

徐卓呆：甚為佳妙  
**Fantastically Fabulous**

By Xu Zhuodai

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I

In the editorial office facing the street, with the plate glass windows half-covered by white curtains, one newly arrived Mr Wang was talking with the director: 'Now the most urgent job is the product map. If you, kind sir, accept the offer to do the cartographic work here in my department, we shall be very grateful if you could make the product map your priority, as the printing staff has already requested it several times. Since previously nobody was in charge of cartography, it has been delayed for a full three months. Your arrival gives us hope that it will be published!'

Director Tao of the Geography Department had a chubby face on which rested askew a pair of thick-rimmed tortoise-shell glasses that weighed a full four ounces. He eyed people directly from above the glasses, with which he came equipped but hardly used. In front of the two of them sat a draft product map hastily sketched out by Mr Tao.

Mr Wang was a master artist who had just graduated from a college of fine arts, with hair so long it reached his shoulders, and around his neck a black-silk bow-tie as large as the white silky knot actors playing martial roles wear in front of their chests. He was wearing a black wool suit, with grains of white scattered on his shoulders and back. It was dandruff, which he would not brush off with a wood comb, and thus fell rampant onto his clothes. He was unwilling to admit that he was too lazy to comb his hair, but instead blamed his wife for it:

'My hair has been under her care since we got married. She used to comb it for me every day. Now she's back in her hometown and I'm here all alone. That's why my hair has temporarily become like those "unregistered westerners" reported in the local news.'

His words not only cloaked his laziness, but also flaunted how affectionate he and his wife were.

‘This is a draft I drew. In case you don’t understand it, feel free to ask me about it any time you’d like. As for the main ideas, we just talked about them a moment ago.’

Director Tao of the Geography Department once again explained his draft.

‘That’s a piece of cake! Commonplace things like drawing maps are not worth my effort. You can just have some guys who work on advertisement posters or pencil drawings of photos sketch them out. My interest is in post-Impressionism and I just don’t want to do this kind of non-artistic work. But, for one thing, Mr Yang referred me and I feel obliged to accept his offer. Secondly, I have no task in hand just now, so I think it might be just as well for me to get some work to do.’

Mr Wang took a perfunctory look at the draft map on the table, and without waiting for Mr Tao to offer, from a tin of Great Wall Cigarettes next to the ink bottle on Mr Tao’s desk, he fetched one out, lit it, and blew out a few puffs of smoke.

‘I’ve drawn simple things like this when I was working at the Publicity Department of the Department of Foreign Affairs, but I would draw one a day. This one is a bit more complicated, but I am sure it should take no longer than a week. Would you please arrange my future duties for me? Or I’ll feel bad about just sitting idle after this job is done.’

This was in late December. Mr Tao and Mr Wang immediately made a deal that the latter would come to work starting from January. As 1 January is the New Year holiday, he would report for duty on the second. With this great painter joining the Geography Department, all the tasks that had been postponed due to wanting maps could expect to be published in the near future.

## II

When the time to open the office arrived at nine o’clock in the morning on 2 January, Mr Tao and three other employees had all arrived one by one at the Geography Department. Mr Yang, who had introduced Mr Wang but had happened to be away the day when Mr Tao had arranged things with Mr Wang, was also an editor in the department and was one of the four to have signed in. However, by a quarter past nine Mr Wang had yet to appear.

‘Did Mr Wang agree the other day to report for work today?’

Mr Yang looked back to ask Director Tao.

‘Sure! He knew that New Year’s Day was a holiday and that today he would come to work by nine.’

Mr Tao answered, eyeing Mr Yang from above his glasses as usual. After this exchange, everyone just set the matter aside and focused on their own business.

After a while, from outside the door came footsteps, inevitably reminding everyone of the question of Mr Wang, whom everyone had already forgotten, making them think that he was coming. When the door opened, however, they saw it was a steward bringing pastries for Mr Zhou, and not Mr Wang.

When the clock struck ten Mr Wang was still like a stone dropped into the sea. At around 10:40 a.m., he suddenly pushed the door open and entered the room. Everyone was about to greet him, but he appeared as if he did not see them at all.

‘Fantastically fabulous!’

Mr Wang, after making this opener, continued:

‘I saw something extraordinary today. A woman in high heels somehow broke the heel off her right shoe when jumping off the tram. Everyone watching that small chunk of black wood rolling down the street was so amused! The woman blushed, but would not pick up the broken heel—even if she had, she wouldn’t have been able to put it back on anyway. She really couldn’t walk what with one step high and one step low. It was hilarious!’

Nobody knew to whom he was addressing these words. All four assumed Mr Wang was going to explain why he had arrived late, so they listened with all ears. Who could have imagined that once he finished his little speech, he was merely imparting a piece of trivia he witnessed on his way in? Mr Yang seemed a little dissatisfied and, out of his responsibility as the recommender, felt obliged to inquire:

‘Why are you so late today? Something wrong?’

Upon hearing this, Mr Wang gave Mr Yang a surprised stare.

‘Not at all! Last night some people came over to play mah-jong and I didn’t get to sleep until daybreak. So how could I get out of the house so early! Most magnificent!’

As he responded Mr Wang noticed an unoccupied desk and chair by the wall. Knowing that it was for him to use, he walked over, looked at the desk, took off his hat, and hung it on the hat stand.

‘Mr Wang, please take a look around. If there is anything else you need, just fill in a form and collect it at the General Affairs Office.’

As Mr Tao told him this, Mr Wang nodded, fetched a copy of today’s newspaper from Mr Tao’s desk, and started to read it with his right foot propped on his desk.

‘Ah! Forgot to bring my cigarettes. Totally pathetic!’

Mr Wang stood up and walked over to his old acquaintance Mr Yang. Oblivious to the fact that Mr Yang was engaged in his work, Mr Wang just opened the left drawer of Mr Yang’s desk and sure enough found a tin of cigarettes. He took one out and went back to his seat, lit it, and continued to read his newspaper.

‘What’s the brand of your cigarettes? It’s awful! Is it Rickshaw?’

Mr Yang kept his silence while Mr Wang calmly read his newspaper. The other four were of course busy with their work and could spare no attention to the actions of others. One was flipping through a book, while another was holding his pen, and yet another was gathering his thoughts. Suddenly an outcry tore apart the silence in the room.

‘Aha! A monk was robbed, his robe ripped off, bare from head to toe! Fantastically fabulous!’

With this outcry too loud to be ignored, everyone turned to look at Mr Wang. There was nothing Director Tao could do. It’s just Mr Wang’s first day of work, he thought, and it seems inappropriate to interfere with him too much; all we can do is let him realize that everyone else is working hard, and he will surely buckle down to his job.

Mr Wang’s newspaper reading was more genuine than anything: every piece of news, big or small, not even the advertisements, could escape his attention. Thus, before he had finished his reading, the lunch bell rang outside.

### III

Knowing that they needed to start working at two o’clock after lunch, Mr Wang went to the Mengyuan Hotel to meet a friend, while the other staff went to the activity room to play Chinese chess or get some exercise.

Before the clock struck three, Mr Wang came back with a lotus leaf wrap in his hands.

‘I really don’t like the food here. How can you bring yourselves to eat it? Look at this meat: if it were June, it would have been blown to the ground by the electric fan. I don’t feel full at all!’

