cobweb in the corner, collecting dust. Joe jumped off the bed and picked away the cobweb with a broom. He knew that he didn’t really care if Xiao would come to his apartment or what he would think after seeing it. But he wanted to have a thorough cleansing.

He wiped tables, chairs, shelves, counters and the sinks. He cleaned the window glass and frames. He went through the refrigerator and sorted out the bad fruit and expired food and threw them away. He swept the floor and mopped it. After he was done, everything looked sharp and clear, and the apartment smelt of the early morning. He looked outside. The sky had started turning hard and dark.

Joe went out to buy burgers and found Sarah had gone. Joe decided that if he saw her smoking again, he would ask if there was anything bothering her. He hoped this question was not too personal. She could always lie if she didn’t want to tell the truth, Joe thought.

On Saturday afternoon, Xiao called Joe and told him that he had arrived at the train station and was waiting for him in a bar around the corner. Joe had never been to a bar. But he knew if he wanted to buy alcohol, he had to show his passport. In case I need a drink, he thought.

It took forty minutes for Joe to find the place. He stood outside the bar for a while before he went in. He looked around and saw a Chinese restaurant across the street. Next to it was a Grill
& Deli. On the other side of the Chinese restaurant was a convenience store. Some people were selling sandwiches and pretzels by the sidewalk. Joe turned back and looked at his reflection in the glass door of the bar. A blonde guy in sweat pants walked out and shattered his gaze.

Xiao was sitting in the corner, watching basketball on the TV mounted on the wall. He was drinking a brownish liquid through a straw from a glass. Xiao’s face lit up at seeing him.

“Hey, Huang Jun, long time no see!” Xiao’s mandarin had a slight Sichuan accent.

Joe was a little annoyed, but he knew he shouldn’t be. Joe wasn’t an official name. “What’re you doing up here...Xiao?”

“I told you on the phone. I came here to see you.”

Xiao finished his drink and smiled. There was a kind of fragile gaiety in that smile.

Joe sat down.

“How’s school?” Xiao asked.

“It’s not bad.” Joe wanted to say more, but didn’t know what else to say. “How about you?”

“It’s, huh, I don’t know.” Xiao shook his head. “I don’t quite understand what the professors are talking about.”

“In the first month, I only understood thirty percent, maybe. Now, it’s a little better.” Joe wanted to ask Xiao what he just drank.

Xiao shook his glass. The ice cubes clinked.

“You said you’re living off-campus?” Xiao asked.

“I just told them that I had trouble falling asleep in a dorm. It’s called a sleeping disorder.”

“Wow, you’re so cool. I don’t even know how to say sleeping disorder in English.”

“Those American movies finally came in handy.” Joe felt more comfortable.

“Is it better living in an apartment?”

“I think so. It’s just the couple next door fight a lot.”

“That sucks.”

“But the wife is pretty. And nice.”
“You ever talk to her?”

“Yeah, several times.”

“In English?”

“Of course. She’s American.”

“Wow, look at you. You’re much more suited to studying here. I didn’t even know what this liquid is. When I’m in a restaurant or a bar, I just point at the menu randomly. Unless it’s a Chinese restaurant.”

That made Joe give up the idea of buying something here.

“Hey, Xiao, are you hungry? Let’s go have dinner. The Chinese restaurant is quite good.”

“Hmm, looks like you know this area pretty well.”

“I guess.”

“Well, it’s rare I ever leave the campus.”

“That’s definitely something we need to celebrate. Let’s go have a big dinner.”

Joe stood up cheerfully.

They ordered beef, pork and eggplant in that Chinese restaurant. Xiao said he missed high school. Joe said he missed it too.

“What a good time we had!” Xiao said.

“Yeah, such a good time,” Joe answered.

Then they talked about some classmates and made fun of the accent of their high school English teacher. Xiao said the food in dining halls was disgusting. Joe said he wanted to learn how to cook when he was back in China for summer. Xiao said it was wonderful that they could see each other in summer.

“This time you came to see me. Next time I go to see you. What about this Christmas?” Joe asked.
“Well, I’m flying home the day after tomorrow,” Xiao said.

“Huh?”

“I told my dad I quit. I didn’t want to stay here any more. I’m going home.”

“But this is only the first semester. It will get better,” Joe said.

“I don’t know. It’s so boring here. They don’t even know how to read my name.”

“Then get an American name, like me. Hi, I’m Joe.”

“I don’t know. Maybe it will make things easier,” Xiao said. “But we can see each other in summer. You’ll go back home, right?”

“Yes. Absolutely.”

Joe paid the bill and invited Xiao to his apartment, but Xiao shook his head. “I’d love to but I really can’t. I have to go back to school to start packing.”

“You should have come to see me earlier.”

“Yeah, I should have…”

“Are you sure? You can go back tomorrow morning.”

“I just came to tell you that I’m going home.”

Joe wanted to ask him when his flight was, if he had to go to Korea or Japan to transfer and what he was going to do when he was back home. But Xiao had already begun walking in the direction of the train station. Joe thought he would turn and wave goodbye, but he didn’t. That was one of his quirks too. Leaving when you least expected it.

