

ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis: THE WAY WE MOURNED

Gu Qian, Master of Fine Arts, 2016

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The five short stories in this collection illustrate the insistence of the imagination in a foreign country. The protagonists deal with loss and exile of the human spirit, as well as language. In “View of the Taft Bridge”, a Chinese painter befriends a panda in the National Zoo in America’s capital. In “Early June before the Millennium”, an illicit student and teacher relationship unveils a painful history of the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre. An adopted teenager finds her life unraveled at the presence of a new tenant who shares her ethnicity in “Girl in the Basement”. And the inertia of a housewife drives her desire to become a house cat, in “Catwoman”, until dream and reality become interchangeable. In “The Way We Mourned”, betrayal and memorial are closely knit in the wake of a close friend’s death. These stories search for connections to bridge “self” and “other”, as well as one’s present with a haunting past.

THE WAY WE MOURNED

by

Gu Qian

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VIEW OF THE TAFT BRIDGE

by

Gu Qian

In my first week in Washington D.C., I made friends with panda Mei Xiang in the Smithsonian's National Zoo.

Late summer is when everyone arrives in a new city. I ran into people with suitcases all the time. They often stopped me and asked for directions, without knowing that I had moved here only a few days before them. In the mornings white clouds drifted across the crisp blue sky, but late afternoon storms would bring the temperature down, much faster than what I was accustomed to in my home city Hong Kong. It took me some time to conclude that the storms usually came around 4pm, when the sky would change from an over saturated blue canvas to brush strokes of grey. Labor Day was still three weeks away, and I found myself without anything to do before school began. I walked along Connecticut Avenue every day, all the way past the Washington Hilton, the old Taft Bridge, a few dry cleaners and restaurants near the Woodley Park metro, and found my way to the zoo. My panda friend Mei Xiang usually came out of her bedroom and said "hi" to me early in the morning, before the waves of tourists rushed

in. Her fur was soft and thick; and she had a round belly with a tiny coin shaped black marking in the middle.

“So how’s your adventure going so far?” She always greeted me in English just the way my boyfriend Bryce would do over Skype. You would think a panda should at least have the courtesy to talk to you in Mandarin. But Mei Xiang apologized a few days after we started conversing that her Chinese had gotten rusty after living here for more than 10 years. “And my baby girl Bao Bao grew up speaking English – I’m a bit worried about her returning to Wolong. She’s not even two, but you know, she’s already very wild. You should have seen her tumbling in the snow last winter like those reckless lion cubs. When the time comes for her to return, all the other pandas in Wolong might not want to hang out with her.”

I had thought over her question for a while. At that time, I hadn’t been here long enough to call it an adventure. But aren’t pandas solitary animals? They become adults, leave their parents, and chew bamboo all by themselves. I’d heard somewhere that pandas also don’t have much sex drive – male and female pandas will mate once or twice as they feel like it and then live separate lives, moving forward without thinking too much about cuddling another plump panda of their age or rolling around together on bamboo leaves. Interesting animals. No wonder they found themselves on the verge of extinction.

It was a surprise to know that Mei Xiang was concerned about her daughter’s social well-being among a group of Chinese pandas. It was, of course, also sort of a surprise to hear a panda talk in the first place, but I figured that she might just be making an exception for me. We had become familiar in some way. I came to watch her every day, always early in the morning, leaning on the railings in front of her glass home, and sometimes did sketches in my exercise book when she walked around. I always stood in the same place. Without knowing anybody in

this foreign city, watching Mei Xiang stride around and take naps had become an addictive routine. A routine that put my mind at peace, especially when Bryce had to take late night conference calls and couldn't talk to me on Skype. After I had left Hong Kong, he got promoted and started to work longer hours. He went to the office even on weekends, preparing presentations and reports for the following week. He was working hard for the future, our future.

“Are you a painter or something?” That was the first thing she ever said to me.

It was a lazy morning and I was wearing a white t-shirt and burgundy sweatpants brought from Hong Kong – not an eye-catching outfit by any standard. At first I thought I had ignored somebody standing next to me, as I tend to lose track of my surroundings when I paint. I looked around but there was nobody in sight.

Mei Xiang tapped her claws on the glass wall and made a drum-like sound until I recognized the source of the voice. “Hey, that's not bad.” She pointed at my sketch book and spoke in perfectly fluent American English.

It was a sketch of her, hiding underneath the arc of a miniature Taft Bridge. I had not gotten a good hang of the bridge yet, and had to redraw it several times. I wasn't sure which angle I should picture the bridge, either. But Mei Xiang seemed to be quite satisfied with her own portrait.

“Well...” I wondered about the fact that the object of my art had just taken some interest in me. How long had she been observing me? How sly of her to pretend to be an innocent model all the time! I had been to Ocean Park in Hong Kong many times and pandas there didn't bother to talk to me at all. In fact, they seldom woke up from their naps when I visited. Maybe pandas living in the US are a bit different, more friendly and outgoing? I had no clue.

“I’m taking painting classes here in graduate school, a wanna-be painter, if you want to be accurate. I’m still figuring this out.” I replied honestly. So many things to deal with in a new country, I thought at that time. Microwaved food, suburban shopping malls, useless post offices, and talking pandas.

“Not bad.” She repeated, like an art critic. “Although I look sad here and the bridge is a bit crooked, it may just be your style.”

“Thank you,” I said. “I find it hard to measure the proximity between the bridge and the landscape here.”

“Because they were not built above the water?” Mei Xiang asked.

Indeed, I thought the Taft Bridge was very different from the red-painted Chinese bridges near the temples or the high-arched ones forming a “full moon” over the pond with their reflections. Those were, of course, smaller, older bridges for travelers on foot instead of cars.

I remembered Nan Lian Garden near my home in Hong Kong, and the first time I had tried to paint the scenery there for a school project in Form 1. Maybe that was when my love for painting had all started. Years later, I noticed that there was my handwriting at the back of the paper, probably what I wrote on that day as a thought worth putting down: *I sat here on the bridge, painting the quiet pond; I didn't realize the pond was painting a quiet me.*

And I was surprised how straightforward Mei Xiang was.

“Do you have an ache in your heart, if I may ask? You know, something that doesn’t go away.”

“Not that I know of.” I said.

“It is a long way you have travelled.” She said. “All by yourself, I assume. Painting bridges and all that.”

“You seem to be a good detective,” I said, “just based on what you see for a short while.”

Mei Xiang tilted her head, as if studying my face in detail. “Of course. One has a lot of free time to think in my situation. But I wonder, who still wants to see a painting when everybody else just takes pictures with their iPhones? Don’t you think I look better in photos?”

Good point. I cleared my throat and tried to think of a way to answer that question, but my mind didn’t seem to cooperate. I had been asking myself this so many times. Why didn’t I just give in to reality like everyone else and record them with my phone? I could even use an iPad. “You must be a rich girl,” my friends in Hong Kong said. “Because you are not married yet and have no children,” my parents said. “Remember to always bring pepper spray in your bag,” my former boss said when we had our farewell team dinner, quoting gun violence numbers in America. I didn’t know how to explain my decision to anyone, except that now I did have an emergency whistle on my keychain just so that I could tell everyone I had it, and that I was not detached from practicality.

Finally I answered Mei Xiang, “I guess you are right. I guess not many people want to look at a painting any more. It is not really a growing industry.”

Mei Xiang, whom I learned later on should be middle-aged in human terms, gave me a childish grin with her black oval eyes, “I thought you would have a comeback with something smarter. Girl, you really disappointed me.” She walked away towards her bedroom behind the concrete walls proudly, hips swinging like an old jazz song.

And that’s how she decided that I was a pretty harmless person to start a friendship with.

My boyfriend Bryce still lived in Hong Kong.

Our friends thought it was funny that I moved to study in his hometown DC while he stayed in mine. We had only been seeing each other for half a year and the last few weeks before I left, we forgot about our other friends. I stopped working but would still go to my old (and his current) office building to have our favorite sushi or salad lunch together. We spent weekends hiking and lying on the beach, with one getting tan lines and the other turning red. I stayed at his place, and we watched Netflix through VPN. In the mornings, he made me cereal with berries and bananas, sometimes adding delicious cinnamon powder on top.

I had thought those breakfasts were quite an innovation until I first visited Whole Foods in DC, where berries were the first thing I saw in the produce section. I learned why he always placed his tea kettle and pot close to the kitchen wall as if there were two more burners in the back. I found out why he used a thicker foam mattress and a “luxurious” in-unit washer/dryer in a small Hong Kong-size apartment.

Half of the people on the metro were wearing red Washington Nationals hats or sweatshirts after a big game, sporting the same “W” that was on one of his favorite t-shirts.

This must be what the Little Prince felt when he left his small planet and saw thousands of flowers swaying in the wind, looking exactly the same as his own precious rose, I thought. But it didn't seem to be such a good metaphor for Bryce, since he was 12 years older than me and too much of a corporate executive to believe in fairy tales.

I missed his “W” t-shirt despite thousands of copies in the subway cars.

A few times I had cried at night on his bed before I left Hong Kong, burying my face in the pillow. “Isn’t this something you always wanted, and wanted for a long time?” He nuzzled my hair as if pampering a puppy.

“But I didn’t know I’d meet you at that time.”

“It will be a great experience in your life. You’ve always been passionate about painting.”

“I won’t go if you don’t want me to.” I said, while feeling rather disappointed with myself for saying that.

“Well, I’m not asking you to choose,” he said matter-of-factly. And after a pause he added, “You can have both if you want. I’m not going anywhere.”

“Even if I only keep painting animals?” I asked cautiously, wanting to make sure.

Bryce looked amused. “Even if you only paint animals,” he said. “Nothing wrong with that.” I wondered why he was the one who always comforted me, even at the time that we both needed comforting. I could ramble for an hour about my day even though all I had done was buy a new set of brushes. When I asked about his work, he always said that it was okay. But Bryce had chest pain at times during important projects. And he would suggest we watch TV shows together while the characters laughed and did all the talking. Now how could I even be his TV buddy? Was it really necessary or was I being selfish for wanting what I wanted?

I was still wearing the previous night’s clothes when we walked out of his apartment together on the morning of my flight. He was heading to work and I was going home to get my luggage. I didn’t have time to put any makeup on but he looked radiant in his suit. We took the bus together and he got off earlier, holding a green umbrella in the drizzling Hong Kong rain. He stood at the

bus stop, smiled and waved until my bus started to move, and soon I couldn't see his face any more.

The bus was full with men and women in work clothes like every early morning. Sleepy faces, the background music of Candy Crush, and morning newspapers. I used to be one of them, wearing suits and heels. "You used to be one of us," Bryce once teased me after I quit my finance job. I started to care less about what I wore and how people thought of me. There were a few expat guys on the bus but none of them looked like Bryce. Nobody has that unique reddish blonde hair color like his. The rain started pouring down and soon nothing outside could be seen from the windows except the rivulets of water running down and enveloping all the passengers.

I told Bryce on Skype the first time I visited the zoo. I didn't tell him about my conversation with Mei Xiang, though. Twelve hours, the time difference was easy to calculate (until later I realized that it became thirteen hours in winter). He had just finished a late night at the office, still with his tie on and I was drinking milk in my pajamas. Just like old times.

"Did you say 'hi' to Bao Bao for me?" he asked. "I've never seen him but he must be very cute."

"It's a girl," I said. "The panda cub is indeed very cute. She's celebrating her second birthday soon."

I could see the brown dotted cushions on his couch. I had always liked to hold them closely when watching TV with Bryce. I felt I could touch the softness by just stretching my arms. I looked at the screen and was quiet for a few seconds. Bryce leaned back against the cushions and smiled.

“Have I told you that I used to intern at the zoo? At the veterinary hospital for 8 months when I was in high school. There was a baby elephant cub and it was so playful – always kicking a bucket or just rolling over. Doing all sorts of tricks. Just like a human baby, with an instinct to play.”

Bryce’s parents haven’t moved since his childhood and they live close to the zoo. Sometimes I would forget that this was the very area where he grew up. It was a coincidence that I ended up in graduate school in DC, but it almost felt like I planned to come here, as a way to compensate for the distance between us.

“What were you doing for all those 8 months?”

“I don’t remember exactly...it was a long time ago.” He said, “In the pathology lab, collecting blood samples or something like that. And I watched operations, and I saw a necropsy – just a term for animal autopsy, you know? Like cutting them open and showing all the guts when they were dead. Finding the reason, I suppose, for research.”

I got goose bumps. How could he talk about this while still eating salad? “Did you get to see alive animals really close too?”

“There was this cheetah, and another time a tiger...the tiger made such a loud noise, something between a purr and a growl, and you will never realize they are so big until you get that close. The sound always sticks with me.”

“Sounds like a fun internship.” I commented, imagining young Bryce with a giant tiger. What did he look like? Did he have a favorite girl at that time? He told me that before his travels, he had liked tall, blonde girls, which is entirely the opposite type of girl to myself. What had changed over all these years working in different countries? He always seemed calm and ready

to rationalize, listening to my problems instead of saying anything about his. I felt that we were definitely different species in a larger animal world.

“Sometimes I wish there would be one night that you couldn’t make it to Skype.” Bryce once said to me. “Don’t get me wrong – I love talking to you but I feel that whenever you come to me on Skype, it’s like you are returning to Hong Kong every night, and you live your day for this moment. Your heart is not really in DC and I’m a bit worried about that.”

What did that mean, I wondered. But before I could decide what to do, Bryce started to have more work projects and late nights in his office and I realized we couldn’t talk every day in my mornings. He had never complained about our distance.

Mei Xiang turned out to be more and more talkative after our first conversation. “Now that Bao Bao is almost two-years old, I don’t need to keep that close an eye on her anymore,” she told me one morning with a yawn, serving herself a breakfast of bamboo leaves and stalks.

I started running in the neighborhood. First I would go down to Rock Creek Park, then follow the trail and end up at the back entrance of the zoo as my finishing point. It was good to hear her talk while catching my breath.

“Like to run, huh?” She sized up my shorts and dry fit shirt. “I like to climb up the tree.”

Very well, I thought. “Just to stretch yourself?”

“Not at all,” she said with a stern look. “To climb high enough so I can get out of here.”

“You want to escape from the zoo?” My slowed heart beats started to escalate again.

“Otherwise who would be such a dummy to hang on those trees all day long? I couldn’t care less about exercises.” She glanced at me again. “Not saying that working out is bad, but it’s just not our thing. You know, pandas are just not into such kinds of activities. Anyway, my first-born Tai Shan almost succeeded. After he was 1, they removed the iron wraps from the tree trunks in the yard and he climbed as high as he could, finding a way out. Smart kid. But they had cameras all over the place, and by midnight a care taker came to ‘rescue’ him – they thought he got there for no reason and was stuck! My poor boy was finally taken down from the tree.”

I recalled that I had read on the gallery wall that Tai Shan was returned to China later on. They were all “rented” guests, the newspaper said, and would be returned home, except that for the cubs, this had already become home. The day when Tai Shan left, many people came to the zoo on a snowy day to bid him goodbye.

Mei Xiang seemed to know what was on my mind. “Bao Bao will go back to Wolong one day too. I guess I shouldn’t care too much for this child,” she said, leaning closer to the glass wall in between us, her eyes rolling. “Or do you think you can do me a favor and sneak her out?”

“Sneak her out?”

“You heard me. Wrap her with a blanket, put her in your suitcase, backpack or whatever, and get her out of here, even before her second birthday party. Let them throw a party with no star next year. What do you think? I’m tired of living a life with people watching and studying me every single minute, and Bao Bao will just go through this all over again. She is already very popular. They will probably try to give her those insemination injections all the time and she will end up pregnant eventually. Her life will be much harder than Tai Shan’s, I suppose. Those

researchers think we pandas all have a death wish and they have the ‘responsibility’ to help us keep going.”

“It is kind of true when you think about it...”

“Will you help me or not?” Mei Xiang looked into my eyes. “Imagine her finding a cozy place in the woods of Rock Creek, like what you drew in the sketch book. Wouldn’t that be nice? Isn’t that what you’re trying to do with painting anyways? To make real the things that you don’t have control over?” Mei Xiang probably imagined Rock Creek Park as a big bamboo forest. Footsteps rang down from afar, children screaming in excitement – early visitors must have arrived.

“I’m sorry, Mei.” I sighed, “As much as I want to help, this is not something I am capable of doing, really. One practical question to start with: I couldn’t even get through this glass wall.” My face burned when I said this. Didn’t I understand the exact reason for Mei Xiang’s plea... that I was able to feel her fears like no one else could?

She gave me a long look of disappointment and turned away slowly.

Feeling that I had let Mei Xiang down, I didn’t return to the zoo for a few days. In fact, I started to read the books I had bought for my studies. I would have a packed schedule of learning art history and figuring out a style that suited me the best. But Mei Xiang was always on my mind. I found myself continuing to draw portraits of her, even though I was working from home. A phone camera wouldn’t be able to do that, I thought, which could be a possible answer to her question. I drew pictures of her back in Wolong when she was young, surrounded by Chinese scientists. I had a picture of her and Tian Tian, the adult male and Bao Bao’s father, eating

bamboo in separate glass rooms. However, the one I liked the most was still Mei Xiang under the Taft Bridge. I had added some athletes on the exercise course in the background. I repainted the leaves so that some would start to have a brighter shade heralding the upcoming cooler weather. In the picture, Mei Xiang lifted up her head and looked at the top of a tree. I decided to add in Bao Bao one day, who napped with her face down on a high branch where Mei Xiang's gaze had landed. Bao Bao looked like a small black and white snowball, a soft candy.