Saying that, Mr Wang opened the wrap, which turned out to contain braised pork. He sat obliquely on his chair and moved the pork, one slice after another, into his mouth using three fingers of his right hand.

‘Not enough time to read the newspaper! So much to do today! I’ll read more of it tomorrow! Totally pathetic!’

He talked to himself while looking at the unfinished newspaper. Instead of returning it to Mr Tao, he wiped the grease off his fingers with the edges of the paper.

Having finished eating his pork, Mr Wang took up paper and pen to note down his account. He listed the items he needed while humming:

‘Yesterday I waited for thee until the clock struck nine.

Today I wait for thee, and now the clock strikes eleven.

My dear lover, again thou are not coming to me.

Boo-hoo, boo-hoo, poor me ...’

The others in the room couldn’t help laughing at him. Staff from other departments, hearing someone singing Sizhou Opera in the Geography Department, quite often also popped their heads in to have a look. Mr Wang completed his list and rang the bell to call a steward.

‘Take this list and go get me these items at the General Affairs Office. And hurry!’

After the steward left, Mr Wang began gazing over the window curtains at the street. He saw a rickshaw carrying a man with blood all over his face, under the escort of two policemen and followed by a horde of onlookers. At the sight of this, Mr Wang’s curiosity was piqued and he moved at once closer to the window to get a better look. Then he just left, probably to explore in more detail on the street.

When he had satisfied his curiosity and returned, everyone else was still working and seemingly unaware of his return from street patrol. Only the steward was waiting for him.

‘Have you got all the things?’

‘No, sir. The General Affairs Office doesn’t have the items in stock, so they’ll have to go buy them. It’s too late today; they’ll do it tomorrow morning.’

‘Why too late today?’

‘It’s after four o’clock and the Evans Store is already closed.’

‘Gosh, it’s already four now? Oh no ...’

Mr Wang’s eyes lingered in panic between the clock on the wall and the watch on his wrist.

‘I have an appointment with one of my fellow townsmen at the Tongyuchun Restaurant at four. It will not do to stand him up!’

After tossing off these words, Mr Wang took his hat from the hat stand and hurried off. The steward, staring blankly, glanced over at the other four gentlemen, who were still working, and heard Mr Wang shouting outside.

‘Rickshaw! Fool! Fabulously fantastic!’

#### IV

On the following day, it was over half past ten when Mr Wang arrived at the editorial office, as it had been the day before. Mr Yang was going to ask him why but in the event did not, afraid that it would be embarrassing if Mr Wang came up with an implausible reason.

Mr Wang, once seated, first smoked a cigarette and then read his newspaper as he had done the day before, thereby frittering away a whole hour, after which he wanted to chat, but seeing that everyone was working hard, he felt snubbed, so he rang the bell to call the steward over:

‘Has the General Affairs Office bought what I need?’

‘Yes. I’ll go and get it all for you now.’

The steward went back out and came back in with a big bag of stuff, putting it on Mr Wang’s desk. Mr Wang opened the bag and checked all the items one by one.

‘This set square is made in Japan; it needs to be exchanged. And the paint needs to be Carter brand, same with the ink. Just return these to the General Affairs Office and tell them to exchange them according to my requests as soon as possible. Most magnificent!’

He took out several items and handed them to the steward. After the steward left, Mr Wang took a pictorial magazine he had bought from a newsstand out of his breast pocket and started to read it. Before long there came the lunch bell. As he had been invited to lunch at the Yuebin Restaurant today, Mr Wang hurried off.

Sometime past three he came back with a toothpick in his mouth, looking a bit tipsy. Seeing that Mr Tao was neither reading nor writing but rather sunk in thought, Mr Wang went over for a chat and showed Mr Tao the pictorial.

‘Have you seen this, Mr Tao? These are awful pieces of work; here’s Ou Meng’s drawing: see how weak the lines are. This one is painted by the famous Leng Feng; he’s just too green. Totally pathetic!’

Mr Tao took the magazine to have a look. Since Mr Tao was an outsider, as Mr Wang critiqued this and that, all Mr Tao could do was to go along. After a while, he suddenly asked:

“Luxi!” That’s your given name, Mr Wang. So you have a work published here, too?”

‘Yes! Actually I don’t like making submissions, not to mention publishing my work together with *their* paintings. It was only that Mr Xiao Tongying, the editor, asked me again and again, so I sent them this piece. It expresses my personality and took me a full three months to finish.’

When Wang Luxi had finished speaking, Mr Tao naturally inspected his masterpiece with great solemnity and full attention.

‘Marvellous! Your reputation is well-deserved! Is it a weasel? How incredible!’

‘No! It’s a cat. Look! It has a butterfly in its mouth. This is called a *Maodie* 猫耨 Image.’<sup>1</sup>

‘Hah hah, a cat? I mistook the butterfly in its mouth for an old shoe!’

Knowing that he had spoken out of turn, Mr Tao dared say no more. Seeing he had failed to garner a compliment, Mr Wang seemed to be greatly dissatisfied.

‘Artistic works are totally different from genre paintings. When you draw a cat, it does not necessarily have to resemble a cat; it also works if it looks like a weasel. From my artistic perspective, however, it is indeed like a cat! It is very difficult to understand it at this level! Anyway, art is truly sacred ...’

Mr Wang listlessly took his magazine and went back to his desk, whispering:

‘Ivory tower! Most magnificent!’

## V

It had been a few days since Mr Wang started to work at the editorial office, but he had not yet drawn a single line of the map, nor had he spread out any drawing paper on his desk or dipped his pen into the inkpot. Out of anxiety Mr Tao had to quietly ask Mr Yang, the person who had referred him, to urge Mr Wang to attend to his work. When nobody was around, Mr Yang raised the issue with Mr Wang.

‘How come you haven’t started to work yet? You seem busy all day long, but you are not drawing the map!’

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<sup>1</sup> ‘*Mao*’ 耨 means cat in Chinese, ‘*die*’ 耨 butterfly. Its homophone ‘*maodie*’ refers to people in their eighties or nineties. *Maodie* Image can be used as a gift to wish people a long and healthy life.



‘I feel quite restless these days, so how can I focus on my job? Why don’t you take my feelings into consideration?’

Mr Yang Bingxin had no idea what Mr Wang was talking about. He had intended to advise him with the best of intentions, but, instead of being grateful, Wang complained.

‘What makes you feel so restless? I had no idea!’

‘Sexual frustration ...’

Mr Wang smiled as he said this.

‘It has been three months or so since I left home. Next week, isn’t it the Lunar New Year holiday? I’m going to go back, for about seven to eight days, and will report back on the fifth of the first lunar month. Otherwise it will be difficult to solve my problem. Totally pathetic!’

Mr Yang did not know what else to say, given that Mr Wang had blurted it out so starkly. Fortunately, the Lunar New Year is close, and it might be better to talk more after he comes back from holiday.

Mr Wang, noticing the steward coming in to serve tea, asked:

‘A moment ago I gave you a list and told you to get the things for me at the General Affairs Office. Have you got them?’

The steward hesitated and wouldn’t answer the question.

‘Did you forget about it? How can you be so stupid?’