When Joe got back to the apartment in the evening, it was still too early to call his father. He sat on the couch and finished the other can of Coke. Suddenly he felt like writing something to Xiao. He didn’t know what he would write yet. But he felt that he should write him a letter or something like that.

He turned on the computer but realized that he didn’t have Xiao’s email address. He searched him on Facebook but nothing came up. He took out his cellphone but realized that his American cellphone didn’t have Mandarin input. He cupped the back of his head and stared at
the wall for a while, then turned off the computer and took out his notebook. Joe thought sending a real letter was an interesting idea. He could call his high school to ask for Xiao’s home address.

Sarah was fighting with her husband again. Joe thought of her standing on the street and smoking the other day. He played some music online and started writing the letter. He wrote, *Dear Xiao, I had such a good time seeing you today. I’m sure you’ll be in China already when you get this....*

But Joe was unsatisfied with his handwriting. The characters spilled over the frames and they looked like bugs if seen an arm away. He ripped the page off the notebook and crumpled the paper into a ball. The edge of the paper made a small cut on his index finger. There was a pinprick of blood. He sucked on the tiny wound like a hungry baby, and started writing all over again.
THE KEY

She is his beautiful neighbor. They live on the same floor. This evening, she comes out of her apartment as he is opening his door. A pearly sheen shimmering over the bridge of her nose. Rouge melting on her cheeks. Her eyes look as tired as a bird without feet flying over mountains and lakes. Her moss green dress in the evening orange and mauve, a flowing river, every ripple a shimmering whisper.

He says, Good evening, Mrs Lin.

Evening, Mr. Zhang. I’m getting some dumplings. She smiles, a deep sea in the evening, its waves, tidal, moon driven.

She is such a beautiful woman, and she stays pretty for her husband who, she believes, will finally be back from a long voyage. But in his eyes, she is not a harbor, she is an ocean, to the rhythm of moon waxing and waning, her heartbeat rises into his fingers and recedes and rises again. Her hair, a forest of sea weed, himself a sinking ship twirling downward through the mesh of green touches and kisses, tangling, disentangling and tangling again.

Her shadow disappears around the corner. He collects her beady words dancing around in his sleeves.

Their is an old building. Wind from all directions whistling. Dust drifting in the air like yellowed words from a poem scribbled on the wall. The first time he saw her, everything still smelt of mint and forest. He stands in front of her door. He knows nobody is home. He reaches up to the top of the door frame and feels a key. It is clean and smooth, not like one that has been lying there for ten years. He holds it tightly in his hand. Feathers of old days pepper his hair. Serrated print cutting deep into his skin.

He hears her steps, and flees back to his apartment. Through the peephole, he sees her
search the pockets for the key and fail to find it. She must have locked it inside. She reaches up for the spare one. He knows the key is clean and warm, just like the first time she put it there, when her husband hadn’t yet left. She is still holding the key, then suddenly opens the door.

Are you back? she asks. Her voice, the echo in a conch to the raindrops landing on waves.

Nobody answers. Only shadow over shadow. She waits, and holds the key the way he just did, seaweeds washed ashore clinging to the moisture on pebbles. Suddenly, she turns to look at his door. His eyes meet hers through the peephole, one trip through a tunnel. Light beckons at its end. His heart misses a beat. She stands there, coated with rosy light from the sinking sun. Water receding off her face. Her gaze, a scroll of silk unfurling and fluttering.
WHAT THE HELL IS GOING ON

I sat straight up and awoke from a shallow sleep. Orange light seeped in from under the door. I heard my parents talking in restrained voices. It sounded like they were arguing again. That was how they argued quietly. I looked around the room and saw the folds of my green curtain formed a face with a mustache. I felt like using the bathroom. Normally when I woke up at midnight and wanted to pee, I was afraid of the darkness. The light of moving cars outside my windows only made it scarier, since from my angle it looked like there were gigantic arms reaching into my room that quickly slipped away in a smoke.

I climbed off the bed and opened the door. I saw Mother’s back in the kitchen. She was wearing a robe over her pajamas. I could not see Father but for his leg dangling over the arm of the chair, his slipper hanging on his toe. Mother heard me and turned around.

“Did we wake you up, sweetie?” She sounded funny.

“I want to go to the bathroom,” I said.

“Your mama found a spider in the kitchen and keeps nagging me about it.” Father half rose from the chair and saw me.

“So it’s my fault, then?” Mother said.

“No, it’s not your fault, it’s mine. It’s always mine.”
He sat back in the chair.

“Go use the bathroom, sweetie.” Mother took a glass off the shelf and filled it up under the tap. Water gurgled in her throat when she drank it.

“God damn it,” Father said, not loud but clear.

“Hey, watch your tongue!” Mother raised her voice a little.

“He can’t hear it. If there’s somebody who wants to wake up the whole neighborhood, it’s
you, not me! What a damn-

“I say, watch your tongue!” Mother interrupted him by saying it very loud and clear.