Maybe the tree would eventually grow so she could jump on the bridge for fun. I started to feel a bit better.

It was the end of August when the whole city celebrated Bao Bao's second birthday. To my surprise, the news also reported that Mei Xiang had just given birth to two new baby cubs a day ago, and nobody knew who the father was yet since she had been sired by two different pandas. "Mei is continuing to nurse her cub in the den. She has not shown any interest in eating yet, but keepers are offering her water and juice to keep her hydrated," said the local paper. As soon as I read the news, I decided to drop by and check in on her. Was this the reason why she got so cranky and anxious about her children when we talked? Maybe she would forgive me when seeing the crowd of admirers. Maybe she would reconsider the escape plan now that the situation had changed. New born pandas are vulnerable and they need to stay with their mother in a more monitored environment. Sometimes one has to adapt for the interest of the majority, right?

The zoo was filled with families and tourists. Girl scouts lined up all over the Asian Trails, wearing small panda hats. Professional photographers carried their heavy equipment having camped out since dawn. I strolled around before the party started, avoiding the crowd.

On the elephant path, there were giant footprints painted in red. I followed them to a quiet area near the elephants' residence. Yellow crocuses were blooming on either side of the path and the fresh fragrance in the air almost smelled like early spring. A lanky red-headed boy was sitting on one of the benches, bending down and burying his face in both hands.

Something about him and the way he sat on the bench stopped me. He was about 16, 17 years old, and when his face lifted up a bit, I could see freckles on his cheekbones and two soft, light colored eye brows. He was in a blue t-shirt and black shorts. It looked like he had waited too long to get his next haircut, making his head puffier but his hair was exactly the same color as Bryce's.

I was not sure whether he had been crying earlier.

The red-headed boy looked over towards me and his face blushed, like he had been caught doing something that he didn't want people to see. He didn't move but looked at me in bewilderment.

"Have you lost something?" I asked, surprised at how I kept conversing with strangers lately. The impact of a new location, I suppose. A wave of tenderness came to me like drizzling rain. A nostalgic feeling.

The boy shook his head, suddenly wary. It seemed funny that with so many tourists in the zoo today, there was no one else passing by on the elephant path. It was quiet here, as if it had been a world of its own. The boy's expression softened after a short while. Maybe he too, found something familiar in me like what I saw in him. I was glad he didn't run away or take out anything like an emergency whistle. He told me he had started working in the zoo as an intern this year. He was in an all boys' school near the Washington National Cathedral.

“I’m from Hong Kong,” I said, feeling a bit embarrassed all of a sudden to talk about myself so formally. I had never talked in this voice before, as if I had only one emotion left in me. And that was the emotion that drove me to paint every day, sometimes like a mad woman. “I study painting here, and I like to paint animals.”

“That sounds pretty cool. What kind of painting do you do, oil, watercolor?”

“Gouache, ink, oil too. All kinds,” I said.

“I went to Japan with my parents when I was a kid, but I don’t remember much. I would like to visit Asia again, maybe Hong Kong some time.”

I found it amusing that this seemed to be exactly the same thing everybody said when I introduced myself.

“Well, I’m here to attend Bao Bao’s second birthday.”

“Bao Bao?” The red-headed boy looked like he didn’t know what I was talking about.

“Never mind,” I said, not wanting to focus too much on my own stories. “What’s it like working in the zoo?”

“I’m doing okay,” the boy looked at his hands. “I get to watch cool operations in the lab. But Kumari is getting worse today. She has had a fever for days and her tongue has turned all purple. I don’t think I can work in the lab anymore.”

“Who is Kumari?” It occurred to me that maybe he was indeed crying before I walked over.

“Oh, I forgot that you don’t know much about the zoo.” He said, “Kumari is an elephant calf only 16 months old. She’s the best. Everybody loves her. But it seems like she’s going to die soon, and the veterinarians can’t do anything about it.”

I said I was sorry to hear that, but sometimes things like that happen. No matter how much you love them.

“Well, it’s really mysterious. The vets didn’t find any cause of the disease. But I know that Kumari is tired, and she wants to lie down. Her mother Shanthi wouldn’t let her because Kumari was new to the herd and she was afraid that other elephants would not accept her.”

“But she should lie down and take a rest if she’s really tired.” I said.

“I’m afraid we are going to lose her,” his voice stayed calm, but there was a heavy weight in the air when he spoke. And then, without warning, I saw tears trailing down his cheeks, despite his great efforts.

I didn’t know how to say something nice to make him feel better. But I knew that he would like me to listen and just stay around. I also felt glad for him that he was able to cry, to cry in front of me. I had a feeling that this didn’t happen to him very often. Finally I put a hand on his arm, when he wiped his eyes with the back of his hands. I asked, “Do you want me to give you a hug?”

The red-headed boy looked embarrassed at first, but he slowly stood up and I hugged him. We stood in the middle of the elephant path, still with no tourists walking by. How long had it been since I had hugged a boy that age? I drew him as close as I could. The moment I asked the question, I realized that he had been waiting here for me for a long time, and that I was the only one to embrace him. It wouldn’t happen if anyone else was here, I thought. The conversation, the tears and the bench wouldn’t exist otherwise. He was simply waiting for me, not just any stranger who chanced on the trail. And how about that? Isn’t that something that makes one homesick? The boy broke into an aching sob again, but just for a moment. His nails pressed on

my shoulders tightly. I felt tears coming to my eyes as well, but I had no choice but to turn my chin up a little.

Even though he was almost 10 years younger than me, the boy was still taller. His neck carried a faint scent of body soap. I patted his back and felt that his body started to turn quite stiff. With his face blushing again, the boy suddenly stepped back and told me he had to return to work soon. His blue eyes reminded me of the ocean in Hong Kong, the shimmering, endless blue that Bryce and I loved every time we stood on the lookout of a hiking trail.

“Good luck with your work,” I said. “Hope Kumari will get well soon.”

He waved goodbye and disappeared at the end of the elephant path, almost running. It took me a while to find the way back to Mei Xiang and the birthday party.

“You finally came.” Mei Xiang spotted me in the crowd. Her belly looked less round than before. It never occurred to me before that she was pregnant. But now I realized how blind I had been, even when I was drawing her. Her eyes had sunken and she seemed to be having a hard time balancing herself.

The party had already started and every camera was capturing how Bao Bao relished her specially made birthday cake with frozen apple juice and beet juice. I noticed that on the top of the cake, a big number “2” had been knocked down when Bao Bao climbed all over it and made nibbling noises.

A few school girls were standing next to me, holding their phones to take photos. “Awww she is just so cute.” “Look at her eating that cake!” “I want a pet panda,” one of them claimed with giggles.

They didn’t even notice that Mei Xiang was talking to me in English.

I stepped aside and lowered my voice, “I wanted to come. Hope you are feeling okay these days, with your new condition of course. Why didn’t you tell me? Where are the twins?”

“I still remember the Zhuazhou ceremony that they had for her a year ago.” Mei Xiang didn’t sound keen on answering me right way. Her mind seemed to be floating elsewhere. “There were three posters for her to choose, as a prediction of the future: longevity, good health and fertility. Bao Bao picked the poster with peaches which symbolized longevity. The ceremony lasted until early afternoon. All the guests had dandan noodles from China...”

The circles of birthday party visitors started to retreat. Mei Xiang still sounded like she was in a dream from a year ago, with a much more sentimental voice than her usual sassy self. But this didn’t last very long.

“In case you are wondering,” she continued, “I haven’t forgotten about our deal. Maybe not today, but someday you will have to help my daughter leave the zoo. Do you know that she’s already a teenager now? And him too, you have to help,” she rubbed the black coin-sized marking on her belly.

“Him?”

“The younger one is a stillborn.” She said, looking aside. I couldn’t see any expression on her face. “This always happens. Not all of them could survive in this habitat. But I’m okay.

I just want Bao Bao and her brother to have a chance to live a better life. They took him for an examination this morning when I left to eat some sugarcane. I hadn't eaten for two days."

"I'm sorry." I stood near Mei Xiang for a long time that day, thinking about how small my power was, and how big it could be. I wish I had taken the painting of her and the Taft Bridge with me, but at the same time, I wasn't sure if that would make her sad now. I wanted to hold her hands but the glass stood in between us. Then I remembered something I wanted to ask her.

"Do you know anything about Kumari, the baby elephant?"

Mei Xiang thought about that for a while. "I don't really know why you are asking me this – of course I remember things about Kumari – I haven't met any elephant calves here. But the caretakers always mentioned this one little elephant girl who had died young. When was that? I wasn't even born at that time, must be like 20 years ago. They said that all the young interns working with the pathologist cried their eyes out. Kumari...I thought it was an Indian name. Am I right?"

"I guess so." I could see that Mei Xiang's black eyes were trying to read my mind. The red-headed boy running and disappearing at the end of the elephant path. I wondered whether those vets would do an autopsy on Kumari. "Yes," I said, "it could be an Indian name."

Walking back to my place from the zoo, I went to a grocery store in Adams Morgan and turned back on Calvert Street. From the Duke Ellington Bridge, I could get a full view of the Taft Bridge that I walked on every morning, with the park in the background that had only just started to change into fall colors. It seemed that no matter how many times I walked past the Taft Bridge, I could only get a full picture of it when I was no longer passing by. I could see the lion

statues, the eagles spreading wings on lampposts, and the traffic bustling from Kalorama to Woodley Park. The former Chinese embassy seemed to be a big construction site ever since I had arrived. Bryce once told me he grew up seeing all the Chinese staff there doing exercises together every morning. The embassy had moved later to a more discrete location after too frequent political protests. I teased him that he had established a fond relationship with China ever since he was a kid.

I looked at the clouds turning colors over the bridge. They were never the same, changing from minute to minute. Why was I so unsure about being here? Why did I choose to make this journey alone? Why was I so afraid of not talking to Bryce every day? He never said anything unsupportive, but was he only tolerating it as a temporary break from “real life”? But I could feel this becoming my reality, when walking over the Duke Ellington Bridge. I could feel that one day when the strangeness of this new city turned familiar, I would be as reluctant to leave as I was in the first few weeks to embrace it.

I thought again about Mei Xiang’s question the first day she started a conversation with me: “But who still wants to see a painting when everybody else just takes pictures with their iPhones?” Maybe there are things that have to be painted. That’s the only way, I thought. Things that my phone couldn’t register, or could no longer register. Maybe what had driven me to come here all this way was right in my hands. Maybe tomorrow I would figure out how to help Mei Xiang and tell Bryce all about her. Maybe he would understand and maybe he wouldn’t. And I had to deal with a future with or without that understanding. But it was worth the travel, I thought. When winter came, maybe we could find a time to see each other during the holiday season.

I realized that for the first time since I had come to DC, I hadn't logged on to Skype for the entire day. And tonight, I have another project. I want to send something to Bryce, now in a deep dream ahead of time. It might contain everything I wanted to say to him.

Tonight I want to draw him a picture of Kumari.

EARLY JUNE BEFORE THE MILLENNIUM

by

Gu Qian

It was in early June, 1999 when everyone was talking about the bombing of China's embassy in Belgrade. We saw angry commentators dominating the news every day since May when the event had taken place.

“It was a deliberate and barbaric attack,” most of the news reporters concluded, disregarding US President Bill Clinton and the Defense Secretary's remarks that the NATO plane “bombed the wrong target because of an outdated map.” “It was a lie. The US was afraid that we would help Milosevic develop something against their missiles,” some teachers in my high school informed us. We often discussed what patriotism meant and how we should be angry with our imperialist enemies. The terms teachers used, such as “imperialist,” sounded outdated and foreign to me. But they also showed news clips of bodies covered with white cloth and encouraged us to make donations to those who had lost their family members in the terrible incident.

That was my birth city Shanghai, a place which I later spent a lot of effort to leave behind. But from time to time, I tell my friends in Hong Kong about the old tree-lined streets with

venders selling rice pancakes and spring onion omelets, the bell-ringing bicycles carrying children in the front, the colonial architecture along the Bund and the deserted theatres which were the relics of the city's golden age in the 1930s. For many years I had thought the baguette and eclair were native to Shanghainese bakeries. I had found it strange that despite all of the classic Chinese poetry and novels I had read in my dad's library, people used a modern language that was so coarse and aggressive. It was my birth city, after all, I had been told, no matter whether I hated it or not. My dad was a Confucianism scholar but his work wasn't much discussed, because his philosophy was no longer the center of our culture. He said that the Confucian *Li* or decorum or good form was once considered degenerative during the Cultural Revolution. And now it was hard to simply bring things back.

But at that time, I didn't really care about politics and wasn't too excited about the embassy bombing discussion. I had just turned 15 and was one of only ten girls who got into the Advanced Science Class in my boarding school after several rounds of brutal exams. We had the best teachers in the district, especially our class teacher Ms. Zhu who had won many education awards, and physics teacher Mr. Yang who had taught in a university. We would represent our school to compete in International Math or Physics Olympiads with students from all over the world. There were only ten boarding schools in Shanghai, one school in each district, and there was only one Advanced Science Class in each grade of my school. I had always been a diligent student, not questioning at all whether these studies would be of much practical use in the future. It would be just a matter of time before I applied to one of the best universities in China, maybe post-handover Hong Kong, or otherwise, as my dad would say, "we can also send you overseas for a better education." What was happening in a faraway, unsettled place in Eastern Europe wasn't really my concern.

But those young boys in my class talked about the attack every day and it annoyed me. They had finally stopped hiding my pencil box or messing with the tea in my Thermos. Instead, they had joined in the overwhelming anti-US sentiment of the previous month. They stopped going to KFC, which was considered a cool hang-out place when the chain first opened in China, and tried to poke a hole in our only foreign teacher's bicycle tire so he would fall and hit his big Clinton-like nose. Poor music teacher Mr. Eriksson. He was from Sweden and married to a local woman. His Chinese was almost flawless, and he had nothing to do with the US or NATO.

I always brought out a Haruki Murakami book whenever I was surrounded by classmates during lunch or exercise breaks. More and more world literature had been translated into Chinese over the past two decades, although later I learned that some was censored and edited in translation. But even with the more "light-hearted" fiction that was introduced, I started to think that those young people living in "imperialist" Asian countries were having a lot of fun. Whimsical characters meeting in Tokyo jazz bars or sunbathing in their backyard sounded more interesting than the tedious embassy attack debate. Besides, my dad said the whole thing was just a trick played by the Chinese government and everybody had been fooled.

What did he mean by that?

I couldn't possibly understand every nuance behind those words but I wished to understand further. My dad was in Germany that year as a visiting fellow and it was the first time he had lived abroad for so long. I grew quiet at home. I usually didn't have much to talk about with my mom. She was busy working for her promotion as the head pharmacist of the district hospital at that time.

One day in late May, when Dad was calling my mom and me, he mentioned an hour-long video he had seen with some Chinese professors at a gathering. It was about an incident that had happened ten years earlier in Beijing, where university students were protesting in Tiananmen Square. I didn't recall any mention of that in my contemporary history textbook nor did the former General Secretary's name Zhao Ziyang ring a bell. He must not have been such an important leader in our history, I guessed.

But I remembered that my dad was enthusiastic that night, telling my mom that this was the first time he had seen a video showing everything. He said he was shocked after watching the video even though he had a vague idea of what had happened at that time. "Some students offered soldiers food and shelter, and tried to talk them into joining the cause when the troops first entered into the city. All of them...just young kids." His voice sometimes lagged through the international call, and would stop for a second once hearing her reply. My mom was quiet most of the time and reminded him not to talk too much over the phone. "You never know who's listening," she said.

My dad said something about her being silly and that the Cultural Revolution was long behind us. However, I noticed that he had lowered the volume to make my mom more comfortable. My mom would never say anything negative about the party and would always become nervous when someone did.

He continued. "Why do you think the government made such a big deal about the bombing of our embassy in Yugoslavia? Not that this isn't newsworthy, but it seems that they put too much emphasis on it. It is all about playing a trick at a critical time to distract people's attention, since it is the 10th anniversary of that event."

“What event?” I asked. I was using the phone in my own room so we could all talk together. My curiosity grew. As long as I could remember, my parents had seldom discussed things other than quotidian details or my school performance. They had a hard time during the Cultural Revolution since both of their parents were “bourgeois” who had worked for the Kuomintang, but they didn’t talk much about it. All I knew at that age was that they had wasted many years working in steel factories or the countryside before they could go back to universities in their thirties. We had watched some TV shows about the period when intellectuals from the city were learning to do all sorts of manual labor and farm work – they were usually comical or heartwarming. People fell in love and found friends during hardship, which my parents joked at times was too idealized. But they enjoyed these idealized shows to a certain extent and followed them religiously for fifty episodes. Those shows made them feel that their youth was not entirely regrettable.

Remembering that I was on the line as well, my dad brought up his recent trip to Switzerland.

“I got you some chocolates and your mom a new watch,” he said, “The watch is square shaped and quite elegant. The Swiss really have amazing technology. Old Wang is coming back to Shanghai this month, and I will ask him to bring the gifts to you. He also bought one for his wife.”