‘I haven’t forgotten and I did go there. Mr Jin of the General Affairs Office said, “that Mr Wang has been working for us for no longer than a week but he has already asked for envelopes and letter paper three times; and each time he takes two hundred of each, for a total of six hundred! Why does he want more today? No more for him! And pencils, why does he want a dozen? Normally we use pencils one by one, and won’t ask for a second until the first is used up. The day before yesterday he took a red one and a black one, and now he wants a dozen more. I won’t approve it! In future he needs to ask Mr Tao to sign before he can get anything!” And Mr Jin even scolded *me*!’

As he spoke, the steward turned his head to look at Mr Tao. Mr Wang, upon hearing this, went scarlet with anger, and waved his hand at the steward.

‘All right! All right! I don’t need it any more! Off you go!’

The steward went out with an awkward look. Wang Luxi hit his fist sharply on



the desk several times in anger, his vision fixed on it:

‘For god’s sake! None of those is your personal belongings, so why must you be so stingy? These things belong to the boss, not you, Mr Jin! Are you kidding me? I didn’t eat the envelopes and letter paper, and I didn’t take them home; they’re all lying in my drawer! And do pencils really cost all that much? When I worked in the Publicity Department, I would always ask for three or four dozen each month and no one said anything about it! I would even take some back to give away as presents! Now I still have several hundred envelopes and pieces of letter paper from the Publicity Department. Who do you think I am? You don’t have to try this hard to butter up your boss ...’

Mr Wang was berating people, swearing all on his own, since no one else had any intention of getting involved. After a while he resentfully tore up a newspaper on his desk. He tore as he swore, and swore as he tore, throwing the scraps of paper on the floor. The steward would have extra work to do when he came to sweep the floor the next day.

‘Excuse me, but may I borrow a compass?’

Mr Zhou, who all of a sudden needed to draw a circle, came to borrow one from Mr Wang, who had just asked the General Affairs Office to buy a set of drawing instruments.

‘I don’t have it here!’

‘Did someone from another department borrow it?’

‘No, I took it home!’

Mr Wang had taken the box of instruments home last night so he could draw a powder puff for a lady living across the street from him.

## VI

Mr Wang, who travelled back to his hometown during the Chinese New Year holidays in order to deal with his ‘sexual frustration’, did not turn up at the editorial office when everyone else resumed work on the third day of the new lunar year. It was the same on the fourth and fifth. And when on the sixth and seventh, there was still no word from him, Mr Tao started to worry:

‘Why hasn’t Mr Wang come to work? The steamers have already started to run again.’

He asked Yang Bingxin.

'Yesterday I called at his place at the White Horse Painting Society, and it's true that he hasn't returned yet. He should be back in a day or two.'

Mr Yang's answer sounded like a defense.

Also in the room was Mr Cao, who seldom spoke. As he suddenly laughed out loud, everyone turned to him and asked:

'What are you laughing at?'

'Had Wang Luxi not gone home at all, that would have been that, but once he did go, it'll be at least a month before he returns!'

With pen in hand, Mr Cao explained this to them with a broad smile.

'I know this because I used to work with him. Before he left he would claim that he was going to be away for only three days, but it always turned out to be thirty. Someone even made a bet with him that he definitely couldn't make it back in three days. He felt as if he were being insulted and took the bet out of indignation. In the end he returned after a month, and just laughed off his losing the bet.'

Mr Cao having thus briefed them on Mr Wang's past, everyone realized that Mr Wang would not return within the month and mentioned him no more.

On the morning of the sixteenth, the telephone rang and before too long the steward announced:

'Mr Yang, it's for you!'

Mr Yang went over and picked up the receiver.

'Who's there?'

'It's me, Wang Luxi!'

'Hi! You're back? Where are you? Come to the office as soon as you can!'

'I just got back and feel extremely tired, so I can't come in today. I am at the Sincere Co. now, most magnificent!'

'I'll see you tomorrow then.'

Yang Bingxin returned to his seat after hanging up. Knowing that Mr Wang had returned, they all thought he would come to work the day after. Who would have foreseen that he would not come the next day, either? In the evening Mr Yang visited his place, but he was not there. When he asked the steward, the latter said that Mr Wang had returned with two of his fellow townsmen the day before, and they had all gone to see a movie today.

The following day shortly after half past ten, Mr Wang stepped into the editorial office with a big smile and burst out an artistic exclamation upon meeting his four colleagues.

‘Totally pathetic!’

‘Hey, it’s Mr Wang!’

With everyone standing up to say hello, Mr Wang stood in front of Mr Tao and said:

‘Back in my hometown there is a Dawang Ritual on the nineteenth of the first lunar month. It’s held every twelve years, and this happens to be the year. Sadly, I don’t have the time to join in; what a pity! I was still a child when I last participated!’

He sounded really regretful. The others, however, had no interest in the Dawang Ritual so they didn’t pick up the thread. Feeling snubbed, Mr Wang walked to his desk, finding it thick with dust, to which he could not help expressing his irritation:

‘Steward!’

The steward came immediately after hearing his call.

‘Why haven’t you dusted my desk? It’s covered with dust!’

Then Mr Wang squatted down and took a closer look from the edge of the desk.

‘I used to dust it every day just after the New Year, but when you failed to show up for so long, I stopped doing it. I planned to dust it all at once after you came back.’

The steward had a good understanding of economics.

‘Well, from now on you should dust once a day.’

Mr Wang, his anger extinguished, for some reason laughed to himself. The steward hurried to dust his desk with a cloth.

‘Fetch the newspaper for me!’

‘It’s on Mr Tao’s desk!’

‘Not just today’s. I want to read all of them, starting from the first day of the New Year.’

What a voracious reader of the daily papers Mr Wang was! Although he had not come in for over half a month, he planned to make up for the missed reading of the period, issue by issue. Indeed! However late he arrived every day, he would never skip his hour of newspaper-reading!

## VII

Mr Wang finally got together all the instruments necessary for his work, but just as he was about to start drawing the map, he suddenly applied for sick leave. He told Mr Tao:

‘Recently my gonorrhoea has relapsed, probably because my work is too exhausting.’

I need to rest for a few days, which the doctor also advised. He said that my life is at risk if I keep working. I plan to apply for a three-week leave, then see what happens after my convalescence. I'll come back once I feel better ...'

Mr Tao found himself in a dilemma regarding granting this leave, and thus just stood there speechlessly.

'One more thing. I'm going to go to the venereal disease convalescent home, but I don't have a penny in my pocket, so if you could please advance me three months' salary ...'

'Well ...'

Just as Mr Tao was about to reply, Mr Wang continued on.

'I am not asking the boss to pay me for nothing! I still work for him, after all, and I've never reported his corruption, so there should be at least this much feeling between us!'

Today Mr Wang asked the steward to give him a cup of boiled water. He took out a bottle of amber-coloured pills and swallowed a few. Before working hours were over he got up to leave, his two legs walking as if not daring to get close to one another, saying to himself:

'Fantastically fabulous! Totally pathetic!'

After Mr Wang left, Mr Jin of the General Affairs Office came over and said to Mr Tao:

'Recently your department used much more draft paper than usual, fully four to five times more; why is that? Would you please pay attention to that in the future?'

Mr Tao, unable to explain the reason, could only nod and promise to do so. Just as Mr Jin turned around, Mr Tang giggled:

'One Sunday I went to visit Mr Wang when he was on the toilet, and I saw something quite amazing. Beside the chamber pot there was a stack of paper he was using as toilet paper. And what do you think it was? It was all draft paper from our editorial department! Mr Jin would never have allowed it if he knew this.'

'So he took all the paper home?'