I went into the bathroom and flushed the toilet. The water tank squeaked when water gushed out. Then it hummed when filling up. When its noise stopped, they had become quiet. I peed and went back to bed without flushing the toilet.

The next morning, Father came in to call me for school. He wore a T-shirt and sweat pants. I said I felt sick. He put his hand on my forehead.

“You don’t have a fever. Stay home, then. Be a good boy. It’s raining. Have a good rest.”

He tucked the covers for me. Before he left, he said he would bring home lunch at noon and check on me. Then he walked out and left the door open.

I heard him get dressed for work. The sound he made when he buckled up the leather belt. Mother must be still in bed. She normally got up after Father left and had a big breakfast before she went to the clinic. She was a nurse. She wouldn’t be back until evening.

Father left. I heard him lock the door and get into the car. He pulled away from the curb, then it became quiet. The rain must have stopped.

I threw back the quilt and opened the school bag and took out a comic book I had rented from a bookstore the day before. Nearly all my pocket money went there. The author was Japanese. It was a story about high school boys playing basketball. I wondered what my high school life would be like. I hoped I wouldn’t be too short to play basketball.

The book was thin and the pictures and characters were big. I finished it in twenty minutes. I got out of the bed. I peeked into their bedroom on my way to the kitchen. Mother was not there. I looked into the kitchen. She was not there either. I hadn’t heard her leave, but the quilts were neatly folded and the pillows were free of wrinkles. Mother loved her bed to be this neat; she
never left the bed messy.

I kicked off my slippers and stood on their bed and bounced on the mattress. Then I opened the magazine on the nightstand, which had many pictures of clothes, cushions and shampoos. One corner was folded. It was a cat food coupon. We didn’t have a cat. That page had a picture of a cat hiding in a hamper. The cat was not even lovely, but kind of creepy.

I opened the bottom drawer and found a box of rubbers in the back. The box was worn and crumpled. I rubbed my fingertip against the bra of the girl on the cover, who stretched her tan and shiny body the full length of the box. I heard someone opening the front door. I threw the box back in the drawer and shut it.

It was Mother. She was wearing a striped dress that almost touched her feet. She smelled like wet paper picked off a dewed lawn. She didn’t look surprised when she saw me.

“Why are you still at home? You’ll be late for school.” She sounded tired.

“I’m not feeling well today.”

“Have you had breakfast?” She flung her bulky handbag onto the couch. It landed like a hurt animal.

“Can I have hot chocolate for breakfast?” I asked.

“OK. I’ll make an exception today. But tomorrow you must have juice.”

She made hot chocolate for me and some coffee for herself. I ate a donut and savored my hot chocolate when she sipped her coffee.

After we had breakfast, Mother said she was tired and needed a nap. When she saw the wrinkled bed, she must have known that I had jumped on it. But she didn’t say anything.

I read the comic book a second time and thought about the girl on the rubber box for a while and drew a picture of a house that had a tree and white fence with crayons. I opened my math exercise book but didn’t feel like solving any problems.

Father didn’t come back at noon. Mother got up and made me a turkey sandwich then went back to bed. I decided to go to school in the afternoon.
It rained a little when I was in class. But it had stopped by the time school was over. I saw Father waiting for me at the school gate. We got in the car and he asked me if I was hungry. I asked if he could take me to the comicbook store before we headed home. He asked where it was.

I returned the book and father paid the rental. Then I went to the Japanese section to pick another book. Father stood beside me and took some books off, flipped a few pages then put them back. I knew many books had violence and sex scenes. I felt uncomfortable with him standing there.

“Never mind. I didn’t find anything interesting today. Let’s go,” I said.

“Are you sure? Take your time. I’ll wait for you in the car.”

He went out.

I picked the book that I had been eager to read for a long time. It was about campus violence.

I went out of the store and saw Father leaning against the car, smoking. The wind pulled away the smoke in tight spirals. I put the book in the school bag before he saw the cover. He asked me if I wanted ice cream. I nodded and got into the car. He didn’t get in until he finished the cigarette.

Father picked a table by a big window at the ice cream shop. There was a tree outside and leaves had started falling and rotting in the rainwater. I ordered a chocolate sundae with whole hazelnuts on top. Father ordered the same thing. While we waited, Father fished out a cigarette and tucked it behind his ear.

“Will be back in a minute,” he said.

Through the window I saw him lighting the cigarette in the shade of the awning and taking a long pull. I looked around and saw a girl in the corner licking her plastic spoon. The flesh on her throat fluttered. I thought of the girl on the rubber box. I took the comic book from the bag and
flipped a few pages, but I didn’t feel like reading. I wanted to ask Father what the hell was going on in the house and why Mother was unhappy.

Our ice cream came. I scooped a spoonful in my mouth. Father snuffed the cigarette against the ground and threw it in a mush of rotten leaves. I was chewing on the hazelnuts when he walked back in.

I got up my nerve and asked him, “What the hell is----”

Before I could finish my sentence, the lighter fell out of his pocket. Father bent down to pick it up.