My mom must have been happy and relieved. I didn’t pay attention to the rest of the conversation, as she talked about an upcoming school reunion and so and so who had done extremely well. She said she could wear the watch. I remembered that in my childhood, my parents had watches with “Shanghai” as a brand name, the only brand people had at that time. But now things were different. Putting down my phone, I couldn’t concentrate on the mock

exams I was doing. I felt that I was close to understanding something very important, something that had changed my parents' lives, and something in their ambivalence made me anxious.

The only person who didn't join those patriotic narratives at school was my physics teacher Mr. Yang.

He was very tall and fit, and you could easily mistake him for a P.E. teacher. In his mid-thirties, he was also younger than most of the other teachers in my high school. He spoke Mandarin instead of Shanghainese, and I found his deep voice magnetic. I had heard that before coming to our school, he was a lecturer in a university in Beijing. The girls in my class liked to call him by the nickname "college professor" and thought he was not good at disciplining us like other teachers. He didn't seem to talk much with Ms. Zhu and Mr. Yu sitting next to him when I went to their office to hand in homework. And I had never seen him having lunch with other teachers in the canteen. He was often by himself. Maybe he just couldn't fit in an office filled with Shanghainese speakers. Maybe he was just not interested in discussing the recent news.

It was fall of my freshman year when he first became my teacher. Sometimes I saw him walking the same way I came to school on Monday mornings, and I would follow him. He always wore a beige trench coat and walked fast. His footsteps were young and a bit reckless, not fully aware of the traffic in a city where the red and green lights didn't make much difference for drivers. Strangely, I even felt protective for Mr. Yang. A few times I caught a glimpse of him from my car window, and I would ask my mom to let me get off earlier just to walk behind him. Why didn't he ever take a bus or drive? Did he live near our school way out in the suburbs?

I also discovered that there were more and more fancy cars waiting outside our school on Friday afternoons. Lots of my classmates' parents had ventured into the stock market or had

started lucrative small businesses since we had become teenagers. In our classroom essays, some people read stories about their summer trips to Venice or Sydney. My parents were barely keeping up with the average among my peers' in this school and they were not keen on international travel, but like others, we had also moved a few times, each time ending up in a bigger place. The world had changed since I was a child, and I finally grasped that truth while in high school. I had heard that you could pay to get into our school now, to help expand our new dorms and campus, which gutted me after all the hard exams I had studied for. No wonder there were so many rich kids around and no wonder each of our classrooms had a brand new TV.

One of my friends, Lily, always wore amazing clothes. My parents would take me on shopping sprees too, but she always had the latest Western brands. Her dad was a top executive in a Chinese bank. She once told me of a scandal involving one of our classmates who was caught calling on a prostitute, but his family managed to cover it up. "His dad is an old business acquaintance of my dad, and I just overheard them talking about it," she said.

Things like that disgusted me. Sometimes I wondered why Mr. Yang left his university job in Beijing and came to teach this bunch of spoiled kids here. I'd heard that he didn't have a family in Shanghai.

"You know, Mr. Yang was married once." Lily told me one day while we were walking down the corridor together and saw Mr. Yang passing by with an armful of books. "I know everything," she said proudly, brushing her hair back from her forehead.

I could tell that Lily adored him too.

She greeted Mr. Yang and he stopped in front of us. “Mr. Yang, I want to apologize for being sick last week. Could I do a make-up test or take it home as an exercise?” She tried to bargain like this with every teacher. But I felt that Mr. Yang would probably let her get her way.

“Alright. You may come to my office this afternoon and take the paper home.” He turned to me and smiled. I could feel his body heat touching the cold December air. Did he ever notice that I was following him? I had to lower my face to avoid his eyes. “How is your reading going?” He asked. “I see you reading on the bench outside of the canteen, a different book every time. But I wouldn’t stay out too long. You might catch a cold.” He looked back at Lily, “And you. You should drink a lot of warm water.” He said to Lily, who was shrugging and making a face with her stuck-out tongue.

After he left, Lily commented on how handsome “college professor” was for quite a while. “And he’s worried about me!” I didn’t know how to respond except nodding from time to time. When you were into someone, you would read every message as an encouragement. It was the same for me. Maybe it was not the best idea to read outside in the open now, I thought. I managed to brush the scene out of my mind for an entire day. But I saved Mr. Yang’s words, as if keeping a secret between us, even though they were just a single sentence. I played his words in my mind over and over again when I was alone in my dorm bed, when the lights were off at 10pm and the girls’ giggles had finally waned.

My physics grades were getting worse. I could easily earn high marks in math or English, but this new subject had become a headache. I wondered whether this was because Mr. Yang was teaching me. In class, he did try to make obscure concepts simpler, and took the time to explain all our earlier homework exercises, but my marks still plunged. It seemed impossible to take in anything he was saying. Sometimes I started writing paragraphs of a story in the physics class, so

that I didn't have to look at him directly. But sometimes I just didn't realize that class time was passing by so quickly, and regretted not seeing him enough when the bell rang. By the end of the fall semester, I was barely passing, and I worried that I would do much worse in the spring.

My class teacher Ms. Zhu was anxious that this would affect my place in the entire cohort, and I might be kicked out of the Advanced Science Class next year. In her conversation with Mr. Yang, he assured her that he wouldn't mind tutoring me during the winter holidays. My class teacher also mentioned Lily and another student, Stephanie, who were also doing poorly. Mr. Yang said tutoring one wouldn't be much different from tutoring three.

Winter vacation soon arrived. We spent days shivering inside Mr. Yang's small apartment without heating. Stephanie kept sneezing all the time, wearing only a thin designer blouse after she took off her fleece jacket, not prepared for an unheated room. Mr. Yang told the three of us that one of his students' family in another class was his landlord. I noticed that instead of a normal wardrobe, he used something like an instant plastic box with a zip in the middle to store his clothes. His apartment was quite humble. Lily and Stephanie seemed surprised by this as well.

At break time, Mr. Yang would make us dumplings. We ate and drank the hot soup as our eyes wandered around. We asked him inappropriate questions, such as, how much do you earn at our school, why were you divorced, and do you find it awful not speaking Shanghainese. He answered these questions with patience and an art of omission. But interest persisted about his marriage for only one year in his twenties. He finally said something about it.

“It must have been 10 years ago. My ex-wife's family was one of those high ranking officials in Beijing. Well, my advice is not to marry one from that group.” He almost teased himself.

“Why?” Lily asked. I imagined that some of the uncles she had to visit on Chinese New Year with her family might not be too far away from the group Mr. Yang had just mentioned. He looked a bit embarrassed, not expecting her forwardness.

“She had a dozen lovers. I only found out after we got married.”

“Wow.” Lily was surprisingly convinced by the answer, nodding with a smile. “I know most officials send their kids abroad now. They speak English like Americans, and live a life like them. Decadent, I mean.”

Stephanie also brought up a story from her older brother who studied in a university in Canada. Despite the one-child policy, her family somehow managed to have two kids. “My brother had a classmate whose dad was a provincial governor. And the classmate was invited to some school gala every year, until his dad lost his power a year ago. Nobody cared to invite him ever since. Those foreigners were just as snobbish.”

“Maybe the trend would stop now,” Lily said, “after the bombing.”

“I would never go to America,” Stephanie bobbed her head in agreement, not knowing then that she was one of the first of my classmates to move abroad with her family, to Los Angeles.

I felt that Mr. Yang was looking at me the whole time, as I stayed silent during this round of discussion. It was in silence, I later learned from him, that he believed that we shared an understanding. An understanding of the matter’s complication that was beyond my formal education.

But I wasn’t really thinking too much about the corrupt officials and their opulent children abroad. I wondered whether Mr. Yang had any girlfriends over these years, but didn’t want to

ask in front of the other two girls. I found him a bit too honest with us about his private life, unlike any teacher I knew. I couldn't believe the way he confided in us, as if we were his only friends. Mr. Yang would sometimes say I was the brightest among us three, and this made Lily and Stephanie quite hostile to me. He shouldn't have expressed that in public, I thought. Part of him still acted like the juvenile boys I knew.

My marks were only slightly improved, but I got along with Mr. Yang quite well. Knowing that he also liked to read and had a decent knowledge of literature, I would show him some novels in progress that I was writing. Of course, I never got beyond chapter three of all those novels. Some of the stories were about a schoolgirl's dreams towards her teacher, and now I realize that I was incredibly bold at that time. But a girl of 15 is not afraid of losing anything.

Our story would have been different if it were not for what happened one day in early June, 1999. A whole new century was waiting around the corner. Was there a rumor saying that the world would end in 2000, hit by a shooting star or something? I dwelled on a certain romantic self-pity, which a teenage girl could easily entertain. If that happened, I thought, I wouldn't even live till adulthood. I would die with my young hair and skin and never get a chance to be loved by someone.

On that day, Mr. Yang came to class as usual, but I noticed that he was wearing all white. A white shirt is common, but I considered it a bit unusual for guys to wear white pants, unless it was for mourning. But who was he mourning for? He had a stern look in his eyes since the start of the class. Even the most talkative boys seemed to pick up on the mood and didn't make much noise. I wasn't paying attention to the content, sensing that something was wrong in his voice. I tried to demonstrate a question mark in my looks towards him, but he didn't seem to notice.

Ten minutes had passed, and Mr. Yang suddenly excused himself to the whole class and said that he couldn't carry on today. Because it was a special day for him, I remember him explaining to the confused classroom. Some good people he knew had died this day 10 years ago, he added. His posture turned stiff in order to keep himself from losing control. It seemed that this 37 year old man was about to burst into tears. I was surprised that he acted so sentimental and didn't try to hide anything.

He left the students in shock and one of the girls had to call our class teacher Ms. Zhu to manage the situation. We had the rest of the class for self-studying. I heard later on that Mr. Yang was accused by the head master for his 'irresponsibility' in the classroom and got some kind of punishment in his paycheck. He took sick leave and wasn't in class for a week. We had an older and more experienced teacher to step in, but I didn't like it every time he used Shanghainese to express physics terminologies.

On the fourth day of Mr. Yang's absence, I went to his small 9th floor walk-up apartment. I bought a plant from the flower shop and thought he would like it. My heart pounded when I knocked on the door, realizing that this was the first time I had come to his place alone, without a tutoring appointment or any reason to speak of. I knocked on the door three times. And there was no answer at first. Anger and humiliation came to me at the same time. I didn't really know why I was so disappointed. I felt that people in the building were looking and laughing at me, although there was nobody in sight. I was about to turn around, but then I heard the lock click. Even at that moment, half of me still feared that Mr. Yang would just send me home the moment he saw me or ask me to visit at another scheduled time. But another half believed, stubbornly, despite all insecurity, that he would take me in as a friend.

Mr. Yang seemed surprised when he opened the door. He invited me in. He didn't look sick at all.

“So you've been hiding here,” I said with the opening line I had rehearsed on the way to his apartment, and looking at him, noticing that he was wearing much more casual clothing than usual, an old long-sleeve t-shirt and faded jeans. The apartment was not as tidy as when we had come for tutoring classes. It smelt cold and damp, and had a strange fragrance. I searched for wine bottles but didn't find any. “What happened?”

He said something else about the older substitute teacher and asked me about my classes. He said I was too young to understand those things.

But I was not interested in how the school system worked. “I've heard there was a protest organized by university faculty and students 10 years ago, but it didn't end up well. What exactly happened? Was that why you left Beijing?”

“I shouldn't have canceled class like that.” He simply said. He wasn't too shocked to hear the questions from me, though. Or maybe he wasn't really listening to what I was saying, suddenly having this girl walking into the part of his apartment that nobody other than himself had occupied. But it didn't occur to me at that time how far I had walked into his life, the vulnerability of people as people despite their social roles, and the implication of my visit to someone who had paid special attention to me.

I thought about what my dad had said over the phone regarding the incident. It was all a hazy picture for me but he must have seen something horrible for a grown man like him to have such a reaction in class. I told him I understood, even though I was not sure what I knew. Maybe leaving Beijing had been a good decision for him.

Mr. Yang came over and had me in his arms. “You are like a little sweetheart to me,” he said in a low voice. He started to kiss me and placed his tongue inside of my parted lips. It was the first time I had ever kissed someone, and it was not what I had in mind. More salacious and more possessing. His tongue moved slowly over my lips and I felt a bit sick.

What happened later didn't seem to register for a few days. I felt that I couldn't close my legs together while walking afterwards. He put me on his single bed and took off my uniform. He entered my body while I still had my socks on, and moved and shook on top of me. I didn't bleed and he said it was normal for girls nowadays who played so much sports at school. He said he had wanted me ever since he first saw me in class, and I had given him the hint that it was okay too. He said we were not living within a good system, and he didn't care too much about the age difference.

I was still in pain and felt that I was not in love with him anymore.

That evening, I looked into the mirror for a long time, worrying that my eyebrows would betray my new physical experience. Girls at school always said that a non-virgin would stop frowning and their eyebrows would grow further apart as time went by. “Has something to do with spreading your legs,” said the all-knowing Lily. She had once pointed out to me a really pretty girl a year older than us, who was in the school dancing team and obviously started to have a pair of wider apart eyebrows after dating one of her classmates. Lily said that the whole school knew what had happened to her. The boy that the pretty girl was seeing went around and told his friends.

But I was mostly afraid that my mom was going to see it and report to my dad, who was still living in Germany. I wished I could talk to one of them, maybe about some other things. Something irrelevant. Just a long, warm talk.

But when the weekend arrived, I couldn't help avoiding eye contact with my mom at our dinner table. I searched for excuses that allowed me not to come back home the following weekend. And soon, to both my relief and disappointment, I realized that my mom hadn't noticed anything. Since becoming the head pharmacist, she had more conferences and drug company presentations to go to. Once she said that it was good that my dad was abroad for the past year so that she could finally concentrate on her work. Sometimes we didn't talk to him for two entire weeks. And the topic of 1989 was never brought up again.

Mr. Yang came back to class later, and he didn't act any differently towards me in front of the other students. He even called my name once for a question, a thing that an adult was capable of doing that comforted me and frightened me at the same time. But sometimes, I thought I caught a look from him while he was talking, and there was something desperate in it. I would turn my head away, pretending to look outside of the window. Our first night was still vivid in my mind. I couldn't understand my own feelings. What was he trying to do with that act? What was he trying to say to me? Now that we were that intimate, I wondered if I had become legitimate enough to know more about the world, about him. I wasn't old enough to give a name to that passion, but I found myself not able to turn him down when he wanted to see me again.

"I think your body should be able to climax soon," he said after doing the same thing over again the second time, on his bed, while I had still hoped that our meetings would turn out to be different. Is that all he saw and wanted from me? But I didn't know what exactly I wanted, either. I breathed on his chest when his hands tested me. On his chest, my hair was no longer a

ponytail that we were required to either cut short or tie up at school. “A lot of women don’t really know that pleasure. But I’m sure it will come soon for you.”

We had a few more dates in his apartment, always after school. And we never walked together. Sometimes he liked me to sit on his lap and told me stories about Beijing, especially how the city looked after the snow, when the streets were empty and the Forbidden City and Summer Palace resembled their quiet beauty from a hundred years ago. He told me how his generation was idealistic and innocent, and different from mine. “Maybe too innocent,” he said, “people don’t care about those things any more, as long as business goes well. And your parents have the money to send you abroad, so you don’t have to worry.” I concluded that he must have been involved in the student movement at that time. I thought it was quite foolish to live in a utopia like that without recognizing the waves of time, pushing us forward. Sometimes I didn’t respond.

I learned that he had been born in Henan Province towards the end of the Great Famine in the early 1960s, and soon orphaned. He was adopted by a relative in Beijing. I learned that he believed the Great Famine wasn’t a “natural disaster” at all as in our textbook, but the result of Mao’s ill-judged Great Leap Forward, when all the private farmers had to abandon their farmland to produce steel.

I learned that he had always liked classic Chinese poetry and told me that now you could only find that kind of aesthetic in Japan. “Whether it’s haiku, flower arrangement or social structure,” he said, “all the things we threw away over the past hundred years.” Mr. Yang had several copies of Yukio Mishima’s translated novels on his bookshelf, besides our textbooks and prep guides. He said the author had committed suicide for something he had believed in. Mishima used his suicide to advocate old values, as he didn’t want to see Japan being

westernized. Mr. Yang said that I had reminded him of Mishima's heroines from a much more conservative time: veiled with such reticence, a fire that doesn't know its name.

I didn't know that what we were doing was so conservative, though. In the Confucius doctrine, the only emotion a student should have for her teacher is respect. She shall respect him all her life, even though she is his student for just a day. I wasn't really torn by this, I told Mr. Yang, maybe because our culture didn't have a center anymore and it did affect us. We just had to admit that we had also thrown some old tradition away.

And one night, the climax came. It came so unexpectedly that my body was not mine anymore. I realized that I had only known devotion of the mind before. But after all, the devotion of the body was not separated, or even different, from the mind. I fell asleep on his shoulder afterwards, ashamed when I woke up that I didn't even know when I had lost consciousness.

We made love a lot, and he always complimented my body, even the rubble scarred knee I had hurt in a P.E. class. He ran his fingers through my scars and kissed them. He told me he kept working out so that he had the physique of a young man. I didn't really care. He bent me over into different positions, and sometimes I stayed so late that he had to call a taxi to take me back to the dorm before curfew.