Mr Tao frowned. As the clock struck five and everyone was about to get off work, Mr Tao quietly told Mr Yang not to leave right away. At last when there were finally only the two of them left in the room, Mr Tao walked over to Mr Yang and said in a whisper:

‘Mr Wang collected loads of stuff from the General Affairs Office to take them home for his personal use. This is just not good. I’ve been aware of it for a long time, but without clear evidence it was not proper for me to tell him to stop. Now that the General Affairs Office has complained, I have to say something about it. When you have the chance, could you please tell him to stop doing this? Stuff like paper, ink, and pens doesn’t cost all that much, so why must he take it from us? He can buy a lot of such things with just one *yuan*!’

‘It’s rather difficult to talk to him about this, too. I’m really afraid that he’ll get angry! Once he hears so much as a word that gets on his nerves, he’ll slap his desk and start cursing people. If he ever acts up here and people from other departments hear him, won’t we be the ones who look ridiculous? Moreover, last time you told me to take him to task for being late for work, he got extremely angry and even cursed you,’ said Yang Bingxin, looking helpless.

‘...’

‘Actually, I wasn’t really willing to recommend him here! It was all because Mr Lu, our Chief Editor, again and again asked me to look for suitable candidates, and I couldn’t find the proper person, so I had to mention him. I had no idea that Mr Lu would say yes right away!’

‘In that case, please talk to him if the opportunity arises, or there really will be no way for me to explain this!’

## VIII

Mr Wang did not come back to the editorial office until after he had convalesced from his gonorrhoea for over fifty days. By his own account, he had still not fully recovered and still needed an injection every other day. A few days before he returned to work, a colleague from the Advertising Department had seen him enjoying Tanhuang Opera at the Tianyun Pavilion.

He seemed elated on the first day of his return. Although he arrived after ten o’clock, Mr Wang did not spend time reading the newspapers he had missed in his over fifty days off, or even today’s, but rather spread a piece of drawing paper on his desk and penciled some lines here and there, planning to draft the product map. Seeing that Mr Wang was becoming serious, Mr Cao could not help being surprised:

‘What an auspicious day!’

As Mr Cao said this to no one in particular, everyone else had no idea what he was talking about. It was a rare event indeed that Mr Wang was concentrated on

his drawing, his hand moving non-stop over the paper. Mr Tao was utterly pleased to be seeing this!

That afternoon, a burst of military music floated in from the eastern direction of the street. On hearing it, Mr Wang immediately stood up, walked over to the window, and stretched out his head and neck to look around. There was a pair of standing lanterns, a parade of musicians, and a bridal sedan chair, heading from east to west.

‘Most magnificent! There are so many weddings today. On my way here just now I saw two, and now here’s another one!’

‘What an auspicious day!’

Mr Tang coldly said this again. The meaning of the utterance this time was quite different from that of the one Mr Cao had spoken just a while ago.

‘What an inauspicious day!’

Mr Wang said as he moved away from the window and returned to his seat, making everyone laugh.

‘God! Totally pathetic! Totally pathetic!’

All one could see was him pounding on his desk. It turned out that a moment ago when he heard the military music and hurried to take a look, he had put the half cigarette in his hand on his desk. He now returned only to find that a big hole had been burnt in the pencil draft of the product map, which was the one result of his three months’ work at the editorial office. Pounding the desk was of no avail.

‘Totally pathetic! I have to redraw it for once!’

This Mr Wang had three and a half pet phrases, the three being ‘fantastically fabulous’, ‘most magnificent’, and ‘totally pathetic’, with the half being ‘XX for once’. For example, for eating, he would say, ‘eat for once’; for going to the restroom, he would say, ‘go to the restroom for once’. In his grammatical system, however, the phrase ‘for once’ did not necessarily follow a verb; sometimes it followed a noun. For example, for watching movies, he would say ‘movie for once’; for flirting with girls, ‘girls for once’; ‘chatting for once’, ‘a pancake for once’, ‘gonorrhoea for once’, ‘diarrhoea for once’, and so on were all applications of this half pet phrase. Anyway, these three and a half phrases could be used flexibly and could fit in everywhere, showing that Mr Wang was indeed an artist.

‘I have to redraw it for once!’

He bunched up the burnt drawing paper, threw it onto the floor, and struck the bell to call over the steward:

‘Drawing paper for once!’

The steward stared dumbly at Mr Wang, his eyes wide open. Mr Wang knew that the steward’s ears had as yet to be aestheticised, so he explained:

‘Get me some drawing paper! I want paper made in Germany for once!’

Having nothing to do after telling the steward to go, Mr Wang looked around high and low until he noticed something that excited his attention on the wall calendar.

‘Gosh! Wednesday! It’s Wednesday today! I almost forgot that today there’s a new movie! I’d better leave right now!’

He looked at the clock on the wall, as if it was a great opportunity that he simply could not miss:

‘It’s two forty-five! There’s a quarter of an hour left, so I should have enough time.’

Without waiting for the steward to return with the drawing paper, Mr Wang rushed to fetch his hat, put it on, and was about to stride out.

‘Totally pathetic!’

As he was leaving, he suddenly stopped and went over to Yang Bingxin’s desk.

‘Aren’t there two one-*yuan* notes in your wallet? Lend me one!’

He already knew how much money others had in their wallets. Yang Bingxin felt as if he had run into a bandit.

‘What for?’

‘To see the movie! Most magnificent! I must leave *now*!’

‘To see a movie? Why do you need to go now?’

‘It starts at three!’

‘There is another screening at seven in the evening!’

Yang Bingxin was trying very hard to protect his cash.

‘I like to go to the matinees!’

‘Then why don’t you go on Sunday?’

‘It’s Wednesday today and there’s a new movie on. Fantastically fabulous!’

Mr Yang glanced at the others in the room, and moved close to Mr Wang’s ear:

‘It’s still working hours!’

Mr Wang snapped:

‘Don’t you know my temper? I can’t focus on my work if I miss a good movie. You must understand that seeing movies is the most important job of an artist, and not just that: it’s sacred.’

Seeing that it was impossible to hold Mr Wang back, Yang Bingxin still hoped to keep his cash safe:

‘I still need the money! I need to buy some stuff today.’

‘You won’t lend it to me? Tightwad! Forget it!’

Mr Wang angrily hurried over to Mr Cao’s desk, still grumbling. The others could only hear a few words, like:

‘A short loan for once! Rich for once!’ He pestered Mr Cao for some time and finally succeeded in securing a one-*yuan* loan. Before leaving the room, however, he looked over and gave Mr Yang the side-eye.

## IX

During the rainy season, it is unpredictable whether it will be sun or rain, and suddenly Mr Wang didn’t come to the office for three days in a row. On the afternoon of the fourth day, he walked in with a big smile on his face and said to Yang Bingxin:

‘Do you know why I didn’t show up these past few days?’

‘A relapse!’

‘No! Because my wife is here, and I’ve been very busy these days working for Xue Dubi in the “Home Affairs Office”!’

As he said this, he cast a self-satisfied glance at the others, as if to say that no one could possibly have a wife as pretty and capable as his. He sat there quietly thinking with a cigarette in his mouth, not drawing anything.

‘Silence and meditation are bread and water to artists.’

Today Mr Wang did nothing but fidget and made frequent phone calls.