“Can I have a look at your book?” he asked.

He sat down and pulled the book toward him.

Just at that moment I bit my tongue. The pain was enormous. I couldn’t utter even a single word.
THE LAST PARTY

Nights are the hardest. Li feels like shit at night. He has trouble falling asleep, though he’s been feeling tired a lot recently. He feels the bed rock like a raft in the water, tipping sideways when he turns from side to side. Has the tumor messed up his sense of direction and balance? There were nights when he thought he would drift into the realm of sleep and never come back. The doctor said he still has good days. That sounds almost ironic. How many good days are there? Enough to outlive his father?

What’s interesting now is that the physical sensation is withdrawing. Dizziness, pain, spasm, knotted veins throbbing, all these dwellers in his brain, once considered to be permanent, have vacated their rooms, while the hollowness left behind thickens and curdles into an idea, an idea of the illness, with his numbered days lying before him, though there are still a few days that Li finds more delightful than the others, when the sense of helplessness becomes soft and as intoxicating as blissful ignorance, and it turns his sadness into drunken circles, which convinces Li that his life is no more than a joke going into a dying fall, and he is okay with that. But this idea, this haunting idea, it stays with him like a dark blue tattoo, always capable of finding its way to hide in darkness, the darkness he sees when he is so hammered that he thinks he can spin on his sentimentality till the end of the world, or until he climbs out of bed at sunrise, quivering and drenched in dew.

Li suddenly misses his father, though Li is not always delighted to see him, which is why he moved out after his mother passed away ten years ago. But he is now craving to move back and live with his father, who is always mysterious in Li’s eyes. He was a mapmaker, so he traveled a lot before his retirement eight years ago, mostly to small villages in rustic area and along borderlines, so he has an amazing knowledge of geography and folklore. But he never talked
about his trips. He improvised maps and sketches of mountains with ochre ink in his notebooks, and he pinned them on the walls of his bedroom. After he retired from the publishing house, whenever Li goes to visit him, he always sits in an old chair, definitely different ones over all these years, but similarly swollen with padding and tense with live springs, and scratches his Adam’s apple. He says his throat itches badly, as if he just swallowed a bird. His scratch always slightly unnerves Li, and is often followed by a burp. Li wouldn’t be surprised if he saw a slice of shadow, thin, vaguely translucent, luminous on the edges, flutter out of his mouth, and disappear behind the curtain. His father, his personality, his whole body, his flair, has an overused-map aspect to it: multiple rips at the edges, flattened on the top of a table, then put away in a backpack, then flattened again on the surface of a rock or against a trunk, then put away again, stained by mashed grass and luncheon meat, its lines and signs smeared, and someday breaks at the fold.

Li was never close to his father as a child. His reticence was intimidating. Li is not even sure if his father ever loved his mother or him. He didn’t cry at the funeral but hid among piles of yellowed atlases for three days and made a map of a village named Lotus. Li couldn’t find the village in other maps, so thought it must be a fictional world. Li didn’t confirm this with his father. He’s never known how to bond with his father, and it has always seemed that his father doesn’t believe in the existence of such a bond either. Li has questions about many things—their family history, including their medical history; what his father’s childhood was like, where he came from; why he became a mapmaker; why he has always seemed to Li to be from another world entirely—but Li has never asked any of these, and his father has never volunteered any information. So Li has learned how to live with questions. He simply stopped seeking answers from his father, regarding anything.

Now he is tired, he is exhausted. He may have found the answers, but they don’t matter anymore. Even the questions are not important. He wants to go home. The house is a quiet place where he can stay undisturbed, and he will have time to read, think, as if not being disturbed,
reading and thinking were important to Li, though thinking too much is tiring, a good book can be dangerously motivating, and loneliness bores him easily. But this impulse feels so strong, like a dying fish swimming against the currents to the place where a river starts, where everything starts. He is afraid of questions now, from others or himself, if he has truly lived a life so far, if he has spent time doing nothing, what he will or should do in the days left. They are tiring questions. Father will not ask him questions; he will let go of Li easily,

Li’s best buddy, Mo, the son of a bitch, has gone to hospital to have his arm stitched up. He got into a fight over a dice after Li left to move back into his father’s house. Li doesn’t plan to tell Mo about his sickness. Mo gives you a feel of wholeness, something as wonderful and fragile as an egg, while Li makes you think that he has left a piece of him somewhere else.