Lily and I stopped being friends after she guessed about me and Mr. Yang. One day, I saw her crying in the classroom, burying her head in both arms. For some reason, I didn't have the courage to ask her what was wrong. But I had an intuition that something was finally brought to the foreground, and it would eventually unravel our lives. Some guys gathered around Lily but she refused to lift up her face. I looked at her from the back row for the whole morning, until I

had to leave for lunch. Stephanie came to me later after the break, frowning, and told me that Lily had found out that I “stole a guy from her.”

“She called you some of the worst names.” Stephanie said. “But she didn’t want to tell me who the guy is. I guess you two have some friends outside of the school. Is that right? I’ve heard you always go out after class these days.” Although Stephanie spent the whole winter tutoring session with us, she was a bit slow. But it wouldn’t take long for her to figure it out.

I came to Mr. Yang’s place that evening and told him about Lily. I guessed that his landlord’s family had seen me and the student from another class told Lily. It was not surprising that Lily would have her sources. Mr. Yang seemed frightened.

“Does anyone else know about us?”

“Lily didn’t say your name.” I said.

He must have thought we were being very wrong. I realized that he was much more afraid of being discovered than I was. I didn’t remember why I liked him in the first place.

“If the school finds out, I can go to jail for this,” he said. What a cowardly remark!

“Maybe you should marry me if everyone finds out.” I meant this as revenge, against his cowardliness, but regretted it the moment words escaped from my mouth.

“Nonsense.” He said quickly. And then, after a few seconds, “It’s not possible.”

He came to take my clothes off and we didn’t say much to each other that night. I was quiet, all the way till the moment I left his apartment. A few days later, he asked me to pee on a stick to make sure that I was not pregnant given that he had been doing the calculations of my period.

I grew tired of those sex positions, and the small empty room. When I entered the second year of high school, I told my parents that I wanted to switch to studying art instead of science in college, so I could leave the Advanced Science Class and add history as my minor. I wasn't interested in history in particular, especially the kind of history that was taught in my school, but I knew that this was Lily's least favorite subject.

My mom wasn't that accommodating at first. "You should think it over. People out there all want to be in the Science Class. Science graduates from university find jobs more easily. Remember how hard you had to study to get in?"

"Doesn't mean it's not a mistake," I argued, "that you have always been there. When you were a teenager, you were a Red Guard and thought it was pretty cool. You would just do anything that everyone else was doing!"

It was the first time my mom had slapped me on the face.

We both cried that night, thinking that if my dad were here, none of this would have happened. None of this, I thought about Mr. Yang, who had put such a stain on my life, and now had broken my heart. My mom hugged me, thinking I was just regretting being so disrespectful. Only years later, I learned that I really shouldn't have said that. One of my mom's greatest regrets in life was joining the Red Guard in the Cultural Revolution, even turning her own father in once and telling people he used to be a member of the Kuomintang. As a result, my grandpa had been forced to clean toilets for weeks; and only then had my mom realized what she had done.

A few days later, my mom and I had a phone conversation with my dad and then agreed on the transition. Dropping physics and adding history, my overall marks started to soar surprisingly

and I even got into the top ten in our 400 student cohort within no time. I told Mr. Yang that it was partly for us as well, so he wouldn't get distracted in class again, and nobody would suspect us.

But I went to his place less and less. In my new class, I made friends with a few of the athletes, and we played volleyball together. I grew close to one of them, who wore glasses and seemed more like a gentleman than his peers. Jeremy had even read Murakami books.

One day Jeremy and I went to a coffee shop in the French Concession district together, and did some shopping at record stores. When heading back, he picked up my hand and we walked holding hands together for many blocks. His palm got wet, and he kept quiet the entire time. The late autumn day was beautiful, and we stepped on the fallen phoenix tree leaves, making pleasant crackling sounds.

At one crossroad, we ran into Lily. She was chatting with a group of university-looking boys and girls in front of a convenience store, cigarette in one hand. Feeling embarrassed, I let go of my athlete friend's hand instantly when she walked across the street to me.

"Are you guys friends now?" She sounded shocked. She stared at me for a while, which made me uncomfortable. This was the first time that she talked to me again since the day she had cried in the classroom. She sized Jeremy up. "What about Mr. Yang then?"

It was expected. But I got angry that she brought him up in front of my new friend.

"Stop it. This has nothing to do with Mr. Yang." I must have raised my voice since Jeremy looked at me in bewilderment.

Lily turned to him. "Do you know that your girlfriend is sleeping with our physics teacher?"

I don't remember how I handled this after so many years. Maybe I don't want to remember. Jeremy and I didn't end up becoming a couple. He was a nice guy, quite a looker and not a stereotypical shallow athlete. But maybe something left a shadow in both our minds so we didn't move our relationship forward. What I could only remember was that he didn't even question me; instead, he let my hand go quietly when I pulled it away in front of Lily. But that was probably what any boy that age would do. At least, he never said anything bad about me among his friends.

A few days after meeting Lily on the street, I came to Mr. Yang's place one evening. He looked happy to see me and tried to make love to me again. But I had my own agenda in mind.

"I can't come here anymore," I said, avoiding his touches and walking straight into the room, like what I did the time when I came with the plant in early June. We had been seeing each other secretly in this room for over half a year now. He leaned his back on the desk in front of me. "Soon it will be my final year in high school and I need to concentrate on my studies." I didn't expect to make this lame excuse. But I continued, "You said before that we didn't have a future anyway. We are not going to marry or anything."

"I think I always knew that this day would come." He said, looking down at his own palms, as if counting the crossing lines. "You have all of your twenties in front of you, and I'm almost forty. There's no reason for me to keep you here, really."

I waited but he didn't say anything else.

He accepted the breakup calmly, making my hardened heart ache again. For all the time I was pretending to act cool, I was only 16 years old, knowing little about matters of the heart. I didn't know that I was cruel, maybe mostly to myself, for walking away from that small, rented

apartment near my boarding school, until I came to know later in life how helpless it could be to be left behind. I hated that he loved me with all those physical attachments, the way he loved an adult woman, while deep inside, I only allowed to be loved as a little girl.

Three weeks later after the breakup, I called Mr. Yang from a phone booth. I had been avoiding places in school where I might meet him. Only once I had seen him from faraway in an assembly event, talking to the foreigner, music teacher Mr. Eriksson, and I couldn't tell whether he was sad or not. I wandered on the streets for half an hour after school that night, feeling afraid that I could end up in front of Mr. Yang's door again. What was I looking for in him? I couldn't admit it. I had just made up my mind a few days ago to apply to universities in Hong Kong. I decided to go far away from my birth city. And finally, I called him.

"How have you been?" Even though it had only been weeks, his voice sounded quite different. "I heard that Ms. Zhu was writing recommendation letters for you and a few others. You never told me."

"I didn't know at that time." I thought he would have heard from me first. But at the same time, I was relieved that I didn't need to bring the news myself.

"So how can I help you?"

I listened to the cars passing by me for a few seconds. The little phone booth stood in the middle of nowhere. And finally I asked, "Can I come over?"

"I don't think that's a good idea." He said it clearly. For a moment I thought he was angry, and he was trying to hurt me, to get revenge. But his voice was calm. "I thought about you all these days, and I couldn't stand it. But, you are right. We shouldn't see each other again. It was not good for us."

My tears fell in that little phone booth, three weeks after breaking up with Mr. Yang myself. I didn't realize that I had made my parting from him that official. I just wanted to say that I was disappointed at the time. That I would not blame him anymore. That I just wished to have different things, the intangible things that were beyond my language at the time. But nothing came out of me except the silent sound of tears.

"I lost my job in Beijing after 89'," he continued, less frigid in his voice. "Two of my students were killed. Two girls, only a few years older than you. I had always encouraged them to be more active. I should have been the one to shield them when it happened, or at least be there with them, since I was the one who planted the idea in their minds. But my wife talked me into giving up on the last few days. And I did. I couldn't stand staying in the university any longer afterwards, nor could I stay in that marriage. But I don't want to lose my job in again. Mr. Eriksson told me of what he has heard lately among the students. Some didn't think he understood Chinese. He was kind to come to warn me of such things."

He said he loved me. I couldn't believe it. Why would he do such things to me then? "Why," I wanted to ask, "did you wait till now to tell me?" But he said he loved me. He said I had my own future and sometimes life was what it was. I didn't know how to respond, not being able to see him ever again. After a while, he hung up.

That was the last time I talked to Mr. Yang.

The world entered the new millennium after all, and the end didn't come. We still had to grow older. Over time, the scar on my knee that I got from my P.E. class started to fade. And you couldn't even tell whether there were still stone pieces engraved in it. I didn't allow myself to be sad. I dived into my studies and got into a good university in Hong Kong. My dad was finally

back and he reassured me that it was okay not to follow the herd when everybody else thought being a science major was more “practical”. I didn’t tell him the real reason why I took the less travelled path. But liberal arts happened to suit me well.

To celebrate my acceptance, we took a short family trip to Kyoto, where I saw the famous *Kinkaku-ji*, the golden temple. At a gift shop, I bought a copy of Mishima’s *The Temple of the Golden Pavilion*, which Mr. Yang had mentioned to me before as his favorite. I spent a month finishing it, and more months thinking about the beautiful things that one had to burn to preserve them. I also read some of my old books over the summer, and realized that I hadn’t understood any of them before.

Then, I left home for Hong Kong and started to speak Cantonese and English more than my native languages. I was still that introverted girl, but in Hong Kong, I made an effort to talk to my classmates instead of reading at lunch time. After college graduation, I became one of those young professionals working and hanging out in the Central business district. Sometimes walking on the overhead bridges between skyscrapers, I looked at all the business women in high heels like me and wondered how long it took for each of them to arrive here, how much they had to leave behind, and how many things we didn’t know were behind those confident strides.

One year in early June, I went to Victoria Park with some friends. Over a hundred thousand people gathered in the city’s annual candlelight vigil. The night was humid, and my friends’ foreheads glowed with the warm candles in their hands. Peacefully, we sat cross-legged on the grass and watched videos about the incident that had happened two decades earlier. I had heard the stories during my years in Hong Kong, but this was the first time I saw tanks rolling on Tiananmen Square, and young soldiers firing at students their own age. Injured civilians were carried on bicycles to hospitals. Ambulance drivers were shot dead. My dad must have watched

something similar when I was 15, I realized. After showing the videos, some former student leaders walked onto the stage and made speeches. Most of them had been foreign citizens for years and couldn't go back to the city where they had left their childhood friends. Most of them still spoke Mandarin, a few with a Beijing accent that I recognized as familiar. I sang the songs with lyrics containing "democracy" and "flowers" with the crowd.

I knew, even at that time, that what Hong Kong had enjoyed would not last forever. The city had become a lonely island with tides slowly invading and eroding its shore. Even before the protest against China's curriculum plans and the "Occupy Central" movement in recent years, there was already discontent against assimilation among natives. People would rather become part of the diaspora, moving to the UK, to Canada, to Australia, to America, and would rather bear all the difficulties of being a minority in another culture, than stay. Once in a while, not very often, when one noticed that I was Shanghai-born, there would be some verbal aggression. But I didn't really mind or want to blame their sense of loss that had turned into a mindless anger. Because I knew that well too, being in a culture and place that were so dear to my heart, but couldn't love anymore. I finally came to understand the mindless anger people had expressed when China's embassy was bombed in Belgrade. With that heartbreaking feeling that I once had for Shanghai, I realized then that Hong Kong had become my home, too.

That night, moving slowly on the crowded streets in Causeway Bay, I thought of Mr. Yang. As I gained more knowledge of politics over the years, I wondered what he had felt on that particular June day, witnessing his students lying cold on the street in Beijing. The brave and foolish students that he couldn't get out of his mind. I wondered whether this had made him the sentimental person that my younger self had started to despise as I got to know him better. I wondered about his loss, which I only came to understand more clearly now, that it was a loss we

shared, even then. I remembered those nights while we were doing the illicit things, twisting our naked bodies into different positions and finding refuge in each other. I regretted that I had never actually loved him, or had never loved enough.

The subway station was always full after the candlelight vigil. Some high school students in uniforms were debating loudly nearby. Slim girls in cheongsams had faces and figures that seemed to be too young for high school.

Feeling nostalgic, I remembered the chilly winters in Shanghai, the month-long news coverage of the embassy bombing, and the morning in early June, 1999 when Mr Yang, wearing all white, refused to teach and stepped out of the classroom, leaving me enchanted with a bittersweet feeling for the first time.

The subway started to move. I searched for those cheongsam girls but realized they hadn't boarded the same train. Still waiting on the platform, they stayed carefully behind the yellow line as the steel behemoth accelerated down the track. I looked outside of the train windows, fixing my eyes briefly on the white knot buttons of their cheongsam uniforms. The overhead speaker announced the next stop in Hong Kong's three standard languages. And soon I couldn't see them anymore.

GIRL IN THE BASEMENT

by

Gu Qian

Alice Hills disliked the girl living in the basement from the very beginning. She wore too much powder, making her face two shades fairer than her legs and the rest of her body. Alice suspected that she might also put on fake eyelashes every day, even when she appeared in her running outfit in front of the house. Maybe this was just an FOB thing - so fresh off the boat, a term she had picked up from school - Alice concluded, given that the new tenant, Yin, had just come to America this summer to be a PhD student in Washington DC. Her parents wanted a steady income from renting out the basement, and a cat sitter for Zoe and Zeke when they went on trips. A single girl like Yin seemed to be the perfect tenant for them; although both Alice and her twin sister Emma didn't think too highly of the new resident in their house.

Alice and Emma were only 13 years old. But the parents had already been thinking about college tuition. In fact, they mentioned this to the new tenant the first day she moved in. It was a humid late August afternoon, and Alice saw her getting out of the taxi with four black suitcases. She put them in front of the garage door, which was going to be her entrance, and came around the house to ring the bell. She seemed to be in her late twenties, or early thirties, probably by definition not a "girl" any more. But she still had bangs on her forehead, which made her adult face look unappealing to Alice. The way she carried herself had a sheepish girlish awkwardness.

There were sweat stains on the back of her t-shirt, and yet she was wearing sandals with heels on a moving day.

From her room on the second floor, Alice could hear her parents greeting the girl and finding the keys for her. “The girls are very shy,” they said. “But you will meet them later. We brought them from Chengdu when they were 1 year old. Do you speak Mandarin or Cantonese? The girls just started their Chinese classes.”

The new tenant, Yin, said that she was from Guangdong Province in China, so she was fluent in both languages. She was a translation major and was mainly translating books from English to Chinese. “I love your house,” she said, with an obvious, almost crude accent, as noted by Alice. Her English was fluent though. “It has a very warm feeling. I’ll be so glad to live here.”

Alice knew that she was exaggerating. Her parents were both busy banking lawyers and didn’t have too much time for decorating the place. The house was old. And their sink was always full with dirty dishes. They had two Guatemalan women coming every Wednesday morning to do the cleaning.

“We have been to Hong Kong once, and loved it very much. Hopefully, we can take the girls to China someday for a visit.” Alice heard her dad saying.

“Please feel free to ask me if they have any homework in the Chinese class,” Yin said. Even though Alice didn’t bother to go downstairs, she imagined that Yin had a smile on her powdered face when she said this.

Alice missed the previous tenant, Kaitlin, who was also a graduate student and always baked brownies for the family. Kaitlin who introduced her to Hunter boots and sushirritos. They biked together along Connecticut Avenue sometimes. Both Kaitlin’s university and the twins’ girls’

school were in Van Ness. But Kaitlin had graduated and moved to Seattle in May. Yin didn't seem to be someone who they could hang out with. Alice wished that her parents would someday regret the decision of renting the place to such a foreigner. Besides, they didn't really need a Chinese tutor. She thought the Chinese classes that her parents enrolled Emma and her in half a year ago were unnecessary and too hard.

Emma came back from her soccer game late in the afternoon on that day. Both girls had their own athletic interests. Emma played soccer and Alice swam. Emma's practices were usually in the afternoons and Alice's early in the mornings. But the twins would always make time to do things together, such as playing tennis or going for a walk in the nearby dog park. They had fights like all teenage girls, but the differences would usually resolve themselves pretty quickly. Alice felt that Emma was the only person in the world that she could talk about everything with. They discussed the new tenant that evening.

"I think she will be invited for dinner this week," Alice started.

"I hope we don't run into her too much. I still don't believe they need the rent for our college. And you said they mentioned this to her?"

"Kaitlin said she would send a postcard once she had settled in."

"Yeah, I miss her." Emma agreed. "What's the name of the new one?"

"Something like Yi, or Yin," Alice said. "I don't remember clearly. Like the names of some of our classmates on Sunday. By the way, have you done the worksheet of that Tang poem?"

"*Qing Ping Diao*? No I haven't. I could barely write the title. But I guess we better start now so we can finish the assignment."

That evening, Alice practiced the characters from Li Bai's poem and wrote the verses three times. If you treat Chinese words as paintings, they appear to be a tad easier. And the form is like a rectangular box, as their teachers explained. Each verse is either strictly five characters, *wuyan*, or seven characters, *qiyan*, in Tang poetry, and you can't simply add words if you feel the meaning is still not expressed fully. Alice looked at the zigzagged handwriting she had on the worksheet.