‘Is this the Ma residence? Please tell the sixth young lady that the third young mistress of the Wang family has arrived in Shanghai!’

‘Is that Dr Yan? This is Wang Luxi speaking! My son is grinding his teeth at night; may I ask what kind of medicine he should take? Oh I see!’

‘Is this the Silk Department of the Sincere Co.? Could you please let me know the price per foot of the cheapest Huasi silk?’

‘Hello! West 189! Is this Yunfei Motors? I’d like to book a cabriolet. What? Not available? Totally pathetic!’

‘Hi there, is this the Wancheng Soy Co.? Send three cattles of soy sauce to No. 1, XX Lane. Be quick about it!’



‘Is this Yuan Laosan? You coming over to play mah-jong tonight? My wife is here! You just have to come! Why not? Sick? You jackass!’

Mr Wang called here and there, and even when the switchboard operator at the telephone company would no longer connect his calls, he was still yelling:

‘499!’

As he was yelling at the top of his voice, the steward came over to him and whispered in his ear:

‘The tailor is here again!’

‘Tell him I’m not here!’

‘He has already heard you making phone calls!’

Mr Wang frowned and hung up the receiver to think of a plan, but the tailor had already charged in:

‘Mr Wang!’

‘Go outside!’

‘There’s no place to sit outside. It’s better here!’

Mr Wang got a little irritated for failing to drive the tailor out of the room.

‘Why do you insist on coming today? I didn’t ask you to come today!’

‘The last time I came, you said you had no money and asked me to come at the end of the month. You said that once you got your salary at the end of the month, you would pay me, so I came today,’ said the tailor in a loud voice.

Mr Wang looked at Mr Tao and the others, all of whom were busy at work and appeared to have heard nothing.

‘...’

‘Isn’t it payday today? It’s the end of the month!’

‘Yes it is payday, but my salary has already been advanced and used up, so I didn’t get a penny today!’

Mr Wang said righteously.

‘But what about me? Do I get nothing too? I won’t accept that!’

The tailor just sat down on a chair, grumbling on and on in a loud voice. With all the noise, nobody in the room could concentrate on work any more. They just put aside their pens to watch the debt-collection. Mr Jin from the General Affairs Office, seeing that a scene was being made, came over to reproach the tailor:

‘This is a workplace! Stop this commotion! If you want to collect debts, go outside!’

With Mr Jin’s interference, the tailor’s voice went even higher:

‘Sir! It’s been three years since I made him a dress suit for eighty *yuan*. He hasn’t paid me a penny so far! Last time I came here to get the money for the suit, he said he would pay me twenty *yuan* at the end of every month. It’s the first end of the month today, and I won’t have him renege. Three years! I’ve come here over a hundred times. Sir! How can I collect the debt without saying anything? He’s in here, so why should I stay outside? No way!’

Mr Jin saw it would be impossible to rid themselves of the tailor and therefore was obliged to urge Mr Wang to find a way to send him away. Otherwise, if anyone noticed what was happening, what would it look like? Mr Wang had planned to pay ten *yuan* and then tell the tailor to piss off, so he went to borrow money from Mr Tao, Mr Yang, Mr Zhou, and Mr Cao. Of those four, one had no money, one would not lend any to him, one just shook his head, and one stayed silent. Mr Wang kept at it for quite some time, but in the end got nothing.

The tailor had come to the office quite a few times before, the first time being not long after Mr Wang had begun working there. The tailor would always make a scene when he came and only after they agreed on payment on a certain day did he retreat. He would always turn up that day and quarrel with Mr Wang until they came to another agreement; these two things happened without fail over and over again. The last time he had come was around a fortnight ago and the tailor had threatened to commit suicide, causing such a ruckus that the steward had to come mediate. They had reached the agreement that Mr Wang should pay twenty *yuan* by the end of every month, when he got his salary. This was why the tailor had gotten so worked up when he failed to get his money on the first day of the new agreement.

The first time the tailor had come to collect his debt, Mr Cao asked Mr Wang why he had had an eighty-*yuan* suit made for himself, as that really did seem to be too expensive. Mr Wang replied resentfully:

‘He said it would cost nothing!’

‘Cost nothing! Where in the world can there be anything that cheap? I needed a new suit this year, but hesitated for six months because I had no money. If there is a place where they can make a suit for free, I’ll definitely want to find out about it.’

Mr Cao did not believe him.

‘I only had him make me the suit after he said it’s for free!’

‘Nonsense! If he makes clothes for free, then how much of his personal property do you think he would have to eat into?’

Only then did Mr Wang spit out the truth:

‘The year before last when I was in the Publicity Department, he often came to talk me into getting myself a dress suit. I said I had no money but he said it didn’t matter! “You pay me once you have the money, and if you don’t, there’s no need to pay right now,” he said. Therefore, according to his own words, I don’t need to pay him since I have no money now. Isn’t the suit free?’

‘Why do you need a dress suit?’

‘I go dancing in the evening!’

As Mr Wang spoke, his feet tapped out a few steps of the Charleston. He had already forgotten that the tailor was still waiting outside.

The second time the tailor came to collect the debt, Mr Wang just returned the suit to him:

‘I’ve got no money, so I’ll just return it to you! I only wore it once!’

This time the two almost got into a fight. People were watching from the street and afterwards colleagues in other departments gossiped about it quite a bit.

Today the tailor would not let it go until he got the money. The more he understood that these people were afraid of a row, the bigger a scene he would make. Mr Tao, fearful of being laughed at by people from other departments, finally paid the tailor five *yuan* from his own salary that he had just received, only then managing to get rid of him.

No more than fifteen minutes after the tailor left, Mr Wang, pen in hand, was doodling on his desk, and singing in a low voice:

‘Oh, destiny! Oh, I meet him, my bosom lover, by sheer luck! I long to betroth myself to him! My dear lover ...’

The four pairs of eyes in the room all darted a look at his face.

## X

One day while they were having a break after lunch, Mr Wang stood up suddenly and said to the rest of them as if with great sincerity:

‘Next Saturday I’ll invite you all out for once! Please do me the favour of showing up then!’

Everyone of course agreed to this.

Later at around three, a friend of Mr Wang came over and took him outside for a chat. Mr Wang did not return after that, and didn’t even take his hat. The four

gentlemen of the Geography Department could not help discussing Mr Wang's recent invitation.

'Are you going to accept Mr Wang's invitation for next Saturday?' Yang Bingxin, the one most concerned about Mr Wang, spoke first.

'I never accept invitations from anybody and I'm not going to make an exception this time!'

Mr Tao answered quite straightforwardly.

'I live far away, so it's not convenient for me to go home late at night. So I have to sacrifice it!'

So said Mr Zhou.

'Why is he suddenly inviting us out, what does he have in mind?'

Mr Tao asked doubtfully.

'Whenever he thinks of something, he just says it. Perhaps he will forget tomorrow what he said today. Starting from tomorrow, we must remind him of this frequently; otherwise we won't get our dinner after all!'

Yang Bingxin could not leave behind this promised meal.

'Come on, what could this "invitation" be? All it means is that he'll order some restaurant food for a *yuan* or two, or his wife will cook something using their kerosene stove. I won't be part of it! When that day comes I'll skip it for sure.'

Mr Cao, who had just moved into the White Horse Painting Society and thus was Mr Wang's neighbour, by no means approved of the idea of the meal.