Mo is always the one who gets them into trouble. Li has thought more than once that someday he will kill Mo, if he hadn’t been killed by someone else, but he is still his best friend. Hanging out with Mo makes Li forget temporarily how yesterday becomes today and how today will become tomorrow. Mo is naturally gleeful and doesn’t care much about the things he has or anything he has not obtained, which makes Li feel kind of superior above him. But that superiority makes Li feel guilty since sometimes Mo is the one who wipes Li’s ass when Li himself can’t clean up his own crap. Like last month, Mo lent Li three thousand yuan so Li could take his ex-girlfriend to have an abortion and buy some walnuts, dates and a chicken to make soup, so she could recover faster. They didn’t see each other anymore after the abortion because she said Li’s face reminded her of the tiny hands and feet of the baby in her dream that gestured all over the place trying to tell her something, which messed up her spleen, stomach and intestines.
Summer arrives. A season when vandalism is rampant in the city. Last week, five days in a row, Li and Mo drank, got high, and danced wildly as if a minute could be a year long, then they stoned the bulbs of streetlamps. After that, Li felt more terrible than he ever did. Li will turn thirty on the weekend. Thirty is a weird age, not just because this may be his last birthday. It feels like it’s a door or something like that, that the birthday party will open it and he will be led into a room where he has to show something to a full house of viewers.

The afternoon Li came back from the hospital, he was irritated by Mo’s questions about how he wanted to celebrate his birthday, where he wanted to have his big birthday party. He had a fight with Mo, who stormed out of the pool room.

“I think you’ve been leading a pretty fucked-up life,” Li said.

“What? What’s wrong with you?” Mo smirked.

“You stupid son of a bitch. You crackpot.” Li snuffed out the cigarette butt with his shoe heel.

“Hey, what’s wrong with you today?” Mo looked a little irritated, but more confused.

“I’m judging you. You sick bastard.” Li squeezed out the words in a kind of devilish way.

“Hey, do you want me to kick your ass?”

“Sounds like you can.”

Li continued testing the limit. It felt like he didn’t really worry about how ugly this could get. But Mo had been looking forward to Li’s birthday for a month and planning on doing something fun together. So he was very pissed by Li picking on him.

So they had a fight. A relatively quick one, a few fists thrown, and then Mo stomped out after bruising his elbows and knees, leaving Li alone wiping his own blood off his fingers and forehead. Li didn’t know that, later that night, Mo got into another more serious fight after that. He didn’t know this because by then, Li was busying with moving back to his father’s house.
Li thought his father would nag about him quitting his part-time job in the bar and moving back to live with him. But when Li moves back to the house in the afternoon, his father looks only a little surprised, puzzled.

“Your room remains the same,” his father says. Then he goes out for a walk.

Li spends an afternoon unpacking, and by the time he’s finished up, back in his old room, it is already getting dark and cool outside. A wind blows in, ruffling the newspaper on the table and the pages of books Li borrowed from the library. He stretches his arms and soon hears steps in the kitchen and tiles on the floor squeaking when stepped on.

“Father?” Li asks aloud.

His father doesn’t answer.

“Are you back?”

“I’m back. I bought eggplants.” His voice small, smoky and kind of feminine.

Li suddenly realizes his father’s voice sounds different somehow. Softer. And it sounds like there is another voice echoing with him. Is this all his father needs? An echo? A response? The two voices doesn’t overlap, though. There is a stretch of silence bridging the two. The silence has a hollow, lonely aspect to it, like old bones losing calcium and agility.

Li hears his father walking in the living room then back in the kitchen. He hears him open the refrigerator and take something out (maybe leftovers from lunch? Or half a can of black bean sauce? What’s his plan for dinner?) and close it.

The house has been here for thirty years, with its smell a mix of dormant volcano and hibernating animal, its texture a layered and tunneled marble. A house has an ability of recovering from any memory in its first seven or eight years, then it starts losing this ability by showing yellowish water marks on the walls (if you look closely at them, you will see a face or a gesture or some words once spoken glued to the wall). A new house is a connection to the outside—heart vigorously throbbing, showing off the bright colors of its feathers, announcing its
uniqueness, to compete for access to a web of relationships and contrivances, the outline defined by the outside world it opposes. But an old one turns into a place for a recluse. Isolated, its color fades to dull gray, sharp edges and corners melt to irregular shapes. It tends to hide itself, or it receives its form more from inside rather than the world around it. Time stills in a house as old as this one, though outside the clock never stops ticking. People living here don’t make choices anymore; they accept. (The moment they are tired of acceptance is when they are tired of the house and think of leaving.) Even for a small thing like what to have for dinner, they don’t make a choice but to accept.

“What are we having for dinner? We can go out,” Li says.

“I bought eggplants.”

“Too hot to cook at home. Let’s go out,” Li says.

“We’ll have garlic eggplants and porridge. Something greasy is not suitable for summer,” his father says loudly, but the last few words taper off into a whisper. Then his father repeats what he’s said to himself, as if to assure himself that eating eggplant is more of an obligation than an option, just like living in an old house for thirty years, and perhaps like dying here.

“There’s light food in a restaurant,” Li says.

“I’ve peeled the eggplants,” his father says.

Li knows he should stand up and go to help him with the dinner. He should have peeled the eggplants for him. But his father finishes everything so quickly. But if Li goes to the kitchen now, he must be still peeling the garlic. His father is slowing down because the half-transparent, paperlike garlic peel has become too thin for him and will stick to his fingers. His father gets cranky when peeling the garlic.