雲想衣裳花想容，

春風拂檻露華濃。

若非群玉山頭見，

會向瑤臺月下逢。

Ms. Thng told them that this poem was about a famous concubine of the emperor in the Tang Dynasty. Her name *Yuhuan* literarily means “Jade Ring.” The emperor was so obsessed with her beauty that he stopped his morning meetings with the ministers where they discussed important national affairs. He would rather be with her all day long. Finally, the country suffered; and one of the generals rebelled and sent troops to the capital, Chang'an. The emperor's soldiers were only willing to defend him on one condition: the death of his beloved concubine. Soon, words went around that “Jade Ring” was actually a fox or a witch turned into human shape, coming to harm the emperor. She was said to bath herself with fragrant pedals every day in the wooden tub so she could cover her animalistic smell. They said that the emperor had even stolen her from his own son. It was not such a surprise to people of the Tang dynasty since they were already familiar with these witchery stories – in every fall of a previous dynasty, there was a woman who played a crucial role. Maybe they were the reincarnation of the same

witch. “*Hong yan huo shuo*,” the soldiers said when they shook their heads. Rosy complexion, disastrous water, Ms. Thung explained, “meaning a beautiful woman is the root of trouble.”

Heart-broken, the emperor had to execute her to protect his throne and his dynasty.

However, this poem was written before the rebellion, when Li Bai was hired by the royal court to write songs and misfortune for the emperor was still at bay. The first four verses were mostly comparing the concubine’s devastating beauty to a few things: clouds, roses, spring breeze, morning dew, jade mountains, and moonlit pavilions.

So much history in so few words, Alice thought with frustration. How much meaning could each word carry? Why did the poet write in such a mysterious style? If it wasn’t for Ms. Thng’s storytelling, she wouldn’t understand the poem even after learning all the words. Every Chinese character seemed like it could be translated into a whole sentence in English. Alice remembered that the new tenant was a translator, and wondered how awful that job could be. She could barely translate her thoughts into words in her diary sometimes.

After the girl in the basement moved in, Alice always had an uneasy feeling that she couldn’t put a name to. She and Emma managed to miss her parents’ welcome dinner for Yin in the first week. Yin had brought a fried noodle dish that was sitting in their fridge as leftovers that weekend, which released an interesting smell when you opened the fridge door. Her mom had enjoyed it and microwaved the noodles for the twins later. Repulsed by the fatty beef, scorched spring onions and greasy noodles, Alice didn’t finish her portion. Emma didn’t seem to mind the food, though. However, she got diarrhea the next morning, running to the bathroom several times and swearing that she would never have fried noodles again.

But they would still run into Yin in the neighborhood. Sometimes she had a sweatband over her head and a pair of blue running shoes, and other times, multiple shopping bags with groceries. She would smile at them and say hi. And Alice couldn't wait to run away quickly.

Once after their week-long family trip to Yosemite in October, Alice came back home realizing that Zoe and Zeke had developed the habit of walking in circles near the door leading to the basement. Zoe had always been a sweet lap cat, but she seemed reluctant to run to Alice when they first opened the door. "Maybe they have confused Yin with the girls," her parents joked. Alice didn't enjoy the joke. From that day on, even though Zoe had gradually resumed her habit of brushing Alice's legs in her own particular way, there was something in the female cat that started to look at her with a strange wariness, as if she could never have complete trust in her like before. Alice also discovered some long black hair on their library couch and she wondered if the girl had come up and stayed too long on the first floor. They could just as well have been Emma's or her own hair. Both of their parents had greying blonde hair. Alice decided that she should probably just cut her hair short.

That night, when she and Emma were unpacking in their room, Emma seemed to be upset as well. Her face went pale. "Alice," she said, "Did you notice that she has put that picture out on the mantle place?"

Alice's heart dropped. "That picture?"

Emma nodded, holding some clothes in her hands, as if not wanting to let them go. Their parents had had two children before when they were young. A boy and a girl, with golden hair and freckles all over their faces. Maybe the freckles would have been gone if they had grown older. But both of them had died in a car accident when they were two and three. Their parents

waited until their fifties to take the trip to China. This is the only photo of the children that Alice had seen. It was always kept in the first drawer under the cupboard, far apart from all the other family photos on display above the mantle place: their annual hiking trips to national parks, Alice and Emma's photos with piano awards, and their parents' wedding pictures.

To be sure, Alice and Emma decided to go down to the living room at 2am in the morning and walked slowly in order not to wake their parents.

"You see," Emma whispered. The picture stayed in its original frame. Their parents holding the golden haired children in their arms. Their mom had a head of big curly hair and their dad was still fit with no big belly. They were both smiling. It was a broad, youthful and carefree smile that was different from any she had seen before.

"Let's be quick." Alice ordered Emma. Even though they were twins, Alice always thought of herself as the elder sister and Emma let her play that role. She picked up the picture while Emma slowly opened the drawer on the other side of the room. She put the picture in and closed the drawer. It made a slight noise and for a moment the girls were scared. But neither of their parents seemed to have woken up.

Filled with excitement, it took Alice almost an hour to fall back to sleep. The next morning, the girls woke late and had to rush out of the house to school with sleepy eyes. When Alice came home in the early afternoon, she found Emma crying in the living room. Zoe and Zeke sat under the dining table, observing the twins.

"What's wrong?" Every time Emma cried, it broke Alice's heart. Often when they were fighting about something, once Emma started to cry, Alice would always give in and let her sister have whatever she wanted.

Emma pointed at the mantel.

Alice opened her eyes wide, and the picture they had hidden last night was out again, in the same place they had seen it a day ago. In between their family hiking photos, the piano awards and wedding photos.

“It’s so strange,” Emma sobbed. “I almost thought it was a dream. But you remember too, right? We did come down last night.”

“Of course we came down.” Alice felt that she should be the more rational one, hiding her own fears.

“Should we ask mom about this?” Emma suggested. “Maybe she decided to redecorate.”

“I don’t think so,” said Alice. “And I don’t want to ask. I think I know who did it already.”

“You know?”

“It must be her, that tenant,” Alice said after a hesitation, satisfied with her analysis. “She only goes to school in the late afternoon or evening. The door to the basement is not locked and she can come up any time. Maybe she was annoyed that we didn’t have dinner with her.”

Emma frowned at the thought of the fried noodles. “Now that you say it, I feel our house smells differently since she moved in. Do you feel it too? The soy sauce steam from her kitchen always comes up.”

“Exactly,” Alice frowned with her sister. “I knew that she was not trustworthy. We should see if she has stolen anything too.”

They looked through their wardrobes and drawers. They browsed the titles of their own books in the library too. Luckily, nothing seemed to be stolen. So was that the only thing the girl in the basement came up to do?

“Shall we put it back?” Emma asked, tears still in her eyes.

Before Alice could decide, she heard her parents’ footsteps at the front door. They were back. “Maybe tonight,” she assured Emma, who quickly wiped her eyes dry.

The parents didn’t seem to notice anything different in the house. Alice wanted to test them as she walked towards the mantle place while having a conversation with them about her coursework. Alice was pretty sure her mom’s eyes landed on the pictures. But her mom didn’t even blink. She seemed to think that picture had always been there. Was it always there? Alice couldn’t be sure now. But her parents didn’t act any differently towards her and Emma. Her dad had brought home their favorite chocolate covered raisin snacks from Trader Joe’s.

At 2am that morning, Alice came down to the living room again. She tried to wake up Emma, but she was too sleepy to join the mission with her. “You don’t have to come down then.” She said to her sister. She picked up the picture from the mantle place and put it in the drawer under the cupboard, this time under a kitchen towel that was in the drawer.

The next morning before leaving early for swimming, she glanced at the mantle place and the picture was not there. Alice spent the day in school with high spirits and even forgave a classmate who hit her elbow on Alice’s chest. She convinced herself that it was just an accident, not one of those rare moments that she got picked upon again, for reasons she didn’t care to know. That’s what teenager girls do to each other, after all. It happens to everyone, for various reasons, Alice thought, some more ridiculous than others. Both Alice and Emma’s periods had

begun a year ago, and their breasts had started to bud, though much later than most of their classmates. Sometimes, Alice felt a bit embarrassed at the pool, surrounded by girls having more obvious breasts.

To her dismay, when she came back home in the evening, the picture appeared on the mantle place again. Emma even questioned her whether she had really put it away. “Are you sure?” Emma said, “How could she find it if you hid the picture under the clean towels?” Alice felt furious. That new tenant, that snake, that foreigner! Turning her parents’ hearts, and now her sister! Emma had never been doubtful of anything her sister had done before. She always trusted Alice wholeheartedly. As usual, the parents seemed rather at home with the situation. They asked the twins if they would want to go to New York for Thanksgiving, to visit a relative.

Feeling tired and disappointed, Alice didn’t come down the following nights. She tried once only in early November, and the result turned out to be the same. When they came home in the afternoon, the picture stood above the mantle place again. Like before, her parents didn’t notice anything. Alice started to wonder if the picture had truly been there all the time. Was it that she had never paid enough attention? But she couldn’t be wrong since Emma remembered it in the same way. Maybe the fear had worn them out over the past few weeks; the twins didn’t talk for long hours as they used to do in the night. They hadn’t been walking in their favorite Rosedale Park for a while either.

One day before the Thanksgiving week, Alice saw Yin in the garage when she was parking her bike. She had been keeping an eye on her for quite a while from her window. She listened to Yin’s footsteps as she walked near the house. There seemed to be a brown-haired guy accompanying Yin home recently. He was about Yin’s age or a few years older, medium height,

often wearing a dark green jacket. Alice thought he was quite good looking, a bit like her 5th grade crush Christian the Italian kid.

Alice couldn't believe that the foreign girl had found herself a boyfriend already! She felt worried for the boyfriend, being with such a treacherous person. Day after day, she couldn't bring up the courage to confront her about the picture. At the same time, Emma never brought it up again, maybe wanting to put it out of her mind. When Alice first saw the couple holding hands in the garage in front of the basement apartment, she kept quiet, avoiding eye contact with them.

But Yin wasn't planning to let her go. "Hi Alice," she said, smiling charmingly with her fake eyelashes. She was wearing a long shining necklace that dangled over her half-bare breasts. "How are you? Just back from school? This is my boyfriend Sal."

"Hi Alice," the green-jacketed boyfriend waved at her, "A beautiful bike for a very beautiful young lady."

Alice blushed. Before she could respond, her mom also walked into the garage to put back some tools. Yin introduced Sal to her mom as well.

"Don't you look nice today, Yin," her mom complimented, "I've never seen you dress up before."

"We just went to a concert at the Kennedy Center with Sal's parents. I met them a month ago but I'm still nervous meeting them every time." Yin giggled, looking affectionately at Sal.

Showing your breasts when meeting the parents, come on, Alice thought. She remembered watching "Cats" with her parents once at the Kennedy Center, her first musical. Something they

did on a very special occasion, probably for the twin's birthday. But now her mom seemed intrigued with Yin's love life.

"That sounds wonderful. We love the Kennedy Center. So things have gone really well for you, Yin!"

"My parents like her so much that sometimes they do things together without me," Sal joked, "They even go grocery shopping together."

"Sal is very busy and I have nothing much to do during the day," Yin said, "and I don't have a driver's license. It does feel sometimes that his parents have adopted me."

Alice saw her mom burst into laughter as she bid them goodbye. She felt her heart grow cold. She followed her mom quietly back to the first floor. There were leaves from the garage sticking on her shoes, and she had to stomp hard on the doormat a few times before entering the living room.

There it is, she thought. That foreigner was clearly behind all this. Why couldn't everyone see what she was trying to do? Even her mom was under her spell. But she could not fool Alice. No. She must be really happy to see the twins suffer every day. Alice wished her dead. Burned. So she could not be reincarnated.

It turned out that Alice caught a terrible cold before the holiday and couldn't join her parents for the trip to New York. Emma wanted to stay home with her. But her parents convinced her to go, considering it an opportunity for the twins to learn to be more independent. More than once, the relatives and friends had joked that the girls were still extremely attached to each other, even after they had become teenagers. "Alice will be fine. At least we will still be able to celebrate Thanksgiving Day together here before we leave for the long weekend. Aunt Nora will come

every day to keep her company. And I'm sure Zoe and Zeke will be happy too." Aunt Nora was her mom's cousin who lived in the same Cleveland Park neighborhood. She was a skinny woman with a high pitched voice. Alice didn't feel close to her. To be fair, her parents did ask her whether they should change their schedule, but of course she couldn't say that they should abandon the air tickets and a fun weekend to stay home with a sick person. "I'm already recovering," she said. Alice felt that they had changed. She had never been left alone for a weekend before. And of course, it was all because of that witch living in the basement.

After Thanksgiving, when her parents and Emma were away, Alice cuddled with Zoe on the couch in the evenings while Zeke curled up on the floor nearby. She remembered their first family trip to New York two years ago when both her and Emma bought King Kong toys with their first names on them from the gift shop in the Empire State Building. Later, Emma suggested that she would keep Alice's King Kong and Alice should keep hers. "We are inseparable," Emma had said. "And if someday one of us is alone, the other one should take the other's King Kong with her so we can still be together." Since they were in different classes, they had been going on girl scout camping trips separately over the years, and the one who was going always brought the King Kong.

Remembering this, Alice stood up and put Zoe on the floor. Nervously, she ran upstairs to her shared bedroom with Emma. Her own bed was messy but Emma's bed was tidy with folded blankets. Not surprisingly, she found the King Kong with her name "Alice" left near the pillow.

Both Zoe and Zeke followed her upstairs and looked at Alice in bewilderment while she collapsed on the carpet of the bedroom. And then, slowly, they turned away and left the crying girl alone.

A few days later, her family returned and Alice didn't reveal the King Kong episode to Emma. She felt that her sister was somehow avoiding her as well, as if the severe cold had never left her, and had become something contagious. Both of them became busy with their final exams and didn't have much time to talk. Sometimes Alice wondered whether Emma had betrayed her and told their parents about the midnight mission during their trip to New York. She couldn't blame Emma though, since she was merely another victim of Yin.

Alice found that she would wake up in the middle of the night more often these days, and would walk quietly downstairs to sit in the living room. She kept her movement minimal so she would not disturb anybody. Sometimes the cats would notice and sometimes they didn't. When sitting on the couch got boring, she would turn on a small light on the library desk and practice her Chinese characters. She had written *Qing Ping Diao* so many times now that she could recite the entire poem.

一枝紅艷露凝香，

雲雨巫山枉斷腸。

借問漢宮誰得似，

可憐飛燕倚新妝。

名花傾國兩相歡，

常得君王帶笑看。

解釋春風無限恨，

沉香亭北倚欄杆。

Li Bai had compared the Tang Dynasty concubine to another consort, “Flying Swallow,” in the Han Dynasty a thousand years prior. “Flying Swallow” was a famous dancer who was said to have small pointed feet. In order to please the emperor, she had wrapped her feet in cloth tightly and invented the later transformed and notorious foot-binding. No wonder in the last two lines of Li Bai’s poem, there was an unspeakable mood of melancholy, making the heroine stand in the pavilion every day quietly, even during the blossoming spring time, in the peak of her love affair with the emperor. Of course, Alice considered, that poor woman probably couldn’t even walk too far away from the golden palace she lived in surrounded by four thick, high, concrete walls.

Sometimes Alice thought about the story her mom had told them a year ago on the twins’ twelfth birthday. Her parents had regarded it a proper time to let the girls know all the details, although Alice thought the details were still too skimpy to connect the dots. “Your biological mother was a village girl living in the suburbs of Chengdu. Very young when she was pregnant with you two, you see. That’s the story I heard from the institution anyways. Her boyfriend was a married man much older than her and he left her afterwards.” Her mother used words carefully such as “boyfriend” and “left.” The story swirled like autumn leaves in her mind for a year, and never settled.

She imagined her biological father reciting *Qing Ping Diao* to the Chinese village girl when he was courting her, telling her she was just as lovely as those Tang and Han beauties. He sent her little poems every day. What was the Tang Dynasty emperor thinking when he decided to put his favorite concubine to death in front of the soldiers? Was she really a thousand-year-old fox turned witch that had the power to corrupt a whole empire? Alice wrote the poem over and over again and felt it getting larger every time. The story, the history, and the feelings broke through the seven-character form and drowned her like returning tides.

One night, when Alice was practicing the characters as usual, she heard a faint noise coming from the basement. Something was hitting against the wall. Both Zoe and Zeke became alert, and Zeke ran towards the basement door. He made a low meowing call and looked back at Alice. Alice felt that the noise was getting louder and louder and she was surprised that neither Emma nor her parents were awakened.

In the following nights, the noise lingered in Alice's mind at night, first only when she was in the library, but then appeared even when she was lying on her own bed. Once she annoyed Emma by shaking her awake. "Listen, Emma. Do you hear that?"

Emma rubbed her sleepy eyes and listened. "I don't hear anything. What time is it?" She reached for her phone a bit impatiently, and then after checking the time, she turned in again.

Looking at Emma's curled up back and long hair on the bed, falling back asleep so easily, Alice sighed. "Lucky," she thought. Last week, Alice had gone to the salon and gotten a lob haircut, just like Katlin used to have, which she believed had framed her face in a more mature way. She decided to figure this out by herself.

When the noise came again one night, Alice followed the cats. As usual, the male cat ran first and stopped in front of the basement door. His back arched. Alice brushed Zeke away and hesitated for a few minutes. She had not been to the basement ever since the girl had moved in. Finally, after taking a deep breath, she turned the door knob.