'Mr Wang has always been the invitee, never the one who actually does the inviting ... So it's not that I hanker after this meal, I just want to know whether he's for real or not.'

Yang Bingxin said in a detective-like tone. Fearing that the others would forget about it, he stood up with his pen and wrote 'Day of Wang Luxi's Invitation' on next Saturday's page of the calendar. Moreover, from that day on he often said to the others when Mr Wang was present:

'It's XX days to Mr Wang's invitation!'

Hearing this, Mr Wang looked happy.

'Most magnificent! My treat for once!'

When Saturday, the day of the treat, finally arrived and the calendar revealed the five words 'Day of Wang Luxi's Invitation', that afternoon the focus of their conversation gradually moved to that invitation.

'Concentrate on your work! In a few hours we will get something nice to eat!'

Yang Bingxin's words sounded like an incitement, but Mr Wang appeared as if he had not heard a thing. Yang Bingxin continued on:

'Mr Wang, what have you prepared for today's treat?'

Wang Luxi somehow seemed a little offended upon hearing this, but stayed silent.

'Will you order some food from a restaurant, or is your wife cooking herself?'

Having nurtured his curiosity for some days, Mr Cao also raised a question.

'Here's your problem, you guys ...'

Mr Wang became angry.

'Do you think that I can't afford a meal?'

'Not at all!'

'OK, then! Let's forget about the invitation! I was just bullshitting you. I won't even bother next time!'

Having said this, he stood up, walked over to the calendar, tore off that day's page, and angrily returned to his seat. He shot his bloodshot eyes toward Mr Cao and Mr Yang, and banged his fist on his desk, while mumbling something—nobody knew what—to himself. Mr Tao, aware of the embarrassing situation and afraid that Mr Wang was going to have a dispute with Mr Cao and Mr Yang, asked the four of them to go out for a walk together when working hours were over at five. They then had a meal on Restaurant Row, paid for by Mr Tao. After a good time, they parted, and Mr Wang, having been the recipient of Mr Tao's treat, was very happy.

## XI

The morning sun shone on the window glass, and everyone in the Geography Department was working in complete silence. Since he habitually arrived later than the others by an hour or two, Mr Wang had, of course, yet to appear. He had already spent two or three months sketching out in pencil the product map that he had started to work on of late, but it was only about 30 per cent complete. People generally feel guilty if they are late for work and rush into the office and immediately start concentrating on their work. For this Mr Wang Luxi, however, the large and small hands of the clock provided no mental incentive at all. Although it was already quite late, he still moved his legs leisurely like a man of leisure from the distant past. After he arrived, he had a daily routine of calling

the steward over to do something for him, making phone calls, complaining about things piled up by someone else on his desk, lighting up a cigarette, and reading newspapers ... Only after all these things were taken care of would he reluctantly raise his pen and begin to draw. Despite that he was looking at the paper as he drew, he would stand up and take a good look whenever someone that excited his fancy passed by on the street outside the windows. His eyes were equipped with a special function that enabled him both to look at his desk and at the same time see who was passing by the window: a lady in red in a rickshaw, a girl student with a short haircut who walked with a man with a small moustache wearing a Chinese tunic suit, Sis Ah-Jin heading for Huajin Alley to buy fragrance oil, thuggish Laosan from Fuxiang Alley, Mr Zhao's fiancée Miss Wu, the dance star Shi Yue'e, a widow in a green cheongsam who was often seen in the French Park, Ah-Bao who sang Shanghai Opera, the waitress known as Big Blacky ... When someone he knew passed by the window, he or she could not escape Mr Wang's discerning eye. Women especially attracted his attention; he would stretch to look around and see them off with his gaze. As he drew, he also supervised what happened in the street and kept an eye on the pedestrians on behalf of the police. It is said that ancient scholars could read ten lines in one glance, but with his glance Mr Wang could see from what was on his desk to what was outside the window. His art was indeed incomparable, but the progress of his drawing was slow like a race between two slugs. Mr Tao was not worried about Mr Wang being late for work, since he would never arrive earlier than half past ten whether he was busy with something or not. His habit of looking this way and that after arriving at the office, however, kept Mr Tao's stomach in knots.

As the clock struck ten, Mr Wang arrived, to everyone's surprise. Pulling a long face and keeping his mouth shut, he sat down for a while before going out again.

'What a rarity! Why did Wang come early today?'

Mr Yang asked.

'Don't bring it up! The couple started fighting around midnight last night, and kept me wide awake till dawn ...'

Mr Cao, who lived in the same dorm as the couple, with his sleepless eyes, complained about what had happened the night before:

'At about ten, they were still laughing and talking, and then went to bed; but somehow in the middle of the night they suddenly started to fight. The wife wept

and the husband raised a ruckus; the wife threw a cup and the husband smashed the kerosene stove; they fought all the way till dawn. There is only a thin wall between my room and theirs, so how could I sleep? After dawn the two were sound asleep, snoring like thunder, but my nerves were so on edge that I could not fall asleep, so all I could do was to get up and leave. I feel sleepy now, though!

‘That Mrs Wang must be pretty hardcore!’

‘Her voice is very high-pitched! Were someone to tune her voice with a *huqin*-fiddle, she could probably reach a high C.’

Mr Wang returned.

He sat down and took out a paper bag—a bag of pastries. Did he buy them himself? Why didn’t he ask the steward to buy them for him? He ate intently.

‘You didn’t have breakfast?’

Mr Wang did not answer, and did not look away either, just focused on eating, his face quite red. At first he ate fast, but as his mouth dried out, he began to slow down.

‘Are you hungry?’

Mr Cao, not sensible of the situation, was trying to make him speak.

‘I’m not eating *your* food!’

As he spoke, Mr Wang’s eyes were fixed on the paper bag. The others heard the conversation and chuckled. Mr Wang ate for a while then began to clean up his desk. Today he was invariably picking things up as if they were very heavy and putting them down with much force, as if the things on his desk were like a spirit tablet to a Taoist or a wooden clapper to a storyteller, all the while muttering away to himself.

From that day on, for as long as three to four weeks thereafter, Mr Wang kept his face long and his actions crude, without saying so much as half a word to the others. According to his dorm mate Mr Cao, Mr Wang and his wife had yet to make peace; the reason for their dispute was rather weird: in the middle of that night, the foot-binding cloth of Mrs Wang, who claimed to have unbound feet but would nonetheless stuff much cotton into her shoes each day, somehow came loose, and as they were sleeping in an awkward position, ended up twined around Mr Wang’s neck. Since this caused him to have difficulty breathing, Mr Wang yelled for help, and accused Mrs Wang of trying to murder him, her own husband. His wife did not, of course, accept this unreasonable accusation, so they had remained unreconciled for over three weeks, neither party willing to give in.

For Mr Wang was thoroughly flustered during the time of the dispute with his wife, he refused to allow the product map to distract him from it. He just sat idly in the editorial office, looking at the street outside the window, allowing himself several days of rest so as to recuperate before getting back to his drawing.

One day he said to Yang Bingxin:

'I won't have her stay in Shanghai. Tomorrow I'm sending her back home!'

And once again he applied for a three-day leave to Mr Tao.

'This time I'll definitely come back to work on time. No delays, I promise!'

He said this as if wanting to maintain his trustworthiness.

## XII

It was more than ten days after the last day of Mr Wang's leave before he finally came back to work. He felt very happy that day:

'There was a drought in the countryside, so steamers could not sail!'