Summer evenings are long and slow. The heat that brutally scorches the day gradually withdraws from the city, and, like a hurt animal, goes back to its cage. The room is dimmer now and his father has turned on the light in the kitchen. But Li enjoys the grayish dimness in his room immensely. The moment makes him dizzy and also sober, and freed him of his visual
acuity in the daylight (everything one can see at this moment is gray, shadow over shadow, hard to discern any shape). But his ears are able to catch some distant music at this hour. Even sometimes there is no music at all; his ears will make it up, out of dust vibrating in the air, or a secluded corner of his brain, where his memory and imagination overlaps. The music will sound strange and also familiar, beyond recognition, yet inspiring. Many times Li is convinced it is something he has heard in another life, a life of pure joviality and melancholy.

“Father, it’s seven already, you go to watch the news. I’ll make the dinner,” Li says.

“Dinner will be ready in twenty minutes. Eggplants today are fresh and tender, nice.”

Li is amazed by the fact that aging precedes at different speeds in one’s life: it accelerates around forties and fifties then slows down at seventy. Seventy is a threshold and once people step over, they stop seeing much change on their faces and bodies, which never, absolutely, stop aging. They just stop reminding you how old you are, because you are old enough to accept it. That is also when they start talking more, trying to make sure that their voices are heard, not by others, but by themselves, as if everything is still well in control.

Li knows he must go to cook dinner now. He will cook something simple and light, an easy and smooth transition for the daylight to segue into the cool night of June. Listen, his father has turned on the television. He must have put the rice in the boiling water and leaves the lid of the pot half open. His father still does things fast and perfectly with his agile fingers without talking much. But he has reached an age that he starts talking to himself. He may need Li’s help. With garlic and everything else. Li thinks he should hurry now.

Mo calls Li that night.

“I went to the bar. They said you quit,” Mo says.

“Yeah, I quit. No free liquor for you from now on,” Li says.
“You know I don’t care about that.”

“Oh, I don’t know.”

“All right, I do care. But that’s not why I’m calling. Did you really move back to your father’s house?”

“Yes, I did. I quit my job, I can’t afford the rent. Hey, listen, about the fight...”

“What fight? We didn’t meet yesterday. Nothing like that stays with me overnight. But, but I’m kind of confused...you’ve been a little off recently...”

“Well, you know, things change... I don’t know. Maybe, maybe the upcoming birthday terrifies me.”

He scratches the back of his head, trying to figure out an answer.

“Birthday? How? We’re going to have a fun time.”

“All right.”

“Hey, good weather, let’s hang out,” Mo says.

“Maybe not tonight. I feel kinda tired.”

“Are you old?”

“What? Only old people are qualified to feel tired?”

“All right, all right. Call me when you wanna hang out.”

“I will...Wait, wait, can I ask you a question?” Li asks.

“What question?”

“Have you ever wished you were somebody else?”

“Of course, I wish I were born to be rich. What? You’ve got a better wish?” Mo asks.

“No, not really, I wish I were rich too.”

Li puts down the phone.

Don’t get the wrong impression that Li and Mo never make big plans. One time, they thought about robbing a grocery store at midnight, where the cashier was a mean girl, Ge. She once recommended the worst-rated ketchup to Mo since there was too much in stock and he
obviously knew nothing about ketchup. Mo thought Ge thought he was stupid and he hated it. Mo wanted to be taken seriously, but not so seriously that things would get hurtful. Mo tended to give you an impression that he had a noble and classic heart but wrapped in a cloud of marshmallow, and that made him vulnerable.

So Mo’s noble and classic heart didn’t allow him to let this mean girl dismiss him with thinly veiled contempt when he took back the ketchup. He wanted to take revenge on her and asked Li for help. Li said they could rob the store and scare the shit out of her. They agreed to use knives as weapons and do it the next night. Li and Mo bought two knives of perfect size to be hidden in a pocket. They planned that when there was nobody in there but Ge, they would point the knife at her and ask for money. That evening, before they started lurking around the grocery store waiting for the right timing, they went to a bar to have a drink as a process of summoning up courage. They told each other that they could do it. They could be cool, cool bad guys. They felt so good after a few shots that they thought they had finished the robbery. They kept drinking until they fell asleep.

The next morning, Li thought about what happened the night before was philosophically interesting but was not sure if this human situation had been covered by any philosopher so he went to borrow books from the library. Mo had a terrible hangover and sat in the bed for the whole day and felt hungry in the evening. On his way to the food court, he passed the grocery store and saw Ge spit out a chewing gum which stuck to the wall like a set of lips. Mo went in to ask her out though he had a girlfriend. Ge said yes and they dated for three months. She broke up with him and he felt, actually he didn’t how to put this, in Li’s words, that he was like “a room whose windows were empty of glass”, everything well exposed, kind of chilly.

Mo felt unhappy for days and borrowed ten thousand yuan from Bald Brother and lost it in his casino. Mo fled, God knew where, and Bald Brother found Li and asked for money. Li said he needed a month. He found a job in a bar and worked two shifts and only slept four hours a day. When he saved enough money at the end of the month, Bald Brother was arrested for owning an
illegal casino. Mo came back a week later, scraggy and shabby, asked for big meals. Li dropped a shift in the bar and took Mo to the food court. He ordered thirty chicken wings and three helpings of roasted lamb, then drank beer while watching Mo devouring, who smeared the grease dripping from the meat all over the place.