The apartment looked very different from when Kaitlin had been there. It was now decorated in red. A red picture of a mermaid on the wall, red pots and pans in the kitchen, a red nightstand lamp and red blankets on the bed. Alice could now see clearly where the noise came from. On the bed, she saw Sal's green jacket pushed aside and his fair, strong body entangled with Yin's

smaller, darker body. Yin had her legs around him tightly and he was rocking her again and again on the pillow against the wall. Sweat on Sal's back glittered in the dim red light and Yin moaned like a wounded animal. Neither of them had noticed the intruder in their room, shocked with disgust.

Alice felt that the red room had stabbed through her eyes. She quickly closed the door and walked as fast as she could from the scene. She couldn't run on the wooden floor as she was afraid that they would hear her from the basement. Maybe Yin had already known her movement every night and this was her ultimate witchery. Alice felt that tears were about to fall down.

The next morning, she had dark circles under her eyes and no appetite for breakfast. Emma looked at her from time to time, but did not inquire. Her parents thought both girls were pretty stressed with finals and suggested another trip for the coming Christmas holiday. "I hope that this time Alice will be able to join us," her mom smiled with Cheerios in her teeth.

In school, Alice looked for the right stationery. And she finally settled on her classmate Karen's corn-shaped pen. All of her own pens were different. She stole it when Karen was away for lunch and brought the pen home.

That evening, making sure that Emma was sound asleep, Alice sneaked into the living room again. Like last night, the noise from the basement grew stronger like a storm. She could hear it clearly even in her bedroom on the second floor. The noise replayed what was in front of her on Yin's bed from a day before: sweat on the man's back, and the woman's toes curled with pleasure, a swaying red image that blurred her vision. She had to stop it in some way. She had no other choice. Sitting on the couch and adjusting her position to make herself comfortable, Alice

slid the pen under her Tinker Bell printed sleeping dress, and moved it slowly inside of her in order not to hurt herself. She had left her underwear on the bed.

Alice closed her eyes and kept moving the pen until its tip got moist. She wondered why she had never done this before. Some girls at school had already taught her how to do it. She didn't remember the details but she knew that she could do it right.

Zoe and Zeke were not around this time when Alice finished with a red flush on her cheeks. She decided that she could make this her midnight ritual. She realized with delight now that the noise from the basement had slowly waned.

But when Christmas came, Alice was sick again.

Her mother first discovered something unusual from Alice's laundry when the Guatemalan helpers were having a week off. And after questioning Alice carefully, she had to take her to a gynecologist. She picked someone who was a bit further away from the city, in Virginia. On the way to the clinic, Alice was terrified. She hadn't thought that things would turn bad so shamefully. Maybe she would be forever ruined. She thought about getting AIDS and dying by herself. Right there in Virginia. She almost wished that there would be a car accident on the way so that she could be erased before getting to the destination. Just like her parents' golden haired children. So that they could love her forever as well.

The girl from the basement finally wins, she thought, not being able to look at her mom. Her dad refused to participate in the trip, and Alice remembered him frowning when her mom told him in front of both Alice and Emma. Her mom regarded this as an educational opportunity for both girls.

The gynecologist turned out to be a very kind middle-aged woman. After some uncomfortable examination with cotton buds, she informed Alice and her mom that she was just a bit infected. “Not a big deal,” she smiled warmly to Alice who lowered her head almost as low as the floor itself. “Just use this medicine for two weeks till the itchiness goes away. If I were you, I would not do this again any time soon.”

Alice’s mom reminded her of her manners, telling her to thank the doctor before they walked out. “Don’t worry. It’s very common,” the gynecologist said. Alice noticed that the gynecologist had lollipops at the reception desk as well, like most of the doctors’ office she had been to. But she didn’t take one this time when her mom thanked the two nurses.

Back home, Alice and Emma were left in the living room while the parents locked themselves in the library to discuss the situation. At least that was what they believed. The twins could hear them from time to time when they raised their voices.

“Have you seen it?” Her mom asked. They had clearly been looking for something for a while. “Purplish hard cover I think.”

“You said it was a red cover. Now it’s purple. We really should have cleaned the library, so it would be easier to find,” her dad said.

“What do you mean? It’s not only my job.”

“I was just worried.”

Zoe and Zeke lingered in front of the library door with curiosity.

“Listen, I have no idea.”

“I’m not saying anything. It’s just that the library needs to be organized so we could find our books when we need them!”

Alice heard the sound of books dropping to the carpet. A pile of books. Straight from arms to the floor, making a deep, dull sound. The cats ran away. Then the room became silent.

And after a few seconds, they could hear their mom's voice turning into a sobbing murmur. "All these years, I tried... You think that's easy?"

Alice didn't know what her mom was trying so hard to do. Maybe she meant her demanding job. But Alice thought she could almost have an alternative explanation. She imagined that her dad was hugging her mom now, like he always did when her mom was really upset. Then she heard his voice again, calmly, in a lower volume, but clearly. Both Alice and Emma heard it and they remained motionless.

"Maybe it's in the genes. I mean, just a phase. Please don't cry, honey. Maybe there's nothing we can do about this."

Alice felt the noise from the basement grow in her head again. She couldn't see anything in front of her, except Emma's hurt look. Emma, her only friend and only sister, her soul and her treasure, now stared at her in shame. She knew that Emma would never forgive her for this, even after many years, after they had become adults. She knew that Emma would never carry her King Kong with her ever again. She felt that she had lost the entire world.

Their mom had given Alice and Emma something about the teenage experience to read over their winter break. It was okay - Alice leafed through the book - many things she didn't know before, but nothing about a certain bewitchment from an ancient Chinese spell. However, her sleep returned gradually. Maybe because of her defeat, or because Emma had refused to talk to her ever since the gynecologist trip, Alice would go to bed earlier and had dreamless, uninterrupted sleep.

After several snow storms in the beginning of the new year, Yin came up to talk to her parents one night. Alice had already given up fighting. She watched Yin walking on the old wooden floor with her cheesy open-toe heels and painted nails, and thought with a strange yearning that she could as well have been her, fluent in Chinese and all of the poetry. She could then come to America in her late twenties and find a Sal, and nothing would make much of a difference. Maybe Alice could learn a thing or two about translation, so she wouldn't be so afraid of herself, growing taller each year, faster than her apprehension.

Yin came to tell her parents that she would get married to Sal soon and she wanted to move out in February. Although surprised and disappointed with losing a tenant, her parents were able to keep their poise. After all, they had only locked the lease for half a year with Yin. They said they really enjoyed her stay with the family and regretted that she had to leave so quickly. They complimented the new ring she now carried on her finger.

“Feel free to drop by any time. I'm sure Zoe and Zeke will miss you very much. You know, our daughters were stressed with school lately and had some problems with sleeping. We're worried about them making friends sometimes. Alice once said that her King Kong toy was her best friend. But I hope she didn't cause you too much trouble. The old wooden floor doesn't help with sound proofing.” Her mom laughed apologetically.

“I can understand. I was an only child,” Yin said with a smile. “Besides, I didn't hear anything. I usually sleep late but very well at night. Even cats opening drawers at 3am won't wake me up.”

The parents always enjoyed a good cat joke. But Alice knew that Yin was talking to her, letting her know what Yin was capable of.

“And we also need some tips from you,” her dad continued, “We are planning a family trip to China next summer, with our daughters this time. Any suggestions would be appreciated!”

Oh dear, thought Alice, praying that next summer would take forever to arrive. Though she quickly ran to her room and marked the vacation down on her calendar. She played with Zoe and Zeke for an hour that night, getting them to exercise with her fishing toys. Sometimes she felt that her room was way too big for her to sleep alone.

So the girl in the basement would be gone eventually. This line circled around in Alice’s mind over and over again the next few days, in the classroom, in the swimming pool and on her bike when she rode home alone as fast as she could. After all, it was her, Alice, who stayed in this house. It was her, Alice, who survived the witchery and the battle.

She savored her victory until it became bitter. What if the noise returns? The very thoughts rattled Alice. With the girl gone, how could she find the source of that sound from the basement ever again? Without the noise, how could she find a reason to walk with Emma to their favorite places in Cleveland Park? Emma, Emma, Emma. Alice prayed that Emma would never be kept apart from her again as they travel in time. Lying on her pillow, she imagined having a heart to heart talk with her sister again, assuring her that she would never change after Yin had gone. But without the girl in the basement, Alice couldn’t tell whether it was the past or the future that she wanted to speak with her sister about.

CATWOMAN

by

Gu Qian

I don't know when things started to become so difficult, but I had always been a happy, carefree cat. Spending half of my time cleaning myself and polishing my claws with my tongue, and the other half contemplating about the world outside in front of a big French window. My gaze would follow a curious blue bird, or maybe a squirrel who hurriedly ran down the tree trunk on a windy December afternoon. I would not attack other species, but liked to imagine them respecting my territory when I entered the yard to stretch my legs, hiding themselves quietly under the thick bushes. My room had always been 70 degrees warm and sunlit. There was a bigger bowl of dry food as an entrée and a smaller bowl of wet food as a treat every day. My litter box was fresh and sandy soft, cleaned and refilled every morning.

During weekdays, when everyone in the building was at work, I liked to sit on the leather chair in front of the piano. It had been my favorite spot to stretch my entire body and sunbath in the early afternoon after my biggest meal. Other cats might have their own favorite toys, such as rattling balls or scratching boards; but for me, the black and white piano keys were such enchanting things that just played by themselves for hours. All I had to do was to put my paws on them and listen carefully. Sometimes I would fall asleep when sitting in front of the piano and have brief dreams of myself taking a human shape, and walking around with two legs. I wondered what it would be like to run household chores. It was always fun to have such

fantasies. But a brief dream seemed to be just enough for my entertainment. I didn't know if my Yamaha reacts to other cats too or whether they heard what I heard. At the end of the day, it seemed that I was the only one who had left small clumps of hair on the keyboard here and there.

And of course, I had always had a master, to whom I ran and jumped on. A master who fed me and scooped my litter box. I liked to bat his face though, after enough cuddling on his lap, and walked away from time to time without him anticipating it. My master was used to my unpredictable temperament and didn't find it offensive. At night, I slept with him under the same quilt, warming his cold feet with my higher body temperature. I was also his alarm clock every morning, making sure that he would dress up, put on his tie and go to work on time. He always drank a small glass of orange juice and scratched behind my ears (my favorite place to be scratched) before leaving our apartment. If I could, I would like to be that kind of cat forever.

But how could I know what plans the world had for me? On some days, thick clouds shadowed the sun. On other nights, the moon turned full. Sometimes things simply took a startling turn without my knowledge. One day when I woke up from a nap on my favorite leather chair, my dream of a human didn't go away. The black fur on my back had disappeared except the hair on my head. I was wearing a grey cotton dress and a pair of white room slippers on my feet. My sharp claws had gone without a trace and my toe nails were painted pink! It had become more picturesque than my usual dreams. I knew at once that my life had changed. Day after day, and night after night, to my disappointment, the long dream continued. My naps didn't make a difference. Time refused to circle back any more, but moved on in a straight line. And I finally stopped hoping that one afternoon I would be able to return again. I realized that I should now settle for just being a woman. Maybe it is time for me to repay the debt of gratitude for my master's kindness.

In this new life though, I'm not a good example for modern women at all, being so empty-minded and submissive. And lazy too, naturally. I'm 35 years old, married for two years, and have never become a mother. In this life, I realize, my former classmates and female cousins of my age have either climbed up the corporate ladder to high positions such as Senior Vice President or given birth to two or three children. Of course, those are not my ambitions. I feel nostalgic all day – I just wanted become a good cat again, if that could be a profession or well-regarded accomplishment. I would like to age gracefully and beautifully like a cat, or not to age at all, since I have always been very attentive to my appearance. My brushed hair spreads on my shoulders like waterfalls. I take baths twice a day, and make spa appointments once a month. Sadly, nobody really understands that or sees the value in me other than my husband. As a result, I have found myself more and more excluded from social gatherings. People whom I played tennis with once or went for a girls' night out with once start to meet regularly without me. I become very lonely during the day when my husband is at work. He is an entrepreneur type. After failing twice, his recent data analysis company seems to be doing well. Over ten people have been hired to work for him in the past year and we have bought our own two-bedroom apartment in downtown San Francisco.

Sometimes sitting on the couch in our sunlit living room, and after switching the TV channels for an entire afternoon, I have a strange feeling: the longer I have become a woman, the more it seems that I have been this way forever. I was always an incredibly lonely woman, a lonely young girl, a lonely child. But I don't allow the doubt to cast for too long.

If I were still a cat, there wouldn't be a problem at all. No one would turn their nose up upon learning that I don't have a job or retain a single bit of "responsibility" in the world. No one would doubt how I sustain my lifestyle. No one would remind me of my biological clock. A cat's

happiness concerns herself and her master alone, sometimes not even her master, a cat being such an individualist.

My husband finds my theory amusing when I try to be honest with him about my past. He is the only person in the world who thinks I'm actually quite sharp. Since he has a Harvard MBA, I believe that he's probably more observant and visionary than everyone else. He also sympathizes with my messed up cultural identity in this life: born in Fujian Province, China, grown up in Singapore and now somewhat American. Although this is the trend in the globalized world that people are not one hundred percent something any more, it still saddens me when my husband watches football. No matter how many countries he has lived in (which includes Britain, Turkey, Peru and Singapore) and the special attachments he feels for each place that have now transformed into our living room art collections, he will always be a proud American. He will always be a New England Patriots fan and won't find his birth country humiliating. My husband believes that besides a lower self-esteem, my identity issues might be one of the reasons why I wish to engage with the world as a cat.

No one can understand your past life entirely, of course. But I like how he brushes my hair behind my ears sometimes when I see him off before he goes to work. I pour orange juice into a small glass for him. I often even drink a glass myself. For a while, I have thought that my life as a woman isn't so bad after all. My husband enjoys my company. Some happiness needs an audience, and some really doesn't.

However, this winter, my hostess skills will be tested. A British couple, Annie and Nick, who used to be my husband's old friends in London, will pay a visit to San Francisco for two weeks. My husband has already invited them to stay in our guest room. We have never entertained guests before, let alone sleep over guests. My husband isn't really the sociable kind; and besides,

his friends are all scattered around the world. The guest room has always been my piano room, where I practice the Mendelssohn and Schumann I had to learn a long time ago, as a child if I had a full human life. One thing about building a memory is that I have learned the composers by name. The music, as usual, gives me great comfort when I'm alone.

“I haven't seen them for ages.” He says, “And Annie is with a baby now. Can't imagine her being a mother!”

I learned that Annie and Nick have been married for two years. She is almost 40, like my husband; but her husband is even younger than me, a really good-looking hunk, I've heard. Annie used to be some sort of a swimming champion, and coached my husband in the gym where she worked for a short time when he was in London 7, 8 years ago. He might have told me in jokes that he used to have a crush on Annie at that time. “You know, every guy in our group at the gym had a crush on her. She was so athletic and really interested in shaping her body.”

If my husband has read a manual about cat care, he would not make the mistake of inviting them to our guest room. But what is done is done. I will try to be very friendly and hide my claws for two weeks (should I still have them). Besides, what can a pregnant woman do? It is not like he will see her as a possibility any more, is it?

When Annie and Nick appear at my door, I can see that they are certainly no domestic animals. Both of them are tanned like “Bay Watch” characters. Annie, despite her noticeable bump, wears a tight black top that exhibits the advantage of a pregnant woman. She hugs my husband before noticing me.

I advise them to take their shoes off.

“Got to respect Chinese tradition,” my husband laughs. I feel a bit annoyed. He has never teased me about this before. The two brunet guests offered an understanding smile to the slightly embarrassed blonde host. My husband pulls a chair for Annie to sit on while she unties her boots.

“You haven’t changed at all!” Annie says to my husband. “Still got that boyish look.” Nick, who hasn’t met my husband before, exchanges pleasantries with him and compliments the apartment. I give them a tour to their room and the guest bathroom, where I have laid out some clean white towels, shampoo, body soap and lotion. They appear to be pretty tired after the trip and retire into their room shortly.

My husband and I stay in our living room for a while before going to bed. Instead of watching TV, he looks for the tour books and maps we have collected over these two years. He says that luckily we have kept them.

“Annie seems friendly,” I don’t know what else to say, playing with the remote control in one hand. “You know, I don’t really mind guests with shoes. It is not really a house rule.” I expect him to say something nice to me too.

“I know,” he says. “They wouldn’t mind. Annie isn’t someone who cares about small details.”

I remember when I was still a cat, I always hid underneath my master’s armchair in our bedroom when there were guests in the apartment. Once a female guest walked all the way into the bedroom to look for me. I thought it was very inappropriate despite her fondness. She kneeled down in front of the armchair and stared at me for a long time, meowing and clapping, hoping that I would come out. But I refused to do so until they had all left. I was certainly a proud cat then. My master didn’t apologize but defended me wholeheartedly. “She’s just very

shy,” he said to the guests, “until you spend a lot of time with her.” I decide to go to bed thinking about the good old days.

The next morning, I am woken up by the coffee machine. My husband purchased an expensive brand a few months ago but seldom uses it, especially since I am usually sleeping when he eats breakfast. However, he wants to make espresso for the couple that he believes still suffer from jetlag.

“I quit coffee.” Annie smiles, nicely dressed in a red sweater while I’m still in my sleeping gown. “But I’ll take whatever else comes from this machine.”