Upon entering the room, Mr Wang explained the reason why he had come back late. In fact, even had he not provided an explanation, no one could have done anything to him.

'Totally pathetic!'

This exclamation came out of nowhere.

'I took the overnight boat, a mysterious thing indeed! It's my favourite when travelling back and forth. Men and women all sleep in the same cabin, lying close to one another on a large wood plank. All sorts of oddities happen in the middle of the night. Zhang San's comforter may roll under Li Si, whose foot lands in the face of Wang Da, whose hand reaches over into Chen Si's mouth. The next morning there are even people who put on other's clothes by mistake.'

He talked with great self-satisfaction, and, finding that the others were curious to hear more, continued on:

'The women on the boat are all nannies and amahs; some may sleep on the boat for the night, then the following morning go rent a room with someone. This time I ...'

He stopped here, smirking. While the others asked him to go on, the more he thought about it, the more amusing the experience seemed to him.

'Fantastically fabulous! Secret for once!'

He kept his secret in the end.



‘You mean you had an amorous encounter like the one you had in the French Park last year?’

Mr Yang asked in a sarcastic tone.

‘OK, OK! Stop making fun of me!’

‘The French Park? What kind of encounter? Do tell us about it, please!’

Mr Zhou’s curiosity got the better of him, and he urged him to tell them about it.

‘Will you tell us about it or not?’

Wang Luxi would not answer, just grinned.

‘Last summer in the French Park he saw a woman standing woodenly by the pond, so he walked over to chat her up. He’s always like this: in the street or on the tram, or wherever he is, he just hits on any unaccompanied woman he sees. So, on seeing a solitary woman standing by the pond he just went over and shot his mouth off. And even though it was a stranger, the woman didn’t reject him out of hand, so Wang was pleased with himself and they ended up talking of this and that. He learned that she hadn’t had anything to eat all day and was ravenous, so he took her to a restaurant to eat her fill, and then to the Painting Society. The woman wanted to stay there, and although Wang agreed, the other members did not, so he took her to the Daxin Street Hotel and got a room, planning to sleep with her. But the more she talked, the less sense she made and her eyes had a mad look to them. As he thought about it more closely, Wang realized she was mentally ill. He hoped to slip away but could not do so, as she was hanging onto his arm; she wanted to go watch the dancing at the Dragon’s Palace with him. Luckily Wang is quite flexible and he eventually managed to sneak out through the room next door.’

Yang Bingxin told the story in one breath, while Wang Luxi, with a fading smile, said nothing. Mr Zhou tapped on Mr Wang’s shoulder:

‘Since you got close to that woman, I’m afraid you’ve been infected with her mental disorder!’

‘Mental illness is not infectious!’

Mr Wang said as he looked out the window.

‘I think you really are mentally ill, and I’ve got proof.’

Mr Zhou said.

‘Why?’

‘I met Mr Huang of X Theatre yesterday, and he mentioned you. You wrote a letter to him last year, didn’t you?’

Mr Wang nodded after hearing this.

‘What did you ask him for in the letter?’

‘...?’

Mr Wang’s face was burning red, his right hand twiddling with his lapel.

‘Is it true that you asked to work as a steward at his theatre? Why did you, a perfectly decent fellow, want to be a steward all of a sudden?’

‘Totally pathetic!’

Wang Luxi, unable to come up with an answer, found this abstruse reply.

‘Doesn’t this action prove that you’ve been infected with a mental illness?’

‘Fantastically fabulous!’

This reply was even more abstruse.

### XIII

Mr Wang Luxi made every effort to draw the draft of the product map, and by early July it was completed at last. With some further revision Mr Wang could start working on the final version, which according to Mr Wang would be really easy to finish once the revisions were made; it would only take two or three days to paint after he finished the draft.

One morning, Mr Cao rushed to the editorial office and sat down dejectedly.

‘What’s the matter?’

‘I don’t even want to talk about it! Yesterday when I went back to the Painting Society and pushed open my door, what I saw in my room was truly bizarre! A cradle in front of my bed, piles of women’s clothes on the bed, and lots of diapers draped over the bed-frame. I wondered if I had entered the wrong room, but after looking around again I saw my photo on the desk; it was my room! I went out and asked the steward about it, and it turned out that Mrs Wang had returned! She arrived late yesterday afternoon, and this time it’s no laughing matter. For not only is Mrs Wang not alone, but she is accompanied by a massive horde: a child, a wet-nurse, and an old woman, along with a cradle and two trunks, flooding in like an unstoppable small army. Since there was not enough space for them to garrison, they confiscated my room as well. There was no place for me at all, I thought, so I had to retreat and stay at my friend’s place for a while, waiting for them to remove themselves. Everything else aside, I really can’t stand the diapers on my bed-frame. What’s more, on my desk there are all kinds of things like a tiny trumpet toy and a clay doll—I really detest stuff like that!’

Mr Cao finished the story full of resentment, shaking his head.

‘Previously, when only his wife was here, Mr Wang was restless enough, and now with this horde, he will have an even harder time focusing on his work!’

Said Mr Yang.

That day Mr Wang really did not turn up for work, and he did not appear the day after, either, although he did call in to ask for a one-day leave, pleading headache. After that, even when he did come to the office, he could not focus on his work. He did nothing other than send the steward to buy milk powder or make endless phone calls to find out what food was best for children.

There were a few days, when his child fell sick, that Mr Wang simply did not come in to work at all, and had someone come to collect his monthly salary for him. Having put up with this for two weeks or so, he finally could no longer bear it and decided to send them all home. He therefore asked for leave again and personally escorted them back. Although it was a short journey that usually took only two or three days, Mr Wang spent over two weeks on the round trip.

When Mr Wang eventually came back to work in the editorial office, Mr Tao said to him:

‘Now that your family is back home, I assume that your mind will be a bit more settled!’

What Mr Tao meant was that from now on Mr Wang should be more serious about his work; his lack of conscientiousness in the past was mainly because he could hardly focus on his work when he was entangled with family, and now, since he was on his own, he should be able to get down to work. Mr Wang’s reply, however, was far from what Mr Tao had expected.

‘I did send my family back, but my wife came back to Shanghai with me!’

‘..?’

Mr Tao could come up with no reply.

‘I’m really inconvenienced when she’s not around!’

Mr Wang’s response was full of implication, and after that the two of them never talked about it any more.

Over a month passed. One day, Mr Wang did not come to the editorial office until afternoon, and as soon as he came in, the steward followed him in, and waited for him to sit down.

‘Mr Wang! You haven’t paid for the noodles you had yesterday yet. They took the bowl and came several times to collect the money!’

‘Why didn’t they ask me to pay yesterday?’

‘Yesterday you left right after eating, and when I followed you out, you’d already hopped into a rickshaw.’

The steward’s explanation was more than reasonable.

‘Then why didn’t you pay for me?’

‘I had no money!’

Mr Wang searched his pocket.

‘Totally pathetic! I have no change. Just wait till tomorrow!’

‘He’s about to come to collect the money. Even coins will do.’

The steward was very insistent and would not let Mr Wang off. Mr Wang had no choice but to reach his right hand into his coat pocket to search for coins. Unexpectedly, however, a shocked look suddenly came over Mr Wang’s face, along with a weird expression, as his right hand fished something out of his pocket, which he threw on the table:

‘Oh no!’