At that time, Li had known about the tumor. He knew he had been hiding all along, from confrontation, from seeking for answers, from facing the truth. In the past month, he had worked like a crazy man and never got much to think about the examination from the hospital. That night, he decided that he would tell nobody about it and find a quiet place to let himself go.

The telephone rings in the morning.

Li is still in bed. He didn’t fall asleep until four in the morning and had a long and tiring dream about a journey. There is a wanderer in the dream, a traveler who doesn’t know his destination yet, trekking around the whole ancient Asia. Wanderlust is a curse, an escape, a luxury, a guilty pleasure; it is for people who tolerate only seconds…because the minutes, hours, days, months and years ahead, this travel through time, seems so intimidating that they can’t be mollified by anything but a journey. One foot in front of the other, but not headed anywhere.

Li is amazed by how detailed that dream is, which almost feels like writing a book. Still partly immersed in the state of plotting for a seemingly plotless journey, characterizing a character who didn’t really have much of a personality (the phone keeps ringing, father hasn’t returned from his morning exercise) he indulges himself in a dreamy half-sleepiness, diagnosing in himself an inappropriate excitement at leaving the journey an open ending. This moment of dreaminess strengthens his attachment to a fictional world immensely and temporarily paralyzes his limbs. This dreaminess, which is also sort of dangerous like the warm, soft muck on the bottom of a river that your feet get sucked in, distracts you from whatever you are trying to
do—flee from the water or to wade further (even planning on drowning yourself)—because it makes you want to stop, at least pause for a second, to question, to doubt, to think that it is all right to feel desperate, to regret you are truly by yourself in this world…

The phone stops. In a few seconds, it starts ringing again.

But that questioning moment is so short, albeit the assurance of the first few minutes that it will stay with you forever like an epiphany. When wide awake after a cup of coffee, you are ready to be ambitious and mingle with the crowd again. Li slowly comes awake when he hears his father coming back in from a morning walk and picking up the phone. Li sits up in bed and perks up, doesn’t hear anything for a moment after his father answers, nor does he hear his father hang up. His father pauses for a long time before saying that he gets it, then hangs up.

Li gets out of bed and walks into the kitchen, where his father has put on a pot of coffee.

“What is it?” Li murmurs.

His father doesn’t hear him.

Li clears his throat.

“What is it?” Li asks. “Who was that on the phone?”

“Why didn’t you tell me?” his father asks.

“Tell you what? Who was it?”

“It’s from the hospital. You didn’t show up for the examination.”


But Li knows his father has known about it.

“I will go to the hospital with you. Let’s have breakfast first.” His father goes into the kitchen.

While buttoning up his shirt, Li looks hard at a dark dot on the wall, then squints and sets the spot rocking like a boat. The paint on the wall re-done by his father three weeks ago is still uneven and layers of beige now look like waves.

Li goes to the kitchen when his Father is cutting steamed bread. Then he sprinkles salt and
ground pepper on the slices and fries them in the pan. Li opens the lid of the pot. The coffee has started boiling. Li opens the windows to ventilate the room and hears the sound of birds. Everything is just like other mornings, peaceful, fresh, cool, as enticing as a pool of turquoise water. All it takes is a plunge! That moment of the gleeful hesitation at the edge of the pool, filled with the promise of a quick and thorough merriment, leaves no space for reminiscence.

Li suddenly understands that his father tries to survive the day by observing his morning routine, and he will survive whatever is in stock for him: taking a walk, buying steamed bread from the morning fair, frying bread slices, making coffee. Just like ten years ago, he continued drawing maps after his mother left them. It is an accumulating assurance, a process of tidy buildup, making you feel dauntless and back in control.

That night, Li lies in the bed and hears somebody humming. The hum gets to him like a nudge on the elbow. He blinks his eyes to make sure he’s not dreaming.

He can’t really make out the tune but it has an arc that’s discernible. It’s no louder than a whisper, only more distinct, but still less idiosyncratic than a full voice. It has nothing to do with the particular melody, or the voice. It’s more than a succession of notes, but features a feel of a spread of fabric. It’s the hum as a whole, including the resonance through the air, the echo from everything in the space. It is a smooth and tidy buildup toward a kind of romance, satisfaction, or celebration, or even finer than these, a persuasion with such confidence and vivacity.

The humming continues.

Li remembers his mother liked humming when she knit. All the sweaters, gloves and scarves they wore back then were made by her. Her fingers moved as fast as a hummingbird, and rhythmically to her tune. She could knit for hours without a break. She kept a notebook of pretty sweater patterns. His father still wears her sweater (a light brown one) in fall and winter which
has gone shabby and gray. There is a long lint on the back (nobody knows how it caught on a
nail or something like that) that dances up and down in the air current like an arm. Years have
passed but it is still waving Goodbye. Li thinks he probably should buy him a new one.