“That’s too bad,” says my husband, pointing at the cupboard. “I’ll show you how to make hot water then. Help yourself. There is tea in the tins.”

“I would like some tea.”

“Remember those days when we were the only coffee snobs in our group?” He sweeps some extra coffee powder into the sink, also smiling while looking up.

Annie nods, “Nobody enjoyed a good espresso like we did. I haven’t been in touch with Vicky and Diana for years since they moved. They went for a triathlon in France last month and posted some photos online.” She mentions some other names of people she still sees regularly.

I look at my husband, remembering that when we first started dating four years ago in Singapore, discovering local coffee shops was one of our favorite things. Actually, it was in a coffee shop where he proposed. Now thinking about it, I start to remember that Annie and Nick’s wedding was a few days before my husband’s proposal, which I then learned when he casually mentioned that “one of my closest friends is getting married in London today.” I considered at

the time that it was merely a peer influence. Was that a coincidence that Annie had finally belonged to someone else? The thought makes me very uncomfortable. I try to replay my husband's tone and expressions on the day when he mentioned the news, but the memory is from too long ago to recall the details. Maybe I am all wrong. Cats sometimes have rather lucid dreams. My husband has given me a comfortable home, and the reason for that doesn't really matter, does it?

Annie says that she continues to swim after pregnancy. She has strong, muscular arms under the red sweater. Her belly is rather big for five months.

"How's your shoulder? Is swimming free style still bothering you?" She asks my husband.

My husband hurt his left shoulder in London and stopped swimming seriously afterwards. He takes on other exercises such as cycling and yoga these years. We don't talk about sports much, like we don't discuss music much. And I have never asked him in this way like Annie does. She was there when the injury happened, I realize, as she seems to know the specific problem and the multiple surgeries my husband had gone through that year. My husband had always been a sports fan growing up, and this must have disappointed him greatly. Annie is not afraid to show what she knows and cares about in front of me.

"It is much better now," he says. "I still swim sometimes. Although I may avoid being seen beaten by a pregnant lady in the pool."

"I was going to suggest that we go swimming one day together." Annie looks at me. I can feel her sizing up my body under my sleeping dress. I wish I had brought out a scarf at least.

"The four of us, having some fun."

“She can probably watch our bags,” my husband wraps one arm around my shoulder. “This one is extremely afraid of water.”

Again, if my husband has read a cat manual, he would know that cats do not like to get wet. We like to stay dry under a warm sun.

“Maybe I can give her some lessons!” Annie says cheerfully. “It’s really not that hard. You just need to get the rhythm.” What’s worse than her trying to be my teacher, she starts to move her arms in the air to demonstrate. I don’t care to respond at all. And she just keeps waving her arms until the silence becomes a bit awkward.

Nick finishes his espresso and asks for the other cup that was originally made for Annie. “Really good coffee, mate,” he says. He is definitely younger, but has grown a thick beard that makes him look more mature. Not a bad guy.

Later that morning, we take them to a neighborhood Mexican diner for brunch. Over corned beef hash and pancakes, Annie and my husband continue to reminisce about their group of expatriate friends in London. Until now I have learned that only Nick is British. Annie was actually from Florida and had moved to London around the same time my husband did. Her accent has changed into something in-between over the years. They laugh the most talking about a British friend of Hong Kong decent.

“Poor Ng had been living in London since he was 13, but never lost the accent. He was the odd ball in the group,” my husband explains to me.

“But he was very helpful the time we went to the Chinese restaurant, and he saw that on the menu it said in Chinese ‘tourist price.’ Can you believe that? Right there in black and white! We called the manager out for a refund.” Annie says.

“Yes, it was good to have Ng with us for once,” my husband laughs, slicing pancakes and pouring maple syrup. “Do you want a piece?” He asks me. We always share food with each other, but I don’t have much appetite that morning.

Some humans really don’t have memories of a previous life, of their own history. I have never met the boy whose last name is Ng, but I feel my tears building up for him. I imagine him being a useless joke for all these people he considered friends. Or maybe a cat just doesn’t understand humor. If I were in my good cat form, I would just stand up and walk outside, closing my eyes and napping my afternoon away all by myself. But instead, I have to pretend to dig into my food until brunch is over.

For the next few days, Annie and Nick drive up to the mountains and then a relative’s place near the wine country, someone in Annie’s family. I suppose if I had passed the driving test, my life here wouldn’t be so boring. It is probably also part of the reason why I can’t go to most of those social gatherings. But Annie has no problem figuring out how to rent a car and get directions on unfamiliar highways. My husband goes back to work and I spend my afternoons playing piano, or sitting on the couch near the window and looking at birds on the trees and people on the street.

I imagine Annie and my husband being in one of those great love stories that take a long time to write a happy ending, sharing a feeling that does not know how to declare its name. What am I then? Someone that he has merely settled with? Someone who is not at all special to him but only comes at the right time? Can I ever become his best friend the way Annie was? Will I have a best friend as well? An ancient Chinese idiom indicates that “it is easy to buy ten thousand tons of gold, but not easy to find a friend confidant for your music.” Or rather, I think, a friend

confidant who recognizes my dream talk as music. There is too much to figure out in this life. A cat wouldn't have such a problem. A cat doesn't have complicated desires and a heart to break.

One afternoon, when I was rearranging my husband's shoes to kill some time, I remember a story my mom told me when I was little. Growing up in China during the Mao Era, her family was really poor. Nonetheless, my grandpa had six daughters before he finally got a boy, my uncle. All the girls had to save the best food at the dinner table such as the chicken thigh for their younger brother. All the sisters wore old cotton shoes while my uncle got a much-envied, new pair of leather shoes for Chinese New Year. In spring, the sound of the little boy's heelpiece echoed on the neighborhood playground and in his older sisters' minds. My mom told me that once when she was bathing my uncle, she nearly drowned him. My uncle, being simply naughty at the time, stepped into the hot water without taking his shoes off. And my mom panicked since she knew how much that pair of leather shoes cost. "I grabbed your uncle's waist and feet and turned him upside down so that his shoes would be out of the water. It was all instinct, you see. Got to save that pair of shoes. I didn't realize that for a minute your uncle's head was in the tub and he was almost choking to death."

My mom said that she hadn't told her parents about the incident afterwards, scared that she would be scolded and punished. But over a decade later when she was 23, she met my father, a businessman from Singapore who was twenty years older than her, and decided to get married, disregarding the scolding from her parents this time. More than once my mom told me that love was not something her generation believed in or celebrated. "People marry to 'live a life together,' and you just keep one eye open and one eye closed afterwards," she said. With her theory, it doesn't really matter who you choose as a partner. You just find a way to maintain the relationship no matter what the foundations are. Our family eventually left the country for

Singapore when I was 8. My mom has never had a life outside of a household. “Some talents serve many, and some serve only a few,” she used to say. I wonder why she has always been so content.

The Chinese shoe custom is not only for keeping dust from the carpet, it seems. It is more complex than I thought. But memory is such a burden for a human. A cat would not be interested in discussing these things. You can just spend a lot of time with her and listen to her choppy purrs.

Now I remember I cried and protested when my mom hired a tutor to give me piano lessons for two hours every day when I was in primary school. One volume that I practiced the most was Mendelssohn’s “Song without Words.” All my other friends would gather and play games together in the neighborhood park after school. Once they even managed to slip a note for me under our apartment door in Tiong Bahru, asking me to come out. But my mom threw the note away as she didn’t want me to break my routine. She told me that she couldn’t afford an instrument when she was in China, but she had always envied those who had music in their suitcases wherever they travelled. She said that I would thank her later.

How could one understand another’s loss of home? In high school, we prided ourselves for not speaking fluent Chinese, although many of us still spoke it with our parents at home. My friend Jennifer who was also born in mainland China like me, never thought of herself as a Chinese instead of a Singaporean. Why couldn’t I let go that easily too? Letting that go would be a betrayal of my mom, though. As she predicted, now I have grown to like Mendelssohn’s later piece opus 109 in D major, but there is no cellist to play a duet with me.

If cats have that much free time with shoes, we keep staring at them and wonder why a human needs so many pairs. I barely want one since I'm always at home. My husband, on the other hand, often complained that it was hard to find his shoe size in Asia before moving back to San Francisco.

Days pass by quickly when there is a domestic project. Sometimes I have a sad feeling that the more I remember about my childhood, the more my previous life as a cat is becoming out of reach.

When Annie and Nick return, they bring us some dark chocolates that say "bear poop" on the package, which seems to be the exact kind of goodie my husband appreciates, and leads to the kind of wordplay banter that tends to annoy me. Annie also offers to make a meal for us to thank us for taking them in.

"Would that be too much?" I whisper to my husband's ear. A pregnant woman in my own kitchen, where I have only mixed up salad and toasted bread for my husband before. Living in San Francisco, we don't need to worry about food.

"Annie likes to cook," he says with a smile. "Let her do it."

So on the night before the couple's departure, we have a homemade dinner prepared by Annie. There are organic lentils (with sliced onions and carrots), some spinach, pork roast seasoned with garlic and baked sweet potatoes. I bought a peach pie from a local bakery as dessert.

"You have a really nice kitchen with all of these Bosch." Annie says when she sits down, wiping her hands on the napkin. "And look at all the beautiful silver!"

“The silver was my parents’ wedding gift. They would be happy to see them finally being used.” My husband saying in a joking tone, looking at me with one eyebrow raised. What is he talking about? I have used those serving spoons for Whole Foods Pad Thai and rotisserie chicken before. I have even lit the candles for our meals.

The pork roast is a great hit and my husband eats heartily. He asks for the recipe and Annie says she will write an email to him later. An email? Great. They can reconnect from there. My husband may not be verbally affectionate, but he writes very thoughtful, nice emails.

Since nobody else drinks, I pour Rosé into my own glass a few times. And soon my cheeks turn hot.

“There is something we want to tell you,” Nick says. Has he also noticed something, I wonder. He puts his hand on Annie’s, who gives a gentle nod. “It has actually been quite tough for us over the past few weeks.”

My husband puts his fork down.

“We have been told that the pregnancy isn’t going so well – the baby’s brain hasn’t developed the way it should have. The doctors haven’t found the cause yet. But he may not survive after child birth.”

The room has been silent for a while, and then without preparing to be the first one to speak, I hear my own voice, “I’m very sorry.”

Sometimes the expected thing to say feels very wrong. And one regrets right away responding too quickly with a learned etiquette.

“You should have told me earlier, Annie.” My husband closed his eyes, covering his forehead with one hand.

“We really had a great time,” Annie continues, still smiling, looking from my husband towards me. “It’s so nice to finally meet you.”

“We thought about giving up, of course, but decided to keep him. You know, these things do happen. I suggested to Annie that we take this trip and take a break from things, to see some old friends and her sister. It was nice to visit her for a few days,” explains Nick.

“Anything we can do to help, let me know,” says my husband. He can’t say much more.

I open my mouth but can’t say anything either. I wish I had the language, more urgently than ever. It is not an easy decision to make, I think. And I have heard people ceasing a pregnancy because of a similar complication. But Annie and Nick wouldn’t. They are keeping the baby as long as they can. We finish the peach pie I bought without much exchange in the room except the sound of swallowing water.

At night, I know that my husband can’t fall asleep for a long time. But I don’t want to start a conversation abruptly. What’s in his mind? Does he want to have a baby someday, too? A cat could just snuggle with him. But what would a woman do?

I think of my grandfather in China who passed away several years ago. He had seven children (all one year apart in age) just to get a son. Was he ever grateful that all his daughters were healthy? Because these things do happen, as Nick said. I can’t imagine myself being in Annie’s position, feeling the baby kicking and turning over day by day, only to wait to say goodbye to him. My tears slide silently into my ears, dampening the pillow, and I try to wipe them dry before my husband notices. Cold sweat gathers on my back as I wonder if my husband

will ever respect me the way he respects a woman like Annie, who in his eyes, remains a hot swimming coach and a bona fide woman from day one, no matter how many years have passed or whether she bears another man's child. And without respect, how does the love of a person differ from the love of a cat?

But another voice in my mind seems to start mocking me at the same time. Where does it come from? A rather ancient voice. Don't be ridiculous, it says. One doesn't have to ask for pain. Enjoy yourself when you can. Besides, is this really what you are worried about right now, that he would find her more charming for the pain she's carrying?

I have had too much Rosé and now in bed my head starts to spin.

Later at night, I can't tell whether I'm asleep or finally awake. Dreams haven't come to me for a long time. But now, I find myself sitting on the leather chair in front of the piano again, my paws on the keyboard, my music forlorn. Nobody else is in the guest room. Only moonlight casts in from the window. The leather chair feels warm and welcoming like always. I can sit here by myself forever, not feeling lonely anymore.

But a cat shadow looms and I realize with a surprise that it is Annie. She has a big bump on her belly, but the rest of her body is lean. I recognize at once that she is Annie for sure. It has never come to me that I would see Annie like this, in the moonlight. Her fur is a mix of black and gold; her eyes hazel. A beautiful cat nonetheless.

"I thought I'd see you here," she says. "At the dinner table, I was looking at you all along. And you had so much to drink! And I realize that this is the only way to talk to you. Nice songs, by the way. You really put your heart into them. I have heard so much about you."

"You do? From him?"

Annie the cat nods. “You are very mysterious for me, though. He describes you as something like a closed book. You are married to your music, he always jokes. He admires you. But it gets lonely sometimes when one needs real companionship.”

“He talks about me with you...”

“One cannot live without friends.”

“You were his friend for a long time. I can’t be his friend from the very beginning. How can I? I think it keeps me from understanding him objectively.”

“There is no objectivity,” says Annie the cat.

I jump off my leather chair and she lets me put my paw on her belly. Beneath the soft fur, I can feel the heartbeat of the baby. If time stops now, I think, then the baby will continue to live. I will keep Annie and her baby in this world with me. I will keep the moment as long as I can in my music. In this world, I don’t have to speak any words to let her know my deep sorrow. I don’t possess anything and anyone. Annie and I are one clan and I only wish her well.

“Thank you,” she says, as if knowing my thoughts. “I don’t really know anything about music. But sometimes I feel that I’m doing a very similar thing when I swim, you know. I am myself in the water although I need to exercise very hard to keep it up. And him too, with his start-up. We are all treading water in different places, it seems. The thing you worry about...it will never happen.”

“I know.”

“But you are still sad.” And I realize that she is right. But it isn’t anyone’s fault.

“Because I understand the sacrifice.”

Annie the cat comes close and we rub each other's noses. She smiles a wide cat smile, almost cartoonish. But her voice is deep. "Who knows what the future holds? Maybe you will see him here someday too, if you let him."

"I don't know. This dream has been too long."

I think maybe it's time for me to go back on the leather chair again. When I don't have an answer, this is the only thing to do. Maybe it isn't entirely an escape, I try to tell myself, but to learn something useful. So I jump up again, facing the moonlight instead of Annie the cat. And I hear her steps hesitate, then drift away behind my back.

In the morning before Annie and Nick's departure, my husband wakes up early again to make coffee, even though only Nick shares it with him. They have already put our sofa bed in the guest room back to shape. Annie asks me if she should leave the sheets and towels in the washer, and I tell her not to worry about it. She seems to talk to me in a more familiar and casual tone now. Her eyes look slightly puffed – did she have a bad dream last night? Some people choose not to acknowledge that kind of trouble. And how lucky they are.

When Annie and Nick put their shoes on, and are about to leave with their two suitcases, it is my husband's turn to hug Annie first. "I will miss you," he says. As I said, verbal affection is not his domain. So I can see this is rather emotional for him, not seeing Annie again for a long time. Maybe what comes out has surprised him as well. There is a sad tenderness in his eyes that I have never seen before.

"So nice to catch up," Annie says, "I'll miss you, too."

If they hadn't been so restrained and dignified, I wouldn't feel so bad. That moment feels like something real. But what I feel isn't anger, just an awful, despairing ache. A late and reluctant

acknowledgement that there is a piece of your most precious person, no matter how big or how small, that belongs to somebody else, and belongs to the past. For a moment, I wish I don't have the sensitivity and alertness of a cat, so that I would not torture myself for the days to come. So I would not have to play on my piano again and again just to understand.

Annie hugs me afterwards, and Nick bids goodbye to us too.

"Annie says that you are a pianist," Nick looks at me with much sincerity, while he already stands in the hallway. "It seems such a waste that we don't get a chance to hear it this time. But if you are interested, I know Annie's sister mentioned that she was looking for a piano tutor for her six-year old son. I mean, I can put you guys in touch if you like. She may even drive here."

"That's right, Nick." Annie turns to me. "You think about it. I know my sister will be lucky to have you. She always has trouble finding one. Feel free to negotiate the price too."

"You are too kind," says my husband. "I'm sure it will be very good for her."

My heart beats fast. Things that I have never considered come to me. Maybe one should never give up on hope, even the slightest possibility that a dream can be as long as daytime, and a moon as real as its shadow. The world is indeed a rather complicated place, I think. Like this moment when my husband closes the door after Annie and Nick have left, and he is surprised to find me covering my face with both hands. I don't know whom I am shedding my tears for. I don't know whether these are happy or sad tears, either. And maybe one day when my cat days are over, I will eventually come to terms with that.

As for now, I'm just glad that my music room is back. And tomorrow I can start playing the songs again to my heart's content with my paws.