Seeing that it was a key rather than coins, the steward felt at a loss.

‘Oh no! I forgot! I was so careless when I went out that I locked my wife in our room! Good Lord! She’s going to starve to death!’

Having said this, Mr Wang rushed out, heedless of the steward standing at his side.

#### XIV

‘Mr Wang! I took care of what you asked me to help you with!’

Mr Zhou told Mr Wang one afternoon.

‘Really? Great! Which school?’

Mr Wang replied with great pleasure.

‘It’s Hujiazhai Primary School. Eighteen teaching hours per week and the salary is twelve *yuan* per month. There was a woman teaching there, but she’s about to give birth, so they need someone to substitute. I was wondering if your wife would be willing to do it.’

‘Why would she not?’

‘Then she needs to begin teaching tomorrow.’

‘Tomorrow? Too soon! She is sick now—she has chilblains. What shall we do then?’

The two men stared at each other.

‘If she can’t make it tomorrow, I’m afraid the headmaster will find someone else!’

‘Fine! I’ll go substitute starting tomorrow, and she’ll go teach once her chilblains are healed.’

Starting the next day, Mr Wang went to substitute for his wife, and did not come to the editorial office for another two or three weeks. He did eventually come back to work, his colleagues thus aware that Mrs Wang had fully recovered from her chilblains and was thereby able to go to work. Mr Wang, however, still did not turn up the next few mornings and would only get to the editorial office at three in the afternoon. His colleagues didn’t understand the reason for this, so they of course asked him about it:

‘Are you still substituting for your wife these days? How come you never show up until 3 p.m.?’

‘No more substituting! It’s because there’s no one at the Painting Society, so I need to look after it.’

‘True enough! Your wife is out teaching, so there’s no one there to keep guard—wait a minute! Isn’t there a steward?’

Asked Mr Yang.

‘It’s because of the steward that I don’t come until 3 p.m.’ No one understood what he meant by that.

‘The steward needs to go out to eat during lunch-time. What if things get stolen when he’s away? Therefore, I stay to watch and don’t leave for work until he comes back from lunch.’

Mr Wang said quite logically.

‘Then why don’t you ask him to have lunch before noon? In that case you’ll be able to leave at lunch-time, won’t you?’

‘No way. Before noon he needs to cook for us, and attend to my rice bowl while I’m eating. So he can only go out after I finish my meal.’

‘Then why don’t you let him have lunch with you?’

‘You have no idea! He is employed by the Painting Society, not by me.’

‘Though it is the Society that employs him, he still works for you all day long, and you’re not even willing to just give him a bowl of rice?’

‘How muddle-headed you are! You know nothing about it!’

Mr Wang got angry, with his face turning scarlet and his eyes blinking furiously.

‘When the steward is out, you can just put a lock on the door and leave. There will be no need for you to keep guard at all!’

‘I am not your enemy or anything, so why must you insist on picking on me?’

Mr Wang stood up and fled to the toilet, hiding inside as if he were taking a dump.

A month later Mr Wang said to Mr Zhou:

‘I have heard that the other teacher has been quite sickly after giving birth and won’t be able to work next year, so the headmaster by rights should issue next year’s contract to us. But I don’t know why it hasn’t arrived yet. Could you please urge him on a bit at your convenience?’

‘Are you sure about the headmaster’s intentions? Is there anyone else competing for the position?’

Mr Zhou’s words were somewhat ambiguous.

‘It only makes sense that the headmaster should have sent the contract to us earlier. How can he be so incompetent? Yesterday I asked a friend to make inquiries at the Education Bureau—it is really careless of the headmaster that he still hasn’t registered my wife’s name at the Bureau after she’s been teaching in his school for over a month; the prior teacher is still registered.’

Mr Wang thought it was the headmaster who was in the wrong, while Mr Zhou thought it was Mr Wang who was in error.

‘...’

‘Please go to him and pull some strings for once!’

## XV

When the west wind had risen and the office had been equipped with a stove and nobody was willing to go outdoors, Mr Tao, seeing that Mr Wang the artist had yet to complete his product map, was very much on edge. With a lot of complaints coming from the Publication Department, all Mr Tao could do was tell Yang Bingxin, who had recommended Wang Luxi, of his concerns, and ask him to pass them on to Luxi.

Moreover, Mr Tao also complained much to Mr Yang about Mr Wang’s frequent unpunctuality and absences from work as well as taking things home from the General Affairs Office. He went on and on in the hope that Mr Wang could rid himself of these bad habits.

Around dusk, after the others had left, only Mr Yang and Mr Wang remained in the room, talking:

‘... I don’t mean to be meddlesome, but since I’m the one who referred you here, Mr Tao would naturally talk to me about you. It has taken you far too long to draw the product map. Didn’t you say that you could finish it within a week when you first came to the office? It has now been almost a year, but it’s still unfinished!’

‘What does he know about it anyway? Let me put it this way: that old fart is way too unreasonable, his mindset is so outdated! He has no artistic sense! How on earth is he qualified to talk about painting? One year spent drawing on a single piece is quite normal. Some may spend twenty years drawing one piece, one masterpiece! This kind of non-artistic map shouldn’t have been assigned to me in the first place!’

Mr Wang wanted to take no responsibility whatsoever.

‘One more thing! Mr Tao feels it’s completely inappropriate for you to come to work late every day, ask for leave frequently, and not work the same hours as the other employees. He asked me to tell you that in the future you need to come on time and reduce your absences.’

Mr Wang got nervous when he heard this, with the flesh on his face knotting up.

‘I didn’t sell myself into slavery, and everyone has things come up from time to time. This is not a prison, so why does he deprive me of my freedom and treat me like a slave? Nonsense! So unreasonable ...’

‘He’s just trying to fulfil his duty. All we need is to fulfil our duty, too. It’s also that, after all, there’s no way to justify taking home the many things you collect from the General Affairs Office for your own use ...’

Mr Wang got furious and slapped his hand on the desk:

‘Bullshit! Who said that? That old fart? If he says that directly to me, I’ll definitely slap him across the face. The things I took do not belong to that old bastard Tao, they belong to our boss! Where does he get off interfering like this?’

Having said this, Mr Wang kept swearing, stomping his foot, and pounding on the desk



non-stop. Mr Yang wanted to continue reasoning with him but he really didn't know how, so all he could do was wait for another time. Mr Yang then departed, leaving Mr Wang alone in the office. Seeing that Mr Yang was gone, Mr Wang turned on the light, ground some ink, fetched a brush, and wrote a letter. As he composed it, he contemplated what he had heard just now, the anger on his face still not receding in the slightest. It took him a full two or three hours to write the letter, and he had to cancel his plan to dine at home. He used a total of fourteen sheets of letter paper, showing just how long the letter was. The envelope was addressed to Mr Lu, the Chief Editor. He handed it to the steward when he finished, asking him to fetch it to Mr Lu first thing the next morning.

After only a month, at the end of the year, the impact of this letter could already be detected.

After the Chinese New Year, someone went to call round at the Geography Department in the editorial office, finding that Mr Tao was no longer there, and that Wang Luxi, the great artist, was now sitting in Mr Tao's seat, with another painter having been employed to draw the product map that had not been completed the year before. Mr Wang could be seen holding a newspaper with both hands, his right foot propped on his desk, repeating:

'Most magnificent ... Director for once ... Fantastically fabulous ...'