The hum tapers off into a sigh. Li gets off the bed and goes to his father’s bedroom. He
opens the door quietly. A slice of moonlight filters through the curtain and shatters on the floor
into starry dots. His father’s breathing turns thready from the mucus he can not fully clear from
his throat. Is this the first time Li notices that? His father hears him and turns to look at him.

“Did I wake you up?” his father asks.

“No, no, not quite sleepy yet.” Li says.

“The moon is too bright. I can’t fall asleep,” his father says and sits up. “Oh, that, it’s from a
very old TV show, even one year older than you.”

“I thought we didn’t buy a television until I was five.”

“That was before your mother and I married, the first time I met her parents.”

“You nervous?”

“Oh, at the beginning. They were nice people. They have the only television set in the
neighborhood. Some kids went to watch it after school. That was my first time seeing TV,” His
father pauses and says, “Well, I don’t remember what I watched that day but the song.”

“It’s a nice song.”

“Your birthday is this Saturday. Let’s throw a party! Invite people over. Your friend, that
guy called, what, Mo? Is it Mo?”

How does his father know about Mo?

“A party? Are you sure?”

“You’ll be thirty. That’s the turn of your life. We should have a big party.”

“Good night, Father.”

His father lies back. His breathing sounds kind of sandy. Li closes the door, stays there for a
minute and leaves it half open.
On Friday, Mo comes over to help them prepare the party. They decide to do a thorough cleaning first.

The house hasn’t changed much since Li left. It looks just older: the carpet in the living room, once rich and uniformly springy, is thinning in paths; in the kitchen, the circle stain left by soy sauce bottle on the counter top becomes permanent; the fake flowers in the vase on top of the refrigerator are covered with dust, its once cheap bright colors (Red! Yellow! Purple!) fading into a grayish gloom; a stack of clipped old water bills stuck between the wall and the microwave oven has turned feathery and blurred because of the moisture in the air of four or five summers. It is impossible to reverse the aging process, even of an object. The house has stayed here long enough to be able to breathe, so it has every right to grow old, as if it’s on a parallel track with the dweller inside. His father possesses the house, no doubt, but the house owns his father too, until they both reach a phase where ownership is off the table forever and they just snuggle together.

But today, his father, Mo and Li, after their big breakfast (they had white bread, scrambled egg, salted fish and pickles), feel fully charged with the power of making the place look cleaner and more delightful. Li is surprised by what an ambition it requires of to make a petty change to a space, as if the dust will take shape of a figure under touch, someone locked up in Li’s memory that he is reluctant to visit, and the old marks on walls and furniture will come alive due to its friction against wiping cloth and continual application of detergent.

They start with the living room. Li vacuums the carpet. He doesn’t realize until he finishes how much dirt, how many pieces of his mother, father and himself (and the occasional visitors) can be hidden in the tiny forest of the carpet wool. (And he knows he has made a mistake of doing cleaning in the wrong order. He should have started from the top.) Mo wipes the floor
lamp and collects feathers of dust carefully in his palm. His father puts his books and newspapers in neat piles and shoes in fine lines. Then they move to the kitchen. Li scrubs the sink and the stove. Mo rinses the fleshy plastic flowers and they look Red! Yellow! Purple! again. Cleaning house makes Li develop such an attachment to details, and no matter how trivial a discovery or victory can be, it deserves as much delight as that an extravaganza can bring to him.

Li has never seen his father being so cheerful: cheerfully stubborn, cheerfully compliant, cheerfully caring, cheerfully indifferent, cheerfully vivacious, cheerfully drooping. It feels like that he is a sea animal that has been beached itself (since when? Since he started taking hypotensive pills every day and heart pills every other day? Since Li’s mother passed away?), sunning, and wrinkling, and suddenly crawls back into the ocean, thirsty and weather-beaten, back to glimmering whispers of waves, back to the indulgence and resistance of saltwater, back to the brilliant effervescence. Li doesn’t know what decision he made after he found out Li’s illness, but he is sure there is one, or it can also be an epiphany, one as good as an impulse that makes you stiffen on the sidewalk, and look into a big shop window glass at your own reflection, gaze centered on your own eyes, while the traffic, the racket withdraws from the realm of your perception like a soluble pill in a glass of water.

Since that night, his father has started displaying to Li his memory more often, of all the trips he took to draw maps, of his mother’s nickname being Lotus before they married, of the day Li was born it was raining, piece by piece, chunk by chunk, as if they were lately uncovered beautiful fossils, streaked, pocked, dented. Only by doing that can he collect them, cherish them, then put them away. It was exhausting for Li to see meaning everywhere, everything happening felt already like memory. But now he sees the fossils tinged with a hint of greenish freshness, the moss survive all weathers and history, growing lively, mapping the remains of his life.

They are going to have a big party. The clean house indicates a good start. Li knows he is not ready yet, for the party and everything else, and he still has a lot to do. So he must move on now, with a party waiting to be done, and all those good days yet to come.