THE WAY WE MOURNED

by

Gu Qian

After Simon had died, I made love with his best friend James every day. We traveled in southern Taiwan in James's grandparents' old silver car: sightseeing during the day, and checking into motels in the evening. The sheets were usually white, but dimmed with the colorful lights in the rooms. Those were "love hotels," as my Taiwanese friends and I called them. James put the Durex box next to the nightstand, sometimes bottled water too. I would take everything off me, and put my hair down. We didn't speak to each other during those times. I let him go on top and I preferred to let him do anything that gave him pleasure. James groaned every time he collapsed on me, soaked with sweat. I had never seen anyone sweat like that before, staining the sheet and dripping all over my body. When the sweat evaporated a few seconds later, it took away the heat from my skin, leaving only the coolness.

He liked to kiss me and I would kiss back. He liked to whisper my name during the most intense and quickened movements. Sometimes he demanded a distance to get a full view of my body after sex, and I didn't mind just lying there without a blanket. But sometimes tears would come and I had to curl up and face my back towards him. And in those moments he would put blankets on me and hug me through them, not touching my skin at all. It must be those moments that kept me with him very close.

I had just come back from Simon's funeral in Michigan at that time. Simon's sister Jessica told me that he took two tanks of helium in his apartment in New York, near his graduate school. It was mid-December. A solitary death. Not that uncommon in New York. Not that uncommon in a big university – 34 workers and students had died in the same year, which I found out from the university press a few weeks later. Simon's name was listed last.

“You can't keep asking ‘what if,’” Jessica said. That was the first time I had met Simon's family. His parents let me stay with them for a few days. It was snowing all the time in Michigan. It was a half hour drive from their house to the cemetery. Jessica was driving Simon's old car. Traffic lights trembled in the wind, as if they were made of paper.

I was planning to visit Simon in New York for Thanksgiving but had postponed the trip to February, since Simon told me he “hadn't got his life together yet,” still in joking tone. I was patient with him. We had spent a month together in Taiwan and then five months apart, calling each other every day. I should have just gone despite everything he said. We both knew what that trip would mean for us. I would visit campuses and start with my applications. I could study anything, as long as it kept me close to him. But maybe that burdened him. He would rather take it himself, far from anyone, in his own way.

He said he didn't want me to be disappointed with him. He said he had wasted my time. He asked me to trust him that he knew what was best. He said I should still continue my studies no matter what happened. That was a short note no longer than one-third of a page, in my mailbox, a week after the news. In the last sentence, he said something we had never said to each other before, for all these months we were waiting to meet again. He didn't give me a chance to say it back.

On the bed, James and I listened to music for long hours. I liked Van Morrison, Neil Young and Jackson Browne, songs from “my previous life’s playlist,” I said. I had just turned 27 but felt very old. James was Simon’s age, a year younger than me. We listened to music in the mornings, and discussed a day’s plan, whether we would go to Tainan to see the Chihkan Tower or Chiayi to have a meal, those kind of things. We never planned beyond a day.

A few times when James got up in the daylight to go to the restroom, he was really shy, asking me not to look. James had Muscular Dystrophy and couldn’t walk without a cane. His leg muscles had weakened and maybe as a result of sitting too long in his car, the skin on his back and thighs had discolored. I remembered the day Simon introduced me to James a week after we had first met, when he was visiting his extended family in Taiwan. They had known each other in Michigan, where they grew up. Taiwan was the homeland of both of their parents. I was surprised at how big James was, and how handsome, and then came to know his condition. James told me he moved back to Taiwan to teach English after the diagnosis four years ago. He was only 22 then.

I was at ease with James after Simon died, despite what my tears said. I could see his wounds and he could see mine.

I had once told Simon that someday I wanted to write fairy tales. “They are the hardest stories to tell,” I said, “But the most beautiful.” We were hiking in Tarako Gorge in eastern Taiwan where we first met in a lodge for backpackers. Both of us liked solitary walks in the mountains, but we were surprised to enjoy spending time with each other. We spent the next few

days going to the trails together. At that time, I still had an office job and Simon was just traveling in Taiwan before graduate school started. He always said that I was quite successful as a young professional; but what I really wanted to do was to write fairy tales. I was just daydreaming about it with Simon, when we passed by sharp cliffs, looking over the green smoky river in the valley.

I told him my favorite book was Frederik Willem van Eeden's *De kleine Johannes*, which I had read in Chinese translation. The author was a Dutch psychiatrist, and not that well-known as a writer. In the story, Little John leaves home on a search for the book that answers everything; he also leaves his fairy sweetheart behind, who has taught him how to talk to plants, flowers and animals. But he is tempted by the book and the journey, only to find more philosophical questions ahead, more headwind on his faith and less happiness. Little John becomes human, I told Simon. In those days, all the stories I tried to write were simply imitations of that book.

“My mom used to have a copy of *The Little Prince* on her bedside when I was a kid. It seemed to be her favorite book.” Simon had lost his mom to an accident when he was 15. His father had remarried and Simon had a step-sister Jessica now. Simon said he wanted to devote his career to psychology, a field in which he could use his own sufferings to help other people. He was very hopeful at that time.

Simon was not typically good-looking. He was very tall but his arms were a bit too long and disproportionate. His eyes were too wide apart and hair too messy. His smile was the most awkward thing in the world. But Simon knew something about the mind, my mind. After he went back to the US, we had long conversations over the phone. I once told him about a work incident and he commented on how inappropriate and aggressive my colleague's words were even though I didn't complain about anything. Hanging up the phone, I lay on my bed facing up

and cried for a long time. I couldn't believe how lucky I was to have him. I thought about how unworthy I was that day, not being able to do the same for him. My bed in Taipei used to have four poles and a flowery patchwork styled blanket. On the blanket, pink and purple and blue, I decided that I would cherish what we had and what we were going to have. If possible, I would teach him how to talk to plants, flowers and animals. I never had a bed with poles again. Some years later, I couldn't remember what the work incident was or the particular challenge that I had back then, but I always remembered those joyful tears after the conversation, and how they slid down my cheeks on the soft pillows.

So I became a writer after all. I felt that I had to try extra hard after Simon had died, now that I carried his life with me. The first two weeks after his letter had arrived, whenever I was walking on the streets to work, I felt Simon holding my left hand. Maybe because holding hands while hiking through the narrow Jhuilu Trail was the only physical intimacy we had, with us both being so careful and understated in our relationship. But I felt every warmth of his touch. He was alive and he was walking with me everywhere I went on those overhead bridges between office buildings. I couldn't believe a heart like his would simply vanish. He must have decided that this was the better way to be with me. All I had to do was to trust his decision. And finally, I had to quit my job to write. I had to go to America to study writing. After my last day at work, I contacted James in southern Taiwan where he was having his winter break. We made love every day even though he was Simon's best friend. I had done things I had not done with Simon, and had let James fondle every part of my body. James said I was his first, and he was jealous that Simon could still have me completely. I wasn't ashamed or afraid of anything, even death. Tears just came in the most unexpected moments.

At first, James was reluctant to tell me more about Simon. “I don’t want your idea of him to change,” he said. I told him that I never thought Simon was perfect. I only came to understand later the real reason of that hesitation: him wanting to be loyal to his friend, and him wanting me to see what Simon truly was.

But during our long drives and late night intimate moments, James slowly opened up and shared how they were during their primary school years. “I wasn’t that close to him at the time. How do you put it – he was a bit awkward and picked upon in school. Simon had a hard life, and his mom passed away. He had speech impairment and would stumble when he talked. And being Asian too, you know. Not a popular kid I would say. But I was different back then, interested in sports, getting good grades. And it seemed that all I had to do was to simply follow that future path and become one of those successful Asians. It’s kind of sad though,” he paused and continued, “When we reconnected, I had already moved back to Taiwan, and my disability had worsened. It became depressing not to be able to get up from a chair without assistance. We became good friends and he visited me a few times. I guess at that time, we were in a similar stage of life. And I realized he had no problem talking to me. He was just very socially awkward.”

James held me in his arms and said he would never imagine Simon getting a girl like me. He said he was even a bit jealous the time Simon introduced me to him. But then he noticed how similar Simon and I were. I guessed he was right – I lost interest in conformity very early on in my school years.

In those days, every anecdote about Simon delighted me. I had wanted to experience life with him together, even though all I could do was to live it one more time, in other people’s memories. In Michigan, Jessica told me a story about him bumping into a tree in their backyard

when Simon first learned to drive. A college roommate at the funeral spoke about how Simon resisted trying weed with him. His high school teacher gave me a tour of their beautiful campus. But this one from James was my favorite:

“You know how most guys would suck up to pretty girls? But Simon didn’t.” He went on and told me about the time when they were having a meal together with some of James’s friends, and a girl teased Simon by putting her spoon in his soup bowl. “He got really annoyed. He just picked it up and put it on the table very rudely. Everyone was kind of embarrassed.”

I thought about that story all the time, about the way some people liked to execute their power over others, with or without intention, simply because they could; how sad that the only way we managed to survive was to put each other down, to channel our loss on one another; and how powerless Simon was because of his gentlest heart.

When I realized what I had done to James, it was too late. He had been wanting to introduce me to his friends, although I always said no. Unlike Simon and myself, James had a lot of friends to do things with together. Life in his small town used to be simple: karaoke after work, shrimp fishing, or going to one of the two bars. For James, friendships were so important that he would get sentimental when people moved to a nearby city or got married. He had people calling him while driving all the time. Only once he didn’t pick up the phone, as I was sitting topless next to him on a chilly night in January while he was driving on a highway. James said that he couldn’t wait to see me without clothes, and I just fulfilled his wish right away. It wasn’t something that I had ever done before. I didn’t even like to wear revealing clothes or miniskirts like the fashionable Taiwanese girls, let alone be caught naked on the highway. James didn’t know how

to keep his eyes straight. I could have easily gotten both of us killed, and I felt alive for a moment.

And then he suggested we go to the hot spring resorts in Guanziling, the suburban area of Tainan. I knew James was underpaid in his teaching so didn't agree at first. Hot springs were a couples activity, not the same as love hotels. But he asked me to stay there at least one night with him. And finally, I agreed.

The room was larger and had a uniform light brown furnishing. There were two hot spring tubs in the bath, one with burning water and the other icy. Plenty of soft white towels and spa lotion bottles lined up near the tubs. We only stayed in the hot one, legs crossing each other, where James told me that he would break things off with a girl he had been dating for a year and a half. I didn't know he had a girlfriend before. She was from Mongolia and didn't speak either Chinese or English well. But she cared for James so much that she helped James's grandparents run errands sometimes. Of course, she had no idea where he was these past three weeks, and some friends who called must have told her about James, Simon and me.

"I haven't been replying to her messages these days." He said. It might have been mist from the heated water, but I thought James had tears in his eyes. He cared for her too. "I want to be with you," he said. "I will wait."

I kept a diary for Simon for an entire year. I had never been a disciplined writer. But at that time, I wrote to Simon every night. I still have it in a locked folder on my old computer, stored in my parents' place when I moved across the ocean. Sometimes it came to me that after a few years, I might not be able to start the computer again and the folder could be locked forever. But

maybe nothing I wrote really mattered. It was all very trivial: what I had done during the day – picking up milk and broccoli in the supermarket, frying broccoli with garlic, studying for the GRE, taking community college writing classes. Simon used to love hearing me talk about these things. You said I was strong for just doing that. I told you about James too, how I contacted him and showed him your letter, and how we played all the music you liked in one night. I confessed about the sex, about bringing bad luck to James and the kind Mongolian girl who was now heartbroken. I told you how I returned to Taipei after the hot springs, feeling that I was the worst person in the world, that I was the person who needed to die. I wrote about my plan while I was in Michigan, and how that plan had failed staying with Jessica and your parents, who treated me like their daughter even though they had never heard of me before. How much I cared about them, but I was too afraid to keep in close contact afterwards, afraid that my mere existence was a reminder of sadness. I wrote about my dreams too, dreams of me making love with you for the first time. Dreams of you wanting me, wanting to come inside of me. I would do anything to make you forget about that pain, to keep you alive.

One of my writing teachers, Sophie, said I was the best in her class, and asked me if I wanted her to write a recommendation letter. We only had five people in the community college class, but I felt that it was a big honor. She looked over my school list, and said, “Before you do this, really think about how much you want it. Some people like the idea of being writers, and some people have to write.” I could only think at that moment that no matter how much better I could write, how much I could improve in the future, and how many stories I could create to make people cringe or smile for a while, Simon would just never come back to me again.

But what other choices do I have?

Simon had ordered a copy of *De kleine Johannes* without telling me. It was brought back to Michigan by Jessica from his New York apartment. At the end of the journey, Little John believes that only death can take him back to his home and his fairy sweetheart. I could never forgive myself for introducing him to this simple love story. Without expectations, he wouldn't have felt so inadequate. He would struggle, but still live, like he always did. But now, what other choices do I have?

My writing teacher Sophie and I were sitting in a taxi, and before she got off, she crossed out one school from my list. "If I were you, I wouldn't go to UC Riverside. You are a city girl. There's nothing there," she said.

I hadn't seen James for three years after that. The next time when I saw him, I had already moved to Washington DC for my writing program. After all, Sophie might be right, I was a city girl. How ironic, I thought, at one time I had been fearless, but now I was afraid of small things such as driving a car. I sent a few pieces to small journals, and taught some beginning writing courses for young children. I started dating a veterinarian in the city, whom I visited with my cat Minnie frequently when I first moved. He read all the stories I wrote and didn't judge me for any deviant thoughts my characters had. I laughed all the time when I was with him, feeling like a happy-go-lucky child again. I took simple pleasure in good food, good movies and good hikes again. Besides, taking care of Minnie, having a small animal depend on me, brought so much joy to my heart.

Only after three years was I able to contact James. I came back to Taipei in the summer for my cousin's wedding. My veterinarian boyfriend Coleman travelled with me to a few cities in

Taiwan, his first time in Asia. When we stayed in Chiayi before going to Ali Mountain, I remembered that James's small town was only half an hour away, so I called him with the same number on my phone. It surprised me when James picked up. He said he lived in Taichung now but he would drive to see us the next morning.

We had lunch at a hotpot place James recommended. When he first walked in, I ran out and hugged him. He was sweating from the summer heat and had lost some weight from what I remembered. He looked more like an adult though, like myself. I smelt the sweat on his neck and his polo shirt.

We had two different kinds of soup for the hotpot, and ordered beef and vegetables. We talked about my life in America, my studies and how I met Coleman. I learned that James had just broken up with someone, but he said it wasn't a serious relationship. And there's my boyfriend, knowing my story with Simon and seeing James's condition, never changing his attitude towards anyone. I thought at that time, maybe he really understood something I had and didn't mind.

James said that he was thinking of going back to America to finish his bachelor's degree. He never told me he had dropped out of college after the diagnosis. He said that he had wasted many years in Taiwan, but he was emotionally ready now to go back to what he had left there, before he would turn 30. He said he wanted to change his major to psychology and had done enough research on the professors he wanted to work with. He said he was particularly interested in how people could use narratives to change one's mental well-being. His journey over the past few years made him become interested in the field. I looked at James when he said that and wondered whether there were other reasons, too. Coleman asked him many questions about his applications, and encouraged him to go back to school, but to be realistic about his choices. He

sounded like an uncle talking to a teenager. James, on the other hand, didn't mind taking his advice at all. And I realized how much my mind had changed over these three years as well. I found myself agreeing with Coleman when he mentioned that some Californian schools might have better weather and easier-to-access campuses.

James talked about his disability openly, which was something we never talked about before. He said due to his inability to exercise, he had ballooned up to 250 pounds, but was at 180 now. He said that he would write about his weight loss in his personal statement, and I agreed to help him polish the essay. "You are a good writer now," he smiled, sitting opposite to us, "You know it was you who inspired me to have this courage. I used to have a list of things you told me you wanted to do, and now look, you have done all that."

I smiled at him too. Maybe later in the day when nobody saw me, I could have a good cry. "Don't be silly," a phrase I had often said to Simon before. "Don't be silly, James."

We didn't finish all the hot pot food since Coleman and I had to catch a bus to Ali Mountain. I hugged James again when we said goodbye. I saw that he had a new car parked outside of the restaurant. What happened to his grandparents' old silver car? In that car he carried me from city to city. I carried him with my body, night after night in the motels. That was the way we mourned.

I asked about his grandparents at last, assuming they were well. But James told me that his grandfather had recently passed, leaving him some inheritance to cover his studies. Three years, I thought. In some cases, they pass by so quickly, uneventfully; and in others, they were a lifetime. He said that his grandma would still ask about me from time to time. "That girl from Taipei," she said, 'how is she now?'" I had only stopped by his grandparents' place briefly before we

went on that road trip after Simon had died. James's grandma seemed to like me a lot even though I didn't understand all of her Hokkien. She gave me pineapple cakes and held me with her wrinkled hands.

I don't remember when I stopped writing to Simon. Maybe it was when I first finished writing a story, one with an ending, a fairy tale. As I had told Simon before, I still believed that fairy tales were the hardest to write. And I had revised that story so many times, still not being able to get it right. But I like revisiting something from a while ago and changing it into something new. I started to write other stories too, more realistic ones, more angry ones, and more passionate ones. Or maybe I'm just writing a different kind of fairy tale now. A different kind of love letter. One after another, my letters piled up. Some of them better than others. After many old songs, many espressos, and many sleepless nights. And I believe, I really believe, that Simon will be able to read all of them.